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“My name is Paul Auster. That is not my  
real name”: The search for identity in Paul  
Auster’s *City of Glass*

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## Introduction

Paul Auster constructs an ambiguously defined cast of characters in his novel, *City of Glass* (1985).<sup>1</sup> Daniel Quinn, a writer of mystery novels, assumes the role of protagonist. Immediately his identity is thrown into doubt when Auster defines Quinn as a “triad of selves” (6). Living with the memories of a wife and son who are now dead, Quinn has become a man of solitude. His publications are ostensibly authored by the pseudonym William Wilson. Auster early sentences his leading man to madness, if only to a thus far limited degree, when asserting that Quinn “never went so far as to believe that he and William Wilson were the same man” (5). While Quinn himself is the instrument of actions or simply the “dummy”, Wilson is the “ventriloquist”, leaving Max Work, the macho detective in Quinn/Wilson’s stories, to complete the triad. His role is “to give purpose to the enterprise” (6). As Quinn yearns to remove himself from his past, he meanders through the endless streets of New York. He feels lost and disconnected. His goal is to escape his mind completely, to eradicate all thoughts and perhaps all memories, “to be nowhere” (4). However, these attempts at depersonalization are fleeting and Quinn, once given the chance, decides to enter into a story. He becomes Detective Paul Auster and assumes a character similar to his own fictional creation, Max Work.

To hinder any possible misunderstanding concerning names and to whom they belong it is imperative to point out that Paul Auster has used his own name, maybe even characteristics of his own person, in the novel. That is to say that his name is not merely on the cover of the book crediting his authorship; it is in fact allotted to a couple of its characters. This distinction will be made clear throughout the paper although eventually such distinctions might seem unintended by the author himself. This conundrum will be at the core of my paper. I will discuss the various twists and features of the novel to assess, as accurately as one might in a mystery as inconclusive as this, the search for, lack of, or indeed need of an identity.

In “An interview with Paul Auster” Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory manage to reveal the acclaimed author in a personal light. Auster answers their questions with diligence and care, uncovering, quite harshly, his own hazy sense of identity. Upon being asked if he is “interested in tracking down the sources of [...] recurrent ideas and motifs” in his work that “have deeply personal resonances for”

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<sup>1</sup> *City of Glass* was first published in 1985 as an independent piece.

him, Auster replies simply, “[n]ot terribly”. He then alludes to the supposed fact that “novels emerge from [the] inaccessible parts of ourselves” and that his writing lessens the troubles caused by what he calls his “buried secrets” (7).

*City of Glass* is highly relevant to this argument and the interviewers make sure to bring out every possible hint to the reality that lay behind the creation of the story’s fictional, if not semi-fictional, New York.<sup>2</sup> They imply that Quinn has a background similar to his inventor, especially concerning the lost wife and child,<sup>3</sup> and even suggest that the novel might be a “disguised autobiography” (McCaffery and Gregory, 14). It is this inquiry that unleashes quite a theoretical statement from Auster who claims that he allowed the entrance of his “author self, that mysterious other who lives inside [him] and puts [his] name on the cover of books” into the story to “break down walls [and] to expose the plumbing” (14).

Auster then proceeds to lay bare the presence of his actual self in the novel when he explains that Quinn’s life is how he imagined his own had he not met his second wife, Siri Hustvedt (18). This revelation sets the ground for analyzing the various aspects of identity in the novel, although answers of a concrete nature might come few and far between; as Auster concedes, his “work is about asking questions” (24). In the interview with McCaffery and Gregory, Auster pays tribute to Arthur Rimbaud, disclosing that a quote of his, “‘Je est un autre’ [...] opened a door for [him]” (18). ‘Je est un autre’<sup>4</sup> is French and translates literally into ‘I is an other’ (my translation). There is a clear grammatical error in that ‘I am’ must take the form of ‘Je suis’ while ‘he is’ must take the form of ‘il est’. Rimbaud has deliberately combined the two forms to create the idea that ‘I’, the self, really can be ‘an other’. This is not merely a twist of words or a comment on the concept of split personalities; Paul Auster, in defining the existence of his own person in the novel, means that Rimbaud is pointing out the previously mentioned “author self”. So while one might have to accept absurdities and indeed absurdism in the reading of *City of Glass*, it is possible

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<sup>2</sup> *City of Glass* is the first volume in Paul Auster’s *The New York Trilogy* that consists of three novels set in New York City.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Auster, soon before writing *City of Glass*, divorced his first wife with whom he had one son (Freeman).

<sup>4</sup> This quote originates from Rimbaud’s letter to Georges Izambard, dated May 13, 1871.

to take comfort in John Zilcosky's claim that "Auster [has discovered] how to speak about another person, himself, without wielding the authority he so distrusts".<sup>5</sup>

### **Quinn embarks on a quest for identity**

Carsten Springer, basing his theory on the studies of psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, claims, in specific relation to Paul Auster's works, that an identity crisis can only be resolved by the "reversal of isolation" (45). In other words, having active relations with others is necessary in order to maintain a stable perception of one's own identity. In *City of Glass*, Daniel Quinn is introduced as an isolated author whose contact with others is restricted to a correspondence with his agent, with whom he has never met. Having lost his family, he gradually severs all his relations, even removing the photographs of his previous life from the walls of his apartment (5). These are, to say the least, poor grounds for building meaningful relationships that might enrich a life.

An interesting concept arises in that Auster says he thinks "the driving force in everything [he has] written so far lies in [a] yearning to participate somewhere and to break out of the isolation", and "[s]imply to be in contact to other people" (Hagen, 24). Daniel Quinn stands as an excellent example of this as he enters into a luncheonette in New York. Here he makes his customary banter with the counterman, a fellow fan of the Mets. For years they have discussed the various happenings surrounding this ironically wretched baseball team without even knowing each other's name. According to the rules of society their relationship does not extend past the exchange of money and service, but as of their mutual fandom they share a strong bond. They speak of the Mets players as if they were part of the roster themselves (37-38). In this, they attain means with which to construct their own identities, however shallow or artificial.

As chance would have it, Quinn is gifted an opportunity to break the isolation that is just bizarre enough for him to entertain. Someone calls him and urgently asks for "Paul Auster. Of the Auster Detective Agency". Quinn hangs up but the caller persists and Quinn eventually takes on the role of the detective, planning a rendezvous with the stranger (11). It has been five years since the death of his family, and, as a consequence, the end of his willingness to interact with people (5). In

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<sup>5</sup> The citation is found under the subheading, "Questioning Author-ity" in Zilcosky's article, "The Revenge of the Author".

becoming Detective Paul Auster, Quinn has seemingly turned to child's play when in fact he has done so much more; he has lifted his embargo on human relations and demonstrated his "yearning to participate somewhere and to break out of [...] isolation". This is a motif that Auster claims as central in all his written works (Springer, 46).

When Quinn arrives at the stranger's home, a woman, Virginia Stillman, greets him. This leaves him baffled and, later, uncertain of the actual proceedings of the encounter. Auster then presents an appealing take on memories as Quinn, musingly, thinks to himself that "remembered things [...] [have] a tendency to subvert the things remembered." He elaborates further, saying that "[a]s a consequence, he could never be sure of any of it" (13). Quinn is, of course, speaking about the encounter with Virginia Stillman. It is, however, plausible to believe that this musing has very much to do with his sullen situation; Quinn is having a hard time remembering his wife and son and undoubtedly questioning if they were ever real. If the happy life he led more than five years ago is no longer a truth, how can he be sure that it ever was?

Quinn soon finds himself listening to Peter Stillman, the persistent caller. He speaks in a mechanical and, to an extent, incoherent manner. Expecting to be filled in on some illustrious criminal tale as, no doubt, Max Work often is in William Wilson's mystery novels, Quinn is disappointed. Instead of receiving an unsolved puzzle, he has been given further incentive to question his own identity. Auster has rejected rationality when Peter says, "[m]y name is Peter Stillman. That is not my real name. My real name is Mr Sad. What is your name, Mr Auster? Perhaps you are the real Mr Sad, and I am no one" (17). Not only does Peter mirror Quinn in his own plural number of selves, he can also see a sadness in Quinn, pointing out to him that that perhaps is his name (18, 20). Furthermore, Peter continuously addresses Quinn as "Mr Auster" since that is who he believes him to be. Thus, Quinn is not only *in possession of* multiple personalities, but actively engaging at least four of them at once: there is his own "dummy" self; there is the fictional detective Max Work attempting a certain authoritative cool, a façade in a façade, as he is claiming to be the Detective Paul Auster; and there is this new, sudden, but strikingly relevant, Mr Sad.

Throughout Peter's uninterrupted speech, or rather discharge of incomprehensible noises and barely decipherable sentences, Quinn gathers enough

information to paint a picture of the case he has taken on: without a mother, Peter was raised by his father, Peter Stillman Sr. who was in search of a language of God. In a cruel experiment, the father locked his son in a dark windowless room cutting off all chords to human interaction. He would beat him when he spoke regular words, hoping that, desperate to connect, the boy would somehow learn the original language of God. After nine years, Stillman Sr. was found out and sent to prison. Now, thirteen years later, he is to be released and supposedly he will come to kill his son (16-20). This is where Quinn, or rather, Detective Paul Auster, comes into the picture.

### **Quinn enters into an arbitrary world**

Having sat through an entire day of mind-boggling revelation, Quinn is at last alone with Virginia. He is attracted to her and thinks of what she might look like if she were not wearing any clothes. Virginia explains how, with an unhappy marriage in her past and after five years as Peter's speech therapist, marrying her patient has given meaning to her life (28). However, she seems very uncertain of herself and in light of Peter's remarks that she brings whores to her husband and that she, herself, does not "like" to have sex, Virginia is desperate to redeem herself (21). Once she has finished the proceedings of hiring Quinn to the case, Virginia throws herself over Quinn and kisses him wildly, saying, "That was to prove that Peter wasn't telling you the truth", and "I just want you to know what I'm capable of" (32). It seems odd that she would requite Quinn's sexual attraction in this episode when she never does so again. It could be that Quinn drifts away from the reality in which she exists before she gets the chance. Or perhaps Quinn has already escaped his box of sanity and tumbled into uncharted waters.

Throughout their discussion, Quinn successfully emulates the role of the self-assured detective. He begins by lighting a cigarette and continues asking questions relevant to the case in a professional manner. He demands of her the respectful amount of "one hundred dollars a day plus expenses" (30). She hands him a check for five hundred, in advance. Quinn takes satisfaction in knowing that it is written to a Detective Paul Auster and thus cannot be traced to him; he does not care that he cannot cash it in. Quinn offers Virginia a final reassurance when claiming that he has not "let anyone down yet" (31). This is of course true, as he has had no previous case. However, Virginia most likely assumes it to mean that he had succeeded with a good

deal of cases. Confident and perhaps proud of this Max Work-like exchange, Quinn might easily have wandered a little too far into his role. The romantic encounter with Virginia might never have happened. Is she even real? If the answer to this question is no, it would be easy to conclude that the kiss was all in his head.

Quinn ponders the history of cases like that of Peter Stillman Jr. He brings up an essay in which Montaigne contends that Nature cannot have denied humans a natural resource for communication when all other animals are born with various such abilities. Quinn appears to think this clever and it is safe to assume that he does not distrust that there might very well exist a language that is without human flaw. In naming a number of cases where children who have had no experience of communication with other humans are brought into society, Quinn repeatedly states that they lived without interest in sex or money – as if such interests are marks of proper integration into society (or regular reality, if you will). In regard to this theory, it is important to assess how Quinn's attitude and attention to both sex and money change as he moves further and further away from his initially perceived reality. First, there is his vivid imagining of a naked Virginia; he is clearly still sexually driven. Secondly, he is not mindful about not being able to cash in Virginia's checks; but at this point this lack of rudimentary greed owes to the fact that he is merely curious about the case and why he has been handed the role of Detective Paul Auster.

With the memory of the burial of his own son fresh on his mind, Quinn's personal investment in this case becomes clear. Auster writes that Quinn "knew he could not bring his own son back to life, but at least he could prevent another from dying" (35). This sentimental piece creates an emphatic feeling of sympathy that might wrongfully dismiss the theory of Quinn's disillusionment. Auster does, however, create a contradictory device by making Quinn's dead son Peter's namesake. This is an alarmingly fitting coincidence that seems more part of a fictional story (which, of course, to the ultimate extent, this is) than to the reality of Quinn's life. But if we are to follow Auster's own line of reasoning, we must pay attention to the discoveries of microbiologist Jacques Monod that conclude "arbitrariness [as] the fundamental principle of life" (Springer, 36). Hence, one might do best to disregard Auster's placement, in his novel, of the meaningful coincidence of sharing a name. It is understandable that Quinn would be further encouraged to take on the case as it provided him with the opportunity, not only to protect a child from unnatural death,



but to protect Peter, a son – mirroring Quinn’s own son whom he ultimately failed to protect.

Quinn’s opinion concerning the phenomenon of a flawless language is validated when he leaves Peter Stillman’s apartment and wonders if Peter sees the world in the same way that he does, and then, more philosophically, “if a tree [is] not a tree, [...] what [is] it really [?]” (36). He is, of course, referring to the word ‘tree’. What makes this item of nature a ‘tree’? If I were to call it something else, would it *be* that also? What is language constructed by man if not a popular agreement? With these questions on his mind, Quinn surely wonders if there is not, in fact, a language of God, a language that is not bound by human limitations that it is intended that man speak. Soon afterwards, Quinn finds himself mystically drawn to a specific red notebook in a stationary shop. “Almost embarrassed by the intensity of his feelings” towards this notebook, he quickly purchases it, not knowing that it will be the instrument of his eventual demise into language (39).

### **Quinn takes an incomplete look at himself**

Once he is back in his own apartment, Quinn clears his desk of cigarette butts and centers the notebook on his desk. He closes the blinds and removes all his clothing. Auster writes modestly that Quinn feels that it seems “appropriate to be naked at this moment” (39). Yet, it is clear that Quinn is doing something quite symbolic here: with an untouched notebook and an uncovered body (or self, even), Quinn marks the first page with his own initials, DQ. This is something that he has not done for more than five years and he realizes this. He has removed all external elements from himself and his surroundings and, in essence, admitted his own existence by writing his own name on this empty paper – a clean slate. But Auster does not give his leading man the moment of eureka that he is so desperately in need of. Quinn cuts his line of thought short. It delves too deep into the mystery of his own person for him to grasp. In light of the inexplicably unjust past he has been victim to, Quinn has allowed himself to come to a stage where he cannot deal with the question of who he is. The symbolic nakedness and literal admittance of his true name, even though they might be feats of his subconscious, prove a change, progress even, in his mental state. The fact that he cannot understand this triumph of sorts, and that he dismisses it by concluding that he might well be a “bloody fool”, does little to help him (39). He is on the verge of

throwing, not just Daniel Quinn, but also his complete will to live, into a down-spiraling game of obsession.

In his first entrance into the red notebook, Quinn contemplates his quandary of having to do actual detective work and remembers, from his penniless college days, how, when wearing friends' clothes, he had felt a "strange sense [...] of climbing into [someone else's] skin" (40). He seems to suspect the intense perplexity of his own mind as he confesses, or even forewarns, to his notebook,

[I have] to remember who I am. To remember who I am supposed to be. I do not think this is a game. On the other hand, nothing is clear. For example: who are you? And if you think you know, why do you keep lying about it? I have no answer. All I can say is this: listen to me. My name is Paul Auster. That is not my real name. (40)

He is evidently confused. First he writes, as if to a diary, that he must remember who he is. Then he changes the pronoun from 'I' to 'you' as if the notebook is having an actual conversation with him, asking him why he hides behind false identities if he knows who he is. Again he switches back to 'I', as if to answer the notebook, claiming that he has no answers. The final sentences are clearly reminiscent of the speech of Stillman Jr. as Quinn proves to understand or just imitates the thoughts of this damaged man. Quinn is in every doubt about the nature of his own identity and more so now that he has stripped himself of his clothes, his surroundings and his pseudonym. Although being relieved of all these materials and fallacies might seem like progress, it has rendered him bare and exposed. He can confront his crisis but chooses instead to "have no answer". In the Stillman saga Quinn has become a character with respect and authority. His decision to work the case is made purely from desire.

### **Quinn plays the role**

Having received information on when Stillman Sr. will arrive at Grand Central, Quinn makes it his business to study the man's work. Formerly a professor at the Department of Religion at Columbia University, Stillman Sr. published a book, *Early Visions of the New World*. Quinn finds it in a library and becomes engrossed in the text about Adams's task in the Garden of Eden and the fall of man; according to Stillman, Adam's "words had not been merely appended to the things he saw, they

had revealed their essences, had literally brought them to life. A thing and its name were interchangeable. After the fall, this was no longer true. [...] Language had been severed from God” (43). Herein lies the story of the lost language or, plainly, the “fall of language” (43). Once man was banished from the Garden, a place of true perfection, language was, too, banished from its own state of perfection as “words devolved into a collection of arbitrary signs” (43). Like Quinn is mystified by the significance of the word ‘tree’, he is intrigued by the fact that Stillman’s text makes perfect sense to him.

The text speaks about one Henry Dark, supposedly the personal secretary to Milton who authored *Paradise Lost*. Following Milton’s death, Dark is to have published a book in which he argues that a new paradise should be built in America, the New World. He provided loosely relevant biblical evidence to support his claims as well as a prediction that exactly three hundred and forty years following the arrival of the Mayflower the grounds for the new Babel would be laid. The date, Quinn found, would be 1960, the same year that Stillman Sr. locked up his son (46-48). Having attained this knowledge Quinn feels that he is now deeply involved and that he is doing quite a good job at being Detective Paul Auster. In fact, so much so that he now reminds himself, not of who he is, as he wrote in his red notebook, but of who he is *meant to be*.

The “burden of [Quinn’s] own consciousness” has been lifted, if only temporarily, as he lives the life of Detective Paul Auster (50). Quinn, clueless as to the identity of the actual man, feels that his mind encompasses just one thing: the Stillman case. With nothing else to bother him, he is glad to occupy this impersonal state and to feel, perhaps, comfortably numb. Auster writes that Quinn is aware that his newfound identity is not his own and that, whenever he wants, he can return to being himself. Interestingly, Auster proceeds to defend Quinn’s deception of the Stillmans. His choice of the word ‘purpose’ is imperative as he presents Quinn’s case stating the fact that there is “a purpose to his being Paul Auster” and that it “served as a kind of moral justification for the charade” (50-51). The purpose, to protect Peter from his father, is noble. But the question that arises is: does Quinn see his true persona, Daniel Quinn, as a *purposeless* being?

As Quinn waits for Stillman Sr. to arrive at Grand Central he sees a girl reading one of his William Wilson<sup>6</sup> novels, *Suicide Squeeze*. Before continuing the analysis of the story it is necessary to become familiarized with an idea that stems, in part, from this book by Quinn. Johan Karlsson points out, in his essay “A Framework for Ideas”, that Paul Auster wrote a detective novel entitled *Squeeze Play* (21). There is clearly a resemblance between the titles of Auster’s empirical work and Quinn’s fictional. However, the similarities do not end there; Auster’s novel was, like Quinn’s, published with a pseudonym, Paul Benjamin. In the interview with McCaffery and Gregory Paul Auster reveals that, while writing *Squeeze Play*, he “felt as though [he] were writing with a mask on [his] face” (15). He goes on to admit that he could not possibly have created the character Daniel Quinn if he had not experienced, first hand, the strange feelings that came with pseudonymity.

According to Karlsson *City of Glass* is, in more aspects than one, to a considerable degree, an autobiographical account. However, I think a more accurate assessment would be that *City of Glass* is an alternative ending or simply an alternative route to that which the author’s life took. Auster’s use of likenesses between himself and, especially, the protagonist in his book, Daniel Quinn, seems to provide infusions of his own person into the story rather than the pieces of a masked plot in an autobiography. That, on the other hand, is not to say that it does not mirror the life of the author. There is no doubt that Auster is intentionally using characteristics from his own life in light of his stern assertion that he “never experiment[s] with anything in [his] books. Experimentation means you don’t know what you’re doing” (Freeman).

### **Quinn submits to chance**

Before Stillman Sr. arrives at the station Quinn studies his face on the twenty year-old photograph that Virginia Stillman has given him. Once the train arrives, Quinn spots the man in the picture. Moving at a terribly slow rate and with great difficulty as well as paying little interest, or none at all, to the people and objects around him he would prove an easy target to tail for Quinn. Suddenly, Quinn sees another man who also

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<sup>6</sup> The name William Wilson, although it refers to an actual Mets player introduced in the book, is an allusion to the eponymous protagonist of a short story by E. A. Poe. Quinn’s motivation for choosing this name as his pseudonym is its literary significance; Poe’s William Wilson suffered from multiple personalities and Quinn, similarly, created an add-on personality for himself (Springer, 97).

resembles the one in the photograph. The difference is that the second man is dressed in a suit and appears wholly kempt, not at all like the first man. Auster places his leading man in an outrageous dilemma as the two men walk opposite ways; Quinn, craving “an amoeba’s body”, can choose to follow only one (56). He first opts to follow the second, less shabby, man but after just a few steps “something [tells] him he would live to regret what he was doing” and so he turns on his heel and sets his pace to the other man, his chosen Stillman Sr. (56).

According to Johan Karlsson, Paul Auster seems more involved in the story than is expected of him – as the writer of a story – and thus the “something” that speaks to Quinn might be attributed to Paul Auster himself. This theory first gains support when Quinn receives the phone call from the Stillmans meant for a Detective Paul Auster. Karlsson believes that “Quinn’s musings about the detective novel show that the role of the detective and the author can be seen as [...] interchangeable” (28). This could be interpreted to mean that the Stillmans are in fact attempting to contact the real Paul Auster. They know that only the author can affect the plot – a plot that, to them, appears to be heading towards the murder of Peter. In the case of the dilemma at Grand Central, it is not, then, completely implausible to assume that Auster *is* this “something” that points Quinn in the right direction. Auster, referring to his writing, assures that if “elegant passages [and] curious details [...] are not truly relevant to what [he] is trying to say, then they have to go” (Freeman); this curious detail remained.

Quinn follows Stillman Sr. to his hotel and for the next few days he keeps himself busy with shadowing the old man and recording his every move in the red notebook. Troubled by the emptiness that his mind experiences when following the unadventurous old man, Quinn achieves the reverse of what he set out to do after having just taken on the case; he was to remember who he was, but now he tells “himself that he [is] no longer Daniel Quinn” because “[t]o be Auster meant being a man with no interior, a man with no thoughts” (61). He does not remember because he has no memories, neither of joy nor of fear. His mind is left blank and free to focus completely on the task ahead – trailing Stillman. Eventually, Quinn decides to trace, on a map, the routes that Stillman Sr. has taken. Beyond doubt, each day’s route takes on the appearance of a letter. Quinn finds that they combine to read, *The Tower of Babel* and he believes that Stillman has left a message for him. However, Pascale-

Anne Brault points out that the message is only legible in English and thus contradicts the cause that Stillman is working for – the rebirth of the language of God. Brault means that Quinn’s interpretation is in fact futile if not entirely imagined (228-238). Auster writes that as Quinn ponders the meaning of his discovery he “arrive[s] in a neverland of fragments, a place of wordless things and thingless words” (72). He is enchanted by Stillman and begins to grow an understanding of his ideas; he can see the flaws of manmade language all around him. Furthermore, Quinn reads the writing on the wall, so to speak, and concludes that Stillman is, as suspected, after his son.

### **Quinn creates a second triad**

Quinn decides to speak to the old man. On three occasions he presents himself to Stillman Sr., each time using a different name. First, he is Quinn; he figures that as Detective Paul Auster he is in no need of protecting his actual name. Stillman instinctively takes an interest in Quinn and rants about the “many possibilities for this word, this Quinn” (74). After listing words with similarities to Quinn’s name, Stillman concludes that “[i]t flies off in so many little directions at once” (74). This phrase holds true in more than a literal manner; Quinn himself seems to fly off in numerous directions with all the fabricated identities and the varying states of mind that he occupies. Stillman continues his philosophical line of thought when noting that people “think of words as stones, as great unmovable objects with no life” (75). This verifies his belief in a language with words that are truly alive. Quinn adds that “[s]tones *can* change. They can be worn away by wind or water” (75, my emphasis). Thus, he verifies the same belief.

Stillman proceeds to argue his point in a manner so convincing that it seems that Paul Auster is in fact speaking. He uses an umbrella to explain that all things have functions that “express the will of man” (77). The umbrella protects us from the rain, but if it is ripped it ceases to do so; it surrenders its function. Stillman claims that it can no longer be an umbrella and that therein lays the fault of language. He asks, rhetorically, how we can speak of the things that really matter to us if we cannot “embody the notion of change in the words we use” (78). Sadly, Stillman’s case loses credibility because of his eccentricity and it is unfortunate that Auster never provides an end to Stillman’s work considering that he heralds its future release “the most important event in the history of mankind” (78).

A second day, Quinn introduces himself as Henry Dark, the man in Stillman's book. Amazingly Stillman does not recognize Quinn and goes on to reveal that he invented a Henry Dark; he used him to launch his own controversial ideas about *The New Babel*, as he titles the book that Dark is meant to have released. He explains to Quinn that the name is an allusion to Humpty Dumpty in that the initials are identical. Quoting from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* Stillman says, "[w]hen I use a word, Humpty Dumpty said, [...] it means just what I choose it to mean" (81). He dubs the egg a "philosopher of language" and continues to quote it, saying that the "question is, [...] which is to be master [man, or words]?" (81). Essentially, he means to ask which is true: that man is master of his language, or that man is restricted by the limitations of his language. If you cannot express that you feel a certain way, can anybody ever really understand how you feel? Can you create a thought using anything other than the languages you know? If not, your mind must be limited to your vocabulary and thus, you are no master.

A third day, Quinn introduces himself as Peter Stillman. Again, Stillman fails to recognize him and seems to believe that Quinn is his son, Peter Stillman Jr., yet he speaks calmly. He tells Quinn that "[w]hen the bad days come, [he] think[s] of the ones that were good. Memory is a great blessing" he assures him (84). Quinn does not protest although he himself has chosen to erase *all* his memories to escape his own "bad days". Nevertheless, Stillman Sr., thinking that he has passed on his knowledge to his son, proclaims, "I'll be able to die happily now, Peter" (86). This statement, although seemingly whimsical, comes to ring true, much to Quinn's misery. The next day Quinn finds that Stillman Sr. has checked out of his hotel and the trail is forever lost (90).

### **Quinn meets his maker**

Quinn figures that he could use the help of a real detective and decides to look up the actual Detective Paul Auster. There is only one "Paul Auster"<sup>7</sup> in the phone book so Quinn assumes that he must be the detective. Much to Quinn's despair, "Paul Auster" is not a detective but a writer. Quinn, nevertheless, decides to reveal to him his entire involvement with the Stillmans. He gives the check written by Virginia Stillman to

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<sup>7</sup> Quotation marks are used around the name of the fictional character "Paul Auster" to differentiate between him and the actual author of the text.

“Paul Auster” who promises to cash it in for him. The two men have lunch in “Auster’s” apartment and after the meal, Quinn feels “[t]ears lurk[ing] mysteriously behind his eyes, and his voice seem[s] to tremble” (97). Although Quinn is certainly insecure, this sentence seems relatively out of place. At no other time in the book does Auster credit him with such blatantly physical symptoms of sadness. Johan Karlsson contends that over the duration of the book Quinn is continuously growing aware of the fact that his existence is purely fictional (28). Karlsson points to the narrator on the very first page of *City of Glass* who says that “[m]uch later, when he was able to think about the things that happened to him, [Quinn] would conclude that nothing was real except chance” (3). He does not reach this conclusion while visiting “Paul Auster” but if Karlsson’s argument is a sensible one it is possible to interpret Quinn’s emotional weakness as the beginning of his realization.

If Paul Auster claims that Quinn’s life is how he imagined his own had he not met his second wife, then it is plausible to imagine that the character “Paul Auster” is a representation of Paul Auster as he *does* live his life. This theory is supported by the introduction of “Paul Auster’s” wife as Siri, the actual name of the author’s wife, and his son Daniel, also the name of the author’s actual son (101-102). The theory that the Stillmans attempted to contact the real Paul Auster coincides with this idea of Paul Auster’s presence in the book – although on a different level. As Quinn speaks to “Paul Auster” he is submitted to this presence and thus he begins to feel a sadness that, to him, is still unexplainable.

During their lunch, “Paul Auster” explains his current work on *Don Quixote* to Quinn; the theories that he presents can be related to Quinn’s situation in *City of Glass*. Foremost is the matter of initials: Daniel Quinn and Don Quixote share the same. This coincidence is quite fantastical and mirrors Stillman Sr.’s creation of Henry Dark, who shares the same initials as Humpty Dumpty. As Quinn contemplates this it seems he realizes that such a meaningful connection as is drawn between the man and Humpty Dumpty is anything but an invention and perhaps he asks himself if it is not probable, then, that his own connection to Don Quixote is an invention. (129).

Karlsson describes *Don Quixote* as a *mise en abyme* – a frame within a frame, the smaller frame mirroring the larger one – to *City of Glass* (29). “Auster’s” theory is that “Cervantes [hired] Don Quixote to decipher the story of Don Quixote himself” and states triumphantly that “[t]here’s great beauty to it” (100). If Don Quixote is



responsible for the transfer of the story from his squire, to the barber and the priest, to the bachelor, his tale mirrors *City of Glass* if, as Bernd Herzogenrath puts it, “Auster” is really the same person as both the Stillmans (71). The fact that Stillman Jr. contacts Quinn owes to a recommendation he receives from one Michael Saavedra – the last name of Miguel de Cervantes (the author of *Don Quixote*). It is this event that sets off the story into which Quinn enters.

“Auster”, after having enlightened Quinn about *Don Quixote*, “lean[s] back on the sofa [and] smile[s] with a certain ironic pleasure” (100). This irony goes unexplained and Auster writes that “the precise nature of [“Auster’s”] pleasure elude[s] Quinn”. It is magnificent, yet fitting, to interpret “Auster’s” pleasure as that of a man watching his work, in this case Daniel Quinn and his predicament, and wallowing in its finesse. As previously mentioned, Quinn believes that the author of a novel and the detective within are interchangeable; thus, Marjorie Worthington dubs Daniel Quinn “a modern-day Don Quixote”. *City of Glass*, however, reaches an even graver state of complexity than *Don Quixote*; the question of authorship is a confusing one, when referring to the author of the book within the book. The end of *City of Glass* reveals this added mystery that will be discussed further on.

Eventually, “Auster’s” wife and son come home and Quinn feels like he is being mocked, knowing that his life could have been just as “Auster’s” is. He gets up to leave and “Auster” asks him, “[a]re you in the book?” (102). He is referring to the phone book but it seems as if, at the same time, he is asking Quinn if he has realized that he is in fact only a character in *City of Glass*. Auster, then, writes, “[y]es,” said Quinn. “The only one” (103). Again, this refers to the phone book but Quinn is also saying, subconsciously perhaps, that he exists only in the book, *City of Glass*.

Auster writes that Quinn, upon returning to his apartment and cursing his lack of leads in the Stillman case, stays away from the mirror because he cannot look himself in the eyes “[f]or some reason” (105). This reason, like the reason for Quinn’s “lurk[ing] tears” and for “Auster’s” ironic pleasure, goes unexplained. It is possible, if the theory presented above concerning the phone book is to be verified, to imagine that Quinn is fearful of himself. He does not know what he will see if he looks into his own eyes and perhaps he fears that he will come to understand his existence as being limited to a work of literature. The memories of his dead wife and son might dissipate and, conceivably, he might too. He tries to distract himself from these thoughts and

sits down to watch a Mets game only to realize, when they are losing, that he really does not care anymore (105). Unable to reach Virginia Stillman and without hope of solving the case, Quinn decides that his only option is to watch over Peter Stillman Jr.'s house so that he can intervene if his father comes to kill him. He is severely unstable and he cannot think of anything concerning himself because it scares him too much. Thus, he empties his bank account of its bulk and takes residence in an alleyway opposite the Stillmans' house (112).

### **Quinn falls in and out of denial**

For months, Quinn lives in the alleyway watching over the Stillmans' house. He eats just enough to stay alive and replaces sleep with short naps so as not to let his tiredness encroach on his vigil. Every waking moment he devotes to the protection of Peter Stillman Jr., to the case. As for his bowels, a bin for garbage suffices – the same bin he jumps into to protect himself from bad weather (116). Staying unseen and away from the law is not an issue as Auster writes that Quinn “melt[s] into the walls of the city” (116). It would seem that Auster is slowly dissolving Quinn into the city of New York, or, if you will, a city of glass. Quinn's existence is limited to this City of Glass, yet he will ultimately see through it. Hence, the title could refer to the transparency of this work of fiction, both from the readers outside and from the characters within.

Once his money runs out, Quinn reluctantly leaves his alleyway and calls “Paul Auster” in the hope that he will give him the money from Virginia Stillman's check as he had promised. “Auster” tells Quinn that the check bounced and that Stillman Sr. has committed suicide, jumping off the Brooklyn Bridge. Quinn hangs up immediately and calls the home of Peter and Virginia Stillman; the phone number is disconnected. With no trace of any of the Stillmans, Quinn cannot proceed with the case seeing as it no longer appears to exist, or, perhaps, to ever have existed at all. Quinn's purpose of being Detective Paul Auster has been depleted. He thinks only of returning home to his apartment where he might revive the calm and eventless routines of combining with the personas of William Wilson and Max Work to produce a living. But upon entering his old apartment, he finds that it has been cleaned out and leased to a new tenant. All his possessions are gone. “He ha[s] come to the end of himself. He could feel it now”, Auster writes, “as though a great truth

had finally dawned in him. There was nothing left” (125). Karlsson theorizes that the Stillman case “seems to be a fiction created by the narrator in order to make Quinn aware that *he* is a fictional character too” (39, my emphasis). Quinn hopes to relax in his home in order to faze his thoughts and realizations born from the sudden liquefaction of his detective work, but his denial is brutally prevented by the discovery of his, now, former home. As a result he is forced to accept the truth that he is but a creation of thought. He seems to do so as Auster writes, through the conscience of Quinn, that “he [is] gone, everything [is] gone” (125).

### **Quinn goes up in words**

Banished from getting “back into his own story”, Quinn walks into the apartment where Peter Stillman Jr. lived (Karlsson, 46). His reason is plain desire, and perhaps curiosity. Since “it no longer matter[s] to him what happen[s]”, he has no fear of any possible consequences, a concept that pays no dividends to a man aware of his ultimate non-existence (Auster, 126). The apartment is completely empty and Quinn, wanting only sleep, finds a small room to settle in. He removes all his clothing and throws it down an airshaft; he is now alone with his red notebook and his pen. He sleeps and wakes, unsure if it is night or day. He thinks of the life he led before Stillman Jr. called him; it had been an invitation to join the case, a fictional experiment that would gift a fictional enlightenment to a fictional Quinn. Max Work is no more, neither is William Wilson. Yet, “Quinn [can]not bring himself to feel sorry” and he “wave[s] goodbye to them in his mind” (128).

The next time he wakes, Quinn finds a tray of food by his side. He does not question the improbability of this occurrence because he knows it, as he, is not real. Instead he eats and proceeds to write until it is dark. He writes questions asking about the logic behind his actions as well as the strange coincidences that take place in his story. He wonders, for instance, what word the map of his life’s movements would spell (129). It almost seems that Quinn is asking these questions of Paul Auster; he is curious as to why Auster chose to write about one thing and to neglect another. Every time he wakes, Quinn finds a new tray of food but he also finds that the hours of dark continuously grow to defeat the hours of light. Eventually, there is not enough time for him to eat. Instead, he chooses to use the little time he has to write in his notebook.

Auster writes that “[l]ittle by little, Quinn [is] coming to the end;” he is not only running out of light, but also of pages in his notebook (130). Quinn loses interest in himself and writes instead about “the infinite kindness of the world and all the people he ha[s] ever loved”, to him, “[n]othing matter[s] now but the beauty of all this” (130-131). He knows that there is no place left for him. He must fill the red notebook with his words and then he must vanish. Quinn is not alive so he cannot die, but his story must have an end. He asks, of Paul Auster perchance, “[w]hat will happen when there are no more pages in the red notebook?” (131). Conceivably, Auster means him to ask, of “the state of is-ness that [is] the ground on which the happenings of the world [take] place”, what will happen when there are no more days in his life (111).

On the final two pages of the book, the narrator speaks of himself. He claims to be – like Cervantes in *Don Quixote* – only the editor of the story, which he says comes from Quinn’s notes in the red notebook. This is, of course, a lie; Quinn does not even buy the notebook until page 38. The narrator says that he accompanied his friend, “Paul Auster”, to the apartment where they found the red notebook. According to the narrator, “Auster” should have done more to help Quinn and even goes so far as to say that he “behaved badly throughout” the whole ordeal (132). John Zilcosky writes that Paul Auster is “trying to distance himself from his “bad behavior”: his mistreatment of Quinn (his alter ego) as well as his writing a fiction too narcissistically tied to his own life”. Thus, the narrator would be, solely, a device that Paul Auster uses to mitigate his own conscience, much like William Wilson is to Daniel Quinn. Completing the comparison, Quinn could be to Paul Auster what Max Work is to Quinn.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this essay has been to assess the search for, lack of, and need of an identity in *City of Glass*. This has been done primarily through the analysis of Daniel Quinn’s psychological development throughout the book. The story begins with Quinn living in isolation; he has removed himself from the social circle he once belonged to, which included his wife and son, now dead. He pens novels using the pseudonym William Wilson whom he strangely sees as a separate being from himself. He possesses various states of mind through which he identifies himself; thus, he

avoids facing himself and his identity crisis that is born from the loss of his family and the consequent feeling that his life serves no purpose. He then tumbles into the Stillman case that serves as yet another distraction.

Quinn makes use of the identity of Max Work, the detective in his novels, to tackle the case that he has been given by chance. Paul Auster, however, gives him one more persona to carry: the detective Quinn is pretending to be, one “Paul Auster”. This revelation is the beginning of a spiral that, possibly, leads to Quinn’s understanding of his existence as purely fictional. As Quinn delves deeper into the case, Manhattan, the city he lives in, begins to seem more and more like a house of mirrors. Auster reflects traits of his own person in his characters and they all seem to share numerous likenesses. Quinn mirrors Stillman Jr., Paul Auster appears to shine through the theories of Stillman Sr., Quinn and “Paul Auster” lead very similar lives, at least before the death of Quinn’s family, and so on. At last, it seems like Paul Auster himself is the root of all the different identities in *City of Glass*. The couple of pages in which the narrator introduces himself and rebukes “Paul Auster” have the effect that they instead drag Paul Auster, the empirical world author, into the story.

When taking heed of Ihab Hassan’s claim that “the Self [...] is really an empty ‘place’ where many selves come to mingle and depart”, it is possible to deduce that Quinn represents Paul Auster’s empty ‘place’ (845). He is fictional and over time he becomes aware of it. This is especially suitable in the end of the book when he has been stripped of all his add-on identities as well as his original identity and he eventually ceases to be; he goes up in words. This relates closely to the work of Stillman Sr. that concerns the impurities of language and the quest for a flawless language of God. Paul Auster, it seems, is asking about the relevance of language to our existence and saying, plainly, that the languages at man’s disposal are flawed and cannot express with pure truth, what anyone attempts to express.

Zilcosky believes that, in the end, Quinn simply falls into utter madness. Yet, this theory does not suffice if Auster is to be trusted when he claims that any “curious details [that] are not truly relevant to what [he] is trying to say [...] have to go”, and when considering the numerous curious details presented in this essay that support the argument that Quinn becomes aware of his fictitiousness (Freeman). Thus, Quinn does not become a madman although while staying in the Stillmans’ apartment, he is surrounded by emptiness. Instead, he writes and writes – trying to express, as best he

can, everything he needs to express before the pages in his notebook run out. Finally, Daniel Quinn does not come to a wholesome understanding of his own identity, but he does succeed in questioning the basis upon which and the manner in which man is taught to understand himself. Ironically, *City of Glass*, a mystery novel, presents no final all-encompassing solution. Quinn's search for identity ends with his disappearance into nothingness. Nevertheless, Paul Auster writes, through the voice of the puppet narrator, that "wherever [Quinn] may have disappeared to, I wish him luck" (132).

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