Narrative Disappearances: A Study of Disappearances in Paul Auster’s Works with a Focus on *Invisible*
Abstract

Disappearance is one of the key recurring features in Paul Auster’s texts. A disappearance occurs in almost every work by him. However, despite the centrality of this theme and motif, it has scarcely been investigated by literary scholars. This essay analyzes the various permutations of disappearance in Auster’s oeuvre, with a particular focus on his 2009 novel *Invisible*.

The analysis is divided into two parts. The first section examines instances of disappearance across a range of Auster’s texts in order to distinguish a pattern. This analysis shows that there are epistemological and existential disappearances; furthermore, they are connected to a change of identity for the vanished character. Moreover, the disappearance affects the narrative as well, creating a rupture which is usually mended by retelling the story of the disappearance, that is, the missing person reappears and recounts what happened to her or him. In addition, this section analyzes the intertextual field that Auster’s writing comments on and participates in: a field underpinned by “Wakefield” by Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Flitcraft story in *The Maltese Falcon* by Dashiell Hammett.

In the second part, the investigation focuses on *Invisible*. The novel follows the general pattern for disappearance, while adding unique features to the thematic. The new features come in the form of disappearance as a literary device, that is, the narrator vanishes by a series of displacements and replacements of this position. Gérard Genette’s method for examining narrative features is used in this part.

**Keywords:** Paul Auster, disappearance, *Invisible*, thematic studies, narrative, Gérard Genette
In *City of Glass*, the first novel in *The New York Trilogy*, there is a famous line that shows the importance of disappeared and missing persons in Paul Auster’s texts: “There is no Paul Auster here” (*TNYT* 7). In fact, Paul Auster is not the only character who has disappeared in Paul Auster’s oeuvre. In this case, it is obvious that the person who has gone missing in the novel has the same name as its author. The main focus for this essay, however, is not an investigation of the position of the author in Auster, but instead how characters in his fiction and non-fiction incessantly disappear.

Disappearances continually run through Auster’s works, intertwining narration and characters. Sometimes the disappearances remain in the background, other times they are at the very center of the plot. It is almost as if Auster's texts constitute a literary Bermuda's triangle. Characters disappear. Sometimes they do not return, remaining forever lost in the work and to the reader. Sometimes they return, but in a different guise, with a different name, as a different person. In this essay, I will trace and investigate two kinds of narrative disappearance in Auster’s texts and particularly in his 2009 novel *Invisible*. Firstly, how characters vanish both in Auster’s texts and in an intertextual field consisting of “Wakefield” by Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Flitcraft story in *The Maltese Falcon* by Dashiell Hammett. Secondly, how the narrator also disappears, is displaced and replaced, with particular reference to *Invisible*. These two components interlock in *Invisible*, forming an intricate network of partial and complete, temporary and permanent disappearances.

*Invisible* is a novel with multiple narratives which co-exist like strata, layers of geological sediment, capturing various stories within the same bedrock. The story
of Adam Walker is the dominant textual stratum in the novel; however, in his three-part narrative, which constitutes a literary triptych, he is progressively disappearing from his own narrative both as a character and as a narrator.

When analyzing *Invisible*, I will have a dual focus: first, I will trace a variety of disappearances which Walker, as a character, is subjected to; second, there will be an investigation into the various permutations of the narrator position and how these are connected to Walker, since he is the author of his autobiography. In fact, there is a destabilization of the novel, as a void or a vacuum is created, that engulfs the other characters as well as the narrative itself.

Important to the analysis of the disappearing narrators in *Invisible* is the method for examining narratives that Gérard Genette has established. I will primarily use the section on narrators, or persons as Genette also calls them. There are three kinds of narrators that are chiefly of importance to the analysis. First, there is the autodiegetic narrator, a variant of the homodiegetic narrator, which is when a character tells his or her own story. Second, there is the homodiegetic narrator which is a character in the world where the narrative is set; thus, the narrator is “present as a character in the story he tells” (Genette 245). Thirdly, there is the heterodiegetic narrator which is a narrator that does not participate in the narrative; or as Genette says the narrator is “absent from the story he tells” (244). Already in this abbreviated description of the principal narrator positions in *Invisible*, it is clear that there is a shift towards less involvement and appearance of the narrator in the story that is being told. It is, thus, this displacement of involvement that I intend to investigate further since it underpins how the protagonist Adam Walker removes himself and is being removed from the narrative, even on the level of narrator.

Before turning my attention to *Invisible*, I will map out how disappearance and reappearance function and reverberate in a selection of texts by Auster. Instances of disappearance are abundant in Auster’s fiction and non-fiction. The persistence with which they recur emphasizes its centrality and importance as both a literary device and a thematic component. Disappearance is, however, more than a technique that Auster uses in his writing; it is also a direct link to an intertextual field, establishing a tradition which Auster’s texts comment and expand on. This intertextual field, consisting of “Wakefield” and the Flitcraft story in *The Maltese Falcon*, will also be investigated in this essay.
Neither disappearance nor its neighboring concepts, such as missing persons or absence have been exhaustively delved into by previous literary scholars. There is usually a comment that this is a salient feature in Auster; however, there is rarely an in-depth analysis of this theme. Barry Lewis, for instance, emphasizes that “the person who goes ‘missing’ from everyday life is an important theme in Auster” (54). Lewis calls it “‘disappearing man’ tropes,” neglecting the disappearing women in Auster’s texts. Rüdiger Heinze says that “disappearance (of characters) is one of his [Auster’s] predominant themes” (41). However, in his investigation Heinze does not develop this claim further, leaving it unsubstantiated. Brendan Martin claims that “Auster intimates that individuals are permitted to vanish without trace. Disappearance seems related to an inexorable schism pertinent to the times” (72). He does not, however, follow this thread much further than this. Debra Shostak analyzes how missing persons can indicate a personal or national loss or absence (66). Her perspective yields intriguing results, particularly in connection to the quests that Auster’s characters often embark on to locate the missing person (66-67); however, her strict Freudian reading of Auster limits the scope of her analysis. Charles Baxter notices disappearances as well: “Sam Auster is the first missing person to appear in Paul Auster’s writing, and he is certainly one of the most memorable of these disappeared ones” (41). However, Baxter’s use of disappearance in this case diverts from how I intend to use it. In this essay, disappearance is not simply about being absent while present in the lives of the other characters; instead, it constitutes a break, a rupture, from the narrative and the character is literally not there anymore. As can be seen in this summary of some of the scholarly writing on the topic, there are different concepts being used to describe this feature in Auster. The preferred term in these texts is missing person, making a clear connection to the detective genre which Auster is wont to play with. The reason why I use disappearance as opposed to missing person is primarily because this is the term predominantly used in Auster’s texts, together with its partner in arms, vanish.

Disappearing acts

The very premise of The Locked Room is a disappearance, or more precisely three kinds of disappearances. The first is quite banal in its ordinariness: two childhood friends who “drifted apart” (TNYT 199) over the course of the years. The idea of
drifting apart, the metaphorical thrust of that expression, emphasizes slowness and that it is gradual. It stands in stark contrast to the second kind of disappearance which happens in the opening of the novel: “Out of nowhere, Fanshawe had suddenly reappeared in my life. But no sooner was his name mentioned than he had vanished again” (200). In this case there is suddenness to Fanshawe’s disappearance: one moment he is there, when the narrator reads his name, and the next he is gone. The third disappearance is closely connected to the second since it deals with Fanshawe, but the point of view is different:

One day in April he [Fanshawe] told her [Sophie] that he was going to New Jersey for the afternoon to see his mother, and then he did not come back. [...] If Fanshawe had decided to leave her, he would not have stolen off without a word. It was not like him to shy away from the truth, to back down from unpleasant confrontations. His disappearance could therefore mean only one thing: that some terrible harm had come to him. (201-202)

This third disappearance, the moment when Fanshawe decides that he will no longer live his former life but simply go somewhere else, is the most typical Austerian one. After this, it is impossible for an eye/I to see Fanshawe again. The “I” of the novel, the narrator, tries to find him by searching his own memories and those of Fanshawe’s, but these eyes/I’s cannot divulge information about him. The same is true for the private eye, the detective Quinn, who Sophie hires to find Fanshawe. Quinn locates him, but in doing so he himself disappears, threatened by Fanshawe.

The detective Quinn is, in fact, a reappearance of a person who has previously vacated himself from one of the parts in the trilogy (Zilcosky 72, Shiloh 101). In the end of City of Glass, as everything falls apart for Quinn and he becomes destitute, he finds himself in Peter Stillman Jr.’s apartment where he is seemingly consumed by madness and writing:

As for Quinn it is impossible for me to say where he is now. I have followed the red notebook as closely as I could, and any inaccuracies in the story should be blamed on me. There were moments when the text was difficult to decipher, but I have done my best with it and have refrained from any interpretations. (TNYT 132)

This nameless narrator does not know what happened to Quinn or where he went to; however, the nameless narrator of The Locked Room mentions Quinn, at least by name and by (fake) profession—an actual gumshoe instead of an impostor. Between these two I’s, the attributes of Quinn have changed: he disappears and reappears as a new man, as another man even. In fact, the change is based on authenticity. Quinn, the
fake detective, returns as Quinn, the real detective. To some extent it is accurate to say that

Quinn has not only vanished at a fictional level, melting into the city walls, but has crossed a metafictional threshold as well, moving outside the purview of the all-seeing ‘eye’: a metafictional Wakefield who enters an extradiegetic space confounding to both fictional author and reader as well. (Swope 221, Swope’s italics)

Within the confines of City of Glass, this analysis is sound and aids in explaining the function of disappearance in the novel. However, Quinn does reappear by name, if not by existence. Quinn from City of Glass has vanished, and remains vanished, but his name returns, affixed to the body of a new and different man. The pattern of someone disappearing and reappearing as someone partially or completely different propagates itself throughout the works of Auster.

In The Music of Chance, there are different layers of disappearance. Nashe’s wife, Thérèse, walks out on him in much the same way as Fanshawe does to Sophie. The parameters are almost identical: one day the spouse decides that s/he no longer wants to stay in the marriage and leaves the other person alone with a child. Whereas Fanshawe does not explain anything on the day when he departs, Thérèse does; however, the note left behind is indecipherable: “At least she left me a note, […] The only trouble was that she put it on the kitchen counter. And since she hadn’t bothered to clean up after breakfast, the counter was wet. By the time I got home that evening, the thing was soaked through. It’s hard to read a letter when the ink is blurred” (TMOC 60-61). The explanation is illegible, resulting in it being meaningless. The words in the letter are gone and cannot be understood anymore: “She even mentioned the name of the guy she ran off with, but I couldn’t make it out. Gorman or Corman, I think it was, but I still don’t know which” (61). The name of the man Thérèse eloped with is ultimately meaningless since it does not make any difference in explaining her disappearance. After all, she is equally gone if she left with Gorman or Corman.

Moreover, Nashe is a person who disappears from his loved ones. First of all he removes himself from his surroundings by quitting his job and emptying his apartment of everything in it. He is thus preparing his departure from a familiar environment by negating all things which previously held meaning to him. This facilitates his decision when he finally “just walked out, climbed into his car, and was gone” (11). Nashe’s disappearance is, however, not as simple as his wife’s. She really just walked out and was gone, whereas Nashe first has to erase the objects that store
his memories of a past life before he can just walk out and be gone. In addition to this disappearance, he also abdicates his role as a father to his daughter Juliette by leaving her with his sister Donna. In fact, Juliette does not recognize her own father after a while: “He had been away from Juliette for too long, and now that he had come back for her, it was as if she had forgotten who he was” (4). Fiona, Nashe’s on-and-off girlfriend, tells him not to “disappear for ever, that’s all” (16) as if she is cautioning him of the dangers of a complete disappearance. However, it turns out that Nashe will disappear forever.

In *The Music of Chance*, these disappearances have mostly been epistemological, that is, this narrative “concerns itself with knowing”, with finding out where a person is or realizing the truth of a puzzle or mystery (Swope 208). The whereabouts of the person who has disappeared is unknown to other people in the novel; however, no one is trying to find the missing persons, Nashe and Pozzi, and this inconsistency disturbs and disrupts epistemology. In addition to this, there is an instance of existential disappearance, of a person disappearing from himself: “The drama with the little boy had changed him [Nashe], and if not for the hibernation that followed, those forty-eight hours in which he had temporarily vanished from himself, he might never have woken up into the man he had become” (189). During Nashe’s deep and extended sleep he becomes void, emptiness, an uninhabited and unfurnished apartment; he loses his self in order to become a new self. He vacates his own being and when he reemerges his previous self is gone. This emptying of himself is a mirror of the emptying of his apartment of all the memories that tied him to the world. In this later case, however, it is not only memories that vanish from him—all aspects of his former being disappear.

Among the true stories that are recounted in *The Red Notebook*, reprinted in Auster’s *Collected Prose*, there is one in which disappearance and reappearance as a new person play a pivotal role. It is the story of a woman from Czechoslovakia whose father was forced into the German army during the Second World War and placed on the Russian front. The family does not receive any news of his whereabouts or his well-being: “The war just swallowed him up, and he vanished without a trace” (*CP* 259). After several years the daughter of the disappeared man becomes a professor of Art History and while teaching meets her future husband, a man from East Germany. After their marriage, they receive the news that the man’s father has died. When they reach East Germany, it turns out that the man’s father had been born in
Czechoslovakia, forced into the Nazi army, shipped to the Russian front, survived all the ordeals of war, but instead of returning to his country, he settled in East Germany, under a new name, raised a new family and thus began his life anew. When the woman from Czechoslovakia is told the name of this man she realizes that it is her father, and that she has married her half-brother. In this case, the reappearance is posthumous and involuntary: the soldier has no intention of returning to his former family and it is only by a series of chance encounters that he actually becomes part of his Czechoslovakian family again. His disappearance is thus both epistemological and existential since his former family does not know his location or what happened to him, and he reinvents himself, becoming, as it were, a new person.

There are other instances of this pattern of disappearance. In *Hand to mouth*, reprinted in Auster’s *Collected Prose*, there are two accounts of people who vanish from their former lives and return in completely new guises. First there is Doc, “a hipster-visionary-neoprophet” (*CP* 178). He used to be H.L. Humes, an author who after his second novel “dropped off the literary map and was never heard from again” (178). Doc only reappears as Humes in the mind of the narrator—it is the narrator who connects the links between Humes and Doc, and thereby solves the mystery of the missing person. Humes, however, has been annihilated a long time ago by electroshock therapy which has made him unable to write; thus, the thing that set Humes apart has been denied him.

The second instance is Joe Reilly, a former art gallery owner who now is homeless. He hangs around in the lobby of the narrator’s apartment building (195). His story mirrors Doc’s: he used to be successful, then suddenly his luck changed and he found himself penniless and homeless. In this case, the existential disappearance does not go as far as a change of names—Joe Reilly is still Joe Reilly. He is, however, completely changed as a person. He can only reappear as his former self in the form of narratives: the narrator’s story, which is based on a story told by a rabbi, and then Joe’s own story of returning to his former brilliance, which the narrator dismisses as fraudulent. The second disappearance of Joe occurs in connection to the narrator: “Even before we said good-bye that day, I knew that I was talking to him for the last time, and when he finally disappeared into the crowd a few minutes later, it was as if he had already turned into a ghost” (199). The connection between disappearance and transformation to another being is reinforced in this quote. Joe turns “into a ghost”
when he is no longer visible to the narrator. This link between disappearance and ghosts is important since it will reverberate in *Invisible*.

There is yet another, and weightier, example of a person absconding from their previous life and becoming a new person, adopting a new persona. In *Leviathan*, Benjamin Sachs unexpectedly, in the eyes of his family and most of his friends, disappears, without leaving any sign as to why he left or where his current location may be: “He [Sachs] went out for a walk one afternoon in the middle of September, and the earth suddenly swallowed him up” (*L* 142). This disappearance shows predominantly two aspects: first, there is an ordinariness about the activity leading up to the disappearance, (Sachs goes for an afternoon stroll in the forest surrounding his Vermont house); second, there is some level of mystery or defiance of the laws of nature (being swallowed by the earth). The disappearance acquires its gravity from the tension between these two poles: it becomes even more incomprehensible since there is no apparent reason for it. The explanation for the disappearance oscillates between ordinariness and mystery. Either there is something very ordinary behind the disappearance (Sachs left because he is fed up with his life) or there is some almost supernatural explanation for it. From the point of view of the people affected by the vanishing act, and who do not know the story behind it, it will never be clear which of these alternatives is the closest to the truth.

There are similarities between Sachs and Doc, Joe Reilly and Fanshawe. All of these cases have connections to art: three writers and one art dealer. Shostak highlights this connection in regard to *The Book of Illusions*; however, she fails to see how this holds true of *Leviathan* as well:

*The Book of Illusions* figures the missing person in relation to art, focusing on the transition from silent film to talkies in the 1920s. *Leviathan* does so in relation to political action, specifically civil disobedience, in the latter part of the century. (73)

The political components of Sachs’ character are of course integral to him turning into a terrorist; however, when it comes to his disappearance, it is imperative to point out that he disappeared when he was writing his second novel and while getting lost in a forest, thinking about how to further develop his work. Moreover, he finally disappears from his former life in New York after being housed and taken care of by the artist Maria Turner. Therefore, there are clear connections between Sachs’ disappearance and art, in addition to the political framework which is ever present.
Sachs’ disappearance leads to his becoming the terrorist The Phantom of Liberty. In much the same way as Doc and Joe Reilly, the disappearance is a way of shedding one identity and adopting a new one. Sachs is able to do this because his former self has already vanished; there is nothing left inside him. This occurred at the very moment of his fall from a fire escape at a Fourth of July party:

Even as I fell, I was already past the moment of hitting the ground, past the moment of impact, past the moment of shattering into pieces. I had turned into a corpse, and by the time I hit the clothesline and landed in those towels and blankets, I wasn’t there anymore. I had left my body, and for a split second I actually saw myself disappear (L 117).

This kind of disappearance is akin to Nashe’s when he falls asleep only to wake up as a new man, since it is internal and existential. Both Nashe and Sachs are emptied out, becoming void as a result of horrific experiences (in Nashe’s case it stems from wanting to kill a small boy). This inner disappearance, vanishing from oneself, will eventually lead up to the actual disappearance, when Sachs leaves his home.

In addition to the various disappearances in Auster’s texts, there is also an intertextual field to which they belong and to which they overtly refer. It is mainly constituted by two texts: “Wakefield” by Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Flitcraft story in The Maltese Falcon by Dashiell Hammett. In both of these texts, disappearance plays a pivotal role. An analysis of the structural components of the disappearances in these two texts reveals their similarities and divergences. The vanishing act is very similar: one day the spouse (both Wakefield and Flitcraft are married) decides to leave his home with no intention of returning. The origin and the aftermath of the disappearances are dissimilar between the stories. In “Wakefield,” the protagonist decides on a whim not to return: “Wakefield himself, be it considered, has no suspicion of what is before him” (Hawthorne 922). There is no premeditation and it seems more like a spontaneous act of mischievous behavior, as a prank Wakefield plays on his wife. Flitcraft, on the other hand, succumbs to the realization that he is not supposed to live in his former life. After avoiding certain death, he cannot see meaning in his life: “Life could be ended for him at random by a falling beam: he would change his life at random by simply going away” (Hammett 66). He leaves his family in order to gain a new life since his glimpse of the capricious nature of life has made him realize that, in the end, life is a string of random events; thus, he resigns himself to this idea and does something entirely unpredictable. After more than twenty years of observing his wife, Wakefield returns home and becomes a devoted
husband once again: “he entered the door one evening, quietly, as from a day’s absence, and became a loving spouse till death” (Hawthorne 921). For Flitcraft too there is some kind of homecoming. He does not, however, return to his former home; instead, he unconsciously creates a home that is almost a one-to-one replica of it—he finds a wife who is very similar to the one he left: “I [Spade] don’t think he [Flitcraft] even knew he had settled back naturally into the same groove he had jumped out of in Tacoma” (Hammett 66). In both cases, there is circularity and symmetry in the narrative: the disappearance is followed by reappearance, a return; an old life is replaced by a new life, similar to the old life.

“Wakefield” is explicitly referred to in *Ghosts*. The plot of the story is being told to Blue by Black (*TNYT* 176). The story has, however, a much deeper significance in *Ghosts* and the trilogy: “By the end of the novel we realize that the Wakefield story is not only relevant to *Ghosts* but actually functions as a *mise-en-abyme* for the larger narrative—and for the entire trilogy” (Swope 212). Blue becomes yet another Wakefield, just as Fanshawe is a version of Wakefield. They both abscond from their partners and leave them in a state of unknowing about their whereabouts, their well-being or their reasons for vanishing.

The Flitcraft story is featured in *Oracle Night* as a model for the writing exercise which Sidney Orr has set for himself in order to regain his confidence as an author (*ON* 11-12). The *mise-en-abyme* effect which the story within the story generates is once again transparently shown by a character who explains the importance of the intertext for the text which is being written within the story, that is, the draft that Orr is writing. However, as with “Wakefield,” this is merely one of the reverberations of the Flitcraft story. In a way, it can be claimed that it serves as a model for Sachs in *Leviathan*. Sachs is transformed by his near fatal accident and this is the impetus for leaving his wife. This is a clear resemblance with Flitcraft. The accident, thus, serves as an axis, a hinge which links together the pre-accident with the post-accident person. Both Flitcraft and Sachs see their lives as being deprived of meaning as a direct result of almost dying; therefore, they have to imbue it with some kind of significance by becoming someone else, somewhere else. For Sachs, this change is more radical than for Flitcraft: the former becomes the terrorist The Phantom of Liberty, whereas the latter merely reestablishes himself in a new geographical position. Thus, Sachs’ identity is considerably more unstable and
fluctuating since it is not enough to simply start a similar life somewhere else—he needs something that is antithetical to his previous life.

Moreover, there are in fact two Wakefield stories in “Wakefield” by Hawthorne. Firstly, there is the newspaper article that the narrator remembers reading and which informed him of the case of Wakefield; secondly, there is the narrator’s imagining of Wakefield and his reasons for absenting himself from his life. The narrator’s Wakefield is thus an adaptation of an original source, and even the name is not the name of the original Wakefield’s, but invented by the narrator: “let us call him Wakefield” (Hawthorne 920). The same structure occurs in Oracle Night, even if Orr explicitly writes a Flitcraft story and not a Wakefield story. However, Orr uses Flitcraft in the same way the narrator in “Wakefield” uses the newspaper article; thus, the structure of the story that Orr writes does not only belong to Flitcraft, it also adheres to “Wakefield.” In Oracle Night, the intertextual field works implicitly in tandem.

The act of disappearing in Auster’s texts is more than simply vanishing, not being there, departing. This is, in itself, a static event which cannot propel a story very far; instead, disappearance is closely linked to identity and especially the transformation of identities, changing them, recreating them. The reason for characters to disappear is often to start a new life by abruptly ending the former life they have led. Identities are therefore not solid entities, monoliths which unbendingly remain in their places; in fact, they are in constant turmoil which results in identities being part of a continuum, in a state of incessant alteration.

The connection between disappearance and identity is also evident in the intertextual field. Both Flitcraft and Wakefield become new persons and start new lives after they vanish from their families. However, they do this to a lesser degree than most of the disappearing characters in Auster’s texts. Flitcraft and Wakefield remain closely connected to their former life: Flitcraft models his new life after his old, and Wakefield observes his own absence and in the end returns in order to restore balance to the family.

Whenever the word disappearance occurs in Auster’s work, it tends to signal that identity is emphasized, being questioned or is about to undergo changes. Its very presence has a strong effect on the characters in the text; it is impossible for them to defy its gravitational pull. This is evident even when the word appears seemingly offhandedly: “I [Orr] stood where I was on the sidewalk, watching her [Grace] cover the
last ten yards. Then she came to the top step, grabbed hold of the railing, and disappeared down the stairs” (ON 132). In itself, this is a simple description of a person not being able to see another person anymore: the field of vision has been broken by the fact that Grace has entered the subway station. However, whenever disappearance occurs in a text by Auster, the reader ought to be attentive and on their guard. After Grace’s disappearance “down the stairs”, she promptly decides not to return home that day and instead takes a hiatus from her life with Orr in order to ponder her identity and their life together. Her explanation to Orr is: “I just needed to be alone yesterday, that’s all. I needed time to think” (151). Thus, a reader of Auster always has to be wary when confronted by disappearance, even when it is said en passant, since it may herald a change in the referred person’s identity.

Another element of paramount importance for the inner functioning of disappearance is rupture. In the instance when a character vanishes from the narrative, the storyline is ruptured, and a hole, an emptiness, is created. As in the examples of Wakefield and Flitcraft, the rupture is abrupt—from one moment to the other the character is no longer in the story—and this abruptness engenders discombobulation and incomprehension both on the part of the reader and of the characters involved. The person who departs from the narrative leaves behind a black hole that demands to be filled by some kind of information. As I have already indicated, there is, firstly, a change of identity associated with disappearance. Secondly, there is a narrative rebirth which occurs when the vanished person reappears and recounts what has happened during the time of the disappearance. In this narrativizing of the rupture, the links between the former and the new self become apparent, as well as the reason the character had for leaving the narrative. The new identity is established, and to some extent created in the retelling of the story of disappearance. Thirdly, the rupture prompts a response from other characters affected by the disappearance. Essentially, they want to find out what happened to the character that vanished and the reasons for them to vanish without leaving any signs as to their motivation for departing. There is at least an intellectual search for the missing character, that is, speculation as to the whereabouts of the person and an attempt to figure out the background and reason for the unexpected disappearance.
“Why have you disappeared?”

In *Invisible*, there are various kinds of disappearance that occur almost simultaneously. On one level, there are disappearances that take place within the narrative, within the story of the novel, that is, characters vanishing from the lives of other characters. On another level, Adam Walker as a narrator disappears by being displaced and replaced. The protagonist of the novel, the same Adam Walker, becomes central in an examination of how these disappearances function.

In the first part of the novel, Walker is shown in full color. His thoughts, experiences, conflicts and desires are made explicit when Walker as an autodiegetic narrator reveals himself to the reader. Doubtless, this is heightened by the use of the first-person singular, making these elements appear more clearly in the mind of the reader. However, the break between the first and the second part of the novel heralds a change in the narrative. Suddenly, Walker is nowhere to be found and a new character is introduced, someone very similar to Walker (*I 75*), but nevertheless distinctly different. The new narrator retells the story of the first part from an outsider’s perspective, the perspective of someone who has not been privy to the disclosures in the first part. This homodiegetic narrator, James Freeman, comments on the fact that Walker is not around anymore: “For the next thirty-something years, he rarely entered my thoughts, but whenever he did, I would find myself wondering how he managed to disappear so thoroughly” (*75*). This remark showcases the epistemological disappearance, that is, Freeman does not know what happened to Walker. This lack of knowledge about Walker’s life is something he shares with the reader. We are also in the dark as to what happened in the thirty-something-years’ gap between the first and the second part of the novel. Walker disappears as a narrator in much the same way as he disappears as a character from Freeman’s companionship. Thus, there is a mirroring of the character’s disappearance within the narratives and the disappearance, through displacement and replacement, of the narrator position.

The state of unawareness about Walker’s life which Freeman and the reader share is soon remedied when Walker returns as an autodiegetic narrator. His reappearance is, however, mediated by Freeman, since the latter presents letters that he has received from Walker, detailing his life between 1967 and 2007. Thus, in the same way as other characters that have vanished in Auster’s work, Walker returns in order to reclaim a lost position, in this case the position as a narrator.
There is a structural similarity between Walker’s disappearance and Sachs’. They are authors (Walker a would-be author and Sachs an almost retired author); they disappear as a result of a traumatic event which essentially changes their lives; they return and recount the story of their disappearance to a former friend, who also is an author and who consequently writes about them in a text similar to a biography; and, finally, they meet their demise in the novel. This structure for disappearance and reappearance shows that the epistemological blind spot that surrounds the vanished character is filled with the story of the disappearance, revealing the truth.

A perhaps obvious, but nevertheless important, component in a character’s disappearance is that there are people from whom the character absconds. The disappearing persons have to remove themselves from the view of someone since a disappearance without anyone noticing it is not a disappearance. When the person is not in their life anymore, an urge to comprehend the facts surrounding that person emerges within them. This drive towards knowledge can be observed in *The Locked Room*, *Leviathan* and *Oracle Night*. In these cases, it is primarily the narrator who wants to find out where the missing person is. This is also true for *Invisible*; however, there are other characters in the novel who want this information as well. Walker decides to stop seeing Cécile since her infatuation with him is becoming a nuisance to him. He stays away from her for three days, but then she confronts him in his residence, saying “why have you disappeared” (278). He answers with a denial and a lie: “I haven’t disappeared. I was planning to call you on Saturday or Sunday” (278). This concentrated exchange of dialogue reveals the bare-bone structure of an epistemological disappearance: there is a lack of information surrounding a character and that lack drives another person to retrieve this information. However, the clouded epistemology is unilateral. Walker’s denial of having vanished is similar to Grace’s reaction when confronted by Orr after returning home. The disappearance was only temporary since the return was imminent and even planned. This can be compared to the disappearances of Fanshawe and Sachs, neither of whom knew that they were to reappear.

As it turns out, Walker’s momentary absence from Cécile is merely a foretaste of what is to come. By the end of 1967, the book within the book that Walker is writing, there are several disappearances which occur almost simultaneously, even if the difference in duration between them is quite long. Firstly, Walker the author “is vanishing from the world, he can feel the life ebbing out of his body, and yet he
Duke forges on as best he can, sitting down at his computer one last time to bring the story to an end" (236). Death as the end of all stories and narrating as a way of holding off death are directly opposed. To vanish from the world means primarily to die; however, given the asymmetrical relation of narration and death, it also means that Walker is losing control over the story since the proximity of death entails that rapid writing is of prime importance. Walker, the character in the book within the book, runs the risk of disappearing from the narration before the story is concluded—in the same way that Nick Bowen disappears from the narration before the story has reached an ending in *Oracle Night*. In order to negate this narrative disappearance, Walker the autodiegetic narrator reduces the writing to its bare-bone essentials: initials for names, summaries of dialogue instead of the actual lines and short descriptions of crucial events. All former stylistic pretensions are dispensed with in order to simply tell the story.

Secondly, at the end of “Fall,” Walker is given two choices: either he stays in France and is incarcerated for possession of narcotics, or he is deported from the country, never allowed to return. He opts for the second alternative. Thus, he chooses to depart from everyone he has established relationships with in Paris, in order to save his own hide. In this case, disappearance is mandated from a source outside of the self. Walker does not decide to leave everyone he knows in Paris; instead, it is an imperative from a “*juge d’instruction*” (242) who demands that Walker disappears. Thus, disappearance has become a mode of survival, a way of remaining in the world since the alternative would have been imprisonment.

The temporary disappearance that Walker subjected Cécile to previously will now become permanent since he cannot return to France. However, he tells her of his disappearance, although his story is mediated by Freeman who recounts the story of Walker’s life to Cécile:

One by one, I took her through the salient points Walker had mentioned—falling down the stairs and breaking his leg on the night of his graduation from college, the luck of drawing a high number in the draft lottery, his move to London and the years of writing and translating, the publication of his first and only book, the decision to abandon poetry and study law, his work as a community activist in northern California, his marriage to Sandra Williams, the difficulties of being an interracial couple in America, his stepdaughter, Rebecca, and her two children […]. (266-267)
In *Invisible*, there are two narrative rebirths of this kind. First, Walker tells Freeman all about his life after they disappeared from each other in the letters he sends to his old friend and colleague. Second, Freeman replicates this narrative when he relates Walker’s life to Cécile. The second retelling of Walker’s life is a mirror of *Invisible* as a book since it is presented as Freeman’s version of Walker’s life—Freeman is the agent who maintains and prolongs Walker’s existence; he is negating Walker’s disappearance by recounting his life. The same can be said about the narrator of *The Locked Room* and Sachs’ imagined biography over Reed Dimaggio in *Leviathan*. However, the narrator of *Leviathan*, Aaron, reverses this structure since he can only write for as long as Sachs remains epistemologically disappeared vis-à-vis everyone else.

Thirdly, Walker’s narrative ends with a series of concluding farewells to characters in the novel:

> And so ends W.’s brief sojourn in the land of the Gaul—expelled, humiliated, banned for life.
> He will never go back there, and he will never see any of them again.
> Good-bye, Margot. Good-bye, Cécile. Good-bye, Hélène.
> Forty years later they are no more substantial than ghosts.
> They are all ghosts now, and W. will soon be walking among them. (242-243)

The characters mentioned are progressively disappearing from Walker’s memories because of the abruptness of his departure. He says good-bye to them from the vantage point of forty years after the fact, and it is this time-difference that is the foundation of their ghostly appearance. They have become ghosts because Walker cannot perceive them anymore, he cannot see, touch, smell, or hear them. They have lost their corporality in the instant he left France. His disappearance is closely connected to their ghostly features. A similar move has been noted in a previous work by Auster. Joe Reilly undergoes the same kind of treatment vis-à-vis the narrator of *Hand to mouth*: “Even before we said good-bye that day, I knew that I was talking to him for the last time, and when he finally disappeared into the crowd a few minutes later, it was as if he had already turned into a ghost” (*CP* 199). In both of these cases, the reason the narrators will know nothing more about the characters involved is their epistemological disappearance. The tellers of the story are unable to locate them or see them again since they have no idea about their specific whereabouts. As soon as
the narrator or the disappeared person loses the field of vision shared with the other characters, they become ghosts, only briefly given life in the framework of the narrative. They are, as it were, reborn in the narrative.

Walker’s last remark adds an ambiguity to the mix since he will “be walking among them.” This seems to imply something like the Elysian Fields, a place where ghosts reside and walk together, since Walker is close to death and he knows that he will die at any moment. However, it is more likely that Walker is referring to how he is perceived by others: that people he knows will regard him in the same manner as he regards Margot, Cécile and Hélène. In addition, he implies that he will become a character, a ghost, in narratives about him. Disappearing and dying are ultimately two sides of the same coin, with the difference that the latter is irrevocable.

The disappearance from Paris is followed by another one in New York; Walker leaves the United States for London. As a result of these disappearances from one location, and reappearances in another, he gradually acquires a new identity. In much the same way as other characters in Auster’s texts, Walker changes his identity while he remains vanished from his former surroundings. In this case, New York serves as a transit hall, a place for waiting, recuperation and contemplation, that houses Walker in anticipation of a second disappearance. The same structure is evident in Leviathan. Sachs returns to New York and regains his strength in the custody of Maria Turner; however, it is a temporary residence only, and eventually Sachs disappears from her as well, travelling towards California where his new identity awaits him. There are, therefore, in both of these cases two disappearances which occur in succession: the first one is from Paris for Walker and from the Vermont cabin for Sachs, and this is the most significant disappearance for the characters; the second one occurs in New York for both of them; they arrive to the city and then leave it after a short visitation. This last disappearance is less significant, even if it leads them to their new identities. Walker relinquishes his dreams of devoting himself to “[t]he fine art of scribbling” (8) and becomes a lawyer who “work[s] with the poor, the down-trodden” (83). In much the same way as Sachs, Walker leaves literature behind; however, he tries to make a difference on the grass-root level of American society.

Walker is thus a character who undergoes many disappearances, all of which are connected to each other. There is, however, a last major disappearance which
encompasses every character and almost all locations in the novel, and which is orchestrated by James Freeman, the keeper of the Walker legacy:

[...] Adam Walker is not Adam Walker. Gwyn Walker Tedesco is not Gwyn Walker Tedesco. Margot Jouffroy is not Margot Jouffroy. Hélène and Cécile Juin are not Hélène and Cécile Juin. Cedric Williams is not Cedric Williams. Sandra Williams is not Sandra Williams, and her daughter Rebecca, is not Rebecca. Not even Born is Born. His real name was close to that of another Provençal poet, and I took the liberty to substitute the translation of that other poet by not-Walker with a translation of my own, which means that the remarks about Dante’s *Inferno* on the first page of this book were not in not-Walker’s original manuscript. Last of all, I don’t suppose it is necessary for me to add that my name is not Jim. Westfield, New Jersey, is not Westfield, New Jersey. Echo Lake is not Echo Lake. Oakland, California, is not Oakland, California. Boston is not Boston, and although not-Gwyn works in publishing, she is not the director of a university press. New York is not New York, Columbia University is not Columbia University, but Paris is Paris. Paris alone is real. I managed to keep it in because the Hôtel du Sud vanished long ago, and all recorded evidence of not-Walker’s stay there in 1967 has long since vanished as well. (260-261)

This catalogue of negation of almost every piece of important information in the novel erases the world and makes the characters disappear in front of the eyes of the reader. They become not-beings; or maybe it is more accurate to say that they become ghosts that show the contours of their former selves, the former lives they inhabited. In the same moment of them becoming not-beings, their original reality is heightened and emphasized. The fact that their former selves had to become ghosts indicates that these selves were real and are in need of protection. It is worth noting, though, the parts that do not need to be displaced into ghosts: Every location in Paris have been left unaltered because they have vanished in reality. There is no point in negating something that has been negated already. Thus, what can remain real is that which no longer is real, which is untraceable and gone.

There is, thus, a disappearance of the names and other particulars by which we have known the characters. This disappearance, just like the others we have looked at, creates a hole, a rupture in the narrative. This is apparent in the case of Born whose name, like everyone else’s, had to be reinvented. However, because of the allusion to a Provençal poet which is a fundamental part of the first meeting between him and Walker, this rupture has to be mended. This is accomplished by the supplemental dialogue in which Born and Walker discuss the appearance of a person with almost the same name as Born in Dante’s *Inferno*, but who has been decapitated. The
Decapitation is a way of dividing “de Born from himself” because his sin was to have split the relationship between a royal father and his son (4). Decapitation is thus a symbol for division of the self and of not being who you used to be. This addition by Freeman becomes a signifier which multiplies itself throughout the novel. There are several references to divided or decapitated people: “that wretched creature who lost his head” (4); “I [Freeman] needed to separate myself from myself” (89); “I’ve [Walker] been working my head off” (91); “his [Walker’s] head is about to detach itself from his body” (203); “His [Walker’s] words are a sharpened axe, and he is chopping off her [Hélène’s] head […]” (237). These scattered references to people losing their heads or being divided are engendered by Freeman’s supplemented allusion to Dante. In each of these instances, they have a specific purpose which is separate from their connection to Dante. However, they all reveal a glimmer of the rupture that is the foundation for all characters in the novel. All characters have, symbolically, lost their heads, lost their original identities and become ghosts of their former selves.

So far the reading of Invisible has focused on how disappearance is related to identity change for the characters in the novel, specifically Adam Walker. In Walker’s narrative the characters as well as himself become ghosts. They lose their original identities, which remain hidden from the view of the reader, and gain new selves which diverge, to various degrees, from their previous selves. There will now be a change of attention from how characters are affected by disappearance to how this influences the narrators and their shifting positions.

There are three characters that narrate Invisible. The main storyline about Walker and 1967 is narrated by him; enveloping this narrative, there is James Freeman, Walker’s University comrade at arms, who writes about Walker’s narrative; and lastly, there is Cécile Juin whose diary, pasted in by Freeman, serves as a coda for the novel. The narrators, however, do not constitute a system as stable as this description would suggest; in fact, there is plenty of friction within this system which undermines the positions of the narrators. This is explicitly the case for Walker as a narrator.

Walker is divided into two narrator positions: first he is a homodiegetic narrator, more precisely an autodiegetic narrator, and then this position is displaced toward a heterodiegetic narrator, that is, Walker is a first, second and third person narrator (Genette 245). Both Freeman and Juin remain homodiegetic narrators;
however, both of them belong to the second type of homodiegetic narrator who only “plays […] a secondary role, which almost always turns out to be a role as observer and witness” (245). As Genette points out, the difference between these positions is connected to the narrator’s involvement in the story. The heterodiegetic narrator is “absent from the story he tells”, whereas the homodiegetic narrator is “present as a character in the story he tells” (244, 245).

As has been pointed out, Walker disappears as a character from the narrative; he is being removed and removes himself from the world. The same happens to him as a narrator. The shift from homodiegetic to heterodiegetic is a way of allowing him to disappear, to vanish from the story. This narrative disappearance, however, is not permanent; instead reappearance is expected and usually fulfilled:

Defined this way, the narrator’s relationship to the story is in principle invariable: even when Gil Blas and Watson momentarily disappear as characters, we know that they belong to the diegetic universe of their narrative and that they will reappear sooner or later (Genette 245). The same is true for Walker as a narrator. When his “I” is replaced with Freeman’s “I,” the reader is nevertheless expecting him to return, albeit in a new guise. Walker soon returns to the narrative, still using the pronoun “I.” However, Walker’s “I” in the letters to Freeman does not correspond entirely to the same Walker who is the protagonist of “Spring.” Instead, the new “I” is older, world-weary and dying, and a character in Freeman’s narrative to boot. There are, however, dissimilarities between for instance Watson and Walker as narrators. Watson is not replaced by another narrator who usurps the role as storyteller; thus, even if he is not present in a certain scene he is invariably the narrator of that scene. The same is not true for Walker who, as it turns out, abdicates from the title as narrator and eventually dies before finishing his novel.

Walker’s narrative “I” disappears in four instances in Invisible. The first one coincides with his disappearance as a character between the first and the second part of the novel. He is replaced by Freeman who from that moment onwards remains the principal “I,” only replaced briefly in the end by Juin.

The second instance when Walker’s narrative “I” disappears is also brought on by Freeman. Walker is stuck in writing the second part of 1967 and Freeman advises him to remove himself as a narrator from the text, something that Freeman did when he wrote an autobiographical work:
My [Freeman’s] approach had been wrong, I realized. By writing about myself in the first person, I had smothered myself and made myself invisible, had made it impossible for me to find the thing I was looking for. I needed to separate myself from myself, to step back and carve out some space between myself and the subject (which was myself), and therefore I returned to the beginning of Part Two and began writing it in the third person. I became He, and the distance created by that small shift allowed me to finish the book. (189)

Besides being one of the clearest formulations of the solipsistic quality of Auster’s writing, the quote shows, in addition, how disappearance works on the level of narrating. When “I” becomes “He,” the narrator is subjected to an inverted change of identity: from “I” and non-self to “He” and actual self. The narrative rupture which the shift in pronouns entails is followed by an identity change for the character that the text is about.

Walker adheres to Freeman’s advice; however, he separates himself by displacement twice, as opposed to once as in Freeman’s suggestion. Walker’s narrative “I” disappears for the third time when he changes the pronoun from “I” to “You.” This unlikely and uncommon grammatical subject in a literary narrative may have been caused by the nature of the second part of 1967 since, according to Walker, it is “disgusting. Every time I think about it, it makes me want to puke” (91). By disassociating himself completely from himself and the norm for literary narratives, Walker has found a way to deal with the revolting and nauseating parts of his life. Only by creating an identity that is different from a normative narrator is he able to tell a story which breaks with social norms, in this case by speaking of incest.

The fourth and final instance of disappearance of Walker’s narrative “I” occurs in the third part of his narrative, “Fall.” In the novel, this part is written in the third person singular; however, in the text that is handed to Freeman there is no grammatical subject, instead the text is written in ungrammatical sentences:

Telegraphic. No complete sentences. From beginning to end, written like this. Goes to the store. Falls asleep. Lights a cigarette. In the third person this time. Third person, present tense, and therefore I decided to follow his lead and render his account in exactly that way—third person, present tense. (166)

The narrator as a subject has vanished from the text and can only be restored by the editorial work of Freeman. Its grammatical position is left empty, creating a sense of incompleteness both in the syntax and in the text (it is unfinished). The idea that
someone else has to fill in the gap after a disappeared person corresponds with the absence of characters in Auster’s fiction which Debra Shostak has noticed:

Since a central absence shadows and directs Auster’s novels, they tend to follow a narrative pattern of quest or detection in which the questing figure—generally the narrator or his surrogate—seeks the missing person, either literally or in the figurative terrain of knowledge and understanding. (68)

Thus, one of the persons the character disappears from is usually attempting to piece together the mystery, making the incomplete become complete, filling in an unfinished sentence. Freeman does this in two ways: firstly, he adds the third person singular pronoun to Walker’s manuscript; secondly, after reading it, he searches for the conclusion of the story in Paris, looking up Cécile Juin in order to find out what happened to her after Walker left the city.

The two kinds of disappearance which figure in Invisible converge: the vanished character and the displaced narrator mirror each other and adhere to a pattern of disappearance that is very similar to one another. Thus, not only does the novel epitomize this central theme in Auster, but it also adds a unique characteristic to disappearances, that is, the displaced and disappearing narrator which is not a common feature in Auster. This marriage of literary devices and themes creates the effect of highlighting and emphasizing disappearances in Invisible—they stand out as more pronounced and discernible—without ever reducing the novel to being solely about that or dealing with that thematic alone. Instead, disappearance becomes more similar to a recurring musical theme that resurfaces at certain moments in the musical piece, only to be completely absent from other sections. However, this is the case not only for Invisible; it is true of Auster’s entire ouvre. It is dotted by disappearances: minor as well as major characters may vanish without any explanation. While these persons may not always return, if they do, they invariably tell the story of their disappearance and how it changed their lives. In the end, this entails that disappearance does not become a literary ruse, only used in order to create tension and suspense; instead, it is a device that generates narratives and engenders the forming of new identities for the vanished characters. Disappearance is, therefore, at the very heart of Auster’s literary project which adumbrates the destruction and recreation of identity in the late 20th and early 21st century.
“A pattern takes shape”: Concluding remarks

The dissemination of disappearance as a theme, as a literary device, as a lexeme in Auster’s oeuvre acts as a strong magnetic force, making the reader conscious of its presence, while also entreatng the reader to fabricate a kind of blueprint of its meaning and most salient features. This pattern-seeking activity has been pointed out by Auster as well: “for as soon as a thing happens more than once, even if it is arbitrary, a pattern takes shape, a form begins to emerge” (CP 124). The shape and form of disappearance in Auster’s texts have proven to be quite interesting when examined more closely.

First of all, there is a difference between existential and epistemological disappearance, which is connected to whether the disappearance is internal (individual and linked to the self) or external (social and linked to people surrounding the vanished character). When an existential disappearance occurs, the character affected can still remain in the story—the person does not necessarily have to exit the fictional world. An epistemological disappearance is, on the contrary, when a person departs from the narrative and leaves without any trace. This kind of disappearance is usually abrupt and happens without any forewarning or signs that the person will leave the story.

The common feature for both these kinds of disappearance is that they result in a change of identity. The person who disappears, whether from themselves or from others, becomes a new person in the process of vanishing and reappearing in the story. To a certain extent, the backdrop for this derives from the intertextual field of disappearing characters which Auster’s texts belong to. In “Wakefield” by Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Flitcraft story in The Maltese Falcon by Dashiell Hammett, the character changes his identity as a result of the disappearance—it becomes the impetus for identity change. The reason for this is that a disappearance ruptures the fabric of the narrative and the lives of the persons affected; it leaves behind a void that needs to be filled. In the case of the characters, this regeneration or rebirth is connected to their new identities. From the perspective of the narrative the rupture caused by the disappearance is mended by the characters’ recounting of it. Thus, there is a narrative rebirth when the character divulges what happened up to the point of their return into the story.
In *Invisible*, there are predominantly two kinds of disappearances: firstly as a thematic component to the story (that is, vanishing characters), and secondly as a literary device that takes the form of displaced and replaced narrators. Adam Walker is the principal character involved in the different permutations of disappearance. He vanishes simultaneously as a narrator and as a character which immediately emphasizes the importance of this dual approach to the novel. Moreover, the two kinds of disappearance adhere to the general pattern that has been located in other works by Auster. This means that Walker’s identity is changed between his disappearance and his subsequent reappearance; in addition, he explains to the new narrator of the novel what happened to him during the course of his absence. Thus, *Invisible* can be regarded as obeying the principles of disappearance in Auster, while at the same time adding the more uncommon feature of vanishing narrator.
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