

**Two Subtexts of Paul Auster's *Ghosts***

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Tutkielmani on subtekstianalyysi Paul Austerin romaanista *Ghosts* (1986, suom. *Aaveita*). Tämä lyhyehkö, metafyyssisen dekkarin muotoon puettu teksti toimii pitkälti intertekstuaalisella tasolla; itse 1900-luvun puolivälin New Yorkiin sijoittuva perustarina on koruttoman yksinkertainen ja päättyy arvoituksellisesti. Siksi tekstin keskeisten ongelmien analysointi subtekstien tarjoamien ulkopuolisten kiintopisteiden kautta tuntuu luontevalta.

Subteksti on kaunokirjallisen tekstin tulkinnan apuväline, toinen teksti, jonka kautta lukija voi osoittaa primaaritekstin elementeille merkityksiä. Venäläisessä kirjallisuudentutkimuksessa syntynyt subtekstianalyysi kuuluu laajaan intertekstuaalisten ilmiöiden tutkimuskenttään, ja sitä voidaan soveltaa tapauksiin, joissa tekstien välinen kytkentä on selvästi osoitettavissa. Samantyyppiseen mekanismiin viittaa myös kirjallisen alluusion käsite, jonka pohjalta luotu malli muodostaa osan tutkielmani teorianrungosta.

Austerin romaania tulkitsen kahden siihen kiinteästi kytkeytyvän subtekstin kautta. Ensimmäinen näistä, Henry David Thoreaun *Walden* (1854, suom. *Elämää metsässä*) on amerikkalaisen kirjallisuuden kaanoniin kuuluva individualismin ja luonnonmukaisen elämäntavan ylistys. Toisena - ei-kirjallisena - subtekstinä analysoin Brooklyn Bridge -sillan symboloimaa teknologista kehitysuskkoa, joka näyttäytyy osana Yhdysvaltain historiaa ja maan keskeisiä kansallisia myyttejä. Lopuksi tutkin vielä näiden kahden subtekstin suhdetta toisiinsa.

Thoreau-subteksti kiinnittyy varsinkin kielen, havainnoinnin ja tarinankertomisen teemoihin, joita *Ghosts* pohjimmiltaan käsittelee. Austerin tekstin päähenkilö yksityisetsivä Blue jää työtehtävänsä vangiksi, kuin henkilöksi jonkun toisen kirjoittamaan tarinaan, ja ulospääsy vaatii sisäistä muutosta. Thoreaun noudattama transsendentalismin filosofia antaa yhden mahdollisen vastauksen siihen, millaisena tämä muutos voidaan nähdä. Thoreau myös korostaa yksilön autonomiaa, johon liittyvät kysymykset nousevat *Ghosts*in tulkinnassa keskeisiksi.

Brooklyn Bridge -subtekstin edustama teknologias-kapitalistinen maailmankuva taas samastuu Bluen mielessä häntä edeltäviin sukupolviin. Tämä tehokkuutta ja yhteiskunnan jatkuvaa progressiivista kehitystä korostava ideologia voidaan nähdä Austerin tekstissä päähenkilöä kontrolloivana, jopa kahlitsevana voimana.

Analysoitujen subtekstien keskinäinen suhde on riitaisa: ideologisesti ne asettuvat monessa mielessä toistensa vastakohtiksi. Yksi pääargumenteistani onkin, että tämä vastakohtaisuus näkyy jännitteenä primaaritekstissä, erityisesti päähenkilö Bluen ajatusmaailmassa. Jännite purkautuu vasta tarinan loppukohtauksessa, joka voidaan tulkita henkilöhahmon pakona kertomuksen mielivallasta.

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## 1. Introduction

This thesis examines *Ghosts*, a novel by Paul Auster, through its subtexts. There are four main reasons for my decision to choose subtext analysis as the theoretical framework of my thesis. Firstly, it recognises the essential role of the reader in meaning-making, offering a comparatively down-to-earth approach to the study of literature. Secondly, it does not treat a work of fiction as a closed system but widens the space of interpretation beyond the limits of the text, which in my opinion renders the analytic process itself more interesting than a mere close reading of any one literary text would be. Because of its exploratory and possibly interdisciplinary nature, this kind of analysis may sometimes require a certain amount of versatility, but it also gives a lot in return. Thirdly, subtext analysis is potentially capable of providing tangible results that actually make a difference for the reader, which is more than can be said about some other - less down-to-earth -ways of examining texts. Fourthly, the text I have chosen for study explicitly invites the reader to pay attention to its subtexts.

When a collection of essays on Auster was published in 1995,<sup>1</sup> the selection dealt with every prose work he had written so far except *Ghosts*. This short and enigmatic piece of fiction has not received much attention as an independent text; it has been examined primarily as a part of *The New York Trilogy*, Auster's commercial breakthrough. On the other hand, despite the fact that Auster has had a relatively wide readership for the last fifteen years and many of his books have received critical acclaim, few serious studies have been made on his writing on the whole. Plenty of

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Barone, ed., *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1995).

articles have been written,<sup>2</sup> but book-length studies are not available except for a recent book by Berndt Herzogenrath.<sup>3</sup> This may result from Auster's versatility, his tendency to intertwine his texts with different genres, which may to some readers look like inconsistency. Another reason could be the fact that the postmodernist quality of his fiction does not prevent it from being exceptionally readable. In spite of the inward complexity of Auster's texts, this readability, or simplicity of language, may have been interpreted by some as 'popular' in the derogatory sense of the word. Auster is simultaneously easy to read and difficult to grasp.

Thematically, what a majority of Auster's texts have in common is that they explore the force of chance; instead of planned and motivated action, it is often totally unexpected events that move the plot forward. Most stories by Auster have their main setting in New York, either Manhattan or Brooklyn, and the focus is usually on an individual who goes through a series of personal crises. To date, Auster has produced nine novels: *City of Glass* (1985), *Ghosts* (1986), *The Locked Room* (1986), *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), *Moon Palace* (1989), *The Music of Chance* (1990), *Leviathan* (1992), *Mr. Vertigo* (1994) and *Timbuktu* (1999). He has also written several books of poetry, two essay collections, two autobiographical prose works, and three screenplays, including *Smoke* (1995).

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<sup>2</sup> Most scholarly articles written on Auster concentrate either on *The New York Trilogy* as a whole or the first part of the trilogy, *City of Glass*. Among such works are Roberta Rubenstein's "Doubling, Intertextuality, and the Postmodern Uncanny: Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*," *Literature-Interpretation-Theory* 9.3 (1998) 245-62; Carl D. Malmgren's "Detecting/Writing the Real: Paul Auster's *City of Glass*," *Narrative Turns and Minor Genres in Postmodernism*, eds. Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995) 177-201; Jeffrey T. Nealon's "Work of the Detective, Work of the Writer: Paul Auster's *City of Glass*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 42.1 (1996) 91-110; Steven Alford's "Spaced-Out: Signification and Space in Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*," *Contemporary Literature* 36 (1995) 613-32; and Norma Rowen's "The Detective in Search of the Lost Tongue of Adam: Paul Auster's *City of Glass*," *Critique* 32 (1991) 224-34. This list is far from exhaustive. *Critique* 39.3 (1998) is a theme issue containing six articles on Auster.

<sup>3</sup> Bernd Herzogenrath, *An Art of Desire: Reading Paul Auster* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999).

I begin my discussion in the next chapter by focusing on intertextuality as a fundamental part of textuality and introducing the theoretical basis of subtext analysis. After taking a closer look at the primary text, *Ghosts*, I then proceed to examine in detail the subtexts themselves. To be more exact, among several alternatives I have chosen two subtexts: those that looked particularly worth exploring, namely the one personified by Henry David Thoreau and the one symbolised by Brooklyn Bridge. A thorough interpretation of the interface between these subtexts and the primary text is the main objective of this thesis. The analysis touches on a wide variety of areas, such as the philosophy of transcendentalism, theories of representation, American history, and some different conceptions of technological progress. In an attempt to reveal a coherent intertextual pattern, the final chapter looks briefly at the relationship between the two subtexts.

A number of choices were necessary because of the interdisciplinary characteristics of the analysis. In particular, the chapter on Brooklyn Bridge rests on the postmodern notions that deny the possibility of objective history.<sup>4</sup> Even at a more general level, I do not claim to be presenting absolute truths. Instead, this thesis takes *Ghosts* as its focal point and looks for possible solutions to the problems the text poses. The theory of subtext analysis is used as a supporting framework, but a relatively loose one; it is the subtexts themselves that steer the course.

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<sup>4</sup> See Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978).

## 2. On Intertextuality and Subtexts

In the autumn of 1998, the literature department of Tampere University organised a lecture series during which a number of postgraduate students presented their research projects. The lecturers were given one common task in advance: they were to explain what it was that they understood by the term *textuality*, and how their understanding of the word might show in their projects as well as in their general attitudes to the study of literature. The answers varied very much in both length and content. A majority of the lecturers, however, considered the role of the reader worth emphasising in the process in which textual elements gain their meaning(s). A few answers stressed the view that textuality does not even exist without the reader: it appears whenever and wherever texts and readers manage to find each other.

Taken to its extreme, this view leads to the idea that each reader is free to attach meanings to a text, even meanings that other readers do not see in the text. This is not to say that the reader is solely responsible for meaning, but that the readers' different inner worlds - their personal histories and ways of cognition - create the need for different meanings and interpretations. The process of interpretation takes place in the reader's mind, not in the text itself, although texts control it by setting limits and pointing in certain directions. This openness of meaning, lack of fixed interpretation, is a typically poststructuralist idea in literary theory. According to Roland Barthes, for example, a literary text is not simply something that consists of elements produced by the author.<sup>5</sup> Instead, every text is a mixture of other texts written before it, other discourses, allusions, citations, metaphors, verbal figures; the author does not

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<sup>5</sup> Roland Barthes, "From Work To Text," *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1979) pp. 76-79.

have an exclusive right to the elements of his/her text. Text resembles mosaic in that it is a collection of things rather than a single entity produced by a single source. It follows that the concept of textuality in the above sense, realised during the process of reading, cannot be totally separated from the concept of intertextuality. As a matter of fact, for Roland Barthes all texts are intertextual, and the two concepts practically blend into one.

One way of approaching textuality, then, is through the idea that reading is always at some level affected by, or even dependent on, intertextuality. This assertion, however, does not lead very far unless the term intertextuality itself is clarified and explained. This word has been dealt with in so many different ways and it has had so many meanings that a short account of how the term developed and received these meanings is necessary. What follows is a selective survey, a look at a few major facets of the term.

### 2.1. Poststructuralist Intertextuality

As every writer on the topic makes sure to mention, the word intertextuality first appeared as a theoretical term in 1966 when Julia Kristeva published her essay on Mikhail Bakhtin. This Russian thinker had not been properly introduced in western countries before. His complex theories of dialogism cannot be examined here, but what Kristeva saw in Bakhtin's thinking was the idea that "any text is the absorption and transformation of another".<sup>6</sup> A literary text cannot be purely and totally original because it always contains, and is a product of, a dialogue. Previous usage of 'a literary word' (Bakhtin's term) is necessarily present when it is used again. In her

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<sup>6</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel," *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) p. 37.



analysis, Kristeva coined a new word for this phenomenon, concluding that "Bakhtinian dialogism identifies writing as both subjectivity and communication, or better, as intertextuality".<sup>7</sup> Cultural context, earlier or contemporary, inevitably finds its way to literary texts in one form or another. Both the form and the content of a text reflect the context in which it was written.

Kristeva's intertextuality, then, is a wide concept, referring to a number of ways in which the past, culture, and different discursive practices are realised in literary texts. Often these "influences"<sup>8</sup> are hardly detectable: they mix well in a text, having become organic parts of it. However, Kristeva as well as some later theorists of intertextuality have been criticised because while theoretically emphasising that texts gather into themselves masses of intertextual material whose origin may be impossible to locate, they take their own literary examples from clear cases in which the exact origin is easy to find.<sup>9</sup> This paradox is an interesting problem as far as intertextual analysis of texts is concerned: how can anyone truly analyse something (intertextual material) that by definition is hardly visible within a text? This question can cause difficulty in an analysis based on poststructuralist intertextual theory.

Roland Barthes had the same basic idea of intertextuality as Julia Kristeva. He wrote about "quotations without quotation marks" by which he meant that a text may look like a unified whole expressing nothing but the author's creative intention, but in fact always contains elements from other texts, cultural codes, thought patterns, and many kinds of other material.<sup>10</sup> The author is dead in the sense that any reader can re-

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<sup>7</sup> Kristeva, p. 39.

<sup>8</sup> I am using quotation marks because the word *influence* alone implies a comparative approach mainly interested in sources and authorial intention.

<sup>9</sup> Anna Makkonen, "Onko intertekstuaalisuudella mitään rajaa?" *Intertekstuaalisuus: Suuntia ja sovelluksia*, ed. Auli Viikari (Helsinki: SKS, 1991) p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> Barthes, p. 77.

create meaningful textual elements during the process of reading. As Anna Makkonen puts it, readers are parts of the textual network as well as the author.<sup>11</sup> The author's position as the most important force behind the text seems questionable because a significant amount of textual material comes from somewhere else than the author's creative process, expanding the reader's role. This celebration of the death of the author makes Barthes's intertextual theory quite political in its implications. Giving the reader some power of creation, his ideas point towards a rejection of authority.<sup>12</sup>

## 2.2. Genre as Intertextuality

Theoretically, intertextual links between individual texts are not the main concern of poststructuralist intertextuality, as the anonymous textual practices present in a text are given priority. A natural consequence of this is that links to larger entities than single texts, where established, receive attention. As a result, genre conventions are important forms of intertextuality especially in so-called postmodern texts, whose relationships to respective genres can be relatively complex and creative. The popularity of parody and pastiche is an illustrative example of this tendency.

As regards the readers, their role in spotting allusions to the genre conventions relevant in each case is much easier than if they had to try to make sense of an endless anonymous intertextual web. In other words, when a text expresses awareness of its genre or makes a direct reference to it, an intertextual connection of a kind is established. For analysis, this kind of connection is fruitful because genres have names; they are usually identifiable entities which can be separated and examined to a

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<sup>11</sup> Makkonen, p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Judith Still and Michael Worton, Introduction, *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, ed. Judith Still and Michael Worton (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1990) pp. 20 - 21.

considerable degree. On the other hand, they are still examples of wide-ranging textual practices that control whole texts, and therefore well suited for the general theory of poststructuralist intertextuality. As John Frow has written, in intertextual theory questions of genre are comparable with questions of ideology.<sup>13</sup> Both are wide structures which can have an influence on the interpretation of the text after they are identified.

One significant quality of genres is that the reader's identification of them leads to a wide set of expectations. The reader of a detective novel, for example, would expect the plot to advance gradually - the detective gathering the evidence - towards its logical closure, the disentanglement of the case. Thus when the main character of Paul Auster's *Ghosts*, Blue, is introduced as a private eye and gets an assignment in the very beginning, many readers identify the genre as detective fiction and continue, expecting the text to follow the conventions of the genre. In the case of *Ghosts*, however, the expectations are not completely fulfilled because many questions asked by the text never receive a straightforward answer. The main point to make here is that texts can follow, resist or parody the conventions of a genre only by showing a profound awareness of them. In other words, intertextuality in the form of generic features is by definition intentional.

### 2.3. Subtext Analysis

The poststructuralist theory of intertextuality outlined above has been called "universal intertextuality" because of its emphasis on anonymous elements from outside, quotations without quotation marks which exist everywhere in literary texts,

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<sup>13</sup> John Frow, "Intertextuality and Ontology," *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, ed. Judith Still and Michael Worton (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1990) p. 46.

covering them completely.<sup>14</sup> The basic theoretical assumptions of this approach seem valid, but its direct practical consequences are more problematic than the theory per se. Textual analysis becomes much more difficult if the focus is on anonymous traces of other texts and discourses than if the analysis concentrates on clearly visible connections. Because of its detectability, the latter type of intertextuality obviously has more relevance to the reader.

On the other hand, a distinction must be made between intertextual research and traditional source criticism (comparative research) which focuses on establishing the sources and influences contributing to an author's work. As Makkonen points out, this kind of research has always something to do with the question of originality.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, intertextual research is not interested in the author's intention because the starting point is the assumption that literature uses literature, that "all texts are necessarily criss-crossed by other texts."<sup>16</sup> Proving the author's originality (or the lack of it) is not the point. Instead, intertextual analysis aims at demonstrating how texts form new sets of meaning together.

*Subtext analysis* is located between the two extremes of universal intertextuality and comparative points of view, concentrating on intertextual connections which can be proved but not taking the author's sources and influences as the object of analysis. Whatever sources the author might have, they only influence the writing process and do not make a semantic difference as far as reading is concerned. Pekka Tammi suggests a simple rule: a source has relevance to the author, a subtext to the reader. Subtexts, and the reader's knowledge of them, contribute to the interpretation of the

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<sup>14</sup> Makkonen, p. 22.

<sup>15</sup> Makkonen, pp. 13-15.

<sup>16</sup> Still and Worton, p. 30.

text. The search for the author's sources may at best lead to the establishment of a causal relationship, but locating a subtext always contributes to widening the semantic space.<sup>17</sup> In other words, a subtext turns the processes of reading and interpretation from textual to intertextual.

Evidently, as implied above, there are some hazards in the playground of subtext analysis, and the credibility of the results of analysis depends on how successfully one is able to avoid stepping into these traps. From a methodological point of view, one of the main objectives of subtext analysis is to challenge the claim that "to determine how an intertextual connection functions is to do so at the risk of establishing some sort of constitutive or essential property in the text that indirectly rests on a notion of authorial intentionality and originality".<sup>18</sup> To be sure, certain frequently used terms that describe intertextual relationships especially in relation to the question of genre, such as *imitation* and perhaps *parody*, can occasionally sound evaluative (and almost inevitably imply clear intention). However, these terms deal with very specific kinds of intertextuality, and subtext analysis does not even aim at reducing the function of the connection to such compact concepts, or at deciding the exact number of functions performed by the subtext. Rather, the goal is to reveal the fruitful interaction between texts and the complexity of semantic patterning when two textual worlds come together.

One must remember that the word *text* is used here in a wide sense. Subtexts do not necessarily have to be literary texts just because the primary text under analysis

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<sup>17</sup> Pekka Tammi, "Tekstistä, subtekstistä ja intertekstuaalisista kytkennöistä: Johdatusta Kiril Taranovskin analyysimetodiin," *Intertekstuaalisuus: Suuntia ja sovelluksia*, ed. Auli Viikari (Helsinki: SKS, 1991) pp. 71-72. An English version of this article, "Text, Subtext, Intertext: On Applying Taranovsky's Analytic Method (with Examples from Finnish Poetry)" was published in *Semiotica* 87 (1991).

<sup>18</sup> Kai Mikkonen, *The Writer's Metamorphosis. Tropes of Literary Reflection and Revision* (Tampere: Tampere UP, 1997) p. 54.

is. As a result, the term *intertextual* does not only refer to connections between two or more written works. An intertextual (or subtextual) link may as well lead to audiovisual texts, collective myths, or other recognisable patterns of thought. As far as analysis is concerned, the only thing required of a subtext is that it affects the interpretation of the primary text.

Subtextual reading and the analysis of subtexts, the method of which was first developed by the Russian scholar Kiril Taranovsky,<sup>19</sup> require of course that the reader has a relatively solid knowledge of the subtext. Otherwise the connection established in the primary text will either confuse the reader or simply remain unnoticed. For example, a reader with no knowledge of the history of slavery in the USA - if such readers exist - could never come to a full understanding of many scenes in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. As a part of the historical context, the institution of slavery serves as a very wide subtext, adding to the interpretation of the book. If readers know the subtext, they are able to connect it with the primary text and use their knowledge in the process of interpretation. Ideally, of course, the reader would have unlimited knowledge of any relevant subtext(s). In this respect, subtexts and generic conventions play similar roles in the process of reading: the more the readers know about them, the better understanding of the text they are likely to attain. This is how the concept of competence links up with questions of intertextuality.

Thorough investigations of subtextual connections, or alternatively *literary allusions*, have been rare in literary theory, considering the commonness and interpretative significance of the phenomenon. In practice, the two concepts (subtext

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<sup>19</sup> Taranovsky developed his model exclusively as a tool for the analysis of Osip Mandelstam's modernist poetry, the result being his *Essays on Mandelstam* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1976). See Tammi (pp. 60-76) for a compact description of Taranovsky's method.

and literary allusion) refer to two different facets of the same intertextual device; the choice of word has often been determined geographically rather than by differences in approach. Using *allusion* alone, without the attribute *literary*, to describe the same mechanism is rendered highly problematic by the dictionary meaning of the term, which restricts the use to tacit references only. In the pioneering articles discussed below, Ziva Ben-Porat and Carmela Perri use the concept of literary allusion, but in my analysis I prefer talking about subtexts because the term aptly highlights the spread of interpretation beyond the limits of the primary text, to a completely different level.

Ben-Porat describes the actualisation of a literary allusion as a four-stage process that starts off with *the recognition of a marker*.<sup>20</sup> The marker is the textual element that reveals the existence of a subtext once it is recognised in the primary text. If the reader's competence suffices, the second stage, namely *the identification of the subtext*, follows immediately.<sup>21</sup> The more openly the reference is made, proper names and direct quotations of well-known texts being the simplest cases, the more easily the reader creates the connection between the text and the subtext. This is where serious analysis can begin. In the third stage, the marker, as it appears in the primary text, receives new meanings from the subtext; the different context provided for the marker in the subtext results in *the modification of the marker's initial local interpretation*. In other words, the text presents a comment, a situation, or a direct problem that the subtext then sheds new light on. Theoretically, the process could

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<sup>20</sup> Ziva Ben-Porat, "The Poetics of Literary Allusion," *PTL: A Journal for Descriptive Poetics and Theory of Literature* 1.1 (1976) pp. 110-11.

<sup>21</sup> Instead of *subtext*, Ben-Porat uses expressions such as *referent text* and *evoked text*. She also employs the terms *sign*, *signal* and *marked* to describe the different components, or marking elements, of the connection. For present purposes, I have somewhat simplified the structuralist terminology.

come to an end here, but it usually continues to the fourth stage, which consists of *the activation of the whole subtext* as a means for interpreting the (whole) primary text, and the attempt to find more meaningful connections, to form further intertextual patterns between the two texts. In this stage, the analysis may easily lead to the appearance of new subtexts and, if no limits are set, to the mapping of practically endless intertextual networks.

Importantly, in the last stage of the process outlined by Ben-Porat, the immediate context of the initial marker no longer plays a role. The connection between the text and the subtext can be seen as metonymic because the link established through local segments becomes a relationship between the wholes, and the analysis must acknowledge and follow that development. The object of analysis can grow even further than to the level of individual texts; for example, the whole literary production of the author of the initial subtext may in some cases become thematically relevant.<sup>22</sup> When whole texts are examined, the most significant contribution for the interpretation of the primary text may well come from such segments of the subtext that are not part of the original connection. Ben-Porat illustrates this point by showing how one visible link from one text to another can activate a whole network of semantic links between these texts.<sup>23</sup>

Undoubtedly, the fruitfulness of any single subtext analysis is decided in the last two stages, especially the fourth, but the beginning of the whole process is important in demonstrating the connection techniques used. Carmela Perri, for example, lists different ways of referring to subtexts, i.e. different forms in which the marker can

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<sup>22</sup> Tammi, pp. 67-68.

<sup>23</sup> Ben-Porat, pp. 113-15.



appear.<sup>24</sup> The most straightforward way of establishing the connection, of course, is to name the subtext or one of its distinctive factors (for example, characters or places) explicitly, allowing the reader to jump directly to the stage of interpretation. Perri considers not only proper names but also direct quotations part of this category. In fact, all kinds of markers resemble proper names in that they always refer to specific entities.<sup>25</sup> Other categories are based on more subtle connection methods, different echoes and modifications of the subtext's form and content, ranging in length from a few words to the whole text.

According to Perri, the function of the marker is not merely to point towards a possible subtext. In addition, the same text segment indirectly specifies which particular properties of the subtext are relevant to the interpretation of the primary text.<sup>26</sup> In other words, Perri says, if the marker poses a problem while creating a connection to a subtext, the reader is likely to receive hints as to where in that subtext to look for answers. This is quite an optimistic idea as such, and one that may not be equally provable in all cases. True, the process seems to work according to these lines if a well-defined interpretative problem really exists to be solved,<sup>27</sup> but providing direct answers is not the only way in which subtexts can contribute to the interpretation of the primary text. As a matter of fact, sometimes a text uses its subtext primarily as an object of polemical discussion rather than as a tool for disentangling its own knots.<sup>28</sup> In still other cases, a text may assume a subtext with

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<sup>24</sup> Carmela Perri, "On Alluding," *Poetics* 7 (1978) pp. 304-05. Perri's term for subtext is *source text*.

<sup>25</sup> Perri, p. 291.

<sup>26</sup> Perri, pp. 291, 295-97.

<sup>27</sup> Perri (pp. 290-92) invents an illustrative example. In a novel, a wife says to her jealous husband: "I will not have you misinterpret my handkerchief." The subtext is *Othello*, and the enigmatic phrase points directly to the relevant themes in the play. The wife does not want to be victimised by her husband's jealousy.

<sup>28</sup> Tammi, p. 66.

the general goal of widening its semantic space, whether or not the subtext is able to provide any crucial problem-solving revelations. It is thus worth remembering that not all subtexts can be satisfactorily examined against one strictly defined framework, a fact illustrated by the two very different subtexts of Paul Auster's *Ghosts* that I have chosen for analysis.

To add one more facet to the function of the subtext, I would suggest that it is possible for a subtext to operate as a specific (extratextual) type of *mise en abyme*, a self-mirroring, or rather self-analysing, element in the sphere of the primary text. The relationship between a text and its subtext may be intertwined with the text's most fundamental essence, and the subtext may then allow the reader to understand this essence more deeply through highlighting the text's own self-reflexive elements. My analysis does not set out with the particular intention of proving this point, but the first subtext of *Ghosts* under scrutiny - the Thoreauvian one - does engage in throwing attention onto some central features of Auster's text. To the extent that *Ghosts* is a narrative about the act of writing (and reading), the subtext makes the nature of the text more thoroughly visible.

### 3. *Ghosts*

The second part of Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*, *Ghosts* is by far the shortest of the three texts and also the simplest as far as the story is concerned. It was first published in 1986, one year after the first part of the trilogy, *City of Glass*, came out. The third, *The Locked Room*, appeared in the same year. Later the three texts were published in one volume under the title of the trilogy.<sup>29</sup>

#### 3.1. The Story

The date when the story of *Ghosts* begins is stated explicitly: it is the 3rd of February, 1947. Blue, a private detective who has learned his skills from an older man called Brown, is hired by White, a man in disguise. The job is simple: Blue must keep an eye on another man named Black, write down everything he does and where he goes, and send a report to White once a week, as long as necessary. To make it even simpler for Blue, White has rented an apartment for him right across the street from where Black lives. The setting is Orange Street in Brooklyn Heights, not far from Brooklyn Bridge.<sup>30</sup>

The two men spend their time sitting by their windows in opposite buildings, Black writing or reading at his desk, Blue watching Black. Everything goes well except for the fact that nothing much happens. Blue sends in his weekly reports and gets his salary regularly from White, but he receives nothing else, no information on what the case is all about. Little by little, Blue starts developing theories about Black

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<sup>29</sup> Subsequent page numbers within the text refer to Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy: City of Glass. Ghosts. The Locked Room* (London: Penguin, 1990).

<sup>30</sup> Most minor characters are also named after colours: Green, Gray, Red, Redman, Gold, Violet.

and White in his own mind, growing frustrated because of the lack of action. He learns to know Black's ways so well that he does not have to watch him any more, and he also begins to take risks, talking to Black on several occasions in disguise, trying to make sense of the case. In addition, Blue attempts in vain to contact White for more information. At times, Blue tries to live his own life but it proves impossible: he has become the prisoner of the case. The situation remains practically the same for years, only Blue's mentality keeps gradually shifting for the worse. He begins to suspect that there is a conspiracy against him, that Black and White are somehow working together, even that there is only one man, Black, who disguises himself as White when needed. This man plays cat and mouse with Blue for some unknown but undoubtedly nasty purpose.

The story ends with a climax of a kind as far as action is concerned: Blue enters Black's apartment, is caught by fury and finally kills Black. The last paragraph of the text speculates on where Blue possibly went, but states that it is not important. The chronological starting point and endpoint of the narrative are carefully pointed out to the reader; whatever happens beyond is not of relevance for the simple reason that it does not belong to the story. Another way of seeing the end is that Blue's sudden burst of violence signifies his escape from the confines of the case, the narrative. He breaks free from the plight of the character of a book in order to decide on his own life.

At different points of the story, Black has once introduced himself to Blue as a private detective, once as a writer. In the final scene of confrontation, Black has finished whatever he was writing, and tells Blue that reading it would be futile; both men already know the story by heart. In this respect, as well as through the common role of the detective, Black works as a mirror image of Blue. After killing Black

(and, it seems, the detective in himself) Blue reads what his victim has written and finds that Black told him the truth: he knows the story by heart.

Thematically, as well as at the level of the plot, the ending of *Ghosts* is enigmatic. In spite of being a detective, Blue does not exactly solve the case or restore the equilibrium of the world of the narrative by any kind of intellectual effort. There is no closure as far as the case is concerned; the reader does not receive an explanation from Blue or the narrator, and many of the questions the reader might have are never answered. Are White and Black the same man? Why would he/they use Blue in their experiment? What was it that Black wrote and Blue read at the end? Where should readers look for meaning? It seems obvious that to find answers they have to abandon the passive role given to them by detective novels and many other kinds of fiction. *Ghosts* is a labyrinth for both the main character and the reader.

The point of view is Blue's throughout the text. The reader knows his thoughts and fears, learning more and more of the man's psyche as the story continues. And indeed, the story merely continues, remains almost unchanged till the end: it never unfolds in the real meaning of the word. The pages are filled with Blue's consciousness, occasionally interrupted by the narrator's remarks about what is going on. There are also memories of Blue's childhood as well as summaries of stories he has read or heard, including a description of the building of Brooklyn Bridge, and reflections on the book both Black and Blue read during the case, *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau. In Blue's conversations with Black, the latter turns out to be an expert on 19th century American literature, telling stories about Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. These figures from the canon of literary history join Blue's father as ghosts of the past in the protagonist's mind. The inevitable presence of history shows itself in *Ghosts* repeatedly.

### 3.2. Genre

It is not possible to bypass the topic of the genre completely when *The New York Trilogy* is analysed because the texts of the trilogy undoubtedly function as versions or transformations of the detective novel. *Ghosts* is no exception: Blue is a private eye, and everything is filtered through his (detective's) mind. In addition, the text's consciousness of the genre is shown by the fact that Blue watches detective films and is inspired by them, especially by *Out of the Past*, starring Robert Mitchum (pp. 191-193). The reader is constantly reminded of the genre the text supposedly belongs to.

It is, however, difficult to say whether *Ghosts* actually belongs to the genre of the detective novel, or whether it is a parody of genre conventions. The text has also been called an anti-detective novel.<sup>31</sup> Commonly, drawing the line between genuine works of a genre and its parodies is not easy because texts within a given genre may also contain revisions and criticism of genre conventions. Sometimes the case is that texts which parody that same genre just go a step further in commenting on the conventions. Thus the distinction between genuine works and parodies of genres can often be made only on the basis of how systematically the conventions are played with. The difference is one of degree, not of content or basic approach.<sup>32</sup>

The choice of the detective novel as the generic framework for *Ghosts* can be at least partly explained by the thematic emphases of the text. Firstly, one of the main themes is the analogy between Blue's situation in the story and the role of any fictional character created by an author. Blue feels like a puppet controlled by Black, trapped by the case with no chance of deciding what is going to happen next. In the

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<sup>31</sup> Alison Russell, "Deconstructing *The New York Trilogy*: Paul Auster's Anti-Detective Fiction," *Critique* 31.2 (1990): pp. 71-84.

<sup>32</sup> Heather Dubrow, *Genre* (London: Methuen, 1982) p. 25.

detective genre, the character's roles are usually relatively fixed; they realise highly specialised functions in the plot and are therefore even more thoroughly "trapped" by the genre and the author than characters in most other genres. The traditions of the genre effectively underline Blue's status as a fictional character, a puppet.<sup>33</sup> Secondly, the job of the detective is also implicitly compared with the processes of reading and writing in many places in the text. The chosen genre (form) is thus a way of making the themes (content) more visible.

The mind of the detective is at work all the time in the text of *Ghosts*, often speculating indecisively about everything concerning the case. Blue's thinking always seems to follow the same pattern after something happens. The following extract from the scene where Blue has just seen Black meet a woman demonstrates this pattern.

... should he stick with Black or divert his attention to the woman? This could possibly accelerate matters a bit, but at the same time it could mean that Black would be given the chance to slip away from him, perhaps for good. In other words, is the meeting with the woman a smoke-screen or the real thing? Is it a part of the case or not, is it an essential or contingent fact? Blue ponders these questions for a while and concludes that it's too early to tell. Yes, it could be one thing, he tells himself. But it could also be another. (p. 183)

Blue's obvious difficulty in answering any of the questions he presents to himself has a slightly comical effect, boosted by the fact that speculation like this occurs repeatedly page after page. The reader gains the sense that the mind of the detective is not only spotlighted but also parodied.

My analysis of *Ghosts* does not concentrate on the question of the genre in itself. The main object of analysis is elsewhere, in the subtexts present in the work.

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<sup>33</sup> Chris Pace, "Escaping from the Locked Room: Overthrowing the Tyranny of Artifice in Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*," home page <<http://www.bluecricket.com/auster/articles/thesis.html>> 25.11.1999.

However, the topic is not avoided, it cannot be because the defining figure of the genre in question, the detective, is present all the time during the introduction of these subtexts to the reader. The detective's consciousness is also the centre of the problems posed by the text and, consequently, the location where different subtexts meet.

### 3.3. The Ghosts

In *Ghosts* as well as the whole trilogy, the theme of writing, the work of a writer, is brought forward and repeatedly placed side by side with the work of a detective. Together with the dimension of genre parody, the idea that the detective does not really solve anything, this contributes to the fact that the trilogy does not, strictly speaking, belong to the genre of detective novels. Rather than simply detectives, the main characters are writer-detectives whose work combines spying with creation, or at least they have some kind of a mirror character - such as Black - who takes care of the writing.

The emphasis on the act of writing and the narrator's occasional remarks about the narrative conventions used ("a story cannot dwell on what might have been" [p. 194]) bring up the question of metafictionality. *Ghosts* has an indisputable self-reflexive quality as a text, but this attribute is never spotlighted as in truly metafictional texts. For example, *Snow White* by Donald Barthelme reflects on the operation of its own codes to the extent that the text seems to parody both fiction and reality; the fragmentary narrative is even interrupted by a series of questions for the reader: "13. Holding in mind all works of fiction since the War, in all languages, how would you rate the present work, on a scale of one to ten, so far? (Please circle your answer)"<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Donald Barthelme, *Snow White* (New York: Atheneum, 1967) p. 83.



By drawing attention to the artificiality of textual meaning, metafiction denies the ability of language to reflect reality. This tendency shows itself most demonstratively in what Paul Maltby calls introverted postmodernist fiction.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, *Ghosts* maintains a contact with reality: the narrative flows without strikingly experimental tricks, and the setting (the 'real' city of New York) anchors the text quite tightly to a historical context. The subtle self-reflexive tone of the text merely acts as a narrative spice. The writers of metafiction - such as Barth, Barthelme, or Pynchon - are no more than distant textual ghosts.

Some more visible ghosts can be found on the level of the story itself. In a conversation between Blue and Black (Blue is wearing one of his disguises), Black talks about the famous people who lived in Brooklyn or otherwise visited Orange Street: Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, Abraham Lincoln, Henry Ward Beecher, and others. The presence of these men, says Black, can still be felt in the place: "Yes, there are ghosts all around us" (p. 207). Later he goes on to talk about Nathaniel Hawthorne who is referred to as another ghost on the grounds that "a writer has no life of his own. Even when he's there, he's not really there" (p. 209). Here the similarity between the writer and the detective becomes apparent. Blue's job as a detective is not to be seen, at least not as himself, to be ghostlike in comparison with the people around him.

Besides appearing in Black's stories, Henry David Thoreau, one of the ghosts, plays a role in the text through the fact that Blue sees Black read Thoreau's most famous book, *Walden*, then runs across it in a bookstore, buys it and starts reading himself. The text makes several references to *Walden*, including the narrator's

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<sup>35</sup> Paul Maltby, *Dissident Postmodernists: Barthelme, Coover, Pynchon* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1991) pp. 37-39.

ambiguous statement that the book, if only Blue had the patience to read it through carefully, would little by little help him to understand all about the case and to change his life for the better. There are also other hints that knowing *Walden* is essential for Blue if he wants to survive the case.

History does not only appear in the form of the ghosts mentioned. Blue's personal history is closely attached to the events of the past. One episode relates the construction of Brooklyn Bridge, which in Blue's mind is associated with his father (pp. 177-179). There is also another embedded story which deals with the theme of father and son, describing a dramatic event in the Alps. A young man runs across the frozen body of his father who has disappeared in the area when the son was a little boy. The focus of interest in the story, terrifying Blue, is the fact that now the son is older than his father whose body has been completely preserved by the ice (pp. 179-180). The generations are somehow not in the proper order for Blue whose own father, a police detective, died when Blue was little. Blue feels the obligation to equal the achievement of the earlier generation represented by his father and Brown, his teacher who has retired after handing over the business to Blue. In the story, these two father-figures are ghosts in the same way as the literary giants mentioned: they are not really there, but they are still there.

#### 3.4. A Poststructuralist Subtext?

In his thesis, Chris Pace builds an enthusiastic argument about how Blue and the other main characters in the trilogy find themselves confined to "the tyranny of artifice" by the author. Gradually, they gain awareness of their situation as prisoners, as characters in a narrative orchestrated by someone else, which finally results in a climax, the characters' escape from the narrative. At the same time, Pace claims, the

readers have to leave behind the inactive role "a conventionally structured novel" sets up for them and use the text, in Auster's phrase, as "a springboard for the imagination".<sup>36</sup> In leaving behind the tight framework of the narrative, Blue serves as a kind of model reader in spite of his role as a character.

The double identity of Blue as a character in one text and a reader of another (the case, or *Walden*) is an interesting aspect closely connected with the problem posed by the ending of the text. If Blue really symbolically breaks through the boundaries of authorial control, setting an example for (other) readers, is he not a truly poststructuralist reader? A character's breakout from the story could certainly signify the death of the author. In addition, the fact that the text poses problems but does not provide clear answers awards readers the freedom to look for answers and meaning by themselves. In a way, poststructuralist literary theory resembles a subtext here in that its concept of reading seems to be reflected in the ending of *Ghosts*. This may, of course, imply that the whole story of Blue portrays his development from a passive reader to a creative one.

Paul Auster has often been labelled a postmodernist on various grounds, mainly because his novels avoid traditional kinds of closure and textual logic, conveying a sense of chaos rather than any kind of teleology. Besides pointing out the fact that Auster himself refutes this label, Bernd Herzogenrath claims that in many ways Auster has more in common with poststructuralist theory than postmodernism as such.<sup>37</sup> This is true, and the choice seems almost too obvious when Herzogenrath goes on to use Lacan's psychoanalytic theory and Derrida's deconstruction to analyse

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<sup>36</sup> Paul Auster, *The Art of Hunger. Essays, Prefaces, Interviews and The Red Notebook* (New York: Penguin, 1997) p. 311.

<sup>37</sup> Herzogenrath, p. 3.

four of Auster's novels. *City of Glass*, for example, is more than inviting for a Lacanian reading, and if the whole trilogy was closely examined together with Derrida's writings, it might start to resemble an introductory guide-book for deconstructionists. With this in mind, it is hardly a surprise that the poststructuralist conception of the reader suits the analysis of the ending of *Ghosts* so well.

I have little interest in wondering whether these poststructuralist aspects in Auster are conscious, or whether this kind of theoretical subtext somehow significantly differs from those found in other branches of culture. There are plenty of more fascinating subtexts and other topics to be found in *Ghosts* alone. The two subtexts I have chosen for close examination, *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau and the ideas represented by Brooklyn Bridge, come from two very different worlds of thought. However, when these subtexts are brought under analysis together, it becomes evident that they have connections not only to Auster's text but also to each other. Following the principles of intertextual theory, the analysis does not attempt any evaluation of the quality or originality of Auster's text, but tries to bring forward interpretative contexts for its examination.

#### 4. The Subtexts

A subtext is only absolutely necessary for the reader if a text poses a problem it does not even attempt to solve. More commonly, however, texts tend to encourage their readers towards extratextual sources slightly more subtly, by using means and expressions that could be satisfactorily understood in the intratextual context alone. As the above theoretical discussion of subtexts shows, the directness of the reference (i.e. of the triggering expression, or as Ben-Porat calls it, the marker) itself is a different question. The two subtexts introduced and analysed here are explicitly pointed to in the text of *Ghosts*. As Tammi writes, this is one of the possible starting points for subtext analysis but not the only one.<sup>38</sup> The primary text can also manifest the need for a subtext without directly referring to one. In the latter case, the text would somehow give hints to the reader that the interpretative problem created demands an outside source to be solved. It is thus essential that the reader feels a subtext is needed to answer one or more questions.

Typically, the extent to which these questions are clearly shaped ones may vary a great deal from one subtextual connection to another. As in the example mentioned above in chapter 2.3. (the institution of slavery and *Huckleberry Finn*), a wide historical or ideological subtext may solve interpretative problems of a very general type: How can the events described take place? Why is it possible for the characters to behave the way they do? Is there perhaps a specific historical or ideological background that can serve to explain some aspect of the narrative world? These questions may lead to subtexts, but it is important to emphasise that there must be a

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<sup>38</sup> Tammi, p. 76.

limit to the width of the subtext. Explaining how the world works does not belong to subtext analysis.

The two subtexts chosen for the analysis of *Ghosts* reflect the fact that not all subtexts can be pushed into one category. Thoreau's *Walden* has been woven into the story of *Ghosts* tightly: the main characters Blue and Black actually read the book. What could be a more direct and obvious way for a subtext to appear in a literary work than that? Brooklyn Bridge is a completely different example. The bridge dominates a few pages of the story (pp. 177-180), but elsewhere it plays no real role. The presence of the bridge in the story contributes to the creation of meaning in an indirect way: it works as a symbol for a wider context. The analysis tries to show that the two subtexts mentioned do not only appear differently in the text, but they also work in different ways as far as interpretation is concerned.

#### 4.1. Thoreau

Henry David Thoreau (1817-62) belongs to the American literary canon as the writer of *Walden* and a few significant essays, including "Resistance to Civil Government" (or "Civil Disobedience", both names are used) and "Life Without Principle". He wrote a great deal on nature but also made a significant contribution to social thought, especially through his criticism of narrow materialism.<sup>39</sup> Thoreau is most widely known for the experiment which is recorded in *Walden*: he lived for two years in a small hut he built himself by Walden Pond near Concord, his little home town. During his lifetime, Thoreau was not able to make a proper living by his

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<sup>39</sup> F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford UP, 1941) p. 78.

writing, nor did he receive much recognition for it.<sup>40</sup> He was considered an extreme individualist and an eccentric. For Thoreau, the consciousness of the individual was the starting point for all practical or philosophical considerations, not the framework provided by any outside authority. When he wrote about political or economic systems, he did it strictly from the perspective of the individual.

As far as Auster is concerned, his intimate knowledge of Thoreau is manifest in a number of his works. In *Leviathan*, for example, Benjamin Sachs has adopted an attitude of deep admiration to the author of *Walden*, living according to the principles of civil disobedience like Thoreau did and even growing a beard just because "Henry David had worn one".<sup>41</sup> *Hand to Mouth*, Auster's memoir, deals with quite a few Thoreauvian questions, such as the problem of making a living without losing one's "purity of purpose",<sup>42</sup> and in an interview Auster mentions that "the spirit of Thoreau is dominant" in *Ghosts*.<sup>43</sup> Elsewhere, Auster has referred to the Concord man as "a great stylist" and "a brilliant visionary."<sup>44</sup> There are also certain thematic similarities between Thoreau's and Auster's writings; for example, as Mark Ford has observed, both are "obsessively concerned with the powers of solitude to convert the socially induced anxieties of self-division into the creative forces of self-awareness."<sup>45</sup> From a very general thematic point of view, this is exactly how *Walden* and *Ghosts* resemble

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<sup>40</sup> Carl Bode, Introduction, *The Portable Thoreau*, by Henry David Thoreau, ed. Carl Bode (New York: Viking, 1947) pp. 13-21.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Auster, *Leviathan* (London: Faber, 1992) p. 26.

<sup>42</sup> Paul Auster, *Hand to Mouth: A Chronicle of Early Failure* (London: Faber, 1997) p. 46. One major problem that both Thoreau and Auster faced as young men was the question of profession. It seems that neither of them saw any real alternative to writing.

<sup>43</sup> *The Art of Hunger*, p. 281.

<sup>44</sup> Paul Auster, "The World Is in My Head; My Body Is in the World", Interview by Gérard de Cortanze, trans. Carl Springer, Carl Springer's home page <<http://www.r2.uni-hamburg.de/springer/int-cort.htm>> 30 November 1999.

<sup>45</sup> Mark Ford, "Inventions of Solitude: Thoreau and Auster", *Journal of American Studies*, 33 (1999) p. 204.

each other. In Auster's own words again, *Ghosts* has its setting at "Walden Pond in the heart of the city."<sup>46</sup>

A major part of the following concentrates on the specific aspects of Thoreau's thinking dealing with the themes central to *Ghosts* and, therefore, having direct subtextual relevance. However, Thoreau's ideas on market economy and technology, which to him represented the two sides of one coin, are also outlined because they place him in a meaningful relationship with the other subtext of *Ghosts* analysed, the technological or capitalist one symbolised by Brooklyn Bridge. This relationship is examined below in chapter 5.

#### 4.1.1. Connection

The first time the reader of *Ghosts* comes across Thoreau is a few pages from the beginning when Blue checks through his binoculars the name of the book Black is reading across the street. It is *Walden*, which Blue has never heard about before. Later he buys the book, justifying this to himself by the fact that Black is reading it, and it might give Blue a hint of "what the man is up to" (p. 181). However, Blue is not very enthusiastic about reading the book, and when he eventually tries it, it makes no sense to him:

As Blue begins to read, he feels as though he is entering an alien world. . . . Why would anyone want to go off and live alone in the woods? What's all this about planting beans and not drinking coffee or eating meat? Why all these interminable descriptions of birds? Blue thought that he was going to get a story, or at least something like a story, but this is no more than blather, an endless harangue about nothing at all. (pp. 193-194)

It may well be that Blue's reactions are not exceptional among the people reading *Walden*, or trying it, in this century. At this stage Blue is beginning to feel uneasy

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<sup>46</sup> *The Art of Hunger*, p. 281.



about being confined to the case, and there is an echo of Macbeth in his thoughts: "no more than blather, an endless harangue about nothing at all" is reminiscent of Macbeth's bitter opinion of life as "a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing".<sup>47</sup> This connection, provided that the reader makes it, is quite ominous as regards Blue's future.

The point, however, is that Blue's attitude to the book has been of the wrong kind. The next day he tries again, realising that the book requires slow reading, and starts to understand some of the points Thoreau makes. However, the feeling of satisfaction does not last long as the problems come back, frustrating Blue. This is where the omniscient narrator throws in the comment that seems essential in determining the significance of *Walden* as a subtext of *Ghosts*:

But Blue still finds it painful, and though he grudgingly admits that Thoreau is perhaps not as stupid as he thought, he begins to resent Black for putting him through this torture. What he does not know is that were he to find the patience to read the book in the spirit in which it asks to be read, his entire life would begin to change, and little by little he would come to a full understanding of his situation - that is to say, of Black, of White, of the case, of everything that concerns him. (p. 194)

The narrator is saying that Thoreau's book is the key to the case Blue is trying to solve, and it also contains the solution for other problems he might have. The fact that *Walden* is so essential for Blue implies that the book could perhaps be worth knowing for the reader of *Ghosts* as well. In other words, the reader's immediate reaction, the question why *Walden* could perform such miracles in Blue's life, creates in the reader a need to know Thoreau's book. This is how *Walden* moves to the position of a subtext; it might not be essential for the reader in the interpretation of *Ghosts*, but it could well add to the understanding of some basic questions raised by the text.

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<sup>47</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Ed. G. K. Hunter (London: Penguin, 1995) 5.5.26-28.

The relationship Blue has with Thoreau does not end here. Between him and Black, there are conversations during which Thoreau's name comes up repeatedly. Black tells Blue how the Concord man came to Orange Street to listen to Henry Ward Beecher's sermon, and afterwards went to visit Walt Whitman on Myrtle Avenue with his friend Bronson Alcott (pp. 207-208). Blue's goal at this point is to learn to know what Black thinks about, and the latter's interest in Henry David Thoreau makes the New England writer seem meaningful to Blue too.

Even before his first face-to-face encounter with Black, however, Thoreau's writings probe into Blue's mind. He is not yet willing to admit that what he has read has any proper relevance to him, but as he begins to feel uneasy with the case, some lines by Thoreau enter his head (p. 200). This happens at the point when Blue for the first time starts to suspect that he is not merely in the role of the observer, but he is being watched too, possibly by someone working for Black/White. Thoreau's words about the general human condition, about the difficulty of breaking free from situations people put themselves into, seem to express something about Blue's own situation. What Thoreau says is no longer just boring "blather", it has a real meaning to Blue who feels "the man in the middle, thwarted in front and hemmed in on the rear" (p. 200). This is where Blue for the first time genuinely finds something, albeit little, to identify with in *Walden*.

It looks evident that Thoreau's book is not only present in *Ghosts* in surface allusions but its ideas have also found their ways into the thematic structure of Auster's text. In other words, *Walden* presents itself as a subtext and qualifies as one. To move on then, the next question is how the book contributes to the interpretation of *Ghosts*. Answering this question is only possible after taking a close look at *Walden* and examining the thematic connections between the two texts.

#### 4.1.2. *Walden*

Before taking a detailed look at Thoreau's thought, it is worthwhile to note that once the analysis moves beyond the specific sentences from Thoreau quoted in *Ghosts*, there has to be the theoretical assumption that anything in *Walden*, perhaps even any point Thoreau makes elsewhere, might be relevant to the analysis. As has been said, it is possible that the most important parts of the subtext are not to be found where the connection is established.<sup>48</sup> Theoretically, the identification of Thoreau as a subtext would force the person carrying out the analysis to examine everything he ever wrote. In other words, the metonymic aspect of subtext connections can sometimes be a problem.<sup>49</sup> A line must be drawn somewhere. The emphasis of my analysis is laid on *Walden*; other texts by Thoreau are used only to express the consistency of his ideas.

Thoreau's best-known book was born as a result of the two years (1845-47) he spent on the shores of Walden Pond. Thoreau's stay at Walden, incidentally or not, ended one hundred years before Paul Auster was born in 1947, the year in which the story of *Ghosts* begins. Thoreau built the house by the pond in order to observe nature every day from a closer view than he could when he lived in the actual village of Concord. At the same time, his aim was to reduce his life to the essentials: in the little hut he only had things that were absolutely necessary for daily life. At the beginning of *Walden*, Thoreau explains how the idea was to minimise the consumption of products brought from outside and to experience the beauty of simplicity.

The first and longest chapter, entitled "Economy", concentrates on this aspect of

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<sup>48</sup> Tammi, pp. 67-68.

<sup>49</sup> *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, published in 1906, consists of twenty thick volumes. Thoreau kept a journal for 24 years in a row.

Thoreau's thought, expressing the strong contrast between his own way of life and that dominant in Concord. People, in Thoreau's words 'men', seem to be imprisoned by their work, by the economic system that controls everything they do. They are used by the system, not even thinking that an alternative could exist:

But men labor under a mistake. The better part of the man is soon ploughed into the soil for compost. By a seeming fate, commonly called necessity, they are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal. It is a fool's life, as they will find when they get to the end of it, if not before.<sup>50</sup>

The problem of most people in Thoreau's opinion is that they miss the finest fruit of life, not having time to truly enjoy anything in the middle of their work. All they do is toil. Trapped by the ideology of materialism, such a person has "no time to be anything but a machine".<sup>51</sup> The narrow way of life does not give individuals the opportunity to realise themselves, or to see their own ignorance. It is this sad situation of the individual that Thoreau's argument was directed against.

Leo Marx explains the viewpoint further, making clear how depressing lives most people in Concord led in Thoreau's eyes at the time:

Resigned to a pointless, dull, routinized existence, Thoreau's fellow-townsmen perform the daily round without joy or anger or genuine exercise of will. As if their minds were mirrors, able only to reflect the external world, they are satisfied with things as they are. ... Thoreau discovers the same pattern of acquiescence, a dehumanizing reversal of ends and means, in all of their behavior. ... The moral, in short, is that here "men have become the tools of their tools."<sup>52</sup>

The people described here are even more thoroughly imprisoned by their situation

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<sup>50</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Resistance to Civil Government: Authoritative Texts. Thoreau's Journal. Reviews and Essays in Criticism*, ed. William Rossi (New York: Norton, 1992) p. 3. Subsequently quoted as *Walden*.

<sup>51</sup> *Walden*, p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1964) p. 247. Subsequently quoted as *Machine*.

than Blue in *Ghosts*, but the basic pattern is the same: one routine takes control over everything else. The fact that people in Concord and elsewhere generally let one activity dominate their lives was exactly the point of Thoreau's criticism: he was against the growing division of work. When there is only one duty to perform again and again, a person reduces to "the ninth part of a man".<sup>53</sup>

Many would have seen this situation of ordinary people as an acceptable and even necessary side effect of economic progress, but this view would have made no sense to Thoreau. He considered life too precious to be spent in serving some abstract and faceless goal that seemed to have nothing to do with personal development. Thoreau saw rapid changes take place in technological and economic systems at the time but thought that these changes should serve the individual and not the other way around. The tool had taken control of its maker.

Thoreau himself describes the common state of mind among the people of Concord bluntly: "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation", and they call it necessity.<sup>54</sup> His view on the effects of the market economy on people was depressing, and he was able to put it into words with no decoration. This leads to the fact that these statements seem empty of the kind of half-concealed witty humour otherwise typical of his writing. There is a sense of alienation in his words, a feeling that he is different, an outsider both economically and intellectually. The fact that Thoreau felt in opposition to the Concord way of life is expressed by him with a tinge of self-irony: "The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be

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<sup>53</sup> *Walden*, p. 31.

<sup>54</sup> *Walden*, pp. 3-7.

bad, and if I repent of anything, it is very likely to be my good behavior. What demon possessed me that I behaved so well?"<sup>55</sup>

This practical and ideological opposition between Thoreau and his fellow people in Concord is well expressed by Leonard N. Neufeldt as he calls Thoreau's project "an enterprise of self-culture in a culture of enterprise".<sup>56</sup> Of course, this opposition resulted in the fact that his way of life and vocation as a poet (which for Thoreau referred to his thoughts rather than his writing) were often ridiculed by those who represented the culture of enterprise. Concord being "a place of unsettling changes" at the time, the literary vocation offered Thoreau a chance to live according to his principles in a state of relative stability.<sup>57</sup> It was not an easy way of life, and Thoreau has been compared with Don Quixote in his struggle against the windmill of dominant opinion.<sup>58</sup>

However, Thoreau was not a cynic wanting to bar himself out of society; he did understand economic reality and recorded the financial side of his Walden experiment, including every detail of things purchased, in the opening chapter of the book. The aim of the experiment being to use only what is absolutely necessary in daily life, keeping a record was an essential part of it. As *Walden* proves, the main purpose of Thoreau's stay by the pond, however, was observing the environment, making analogies and drawing conclusions based on these observations. The remarks he makes about people working in the area are only there because these people happened to belong to the environment visible to him.

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<sup>55</sup> *Walden*, p. 6.

<sup>56</sup> Leonard N. Neufeldt, *The Economist: Henry Thoreau and Enterprise* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989) pp. 23-52.

<sup>57</sup> Neufeldt, pp. 16, 40.

<sup>58</sup> Neufeldt, p. 80.

The first chapter contains a lot of social criticism and therefore often receives the most attention, but a majority of the pages of *Walden* are filled with detailed description of nature. All the chapters have main themes according to which they have received their titles: "Reading", "Solitude", "Visitors", "Higher Laws", and so forth. Under these titles, Thoreau deals with a wide variety of topics. Basically, the book covers the natural cycle of one year; at the end Thoreau bluntly states that the second year of his stay did not differ very much from the first.<sup>59</sup>

#### 4.1.3. Reading Reality

In the chapter "Reading", Thoreau champions the study of old classic books, crushing the argument that they should give way for more modern and practical texts and ideas:

We might as well omit to study Nature because she is old. To read well, that is, to read true books in a true spirit, is a noble exercise, and one that will task the reader more than any exercise which the customs of the day esteem. It requires a training such as the athletes underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this object. Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written.<sup>60</sup>

Classic books resemble nature in offering careful readers (or students, or simply observers) lots of stimulating material. Seeing and reading are similar forms of perception for Thoreau, but this is not the only connection he makes in the above lines. The last sentence, which is also quoted in *Ghosts* as the first of Thoreau's thoughts that made any sense to Black, draws the important parallel between reading and writing. Intellectually, these two creative activities require similar qualities from the individual performing them, provided that the reading is good enough. In the story

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<sup>59</sup> *Walden*, p. 213.

<sup>60</sup> *Walden*, p. 68.

of *Ghosts*, Thoreau's book is the classic that both Black and Blue read, and Blue at least finds it very difficult to read it in the way its writer, Thoreau, wants books to be read, with great concentration and dedication. However, Blue's situation is similar to Thoreau's during his stay at Walden in that he is relatively isolated from the outside world. Thoreau considered this state as practically ideal for serious reading: there he was with his classics, "beyond the range of the ordinary circulating library", with all the peace and quiet that was necessary.<sup>61</sup>

What the narrator of *Ghosts* says about *Walden* (that the book has the potential to change Blue's life) is also an allusion to the text of Thoreau's book. In his chapter on "Reading", Thoreau criticises so-called easy reading because it does not require much intellectual effort or change anything in the reader:

It is not all books that are as dull as their readers. There are probably words addressed to our condition exactly, which, if we could really hear and understand, would be more salutary than the morning or the spring to our lives, and possibly put a new aspect on the face of things for us. How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book!<sup>62</sup>

The resemblance with the lines from *Ghosts* quoted earlier is considerable. Thoreau's words seem to describe what could happen to Blue if he had the necessary patience to concentrate on *Walden* in the way the book asks to be concentrated on.

Understanding is what Blue needs and what Thoreau seeks in his classics. Blue considers the case (the mystery of Black) and Thoreau's book equally difficult to understand, *to read*. This idea leads to the realisation that *Ghosts* is ultimately a narrative about reading. As Blue struggles with the case and with Thoreau's book, he is a reader in front of two difficult texts, desperately searching for meaning.

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<sup>61</sup> *Walden*, p. 67.

<sup>62</sup> *Walden*, p. 73.



The curious comments by the narrator of *Ghosts*, concerning the significance of *Walden* for Blue personally, give reason to expect that the relevance of Thoreau's book to the interpretation of Auster's text is to be found by examining the patterns of Thoreau's ideas. One obvious theme of *Ghosts* to which Thoreau can contribute is that of observing and writing. Blue spends most of his time during the first few weeks of his case watching Black and writing down everything, and in fact it seems that Black is engaged in a similar activity. It is revealed later that Black is actually writing a book, and that he is a writer by profession (p. 220).<sup>63</sup> Thoreau, on the other hand, based his life as a writer on the method of observing natural details and writing down the truth. In his opinion, nature and books could be read and interpreted in a similar manner. It must be emphasised that interpretation was the most important part of the process of reading for Thoreau: he was not satisfied with "the surface of things".<sup>64</sup> Much more important was the effect sensory facts had upon his mind.

In spite of his love of detail, then, Thoreau can hardly be called a realist in the strictest sense of the word. True, he aimed at giving "a true account" of everything,<sup>65</sup> including his stay at Walden pond, but he thought that this truth was not necessarily revealed if things were simply looked at: the appearance of things can be deceiving. The essence of things, the facts, were found by probing beneath the surface, and in Thoreau's case this often meant using imaginative analogies and extended metaphors to create order, to find patterns in what would otherwise be just an endless continuum of unrelated details. Ralph Waldo Emerson said that he did not know "any genius

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<sup>63</sup> In another scene, however, Black says he is a private detective and describes his current case as identical with Blue's (pp. 213-216).

<sup>64</sup> *Walden*, p. 65.

<sup>65</sup> *Walden*, p. 61.

who so swiftly inferred universal law from the single fact".<sup>66</sup> These laws could not be arrived at with the help of the human senses merely; they were a matter of thought and consciousness. In other words, access to real truths can only be gained through determination, hard work and imagination.

It is this process that Thoreau describes as follows:

Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through church and state, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*, and say, This is and no mistake. . . . If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces . . . and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career. Be it life or death, we crave only reality.<sup>67</sup>

The passage makes clear how important it is in the art of observation, or reading, not to take anything for granted. Thoreau talks about reality as the outcome of the process, but it is not the everyday routine reality that exists under the title of realism. Rather, his reality is another name for truth, deep meaning, or the nucleus of being. It is certainly something more spiritual than real in a concrete way. In fact, Thoreau's description of his method follows quite closely the principles of transcendentalism as presented by Emerson, who identifies transcendentalism with the more general notion of idealism (as opposed to materialism) and locates the centre of meaning in the individual's consciousness.<sup>68</sup> Materialists stop where their five senses take them, whereas the idealist goes further to look for reality. One of the implications

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<sup>66</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Thoreau," *Selected Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982) p. 408. This essay is a eulogy written after Thoreau's death in 1862. Emerson was Thoreau's friend and, for some time, employer.

<sup>67</sup> *Walden*, p. 66. Thoreau's emphasis.

<sup>68</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Transcendentalist," *Selected Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982) pp. 239-40. Original 1842.

(suggested by the almost divine essence of the "fact" in the above extract by Thoreau) is that there is a high spiritual dimension everywhere in nature, behind the world of appearances.<sup>69</sup> This idea is present in Thoreau's writing, providing an interesting contrast to the practical side of his reasoning.

#### 4.1.4. Language and Life: The Question of Authorship

The link between the transcendentalist way of observation and Blue in *Ghosts* may not at first seem very strong. There are many noticeable circumstantial differences between Thoreau's reading of natural details and Blue's speculation about Black and the case. However, the fact that both men write down their observations makes it easier to see the connection, which is in fact a case of opposition. It follows from the transcendentalist view of the world that how things look (appearance) is merely one way of representing their real essence (truth). In Thoreau's mind, the details of nature resemble words in that they refer to invisible meanings. Thoreau's method of writing down the facts aimed at truthfulness, but it was not enough for him to record appearances because in that case words would deceive. In contrast, Blue's view of writing and language at the beginning of *Ghosts* is straightforwardly naive:

The day comes for him to write his first report. Blue is an old hand in such compositions and has never had any trouble with them. His method is to stick to outward facts, describing events as though each word tallied exactly with the thing described, and to question the matter no further. Words are transparent for him, great windows that stand between him and the world, and until now they have never impeded his view, have never even seemed to be there. . . . In every report he has written so far, action holds forth over interpretation. . . . The report confines itself to known and verifiable facts, and beyond this limit it does not try to go. (pp. 174-75)

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<sup>69</sup> The vocabulary is problematic here. Thoreau is not very consistent: sometimes he talks about a 'fact' as the truth beyond appearances, sometimes the meaning is more practical and material. Emerson uses the word to refer to the surface of things as experienced by the five senses. I use 'appearance' in the latter (not strictly visual) sense.

Here Blue works as a perfect example of Emerson's notion of the materialist. He not only considers appearances "known and verifiable facts" but also fails to see all dimensions of language except its mimetic function. His belief that language is transparent seems to follow some imaginary branch of pre-Saussurean linguistics, not acknowledging the nature of language as a contract-based system. Words are as transparent for Blue as appearances are deceiving for Thoreau.

Stuart Hall writes that all explanations dealing with the production of meaning through language can be roughly divided into three categories.<sup>70</sup> All have different answers to the basic problem of where meanings come from. The first of these, the mimetic explanation, argues that meaning comes directly from the thing described, and words only reflect it without changing anything. The second approach is based on the view that the speaker, the author, is the source of all meaning and uses language to say exactly what he or she intends to say. This intentional explanation, as I have pointed out in previous chapters, is in direct contradiction to poststructuralist literary theory. The third approach is called the constructionist one because it explains representation as the construction of meaning in and through symbolic systems such as language. This modern approach, emphasising the social aspects of language, can be divided further into different branches based on Saussurean linguistics and semiotics on the one hand, and Michel Foucault's notion of discursive formations on the other.

Blue's idea of language clearly stays within the first category. As a matter of fact, it is an extreme example of the mimetic approach. Blue does not even see words as

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<sup>70</sup> Stuart Hall, "The Work of Representation", *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage, 1997) pp. 24-25. Hall defines representation as the production of meaning through language (p. 16).

mirrors reflecting the real world but as windows that let everything straight through! In effect, language as a system of codes and conventions does not exist for him at all: he exists, the rest of the world exists, but he thinks there is nothing between the two. This is indeed a case of extreme linguistic naivety; the level of interpretation is totally removed from Blue's writing.

When Blue reads what he has written, he immediately realises that the familiar method of writing does not work any more. This case is not just about surface appearance. Instead of showing the things described as they are, the words seem to erase them - the transparency of language proves to be a fallacy. It occurs to Blue that he might try to season his report with his own speculation about who Black really is, but then he reminds himself that it is his job to report the facts, not to express his personal thoughts. "This isn't the story of my life, after all, he says. I'm supposed to be writing about him, not myself." Still, the idea of adding something of his own "looms as a perverse temptation" (p. 175). With great difficulty, Blue completes the report in his familiar style but is not fully satisfied with the result.

All this happens before Blue reads a word of Thoreau. The temptation Blue feels, of course, is anything but perverse. It can be read as a sign of his beginning realisation that language is not automatically mimetic, that it has other possible functions or facets, including the speaker's intention. As regards representation and language, Blue is thus slowly moving towards awareness of the ideas corresponding to the last two categories suggested by Hall: the intentional approach and the constructionist idea of language. For Blue this transition would, at least to some extent, include adopting a more active role both as a reader (of Black's case) and as an

author (of his reports), and consequently also as a character (of *Ghosts*). Blue would step from the world of facts to the realm of interpretation.<sup>71</sup>

Blue's first attempt to read *Walden* and make some sense of it appears to be a decisive moment in his linguistic development. One of Thoreau's sentences is mentioned because it makes a positive impact on him: "Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written" (p. 194).<sup>72</sup> This struggle with Thoreau's text (described in 4.1.1.) ends when Blue runs out of patience and goes for a walk. The next event is what the narrator twice calls "the beginning of the end" (pp. 194-96). In Manhattan, Blue happens to run across his ex-girlfriend, earlier referred to as "the future Mrs. Blue", who now walks with another man. Blue "realises that he has thrown away his life" and "lost whatever chance he might have had for happiness" (p. 196). From this moment on, he has no connections to anyone or anything else but the case. He is simultaneously a reader, a writer, and a character, living only through texts. The basic paradox of the situation becomes visible at this point: the text (case) which Blue is trying to read has at the same time trapped him inside itself as if it were a book and Blue one of its characters. How could a character read the narrative he is in? After a few more months, Blue's situation is so hopeless that he feels he is dying. At this stage, he still considers White and Black two different men, and thinks that they

have trapped Blue into doing nothing, into being so inactive as to reduce his life to almost no life at all. Yes, says Blue to himself, that's what it feels like: like nothing at all. He feels like a man who has been condemned to sit in a room and go on reading a book for the rest of his life. . . . seeing the world only through words, living only through the lives of others. . . . But how to get out? How to get out of the room that is

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<sup>71</sup> Again, the difference between Blue's and Thoreau's conceptions of 'fact' must be kept in mind. For Thoreau, the real world of fact could only be reached through interpretation, in consciousness.

<sup>72</sup> From the chapter on "Reading", *Walden*, p. 68.

the book that will go on being written for as long as he stays in the room?  
(pp. 201-02)

Immediately after meeting his former fiancée in the street, Blue takes the important step in his awareness of language: he adds an invented piece of information to his report. For the first time, he uses language as a tool for his own ends, aiming to lure White out of his silence. Blue's deliberate lie shows that now he has understood the manipulative power of language. His intention, not the outside world, is now the main source of meaning, and Blue begins to be aware of the conventions, codes and rules of language that also contribute to representation. If language were transparent, if the first - the mimetic explanation - of the three approaches suggested by Hall could account for representation, lying would not be possible. Blue has now abandoned the mimetic idea of language and entered the realm of interpretation, adopting the basic assumptions of the constructionist approach to representation. The realisation that language works as a system rather than as a window also makes it impossible for the speaker's intention to be the *only* source of meaning. A dynamic system cannot be a private plaything. What Blue is left with is the constructionist idea of representation, and a need to escape his prison of words.

The text implies that this process concerning Blue's relationship with language was initiated at the moment when he opened *Walden* for the first time. It is thus Thoreau who gives Blue the incentive to start thinking of language more attentively, with deliberation. The sentence Blue reads in *Walden* pushes him towards linguistic awareness. At the same time, it becomes easier for him to understand that appearance does not equal the truth. Watching Black, he feels like looking into a mirror because both men mostly sit at their desks, reading or writing. Blue realises that things are not how they look. If words can deceive, and if - as he says - he is seeing the world only through words, it is not his sense of sight (or hearing, or any of the kind) that he can

trust, it is rather his vision, his mind, his consciousness. In other words, Blue is about to adopt Thoreau's basic method of perception and conception, accepting that some things are "mysterious and unexplorable, . . . infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable."<sup>73</sup> Now, with a new awareness, Blue has the courage to take action.

At the beginning of the story, White is in disguise, and later when Blue sees him in the post office he is wearing a rubber Halloween mask. Now Blue himself enters the game of appearances, disguising himself for his conversations with Black.<sup>74</sup> These conversations turn out to be scenes of pure acting with both Blue and Black playing their chosen roles, and the relationship between the two men turns increasingly bizarre. In effect, Blue and Black are competing for authorial control: Blue has understood that Black is "the so-called writer of this book" that is Blue's prison (p. 202), and now he wants full freedom to decide of his own life. Even before the final confrontation, he considers the possibility of escape, and experiences a vision of himself as a free man:

He ponders this thought for a while, testing it out in his mind, and little by little he begins to tremble, overcome by terror and happiness, like a slave stumbling onto a vision of his own freedom. He imagines himself somewhere else, far away from here, walking through the woods and swinging an axe over his shoulder. Alone and free, his own man at last. He would build his life from the bottom up, an exile, a pioneer, a pilgrim in the new world. (p. 222)

It is not difficult to think of a model for this picture of the free man. Thoreau's stay at Walden pond was exactly a retreat to the woods where he also undoubtedly used an axe in building his house. In addition, Thoreau's whole life was - and many of his

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<sup>73</sup> *Walden*, p. 212.

<sup>74</sup> In disguise, Blue adopts the name and appearance of Jimmy Rose, a tramp who used to live in Blue's neighborhood when he was a child. The name is another allusion to the American writers of the mid-19th century, referring to the title character of a short story by Melville.



writings are - inextricably intertwined with, if not reducible to, the question of how to be your own man. Blue's pastoral vision thus implicitly strengthens the bond between Blue and Thoreau which was created earlier. However, Blue decides that he has to take care of Black before he can leave the confines of the story. This decision sets off the succession of events that ends in Black's death and Blue's departure.

Whether or not Blue knows it (after all, subtexts are relevant for the reader, not necessarily for the character), his pastoral dream is not much different from the dream Thoreau realised. This is how Thoreau explains the reasons for the Walden retreat in his famous passage:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, . . . to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms. . . .<sup>75</sup>

In the Thoreauvian subtext of *Ghosts*, the adjective 'deliberate' (in a double meaning of 'intentional' and 'slow, unhurried') and its connotations occupy a central position. In the first meaning, the word describes the exact opposite of Blue's actions during the first half of the story. It is only in the latter half that he is able to act out of intention, and the final decision to take care of Black (it is never quite clear whether he intends to kill him) is an example of calm deliberation. The second meaning is obviously present in the above extract by Thoreau, as well as in the sentence that originally catches Blue's attention in *Walden*, where Thoreau writes how important it is to read deliberately. The phrase "to live deliberately" includes the idea that one has complete control of one's life. When Blue realises his intention at the end of *Ghosts*,

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<sup>75</sup> *Walden*, p. 61.

he is no longer a character imprisoned by someone else's narrative. He is the author now, "his own man at last", as in his pastoral vision.

The subtextual contribution of *Walden* to *Ghosts* is as complex as Thoreau's book itself which has been characterised as a series of textual metamorphoses, a work of "near unreadability" that "reveals the impossibility of abstracting from the experiences it describes."<sup>76</sup> From Blue's point of view, what seems significant is the same thing that first bewilders him, namely Thoreau's linguistic project, his "compulsion constantly to refigure the relations and divisions between living and writing."<sup>77</sup> The fact that Blue's life has been designed and written by someone else is something he awakes to as a result of reading Thoreau. After this awakening, Blue's ultimate goal is the same as Thoreau's: "to elude definition, to escape being imprisoned within the various myths and rhetorics" appropriated.<sup>78</sup>

It is evident that the particular passages of *Walden* referred to in Auster's text are by no means to be isolated from the rest of the book and the more general patterns of Thoreau's thinking; the subtext is a relatively wide one. When Thoreau described the people of Concord as leading lives of desperation, he could have been analysing the mind of Blue, who also thought there was no way out of his situation. At that stage, Blue is as thoroughly trapped by the story of Black's case as Thoreau's fellow townsmen by the great narrative of progress that seemed to write itself. It is thus clear that the same question can be asked on the level of the narrative text and in real life: Who is the author? Thoreau solved this problem by literally writing his own life. As far as Blue is concerned, there is no answer because when he stops being a character

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<sup>76</sup> Ford, pp. 202-203.

<sup>77</sup> Ford, p. 218.

<sup>78</sup> Ford, p. 209.

in the story authored by others, the narrative ends. "And from this moment on, we know nothing" (p. 232).

#### 4.2. Brooklyn Bridge

Henry David Thoreau is often described as a naturalist, sometimes even as a Romantic, in any case nearly always as a man who followed his pastoral imagination to the woods.<sup>79</sup> In *Ghosts*, however, a counter-force to the Transcendentalist way of looking at the world can also be detected. For two reasons, this second subtext is not as directly interpretative as the one analysed above. Firstly, it is not a literary text but a combination of history, myth, and collective imagination; and secondly, in this case there is no clearly defined problem posed by *Ghosts* and needing an answer. In contrast, it may be to the point to say that this wide technological subtext itself gives rise to the questions it tries to answer. However, Auster's text guides the reader in the right direction and finally reveals a fundamental tension produced by this subtext. In the text as well as in the real world, Brooklyn Bridge serves as an apt symbol for this historical structure of thought and action.

In the preface of his book on Brooklyn Bridge, Alan Trachtenberg states that in the collective mind of Americans the bridge over the East River represents the change from a rural society to an industrial and urban one.<sup>80</sup> Completed in 1883, Brooklyn Bridge connected Manhattan and Long Island, providing fast cable-train passage to

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<sup>79</sup> Ruth Schwartz Cowan, for example, defines the Romantics as people who "preferred creativity to discipline, anarchy to order, spontaneity to practicality" and goes on to label Thoreau as one. Cowan, *A Social History of American Technology* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997) p. 208. True, Thoreau did speak of himself as a poet, but in fact his daily life and writing was based on self-discipline and hard work rather than moments of inspiration: for example, he re-wrote *Walden* seven times before the book was published.

<sup>80</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1979) p. ix.

Brooklyn. The structure was designed by John A. Roebling, whose son Washington Roebling was in charge of the construction after his father died as a result of an accident in 1869. In the opening ceremonies, the bridge was celebrated as the emblem of progress, proving "man's continuing victory over nature".<sup>81</sup> This celebration of technology reflected the ideological premises that backed up John Roebling's conception of the bridge.

#### 4.2.1. Connection

The main setting of the story of *Ghosts*, Orange Street, really exists in Brooklyn. It is a quiet little street where all the landmarks mentioned in the story can be seen. When Blue arrives at the apartment White has rented for him, the place is introduced as follows:

The address is unimportant. But let's say Brooklyn Heights, for the sake of argument. Some quiet, rarely traveled street not far from the bridge - Orange Street perhaps. Walt Whitman handset the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* on this street in 1855, and it was here that Henry Ward Beecher railed against slavery from the pulpit of his red-brick church. So much for local color. (p. 163)

The narrator says that the choice of setting does not matter - it is arbitrary, and therefore any further description of the background of the place would be a waste of time. However, the bridge is mentioned, and the mere fact that some information about the historically relatively important street is given implies that after all, the setting really does matter. In playing down the significance of local colour, the narrator shows signs of unreliability. Later on in the story, in the conversations between Black and Blue, it is precisely the history of the street that provides one explanation for the name of the story.

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<sup>81</sup> Trachtenberg, p. 118.

It soon becomes clear that the vicinity of the bridge also has its meanings. During the first week of the case, Blue's spirits are generally high. He is optimistic about the outcome of the case, wakes up cheerful in the mornings, and works hard to find out what Black is really doing. One bright morning he follows Black along the streets of Brooklyn, when something new happens:

But then, his [Blue's] mood suddenly darkens. Black begins to climb the staircase that leads to the walkway across the Brooklyn Bridge, and Blue gets it into his head that he's planning to jump. Such things happen, he tells himself. A man goes to the top of the bridge, gives a last look to the world through the wind and the clouds, and then leaps out over the water, bones cracking on impact, his body broken apart. (p. 177)

The monumental nature of the bridge is perhaps further enhanced in Auster's text by the fact that the structure is called *the* Brooklyn Bridge. Other sources usually omit the article. At first, as the above quotation shows, the great bridge appears as something threatening. On the walkway, however, the fear proves unnecessary and Blue's thoughts wander to the past. In a vision, he sees himself as a boy, walking on the bridge with his father and listening to his stories. In fact, Blue has never crossed the bridge on foot after his father died. The fact that the bridge was finished in the year the father was born creates a link in Blue's mind, "as though the bridge were somehow a monument to his father" (p. 178). What is more, one of Blue's father's stories deals with the accident that caused John Roebling's death, and another relates the incident as a result of which Washington Roebling had to spend the rest of his life as an invalid. These two real-life engineers, father and son, and the two men of the Blue family are placed side by side by the text. The implicit assumption, given the fact that after the accident Washington Roebling was confined to a Brooklyn Heights apartment, is that in a way the two sons have a similar fate. Washington Roebling was crippled after taking over his father's duties, and Blue as well has chosen a line of

work similar to that of his father who was a police detective. Brown, from whom Blue has taken over the private eye business, used to be another father figure, a professional father who had replaced the biological one.

The history of the bridge thus links up with Blue's family history, but it also intertwines with the thematic structure of the story. In implicitly juxtaposing Washington Roebling and the main character of the narrative, the text gives the reader a hint that Blue's life, the free mental and physical space available to him, may prove as limited as Washington Roebling's life was during the years after his almost fatal accident. This confinement of Blue by the case he is investigating, with all its variations and implications, then turns out to be the most important single psychological element of the story. Blue, however, is not physically disabled, and it remains an open question whether his situation, his mental imprisonment symbolised by the closed space of his rented apartment, is permanent or not. This is one of the questions the ending of the story sets out to answer.

This question, although interesting, is not an intertextual one because it is not answered by a subtext. To find a basis for the subtext status of the bridge, one has to look elsewhere. Rather than a vehicle for providing straightforward answers for straightforward questions, the bridge between Manhattan and Brooklyn is a monument carrying a heavy load of meanings. These meanings derive from historical facts and ideological constructs as well as collective imagination. The presence of Brooklyn Bridge in the narrative gives the readers of Auster's text an incentive to bring the meanings associated with the bridge to the reading process of *Ghosts*, to add new elements to the thematic structure of the text. To understand the nature of this contribution, one has to examine where the progressive ideology connected to

Brooklyn Bridge came from, and what kind of significance it has in the large context of American society.

The following historical survey traces the origins of a prominent feature in American ideology, an aspect that has led to a number of significant practical consequences. In keeping with Hayden White's notion of historical narratives as a type of verbal fiction subject to *emplotment*, the process of encoding individual facts into a coherent plot,<sup>82</sup> I do not claim to be writing objective history. Rather than that, what follows is an image of a certain aspect of 'real' history.

#### 4.2.2. Progress?

From the age of the Puritans, it can be argued, money has been among the most important defining values of American life. This may well be the case in the rest of the world as well, but in the United States the significance of wealth has apparently become more of a part of collective ideology than elsewhere. Even before the term 'economic liberalism' was born in Europe in the wake of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, making a profit was generally not just acceptable but highly admirable on the western coast of the Atlantic Ocean. In the Puritan mind, someone's economic prosperity implied that they must have a relatively high number of positive mental and spiritual qualities. In 1630, Puritan immigrant John Winthrop preached that "divine providence" divides people "into two sorts, rich and poor" according to their abilities.<sup>83</sup> Once the thought that goodness brings success was rooted, it also became possible to think the reverse.

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<sup>82</sup> White, pp. 82-83.

<sup>83</sup> John Winthrop, *A Model of Christian Charity*, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 3rd ed., vol. I (New York: Norton, 1989) pp. 31-32.

In his introductory book on U.S. history and life, Torbjörn Sirevåg touches on the topic, attributing the birth of capitalism mainly to the Puritan heritage.<sup>84</sup> On the individual level, wealth was seen as a proof of piety. It was natural for someone with Puritan ideology to think that God rewarded good people by awarding them material prosperity in return for their valuable deeds. The other side of the coin was the fact that the poor were treated with contempt because their economic state proved their lack of faith. As Sirevåg points out, the assumption was that personal progress had a spiritual as well as an economic dimension, and these two went hand in hand.<sup>85</sup> In other words, the majority believed that spiritual development contributed to a person's financial success.

Keeping in mind that Puritan ideas have generally proved very persistent in the United States, it is not surprising that the new technologies of the 19th century were welcomed with enthusiasm after their economic benefits became apparent. The optimistic attitudes to technology according to the Puritan tradition did not, however, remain uncontested. As Cowan points out, there always existed a small minority of those, among them Henry Thoreau, who expressed more pessimistic views on the machine. In the USA as well as in Britain, Romanticism in particular was a movement that spelled out a critique of industrialisation.<sup>86</sup> The Romantic emphasis on the uniqueness of the creative individual mind, and the view of nature as the source of pure inspiration did not seem compatible with the modern world of factories, steam engines, and machine-like workers.

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<sup>84</sup> Torbjörn Sirevåg, *American Patterns: An Interpretation of U.S. History and Life*, 2nd ed. (Oslo: Ad Notam Gyldendal, 1993) pp. 166-168.

<sup>85</sup> Sirevåg, p. 168

<sup>86</sup> Cowan, p. 208.



Examined on a general level, this opposition between Romantic ideas and the proponents of technology can be seen as part of a larger, typically American paradox. There are often two conflicting tendencies simultaneously in operation in people's minds. Firstly, as Leo Marx explains, there is the common almost religious view that the USA has been singled out as the model nation of the world, to show the way for progress. The concept of Manifest Destiny denotes that it is the responsibility of the chosen people to use whatever means available to expand practical knowledge, facilitate the advance of technology and free trade, and establish humanity's power over nature more and more firmly. Secondly, however, there is the contending tendency to follow the ancient pastoral dream. This impulse often shows itself in people's nostalgic thoughts about the environment and their occasional willingness to retreat to nature.<sup>87</sup> In Marx's opinion, it was in the nineteenth century that the various stages of development in the USA allowed people to embrace both of these opposing viewpoints at the same time. Importantly, the American (mainstream) version of pastoral thought always considered the half-developed "middle landscape" the ideal environment for life; there were few real primitivists.<sup>88</sup> This enabled the co-existence of the progressive and the pastoral tendencies.

It is the progressive world-view spiced by the idea of Manifest Destiny that the designer of Brooklyn Bridge, John Roebling, was influenced by. Born in Germany in 1806, he attended Hegel's lectures and received from the famous philosopher the belief that the New World was where the dreams for a better future could be fulfilled

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<sup>87</sup> Leo Marx, *The Pilot and the Passenger: Essays on Literature, Technology, and Culture in the United States* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) pp. 186-87. Subsequently quoted as *Pilot*.

<sup>88</sup> Marx, *Pilot*, p. 187.

by shaping reality with the help of Reason.<sup>89</sup> These dreams included not only geographical insights of America as a vast area of vacant space, but also the technological dream about the mastery of nature. The basic line of thought defended by people like Roebling was that technology was a fundamental component in the quest for freedom.<sup>90</sup> Industrialisation was seen by this group as a necessary phase on mankind's way to prosperity. Progress, spurred by Reason and technological skills, would eventually and inevitably lead to the liberation of men.<sup>91</sup> This ideal state of being would, of course, first become a reality in the United States of America, which was at the time the home of many enthusiastic technological utopians. One of them, John A. Etzler, was Roebling's close friend and colleague who moved to America in the same group of emigrants in 1831.<sup>92</sup>

With a tradition of Puritanism, the large American public remained a biblical people who took pride in their knowledge of the Old Testament. In their opinion, technological progress was based on the fact that Genesis literally gave people permission, perhaps even an obligation, to have dominion over nature.<sup>93</sup> In the eyes of some American pastoralists, the Bible clearly supported the idea of an agrarian society, but as industrialisation began to seem inevitable this mild version of dominion over nature soon gave way to more aggressive points of view. According to the most eager proponents of industrialisation, this kind of progress was "entirely

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<sup>89</sup> Trachtenberg, pp. 42-44. Hegel's concept of Reason is a synthesis of historical self-realization and rationalism.

<sup>90</sup> It must be made clear, however, that Roebling's world-view cannot be reduced to this straightforward belief in progress. As Trachtenberg's book demonstrates, Roebling also expressed critical opinions on the side effects of industrialization and capitalism.

<sup>91</sup> Cowan, p. 210. Interestingly, Cowan shows, the defenders of industrialisation and idealisers of technological innovators employed the Romantic rhetoric to further their cause.

<sup>92</sup> Trachtenberg, p. 47.

<sup>93</sup> Cowan, p. 205.

natural and entirely ordained by God."<sup>94</sup> It is the religious emphasis that gives a particular air to the nineteenth century attitudes to technology in the USA. Opinions about the proper course of progress differed from each other, but the argument behind the presented opinions was commonly the same: humankind must do what God had wanted them to do.

The idea for Brooklyn Bridge was originated in John Roebling's mind as a product of the progressive way of looking at the world. The structure can therefore serve as a symbol for the view of history as continuous development from one stage to another, and for the well-known American ideology with its vision-like emphasis on the future instead of the past. Most importantly, however, the bridge as a symbol links up with the 19th-century processes of rapid technological development and urbanisation as well as some central points of view associated with the capitalist system of economy. The following subchapter contains a discussion of some specific economic and technological aspects, concentrating on how the limitations set by time and space came to be conceived in a new way, and how the construction of Brooklyn Bridge can be seen as the culmination of these novel conceptions in the United States.

#### 4.2.3. Machines of Time and Space

It was hardly a coincidence that standard time was introduced in the USA on November 18, 1883, less than six months after the bridge across the East River was opened. Before that date, virtually every community in the United States had their own time, which was established in a very practical way: by marking as noon the

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<sup>94</sup> Cowan, p. 207.

point when shadows were shortest.<sup>95</sup> The transition included dividing the country into four time zones, but the main significance of the event was that people were forced to start thinking about time in a way that differed radically from the viewpoints of the past. Having just built the landmark that symbolised both the transportation revolution and urbanisation, American society moved into the era of standardised timetables. In other words, industrialisation now advanced from the dimension of space into the dimension of time, a vital step as far as economic profit is concerned.

It was in railroading that both these dimensions were in operation simultaneously. In fact, the railroad companies had had their own standardised "railroad time" for twelve years before official standard time was introduced. What is more, the time zone system was established mainly because safe and accurately timetabled railroad services demanded it.<sup>96</sup> During the previous decades, collisions between two trains had been far too common because of the lack of synchronisation in the railroad network. Now these accidents could be avoided much more easily because knowing the location of a train at any given moment no longer required complex calculations.

The railroad system was by no means the only branch of society where standard time changed things decisively. The modern concept of time as a mechanism of control began to creep into people's consciousness. It became more and more obvious that maximising the profit in an industrial and capitalist society required taking advantage of the clock. The very notion of productivity only came to full existence after this increased significance of time was realised. In David Landes's opinion, the clock is the essential machine of control, allowing people to measure work

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<sup>95</sup> James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1992) p. 223.

<sup>96</sup> Carey, pp. 224-25.

performance in uniform time units. This function of the clock makes it helpful in increasing the productive output of workers.<sup>97</sup> The exact measurement of productivity added a new vital element to business competition. Consequently, it is not an exaggeration to say that the clock occupied the key position in the birth of capitalism.

Now, as this mechanism of control became available nationwide in a more organised form than previously, the levels of performance in workplaces, especially factories, were measured with the help of the clock. In addition, because time was money, it was now important to be able to tell the time. In other words, the nationwide standardisation of time helped capitalists to understand the importance of the clock as a device for controlling the workers and making money. As James W. Carey points out, this ideology has spread so wide that "the scene of the worker receiving a watch at his retirement is grotesque and comic."<sup>98</sup>

The train, or more specifically the locomotive, has repeatedly been used as a symbol for technology in an American context. It is the model machine which invaded the virgin garden of the continent during the nineteenth century, transporting progress to all corners of the USA.<sup>99</sup> Until the telegraph was invented, the railroad was not only a method of transportation in the modern sense of the word but also the fastest available way of communication: mail was carried by rail.<sup>100</sup> The emerging systems of technology and capitalism, of which fast and effective communication was an essential part, were as much dependent on the railroad network in the spatial dimension as they were dependent on the clock in the dimension of time. In effect,

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<sup>97</sup> David Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations. Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor* (New York: Norton, 1998) pp. 49-50.

<sup>98</sup> Carey, p. 229.

<sup>99</sup> This is the central metaphor of *The Machine in the Garden* by Leo Marx.

<sup>100</sup> Carey, pp. 203-04.

the train and the clock were among the cornerstones of these systems in a society that kept changing at an increasing pace.

The era of rapid technological and ideological evolution that started at the beginning of the 19th century is often called the transportation revolution. At the turn of the century, as Cowan writes, the state of the roads in the young nation was deplorable. The model for what had to be done could be seen as far back in time as the Roman Empire: roads had to be built and other conditions of transportation improved.<sup>101</sup> The building of the railroad network was the last step in a long list of measures taken to solve the transportation problem. Before the railroad came roads, canals, and steamboats. When the first transcontinental railroad was opened on May 10, 1869, the most fundamental initial problems did not exist any more.<sup>102</sup> It can be thus said that the most critical phase of the American transportation revolution lasted about seventy years. This does not, however, mean that the pace of development in the field of transportation slowed down afterwards. Big obstacles to the fast movement of people and goods still existed - bridge engineering, for example, was a growing line of business.

Railroads and other basic transport facilities were generally considered an egalitarian form of technological progress. Thomas Jefferson, who took office at the beginning of the transportation revolution in 1801, had the belief that practical inventions had to be at the service of everyone. This utility principle both reflected and contributed to the optimistic attitude to new technologies that has always been a part of mainstream American thought.<sup>103</sup> The same idea, though modified in a

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<sup>101</sup> Cowan, pp. 93-94.

<sup>102</sup> Cowan, p. 117.

<sup>103</sup> Hugo A. Meier, "Thomas Jefferson and a Democratic Technology," *Technology in America: A History of Individuals and Ideas*, ed. Carroll W. Pursell (Cambridge: MIT, 1981).

practically goal-oriented way, was later used to promote the building of Brooklyn Bridge as well as to advocate many other constructions and technological experiments. It was a powerful argument to declare that the proposed enterprise was good for everyone and must therefore be accepted. In the latter part of the century, of course, it was those with big money that had to be convinced for the plan to proceed. Often, as in John Roebling's case, the engineer himself was forced to perform this initial task of persuasion and to act as a kind of entrepreneur before the construction process itself could be started.<sup>104</sup> This tendency realised itself in an extreme form in the life of another bridge engineer, James Buchanan Eads, who built himself a career as a banker and promoter of railroads.<sup>105</sup>

In many ways, it was the engineer who best embodied technological progress and the spirit of enterprise in nineteenth-century America. He (technology being almost completely men's territory) was the man whose profession gave him access to the world of the machine, and whose business connections often made him look like a prime capitalist specimen as well. He was an example of man's ability to conquer nature through practical knowledge. During the latter half of the 19th century, as Cowan carefully illustrates, the figure of the engineer gradually gained more and more heroic status. In the 1870s, this almost superhuman figure entered Walt Whitman's poetry, and later some authors of popular novels began writing about the hero-engineer, using Romantic language and describing their protagonists as

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<sup>104</sup> Trachtenberg describes this phase of the Brooklyn Bridge project in chapter 4 of *Brooklyn Bridge*, "A Master Plan", pp. 67-77.

<sup>105</sup> John A. Kouwenhofen, "James Buchanan Eads: The Engineer as Entrepreneur," *Technology in America: A History of Individuals and Ideas*, ed. Carroll W. Pursell (Cambridge: MIT, 1981) p. 81.

courageous and handsome men who had noble visions about the future.<sup>106</sup> In "Passage to India", Whitman wrote:

Singing my days,  
Singing the great achievements of the present,  
Singing the strong light works of engineers,  
Our modern wonders, (the antique ponderous seven outvied.)  
In the Old World the east the Suez canal,  
The New by its mighty railroad spann'd  
.....  
A worship new I sing,  
You captains, voyagers, explorers, yours,  
You engineers, you architects, machinists, yours,  
You, not for trade or transportation only,  
But in God's name, and for thy sake O soul.<sup>107</sup>

It is clear that Whitman shared little of Thoreau's critical ideas on industrialisation, technology, and economic progress. His religious vocabulary reveals that he belonged to the majority relying on the notion of Manifest Destiny, a structure of thought now symbolised by the engineer.

The popular view of the engineer as the man with a mighty vision and impressive capabilities emerges in *Ghosts* when Blue thinks about what his father had told him about the crippled engineer, son of John Roebling:

There Washington Roebling sat every day for many years . . . drawing elaborate color pictures for the foreign workers who spoke no English so they would understand what to do next, and the remarkable thing was that the whole bridge was literally in his head: every piece of it had been memorized, down to the tiniest bits of steel and stone, and though Washington Roebling never set foot on the bridge, it was totally present inside him, as though by the end of all those years it had somehow grown into his body. (pp. 178-79)

The engineer is a man who lives for his great plan and masters its every little detail. As suggested, for Blue Washington Roebling is a significant person also because he was able to live up to his father's standards by realising John Roebling's master plan

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<sup>106</sup> Cowan, p. 215.

<sup>107</sup> Walt Whitman, *Selected Poems* (New York: Dover, 1991) pp. 103-04.



of Brooklyn Bridge. Blue himself is trying something similar by working as a detective like his father did, but he knows he lives in a different world. Blue's father belongs to the same stage of history as the Roeblings: the era of great changes when, Blue feels, one man could make a difference. As a private eye (or private I) in the big city, Blue himself is merely a drop in a sea of people, surrounded by others but still alone. The bridge represents something that has already escaped Blue along with his father, something that seems monumental and produces feelings of nostalgia but can never again be reached.

In his job, Blue has practically no time of his own. Living according to Black's time schedule in an apartment rented by White, he is a perfect example of someone who no longer possesses or controls his own time and space. What is more, his failure to detect any sense in the case he was given can be seen to result from the fact that he has grown up to respect the notion of productivity. It is not enough for him that he gets paid regularly for doing what he was asked to do; he needs to see some progress, some type of concrete development in the case, in return for all the time he has spent working on it. But things remain unchanged. The case simply goes on and on, and Blue feels he is wasting his time doing something that no respectable professional should be doing. He is not aware that what he needs is a change of attitude - a spiritual return, so to speak, to the time before concepts related to productivity took over. That change of attitude is hinted at by the appearance of *Walden*, but Blue still has a long way to go. The most significant process in the story takes place in Blue's mind, which underlines the fact that *Ghosts* is much more about a search for self than about possible solutions to a mystery.

The only moment of Blue's childhood described for the reader of Auster's text is father and son taking a walk on Brooklyn Bridge. This scene is significant

considering that the adult Blue's trouble with Black's case is connected with the notion of productivity, which in turn has a great deal to do with the bridge itself. The most obvious aspect of productivity enhanced by the bridge is fastness of transportation: crossing the East River by boat or ferry could not compete with the cable-train. It was now much easier for workers and businessmen to move between Manhattan and Brooklyn. In addition, as Congressman Abram S. Hewitt - a prominent industrialist - claimed in his speech in the opening ceremonies, the new bridge expressed promises that labour and capital could work together in harmonious cooperation. The structure was not only an apt symbol for science, commerce, and courage, but also a convincing piece of evidence about the progress of humanity towards a future of equality and productivity.<sup>108</sup> Equally optimistic visions of democracy through technology have now, in the early years of the 21st century, been experienced and spread by the most eager advocates of the Internet and other electronic media. In 1883, transportation was a top priority. As Hewitt's enthusiasm reveals, Brooklyn Bridge brought some utopian dimensions to the American nineteenth-century version of technological optimism.

Obviously, the needs for more efficient transportation and communication between Manhattan and Brooklyn were among the main reasons for building the bridge, and the result was that the two boroughs came into closer contact with each other. There were, however, other major sources of motivation. As the plan proceeded, "property values prevailed over community values, and 'utility' was defined by standards of commerce"<sup>109</sup> Owners of real estate had reason to be satisfied because the bridge greatly increased the value of building lots and raised rents

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<sup>108</sup> Trachtenberg, pp. 120-21.

<sup>109</sup> Trachtenberg, p. 110.

especially in Brooklyn.<sup>110</sup> Because of faster access to Manhattan, more people were on the move, which served capitalist needs: it was not only real estate that increased in productivity but other kinds of business as well. This fact had been used in advance to gain support for the bridge plan. The businessman's self-interest had been recognised as the most effective source of motivation when demanding projects had to be undertaken. The business aspect of the bridge, its ability to enhance productivity, may have contributed to Henry James's gloomy vision of the structure as a kind of technological monster whose steel parts resembled clock machinery:

One has the sense that the monster grows and grows, flinging aboard its loose limbs even as some unmannered young giant at his "larks," and that the binding stitches must forever fly further and faster and draw harder; the future complexity of the web, all under sky and over the sea, becoming thus that of some colossal set of clockworks, some steel-souled machine-room of brandished arms and hammering fists and opening and closing jaws.<sup>111</sup>

Here James creates a picture of Brooklyn Bridge as an ominous symbol, but the description seems to have direct connections to the real-life functions of the bridge. The fact that James uses the image of clock machinery (the clock being the prime machine of capitalism) while somewhat pessimistically referring to the future makes his opinion stand in stark contrast to those of the technologically oriented mainstream. If Manifest Destiny with all its capitalist and technological dimensions is embodied by the bridge, as John Roebling's original plan suggested, this complex sentence by James describes that destiny as an exceptionally unpleasant one.

The construction of the bridge directly served the needs of capitalism and had several practical consequences, but it has arguably had a stronger and more lasting effect on Americans as a part of national mythology, through consciousness. This

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<sup>110</sup> Trachtenberg, pp. 111-13.

<sup>111</sup> Henry James, *The American Scene*, 1907. Quoted in Trachtenberg, p. 132.

aspect, the topic of the next subchapter, has also been woven into the fabric of Auster's story. To maintain a sense of proportion, one further point can be made at this stage. The Brooklyn Bridge subtext, it seems, could easily be expanded almost infinitely, perhaps to the point where it equals America (or the popular conception of it). Rather than carrying out this expansion project in detail, however, it may be more useful to look for some concrete ways in which the subtext can influence the reader's experience of *Ghosts*. Revealing these influences is, after all, what the analysis of this large subtext aims at.

#### 4.2.4. Symbol

It is quite a simple conclusion to say that many of the popular symbols and concepts in the collective mind of Americans belong to similar categories of thought. In other words, they seem ideologically quite homogenous, and their meanings overlap each other to a certain extent. Expressions such as "equality of opportunity" and "rags to riches" fit into the same optimistically progressive thought pattern as concepts like Manifest Destiny and the historically significant *frontier*. In the nineteenth century, the frontier was still concretely a significant force. In many branches of life, westward expansion was an important phrase, and hopeful words such as 'opportunity' were used in that context. Above all, the Great West was a powerful symbol for those who shared a belief in technological and economic progress. John Roebling had earlier in his life advocated the construction of the transcontinental railroad, and he saw his own bridge plan as the final step in the mythical pursuit of a passage to India, a project Columbus had begun.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Trachtenberg, p. 76.

This idea of a unity between westward movement and progress was expressed with enthusiasm by Whitman in "A Passage to India", and many other American writers have presented going west as an act of personal development or purification. In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway finds that "the East was haunted" after Gatsby's death,<sup>113</sup> which forces him to go back to the Middle West, a region he used to think of as "the ragged edge of the universe".<sup>114</sup> Although Fitzgerald partly reverses the traditional way of thinking (financial opportunity originally drove Carraway to New York *from* the west), the direction of the frontier still represents real moral value after Nick has had enough of the corrupt East. To go back to Auster, Blue has a similar decision to make at the end of *Ghosts* when he has eliminated Black and is about to exit the narrative. The last paragraph first follows the familiar idea of westward movement as purification:

Where he goes after 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. Anything is possible, therefore. I myself prefer to think that he went far away, boarding a train that morning and going out West to start a new life. (p. 232)

Leaving New York behind and moving west to begin all over again would certainly be a peculiarly traditional ending to this story. The train, the original vehicle of large-scale westward travel, is of course present. The narrator now appears as "I" for the first time, to speculate on Blue's future actions. The narrator's failure to know anything for sure emphasises the self-reflexive quality of the story, but it also plays down the importance of Blue's decision: whatever he decides does not even belong to the story and is therefore insignificant. In other words, the narrative does not require Blue's departure to the west - it is enough that he walks out of the room.

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<sup>113</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner, 1953) p. 178.

<sup>114</sup> Fitzgerald, p. 3.

The concluding sentences add a new tint to the attitude the story takes to the American myth of westward movement:

It is even possible that America was not the end of it. In my secret dreams, I like to think of Blue booking passage on some ship and sailing to China. Let it be China, then, and we'll leave it at that. For now is the moment that Blue stands up from his chair, puts on his hat, and walks through the door. And from this moment on, we know nothing. (p. 232)

The narrator's sudden decision that Blue's destination has to be specified comes as a surprise after the same speaker has just said it does not matter. The choice, China, is unexpected as well, underlining the fact that the narrator has a complete freedom of choice in the matter. The destination is comically far-fetched; Columbus was aiming at India, but the idea of a new life in China may nowadays seem quite absurd from a mainstream American perspective. Of course, China *is* located west of New York, and the choice is thus in fact quite consistent with the traditional ideal of westward movement. The main point, however, is that by bringing up the theme of the West, the story creates another connection to the most basic myths of American consciousness. If, as John Roebling thought, Brooklyn Bridge embodied the final link of the passage to India, or the more general dream of the West, the last few paragraphs of *Ghosts* certainly express something about the relationship between the text and its subtext. On the last page, after Blue has finished reading what Black has written, it is mentioned that "he hears a car driving across the Brooklyn Bridge" (p. 232). Indisputably, the bridge is a dominant element in the environment Blue is now leaving for good. In fact, he has been raised by the bridge, figuratively speaking, as his close association of the structure with his father suggests. Moreover, it must be added that Blue seems to depart with an air of hope, perhaps understanding: reading Black's book may have made a difference.

What is it, then, that Blue is departing from, or ridding himself of? The answer to this question can be composed of the ideological, historical, and philosophical aspects of the Brooklyn Bridge subtext. For years, Blue has been trapped by the case; by his own rationalism in trying to solve it; by the necessity of finding a functional solution everywhere; by his insistence on reason. This way of thinking is in its fundamentals well comparable with the ideology of technological rationalism (sometimes leading to utopianism) that Brooklyn Bridge symbolises. Blue's functionalist and straightforwardly mimetic approach to language is merely one example of his general attitude to things. Little by little, however, his mentality changes, eventually to the extent that an escape from the prison of rationalism becomes possible. The ending of *Ghosts*, expressing scepticism about the applicability of some common American thought patterns, signals that Blue may finally be capable of walking out of the ideological prison, as he at the same time exits the narrative.

The Brooklyn Bridge subtext can thus be seen as an ideological equivalent of the narrative trap, so to speak, that Blue finds himself in as a character in someone else's text. As he walks out of the text, he no longer has to obey the limitations of time and space set by someone else (White, Black, the narrator of the story, the city). Affected by the way of thinking his father had passed down to him, Blue used to admire Washington Roebling, who was able to pull all the strings needed to control the entire building project of the bridge. From the days when he listened to his father's stories about the bridge, Blue has lived according to the ideology of reason. However, as the story of *Ghosts* reaches its end, the requirements (and, consequently, the pressure) of productivity and rationality no longer concern him. He has experienced and learned the uselessness of trying to make sense of Black's case in standard ways, the vanity of relying on rationalism in a world full of puzzling paradox, a world controlled by

narratives written by ghosts. Brooklyn Bridge has been like a giant mechanism of control, signifying Manifest Destiny and watching Blue's progress with the case, but now he is finally able to free himself. As the narrative reaches its conclusion, Blue exits to go on as an invisible man, as another ghost.



## 5. Synthesis: The Fuller Pattern

To return to the theoretical aspects of subtext analysis, one of Ziva Ben-Porat's main arguments was that the actualisation of a literary subtext connection ends with the establishment of as many and as rich intertextual patterns as possible.<sup>115</sup> These dynamic patterns determine the results of the analysis. As far as *Ghosts* is concerned, it has been shown above that some significant interaction can indeed be detected between the text and its subtexts; a number of thematic patterns contribute to the process of interpretation. So far my analysis has concentrated exclusively on the relationships the primary text has with its two subtexts. What follows, however, leaves *Ghosts* aside for a moment in an attempt to discover a meaningful relationship between the two subtexts. To put it more specifically, I will juxtapose Thoreau's ideas with the Brooklyn Bridge ideology and, while doing that, examine one specific instance of collision between the two, namely J. A. Etzler's technological utopia and Thoreau's reaction to it. The aim is to suggest that a similar tension, in a less outright form, may be implicit in *Ghosts* through the way the text connects itself with the subtexts.

There are several quite obvious ways in which the two subtexts of *Ghosts* analysed above differ from each other fundamentally. The types of text (literary vs. historical/ideological), the methods of connection, and the roles the subtexts play in the interpretation of Auster's text all have little in common. Furthermore, Henry David Thoreau and Brooklyn Bridge represent two ideological viewpoints that can hardly be brought into any kind of harmony. Specifically, the opposition between

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<sup>115</sup> Ben-Porat, p. 111.

these viewpoints is illustrated, albeit in a simplified form, by the gulf between the industrialist mainstream and Romanticism in 19th-century America. The old Puritan idea of a correlation between wealth and goodness contributed to the wide acceptance of new technological and economic systems, as did also the religious belief in Manifest Destiny and humankind's control over nature. These very systems were what Thoreau set himself against. He was never tempted by the prospects of the new technologies or the wildly optimistic visions of the future that became more and more common as the 19th century progressed.

### 5.1. Argument

The first book presenting the United States as a true technological utopia was written and published by John Adolphus Etzler, boyhood friend and fellow emigrant of bridge engineer John Roebling, in 1833. The persuasively entitled *The Paradise within the Reach of All Men, without Labor, by Powers of Nature and Machinery: An Address to All Intelligent Men* prophesied a perfect society capable of fulfilling everyone's dreams in the near future if only people had it in them to consider the message seriously. In Germany, Roebling and Etzler had attended Hegel's lectures together, and although Roebling later criticised the impracticability of Etzler's calculations, the two men shared a powerful vision of humanity's mastery over nature.<sup>116</sup> Philosophically, Etzler's Hegelian utopia presents an extreme version of the same progressive ideology that Brooklyn Bridge, his friend's design, stands for.

Etzler's book starts with a pompous declaration of his objectives and ends with letters to the President and Congress to promote his cause. There is no place for

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<sup>116</sup> Trachtenberg, pp. 47-48.

modesty in his boundless optimism:

I promise to show the means for creating a paradise within ten years, where every thing desirable for human life may be had for every man in superabundance, without labor, without pay; where the whole face of nature is changed into the most beautiful form of which it be capable; where man may live in the most magnificent palaces, in all imaginable refinements of luxury, in the most delightful gardens; where he may accomplish, without his labor, in one year more than hitherto could be done in thousands of years. . . .<sup>117</sup>

As Howard Segal notes, technological utopias generally differed from other utopias in presenting their ideal society as a perfectly logical, scientifically possible and even probable outcome of contemporary developments. Another characteristic of these visions was their lack of specification as far as the practical means of creating the desired utopias were concerned.<sup>118</sup> Etzler's work illustrates both these tendencies. Firstly, it carries absolute conviction that the utopia can be realised; and secondly, rather than suggesting any practical solutions, it focuses on calculating the power potential of natural forces (the wind, the waves, the tides, the sun) and describing the abundance that potential could theoretically produce. The goal is to be accomplished with the help of simple mechanical contrivances: "Machineries are but tools. The possibility of contriving tools for any certain purpose cannot be questioned."<sup>119</sup>

According to Etzler, the utopian project would require the formation of voluntary associations; individual enterprises do not lead to anything truly valuable: "Man is powerful but in union with many."<sup>120</sup> After their establishment by "bold and humane" people, the associations would make the end product of "this great, and most glorious

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<sup>117</sup> John Adolphus Etzler, *The Paradise within the Reach of All Men, without Labor, by Powers of Nature and Machinery: An Address to All Intelligent Men. In Two Parts* (Pittsburgh: Etzler and Reinhold, 1833) part 1, p. 1.

<sup>118</sup> Howard P. Segal, *Technological Utopianism in American Culture* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985) pp. 21-22.

<sup>119</sup> Etzler, part 1, p. 20.

<sup>120</sup> Etzler, part 1, p. 105.

cause of humankind" a reality within the next ten years.<sup>121</sup> In this scenario, there is clearly an air of Manifest Destiny, a sense that the ultimate agent capable of realising the dream will be the nation, not its citizens. As a people, Americans are offered "dominion over the world";<sup>122</sup> the whole second part of the book is devoted to showing how the scenario can be put to use in the USA. Etzler's way of presenting his plan is also heavily influenced by the very (technological) rationalism that he and his friend John Roebling had derived from Hegel. The basis of his argument, as he persistently reminds the reader, is simply the calm use of reason, and anyone without prejudice would inevitably have to accept his assertions. Furthermore, he claims, a denial of his ideas could only result from "a blind adherence to customary impressions of minds little used to reflection" or the disease of "despicable mental sloth" in which "the patient is very arrogant and very ready in his judgment without giving or taking any reason."<sup>123</sup>

Another aspect of Etzler's utopia is the replacement of the natural environment with man-made pastoral landscape. Machines would level the ground for agriculture, removing all kinds of natural obstacles, and the "hideous wilderness" now inhabited only by "brutes and venomous or loathsome vermin and a few scattered miserable indians [sic]" would be turned into gardens.<sup>124</sup> In other words, Etzler's technologically oriented mind saw no real value in nature as such; it was merely material to be used in the creation of a paradise for humankind, a world in which people would live in standardised flats in standardised buildings, and all physical needs could be satisfied

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<sup>121</sup> Etzler, part 1, p. 112.

<sup>122</sup> Etzler, part 1, p. 118; part 2, p. 4.

<sup>123</sup> Etzler, part 1, p. 55.

<sup>124</sup> Etzler, part 1, pp. 62-64, 67-68; part 2, p.6.

"by a short turn of some crank."<sup>125</sup> Etzler champions the study of natural sciences, regretting that in the contemporary world "the sciences of reason are less cultivated than those of memory and imagination,"<sup>126</sup> but rather than a thorough knowledge of nature, his objective seems to be learning how to use nature as a tool for material purposes. Aiming at a total metamorphosis of the surface of the globe, Etzler's utopian plan assumes that once people's material needs are satisfied, moral problems will cease to exist.

## 5.2. Counterargument

In John Etzler's mind the term *progress* in itself undoubtedly produced utopian visions, whereas Henry Thoreau had grown more sensitive to the negative connotations of the concept. The new economic, technological and industrial phenomena had all shown their dehumanising effects to him. In the essay "Life without Principle", Thoreau later presented ideas which, not surprisingly, seem the exact opposite of the Puritan notion of joined economic and spiritual progress:

The ways by which you may get money almost without exception lead downward. To have done anything by which you earned money *merely* is to have been truly idle or worse. If the laborer gets no more than the wages which his employer pays him, he is cheated, he cheats himself. If you would get money as a writer or lecturer, you must be popular, which is to go down perpendicularly. Those services which the community will most readily pay for, it is most disagreeable to render. You are paid for being something less than a man.<sup>127</sup>

These lines reflect Thoreau's own experiences in writing and lecturing, which never turned very profitable because he was not willing to "go down" in order to be popular.

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<sup>125</sup> Etzler, part 1, p.76.

<sup>126</sup> Etzler, part 1, p.59.

<sup>127</sup> Henry David Thoreau, "Life without Principle," *Great Short Works of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Wendell Glick (New York: Harper & Row, 1982) p. 361.

The kind of work he labels disagreeable covers practically every common profession in a society based on capitalist economy and the strict division of work. Contrary to the title of his essay, Thoreau was a man of principle more than anything else. For example, after graduating from Harvard he crossed out for ethical reasons two of the three options open to him as career alternatives. Significantly, one of the two was trade.<sup>128</sup> From early on in his life, Thoreau had grown to despise everything the businessman represented.

Leo Marx elaborates on Thoreau's comment about the machine-like functioning of the worker as follows, emphasising the significance of the exact measurement of time for capitalism:

The clock, favorite "machine" of the Enlightenment, is a mastermachine in Thoreau's model of the capitalist economy. Its function is decisive because it links the industrial apparatus with consciousness. The laboring man becomes a machine in the sense that his life becomes more closely geared to an impersonal and seemingly autonomous system.<sup>129</sup>

Here Marx makes an important connection. As mentioned, in Thoreau's thinking everything starts from and ends at the consciousness of the individual. There is a natural link from the Enlightenment (and, on the other hand, from Romanticism) to Thoreau as well as from capitalist economy to advancing technology. The latter connection, suggested by Marx here, may be easy to prove by historical facts, but it is especially emphasised in Thoreau's opinions. The market and the machine join forces to create a common image in his mind. The symbol for this joined entity in *Walden* is the train that passes one corner of the pond on its way to Boston. The railroad is mentioned frequently throughout the book. A scene in the chapter called "Sounds" expresses how technology and economy go hand in hand:

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<sup>128</sup> Bode, p. 13.

<sup>129</sup> Marx, *Machine*, p. 248.

The whistle of the locomotive penetrates my woods summer and winter, sounding like the scream of a hawk sailing over some farmer's yard, informing me that many restless city merchants are arriving within the circle of the town, or adventurous country traders from the other side. . . Here come your groceries, country; your rations, countrymen!<sup>130</sup>

In effect, technology carries capitalist economy inside itself as the train takes its merchant passengers to potential customers. The train symbolises both technology and the craving for money implicit in the system of free enterprise. City merchants are transported according to timetables; again the clock creates the link between consciousness and technological and economic development. The train works as a kind of clock: its loud whistle always crosses the air at the same time of the day, letting everybody understand that economy requires regularity.

Henry David Thoreau was only fifteen years old when Etzler originally published *The Paradise within the Reach of All Men*. At the time, the book attracted little attention. Nine years later, however, the same text was printed in Britain and circulated back to the USA, and it was this reprint that Thoreau read and reacted to. His criticism, spelled out in the review essay "Paradise (to be) Regained", was primarily directed at Etzler's idea of material abundance as the ultimate condition of human happiness, which to Thoreau seemed merely another expression of the commercial spirit, or "the signs of the times".<sup>131</sup> The fact that Etzler presented a complete destruction of the natural environment as a requirement for his paradise must have annoyed Thoreau. He had seen the incompatibility of profit-making and

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<sup>130</sup> *Walden*, p. 78.

<sup>131</sup> Henry David Thoreau, "Paradise (to be) Regained," *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 13 (1843): p. 451. Subsequently quoted as "Paradise". This text has been reprinted in *Reform Papers*, ed. Wendell Click (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973), a collection of Thoreau's essays. His phrase "signs of the times" echoes the title of Thomas Carlyle's influential techno-critical essay from 1829. For an analysis of Carlyle's (quite Thoreauvian) discussion of the Machine of Society, see Segal, pp. 82-87.

technological progress on the one hand and nature conservation on the other lead to ugly results. The public opinion in his hometown Concord had always favoured the former:

If a man like Thoreau chose to devote his time and energy to interests which yielded no actual pecuniary profits, public opinion, or what he termed so aptly "the police of meaningless labor," accused him of squandering time. The man who walked in the woods for love of them was called a loafer, while the one who cut down forests was considered industrious and enterprising.<sup>132</sup>

As Marx explains in *The Machine in the Garden*, it was the same whistle which penetrated the woods near Walden Pond that opened the path for technological and economic change in general in 19th-century America. As the nation concentrated on enhancing westward expansion and effecting technological advances, transportation occupied an essential role. *Access* was the key word in many respects, whether the issue was a railroad across the continent or crossing the East River in New York. For many U.S. citizens, the west coast - especially California - used to be (or sometimes still is) the mythical land of new life, an almost utopian cornucopia of opportunity. For Thoreau, in contrast, California was "only 3000 miles nearer to hell".<sup>133</sup> The American dream more or less equalled the desire for money, but in Thoreau's opinion such a goal made no sense.

Etzler never claimed for any financial profit for his plan, thus not completely conforming to the stereotype of the capitalist,<sup>134</sup> but his text nevertheless worked to maintain the existing ideal of material abundance as the number one goal for

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<sup>132</sup> Reginald L. Cook, *Passage to Walden* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949). *The Thoreau Home Page*. Thoreau Society <<http://www.walden.org/thoreau/>> 15 December 2000, Ch. 5, par. 11. Thoreau's phrase is from "Life Without Principle," p. 360 in *Great Short Works*.

<sup>133</sup> Quoted in Neufeldt, p. 7.

<sup>134</sup> He did, however, devote several pages to discussing "the pecuniary profit of the new means", pp. 99-104.



humanity. "Man must first be satisfied with his physical wants," he wrote, "before his mind can be accessible to superior culture."<sup>135</sup> In Thoreau's opinion, in contrast, any reform must start with a moral change within the individual. In his review of Etzler's utopia, the Concord man summed up the most fundamental contradiction between the two points of view:

It would seem . . . that there is a transcendentalism in mechanics as well as in ethics. . . . One says he will reform himself, and then nature and circumstances will be right. . . . The other will reform nature and circumstances, and then man will be right.<sup>136</sup>

As consistently as Etzler insists on the essentiality of collective action from the beginning, Thoreau maintains that "nothing can be effected but by one man. . . . We must first succeed alone, that we may enjoy our success together."<sup>137</sup> Thoreau's reaction to Etzler's calculations as such can by no means be called a total repudiation: he values them for what they are - calculations. However, in Thoreau's reading of Etzler's scenario, the problems far exceed the virtues. Above all, the disregard of people's moral condition seemed unpardonable. The idea of reducing all labour to "a short turn of some crank" is meaningless, says Thoreau, unless "the crank within," "the prime mover in all machinery," is turned first.<sup>138</sup> Unfortunately, he fears, this moral change is so difficult to effect that even if the utopia was otherwise realisable, the ten years of Etzler's plan would be prolonged "to ten thousand at least."<sup>139</sup> Rather than the powers of nature, Thoreau feels, it is the power of the human mind that should be harnessed to good ends. That would be a real breakthrough on the way to a paradise.

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<sup>135</sup> Etzler, part 1, pp. 110-11.

<sup>136</sup> "Paradise," pp. 451-52.

<sup>137</sup> "Paradise," p.461.

<sup>138</sup> "Paradise," p.460.

<sup>139</sup> "Paradise," p. 461.

### 5.3. Interpreting the Pattern

What Thoreau and Etzler have in common, then, is the conception of ordinary people as slaves to work, but the solutions they offer could not be further from each other. The former speaks for a change in the individual, the latter wants to transform nature to serve human needs. Thoreau flatly opposes all kinds of standardisation because it only produces mechanised routines, whereas Etzler sees standardised structures as a fundamental part of his utopia. As philosophical standpoints, Thoreau's individualistic transcendentalism and Etzler's technological utilitarianism are irreconcilable. As regards Auster and *Ghosts*, this seems to prove that the two subtexts examined represent opposing forces in the text.

In studying the relationship between the subtexts, I have perhaps pursued the examination beyond the normal (some might say, reasonable) limits of subtext analysis. Establishing intertextual patterns between the primary text and its subtexts, not between two subtexts, is certainly the most important objective, since the interpretation of the primary text is what subtext analysis always aims at. However, in this particular case the relationship between Henry David Thoreau's ideas and those associated with Brooklyn Bridge is also meaningful because this relationship is in clear analogy with the irreconcilable tension between self-realisation and subjection to outside control that Blue continually experiences in Auster's text.

In his most famous essay, Thoreau advises: "Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine."<sup>140</sup> The machine is his name for any overpowering system or process - the market economy, government, technology, industrialism, or other - that has dehumanising tendencies. In *Ghosts*, Blue accepts a case that turns his whole life

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<sup>140</sup> Henry David Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government," *Great Short Works of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Wendell Glick (New York: Harper & Row, 1982) p. 143.

into an uncanny continuum of standardised functions, a continuum that can only be broken with violence. Blue's escape at the end of the story is indisputably the most important single action as far as interpretation is concerned. To simplify the pattern somewhat, the analysis of the subtexts has indicated that Thoreau represents the values (individualism, self-realisation, simplicity) that *help* Blue to escape, whereas Brooklyn Bridge stands for the things (forces of control, conventions dictated by habit, history, and national myths) that he escapes *from*. The whole picture is certainly more complex, and the intertextual patterns revealed can hardly be reduced to a single case of binary opposition, but the general opposing tendencies of the two subtexts are evident.

To acknowledge the individuality of literary texts, one further comment is necessary. The extent to which Auster's text can be explained through its subtexts is inevitably limited by the story itself. Whether read as a detective story or not, *Ghosts* describes a world of metaphysical phenomena, a world that cannot be satisfactorily comprehended by calm reason and bodily senses. Blue is changed by what he experiences. He enters the narrative as one man and exits as another, but the reader never learns exactly what it is that changes. The narrative has its own air of transcendentalism, a sense that things are never merely what they seem to be, which makes any attempt at a total interpretation unrealistic. Subtext analysis has to recognise its limits and content itself with tangible elements; it cannot deal with textual ghosts.

## 6. Conclusion

The word *allusion* has its origin in the Latin *alludere*, 'to play with, to jest, to refer to'. Literary subtext connections represent a very specific type of allusion, but the full meaning of the Latin word still seems to be alive in the way these connections work. A subtext is definitely at its most fruitful when it has a creative relationship with its primary text, a relationship which is simultaneously playful and serious. In fact, depending on the complexity of the intertextual networks that the primary text opens for view, a serious analysis could sometimes begin to look like an elaborate game of literary hide-and-seek. The results can be unexpected.

I set out with the intention of finding contexts in which the interpretative problems of *Ghosts* could be seen in a new light, and ended up drawing a comparison between two different ideological stances on progress from the 19th century. During the process, it has become evident that subtext analysis has both its hazards and its possibilities. One of the most obvious risks is that the analysis can easily stray too far from the primary text, into territory irrelevant for any reader's experience. This danger, it seems, can only be avoided by keeping in mind the starting point, the text, and making it the ending point as well. Otherwise the analysis would no longer deal with subtexts; it would merely describe some unconnected facts in the text's background. Conscious of this danger, although discussing the chosen subtexts at some length, I have made an effort to remain in touch with *Ghosts*, the actual object of analysis, wherever possible.

The benefits inherent in subtext analysis arise from the same feature that from another point of view looks like a potential danger. The widening of semantic space allows the reader to see the details of the text in a larger context, and as long as this

context is a relevant one, this may result in a richer interpretation. In other words, intertextuality becomes a vital element of textuality. On the other hand, the role of the reader grows when subtexts emerge. As far as this work is concerned, it is without doubt an examination of myself as a reader of *Ghosts* at least as much as an objective study of Auster's subtexts. To put it simply, I have shown the subtexts as I see them, and in doing that established a few links and constructed a few narratives of my own. Ordinary readers of Auster can hardly be expected to know the philosophical details of literary transcendentalism, but many are probably familiar with the symbolic value of Brooklyn Bridge and the name of Henry David Thoreau. It is possible that *Ghosts* may even give someone an incentive to read Thoreau.

In *Ghosts*, the only mind even partly accessible to the reader is Blue's; he is the focal point and practically the sole actor of the narrative. Consequently, it is through his consciousness that any other factor must be examined. Of the two subtexts, as the analysis has indicated, Thoreau represents personal autonomy, the ability to see through appearances, linguistic competence, and non-standardisation. For Blue, these are all forces of emancipation. The Brooklyn Bridge subtext, in contrast, stands for rationalism, productivity, Manifest Destiny, other national myths, and the progressive mentality of earlier generations - all primarily forces of control for someone in Blue's position. The conflict between these opposing worlds of thought remains alive until Blue finally leaves his solitary room, his own little Walden Pond at the heart of the city, for good. The reader does not know exactly where he goes or what he is going to do next. As the private eye disappears through the doorway, the only dead certainty is that he will not look back.

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