

# Defying Expectations: Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* and Orhan Pamuk's *The Black Book* and *My Name is Red*<sup>1</sup>

Bilge Mutluay ÇETİNTAŞ\*

## Abstract

Paul Auster and Orhan Pamuk have similar narrative strategies. New York and İstanbul, the metropolitan settings become symbolic places for searches undertaken by Auster's and Pamuk's characters. Both authors employ the structure of metaphysical detective fiction while using digressions to comment on the function of the author and the creation process. Auster and Pamuk use several metafictional techniques to achieve their intentions.

**Key words:** Paul Auster, Orhan Pamuk, metaphysical detective fiction, metafiction

## Özet

Paul Auster ve Orhan Pamuk eserlerinde benzer yazı teknikleri kullanırlar. Bu yazarlar için New York ve İstanbul karakterlerinin bir arayış içinde olduğu sembolik yerleşim merkezleridir. Her iki yazar da dedektif romanı kalıplarının ötesine geçerek, yazarın konumu ve yaratıcılık süreci konusunda söylemek istediklerini öykünün konusu ile doğrudan ilintili olmayan bölümlerde tartışırlar. Auster ve Pamuk bu bağlamdaki amaçlarına ulaşmak için üstkurmaca tekniklerini kullanırlar.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Paul Auster, Orhan Pamuk, dedektif romanı, üstkurmaca

Paul Auster and Orhan Pamuk live and write in different cultures and environments. Besides their age and gender, similarities in their narrative techniques are numerous.

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\* Hacettepe Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi, Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı Bölümü, Beytepe 06532  
Ankara e-mail: mutluay@hacettepe.edu.tr

These similarities include intertextual references to their literary ancestors. Auster refers to numerous writers among which are Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walt Whitman, and Henry David Thoreau. Pamuk favors writers from the eastern tradition such as Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi, Firdevsi, Seyh Galip, and Levni. Both writers are fond of opposites, paradoxes and ambiguities. They experiment with language usage and are fond of unexpected coincidences and chance encounters which start the course of events. They like to build their main characters on doubles/doppelgangers and may include a minor character who is named after the author and is preoccupied with similar life experiences (i.e., "Paul Auster" in *New York Trilogy* and "Orhan" in *My Name is Red*). Last, but not the least, both writers mostly place their plots in large metropolitan cities, namely, New York and İstanbul. I am not suggesting an influence and/or intertextuality between the writers but basically indicating that both writers' novels could be examined under similar experimental fictional tendencies to reveal their purpose in writing stories.

However bleak the physical connection or interaction is between the two authors, they obviously share a similar outlook in the creation of their fiction. That is, besides building an exciting story, both writers have a tendency to "digress" from the story to start a discussion on a seemingly different subject that shares no affiliation with the plot line. Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* (1985 - 1987) and Orhan Pamuk's *The Black Book* (1985 - 1989) and *My Name is Red* (1998) exemplify the kind of digressions in which both writers focus on the writing process and the question of authorship. To achieve their metafictional tendencies, they employ the mystery and detective fiction as a framework. The inclination to talk about the creation of their stories within the structure of an undertaken search falls under the category of metaphysical detective story.<sup>2</sup>

The genre is not original either to Paul Auster or Orhan Pamuk. Although one can trace its beginnings to Edgar Allan Poe's tales, best examples of metaphysical detective story were created in the twentieth century. Thomas Pynchon in *The Crying of Lot 49* or *V.*, Don DeLillo in *Ratner's Star* have made use of the same genre. Umberto Eco creates a similar framework in *The Name of the Rose*. Auster's and Pamuk's works illustrate that this genre still appeals to a number of authors. As Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney explain, all metaphysical detective stories have characteristic themes which can be grouped under a) the defeated detective figure, b) the labyrinthine world and text, c) the "embedded text" d) the meaninglessness of clues, e) double, lost, stolen or exchanged identities, and f) resistance to closure (8). Auster's and Pamuk's contribution to the metafictional detective story is their tendency to explain their objectives in their texts. On one hand, the reader confronts a familiar framework with

the structure of a detective story and on the other hand the authors achieve their purpose in digressions without being obscure. This is one of the reasons which make both authors highly popular and understandable, contrary to many other postmodern writers.

Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* consists of three books, *City of Glass*, *Ghosts* and *The Locked Room*. The characters and the plot line of all three stories are different but all three stories involve a search and a detective figure. In *City of Glass*, Daniel Quinn is a detective fiction writer who writes his stories under the pen-name William Wilson. The action starts with a telephone call which inquires if Quinn is detective "Paul Auster." Although his initial answer is negative, he cannot help thinking, what would have happened if he had given a positive answer. This "What if?" question turns out to be his predicament when he answers positively to one of the following inquiries. He is hired by Virginia and Peter Stillman to follow Peter Stillman's father, Peter Stillman Senior, who is just being released from the prison and is suspected to hunt after his son. Years ago, linguist Peter Stillman, Senior had locked his young child, Peter Stillman, to a closet so that he would learn the original/first human language. This act had eventually caused his imprisonment. Quinn accepts the duty given by the Stillmans, assumes the role of a detective and starts following the elder Stillman. This search ends with Quinn's disintegration and final disappearance.

Orhan Pamuk's *The Black Book* starts with the lawyer, Galip, trying to locate his missing wife, Rüya, who is also his cousin. Rüya disappears at the end of a working day by leaving a cryptic note to Galip and without elaborating on her motives. During his search, Galip finds out that Rüya's half brother, Jelal, the newspaper columnist is also missing. Trying to find Rüya and Jelal, Galip enters into a maze of relationships that do not provide any satisfactory clues as to the whereabouts of both. He loses track and starts concentrating on Jelal's newspaper columns more. He comes across Jelal's private hideaway and stays there and writes newspapers columns, pretending to be Jelal. He answers Jelal's phones, talks with foreign TV cast and lives in Jelal's apartment. The more he impersonates Jelal, the more he loses his own identity and the focus of his search. At the end, Jelal and Rüya are killed by a one of Jelal's fans before Galip can find them.

*My Name is Red* takes place in the late 16th century İstanbul. Black has returned to his hometown after a voluntary self-exile, partially caused by his broken heart over the marriage of his childhood sweetheart and cousin, Shekure. Upon his return, Black visits Shekure's father, his maternal uncle, Enishte, who is in charge of a commission to create an illustrated book to celebrate Sultan's Decree in the thousandth year of the Islamic

calendar. The illustrations are to be created by several well known miniaturists of the era and are to be kept as a secret because the pictures are to be drawn in the western style three-dimensional representations of the objects. The several miniaturists who are commissioned to draw parts of this picture have not seen the complete work. One of these miniaturists has been murdered and Enishte is eager to find out the identity of the murderer. The murderer is possibly one of the other miniaturists and the clue is a miniature horse drawing with split nostrils which is found in the possession of the victim. Enishte asks Black's help as an objective observer. Black sees this as an opportunity to be close to Shekure whose husband has not returned from war and who is presumably dead. During this process, Enishte is also murdered. Although the murderer of both the miniaturist and Enishte is revealed at the end, it is not Black alone who solves the mystery.

All these stories take place in the metropolitan cities which create a convenient environment for the digressions in the texts. Actually, most detective fiction takes place in big cities. These cities with their size, number of people and complicated structure become the means to refer to the texture and complexity of life. Auster's character Peter Stillman, Senior explains his reasons for coming to New York. He says New York is, "the most forlorn of places, the most abject. The brokenness is everywhere, the disarray is universal. . . . The broken people, the broken things, the broken thoughts. The whole city is a junk heap" (78). Quinn feels that, "New York was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps, . . . it always left him [Quinn] with the feeling of being lost" (3).

The chaotic nature and paradoxes of city life provides an atmosphere of maze. In *City of Glass*, Quinn follows the elder Stillman in the streets of New York, while the latter collects bits and pieces of memorabilia from the streets. Stillman intentionally or unintentionally ends up following a path that turns out to spell the words, Tower of Babel. Besides its obvious connections to the Biblical story, and a preoccupation with the creation of language, Tower of Babel also stands as a symbol to the condition of New York City, before or after the destruction of the tower. In the novel, if New York stands for before the destruction of the Tower of Babel, it refers to people being arrogant enough to think that one can solve mysteries. On the other hand, if New York is a referent to the condition after the destruction of the tower, it refers to the already scattered people who have lost the ability to understand/comprehend each other and therefore still incapable of solving mysteries.

The discussion on the condition of the city is tied to the discussion on language with references to other biblical stories as well. During these diversions, elder Peter

Stillman's studies on language are also revealed to the readers in detail. Stillman's earlier study "The Garden and the Tower: Early Visions of the New World" (50) is divided into two parts, "The Myth of Paradise" and "The Myth of Babel." While the first part is related to the discovery of the New World, that is America, the second part examines the myth of the Fall. With intertextual references to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Stillman explains that "it was only after the fall that human life as we know it came into being. For if there was no evil in Garden, neither was there any good" (52). Thus fall created the gap between the subject and the object, causing a rupture in the language. Adam's words revealed the "essences" and now "each word has two meanings—one before the fall and one after the fall" (52). After the Fall "names became detached from things; words devolved into a collection of arbitrary signs; language has been severed from God" (52).

The story of Babel encompasses both the idea of one "unified" language and the diverse languages as Bernd Herzongerath points out. In his criticism, Herzongerath shows that Stillman only "concentrat[es] on the 'positive reading' of this myth . . . . The self consuming metaphor of the Tower of Babel thus denotes again the complicity of *the ideality of the signified* and the *materiality of the signifier*" (49, italics belong to the author). In his criticism, Herzongerath continues to associate Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of language to the structure of the city. Referring both to Derrida and Lacan, he asserts that "the city, like the unconscious is structured like a language. . . [and] 'city' always has to be read as 'text' and 'unconscious' as well" (53-54).

Orhan Pamuk's *The Black Book* takes place in İstanbul. The city is as multi-layered as New York and resembles New York in its portrayal. Pamuk wrote *The Black Book* mostly in The New York Columbia University Library, in the top floor, private study room during night time, listening to the never ending police sirens and voices of the subway train movements which partially explain this resemblance (*Öteki Renkler* 48). Yet, İstanbul is not portrayed as a transformed New York, but as a city with its specific history and details. The unique geographical position of the city as the bridge between the East and the West is represented not only in the architecture but also in the lifestyle and ideas of its inhabitants. As Pamuk points out, the book is a "collage" where the past, the present and the unrelated stories merge (*Öteki Renkler* 139). Besides all the confusion and chaotic nature of city which is the result of its geographical and political situation, the added atmosphere of historical connections which date back to centuries complicate the relationships further. Orhan Pamuk explains his version of İstanbul in *The Black Book* as:

I could say that I wished to create a suitable story for the violence, colors and confusion of İstanbul. The long sentences, the dizzying effect of the baroque sentences which spin around themselves, has come out of the confusion, the history and the present rich texture, the indeterminate condition and the energy of the city. The Black Book has been written with the enthusiasm to say everything about İstanbul at once . . . a personal encyclopedia of İstanbul (*Öteki Renkler* 138-139, author's translation).

The wish for comprehending the labyrinthine nature of İstanbul leads Galip on a search for the past where, nostalgically speaking, the power relationships are easily understandable. This wish is clearly presented in Jelal's newspaper columns where the reference is to a lost, idyllic city before the destructive Western influences and the present chaotic nature. "Aladdin's Store" serves as the symbol to bridge the past and the present. This old store sells "the thousand . . . kinds of articles . . . alive in . . . memories color by color, smell by smell" (36). The owner of the store is dedicated to finding anything his customers demands, whether it be "tri-colored shoelaces. . . the pencil sharpeners in the shape of Dutch windmills, the signs that said FOR RENT . . . the pink backgammon dice which could only be found at the Covered Bazaar . . ." (38-39). This store becomes the microcosm of the city since it carries the codes of a multilayered culture. On one hand the store is a private museum of popular culture artifacts and on the other hand it is a referent to the complicated structure of the city. It is not surprising that Rüya's body is found at the back of this store among the empty boxes.

*My Name Is Red* also takes place in İstanbul, in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Although not as chaotic as *The Black Book*, İstanbul is not presented as a comprehensible environment in an earlier setting either. Besides various power struggles related to social status, several multicultural groups and views complicate matters. Differences in ideas often become the starting point of oppositions, arguments and even bloody struggles.

Auster's and Pamuk's detective characters set out to collect clues in these cities of complicated networks but none of these clues offer any explanation to the mysteries. On the contrary, these clues either complicate the events or divert the detective from his search completely. These clues become the means to talk and discuss other intentions of the authors whose linear narratives are split by vertical texts. The plot line stops and moves in different directions. The reader even wanders when the writer will continue his plot or will he ever do so. Auster and Pamuk are both interested in the question of authorship and personal style in these digressions and they offer discussions on the design and the creation process.

The design and creation process cannot be separated from the discussions of language which has been referred to earlier. Auster's language concept is related to Ferdinand de Saussure's definition of language which is implemented both by the structuralists and the poststructuralists, often in non-linguistic fields. Auster believes that language is inadequate in solving mysteries due to the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified. This concept of the arbitrary relationship between the observable and its connotations is carried further in *New York Trilogy* with the discussions on the meaning of authorship.

When Quinn is unable to solve the mystery surrounding the Stillman case, he tries to locate the character "Auster." He hopes that the character "Auster" would be able to solve the problem. "Auster" turns out to be a writer instead of a detective. The fictional "Auster" lives with his wife, Siri, and son, Daniel, which are real life details of the "non-fictional" Auster. Instead of offering any solutions, he lapses into a long explanation on the question of authorship in *Don Quixote*. Cervantes in his novel explains that the text was written by an Arabian historian, Cid Hamate Benengeli and translated into Spanish. The fictional "Auster" reasons that if the events in the book are real as Cervantes claims them to be, then Benengeli could not have been the author since he never appears in the text. Benengeli could have been the combination of four different people; Sancho Panza, the barber, the priest and Samson Carraso, the translator of the entire manuscript to Arabic. Cervantes had the text rendered to Spanish. The fictional "Auster" carries his ideas further to suggest that Don Quixote's friends had undergone such pains to create the text to cure Don Quixote from his madness. Finally, he even suggests that it was Don Quixote who orchestrated the whole affair and even translated the text for Cervantes merely for his personal amusement while disguising himself as an Arab.

Auster refers to the question of authorship in *Don Quixote* to focus on the particular position of the author in the text. On one hand, with the creation of the fictional "Auster," he does not disassociate himself from the text, as Benengali had supposedly done. "Auster" serves as a signature on the canvas. On the other hand, the inclusion of the name "Auster" blurs the boundaries between the "real" and the "fictional" author. In Michel Foucault's essay, "What is an Author?", the "author-function" is discussed with its characteristics such as copyright, acceptability and attribution. At the end of his essay, Foucault finds the question of real authorship boring and emphasizes the "modes of existence of this discourse" (148). He ends his text with a question from Samuel Beckett, saying "What matter who's speaking?" (148). Auster might have wanted to

dissociate himself from the text by including his name as a fictional character. Madeline Sorapure reads into Auster's intentions in the opposite direction, stating that if "one has discovered the *true* author of a work, one possesses the key to understanding the work" (emphasis belongs to the author, 84). Yet, she also draws connections between Auster and all the other author-characters of the novel by stating that none of these characters fulfill the readers' expectations since they do not offer adequate explanations on the discussions. Therefore, even if the reader possesses the knowledge of the author's identity, the meaning is delayed.

*The Black Book* also offers discussions on the act of writing and personal style. Chapters on Galip's search alternate with Jelal's newspaper columns. These columns serve to advance the plot to some degree and often stand alone as vignettes. Daily newspaper columns have a special meaning in the Turkish media and popular culture. These newspaper columns (or "corner texts" in Turkish) are written on a variety of subjects and carry traces of oral literature. The writers have fans who buy newspapers to read the columns. In *The Black Book*, the lengths of columns vary. Some are in the form of stories and almost all of them are related to the changing face of İstanbul and its social and cultural history such as household habits, boat rides on the Bosphorus, music selection on the radio and games played by children.

The author of the newspaper columns carry a social responsibility as Jelal's fan in the novel insistently argues. This responsibility involves honesty and coherence in expression. Jelal's fan expresses his unhappiness over Jelal's (Galip was impersonating Jelal at this point) reluctance to meet and discuss matters which supposedly interest Jelal. Jelal, in his writing act claims that he is not "'creating' something new but taking something astonishingly wonderful that had been worked on by thousands of intellects over thousands of years elegantly changing it here and there, and transforming it to something new" (226). This remark recalls Auster's discussions on authorship in *City of Glass*. By assuming Jelal's name and style, Galip stands as a commentary on the futility of the personal identity of the author. What matters is the act of writing, "modes of existence in the discourse" as Foucault puts it. The act of writing becomes the focal point at the end of the novel. "Nothing can be astounding as life. Except for writing. Except for writing, except for writing, the sole consolation" (400).

*My Name Is Red* is also full of stories within stories and discussions on miniature art. This form of art is considered to have Eastern origins and is highly influenced by Islam. According to the historical interpretation of Islam, three-dimensional representation is a heresy because an art work cannot and should not replicate the world

created by God. Reality is the domain of the creator and it should remain that way which explains the style of the miniatures. *My Name Is Red* focuses on the differences between the two-dimensional Eastern illustrations and the three-dimensional Western illustrations. The discussions center on the paradox between creation process and the demands of religious beliefs. The head miniaturist, Master Osman says, “What could be more exquisite than looking at the world’s most beautiful pictures while trying to recollect God’s vision of the world?” (394). Western paintings depict the world as seen by the human eye; that is they employ perspective. Miniaturists, on the other hand, paint their illustrations as God envisions them from above. Although the larger paradox between the Eastern and the Western ideas of representation is solved with a reference from Kur’an “To God belongs the East and the West” (408, Bakara 115), the discussions on the personal style of the artist remain open.

The validity of personal style is one of the major discussions in *My Name is Red*. These passages recall the discussions of language and authorship in *City of Glass* and *The Black Book*. The Murderer claims that if the artist possesses “true art and genuine virtuosity [he] can paint an incomparable masterpiece without leaving even one trace of his identity” (22). In miniature art, the sign and its meaning is not based on arbitrary relationships. It is unnecessary for the miniaturists to have personal styles/signatures since there is only one meaning connected to the illustration. A tree is a tree, a man is a man, and a dog is a dog. In other words, miniature art can be described in a similar fashion to Peter Stillman’s reference to language in the Garden of Eden where “A thing and its name were interchangeable” (52). In *My Name is Red*, the storyteller personifies the tree which is grateful that it is not drawn in the western style since the dogs would piss on it, thinking that it is real. “I don’t want to be a tree, I want to be its meaning” (61).

Orhan Pamuk finds a connection between his narrative approach and miniature art. He explains that the figures in the miniature art gaze to the picture with one half of their bodies and gaze outside the picture, toward the observer, with the other half of their bodies. Similarly, his characters tell their stories to each other and the reader. The observer is aware that he is observing a picture in the miniatures; likewise, the reader is always aware that he is reading a novel (*Öteki Renkler* 159).

Auster and Pamuk are both uncomfortable about the emphasis the critics place on the detective fiction framework of their works, since both view this framework as a means to the end. They both use the detective fiction framework to capture the initial

interest of the reader, but consciously divert from the genre to discuss language problems, authorship issues and the creation process. Since the process involving a search is valued more than the outcome of the search, both writers do not necessarily end their fiction with satisfactory answers to the events. Their texts resist closures. Auster draws the distinction between mystery novels and his work in the following manner: "Mystery novels always give answers: my work is about questions" (*The Red Notebook* 139). Pamuk resembles detective fiction to a clothes line where he can hang the stories he wants to narrate (*Kırmızı ve Kar* 50). He points to the fact that "detective fiction genre does not exist in Turkish Literature nor does it have to exist. . . . In classical detective fiction clues, the details from life do not transform to signs of sadness. In *The Black Book* Galip searches his wife in tears" (*Öteki Renkler* 138, author's translation). Auster and Pamuk frustrate the reader who is looking for the unfolding of events but delight the ones who take pleasure in entering into the maze of complexities in the labyrinthine cities. The readers who struggle alongside the inept detective characters may have trouble in tying the end knot to the events and the digressions discussed by the authors but they might at least enjoy the course of the narrative.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This is a revised and expanded version of the paper presented at the Popular Culture / American Culture Associations gathering, April 16-19, 2003 in New Orleans, Louisiana, USA. Several sections have been reworked and expanded in the present version.
- <sup>2</sup> In 1972 William V. Spanos coined the term "anti-detective story." He meant that such texts that would refuse to solve the crime. In 1984, Stefano Tani wrote about "anti-detective fiction." In 1990, Kevin Dettmar classified the same texts under "postmodern mystery." Yet another term "analytic detective fiction" was proposed by John T. Irwin. Elena Gomel coined the term "ontological detective story" in 1995. In this article, I will be using the term "metaphysical detective story" as coined by Howard Haycraft in 1941 and explained by Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney in "The Game Afoot: On the Trail of Metaphysical Detective Story." p. 2-4.

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