



Finding Ghosts in a “No Man’s Land”: Žižekian Subjects in Paul Auster’s *The New York Trilogy*

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Abstract

The present article is an attempt to investigate Paul Auster’s *The New York Trilogy* in the light of Žižek’s Hegel-inspired theorization about subjectivity. It studies Hegelian themes of “absolute negativity” and the “night of the world” that figure prominently in theorization of the Žižekian subject. In so doing, it argues how the characters of *The New York Trilogy* experience their immediate surroundings as “absolute negativity,” as a “no man’s land” that is eclipsed by the “night of the world,” and how as empty points of negativity they see the need for the transition from a state of nature to that of culture, so that giving birth to their subjectivity. By dividing the procedure between two groups of characters, it tries to show how desperately both try but fail in their attempts to become a subject, that is why ghosts frequent New York’s streets, and not the real subjects.

Keywords: subject, subjectivization, “absolute negativity”, “night of the world”, “empty point of negativity”

1. Introduction

1.1 Cartesian Subject: For and Against

In *Ticklish Subject*, Žižek (2000) asserts that the spectre of the Cartesian subject is haunting Western academia, and “all academic powers have entered into a holly alliance to exorcize this spectre,” (p. 1) however he claims that the book is an endeavour to “reassert the Cartesian subject” (p. 2).

The point is not to return to the *cogito* in the guise in which this notion has dominated modern thought (the self-transparent thinking subject), but to bring to light its forgotten obverse, the excessive, unacknowledged kernel of the *cogito*, which is far from the pacifying image of the transparent self. (p. 2)

To grasp Žižek’s notion of the subject fully, and how in stark contrast to the opposing contemporary views he supports the Cartesian subject, one must have at least a partial understanding about those theories. The first view supports *cogito* as “the basis of the centred subject,” or as it is more commonly known the “individual” (Myers, 2003, p. 32). In this view the individual is indivisible and master of itself. In fact “nothing impedes its understanding of itself because it is in total control and total autonomy over its actions” (ibid, p. 33).

However, post-structuralists reject the idea of *cogito* as a “completely self-contained being that develops in the world as an expression of its own unique essence” (Mansfield, 2000, p. 13). Instead, they placed the idea of “decentred subject” (Myers, 2003, p. 32). This subject is “constructed, made within the world, not born into it already formed” (Mansfield, 2000, p. 11). *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* also describes the postmodern subject as “a fragmented being who has no essential core of identity,” this subject is then to be regarded “as a process in a continual state of dissolution rather than a fixed identity or self that endures unchanged over time” (Sim, 2001, pp. 366-7). Žižek (1989) recalls that in post-structuralism reducing to the so-called subjectivation, the decentred subject is the effect of a “non-subjective process”:

The subject is always caught in, traversed by the pre-subjective process (of ‘writing’, of ‘desire’ and so on), and the emphasis is on the individuals’ different modes of ‘experiencing’, ‘living’ their positions as ‘subjects’, ‘actors’, ‘agents’ of the historical process. (*Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 174)

However, the problem with this model is that the objective world is so pervasive that there is little or no subjectivity left. The point here is that if there is no subjective element to my character, then I do not have any individuality. Both models of subjectivity we have talked about so far are affected by forms of extremism. They either emphasize highly the subjective world of the individual or value the objective world.

1.2. Žižek’s Reading of Cogito

1.2.1 Cartesian Doubt as a “Withdrawal into Self”

In stark contrast to these models stands Žižek’s reading of the *cogito*, which is more indebted to the method through which Descartes arrived at his famous pronouncement about *cogito*, than just *cogito* itself. For Žižek, the method of

Cartesian doubt gives form to the knowledge of transformation from nature to culture that is a movement from the self-enclosed individuality to the realm of the universality. When one withdraws into self, the only possible way to escape from madness is to construct a world of culture, or the Symbolic world.

Žižek believes that German Idealists among them Kant and Hegel were haunted by the question of this transformation. Hegel was interested in the relation between a self-conscious subject and the external world, so at the core of his philosophy of phenomenology is the idea of intersubjectivity (Beiser, 1999; James, 2007). In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel calls this self-transforming process, as a “reflection into self,” the “moment of the ‘I,’” or as “pure negativity” (1977, p. 11). Žižek believes that the missing link between nature and culture should be found in the process of Cartesian doubt. He describes this process as a withdrawal into self, one that is analogous to Descartes’s physical withdrawal into the oven (*Abyss of Freedom*, 1997, p. 8). As Descartes cuts himself off from the world, all he is left with is cogito.

1.2.2 Subject as an “Empty Point of Negativity”

For Žižek, Descartes’ cogito is an empty void of negativity and not the “I” of the individual, as post-structuralists aver it to be. In *Abyss of Freedom* (1997) Žižek brings to light the basic insight of Schelling, that a subject, prior to its assertion by the Symbolic universe, is an infinite lack of being, or the violent gesture of contraction that is inclined to negate every being outside itself (p. 8). The subject is, then, a void, and he locates the subject in this empty space devoid of all content. However, the crucial point is that, it is this void that brings about one’s transition from a state of nature to that of culture.

Borrowing a Jamesonian concept, Žižek calls the subject, a missing link, or “vanishing mediator” between a state of nature and that of culture. He borrows the concept of vanishing mediator from an essay “The Vanishing Mediator; or, Max Weber as Storyteller” by Marxist critic Fredric Jameson. It is a concept that mediates the transition between two opposed concepts and then disappears. Žižek’s point here is that, the transition from nature to culture is not direct, because it is impossible to pass directly from “purely ‘animal soul’ immersed in its natural life-world to ‘normal’ subjectivity dwelling in its symbolic universe” (*Ticklish Subject*, 2000, p. 36). An “in-between,” or a kind of “vanishing mediator,” which is “neither Nature nor Culture” has to intervene between the two states (*Cogito and the Unconscious*, 1998, p. 256). It is the missing link around which the transition is made possible.

1.2.3 A Passage through Madness

For Žižek, this passage from nature to culture is one that passes through madness: “Was not this withdrawal-into-self accomplished by Descartes in his universal doubt and reduction to cogito, also involves a passage through the moment of radical madness?” (*Ticklish Subject*, 2000, p. 34). He reads the vanishing mediator as a passage through madness, and by so doing he conceives the subject as mad. However, he believes that this madness is not to be conceived as a negative element, since it is a prerequisite for the normality of a subject. In *Cogito and the Unconscious* (1998), he further justifies the ontological necessity of madness by offering the claim that, “it is not possible to pass directly from the purely ‘animal soul,’ immersed in its natural environs, to ‘normal’ subjectivity ... the ‘vanishing mediator’ between the two is the ‘mad’ gesture of radical withdrawal from reality, which opens up the space for its symbolic (re)constitution” (p. 259). And for him, this is the same madness as Hegel’s “night of the world”:

The human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity—an unending wealth of many representations, images, of which none belongs to him—or which are not present. This night, the interior of nature, that exists here—pure self—in phantasmagorical representations, is night all around it, in which here shoots a bloody head—there another white ghastly apparition, suddenly here before it, and just so disappears. One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye—into a night that becomes awful. (Cited in *Ticklish Subject*, 2000, pp. 29-30)

This passage from Hegel’s *Jenaer Realphilosophie* manuscripts appears in many of Žižek’s oeuvres, and plays an important role in his theorization of the Hegelian subject. Hegel characterizes the contraction into self, and the experience of pure self as the “night of the world”. Žižek reads the passage as an exemplary description of the negative, disruptive power of imagination, “as the power that disperses continuous reality into a confused multitude of ‘partial objects’, spectral apparitions of what in reality is effective only as a part of a larger organism” (ibid, p. 30). In *Abyss of Freedom* (1997) he also adds that, a subject “prior to its assertion as the medium of rational Word,” is that “pure “night of the Self,” an “infinite lack of being,” or the “violent gesture of contraction that negates every being outside itself” (p. 8).

1.2.4 The Construction of a Symbolic Universe

How, then, is the subject able to climb out of madness and reach a state of normality? In *Cogito and the Unconscious* (1998), Žižek resorts to Daniel Dennett, the American philosopher and cognitive scientist who was born in 1942 and whose ground-breaking works in the field of evolutionary biology provide him with the world-wide fame. Žižek’s point of reference is where Dennett makes an insightful parallel between animal’s environs and human’s environs. He quotes from Dennett’s *Consciousness Explained*, where he says, “stripped of [the ‘web of discourses’], an individual human being is as incomplete as a bird without feathers, a turtle without its shell” (416, Cited in *Cogito and the Unconscious*, 1998, p. 256). He believes that “without language,” humans are like “crippled animal[s],” but as soon as the lack is “supplemented by symbolic institutions,” the human being is born (ibid, p. 256). In *Ticklish Subject* (2000) Žižek explains the phenomenon as such:

The withdrawal-into-self, the cutting off of the links to the environs, is followed by the construction of a Symbolic universe which the subject projects on to reality as a kind of substitute-formation, destined to recompense us for the loss of the immediate, pre-symbolic Real. (p. 35)

It is deducible that, the construction of a Symbolic universe is possible only and only when the outside reality is eclipsed by this “night of the world,” in other words, when the reality or the outside world is experienced as “absolute negativity”. Then if one wants to escape from madness, one must build up a world of culture.

It is in the phrase “absolute negativity” that one can observe Hegel’s break with the Enlightenment tradition: “The subject is no longer the Light of Reason ... ; his very core, the gesture that opens up the space for the Light of *Logos*, is absolute negativity, the “night of the world,” the point of utter madness in which phantasmagorical apparitions of “partial objects” wander aimlessly” (Žižek 2000, *Ticklish Subject*, p. 34). However, where Žižek parts company with Hegel is in arguing that this withdrawal from the world, that is the “subject’s contraction and severing of all links with the *Umwelt*” is the “founding gesture of ‘humanization,’ indeed the “emergence of subjectivity itself” (*Abyss of Freedom*, 1997, p. 9).

1.3. Fear of the Dissolution of Subjectivity

Žižek (1998) believes that “the entire psychoanalytic experience focuses on the traces of the traumatic passage from ‘night of the world’ into our ‘bodily’ universe of logos” (*Cogito and the Unconscious*, p. 259). And his reading of the “night of the world,” as a pre-ontological universe in which “partial objects wander in a state preceding any synthesis” (*Ticklish Subject*, 2000, p. 49) fit perfectly with “Lacan’s notion of the ‘dismembered body [le corps morcele]’,” (*Cogito and the Unconscious*, 1998, p. 259) or as it is called the “threatening return of fragmentation” (Hall, 2004, p. 83). Lacan believes that this fragmentation manifests itself in the form of “images of castration, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, bursting open of the body,” (Ecrits, 2001, p. 9) which are all signs revealing the “base-level fear of fragmentation that drives human attempts to secure identity” (Hall, 2004, p. 83). And that is the reason behind subjects’ attempts to identify with something external, to externalize themselves in order to acquire the basis of a self-unified identity.

2. Discussion

2.1 New York as a Place of “Absolute Negativity”

In Paul Auster’s *The New York Trilogy*, New York is depicted as a barren and fragmented place of nightmarish objects where the outside reality is experienced only as loss, as “absolute negativity” and is eclipsed by the “night of the world,” or as Blue observes, “It’s a no man’s land, the place you come to at the end of the world” (*Ghosts*, p.181). The characters are determined by the confines of such an environment. After experiencing the radical negativity and confronting with the “night of the world,” they are able to make the transition from nature to culture. In the meantime, they struggle to survive within this disarray and the brokenness of their immediate reality, but all their attempts to become a subject in a Žižekian sense appear as a total failure.

Commenting upon the states of things in New York, Stillman senior the character of *City of Glass* utters these words:

I have come to New York because it is the most forlorn of places, the most abject. The brokenness is everywhere, the disarray is universal. You have only to open your eyes to see it. The broken people, the broken things, the broken thoughts. The whole city is a junk heap. (p. 77)

He embraces the evident dislocation within the city. New York is as “an inexhaustible space”, “a labyrinth of endless steps” that brings for Quinn “the feeling of being lost”, “lost, not only in the city, but within himself as well” (*City of Glass*, p. 4). It is the “nowhere” he builds around himself: “New York was the nowhere he had built around himself, and he realized that he had no intention of ever leaving it again” (ibid, p. 4). It is a place that if Stillman senior decides to vanish, he will become “part of the city”, “a speck”, “a punctuation mark” or “a brick in an endless wall of bricks” (ibid, p. 90). New York is also experienced by Blue as a place of “absolute negativity”. The outside reality is dispersed into a multitude of partial objects, and is eclipsed by the “night of the world”. The “visibility is poor” due to the snow fall, and Blue “has trouble deciphering what is happening in Black’s room” (p.139). The reality outside is blurred, so that even binoculars appear to be of no help. Through this interminable snow fall, Blue says, Black appears to be “no more than a shadow” (p. 139).

Within each story this theme of “radical negativity” is depicted with utmost vigilance. Auster’s use of relevant imageries is significant in creating the ethos of New York. At the end of *City of Glass*, the darkness wins out over the light, while the light becomes fainter and more fleeting. When the reality outside is eclipsed by the “night of the world,” that is to say darkness becomes prevalent, and the world is experienced as “absolute negativity,” the need of a withdrawal into self keeps rushing to the surface; however, in this story Quinn fails in the fulfillment of subjectivization and remains as the subject of enunciation. It is interesting that the characters are bound within the boundaries of this city, within its “chaotic streets” and “aggressive buildings” to the extent that upon finding themselves within the district of another city, they have the feeling of being “displaced” and “unsure of” themselves, such as the feeling that the narrator of *The Locked Room* experiences upon entering Paris (281).

Drawing on the related images between the chaotic ethos of New York and the lost sense of selfhood, Alford (1995) in his essay “Spaced-Out: Signification and Space” explains the connections between “selfhood”, “space” and “signification”. He argues that characters’ wanderings presuppose their absence of a “destination,” that is to say, a sense of self, so the space in this *Trilogy* is the “seeming theater for a loss of selfhood” (p. 613). He further contends that under the façade of the characters’ suffering from this loss of destination is “not” the traditional sense of “alienation,”

but their “placelessness” owes to “their sense of self being neither exactly at ‘home’ nor exactly ‘away’” (p. 627). To put it in a Žižekian terminology, the characters can neither withdraw into self, nor have a sense of their surrounding space. Near the end of *City of Glass*, this search to find a place *within* is depicted by Quinn’s trial to disappear “into the atextual, nonspatial void of having completed the red notebook” (p. 623).

2.2 Characters as Empty Points of Negativity

For Žižek, prior to its assertion by the Symbolic universe, subject is an empty void of negativity, an infinite lack of being that negates every being outside itself (*Cogito and the Unconscious*, 1998, p. 258). *The New York Trilogy*’s characters are ultimate examples of this assertion. Through his wanderings in New York, Quinn had the feeling of being lost, lost “not only in the city, but within himself as well” (p. 4). His wanderings provide the opportunity to “escape the obligation to think,” and this, more than anything else, brings him “a measure of peace” (p. 4). Whereas Stillman senior believes that in order to be a subject, one must enter into the Symbolic, or the world of culture, Quinn escapes the “obligation to think” (p. 4). Talking to Quinn in the Riverside Park, Stillman senior says he “prefer[s] not to speak to anyone who does not introduce himself” (p. 73). He believes in order to begin, one “must have a name”: “Once a man gives you his name, he’s no longer a stranger” (p. 73). One must first withdraw into self, cut off from all the links with external reality and appear as absolute void of negativity to be a subject at all, to enter a world of culture. With Quinn, however, it is a different case. He does not think of himself as a real subject. Writing in the red notebook, he puts his initials D.Q., standing for Daniel Quinn, on the first page. It is said that, for more than five years he has not put his own name in one of his notebooks: “He stopped to consider this fact for a moment but then dismissed it as irrelevant” (p. 39). In order to substitute for this lack of subjectivity, he resorts to adopting masqueraded identities. Even his dreams are a testimony of his troubled unconscious. He finds himself “alone in a room, firing a pistol into a bare white wall” (p. 9). By drowning himself completely in Stillman case, he has signed his soul away. Firing a pistol into a bare white wall, is like firing into that “empty space” of his own subjectivity, and from then on he is dead as a real subject, as Quinn, and lives a dead life, only through the imaginary Paul Auster, the fake detective. Afterwards his dreams are fraught with images of “coffin[s]” (p. 35) and “mountain[s] of rubbish,” which he is “sifting through” as if in search of something lost (p. 71).

Even the blankness of the notebook is a metaphor for the empty void and blank spot within the characters. It is an emptiness which resists symbolization, or the withdrawal into self, so hindering the characters to become a subject fully. As a container which registers the thoughts, life events, and wanderings of Quinn, or as McKean (2010) says, as an attentive listener whose blank pages compel Quinn to jot down his confessions, it is also a sign of its failure to fully adapt to the needs of subjectivity (p. 107). Instead of filling the void of subjectivity, and registering the growth of a fully developed subject, it consists of incoherent writings that are full of insecurity, uncertainty and are governed by pure chance.

The same stands for Black and Blue. Inspecting Black, Blue sees him as “a kind of blankness, a hole in the texture of things,” (p. 143) while his “blank stare” signifies “thought rather than seeing” (p. 135). As an empty point of negativity who withdraws into self, he is also “thrusting Blue into an empty room,” (p. 166) as Blue says metaphorically. From then on, Blue is entangled in an inward quest, “groping about in the darkness, feeling blindly for the light switch” to illuminate his journey from the world of nature to that of culture (p. 166). Talking about the autopsy on Walt Whitman’s brain and the breaking of it upon falling to the ground before surgery, Black says it’s sad to think of him “lying in his grave”, “all alone and without any brains,” as though the subject without the radical withdrawal into self, without brain is like a “scarecrow,” like a ghost (p. 170).

Nowhere is this difference more obvious than in *The Locked Room*, when the narrator compares his own life and thoughts with those of Fanshawe. Fanshawe is described to have lived “inside himself,” to “withdraw” into self and by the time he is fourteen he actually becomes “a kind of internal exile ... cut[ting] off from his surroundings” (p. 212). Once in France, he was given the chance to live in a country house with no one to distract him from a hermetic life. Fanshawe lived in this solitude for more than a year, and little by little it seemed to “alter him,” to “ground him more deeply in himself” (p. 272). Solitude has become “a passageway into the self” and “an instrument of discovery” (p. 272). The narrator later finds it natural that Fanshawe has become a writer: “The severity of his inwardness almost seemed to demand it” (p. 209). Fanshawe is always detached from life and external reality and this is the quality that sometimes scares the narrator away from him. He realizes that Fanshawe is “alien” to him, that “the way he [Fanshawe] lived, could never correspond to the way he [the narrator] needed to live” (p. 208): “It took me a long time to learn what was good for Fanshawe was not necessarily good for me” (p. 209). Whereas this inwardness and cutting off from the reality is “essential business” for Fanshawe, giving birth to his being a subject of the enunciated, for the narrator “it was only sordid, a miserable lapse into something [he] was not” (p. 211). This is something that differentiates Fanshawe from others; “Fanshawe was visible, whereas the rest of us were creatures without shape” (p. 206). He is “searching out the unknown,” looking “for challenges elsewhere,” (p. 211) in the Symbolic domain perhaps. He knew that the way to culture is attained by a radical withdrawal into self, and through the negation of all determinacy. When as sixteen-year-old teenagers they come upon a cemetery through an aimless drive, they see a freshly dug grave. The snow is falling and they stop at the edge looking down into it. The narrator describes the experience as such: “I can remember how quiet it was, how far away the world seemed to be from us. For a long time neither one of us spoke, and then, Fanshawe said that he wanted to see what it was like at the bottom” (p. 215). The scene is spectacular. The snow is falling eclipsing the reality outside. The world seems to be far away demanding a withdrawal into self. The narrator then says, whenever Fanshawe withdrew into self, here metaphorically into the void of the grave and pretending to be dead, he was alien to him, though the narrator was present. Fanshawe is alone down there, he continues, “thinking his thoughts, living through those moments by himself, and though I was present, the event was sealed off from me, as though I was

not really there at all” (p. 216). By climbing into the grave, it seems as though he “is apprehending his own death” (Segal, 1998, p. 214) that is why near the end, death seems so tempting to him and the only solution left: “I’ve lived with it for so long now, it’s the only thing I have left” (*Locked Room*, p. 306). This reminds the narrator of another shared experience with Fanshawe; the “cardboard box”: It was Fanshawe’s “secret place,” and so “off limits to me,” the narrator says, “he never let me go in it” (p. 215). Getting to know Fanshawe, to share his experiences and his way of life is like “slipping through a hole in the earth” or “falling into a place” where he had never been before; says the narrator (p. 199). Whereas this inwardness is “essential business” for Fanshawe, for the narrator it is “only sordid, a miserable lapse into something” he is not (p. 211).

2.3 Humpty Dumpty: “*The Purest Embodiment of Human Condition*”

The New York Trilogy’s readers are faced with characters who are pure potentials and have not yet been born. But what does it mean when we say that the characters have not yet been born? Do we doubt the testimony of our eyes and mind when we read the stories? Do they not exist on the page? Do they have not a name, a job or relations? Have they not got a story behind them? Let’s go back to Žižek’s theory about subject. The subject according to him is an empty point devoid of all content, and it is exactly this void that enables the transition from a state of nature to a state of culture. One must remember that this transition is possible only by a withdrawal into self. If not for this transition, there would not be a subject, since according to *Ticklish Subject* this withdrawal into self or the “cutting off of the links to the environs” is followed by the “construction of a Symbolic universe,” and the construction of this Symbolic universe is what “subject projects on to reality as a kind of substitute-formation, destined to recompense us for the loss of the immediate, pre-symbolic Real” (Žižek, 2000, p. 35).

So, when we say the characters have not yet been born, we mean that they could not make the transition from a state of nature to that of culture. As the result, their subjectivization, that is to say the process of being a subject, has not fulfilled and the subjects have not yet been born. To be more precise, we should say that they “exist,” but not yet developed into what is a subject, “not yet achieved the form that is their destiny,” or as Stillman senior observes, “[w]e are pure potential, an example of the not-yet-arrived” (*City of Glass*, p. 80). He further avers that “Humpty Dumpty,” the egg in *Through the Looking Glass*, is the “purest embodiment of the human condition” (p. 80).

What is an egg? It is that which has not yet been born. A paradox, is it not? For how can Humpty Dumpty be alive if he has not been born? And yet, he is alive—make no mistake. We know that because he can speak. More than that, he is a philosopher of language. (p. 80)

Characters of *The New York Trilogy* are still in the process of being born. They have not yet completed the process of subjectivization, not made a satisfactory transition to the world of culture, so they have not yet been born as complete subjects. They only “seem to be there,” but “cannot be counted as present” (p. 107). They are rather a “shadow,” a “ghost” or “a husk without content,” “a man without interior, [...] with no thoughts” (p. 61), transparent objects that have not yet been solidified.

Ghosts actually frequent these stories, and not real subjects, as Black puts it beautifully “there are ghosts all around us” (p. 171). The whole city is haunted, and the characters who frequent its streets as well. There are those such as Quinn, Blue, and the unnamed narrator of *The Locked Room* who do not make the transition successfully, though they are not content with the course of the events as such, because they know they are not where they are supposed to be, as Blue says, “but in a false position” (p. 166). There are also those such as Stillman senior, Black, and Fanshawe, who once confronting the radical negativity and the void of subjectivity, made the transition, but on the other part of it saw the naked reality of a disintegrated big Other, so all their hopes became thwarted. Unable to digest the fact, they faced periods of isolation, self-exile, and madness. Some committed suicide, and one was killed by his counterpart, Mr. Blue. Upon a detailed analysis, one is confronted with characters who “wander aimlessly” through the streets of New York. Such is the case with Quinn:

By wandering aimlessly, all places became equal, and it no longer mattered where he was. On his best walks, he was able to feel that he was nowhere. And this, finally, was all he ever asked of things: to be nowhere. New York was the nowhere he had built around himself, and he realized that he had no intention of ever leaving it again. (p. 4)

The characters are “lost, not only in the city, but within themselves as well,” and by giving themselves up to the movement of the streets, they are able to “escape the obligation to think” and this brings them “a measure of peace” (p. 4). They are moving “rapidly along the surface of things,” always “taking pleasure in the world as such,” and “asking no more of things than that” (p. 141). The characterization of Blue shows a person who “has never given much thought to the world inside him, and though he always knew it was there, it has remained an unknown quantity, unexplored and therefore dark, even to himself” (p. 141). This kind of life on the surface of things and this rejection of a withdrawal into self, of the world inside is followed by a sense of lethargy that permeates the stories. *City of Glass* represents Quinn as a man who has an indifferent attitude toward life: “He no longer wished to be dead. At the same time, it cannot be said that he was glad to be alive” (p. 5). He cannot even remember any of his dreams. The narrator says, it was then that “he had taken on the name of William Wilson” (p. 4). Of course, he had long ago “stopped thinking of himself as real,” and if “he lived now in the world at all, it was only at one remove, through the imaginary person of Max Work” (p. 9). The characters’ lack of introspection or their self-withdrawal shows itself in different ways; whether through their desire to lose themselves in their wanderings in New York’s streets, or else through their willingness to inhabit the self

of another persona, that is through the masqueraded selves they assume during their lives. Both their attempts point to figures who suffer from a misunderstanding of their place in the world. In what have been said till now it was depicted, how miserably the characters failed through their wanderings, so the only possible way left to them is to invent, to duplicate real life in the form of writing stories, reports, biographies, and adopting fake identities. Since their transition from a state of nature to that of culture is left incomplete and unsatisfactory, and besides it does not lead to the desired effect of giving birth to a subject, they try to compensate for it through such duplications and adaptations, although they know that they are all inventions after all. Taking up the pseudonym of William Wilson as the writer of his stories, Quinn is said to treat him with deference, “but he never went so far as to believe that he and William Wilson were the same man” (p. 61). Another time and through a deft twist of naming he adopts an invented identity of a detective. He knows that the identity of Paul Auster is fake and an illusion, “Auster was no more than a name to him, a husk without content,” (p. 61) so he does not really lose himself, “he was merely pretending, and he could return to being Quinn whenever he wished” (p. 50). That is because he knows, to be Auster meant “being a man with no interior, a man with no thoughts. And if there were no thoughts available to him, if his own inner life had been made inaccessible, then there was no place for him to retreat to” (p. 61). So, the question is, why, in spite of their dissatisfaction with their masks, they are not content to “emerge from behind the mask[s] of [their] pseudonym[s]” (p. 5). The answer is probably because this is the only way left to them to retreat to.

2.4 A Passage through Madness

This radical withdrawal-into-self also involves a passage through the moment of madness. *The New York Trilogy*'s characters are also faced with extreme moments of madness. They are frustrated, some choose self-exile and isolation from their immediate surroundings and still some commit suicide as the result of not being able to cope with the reality as such. Confronting the naked reality of a disintegrated big Other, Stillman senior and Fanshawe choose death instead of living a frustrated life in a dislocated world. Hope has thoroughly abandoned them. Committing himself to a twenty-four-hour watch on Stillman's alley, Quinn understands “the true nature of solitude,” and one thing he discovers there, is that “he was falling” (p. 115). Approaching Stillman senior, he also comes to know the need to a true subjectivity and he even experiences moments of negativity. He gets to know that the way to a true subjectivity passes through madness, but he is unable to surpass the moment because he is stuck somewhere *in between*. He even comes to know that many people are “locked inside madness” as a result of being unable to surpass the transition completely:

For every soul lost in this particular hell, there are several others locked inside madness—unable to exit to the world that stands at the threshold of their bodies. Even though they seem to be there, they cannot be counted as present. (*City of Glass*, p. 107)

Quinn takes an attitude of total indifference near the end. Imprisoning himself in a “windowless cubicle” in Stillman's deserted apartment on East 69th Street, he thinks that “he had come to the end of himself” (p. 123). Living in a state of paralysis, he accepts whatever happens around him without protest. He is neither surprised nor disturbed by what goes around him. Approaching the end of the red notebook is synchronized with the dominance of darkness over light, as if he is also coming to the end of his own subjectivity. In his hide and seek with Black, Blue also approaches moments of subjectivity and subsequently experiences moments of madness. He knows that he cannot live such a life, because he is a man unaccustomed to true inwardness. For a period in between he falls to utmost despair and even lives “with the knowledge that he is drowning” (p. 175). Being entangled with Fanshawe's case, the narrator of *The Locked Room* is vanishing before his wife's eyes, the same as Fanshawe. “Fanshawe himself was not death,” the narrator says, “but he was like death, and he functioned as a trope for death inside me” (p. 295). Trying to take the same route as Fanshawe, the narrator had once experienced the true nature of subjectivity, but could not surpass the moment totally. Now, he can see that his own life is fading before his eyes and his only hope is that, he “will find a break in the darkness” that he has visited and stuck in ever since (p. 231).

2.5 Representation of Death in *The New York Trilogy*

It is actually the fear of the dissolution of subjectivity that brings about the characters' attempts to identify with something external, and here by adopting masqueraded identities in order to acquire a self-unified identity. It is this fear that is responsible for creating an array of images such as death, corps, coffins, darkness and a host of other relevant imageries all standing as manifestations of this fear that is prevalent among the *Trilogy*'s characters. Let's deal with the issue in detail. Death, as the strongest manifestation of the dissolution of subjectivity, happens in *The New York Trilogy* both literary and metaphorically. At the end of *City of Glass*, Quinn lies in the deserted apartment not conscious about his life and surroundings, sipping death metaphorically, while darkness takes over the light. Approaching the end of the red notebook, he is also approaching the end of his own life, that is to say the end of his own subjectivity. Death, as the dissolution of our subjectivity, carries with it the relevant images of corruption and corps. Quite aware of the dissolution of his own subjectivity, Quinn lies in the vacant apartment, unbothered by what is circulating around him. Even before the end, he dreams of coffins, of firing a pistol into a bare white wall, all representing the death of his subjectivity and his own apparent death. Death hovers *The Locked Room* as well, but the case is a bit different for the narrator of the novel. Being like Fanshawe is “suicidal” for him: “Fanshawe himself was not death, but he was like death, and he functioned as a trope for death inside me” (p. 295). It is like the death of his own subjectivity, because taking the same route as Fanshawe is like vanishing from his own life, like tasting death:

I felt as though I was no longer inside myself ... I couldn't feel myself anymore. The sensation of life had dribbled out of me, and in its place there was a miraculous euphoria, a sweet poison rushing through my blood, the undeniable odor of nothingness. This is the moment of my death, I said to myself, this is when I die. (p. 292)

Death as “something that happens to us every day” (p. 195) is prevalent in these novels. The words “death” and “dead” occur one hundred and eleven times in *The New York Trilogy*, showing the preoccupation of characters with the dissolution of their subjectivity. Blue's mind, for instance, is occupied with the unsolved case of the “child lying in his grave with no name,” (p. 162) and he imagines himself instead of the child. This is the moment of utmost despair, of living a life but having no name after your death. Fanshawe also writes about the story by Peter Freuchen he had once read. The story says that an Arctic explorer, being stuck in an igloo, notices how the walls of his shelter were gradually closing in on him, because by each breath he took the walls became thicker, and the igloo smaller, until no room was left for him. Fanshawe says that it is a frightening thing to “imagine breathing yourself into a coffin of ice” (p. 250). In “The Pit and Pendulum” by Poe, Fanshawe again gives an example of how unavoidable death is, and how the instrument of the protagonist's destruction is the very thing he needed to keep him alive: “For surely a man cannot live if he does not breathe” (p. 250). These are all signs revealing the fear of fragmentation that directs all the characters' attempts to secure their subjectivity through identifying with something external and this is the hidden motive behind the characters' adopting of fake identities.

3. Conclusion

In theorizing the subject, Žižek borrows and amends some notions from Hegel. In stark contrast to contemporary thought, he also endorses Cartesian subject. He believes that the method of Cartesian doubt gives form to the knowledge of transformation from a state of nature to that of culture and describes this process as a withdrawal into self. According to Žižek, Descartes' cogito is an “empty point of negativity,” and it is this void that enables the transition from nature to culture. He further reads this passage as one that passes through madness. For him, this madness is reminiscent of Hegel's “night of the world”. The subject is able to climb out of madness and reach a state of normality by the construction of a Symbolic universe, which acts as a projection on to reality to recompense us for the loss of the pre-Symbolic Real. In quite the same way, *The New York Trilogy's* characters found themselves in an environment which was totally negative, dislocated and out of place. They experienced their immediate surroundings as loss, as a place of “absolute negativity” that was eclipsed by the “night of the world,” so that they were confronted with the need to cut off from the blurry-outside-reality, withdraw into self, and in the meantime make the transition from a natural being to a social subject. As pure potentials, they were in the process of being born every day, however, all their attempts at actualizing their potentiality failed and that was why ghosts rather than real subjects frequented New York's streets. In the end, it was revealed that death as the strongest manifestation of the fear of the dissolution of subjectivity creates a powerful web of imageries within the *Trilogy*, and it was actually this fear that drove characters attempts to secure their identity through assuming fake identities.

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