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Lowenstein, Marc  
九州大学大学院言語文化研究院 : 准教授

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## Detecting Disappearances in Two of Steven Millhauser's Strange Tales

Marc Lowenstein

### Introduction

Pulitzer Prize-winning American author Steven Millhauser (b. 1943) has written many brilliant short stories over the course of his career—a career that, for all intents and purposes, started with his well-received debut novel *Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer 1943-1954* By Jeffrey Cartwright in 1972 and continues to this day. Millhauser's novels, novellas, and short stories have been noted for their ability to, as one critic put it, “manipulate reality, stretching it until it seeps into another realm—otherworldly, fantastic, and strange” (Alexander, Ponce and Rodriguez 9). He writes about magicians, knife throwers, ghosts, fantastical spaces: all without apology or concern for the type of naturalistic or realistic writing that so often seems to pervade the American fiction landscape.<sup>1</sup> That being said, ultimately Millhauser considers himself a sort of realist, just not a conventional one.<sup>2</sup>

One genre in which Millhauser is not generally credited as having written is the detective, or mystery, genre. This is not too surprising, as nowhere in his fiction do we find dead bodies or private eyes trying to solve a case; neither ratiocinative armchair detectives à la Poe's Dupin nor hardboiled street-smart detectives such as Chandler's Philip Marlowe appear in his tales. That being said, I will argue that two of Millhauser's relatively recent short stories—“The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman” and “The Slap”—exhibit important characteristics of the so-called postmodern or metaphysical detective genre—as defined by Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney; see below—and that Millhauser, therefore, can and should be thought of as having contributed something important, albeit uniquely so, to the metaphysical detective genre canon.

Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, in their article “The Game's Afoot: On the Trail of the Metaphysical Detective Story,” define the metaphysical detective story as

a text that parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions—such as narrative closure and the detective's role as surrogate reader—with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot. (Merivale and Sweeney 2)

They also list six “characteristic themes” that many such stories share, the fifth of which is: “the missing person, the ‘man of the crowd,’<sup>3</sup> the double, and the lost, stolen, or exchanged identity” (Merivale and Sweeney 8). My intention here is to show that both of the Millhauser stories I have chosen to discuss

are indeed a sort of parody of the detective story (if not a parody of the *metaphysical* detective story, thereby becoming, in essence, a “parody of a parody”); both pose questions about “being and knowing”; and both deal with the theme of a missing person, i.e. a person who has, either literally or figuratively, “disappeared” from the text. Before doing so, however, I will briefly discuss two American texts—the first an early ancestor of the metaphysical detective tale: Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd”; the second firmly entrenched in the genre: Paul Auster’s novella *City of Glass*—both for clarification of what the genre constitutes and also for comparison to Millhauser’s own unique take on it.

### In Pursuit of a Stranger: Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd”

“The Man of the Crowd” (1840) precedes Poe’s detective “trilogy,” featuring the armchair detective C. Auguste Dupin and consisting of the stories “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), “The Mystery of Marie Roget” (1842), and “The Purloined Letter” (1844), and it, like the aforementioned stories, has been considered as a precursor to the metaphysical detective tale.<sup>4</sup> In the story, an unnamed first-person narrator silently pursues an old man he believes to be a criminal through the streets of London. He does so because, at first glance, he imagines the man to be a “fiend” and feels that he must keep an eye on him.

As I endeavored, during the brief minute of my original survey, to form some analysis of the meaning conveyed, there arose confusedly and paradoxically within my mind, the ideas of vast mental power, of caution, of penuriousness, of avarice, of coolness, of malice, of blood-thirstiness, of triumph, of merriment, of excessive terror, of intense—of supreme despair. I felt singularly aroused, startled, fascinated. “How wild a history,” I said to myself, “is written within that bosom!” Then came a craving desire to keep the man in view—to know more of him. (Poe 297)

Although the narrator tells us that he catches “a glimpse both of a diamond and of a dagger,” (Poe 297) thereby implanting images of theft and murder into the reader’s mind, and though he pursues the man relentlessly through the streets of the city, into and out of shops, and back to the cafe he had been sitting at at the beginning of the tale, there is no closure in terms of any crime the “fiend” may have committed. The reader is left to wonder whether the pursuit of the old man, the so-called “man of the crowd,” was hopeless from the start, for, like the “certain German book” mentioned at the beginning of the story, he is unreadable, impenetrable, a mystery. The narrator says, finally, in defeat, “It will be in vain to follow, for I shall learn no more of him, nor of his deeds” (Poe 299). He gives up his pursuit, and, the reader presumes, the man disappears into the crowd from which he had first emerged, as ever an enigma.

How does this tie in with the metaphysical detective story? If the criminal hasn’t committed any crime, as Patricia Merivale points out, then the reader is instead dealing with “a Wakefield,<sup>5</sup> a Missing Person, a person sought for, glimpsed, and shadowed, gumshoe style, through endless, labyrinthine city streets, but never really Found—because he was never really There, because he was, and remains, missing” (Merivale 105). The trope of the missing or disappeared person will again be found in the second example of the metaphysical story—this time a bona fide example, rather than a precursor to it—that I would like to discuss: Paul Auster’s novella *City of Glass*, which forms the first part of Auster’s postmodern detective “trilogy,” *The New York Trilogy*. And it will again, respectively, be found in two of Millhauser’s

short stories, though the settings, as I shall show, will be somewhat different.

### **In Pursuit of a Madman's Double: Auster's *City of Glass***

In Paul Auster's novella *City of Glass*, an author of detective novels, named Daniel Quinn—though writing under the pen name William Wilson, recalling to our minds Poe's eponymous doppelgänger tale—receives a strange phone call. The novella opens with the following enigmatic lines:

It was a wrong number that started it, the telephone ringing three times in the dead of night, and the voice on the other end asking for someone he was not. Much later, when he was able to think about the things that happened to him, he would conclude that nothing was real except chance. But that was much later. In the beginning, there was simply the event and its consequences. Whether it might have turned out differently, or whether it was all predetermined with the first word that came from the stranger's mouth, is not the question. The question is the story itself, and whether or not it means something is not for the story to tell. (Auster 3)

Quinn is, the reader eventually learns, asked by a mystery caller whether he is a detective by the name of Paul Auster. Though he hangs up the first time, he readies himself for a repeat call and, when it comes, says to the voice at the other end of the line that he is and agrees to take on a case involving an old man named Peter Stillman, the father of a younger man, also named Peter Stillman. The older man had, he learns, apparently kept his son in seclusion for many years, had beat him and refused to teach him to speak or communicate as a sort of bizarre language experiment. The boy has by now grown into a man who can only speak in a very strange manner, and who, along with his guardian and Quinn/Auster's employer, the sexy (if not exactly a typical *femme fatale*) Virginia Stillman, is afraid that the older Peter Stillman, who has recently been released from prison, may come and hurt him, hence the phone call to the detective "Paul Auster."

This basic frame eventually sets in motion a chase that echoes the one found in "The Man of the Crowd": as in that story, a would-be detective (Quinn) pursues another man (Stillman)—who is a total enigma to the hapless, would-be detective—through a labyrinthine city (here New York, instead of London), and is ultimately unsuccessful in unmasking/reading him, of gaining any further knowledge about what really makes him tick. In the case of Quinn-as-Auster, however, this would-be detective is not only chasing a "stranger," but also a "double."<sup>6</sup> For, at the very start of the chase, Stillman the elder surprisingly splits into two people.

As Stillman reached the threshold of the station, he put his bag down once again and paused. At that moment Quinn allowed himself a glance to Stillman's right, surveying the rest of the crowd to be *doubly sure* he had made no mistakes. What happened then defied explanation. Directly behind Stillman, heaving into view just inches behind his right shoulder, another man stopped, took a lighter out of his pocket, and lit a cigarette. His face was the exact twin of Stillman's. For a second Quinn thought it was an illusion, a kind of aura thrown off by the electromagnetic currents in Stillman's body. But no, this other Stillman moved, breathed, blinked his eyes; his

actions were clearly independent of the first Stillman. The second Stillman had a prosperous air about him. He was dressed in an expensive blue suit; his shoes were shined; his white hair was combed; and in his eyes there was the shrewd look of a man of the world. He, too, was carrying a single bag: an elegant black suitcase, about the same size as the other Stillman's. (Auster 56; emphasis mine)

Having no choice but to quickly decide which of the two Stillmans to pursue, Quinn/Auster follows the "shabby" Stillman, thinking that he must be the "madman" who subjected his son to total isolation for so many years. He pursues this Stillman through the subway system of New York, finally following him to a hotel that is described by the narrator as a "small fleabag for down-and-outs"—the irony here being that Quinn will himself become a "down-and-out" later in the narrative—, and then watches him go inside (Auster 57). When he does not reappear for two hours, Quinn/Auster gives up for the day.

But this is not the end of his pursuit of Stillman the elder. For days after following Stillman to the hotel, he continues to watch him, taking notes in a red notebook in order to try and figure out what the man is up to, and to thereby "solve the case." On three separate occasions he meets Stillman (their conversations are enigmatic, and do not give the would-be detective any further leads) and then, suddenly, one day, Stillman "disappears." That is, he leaves the hotel without any trace and is never seen again by Quinn/Auster. At this point, the case begins to really fall apart, and eventually he can no longer contact his employer, though he continues trying to understand Stillman and his motives, ending up a bum on the streets of New York. What he fails to understand, seemingly, is that, like Poe's "man of the crowd," Stillman *does not permit himself to be read*, and the would-be detective thus fails in his mission to unravel the enigma of his person and, thereby, to solve the case.

#### **"So long as it was something we were able to understand...": Millhauser's "The Slap"**

Stephen Millhauser's short story, "The Slap," published in book form for the first time in the retrospective collection *We Others* (2011), is, without a doubt, parodic. The story is about a man who goes around a small, quiet town in Connecticut—as opposed to a big city such as London or New York—and, almost nonchalantly, slaps people, with no apparent motive and following no discernible pattern. The "mystery" in this story, as in Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" and Auster's *City of Glass*, one might say, revolves around uncovering the real identity of the criminal—if true criminal he be, and here, as in those tales, it is a *he* rather than a *she*; I will explain the irony of this in paragraph five, below—, and also of understanding his motives, or of being able to "read" him.

The would-be detective here is not a single, obsessed man, as in Poe and Auster, but, rather, a chorus of voices, determined to get to the bottom of the situation: the townspeople, who narrate parts of the tale as "we," an otherwise uncommon perspective which Millhauser's frequently employs in his fiction.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the narrative, the narrators complain that they do not understand why the unnamed, unidentified slapper is going around slapping people, thus upsetting the harmony of the small town. Are the slaps deserved, or pointless? Is the slapper a madman, or simply playing games in order to get attention? If the latter, why not reveal his identity? Why not "take credit" for driving the very town itself to the brink of madness?

The first slap lands on the cheek of one Walter Lasher in the parking lot of a local train station. The slapper strikes and then quickly disappears. When Lasher tries to remember the man who slapped him after the fact, all he comes up with are vague details: "The man was about five ten, well built, tan trench coat, no hat. It was difficult to remember his face..." (Millhauser, *Others* 3). He assumes that the man was "looney," but then admits that he hadn't "looked crazy." The slap reminds him of an event that had occurred when he was in the sixth grade: a boy named Jimmy Kubec had pushed him, and he had retaliated by punching him in the nose, thus breaking it. Were the two incidents somehow related? Was the slapper the grown-up Jimmy Kubec?

Soon the slapper strikes again, this time sixteen hours after the first slap (and once again at the station), hitting one Robert Sutliff on the cheek, hard. When he reports him at the police station he describes him thus: "Five ten, five eleven. Short hair, brown, darkish, hard to tell. Clean shaven, mid-thirties. A stranger" (Millhauser, *Others* 7). Again, nothing but vague details and a mention of the term "stranger," the very term which was used in Poe's tale to describe the "man of the crowd." The police promise to "send a car out," but the slapper is not found. His identity and motives remain a mystery. Lasher sees the description of the slapper in the paper, noting that his hair had been light rather than dark, thus throwing doubt on which description is more correct, or whether it is all just "a matter of perspective," but he does not go to the police.

The third victim, Charles Kraus, discusses the case, which he has read about in the paper, with his buddies—one of whom uses the phrase "It's always a dame"—before himself getting slapped and phoning the police on his cell phone. This is obviously a paraphrased version of the expression in French, "*cherchez la femme*" ("look for the woman"), and therefore gives Millhauser's readers a clue to the genre this tale seems to be parodying: the noir genre. Of course the irony here is that there's *not* a woman involved, at least not in the sense that the phrase would seem to suggest (i.e. that a woman is at the root of the problem/a motive for a crime), but the expression serves its purpose: to establish this tale as a parody/homage to the pulp detective story, even sans detective. My further assertion here is, of course, that it's not only that, but also a form of metaphysical detective tale, for reasons I've explained and will explain further on.

Immediately following the section describing the third slapping incident, the point-of-view shifts to that of the townspeople, who, let us recall, are a surrogate for the missing detective in this tale—albeit less "objective" than we would hope from a bona fide gumshoe; here they describe what they know of the way the criminal looks in a manner reminiscent of a police report:

From the two descriptions [those of Sutliff and Kraus], we learned that the assailant was a male Caucasian about five nine or ten or eleven, solid in build, clean-shaven. His hair was short, light brown or dark brown, neatly combed. He had brown or gray or blue eyes, a straight well-shaped nose, and a slightly protruding chin. He might have been thirty or thirty-five years old. Both victims agreed that the man had looked angry. He wore a beige or tan double-breasted trench coat. According to Kraus, the belt had been tied, not buckled. Sutliff, who wasn't sure about the belt, remembered the coat fairly well. It was the sort of trench coat that anyone on that train between the ages of twenty-five and sixty might have been wearing—an expensive coat, well cut, stylish in a conservative way. (Millhauser, *Others* 10)

Note the inconsistencies: “light brown or dark brown”; “brown or gray or blue eyes”; “beige or tan double-breasted trench coat”; etc. Here, as in Auster’s *City of Glass*, there is no way for the detective—or for us, the readers, who, as Jeffrey T. Nealon claims, “identify with the detective, because both reader and detective are bound up in the metaphysical or epistemological work of interpretation, the work of reading clues and writing a solution or end” (117)—to know what constitutes “the facts.” And so it is in Millhauser’s tale: the townspeople (the “detective”) are kept in the dark until the bitter end, as we shall see.

The next victim, Raymond Sorensen, is struck outside of the bank by a “man in a trench coat.” And, as in previous incidents, he disappears immediately afterwards; as reported by Sorensen, he “just seemed to vanish into thin air” (*Millhauser*, *Others* 11). By this point, the police are patrolling like mad, and everyone is very tense. There is a shift back to first-person plural, to our surrogate detective chorus, who notes that there has been a “violation of a second pattern” in the last attack; i.e. that Sorensen was not attacked at the station, and also that he was not a high-paid businessperson, but rather a lowly “uniformed worker” taking his lunch break. There is, it is reported, a lull in slapping incidents over the weekend, and so, in the section labeled “A Ripple of Disappointment,” the townspeople narrate:

Our sense of relief [i.e. at the fact that the slapper did not strike again] was accompanied by a ripple of disappointment. For though we were happy to be rid of him, if in fact we were rid of him, we were *annoyed at our failure to catch him and troubled by our inability to understand anything whatever about who he was or what he was trying to do*. Many of us, while openly expressing pleasure at his disappearance, secretly admitted that we would have been happier if something worse had happened in our town, even much worse, so long as it was something we were able to understand, like murder. (*Millhauser*, *Others* 13-14; emphasis mine)

There are, of course, many ways of reading this, but if one thinks about it from the perspective of a metaphysical detective tale, one soon recognizes a familiar theme of the genre: i.e. the inability to catch the criminal, precisely because one does not “understand anything whatever” about him or her.<sup>8</sup> Like Quinn-as-Auster in *City of Glass* and like the unnamed would-be detective in “The Man of the Crowd,” the criminal or madman being pursued, literally or, in the case of Millhauser’s story, figuratively, is unreadable, off-limits. There is no knowledge to be gained by pursuing the case, there are no facts that lead to the criminal’s capture or conviction. The townspeople have a further problem to contend with: the fact that they are not only wishing to capture and condemn the criminal, but that they are also, in fact, his victims.

As the story progresses, three more victims are slapped: Sharon Hands, a senior high school student, is the first female victim. She is followed by Valerie Kozlowski, who is attacked in her own home. And then, finally, Matthew Dennis, a reporter for a local newspaper, is slapped. The perpetrator, however, is not captured, and no one seems to understand the *raison d’être* for the attacks, nor the pattern (although Dennis, who writes an article after the attack, tries to come up with an explanation for the slapper’s actions, it is completely refuted by the townspeople).

The final number of the victims is seven, and seven days after the final attack a package arrives at the police department.<sup>9</sup> Inside the package is a neatly-folded trench coat, sans note. It turns out that the slapper has, in the end, disappeared. The townspeople remark thus:

Although we could feel ourselves moving toward the normal course of our lives, with all the familiar pleasures and worries, at the same time we couldn't escape a sense of incompleteness. The proper ending, we felt, should have been the capture of the stranger, *who would have given us the explanation we desperately needed to hear*. We would have listened carefully, nodded our heads thoughtfully, and punished him to the full extent of the law. Then we would have forgotten him. Instead, we'd been left with an improper ending, *an ending heavy with uncertainties, which was to say, no ending at all*. (Millhauser, *Others* 28; emphasis mine)

As in other metaphysical detective works, which this work seems to take important cues from, in the end the criminal disappears, the would-be detective (or surrogate) is left wondering who and why, and the reader, too, has some interpreting to do. In Millhauser's tale, the townspeople themselves seem to be not only the victims, but also in some way responsible for these "crimes," if slaps may be considered as a criminal activity. They may even be deserving of them. All the while, the slapper remains an unreadable enigma, here today, gone tomorrow.

### **Fade to Nothing: Millhauser's "The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman"**

If "The Slap" is a metaphysical story of trying to unmask a sly criminal, "The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman"—which appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1999 before showing up in Millhauser's award-winning 2008 collection *Dangerous Laughter*—is a metaphysical story of trying to solve a bizarre disappearance, that of a shy, unattractive woman. The narration begins in first-person plural—once again the "we" of the townspeople—but shortly shifts to first-person singular, albeit the narrator remains nameless throughout. It opens with the following lines:

The news of the disappearance disturbed and excited us. For weeks afterward, the blurred and grainy photograph of a young woman no one seemed to know, though some of us vaguely remembered her, appeared on yellow posters displayed on the glass doors of the post office, on telephone poles, on windows of the CVS and the renovated supermarket. The small photo showed a serious face turned partly away, above a fur collar; the picture seemed to be an enlargement of a casual snapshot, perhaps originally showing a full-length view—the sort of picture, we imagined, taken carelessly by a bored relative to commemorate an occasion. (Millhauser, *Laughter* 21)

But this is no ordinary missing person story, as readers eventually learn. It does, however, unfold a bit like a police procedural, with evidence described and evaluated, both by the townspeople, the police, and also by the lone "detective" figure (surrogate), or the first-person narrator, who tries to put the pieces of the puzzle together and to gain some form of knowledge about the missing person/victim on his own. Here, he considers the extent of evidence gathered, which will lead him to an odd and improbable (yet seemingly true) conclusion:

The bafflement of the police, the lack of clues, the locked door,<sup>10</sup> the closed windows, led me to wonder whether we were formulating the problem properly, whether we were failing to take into



account some crucial element. In all discussions of the disappearance only two possibilities, in all their variations, were ever considered: abduction and escape. (Millhauser, *Laughter* 30)

But neither abduction nor escape seem probable to our narrator, who, after explaining that there was ultimately no evidence of any intruder, nor had police found anything suspicious in the “north woods” or the “pond behind the lumberyard,” realizes that the solution may lie elsewhere, that it might be tied to much fuzzier logic than a traditional ratiocinative detective would be likely to employ. He says,

If there was no abduction and no escape, then Elaine Coleman must have climbed the stairs, entered her apartment, locked her door, put the milk in the refrigerator, hung her coat over the back of a chair, and—disappeared. Period. End of discussion. Or to put it another way: the disappearance must have taken place *within the apartment itself*. If one ruled out abduction and escape, then Elaine Coleman ought to have been found somewhere in her rooms—perhaps dead in a closet. But the police investigation had been thorough. (Millhauser, *Laughter* 31; author’s emphasis)

And so, the solution, as absurd as it appears to be, seems to have been deduced by the (il)logic of the “detective.” Why, then, do I still insist that this story falls into the category of “metaphysical detective story,” rather than just standing as a parody of a police procedural/missing person type mystery? Aside from the fact that the police remain “baffled” and that the so-called solution would never be accepted by readers of a more standard mystery or hard-boiled detective novel—i.e. people don’t just vanish into thin air in a genre that is essentially realist—, there is the conclusion, which reminds this reader of one of the seminal *Nouveau Roman*, or New Novel, works of the French author Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Les Gommages* (1953, translated as *The Erasers* in 1964), mentioned by Merivale and Sweeney in their article “The Game’s Afoot,” alluded to earlier in this paper. In *Les Gommages*, a detective named Wallas unwittingly becomes the very assassin he is seeking. In self-defense, or so he believes, he accidentally kills the man he had assumed had been murdered, though he was actually only pretending to have been killed, and whose death he had been investigating over the course of the novel.<sup>11</sup> In this way, as Michel Sirvent has duly noted in his essay “Reader Investigations in the Post-*Nouveau Roman*,” he is both “detective” and “criminal” at the same time (165-6).

In “The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman,” the narrator, similarly—and much like the townspeople in “The Slap,” some of whom believe that they deserved the attacks; i.e. that they were retribution for sins committed—implicates himself in the disappearance. Neither he, nor anyone else, seems to remember Ms. Coleman well. The story deals, in many ways, with his guilt around this issue. He recounts seeing her shooting hoops one time, at a movie theater another time.... But despite these isolated meetings, he cannot recall her full image to mind. In the following excerpt, he goes so far as to liken himself to a detective (or lover), searching for clues to her past.

Like a detective, like a lover, I returned relentlessly to the few images I had of her: the dim girl at the party, the girl with the basketball who lowered her eyes, the turned-away face in the year-book picture, the blurred police photo, the vague person, older now, whom I nodded to

occasionally in town, the woman in the theater. I felt as if I'd wronged her in some way, as if I had something to atone for. The paltry images seemed to taunt me, as if they held the secret of her disappearance. (Millhauser, *Laughter* 33)

As in the other metaphysical detective stories I have discussed in this paper, there is an element here of never being able to get inside another person, of a person—be it criminal, or, in this case, victim—being as unreadable as the German book mentioned in Poe's "Man of the Crowd." The narrator finally decides to return to the house that Elaine Coleman lived in. After leaving it behind him, a "peaceful, mocking street," he "rummaged through [his] images, searched for clues, sensed directions that led nowhere" (Millhauser, *Laughter* 34). Two nights after visiting her house, however, he wakes up in the middle of the night with the knowledge that Elaine Coleman didn't disappear of a sudden, but rather gradually faded over time due to not being noticed. This, for the narrator, implicates not only himself but all of the townspeople who ignored her and others like her in her disappearance.

In this tale, then, the missing person was not abducted, nor did she run away. However, the narrator-detective concludes grimly:

...[P]erhaps the police, who suspected foul play, were not in the end mistaken. For we are no longer innocent, we who do not see and do not remember, we incurious ones, we conspirators in disappearance. I too murdered Elaine Coleman. (Millhauser "Dangerous" 36)

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that, although Steven Millhauser is not usually regarded as a writer of detective tales, at least two of his short stories do exhibit characteristics of the metaphysical detective story, as defined by Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney. While the two stories in question appeared within three years of each other in book form, "The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman" is actually a somewhat older story, having made its first appearance in *The New Yorker* in 1999, the same year that Millhauser's novella *Enchanted Night* was published, while "The Slap" made its first appearance in 2011. Nonetheless, the two stories work, equally, as parodies of the mystery or detective tale, in that, in either case, the "crime" is either entirely absent ("The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman"), or it is something which generally is not thought of as criminal ("The Slap"). But elements found in perhaps the earliest cousin of the metaphysical detective story, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man of the Crowd," having to do with the inability of a would-be detective—or surrogate detective—to "read" another character and thereby solve the case, as well as in Paul Auster's postmodern detective story *City of Glass*, also qualify Millhauser's stories as "metaphysical" tales of detection.

What Millhauser has done in these two unique stories, respectively, I would argue, is to implant the metaphysical detective tale in a different sort of environment, one that is decidedly *non*-labyrinthine, i.e. a sleepy New England town, rather than the big city; replace the would-be detective with a chorus ("we") or a humble townspeople; and, in the case of "Elaine Coleman," at least, to overlay everything with a truly mysterious disappearance, one that, in itself, seems quite "metaphysical" to this reader. One could argue, in this way, that Millhauser has, by parodying a genre that already was a parody of another genre—whether

intentionally or not—created a new sub-genre of the detective or mystery tale for his readers to enjoy and ponder.

### Notes

- 1 Though I realize that I am making a generalization here, it certainly isn't too far afield to say that Millhauser's work is more aligned with that of Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges, Japanese writer Haruki Murakami, Italian writer Italo Calvino, or Russian-born writer Vladimir Nabokov, than it is to the now-classic American writings of Ernest Hemingway or Henry James (with the exception perhaps of the latter's ghostly writings, especially the novella *The Turn of the Screw*, though that work is much more psychological than supernatural).
- 2 In an interview in *Publishers Weekly*, Millhauser says, "Strange as this may sound, I consider myself a realist. Or let's say, I've always had a complicated relation to so-called realism. What I dislike is conventional realism—a system of gestures, descriptions, psychological revelations that was once a vital way of representing the world, but has become hackneyed through endless repetition" (Harvkey).
- 3 This, of course, is a direct reference to Edgar Allan Poe's story of the same title, which I will discuss later.
- 4 According to Patricia Merivale, apart from the trilogy, "At least one other Poe story, however, one not usually considered to be a detective story at all, has analogous affinities with the hardboiled or "gumshoe" detective story, and thus also with its metaphysical descendant..." (Merivale 104). That story is, of course, "The Man of the Crowd," and according to Merivale it "enacts a definitively insoluble mystery" (Ibid). More about what that mystery is below.
- 5 "Wakefield" here refers to the story of that name by Nathaniel Hawthorne. In it, a man disappears from his home one day and, presumed by his wife and others to be dead, does not return for twenty long years. The story is recounted in Paul Auster's *Ghosts*, the second part of *The New York Trilogy* (the first part, which I discuss in this paper, being *City of Glass*; the third, *The Locked Room*).
- 6 Recall, again, that Quinn writes under the name "William Wilson," a reference to Poe's story about a double.
- 7 Again, in the *Publishers Weekly* interview, Millhauser says: "What's fascinating about 'we' is that it invites conflict. There's nothing innocent about 'we'—it implies a not-we who...must be dealt with." Also: "[I]t's uncommon. It's liberating. If you read a story with an 'I' or a 'he' or a 'she' you're in familiar territory—but 'we' is mostly unexplored" (Harvkey).
- 8 It is much more likely to involve a her in a classic noir tale, in which the femme fatale often figures prominently (recall the expression "cherchez la femme" discussed earlier).
- 9 This number seems to indicate the "seven deadly sins," though the slapper himself, of course, remains silent on the issue, and so only the readers can decide.
- 10 This reference reminds readers of "locked room" mysteries, such as Poe's first bona fide detective story "Murders in the Rue Morgue," where all doors/windows are locked from the inside, yet the crime takes place within the room.
- 11 See Robbe-Grillet, Alain. *The Erasers*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Grove Press, 1964. Print.

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