



Material Entanglements: Identity Collapse and Object Agency in Paul Auster's *City of Glass*

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Abstract— *Paul Auster's City of Glass, a seminal work of postmodern urban literature, unravels the disintegration of Daniel Quinn—a writer who morphs into a detective and ultimately a nameless wanderer—through a labyrinth of material encounters. This paper repositions City of Glass within the framework of new materialism, arguing that Quinn's identity crisis is not merely a psychological collapse but a material entanglement. By centering the agency of objects—names, the red notebook, and urban spaces—the analysis reveals how nonhuman actors actively co-author Quinn's subjectivity, reflecting broader tensions in 21st-century urban existence. Quinn's reliance on pseudonyms, the parasitic vitality of the red notebook, and his submersion into empty apartments exemplify the animacy of objects and their dual capacity to mediate desire and despair. City of Glass prefigures the material logic of 21st-century identity crises, urging a reimagining of human-object relations in an age of ecological and digital precarity. Through this lens, City of Glass critiques the fragility of selfhood in consumerist urban environments, where identity dissolves into a contested terrain shaped by the vibrancy of matter.*



Keywords— *City of Glass, Paul Auster, Identity, New Materialism, Urban Literature*

I. INTRODUCTION

Paul Auster is a pioneering American writer known for his innovations, who won the French Prix Médicis étranger in 1993 and was nominated for the Booker Prize in 2017. *City of Glass* is a cornerstone of postmodern American literature. Auster in this work narrates about the plight and struggles of ordinary people in urban America in a suspenseful tone, who uses a postmodernist form of language play to convey the confusion and anxiety of the urbanite, interrogating the fragility of urban identity through the existential collapse of Daniel Quinn—a writer-turned-detective who dissolves into New York's material labyrinth.

Paul Auster is personally interested in French modernism and avant-garde art. He spent a critical period of his intellectual formation in Paris during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the golden age of French philosophical theory. During this time, Auster began to conceive and write his early novels, including *The New York trilogy*, which also incorporate elements of Derrida's syntax in their narratives and thematically discuss existentialist confrontation and Foucault's discourse of power. "We can intuit the extent to which Auster employs twentieth-century French theory in order to conceptualize the processes of twentieth-century existential exhaustion brought about by the condition of postmodernity"

(McKean, 1998). This anti-detective novel, in which the author Paul Auster's own name appears, depicts the Oedipus dilemma and the multiple anxieties of identity of an urban population in a postmodern, uncannily intertextualised way. "As part of Auster's intertextual play with doubles, names, and identities, another of Daniel Quinn's personas is 'Paul Auster,' a doubling that further complicates the boundaries between author, narrator, and character" (Rubenstein, 1998). Marcus Richey combines Lacanian feminism with *City of Glass* to discuss the patriarchy erosion in Quinn's identity that transcend postmodernism. She argues that the protagonist, Daniel Quinn, expresses a desire to rebel against and overthrow traditional 'patriarchal law' by virtue of language play in order to seek reliance and psychological defence in the midst of suspenseful events in a perplexing anti-detective affair. "Quinn's slumming-with-a-vengeance into full vagrant identity repudiates Freud and Lacan's traditional phallic power and opts for masculinist castration, so very far removed from William Wilson, Max Work and their kind"(Richey, 2024). David Coughlan interprets the fictional text of *City of Glass* interactively with its graphic adaptation. The visual translation in the graphic novel becomes a strange doppelgänger of the original, a re-creation that harbours the shadow of the original. The visual metaphor of graphic elements in graphic novels serves as a vague window, rendering multi-dimensional conjectures and guiding the protagonist to blur his identity. "In light of Stillman's musings, the visual metaphor of the labyrinthine fingerprint (a mark of identity) smudging the windowpane can be related to the graphic novel's engagement with misdirecting signs" (Coughlan, 2006).

It is evident that the issue of Quinn's self-identity has been the focus of scholarly research on the novel, but previous studies have remained anthropocentric in perspective, reflecting on Quinn's mental breakdown and confusion from the dimensions of Quinn's spiritual problems, the visual details of the characters in the graphic novels, and even authorial consciousness. This paper shifts the paradigm by applying new materialism—a theoretical framework that repositions objects as active participants in social and psychological processes—to argue that Quinn's identity crisis is not merely a psychological phenomenon but a material entanglement. By centering the "vitality of

things" and their capacity to shape human subjectivity, this study not only reinterprets Auster's novel but also illuminates broader tensions in contemporary urban life, offering a prescient meditation on identity in an age where objects increasingly dictate human experience.

II. DISEMBODIED SIGNIFIERS: NAMES AS AUTONOMOUS AGENTS IN QUINN'S IDENTITY FRAGMENTATION

In *City of Glass*, Quinn's relationship with names—both his own and his pseudonyms—epitomizes the new materialist assertion that objects, once detached from human intentionality, acquire agency to reconfigure identity. As early as 1950, Heidegger, in his existentialist philosophy, made a theoretical attempt to transcend traditional metaphysics with regard to things, which are not only an ensemble of functional properties ascribed by man or materials that fulfil human needs. The process of "thinging" is a way for things to exist as objective beings. Heidegger's notion of "thinging", which posits that objects reveal their essence only when stripped of utilitarian functions, finds resonance in Quinn's gradual alienation from his name. Initially, "Quinn" operates as a semiotic prosthesis—a vessel for his literary ambitions and social belonging. As a young man, Quinn harboured literary dreams of making a mark with aspiration in the fields of poetry, serious literature and criticism of social issues, using his name Quinn as a material vehicle to bear witness to the self-belonging of individual identity. Yet, the name's semiotic stability crumbles under the weight of personal tragedies: the deaths of his wife and son, coupled with his failed poetry, render "Quinn" a hollow relic. This shift is crystallized in his declaration: "A part of him had died, he told his friends, and he did not want it coming back to haunt him." (Auster, 2011). The name morphs into a "thing" that mirrors his existential void. Here, the name "Quinn" ceases to signify a coherent self; instead, it becomes a spectral entity that haunts him, embodying Brown's claim that "the story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation." (Brown, 2001).

Quinn's creation of the pseudonym "William Wilson" further illustrates the animacy of names. Quinn later chose to make his living by writing popular mystery novels, for which he deliberately created a pen name for himself, "William Wilson", to replace his image as the author of these novels. Unlike "Quinn," which carries the weight of failed aspirations, "William Wilson" is deliberately emptied of personal history—a pure signifier designed to commodify mystery novels. Yet, this calculated detachment backfires. The name evolves into an autonomous agent that writes for Quinn for money, divorcing itself from his creative control. Quinn's refusal to publicly claim "William Wilson"—"He did not feel responsible for it and therefore was not compelled to defend it in his heart." (Auster, 2011)—exposes the paradox of object agency: the more he distances himself from the name, the more it dominates his existence. At this stage, Quinn has deepened the relationship between person and name from a separate parallel to an inverted subject-object relationship. The pseudonym, now a spontaneous life, colonizes his identity, reducing him to a ghostwriter for his own fictional persona.

This ontological inversion culminates in Quinn's relationship with "Max Work", the detective protagonist of his novels. Work, though a fictional construct, becomes Quinn's "presence in Quinn's life, his interior brother, his comrade in solitude" (Auster, 2011), a spectral companion whose adventures offer illusory agency. Through Work, Quinn projects his repressed desires for clarity and heroism, yet the detective's autonomy—symbolized by his "aggressive, quick-tongued" persona (Auster, 2011)—ironically highlights Quinn's own passivity. As Rankin (2016) notes, the "thingscape" of the novel thrives on "hidden interactions" between humans and objects. Significantly, Work's investigative methodology mirrors Quinn's own existential quest: both obsessively trace clues (literal and metaphorical) through New York's labyrinthine streets. But whereas Work resolves mysteries, Quinn's pursuit of truth only deepens his confusion. This asymmetry reveals the ultimate irony: the fictional construct attains narrative agency while his creator becomes a "ghostwriter" of his own life. Work, as a textual artifact, exemplifies this dynamic: he is both Quinn's creation and his captor, a materialized fantasy that

consumes his subjectivity. Quinn's names—Quinn, Wilson, Work—no longer represent identities but autonomous actants in a material network. Their agency exposes the fragility of human-centered identity models, affirming new materialism's insistence on the vibrancy of matter. In a world where names outlive their creators, Quinn's disintegration becomes a parable of urban modernity: identity, once anchored in language and labor, is now a contested terrain where objects write their own narratives.

III. PARASITIC VITALITY: THE RED NOTEBOOK AND THE SUBJECTIVITY LOST

Bill Brown argues that things possess animation, which compel people's attention and perform activities with them. "When the subject-object relation is temporalized to the point of becoming recognizable as a negotiation, when the object reappears as a thing assuming a life of its own, this is when we discover the uncanniness of everyday life." (Brown, 2016) The animation of objects leads everyday life in a dynamic and unpredictable direction. The complexity and unpredictability of everyday life lead humans to unconsciously adjust their self-perceived assessments in an environment of dynamic negotiation with objects. Subject-object relation is regarded as the psycho-interactive negotiations. This animation is dependent on both introjection and projection to achieve its manifestation.

When objects are transformed into commodities and displayed in the window, they not only carry aesthetic value, but also inspire people's perception of beauty and emotional investment. The mistaken phone call conferred on Quinn another mysterious and adventurous possibility in his life. After accepting the commission of tracking, he decides to buy a notebook to use as the first tool for investigating the case. Quinn held that "now that he had embarked on the Stillman case, he felt that a new notebook was in order." (Auster, 2011) In a stationery shop, a red notebook attracts his attention for no apparent reason. "For reasons that were never made clear to him, he suddenly felt an irresistible urge for a particular red notebook at the bottom. He pulled it out and examined it, gingerly fanning the pages with his thumb. He was at a loss to explain to himself why he found it so appealing." (Auster, 2011) All of a sudden he feels a force attracting him to purchase

the notebook. This force can be understood in the text as being the life force of the Thing. The combination of notebook aesthetic experience and the individual's pursuit of self-satisfaction inspires people's admiration and enthusiasm for the goods, which in turn drives the consumer behavior. In this process, commodities are endowed with a kind of "animation", they are no longer static objects, but active participation in social and cultural dynamics, affecting human emotions and social activities. The red notebook at this moment demonstrates the internal projection of the animation of things, which reflects into Quinn's heart. In detective fiction, the notebook, as a symbol of the detective's professional skills and expertise, is not only a key tool for the detective's professional identity, but also an important part of the detective's image building. Here the notebook serves as a commodity that can be purchased, and one of the commodity values it is endowed with is to increase the sense of identity and authenticity of being a detective. The purchasing value of the notebook elicits Quinn's fervor for identity through the process of attracting Quinn to inspiring the desire to consume. Buying it means that he is no longer a novelist who has been muddling through and been anonymous in the world, but a private investigator who carries the expectations from other people. The fire and power of his life is ignited again by this red notebook. After obtaining this notebook, he comes back home immediately. He set the notebook on the table, sat himself naked at the table gazing at it, and solemnly wrote his real full name Daniel Quinn on the title page without any intention to conceal it. The life force released from this notebook makes it veiled in divinity. This notebook is detached from its physical appearance, and its animation becomes a introjection of Quinn's inner being. It is a detective notebook that truly belonged to him, whose presence sealed Quinn's new identity-being a detective named Paul Auster. "The fact that there was now a purpose to his being Paul Auster—a purpose that was becoming more and more important to him—served as a kind of moral justification for he charade and absolved him of having to defend his lie. For imagining himself as Auster had become synonymous in his mind with doing good in the world." (Auster, 2011)

The subject of the investigation, Stillman, spends his days wandering around New York City. In trailing him, at

first, Quinn finds it very tedious and even always wanders off. To avoid wandering off, he employs his usual practice: throwing off his inner perceptions and imagining that he is Paul Auster, whose identity Quinn has taken over. Just as the shattering of his literary dreams in the past made him seeing the pen name and himself as two identities. But whereas mere role-playing did not significantly enhance Quinn's focus on the case or his sense of identification, the animation of the red notebook helped Quinn fulfill this need. "It was the red notebook that offered him salvation. Instead of merely jotting down a few casual comments, as he had done the first few days, he decided to record every detail about Stillman he possibly could." (Auster, 2011) The distraction that occurs during the stalking process reveals that Quinn's real identity is still permeating and interfering with his identity as Detective Paul Auster in the early stages of the case. This indicates the entanglement and tension that still exists between Quinn's real self and role-playing in the early stages. "As Auster he could not summon up any memories or fears, any dreams or joys, for all these things, as they pertained to Auster, were a blank to him." (Auster, 2011) Quinn's avoidance behavior towards the distraction reflects his underlying need to escape the constraints of his real identity, and this oscillation and conflict between identities is dissolved in the materialistic interaction with the red notebook. In this process, the notebook, as a carrier of the "vitality" of the object, significantly enhances the immersion and identification of Quinn's detective identity. By recording the case clues in the red notebook, Quinn's interaction with the notebook not only realizes his immersion in and attention to the case, but also injects motivation and depth into Quinn's identity as a detective on a spiritual level. In this process, the notebook is not only a tool for recording and organizing the case, but also a visualization of the detective's qualities such as rationality, wisdom, justice and logic. The spirituality of the red notebook as an object continues to permeate and influence Quinn's psychological dimension. When recording clues in the notebook, he is no longer the obscure third-rate popular fiction writer in reality, but gradually becomes a detective who holds the key to logic and wisdom.

The vitality of the object is manifested not only through the internal projection of the object, but also the

external projection of the person, that is the process by which a person is objectified and takes on the characteristics of an object. Quinn recorded the road map of Stillman's daily wanderings in a red notebook and surmised new clues: Stillman's road map might hint the alphabetic information. At the same time, Quinn begins to question whether his imagination is overactive, wondering whether he has over-assigned a wordplay connotation to Stillman's behaviour during his aimless city walks. "Quinn paused for a moment to ponder what he was doing. Was he scribbling nonsense? Was he feeble-mindedly frittering away the evening, or was he trying to find something?"

(Auster, 2011) As Quinn gazed again at the maps and clues drawn in the red notebook, he couldn't ignore the strong presence it gave him. "And yet, the pictures did exist—not in the streets where they had been drawn, but in Quinn's red notebook." (Auster, 2011) The notebook's "spirituality" adds a mysterious power to the clues it records, a power that strangely captures Quinn's attention, causes him to abandon his doubts, and allows him to think further. By carefully analyzing the map's contours, Quinn deduces the hidden letters, which he splices together, arranges, and ultimately deciphers the metaphorically rich message of the "The Tower of Babel". Quinn's mind is consumed by these clues, and even as he alternates between sleep and wakefulness, his consciousness is still pulled by the verisimilar clues in the red notebook. Quinn's perceptions are no longer judged by direct experience in the real world, but through the mediation of the notebook. And in the process of interacting with the notebook, he is dominated by the clues in the notebook and his independent doubt is erased. His thinking is no longer free and independent, but is qualified by the object (the notebook).

Just as he was in the final throes of solving the mystery and nearing the truth, the unexpected happened. Stillman vanished overnight. The client also lost contact and moved out of New York overnight. The disappearance of his employer deprives his identity as a detective, and gives him the signal that it is the time that this misunderstanding should get to the end. The simultaneous disappearance of the tracking target and the employer means that Quinn's stabilization of identity, which was achieved by pinning on objects, is once again out of

balance. The reconstructed sense of self-worth collapses once again, and the disorientation and frustration that once surrounded him came crashing down on him once again. The existence of the red notebook makes it impossible for him to stop his investigations, and he pours all his thoughts and attention into the notebook, "He wanted to think a little more about what he had written but found he could not." (Auster, 2011) At this point, his insides have been gradually objectified. This objectification of thinking implies that the human capacity for rational and logical thought is mastered by the vitality of the object. Quinn continues his stakeout under the Stillman's apartment day after day and records everything and everyone he saw. Finally, after his savings are all spent and he is left homeless, he realizes the case is over. His only choice is to go back to the source of the case, Stillman's apartment. He completely lost all his abilities, all his identity, all his value, becoming a wanderer. The only thing he knows what to do is record something in the notebook. No longer recording what he sees, caring less and less about himself, he writes about the stars, about the earth, and his hopes for humanity.

"The personification of the object brings the object's characteristics close to the human being, and the human being's dark fearfulness derives from this familiar individual. This psychology makes man more sensitive, and the truth that he is unconsciously objectified is uncovered." (Lu, 2020) The red notebook keeps writing, keeps its animation, while Quinn stops recording himself, drowning himself out of himself. The notebook is imbued with human characteristics: the power of thought, logic, and reason; and is in constant renewal. However, Quinn is motionless. He abandons his pursuit of self-identity, becoming completely objectified. His life is degenerating, from a novelist to a homeless wanderer. Introjection and projection from thing's animation brutally express Quinn's confusion and melancholy in the search for identity in the metropolis, causing him to lose his self-awareness and become a wanderer.

IV. NEGATIVE SPACES: URBAN VOID AND QUINN'S EXISTENTIAL DISINTEGRATION

According to Woodward, material culture emphasizes "how apparently inanimate things within the environment

act on people, and are acted upon by people, for the purposes of carrying out social functions, regulating social relations and giving symbolic meaning to human activity.” (Woodward, 2007) Brown makes a similar point but from the perspective of emotion that “if the history of things can be understood as their circulation, the commodity’s ‘social life’ through diverse cultural fields, then the history in things might be understood as the crystallization of the anxieties and aspirations that linger there in the material object.” (Brown, 222) The ontological function of things creates its own history in its interaction with people, and these histories contain many emotional effects and fluctuations. The different inhabited spaces Quinn is exposed to carry the several emotional alternation of his several shifts in identity.

His favorite activity is walking around New York, so much so that he would wander the streets every day, no matter how harsh the weather is. “New York was the nowhere he had built around himself, and he realized that he had no intention of ever leaving it again.” (Auster, 4) As individuals relentlessly pursued social status and wealth, they became increasingly entangled in profit-oriented social relationships, characterized by pervasive indifference and loneliness. This environment, marked by alienation, transformed New York into a spatial manifestation of disconnection, where countless dispirited individuals performed their confusion and helplessness, rendering the city an objectified space of human activity. Thus, New York City, with its indifferent social fabric, became both a stage for Quinn’s existential struggle and a paradoxical sanctuary where he could evade the anxiety of his fragmented identity. Home should be a private space that contains one’s emotional attachment and warm memory, and it often carries the truest aspects of the self. As the story begins, Quinn lives alone in a small, dilapidated apartment. Without his wife and son, the apartment is no longer a loving abode, but a cave to conceal his disappointment and confusion in this prosperous city. “He cleared the debris from the surface—dead matches, cigarette butts, eddies of ash, spent ink cartridges, a few coins, ticket stubs, doodles, a dirty handkerchief.” (Auster, 39) Quinn lives in the company of hoarded clutter and trash in a space where the

home becomes a garbage dump used for self-enclosure, letting him wallow in his own disillusionment.

That wrong phone calls for several times pique Quinn’s curiosity about the case. He decided to pose as a private detective and went to his client’s home. Peter Stillman’s home was stately and neat and very well decorated. “The apartment loomed up around him as a kind of blur. He realized that it was large, perhaps five or six rooms, and that it was richly furnished, with numerous art objects, silver ashtrays, and elaborately framed paintings on the walls.” (Auster, 14) The soft velvet couch and light perfume evoke a sense of comfort and refinement, contrasting sharply with Quinn’s disheveled life. From a new materialist perspective, the objects in Stillman’s home actively shape Quinn’s emotional and psychological state, influencing his perception of identity. In *Other Things*, Brown demonstrates the presence of things is “how it uses the psychosemiotic to disrupt the sociosemiotic register, how it defamiliarizes the object into an other thing that can attain a new kind of presence” (Brown, 2016) The animation of objects is evident here. The velvet couch and perfume, for instance, are not static; they evoke a sense of comfort and privilege, contrasting with Quinn’s marginal existence. Those objects in these rooms would have been easily overlooked and featureless in Quinn’s day-to-day life, but they became a courtesy, a sign of respect when Quinn came into contact with them as a private detective. This contrast highlights the intersubjectivity between Quinn and the objects, as they shape his emotions and self-perception. The objects’ cultural and social capital—symbolized by the silver ashtrays and paintings—act as markers of respect and authority, compelling Quinn to renegotiate his identity in relation to this privileged world. By defamiliarizing Quinn’s everyday experience, they force him to confront the gap between his marginal self and the privileged world he temporarily inhabits. His identity as a detective, his ambition, and enterprise, are affirmed and reconstructed by the courtesy expressed in these exquisite decorations.

However when the subject of the stalk suddenly disappears and his employer loses contact. Quinn’s long-established identity begins to falter. He set out to find out who the real Auster is, so he goes to Paul Auster’s house. “It was a pleasant enough place inside: oddly

shaped, with several long corridors, books cluttered everywhere, pictures on the walls by artists Quinn did not know, and a few children's toys scattered on the floor—a red truck, a brown bear, a green space monster.” (Auster, 2011) This space, filled with warmth and domesticity, stands in stark contrast to Quinn's own fragmented and isolated existence. Auster has been holding on to Quinn's original dream of being a literary writer, and he has a lovely son and a beautiful wife. These objects in real Auster's home, which might seem mundane in another context, take on a profound significance in Quinn's eyes. The red truck, brown bear, and green space monster are not just toys; they are markers of a life Quinn has lost—a life filled with familial warmth, creativity, and stability. The books scattered throughout the home, meanwhile, symbolize Auster's success as a literary writer, a dream that Quinn himself once cherished but has since abandoned. The warmth contained in such a space and its furnishings is exactly what Quinn has been avoiding, not daring to anticipate. As Quinn moves through Auster's home, the objects exert a powerful influence on his emotions, shifting his perception from comfort and pleasure to embarrassment and loss. Initially, the warmth of the space and the familiarity of the objects provide a temporary sense of solace, allowing Quinn to momentarily escape his own identity crisis. However, this comfort is short-lived. The presence of the objects—particularly the children's toys—forces Quinn to confront the harsh reality of his own life: his lack of family, his failed literary career, and his precarious sense of self. The initial comfort he felt in Auster's home gives way to a profound sense of loss and alienation. This emotional transformation is a direct result of the vitality of the objects, which actively shape Quinn's perception of self and reality.

When Quinn confronts the hollowed remnants of Stillman's apartment—a space stripped bare to its skeletal structure—the material absence itself becomes a haunting force that accelerates his psychological collapse. In *Other Things*, Brown writes that the absence of an object can have an impact on the emotional level of human beings through its invisibility, and that its physical vacuity (e.g., an invisible space or an empty room inside the object) can provoke the observer to ask questions about the nature of the object and the impact it has had on its former existence.

Thus, the void of the object also maps the confusion of human beings about their own existence: “The black void can't help but overwhelm the most casual beholder with the sense that there is something essential about the object (or the inside of the object) that remains elusive.” (Brown, 2016) The room, now vacant, is described as “a wooden floor and four white walls... one wire-mesh window that gave on to a view of the airshaft, and of all the rooms it seemed to be the darkest.” (Auster, 2011) This barren environment, devoid of any trace of human life, epitomizes the ontological void central to new materialism, where the lack of material presence paradoxically amplifies the agency of objects in shaping human subjectivity. Here, the emptiness of Stillman's apartment operates as a negative object—a space where the withdrawal of material culture strips Quinn of his relighted energy to identity. The room's uniformity (“each one identical to every other”) and confinement (“ten feet by six feet”) mirror Quinn's internal void, reflecting his eroding sense of self. The wire-mesh window, offering only a view into an airshaft, symbolizes his entrapment within a material and existential labyrinth, where even light—a metaphor for clarity or hope—is filtered through a grid of material alienation.

The red notebook, once a tool of agency and identity construction, now embodies the paradox of object vitality. In this empty space, the notebook transforms from a mediator of Quinn's detective persona into a passive recorder of absence. Quinn, now “a recorder without thoughts,” surrenders his subjectivity to the notebook's blank pages, which no longer hold clues or meaning but merely absorb his despair. This inversion of the object's role—from active collaborator to indifferent receptacle—exemplifies the concept of object withdrawal, where things lose their relational vitality, leaving humans adrift in a non-responsive material world.

This final spatial encounter crystallizes Quinn's emotional trajectory. The apartment's emptiness amplifies his earlier encounters with objects that alternately promised and denied coherence: the red notebook's false agency, Stillman's deceptive existence, and Auster's taunting domesticity. Each space, through its material dynamics, manipulated Quinn's emotions—hope, envy, despair—until his identity fragmented under their

cumulative pressure. The barren room, as the terminal site of material withdrawal, completes this cycle, reducing Quinn to a “wanderer” whose pursuit of selfhood dissolves into nothingness.

In this way, the novel's material logic—guided by new materialism—reveals how objects and spaces are not mere backdrops but co-authors of human collapse. Quinn's disintegration is not merely psychological but a material entanglement: his identity unravels as objects alternately animate, deceive, and abandon him, until even their absence becomes a force of annihilation.

V. CONCLUSION

Paul Auster's *City of Glass* transcends its postmodern narrative to illuminate the precarious nature of identity in a material-saturated urban world. Through Quinn's disintegration—from a disillusioned writer to a nameless wanderer—Auster critiques the fragility of selfhood in modern cities, where objects and spaces are not mere backdrops but active co-authors of human existence. The ontological function of things enables us to understand how the author used “the gap between ‘things’ and their linguistic and cultural representations to highlight the truth of ‘things’ and the relationship between people and ‘things’.” (Yin, 2019) By framing this collapse through new materialism, the novel reveals how urban environments, steeped in consumerism and alienation, amplify the entanglement between humans and things, ultimately questioning the stability of identity itself.

Quinn's his self-protection with difference name, reliance on the red notebook, and his eventual submersion into empty apartments exemplify the animacy of objects and their power to mediate desire and despair. The notebook, for instance, initially a tool for constructing a detective persona, becomes a parasitic force that hollows his agency—a metaphor for how urbanites today cling to smartphones, social media, or branded goods as prostheses for self-definition. Yet these objects, like Quinn's notebook, often deepen existential voids when their symbolic utility fades, mirroring the paradox of consumer culture: the more we consume, the less we possess.

Yet *City of Glass* is not merely a dirge for lost selves. Quinn's final, fragmented recordings about “stars”, “earth” and “humanity” hint at a fragile hope: that identity might

persist in the interstices between objects and aspirations. In an era of climate crisis and algorithmic determinism, such a perspective invites urban dwellers to seek resilience not in material accumulation but in ethical engagement with the nonhuman world. For city dwellers navigating a world of screens, brands, and houses, Quinn's journey is a cautionary tale and an invitation: to forge identities that are fluid yet anchored, material yet transcendent.

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