Anand Sekar

English 111

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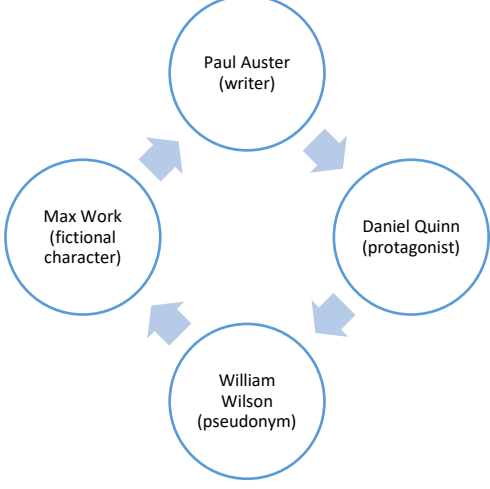
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"Drawing heavily on Milton's interpretation of the fall, he followed his master in placing an inordinate importance on the role of language. But he took the poet's ideas one step further. If the fall of man also entailed a fall of language, was it not logical to assume that it would be possible to undo the fall, to reverse its effects by undoing the fall of language, by striving to recreate the language that was spoken in Eden? If man could learn to speak this original language of innocence, did it not follow that he would thereby recover a state of innocence within himself?"

- Paul Auster, *City of Glass,* 76.

How does the language problem relate to such "problems" in the story?

There are a few problems that are brought up in this postmodernist novel, which takes some inspiration – such as the language problem – from the modernist movement. The second most apparent problem brought forth early in the story is that of identity. Yesterday in class we drew this list and hermeneutic circle of the identities created:

List:	Hermeneutic Circle:
Paul Auster (writer) ➢ Daniel Quinn (protagonist) ➢ > William Wilson (pseudonym) ➢ >> Max Work (character)	

Here we discussed that identity is unstable, fluid, and permeable. The hermeneutic circle represents the idea of non-individualism, that identities are part & whole. Existence itself comes within a paradox, especially when one, such as our protagonist Quinn, marginally denies it. The phrase "I think therefore I am" by René Descartes curtly sums up this paradox – that one must exist. Followingly arises the problem of perception, with respect to oneself, in which the concept of subjectivity is prevalent.

The structuralists, from what I can put together, believe that reality is complex and infinite; that it cannot be understood objectively and directly. Rather, subjects must come up with a discourse to comprehend and mediate reality. In this sense, the discourse constructs the reality, as much as the reality constructs the discourse. This philosophy captures the essence of the language problem. How does this relate to all the above with respect to identity? The identity problem exists with almost no distinction from the language problem: the Self cannot be understood directly; rather subjects must come up with an identity to comprehend and mediate the true Self. In this sense, the identity constructs the Self, as the Self constructs identity. As demonstrated in Auster's novel, this isn't a two-step process: there can be multiple levels of identification, discourse, and subjectivity. This is what the language problem would look like if we drew in a similar manner to the list and hermeneutic circle above:

List:	Hermeneutic Circle:

Reality
   ➢ Language (the system)
   ➢ > Pieces of literature (the instance)
   ➢ >> following instances – individual sentences and words
	Reality → Language (the system) → Pieces of literature (the instance) → following instances – individual sentences and words (arranged in a circle)

Putting the two diagrams together – because of their similar structure – once can be used as a reference frame for the other. There is a slight lack of correlation that I will fix by putting the diagrams side-by-side, with the augmentation of "the Self."

Identity Problem	Language Problem
Circle: The Self of Auster (truth) → Paul Auster (author) → Daniel Quinn (protagonist) → William Wilson (pseudonym) → Max Work (fictional character)	Circle: Reality (truth) → Language (the system) → Pieces of literature (the instance) → following instances – individual sentences and words → futher instances

From the first element of both diagrams, we can see that they relate to "truth:" the objective reality which we can only perceive with further abstractions (the other elements of the

diagram). The right elements serve as a reference frame in which the left elements exist: the true Self exists within true Reality, the author Paul Auster exists in the system of language, Daniel Quinn exists as an instance of literature, and so on and so forth. This correlation between the two problems is identified in a flawed manner by Stillman and Dark: correlating the philosophy of the fall of Man with the fall of language. The reason it is flawed is that language is derived from reality as Man is derived from some original Self – but the concept of derivation entails losses as it does in mathematics. What Stillman attempted to do, and Dark predicted, was some sort of integration from subjective language to objective truth, disregarding the losses – as a mathematics student doesn't account for the constant "C." "If the fall of man also entailed a fall of language, was it not logical to assume that it would be possible to undo the fall, to reverse its effects by undoing the fall of language, by striving to recreate the language that was spoken in Eden?" – I believe the answer is yes, it was not logical (Auster 76). In the following page, Auster articulates Dark's belief that "it would again be possible for the whole earth to be of one language and one speech. And if that were to happen, paradise could not be far behind" (Auster 77). This caught me off guard: saying paradise is "not far behind" rather than the more logical "not far ahead." This is literally, in several aspects, a backwards philosophy.

Additionally, with respect to direction, the concept of the Tower of Babel is certainly related to the concepts of verticality with respect to the language problem. In this philosophy, the tower had existed at one point, in the past (behind), and Stillman's attempts to create a tower in the future are backwards. "Stillman" – like how Faulkner conveyed Anse to convey the concept of man standing still and vertical – could support this concept.