Self-Destructive Double Questers: A Psychosocial Study of Suicide in Paul Auster's *The Locked Room*

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Abstract

As a quintessentially postmodern territory, Paul Auster's fictional world is laden with suicidal doppelgangers, whom Auster employs in the third volume of his celebrated triptych *The New York Trilogy*, namely *The Locked Room* (1986), as a structuring device geared to echo a postmodern world of hermetically locked rooms. Despite the striking presence of suicide in Auster's oeuvre, its significance as a thematic phenomenon has received surprisingly scant critical attention. The present study seeks to narrow the current lacuna by establishing a complementary relationship between suicide, the double-motif, and the characteristic postmodern mode of existence in *The Locked Room*. The study is carried out by applying Anthony Giddens's psychosocial account of suicide in "A Typology of Suicide" (1966), which in addition to providing an etiological analysis, helps to contextualize the structuring device of suicidal doppelgangers in the postmodern milieu of the novel. The upshot is a coherent tripartite nexus, in which an ultimate narrative of identity loss, suicide, and the double-motif correspond to one another's contradictions and undecidability. The aporetic indeterminacy rooted in the foregoing trio reflects the author's literary conception of postmodern existence in the novel.

Keywords

Paul Auster's fiction is packed with (self-)destructive doppelgängers. The double-motif is a pervasive element in his work, and the idea of a volatile and dissolving self-identity, shadowed by morbidity and fatal encounters, looms large. Stillman and his doppelgänger in *City of Glass* (1985), Black and Blue in *Ghosts* (1986), the unnamed narrator and Fanshawe in *The Locked Room* (1986), and Fogg and Effing in *Moon Palace* (1989) are some examples of its predominance in Auster's literary universe. In each of the installments of *The New York Trilogy* (1986), the protagonist embarks on a quest to locate his alter ego, which almost always results in death (and/as suicide). In *The Locked Room*, the protagonist-narrator engages in a deadly pursuit of his childhood friend, role model, and double, Fanshawe. What distinguishes the doppelgänger relationship in *The Locked Room* from those in the other installments, however, is the fact that the relationship between the narrator and Fanshawe is characterized by a self-destructive and shame-infused quest for the appropriation of the protagonist's embodied ego-ideal, namely, Fanshawe. Despite the prominent presence of suicide in American literature, there are not many studies that focus on this theme, particularly as it appears in Auster's oeuvre. In view of the existing gap, the present study establishes a complementary relationship between suicide and the double-motif in Auster, facets of his work that hitherto have been explored individually. We claim that the self-obsessed identity quest in *The Locked Room* assimilates the indeterminacy associated with suicide and the double-motif in such a way as to reflect the condition of postmodern existence. In other words, the structuring device of suicidal doppelgängers represents postmodern existence as a narrative of identity loss.

Using Anthony Giddens's psychosocial typology of suicide as presented in "A Typology of Suicide" (1966) as a lens, we argue that the suicidal behavior of *The Locked Room*'s protagonist can be traced to a sense of shame associated with the unbridgeable gap between the expectations of his ego-ideal and the actual performance of his ego. Through self-destruction, the protagonist seeks a rebirth that would replace his inadequate ego with his incarnate ego-ideal—that is to say, Fanshawe. The protagonist, however, is oblivious to the fact that, ironically, such an act requires Fanshawe's annihilation along with his own. Ultimately, by destroying the very embodiment of the ego-ideal, suicide thwarts the actualization of the protagonist's rebirth, rendering it phantasmatic and illusory. Hence suicide's intrinsic indeterminacy: as an act that simultaneously asserts and annihilates identity, it is a necessarily self-defeating event. Accordingly, in Auster we find an overlapping, dynamic trio in which narratives of identity loss, suicide, and the double-motif correspond to one another's contradictions and undecidability. The indeterminacy

rooted in this trio reflects Auster's literary conception of his cultural milieu. In order to provide a theoretical context for this reading of Auster and the significance of these triadic themes, the following section gives an overview of Giddens's typology of suicide and a brief survey of the double-motif. We then turn to a closer examination of *The Locked Room*.

Towards a Bridge between Suicide and the Double-Motif: Anthony Giddens's Psychosocial Typology of Suicide

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed a paradigm shift in the systematic study of suicide, which effected a breakaway from medical interpretations toward sociological and psychological accounts of the act and its ideation. Émile Durkheim's *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (1897) transformed the understanding of the phenomenon from a private act into one deeply rooted in the social structure. Durkheim's analysis rules out extra-social factors, such as psychological states and predispositions, as the determining causes of suicide, proposing instead the progressive concomitants of social life (29, 51). The significance of this theory is underscored by Jack D. Douglas's observation that "most of the sociological works on suicide have been influenced by [Durkheim's] *Suicide*" (79). At the other extreme of the spectrum of modern suicidology lies the psychoanalytic theory established by Sigmund Freud, who introduces such concepts as the superego/ego-ideal and the death-drive into his analysis of suicide as a psychological phenomenon.[1] Between these two extremes, there are attempts to reconcile the sociological and psychological aspects of suicide. For example, in "Occupation, Status, and Suicide: Toward a Redefinition of Anomie" (1958), Elwin H. Powell presents an analysis which operates under what Douglas terms the "unexamined assumption" that suicidal behavior stems from the inability of the individual to "validate" his or her self "through the normally approved form of status activity" (Douglas 93). Even though the "frustration-leads-to-suicide" theoretical assumption makes some allowance for the psychological dimension of suicide, Powell's theory is again more inclined toward Durkheim's and remains rather limited (Douglas 93). There is also Andrew F. Henry and James F. Short's psychosocial theory of suicide, *Suicide and Homicide* (1954), which focuses on aggression as the main determinant. Martin Gold's "Suicide, Homicide, and the Socialization of

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[1] For more elaboration on these terms, see Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Ego and the Id*, and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

Aggression" (1958), which again examines the correlation between aggression and suicide/homicide, also takes account of the influence of social class. Nonetheless, none of these psychosocial theories establishes a link between psychological and sociological dimensions in such a way as to explore the relation between shame, ego-ideal, and the social context. In other words, they lack a bridge that could accommodate the relation between suicide and the double-motif in their examination of the social context. Anthony Giddens's "A Typology of Suicide" builds a bridge compatible with such interactions.

Giddens addresses the gap between sociological and psychological explanations by introducing a schematic typology that links Durkheim to Freud. While accepting the differentiation Durkheim makes between anomic and egoistic suicide, Giddens underscores the extent of their overlap by reiterating their common element, that is, "a low level of regulatory control over behavior" (278). He further explains that social norms govern by influencing "the actual setting of goals" as well as restricting aspirations (278). When social norms fail to provide clearly defined goals or give rise to a "disparity between aspirations and the possibility of their implementations," anomie is generated, which debilitates social ties. Accordingly, the variation of "normative integration" in a social system (i.e., anomie) is not entirely independent of that of "social integration" (i.e., egoism) (279). Despite this overlap, he concludes that the psychological dimension of Durkheim's theory is "fragmentary" and "inadequate," which leads him to incorporate Freud (279). Drawing on psychoanalytic concepts, Giddens establishes a psychological type that is particularly compatible with those cases of suicide that correspond, for the most part, with failure and a sense of inferiority. Following Gerhart Piers and Milton B. Singer's association of the super-ego and ego-ideal with guilt and shame, respectively, Giddens argues that if guilt can derive from a tension between super-ego and ego, friction between "the goals and self-conception embodied in the ego-ideal" and "the actual performance of the ego" can result in a sense of shame that drives one to destroy self-identity in hopes of rebirth—the rebirth of an ego consistent with the ego-ideal (283).

The fantasy of rebirth, which precipitates the shame-ridden suicide, is especially relevant to Auster's *The Locked Room*, whose self-destructive protagonist is propelled by a similar sense of inferiority, seeking to replace his "unsatisfactory ego-identity" with a new one more in keeping with the demands of his ego-ideal (Giddens, "Typology" 285). The link that Giddens creates between the sociological factors involved in suicide, such as anomie and egoism, and the psychological concept of the ego-ideal makes his typology particularly pertinent to Auster's representation of suicide. Giddens's theory allows us to establish the connection

between suicide and the double-motif at the same time as it helps contextualize the literary device of suicidal doppelgängers. Moreover, Giddens's sociological variables (such as the family structure and social status), which perform a key role in the formation of the over-demanding ego-ideal, can illuminate our understanding of the novel's postmodern context and the relationship between postmodernism, suicide, and the double-motif.

Now that the relevance of Giddens's typology is spelled out, an overview of the double-motif would prove instrumental in forging the link between suicide and the double-motif. The origin of the word "doppelgänger," literally meaning "double walker," can be traced to Jean Paul's coinage of the word in his 1796 novel *Siebenkäs*. However, as Dimitris Vardoulakis observes, given the liminal ontological structure of the doppelgänger, "its effective presence is not reducible to any pragmatic context nor to any single historical narrative," and as a result, the motif is not "framed by an absolute beginning or an absolute end" (9).

According to Otto Rank, modern individuals rerouted the trajectory of the concept of the self-reflexive double through the consciousness of death and the subsequent fear of its threat to humankind's "primitive narcissism" and "wish for immortality" (*The Double* 84), converting its primary position as "a symbol of eternal life in the primitive" into "an omen of death in the self-conscious individual of modern civilization" (*Beyond Psychology* 76). In "The 'Uncanny'" (1919), Freud expands on Rank's account of the evolution of the double-motif, which was originally published in 1914, and maintains that the double-motif is associated with the formation of a special agency, namely the super-ego, which is able to treat the rest of the ego as a "dissociated" object (235). In addition to this repressive agency, Freud incorporates into the idea of the double "all the unfulfilled but possible futures to which we still like to cling in phantasy, all the strivings of the ego which adverse external circumstances have crushed" (236). In other words, the ego-ideal also feeds into the idea of the double. In keeping with Freud's argument, Rank clinches the connection between suicide and the double by adding that an awareness of the guilt informed by an overwhelming fear of death measures the distance between ego-ideal and "attained reality" that, at times, drives the subject to extreme forms of self-punishment, including suicide (*The Double* 77).

In addition to its psychological meanings, the double-motif also has implications for grasping literature in relation to its social context. What Andrew Webber regards as the "non-progressive" (*Double Visions* 5-6) and Vardoulakis calls the "non-teleological" dialectic of the doppelgänger (*Literature's Philosophy* 42) proved to be a helpful device for representing fragmentary modern (and postmodern)

experiences. Doppelgänger relationality, "double, contradictory, [and] undecidable," renders the anchoring sense of self-identity inoperative and thus corresponds to the textual fragmentation inherent in modernist and postmodernist literary discourses (Derrida 230). Analogously, Auster's literary universe is one of infinite contingency and erratic arbitrariness, where the only certainty is likely to be uncertainty. According to Ilana Shiloh, while the notion of the double deconstructs identity by suggesting that "two separate entities are one," thus reducing its defining characteristic of difference to sameness, it simultaneously retains a sense of infinite duality or multiplicity, implying the "impossibility" and/or "inevitable defeat" of knowledge (23, 20, 165). Auster's adoption of the theme of suicidal doppelgängers therefore reflects a world fraught with ambiguity and overwhelming indeterminacy.

Dual and/or Identical: The Ontological Uncertainty of Doppelgängers in *The Locked Room*

Introduced as the most significant person in the narrator's life, Fanshawe's haunting presence weighs heavily on the narrative from the very beginning of *The Locked Room*. The novel opens with the narrator's obsessive remark about Fanshawe's pervasive and formative presence in his life since their childhood. In a symbolic act, they even made themselves "blood brothers for life" when they were only seven years old (195). The narrative continues to be punctuated with the narrator's memories of and obsessive musings on Fanshawe, and as the story progresses, their uncanny resemblance and relationship is increasingly foregrounded to the extent that the harder the narrator looks the more their identities shade into one another. Regarding their childhood attachment, the narrator reveals that it was as though they belonged to "the same household" (209). Their parents were close friends. Neither one had a brother to stand between them. They were born less than a week apart and took their first steps on the same day. The narrator adds that once they asked his mother "if it was possible for men to get married" because they wanted to "live together when they grew up" (209). The persistent inseparability, as well as the pseudo-blood bond, between the two corresponds to the concept of doppelgängers, who obsessively and inextricably retain a haunting presence in each other's lives, as in Edgar Allan Poe's "William Wilson."

Several characters in the novel note this correspondence. Fanshawe's mother, Jane, points out the confusing similarities between the narrator and her son when she observes, "You even look like him, you know. You always did, the two of you—like brothers, almost like twins. I remember how when you were both small I would

sometimes confuse you from a distance. I couldn't even tell which one of you was mine" (256). As soon as Jane sees the narrator, she admits, "You have no idea how good it makes me feel to have you here. All the memories that come back"—and because it is possible for the narrator to act as Fanshawe's doppelgänger substitute, she acknowledges that it is "as though the bad things never happened" (256). Apart from this acknowledgement from Jane, the uncanny resemblance is also alluded to by a woman whom the narrator goes to meet during his attempt to locate Fanshawe in Paris. She gives "a little start" when the narrator enters the café, revealing that her "initial double take was caused by the fact that she mistook [him] for Fanshawe." The narrator admits that the resemblance had been noticed before, "but never so viscerally, with such immediate impact" (283-84).

The doppelgänger relationship between the two main characters, however, develops into a hierarchical relationality in which the narrator feels inferior to Fanshawe, who is in fact his nemesis. The first time the reader encounters the narrator's expressed sense of shame and inferiority is when he refers to his failed writing career in contrast to the talented Fanshawe. When Fanshawe's wife, Sophie, informs the narrator that Fanshawe had often talked to her about his admiration for the narrator's work, the narrator, who has resorted to quickly pushing out articles for magazines, admits that he is having "a hard time" and does not share this "high opinion" of himself (203). The fact that he has written many articles is not "a cause for celebration" or a source of pride (203). Rather, his writings are only "a little short of hack work" (203). The narrator indicates that he once believed in his own potential: beginning with "great hopes," imagining that he would become a successful novelist, and hoping that he would eventually be able to "touch people and make a difference in their lives" with his writing (203). However, as time went on, he became disillusioned, concluding that he did not have "such a book" inside him (203). He therefore gave up his dreams and turned to writing hack articles. As a consequence, he confesses that what he has done so far "amount[s] to a mere fraction of nothing at all" (203). For the past several years, his life has been "a constant scrambling act, a frantic lunge from one paltry article to the next" (239).

In contrast, being "already himself before he grew up"—or, to put it another way, being the person the narrator wanted to be—Fanshawe, the narrator reveals, thought of himself as a writer since he was ten or eleven (209). He impressed everyone with his talent for writing as early as his school years, when he wrote an "infinitely complex" story, which quite symbolically involved "something like the confused identities of two sets of twins" (210). Contrary to the spirit of the postmodern age as one characterized by obscurity and the collapse of subjectivity,

the narrator insists that Fanshawe was "visible," whereas the rest of them were "without shape" (206). After his books are published to rave reviews, the narrator wistfully remarks that for Fanshawe, it was as though "seeing" and "writing" had almost been "identical, part of a single, unbroken gesture" (271-72). The narrator's sense of inferiority is not limited to their writing skills, however, as when he recalls his exalting childhood admiration of Fanshawe, referring to him as an "extraordinary" child more successful than everyone else in everything (210). All of Fanshawe's qualities and achievements made him seem "heroic" in the narrator's eyes, like "a child who had been touched by the gods" (210). The narrator hesitates to use the word "envy" to describe his feelings, remarking instead that he had a "suspicion" or a "secret feeling that Fanshawe was somehow better than I was" (205). Fanshawe's influence extended even to such trivial things as wearing the same sneakers and reading the same books (205). As Fanshawe's most devoted emulator and "the one who gave in most willingly to [his] power" (205), the narrator admires him so "intensely" that he wants "desperately to measure up to him" (208). However, he is always aware of the fact that Fanshawe is somehow better or, more precisely, "more truly himself" than the narrator could ever hope to be (205). This recognition, in turn, suggests the inadequate fulfillment of his potential, as opposed to that of his ego-ideal double, Fanshawe. Consequently, the narrator's shame-filled inferiority is grounded in his conception of Fanshawe as an ego-ideal.

In addition to Fanshawe's talent for writing, which arouses the narrator's envy, his marriage to the beautiful Sophie, with whom he is about to have a child, is another mark of enviable prosperity in the narrator's eyes. The fact that Fanshawe, as an extraordinary person, seeks to free himself from the bonds of convention and leaves his pregnant wife in order to retreat to an anonymous life of solitude (and eventual suicide) does not discourage the narrator from coveting Fanshawe's life. The moment the narrator sees Sophie he covets her, just as he does everything and everyone else linked to Fanshawe. He wants to possess everything Fanshawe possesses and walk away from it all just as he did. He wants to be as "free" as Fanshawe: free "not only of others, but of himself" (268). Encroaching on Fanshawe's life, he insidiously lays claim to Sophie, Fanshawe's son Ben, and even Fanshawe's mother, who, the narrator admits, was "the most ravishing woman I had ever seen," and with whom he commits adultery just to appropriate Fanshawe's entire life and give vent to his envious hatred (251). Accordingly, Fanshawe represents all the "unfulfilled" possibilities to which the narrator clings in fantasy and "all the strivings of the ego," which "adverse external circumstances" have hindered ("The 'Uncanny'" 236). The narrator's self-

destructive quest to metamorphose into Fanshawe is self-admittedly a chance to "redeem" himself (203).

Nevertheless, as will be discussed in the next section, the narrator's assumption of Fanshawe's identity entails the obliteration of his own unsatisfactory ego, creating a fatal doppelgänger relationality. This fatality is also foreshadowed in the narrator's contemplated destruction of Fanshawe's literary works as a means of destroying Fanshawe himself. These works function, among other things, as the symbol of the author's identity and existence—so much so that the narrator remarks that, combined together, they are "as heavy as a man" (204). Indeed, the narrator notes, "There was no difference in my mind between giving the order to destroy Fanshawe's work and killing him with my own hands" (218). The narrator's equation of Fanshawe's literary success with his own proves necessary to the appropriation of his identity, as it justifies the narrator and makes him feel "important," compensating for his own failure as a writer (227). Indeed, during this paradoxically self-destructive quest, the more fully the narrator disappears into his ambition, the more sharply he comes into focus for himself, thus fulfilling—or at least approaching—his ego-ideal. In fact, he realizes that

> My true place in the world, it turned out, was somewhere beyond myself, and if that place was inside me [as ego-ideal], it was also unlocatable [unconscious and inaccessible]. This was the tiny hole between self [ego] and not-self [doppelgänger ego-ideal], and for the first time in my life I saw this nowhere as the exact center of the world. (228)

This reflection is ostensibly intended as an expression of the narrator's feelings for Sophie, but it corresponds, for the most part, to his relationship with Fanshawe as well. As Shiloh observes, the postmodern doppelgänger relationship blurs the boundary between investigator/pursuer and perpetrator/pursued, thereby subverting the teleology of classic detective fiction. It thrusts "the apparent pursuit of justice into a vicious circle," as in a "tail job," that is, a dog chasing its own tail (18). The ironic meaning of "tail job," the extreme form of which Auster portrays in his detective fiction, is already implied in Poe's "William Wilson," where the protagonist warns his persecutor with the frantic reproach, "you *shall not* dog me unto death!" (640). What renders this admonition ironic is the obscurity and ambiguity as to "who is the pursuer and who the pursued and whose death is sought, and eventually achieved" (Shiloh 18). Accordingly, the figure of the double in *The Locked Room* transcends

and deconstructs mythical constructs of identity, exposing identity itself as a "false category" and promoting a proliferation of indeterminacy (23).

Phantasmatic Self-Preservation: A "Southward Trek to Oblivion" and Indeterminacy

The narrator's suicidal quest for identity is, from the outset, entangled in the suicide-inducing psychosocial context of the postmodern world. The world of *The Locked Room* is one in which the obfuscation of boundaries, whether political or artistic, trivializes anchoring distinctions, the direct result of which is a world where there is "no essential self" or meaningful politics as such (Barone 8). Accordingly, in a world where the "secret core" (*The Locked Room* 206) of others can never be fully penetrated and "the boundary into another" cannot be crossed for "the simple reason that no one can gain access to himself" (243), an exaggerated, intensified, and even more indistinct overlap emerges between Durkheimian anomie and egoism than was present in the modernist context. The postmodern world is one in which all the ritualistic and collective concepts that in Durkheim's analysis would aid the regulative force of society, in the form of retaining solidarity, collapse (Graff 306). The disruption of the regulative force of society—in other words, the postmodern crisis—is attributable not simply to the experience of war and rapid technological and theoretical advances, as in modernism, but also to the absolute decentering of the most fundamental and previously sustaining concepts and principles, such as the principle of cause and effect and the very concept of human subjectivity. Postmodernism is thus the extreme "expression of a culture in crisis" (Hutcheon 230).

Writing about the figure of the author as a "solitary individual" as well as the impact of contingency on his or her life, Auster creates protagonists whose egoism, as Brendan Martin notes, occasions "a limited perception of the workings of the world" (27). They are "blinkered" in such a way that their "corresponding apathy" leads to "estranged isolation" (27). In *The Locked Room*, egoism and lack of social integration are suggested in the superficial relationships that often involve indefinite periods of absence and disappearance. The interpersonal relationships in the novel—especially the narrator's and Fanshawe's—are dysfunctional, solipsistic, and superficial. Social integration and collective life are depicted as faulty and impractical. Apart from occasional recourse to the word "God" in colloquial expressions, there is almost no mention of a sustaining religious faith throughout the narrative. Religious terms are simply used ironically, as when Fanshawe compares himself to a "missionary" or "big Father Know-It-All" for introducing a refrigerator to a man called Ivan (269).

The ironic event suggests that "the true religion" in postmodernism is consumer capitalism. However, even the attempt at "redeeming the life of this stone-age man" by the so-called "true religion" results in "disaster," as the refrigerator breaks down (269). Accordingly, the preventative effect of religion on suicide, as a uniting force facilitating social integration, is missing in the anomic world of *The Locked Room*.

Family relationships are also either mentioned briefly, as with the narrator's family, or portrayed as a disaster, as with Fanshawe's family. Throughout the narrative, the narrator's references to his parents are confined to a few general facts only in relation to Fanshawe. For instance, he adverts to the friendship between their parents or compares his father with Fanshawe's: "Whereas my father tended to be around a lot, especially on the weekends, Fanshawe's father was rarely to be seen" (209, 214). He also refers to his parents in passing when he reveals, on his way to visit Mrs. Fanshawe, that they no longer live next door and have retired to Florida (251). That is as far as the narrator's relationship with his family extends, and, as a result, there are no meaningful family bonds supporting him. Although Fanshawe's family is given more prominence, it reveals the same lack of a meaningful bond. His father was a busy lawyer, who, the narrator suspects, never "knew quite what to make of his son" (214). It was only after he fell terminally ill that he and Fanshawe tried to spend more time together. However, it was too late for any sort of meaningful relationship to form. Fanshawe's relationship with his mother is even more dysfunctional. She refers to Fanshawe as "a separate being, a child without parents" (257), who was "cold" and "dead" inside, and, therefore, never "loved anyone—not once, not ever in his life" (256). She concludes that "[y]ou can't force a child to love you just because he's your child" (257). After the loss of his father, Fanshawe grows even more distant. However, his sister, Ellen, forms an unhealthy dependence on Fanshawe as a result of "the parental void" (214). Fanshawe becomes "her father, her mother, her bastion of wisdom and comfort" (214). Knowing how unhealthy her dependence on him was, "there was little he could do about it short of hurting her in some irreparable way" (214). After his sister's mental breakdown, which his mother blames on his enigmatic poems, he drops out of Harvard and leaves, reducing his communications to occasional unreturnable letters (257). The narrator maintains, however, that even though the letters are seemingly addressed to Ellen, she is no more than "a literary device, the medium through which Fanshawe communicates with his mother," yet "even as he speaks to her [his mother], he can pretend to ignore her" (268).

Fanshawe's relationship with Sophie and his unborn child is as cold and distant as his relationship with his family. He never evinces any desire to find a job to support

his family. In fact, it is revealed that when Fanshawe begins to live with Sophie, he does not work at all (200). Indeed, he walks out on his pregnant wife right when she needs his support most. Despite his insistence otherwise, the narrator's relationship with Sophie after Fanshawe's disappearance is another instance of a shallow and subsidiary relationship. As mentioned above, their relationship marks the beginning of the narrator's insidious appropriation of Fanshawe's identity. Indeed, Sophie plays the role of the "invisible instrument" in the narrator's self-destructive quest—the same role that the narrator thinks he plays for Fanshawe (219). His desire for Sophie is little more than his desire to be Fanshawe and possess everything he used to have. Not only is he constantly dishonest with her, but he also cheats on her repeatedly. His adoption of Ben is also linked to his assumption of Fanshawe's identity. He admits in the beginning that he feigns interest in the baby (197). Even after subtle intimations of improvement in their relationship, the narrator gradually turns into the absent father that Fanshawe has been for Ben, frequently leaving him and his mother because of Fanshawe. Moreover, the closer the narrator comes to his fatal encounter with Fanshawe, the more distant he grows from Sophie and Ben. His lies and secretive behavior turn into cold withdrawal and recurrent infidelity in Paris, and even after the narrator's subsequent return, these actions leave an indelible taint on their relationships. The narrator's excessive egoism keeps him from confiding in Sophie yet again, and he is led toward his ego-ideal doppelgänger for a final encounter.

The obscure aspirations of both the narrator and his double result from the failure of a regulative society and an overlap between excessive egoism and anomie. When passions and aspirations are left unchecked, a heightened "state of de-regulation" renders fulfillment impossible, since undisciplined ambition constantly exceeds one's achievements (Durkheim 214). In this quest for an "unattainable goal," nothing gives lasting satisfaction (214). The narrator never manages to feel content with his achievements, and it is only in the process of becoming Fanshawe that he begins to feel important. In other words, "the more fully I disappeared into my ambitions for Fanshawe, the more sharply I came into focus for myself," as if he is becoming who he should have been (227). Accordingly, psychosocial factors are at play in the formation of the narrator's over-demanding ego-ideal, embodied in his doppelgänger, Fanshawe.

A failed writer in a world where no family or meaningful human connection is present can only embrace the contingency of existence by arriving at the consciousness of making "the *best* out of his or her practically infinite possibilities" (Heller 291). For the narrator, this arrival takes the form of an inward quest, the net result of which is an irresolvable opposition between annihilation and preservation.

As we have seen, the narrator's sense of shame and inferiority stems less from humiliating familial relationships than from the lack of any familial bonds or meaningful human connections, with the exception of his obsessively solipsistic relationship with his double, a relationship that leads only to a locked room. As Giddens maintains, not only "generalised shame oriented techniques of socialisation" but also "the existence of values promoting individualistic action in a given sphere of social life" can lead to the formation of an over-demanding ego-ideal ("Typology" 284, 293). For Giddens, individuals' goals are not separate from "the stability and closeness of [their] social relationships," and the responses of others are a critical measure against which individuals "evaluate their attainments and in terms of which their identities are structured" (293). Similarly, by so "desperately" trying to "measure up" to Fanshawe, the narrator has been steeped in "feelings of inferiority and failure" since childhood (208).

Giddens also posits that the sense of shame that ensues from ineffectuality is rooted in "the overall tissue of self-identity," involving an "insight into the nature of the narrative of self-identity" (*Modernity* 67). This type of anxiety, as discussed earlier, is produced when the goals "embodied in the ego-ideal diverge from the actual performance of the ego" ("Typology" 283). When the pathological ego-ideal imposes unattainable and/or unspecified goals, it disrupts the balance between "the position and the attainments of the ego, and the demands and conception of self set by the ego-ideal" ("Typology" 283). As a consequence, the failure of the ego to attain an identity in tune with the demands of the persecutory ego-ideal renders it vulnerable to "shame anxiety" and makes it "sensitive to validation of [its] worth from the external world" ("Typology" 283). By the same token, the narrator admits, "I wanted too much of things, I had too many desires. . . . It mattered to me that I do well, that I *impress* people with the empty signs of my ambition: good grades, varsity letters, awards for whatever it was they were *judging* us on that week" (208; emphasis added). Unable to impress people with his writing, he resorts to the safer job of writing magazine articles. However, when given a chance to have Fanshawe's life, he "jump[s] at the chance to redeem himself" (203). In fact, when he learns that Fanshawe has complimented his career, it leaves him with "mixed feelings. On the one hand, I knew that he was wrong. On the other hand . . . I wanted to believe that he was right. I thought: is it possible that I've been too hard on myself? And once I began to think that, I was lost" (203). Furthermore, when he hears the rumor that he wrote Fanshawe's book, he secretly enjoys such a possibility: "It struck me that writing under another name might be something I would enjoy—to invent a secret

identity for myself—and I wondered why I found this idea so attractive" (232). It is attractive because becoming Fanshawe is the only way to relieve his shame anxiety.

Throughout the narrative, the more inward Fanshawe moves in his attempt at self-discovery, the more apathetic he becomes to other people. By the same token, as the narrator progresses in his oblivious metamorphosis into his ego-ideal, he sheds his initial concern about the impressions he conveys to others, becoming increasingly solipsistic and indifferent. In the early phases of his quest, the narrator even considers writing a book or two under Fanshawe's name, "to do the work myself and yet pass it off as his," so as to prove his self-worth to everyone under the guise of Fanshawe. As his self-destructive quest progresses, however, he realizes that he does not even want to write the biography he is bound to write by contract, and the fact that he writes the trilogy is merely for his own sake, only to "escape" what has happened (231), which is what the remainder of the paper will address.

Intimations of suicidal behavior pervade *The Locked Room*. Apart from the numerous confessions and hints of the narrator's desire to become Fanshawe, there are a number of morbid scenes characterized by the classic fatal relationship between doppelgängers. The grave scene, for example, is symbolic of death and suicide. Fanshawe wanted to see what it was like at the bottom of a grave. The narrator notices "a half-smile" before Fanshawe lies down on his back and pretends to be dead, as though Fanshawe felt the open grave calling out to him (215-16). The narrator desperately tries to penetrate Fanshawe's mind and experience the same feelings, but, as in the other scenes of confined spaces, such as the cardboard box and the locked room, Fanshawe, as an unattainable goal, remains "sealed off" from the narrator (216). Furthermore, the narrator believes that he has been given "the power to obliterate, to steal a body from its grave and tear it to pieces" (218) and that Fanshawe has chosen him as his "executioner" (264). After being commissioned to write Fanshawe's biography, the narrator notes, "I was going to take a living man and put him in his grave. . . . I was digging a grave, after all, and there were times when I began to wonder if I was not digging my own" (246). When he signs the contract to become the author of Fanshawe's life and thus take full control of his identity, he feels like "a man who had signed away his soul" (242). Both of the foregoing remarks hint at the narrator's own obliteration along with Fanshawe's, despite the fact that—and also because—Fanshawe remains an unattainable ideal.

The narrator's feeling of inferiority toward Fanshawe gradually mutates into a full-blown hatred that verges on a desire to kill. Sharing Fanshawe's mother's hatred for her son, the narrator acknowledges that "in the darkness of this sin, [his mother] would have him again, but only in order to destroy him, a terrible revenge. . . . [and]

I was her accomplice" (261). In fact, the narrator admits to having suicidal and murderous desires after committing adultery with Fanshawe's mother, disclosing that "sexual desire can also be the desire to kill. . . . I finally understood this. I wanted to kill Fanshawe. I wanted Fanshawe to be dead, and I was going to do it" (261). It is not enough for the narrator that Fanshawe has disappeared; only death will allow complete possession of his identity. The end of his (self-)destructive quest will bring, he believes, a consummated rebirth. Indeed, as the narrator insinuates himself into Fanshawe's household, he begins to feel that he has "a talent for this kind of life," an unfulfilled potential waiting to flourish. As he encroaches on Fanshawe's life, he feels himself becoming "stronger" (230) while laboring under the illusion that he would "survive" the complete appropriation of his double's identity (238). He understands, however, "how badly" he has been "deceiving" himself (238). The narrator increasingly loses his sense of self as he advances on his quest for rebirth. At one point in the narrative, he realizes that he "did not once stop thinking about Fanshawe" and is "haunted" or even "possessed" by him day and night (238).

As previously mentioned, the narrator acknowledges his suicidal urge by admitting that the more he disappears into his ambitions regarding Fanshawe, the more intensely he feels like his true self, and the plight indicates that he was self-admittedly "looking for trouble" (227). Moreover, the narrator holds that "[n]ot only is death the one true arbiter of happiness . . . it is the only measurement by which we can judge life itself" (248). Therefore, it is only through death that he can accomplish a full rebirth into his ego-ideal, not just the fading or merging of his unsatisfactory ego into Fanshawe's. Like Fanshawe, the narrator is so deeply immersed in his own egoism and solipsism that he becomes downright blinkered to his surroundings. He disregards family, work, money, and in short, all the trappings of a semblance of ordinary life that many people try to retain, at least in some measure, even in a crisis-ridden postmodern world. His consequent solitude is meant as "a passageway into the self, an instrument of discovery," but the narrator's self-discovery is paradoxically intertwined with self-destruction (272). Before the narrator leaves for Paris, Sophie remarks, "I can't get through to you anymore. . . . You're so close to being gone already. I sometimes think I can see you vanishing before my eyes. . . . You're going to vanish, and I'll never see you again" (279-80). This follows the narrator's revelation that he is "on the verge of smashing [his] life" (263).

As the narrator advances on his "southward trek to oblivion" (284), he progressively loses track of himself and feels his identity come apart (287). In Paris, his conceptions of time, space, and identity gradually unravel and turn into irreconcilable "bits and pieces that refuse to add up" (287). The transformative

disintegration of his sense of identity—a result of his self-destructive quest—leads to a loss of the sense of distinction whereby everything begins to have "the same taste" (284). The narrator's approach to suicide increasingly renders his language incoherent, and his loss of self-identity reaches a point where he reveals that when he tries to remember past events, it seems as if he were "watching someone else" (287). Anonymity and a confusion of identities continue to replace distinction and ontological certainty, as the narrator randomly chooses a man called Stillman as a substitute for Fanshawe. Based on the random logic of contingency, he decides, "[I]f he's no one, then he must be Fanshawe" (289). The narrator wants to invite death by confronting Stillman, and, to some extent, he succeeds. He describes the moment he approaches "the undeniable odor of nothingness" as "a sweet poison" rushing through his blood, and it feels "incomprehensible" to be alive (292-93). Nevertheless, this encounter is not enough to efface the narrator's identity because Stillman is not his ego-ideal. Later, however, when the narrator thinks he may have successfully eliminated Fanshawe through his "binge" of debauchery in Paris, he notes, "He was gone, but I was gone along with him" (287).

Before their final confrontation, the narrator admits that he has learned to "live with him in the same way [he] lived with the thought of [his] own death," because Fanshawe functions as "a trope for death" inside the narrator—a death necessitated by a rebirth (295). Therefore, the narrator cannot let go of Fanshawe and acknowledges that if Fanshawe still had the power to destroy him and his family, it would only be because they wanted him to or, more precisely, because the narrator wanted to destroy himself (295). The narrator admits that he has been struggling to "say goodbye to something for a long time," and it is evident that the valediction cannot be completed without a final encounter (287). This terminal encounter occurs next to the closed door of a locked room, which figures as a site of confrontation with death. The narrator's pursuit of Fanshawe turns out to have been a "tail job," as the latter reveals that he has also been watching the former all along. The "tail job" is a vicious circle in which the pursuer and the pursued are interchangeable, so much so that their deaths shade into each other. The narrator's attempt at rebirth through self-obliteration is inevitably doomed to failure because it ends with the literal suicide of his ego-ideal doppelgänger, thus rendering his quest phantasmatic and illusory. The narrator never manages to gain access to and truly assume Fanshawe's identity. As Fanshawe dies, the narrator feels his head "going black inside" and life being "sucked out" of him; just like the words in Fanshawe's red notebook, he and the narrator ultimately "cancel each other out" (306-07).

In the end, as implied by the doppelgänger relationality, Fanshawe and the narrator are not so different. Being almost as discontented with himself as the narrator was with his own performance, Fanshawe also contemptuously calls his own work "garbage" (302). Fanshawe and the narrator are both egoistic products of their anomic and crisis-ridden postmodern world. The double-motif eventually deconstructs their hierarchical relationship without, however, allowing complete sameness, as it simultaneously sustains duality by virtue of the narrator's unconsummated rebirth or failed attempt at the full appropriation of the other's identity. Shiloh is, once again, perceptive here. She describes neo-noir as a first-person narrative in which the detective is no longer looking for a mysterious villain. Rather, he is looking for himself—as an "other" (80). Similarly, to escape the drudgery of his ego, the narrator withdraws from his inadequate self and reaches toward Fanshawe in a symbolic suicide that precipitates the latter's actual suicide, thereby destroying the very identity he coveted. Becoming Fanshawe means fulfilling the narrator's ego-ideal but at the expense of the obliteration of his own ego, as well as the annihilation of Fanshawe himself. Prior to the fatal event, the narrator slowly realizes that Fanshawe is inseparable from his identity and could never "escape" him, since "Fanshawe was exactly where I was, and he had been there since the beginning" (286). Nevertheless, this realization is not powerful enough to prevent his blinkered egoism from rising to the level of dissipating individuality. In a world devoid of cognitive certainty, the protagonist and his double are so immersed in their solipsistic world that their own identities seem slowly to fade in correlation with their ontological skepticism. In other words, the narrative topples over from the protagonist's quest for identity into an indeterminacy that emerges from the narrator's "double self-consciousness" (Russell 192).

The failure to decode Fanshawe's red notebook, the last item linked to Fanshawe's identity, parallels the narrator's failure to assume his identity. Upon finding that the sentences erase each other, and "each paragraph [makes] the next impossible," the narrator tears its pages (307)—calling to mind his earlier assertion that destroying Fanshawe's work would mean destroying Fanshawe himself (218). Therefore, as a final homicidal/suicidal act, he destroys the notebook and the last vestige of his identity along with it, thus surrendering to the phantasmatic nature of his rebirth. But his self-preservative act fails to yield a secure sense of identity, as his "narrative of self-identity" (*Modernity* 67) becomes even more flimsy and illusory than it was at the beginning of the story. The narrator claims he has written the trilogy to escape the "darkness" of what happened (231). Yet he remains mired in the darkness of his phantasmatic self-preservation on account of its irresolvable

indeterminacy. It has no ending for him, and as he himself observes, to be caught in a story without an ending "means that you must die before your part in it is played out" (231). Accordingly, the net result is a book or a series of books in which contingency, disappearance, death, anonymity, and identity loss reign supreme. In other words, Auster taps into the complementary relationship between suicide and the double-motif in order to finesse a postmodern narrative that doubles back on itself in a way that precisely corresponds to the narrator's aporetic quest. By virtue of the structuring device of suicidal doppelgängers, Auster's self-reflexive narrative mirrors the ontological indeterminacy that pervades the postmodern world.

Conclusion

The world of *The Locked Room* is a world of locked consciousnesses. The narrator cannot access even the mind of his doppelgänger, a man from whom he cannot be clearly differentiated. Although he claims it would be impossible for him to know anyone as well as he knows Fanshawe, all his endeavors to penetrate his (own) consciousness arrive at a locked room (209). By extension, the narrator invariably arrives at the locked room of the postmodern aporia, where distinctions fade, identities disintegrate, and no cognitive certainty can be gained. The narrator implicitly compares his quest to the reader's endeavor to comprehend characters and concludes that "[n]o one can cross the boundary into another for the simple reason that no one can gain access to himself" (243). The notion of a locked room, an impenetrable box, or an equally inaccessible grave all connote the extensive overlap between egoism and anomie in the postmodern world of *The Locked Room*. The novel portrays and functions as "a chaos of snow" (216) that blurs distinctions and, at the same time, resists straightforward and organized knowledge based on juxtaposition and difference. The overwhelming ambiguity ingrained in the act of suicide and the double-motif corresponds to a world of ontological indeterminacy and cognitive uncertainty, which raises the suspicion that the entire narrative could have taken place in the locked room of the narrator's mind. The designation of the locked room as the invariable destination of the narrator's solipsistic and suicidal mind, which is itself primarily the product of the crisis-ridden postmodern world, creates an infinitely recurring narrative *mise en abyme* that embodies the indeterminacy, ambiguity, and solipsism permeating the postmodern mode of existence.

The efficacy of the aforementioned notion in the representation of the postmodern spirit, however, is based on the theme of self-destructive doppelgängers as almost all the events of the narrative pivot around it. Auster's employment of

suicidal doppelgängers, therefore, contributes directly toward the reflection of a world fraught with ontological and epistemological indeterminacy. Accordingly, the upshot is a dynamic trio, in which the postmodern narrative of identity loss, suicide, and the double-motif correspond to one another's contradictions and indeterminacy. The paradox of sustained duality and disintegrating selves that remains in force throughout the narrative is shared by the impenetrable and paradoxical nature of the act of suicide, which involves the simultaneous preservation and annihilation of identity. The double-motif, with its inherent paradox of duality and indistinguishability, also folds into the elusive and contradiction-laden narrative of *The Locked Room*. In other words, Auster employs the theme of suicidal doppelgängers as a structuring device geared to echo a world of hermetically locked rooms, in which erratic arbitrariness and rampant contingency override the previously anchoring principle of cause and effect and eventually lead into the vicious circle of ontological indeterminacy.

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