Many are familiar with Ezra Pound’s remark that artists are the antennae of the race and with Freud’s comment that writers and philosophers discovered the unconscious long before he did. British critic Harriet Hawkins agrees that literary artists do anticipate patterns later explicated more formally in other fields by suggesting that if we look at chaos from an artistic angle, “chaos in nature (as in art) likewise may be seen to serve a higher order as a creative force that may produce beauty, freedom, and growth as well as catastrophe”.¹ Literary critics may therefore interpret the depiction of events in particular works of literature as an artistic response, perhaps unconscious or preconscious, to the same social, political, and technological milieus that chaos theory attempts to explain in mathematical language.

Few contemporary writers have explored the themes of chaos, complexity, and randomness with as much depth and breadth as the American novelist Paul Auster. In novel after novel, Auster depicts how, moving in time to “the music of chance” – the play of random events – not just the lives but also the identities of characters may be thrown into chaos, a complex state that at a certain point emerges, that is to say, spontaneously organizes itself into a new stable system. This is not chaos in the everyday sense of the word, but as defined in a technical sense in chaos theory and complexity theory as random behaviour on the surface masking an underlying structural order. Roger Lewin writes that physicist “Murray Gell-Mann has a good phrase for it: Surface complexity arising out of deep simplicity”.² Lewin himself calls it “global properties arising from local interaction”,³ identifying the edge of

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chaos as a place of maximum capacity of information computation where complex systems adapt, honing the efficiency of their rules as they go:4 “A chaotic system could be stable if its particular brand of irregularity persisted in the face of small disturbances.”5 Who cannot recall a relationship, or person, described by that definition?

It is difficult to argue, though not necessary to determine, whether this is a paradigm emerging in multiple disparate fields at a particular cultural-historical period, or whether, as with many other areas, fiction created or contributed to the paradigm (the flashbacks, cuts and shifts in focus of cinema as anticipated in fiction being one example), or whether Auster was as acutely sensitive to developments in his culture as were poets such as Walt Whitman or John Ashbery. The fact remains that Paul Auster’s New York Trilogy, containing the three novels that comprised the first work Auster published under his own name, demonstrates that Auster’s vision of the world corresponds closely with the fundamental tenets of chaos theory and complexity theory (the latter explains in more detail how an organization or network of elements adapts to an unstable environment). Despite the extreme unlikelihood that Auster deliberately set out to dramatize the tenets of chaos and complexity in The New York Trilogy, the perspective of these theories is explicit throughout this work, and critics can easily discern throughout it several instances in which a character’s identity is altered from one fundamental state (collapse, stagnation, bifurcation, chaos) to another, or may persist, complexly, to the edge of chaos, before emerging into something wholly new.

The New York Trilogy consists of three interlocked narratives, City of Glass, Ghosts, and The Locked Room, each of which reiterates the drama of a sole unnamed protagonist who survives the disintegration and achieves the reintegration of his sense of identity. Because the fact that each novel is a separate iteration of the same story is not made explicit by Auster until well into the third novel, the trilogy’s structure as a single story in three long sections would not have been at all obvious to original readers of the novels (published separately in the two years prior to the publication of The New York Trilogy in a single volume in 1987), but not particularly important to those readers, either, since each part of the trilogy stands on its own as a self-contained and internally consistent, if unconventional, narrative. However, early readers would have noticed that each of this unusual new American novelist’s early novels depicted a

4 Ibid., 54-55.