

## THE IDENTITY GAMES IN PAUL AUSTER'S *THE BOOK OF ILLUSIONS*

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PAUL AUSTER'S NOVEL *THE BOOK OF ILLUSIONS* BRINGS UNDER THE MAGNIFYING GLASS ONE OF HIS PRIMARY CONCERNS: IDENTITY IN AN EVER CHANGING WORD, DOMINATED BY LOSS AND NECESSITY OF PERMANENTLY INVENTING ONESELF.

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**KEY WORDS:** IDENTITY, LOSS, TRAUMA, METAFICTION, NARRATIVE DISCOURSE, ROLE-PLAY.

### INTRODUCTION

In the world of narrative fiction, the identity of the characters is primarily built through narrative discourse. Particularly in postmodern fiction, identity can be understood “as one construct within the abstracted story, can be described in terms of a network of character-traits.”<sup>2</sup> Further on, in Rimmon-Kenan Shlomith’s work dedicated to contemporary poetics, he identifies the primary means of constructing a character in narrative fiction, such as: direct definition, indirect presentation (action, speech, external appearance, and environment), reinforcement by analogy (that is subdivided in analogous names, analogous landscapes and analogy between characters).<sup>3</sup> In this particular novel – *The Book of Illusions*, Auster positions the characters on a traumatic/post-traumatic background, whereas his main concern is to render as much as possible an image of the fantasising traumatized subject and his response to the context in which he is placed.

### LOSS AND TRAUMA AS IDENTITY SHAPERS

Paul Auster’s novel is, apparently, an account of the life of Hector Mann, told by David Zimmer, the Columbia University Professor who gives up teaching, after the loss of his family in a plane crash, and engages in an endeavour to reconstruct, in memory, the identity of the supposedly long-disappeared silent comedian. Nothing special, no turn in narrative perspective, just a first-person narration of a man who tries to legitimize not his existence, but the one of his alter ego, Hector Mann. The beginning of the novel puts a veil of mystery on the life of Hector Mann, who inexplicably disappeared some sixty years before. Apparently, the narrator indulges in a detective pursuit to discover the hidden comedian’s films that have been scattered around in the United States and Europe. Further to viewing them, David writes a whole book dedicated to the silent comedian. He also tries, with no success, to trace the

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<sup>2</sup> Rimmon-Kenan Shlomith, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 59.

<sup>3</sup> Shlomith, *Narrative Fiction*, 59-71.

outcome of the vanished actor. Neither the narrator, nor the other journalists who sought him have come to a conclusion. The opening sentence is revelatory in this sense:

“Everyone thought he was dead. When my book about his films was published in 1988, Hector Mann had not been heard from in almost sixty years.”<sup>4</sup>

Later on, through the accounts of Alma Grund (a character close to Hector Mann, living with the family at the ranch in Tierra del Sueno, the one that convinces David to visit the dying silent comedian), David finds out the reason for Hector’s disappearance: Dolores Saint John, his wife, accidentally kills Brigit O’Fallon, Hector’s ex-lover, and this triggers the silent actor into leading the existence of an eternal runaway and a permanent quest for new identities that will hide his initial one.

It could well be considered that the story, as Anthony Giddens affirms, or else the autobiography, since Auster’s novel bears the characteristics of an autobiographical account (a feature seldom encountered in postmodern metafiction), is only one “among many other potential stories that could be told about her development as a self.”<sup>5</sup> Of course, in the case of *The Book of Illusions* only we, the readers, are aware of the fictitious character of the writing and of the unreliability of the narrator, who has been much traumatized by the losses he underwent, as well as the mourning period afterwards in which he sank in heavy drinking and isolation. It seems, as the narrator confesses, that the salvation came from film viewing, particularly the silent films in which Hector Mann, the comedian, played.

The book’s motto, not accidentally drawn from Chateaubriand’s writings, that will further be the subject of the narrator’s translations, reveals the two main characters’ life purpose and accounts for their state of unhappiness and depression. Especially Mann’s existence was characterized, after withdrawing himself from public sphere, by continuous casting off and adopting different identities, in a never-ending role play: “*Man has not one and the same life. He has many lives, placed end to end, and that is the cause of his misery.*” The quote from Chateaubriand that precedes the novel is summing up Hector’s life, a life made of many sub-lives that he had to play virtually, in films, or in his real life.

Loss is the primary determinant of the search for identity, a leitmotif in the author’s writings that generates endless identity games. A similar identity game was identifiable in *The City of Glass*, Auster’s first outstanding fiction novel, in which the protagonist Daniel Quinn experiences the same loss of family members – wife and boy, but the mourning afterwards was not so overtly expressed. Conversely, in *The Book of Illusions*, loss is accompanied by a deep anguish, a sense of nothingness and incapacity to find a driver to go on living. David Zimmer is at complete loss with himself, he cannot cope with his new condition and, in an attempt to confront his condition, David finds refuge in “wandering around the world, looking at silent comedies.”<sup>6</sup> Also, writing a book about Hector Mann would be another way of trying to overcome the emptiness of his existence. His whole life wound up around “books, language, the written word.”<sup>7</sup> The silent movies opened up as a new perspective and gave a new sense to his apparently senseless existence. What David insists on, as he describes himself, are his inner states, his inner life, which is more important than his outward appearance:

“For several months, I lived in a blur of alcoholic grief and self-pity, rarely stirring from the house, rarely bothering to eat or shave or change my clothes. (...) When I wasn’t drunk or

<sup>4</sup> Paul Auster, *The Book of Illusions*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2003), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Antony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 55.

<sup>6</sup> Auster, *Book of Illusions*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Auster, *Book of Illusions*, 13

sprawled out on the living room sofa watching television, I spent my time wandering around the house.”<sup>8</sup>

Starting from the premises enunciated by Culler, that the “I” is a mixture of the given and the socially constructed character, we might acknowledge that Zimmer, the protagonist of the novel, is mainly at the socially shaped stage, since he is not a child anymore, but an adult in search of his role on earth, since the previous ones of father and husband had been taken from him. Culler further inquires on the psychoanalytical dimension of the subject, that according to the field is “not a unique essence but as the product of intersecting psychic, sexual, and linguistic mechanisms”<sup>9</sup>. In Auster’s novels, most of the characters are narrative-constructs, and in the following part of the paper the insistence will be on Hector Mann, the narrative construct of David Zimmer, the narrator of the novel that struggles to account for the verisimilitude of his hero, when there are no more proofs left of his existence. After Hector’s death, his wife had the task to incinerate the former actor’s body and his films. So there is no conclusive proof that Mann ever existed.

Hector is the main character in *The Silent World of Hector Mann*, but he is also the centre of David’s metanarration, in which he goes beyond the films of the silent comedian and tries to reconstruct, in memory and through narrative discourse, the character he loves and that helped him overcome his sadness. The frame story serves as the background for recapturing the main events in Hector’s life, but also in David’s. David’s account serves as an umbrella or master-story for the other accounts related to Hector Mann: David’s retelling Hector’s silent movies; fragments related to Hector’s sudden disappearance, drawn from newspaper articles; the script of *The Inner Life of Martin Frost*; Alma’s stories about Hector’s life after his vanishing and the fragment copied from comedian’s diary, during David’s stay at the actor’s mansion in New Mexico. All the evidence David brings is meant to legitimize Hector’s existence after his mysterious disappearance, since, as David states: “Dead men don’t crawl out from their graves, and as far as I was concerned, only a dead man could have kept himself hidden for that long.”<sup>10</sup>

David Zimmer’s grand work *The Silent World of Hector Mann* recaptures the silent artist in all the twelve films in which he acted as a protagonist. David actually rebuilds Hector’s personality from the films he watches, but also from the press articles of the time, some of them even contradictory. In one newspaper interview, Hector admits he was born in Stanislav and from this hint David arrives at the conclusion that the silent comedian was a Jew: “Stanislav is located just south of the Dniestr River, halfway between Lvov and Csernowitz in the province of Galicia. If that was the terrain of Hector’s childhood, then there was every reason to suppose that he was born a Jew.”<sup>11</sup> This statement will be supported later on, when it will be revealed that he was circumcised, but, the fact that he was cremated, contrary to the Jewish rules, might be a clue that he was not actually a Jew, which further adds to the mystery of the story.

Of primary importance is Hector’s physical appearance, or, more exactly, the description made by David, that manages to create in the reader’s mind an accurate image of how the silent comedian might have looked, with his masterful moustache:

“Before the body, there is the face, and before the face there is the thin black line between Hector’s nose and upper lip. A twitching filament of anxieties, a metaphysical jump rope, a dancing thread of discombobulation, the moustache is a seismograph of Hector’s inner

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<sup>8</sup> Auster, *Book of Illusions*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 105.

<sup>10</sup> Auster, *Book of Illusions*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Auster, *Book of Illusions*, 85.

states, and not only does it make you laugh, it tells you what Hector is thinking, actually allows you into the machinery of his laughs. (...)”<sup>12</sup>

The insistence on the description of the moustache is not of little importance, since it might well be noticed that this element of Hector’s face is actually a synthesis of his entire being, it represents himself, it conveys Hector’s internal mood, it “speaks” in his silent representations. The narrative discourse turns it into an element of Hector’s identity that acquires plenty of significance through the actor’s skilful manipulations. It renders perfectly the actor’s thoughts, his beliefs and it is a suitable substitute for the spoken word. Its expressivity gives way to multiple meanings. Through the moustache, “we can read the content of Hector’s mind”<sup>13</sup>, it “defines who he is”<sup>14</sup> and it might well be considered that “the moustache is the link to his inner self, a metonym of urges, agitations and mental storms.”<sup>15</sup>

This little, apparently insignificant element of Hector’s face is actually the most important one, since it conveys an outward expression of his inner states; it links his inner world with the silent world of the comedies. Together with the white suit, it turns Hector Mann into the epitome of the silent comedian of the 1920’s.

As it is mentioned in the novel, “The suit embodies his relation to the social world” and it “is a sign of Hector’s vulnerability.”<sup>16</sup> The suit is opposing itself to the moustache that serves as a connection to the actor’s inner feelings. The colour of the suit may have several meanings – it is the epitome of the era – that of black and white silent movies; it is, as the narrator implies, a metaphor of his vulnerability, incapacity to be autonomous, since he was the outsider, the embodiment of otherness, he belonged to the silent world, since he didn’t speak English very well and without an accent. Only when he casts off his silent actor-role he will be able to take his life in his hands. The separation from his actor life enables him to assume other roles, in his new life as an eternal runaway, which eventually culminates with his director role.

Zimmer chooses to present only some of the most relevant movies in which Hector plays the part of the “target, the focal point of every mishap that can possibly occur within a hundred yards of his person.”<sup>17</sup> The most important is *Mr. Nobody*, in which Hector is stolen his identity by his supposedly best friend Lester Chase, that makes him invisible in order to steal him the soft-drink business and pay his debts. Hector is thus “reduced to nothing.”<sup>18</sup> He nevertheless gains a lifetime experience from this “infirmity”. Although invisible, he is able to grab and touch things. He turns into a rescuer, but also into a vengeful person and sets-up a theft to his so-called friend Lester. He is, despite this, sad because he cannot be with his family any longer. The film “is a meditation on his own disappearance, and for all its ambiguity and furtive suggestiveness, for all the moral questions it asks and then refuses to answer, it is essentially a film about the anguish of selfhood.”<sup>19</sup>

Actually the film is highly self-reflexive, an intertext in itself, and it should be regarded as Hector’s own way of saying goodbye to the world, as it could be interpreted as his last film. Towards the end, he looks in the mirror and though he is visible again, he doesn’t recognize himself: “as he peers into the eyes of the man staring back at him from the wall, it’s as if he’s looking at a stranger, encountering the face of a man he has never seen before.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Auster, *Book of Illusions*, 29.

<sup>13</sup>Auster, *Book of Illusions*, 30.

<sup>14</sup>Auster, *Book of Illusions*, 30.

<sup>15</sup>Auster, *Book of Illusions*, 31.

<sup>16</sup>Auster, *Book of Illusions*, 31.

<sup>17</sup>Auster, *Book of Illusions*, 31.

<sup>18</sup>Auster, *Book of Illusions*, 50.

<sup>19</sup>Auster, *Book of Illusions*, 53.

<sup>20</sup>Auster, *Book of Illusions*, 52.

Hector is thus anticipating his own invisibility to the public, which is about to take place. Eventually, as readers, we are only able to “watch him confront his own annihilation.”<sup>21</sup> If in the film he eventually rescues himself, becomes again visible and the tone in which the movie ends is a light-hearted one, with Hector smiling and ready to take up new challenges, in real life, Hector will not be able to rehabilitate himself, as much as David may try to account for his existence, which eventually equals to his spiritual death. As mentioned in the first pages of the novel, Hector’s invisibility and disappearance from the public life can only be equalled to his death, since “only a dead man could have kept himself hidden for that long.”<sup>22</sup>

An important feature in unveiling the characters’ identity is their name that is charged with plenty of significance and enhances the understanding of the protagonists within the contexts in which they are placed. Nothing in the novel is random, moreover, the characters’ names represent a clue that further unlocks the meaning of the story and constructs the whole. In metafiction, identity is a subject difficult to grasp. It plays much upon doubles, or should they be called mirror-characters, or doppelgangers. The protagonist in metafiction is never alone, though most of them, especially in Auster’s novels, rejoice in their loneliness. They are multifaceted selves, each complementary to the other, in an endless role-play. Hector Mann is actually to be interpreted as an alter-ego of the narrator of the story, David Zimmer. They somehow lead parallel existences. Hector is, just like the Trojan character whose name he bears, a victim of the circumstances, continuing to bear his burden until the end of his life. Mann, as it is known, stands for the English *man*, so Hector might be assimilated to a Godlike figure – the Man, one that was created to be sacrificed, a victim that will bear his burden for all his life, leading an invisible existence. Hector invariably seems to know and accept his fate, he does not rebel, and instead he is only looking for the aesthetic side of his existence: art, but only for the sake of its creator – himself. An egoist endeavour, one might say, but it is the only way to remain free, yet captive in his isolated existence, with his wife and the few crew members that served until the end of his life.

Trying to hide himself from the world, Hector gives up the moustache, his distinctive, identity sign and finds a worker’s cap in the bathroom of the airport. Hector decides to take the name of the owner of that cap: Herman Loesser. It will become his alter-ego, his new self, but nevertheless, not himself. “If he took to calling himself Herman, he could change his identity without altogether renouncing who he was. That was the important thing: to get rid of himself for others, but to remember who he was for himself. Not because he wanted to, but precisely because he didn’t.”<sup>23</sup>

Hector might be considered a self-made man. Secluding himself from his possible chasers, he got to learn a lot especially from classical literature. He took himself all the time in the world in order to discover, or more precisely to rediscover himself: “the rigors of his intellectual training gradually turned him into someone else.”<sup>24</sup> Hector kept a secret journal into which he recorded his deepest thoughts: “I talked only to the dead now. They are the only ones who understand me. Like them, I live without a future.”<sup>25</sup> Hector thus leads an underground existence, like a shadow, self-punishing for a crime he did not commit. But his humanity, his solidarity towards Brigid, whom he nevertheless loved, cannot be stopped. Mesmerized by her home town, Spokane, Hector goes there to find a job and continue his mourning and his self-seclusion.

In Brigid’s hometown, when seeing Nora, Brigid O’Fallon’s sister, Hector feels like seeing and hearing his ex lover, now gone and buried. He is again casting in a new role, that of

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<sup>21</sup> Auster, *Book of Illusions*, 52.

<sup>22</sup> Auster, *Book of Illusions*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Auster, *Book of Illusions*, 144.

<sup>24</sup> Auster, *Book of Illusions*, 147.

<sup>25</sup> Auster, *Book of Illusions*, 148.

stockboy in the O'Fallon business. Slightly and unknowingly, pushed by some hidden force, Hector gains Nora's heart and confidence and she hires him in the family store as a stockboy. Living on the edge was Hector's motto and if he was on the verge of being discovered, he felt that he deserved the punishment: "If I mean to save my life, then I have to come within an inch of destroying it."<sup>26</sup>

When constrained by circumstances, as Nora's father asks him to propose her or leave the country, he chooses without thinking twice the second option. He could not live the cruelty of hurting Nora, so he escapes as soon as he is constrained to. He flees O'Fallon's business and arrives in Chicago, after two failed attempts of suicide. Along the way, he meets a prostitute, Sylvia Meers, who sets a deal with him to do live performances together and thus gain lots of money. It is a period Hector would like to cut away from his existence, in this period he stops writing in his journal and a sort of de-doubling taking place: he even chooses to wear a mask during the performances, so that no one would recognize him and, also, would make the shame less hard. "He was an exhibitionist and a hermit, a mad debouche and a monk, and if he managed to survive these contradictions in himself for as long as he did, it was only because he willed his mind to go numb."<sup>27</sup> A contrasting being, rejecting, at least at a declaratory level, God and his existence, Hector considers "man is the measure of all things."<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the period in which he "prostitutes" himself is the darkest one of his existence, even darker than the killing of Brigid, so, even if apparently he rejects Catholic values, he is affirming indirectly his humanity, his shame in front of God of his self degradation. His penance will continue until the end of his existence.

David is Hector's alter-ego, since the endeavour of rediscovering Hector's films and life details is a quest of discovering himself. Their salvation comes from films – David watches Hector's films and a spark of hope springs in his heart; Hector begins, after meeting Frieda Spelling, directing films that would eventually have just one viewer – himself. Women also play a significant role in their recovery from the wounds of the past. Just as Frieda saved Hector from his inner death, so does Alma with David: "Alma was giving me the possibility of a second life, that something was still in front of me if I had the courage to walk toward it."<sup>29</sup> It is the same fact that David acknowledges in the conclusion of the novel, that Alma acted as a rescuer for him, since that was her role, a sacrifice in order to re-establish order in David's life. In his desire to change his life, Hector changes his name again, taking his wife's, thus becoming Hector Spelling: "He didn't want to be Loesser anymore."<sup>30</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

The stories of the two protagonists – David Zimmer and Hector Mann - are parallel and complementary. Yet, their disappearance, the fact that there is no other character left to account for their existence, leaves the end open and prone to endless interpretations. The identity of the two characters is entirely called into question, since nobody can testify for their actually living and doing what the unreliable narrator told us. Thus, unless what he wishfully hopes it will happen, that the films directed by Hector in his secluded house in Tierra del Sueno will mysteriously reappear, their life stories are quite hard to account for. David, as the other protagonists in Auster's first person novels, "must reconstruct the story of his subject

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<sup>26</sup> Auster, *Book of Illusions*, 154.

<sup>27</sup> Auster, *Book of Illusions*, 184.

<sup>28</sup> Auster, *Book of Illusions*, 174.

<sup>29</sup> Auster, *Book of Illusions*, 174.

<sup>30</sup> Auster, *Book of Illusions*, 203.

secondhand, from fragments, hearsay, and invention.”<sup>31</sup> The fragmentation of the subject, together to the high number of interpretational approaches, places the reader in the middle of a complex pursuit of understanding – as Susan Elisabeth Sweeney states in relation to *The New York Trilogy*, commenting on the loose character of the detective genre: it (the detective genre) leads “to an irresolvable confusion of textual, narratorial and authorial identities.”<sup>32</sup> In fact, *The Book of Illusions* may be considered a metadetective story in which the chaser vanishes before unravelling the mystery of the chased. Thus, identity in Paul Auster’s novel stands under the sign of mystery, of relativity and each certainty is gradually dismantled by the narrator of the novel that leaves the end suspended. Auster’s novels are mainly connected with loss of the narrative subject. As Jonathan Boulter puts it, the subject is one that might be defined as “a subjectivity without any subject”, that is “the subject negotiates a relationship to a disastrous history, to a past marked by loss and trauma.”<sup>33</sup> It is indeed what David does: in search to unravel the past of Hector Mann, he confronts with his own loss, but also Hector’s, his alter ego, that fails to become a legitimized character, as all the evidence of his existence is gradually dismantled and, in the end, illusion is the only certainty.

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<sup>31</sup> Debra Shostak, “In the Country of Missing Persons: Paul Auster’s Narrative of Trauma.” *Studies in the Novel* 41(2009): 85.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Briggs, “Wrong Numbers: The Endless Fiction of Auster and Deleuze and Guattari and...”, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 44 (2003): 223.

<sup>33</sup> Jonathan Boulter, *Melancholy and the Archive Trauma. History and Memory in the Contemporary Novel.*, (London & New York: Continuum, 2011), 9.

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