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Notes on/in Paul Auster's *Oracle Night*

> Encountering a footnote is like going downstairs
> to answer the doorbell while making love.
>
> Noel Coward

> I tried to use certain genre conventions to get to
> another place, another place altogether.
>
> Paul Auster

Paul Auster's twelfth novel, *Oracle Night,* is the account of nine days in the life of Sidney Orr told by himself twenty years later. The nine days, starting "on the morning *in* question — September 18, 1982— " (189) span a (retrospectively) crucial moment in the life of the protagonist/narrator who, while recovering from a near-fatal illness is won back to his job — writing — by a close friend of his, the acclaimed writer John Trause, and by the spellbinding power of a newly acquired blue Portuguese notebook. John Trause (and the new notebook) intrigues him into trying to write a variation of an episode in Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* in which a man walks away from his wife and disappears after going through a near-death experience.

Almost halfway through the book, the novel progresses on a double track: on the one hand, Sidney Orr's therapeutic walks, his everyday life with his beloved wife Grace and his friend John, and on the other, Nick Bowen's story, his flight to Kansas City, his friendship with a retired taxi-driver, Ed, whom he helps in the heavy

job of reorganizing his collection of phone-books in a deserted underground warehouse in which he eventually gets trapped. Once Nick is left locked underground the story within the story is closed and the novel returns to the linear account of Orr's life in which revelations and *coups de théâtre* (death and violence included) provide the (apparent) reason for the retrospective act of narration,

Oracle Night thus revolves around some of the great favorites of Auster's art: the theme of chance and loss intertwined with the ever-present quest and negotiation for usable identities, and the act of writing. I shall focus on the latter.

As a possible way of coming to terms with Auster's conception of writing and narrative strategies, I propose to analyse here Auster's paratextual choices. This critical approach stems from the conviction that microanalysis — that is to say, a focus on the level of particulars — may shed light on broader strategic moves and choices. More specifically, I hope to show how an exploration of the interrelations between text and what may provisionally be termed subtext helps bring into focus two interrelated aspects of referentiality: the relationship between the code of the real and the code of the fictional and the pact with the reader each text postulates or creates anew. This line of work may furthermore offer some useful insights into the issue of self-sufficiency to which postmodern fictions aspire.

Space limits allow just a brief sketch of the coordinates of what may be provisionally termed an Austerian paratextual map. The theoretical basis of what follows is Gerard Genette's grammar of the paratext, *Seuils*.

First of all, the title. Obvious though it may be, I would like to start by stressing the tautological fact that the title is "the name" of a book. As such, it is, as is the case with all other fictional names,

a "blanc semantique" (Docherty 47) which has to be filled with significance by the reading process. Only the novel itself, what lies between the front and the back cover, will provide the reader with the clues to fill the gap in the sense of either a thematical or symbolical relation, or both. Retrospectively considered, the title cannot but be a hermeneutical key to the text. This is to say that the radical hypothesis of an absolutely opaque reference would be significant in itself as well.

The title on the cover of Auster's twelfth novel is the same as the title of the manuscript Nick Bowen reads in the story Sidney writes in the blue notebook. This manuscript happens to be in his briefcase when he is almost crushed to death by a falling gargoyle head and decides to start everything anew by boarding the first scheduled flight.

There are two *Oracle Nights* then: the fictional Sylvia Maxwell's, and Paul Auster's. Genette writes about the formation of a title through synecdoche: "le détail ainsi promu s'investit *ipso facto* d'une sorte de valeur symbolique et donc d'importance thématique" (79).

The few paragraphs that Maxwell's *Oracle Night* occupy make of it a detail: it is, in fact, embedded in a thrice-removed fictional place, namely, in a story within a story within a story. I suggest viewing both its symbolic and thematic value precisely in this border-crossing.

> As the story opens, the manuscript of a novel has arrived on Bowen's desk. A short work bearing the suggestive title of *Oracle Night,* it was supposedly written by Sylvia Maxwell, a popular novelist from the twenties and thirties who died nearly two decades ago. (13)

> At that point, I had only the dimmest notion of what I wanted *Oracle Night* to be, no more than the first tentative tracings of an outline. Everything still had to be worked out concerning the plot, but I knew that

> it was supposed to be a brief philosophical novel about predicting the future, a fable about time. (52-53)

> That is why he keeps reading the book. He must lure himself away from the false memories of a life that no longer belongs to him, and because the manuscript demands total surrender in order to be read, and unremitting attentiveness of both body and mind, he can forget who he was when he is lost in the pages of the novel. (56-57)

The issue at stake here seems to be the game of literature itself: *Oracle Night,* in fact, is there to be written by Sidney, the protagonist of Auster's novel, and is there to be read by Nick who has just been created as a book editor by Sidney himself. Both activities are crucially on display: *Oracle Night* is from Sidney's point of view just an outline to be worked out, whereas from Nick's perspective it is a full-fledged manuscript of two hundred and nineteen pages which helps him to forget his old life in New York "which is nothing more than an illusion now" (56). Merely a "suggestive title," at best a dim outline, thrice-embedded *Oracle Night* stages the paradox of a novel which can be read without having been written — a veritable apotheosis of the powerful illusion of literature.

The other thematic link between Lemuel Flagg, the British lieutenant gifted with the tragic burden of prophecy, the protagonist of Maxwell's story, and Sidney Orr's world concerns the idea espoused by John Trause about writing and prophecy:

> Words are real ... we live in the present, but the future is inside us at every moment. Maybe that's what writing is all about, Sid. Not recording events from the past, but making things happen in the future. (189)

These two layers intersect and amplify each other pointing in

two interrelated directions: on the one hand the long-standing
diatribe between literature as representation and literature as
creation, on the other the consequential postmodern issue of making
fiction reality itself. The border-crossing which elevates *Oracle
Night,* the outline, to the real *Oracle Night* we are reading brings the
metafictional issue to the toreground of Auster's latest work. The
title turns thus out to be "suggestive" in the two senses of the term:
both mysteriously fascinating and subtly loaded with metafictional
implications. As *the name* of the book it stands for, it strikes the
leading note the whole novel will be modulated on.

Some of Auster's novels do not bear any dedication, others do:
Leviathan is dedicated to Don DeLillo; *Moon Palace* to Norman
Schiff; *In the Country of Last Things* to Siri Hustvedt, *Timbuktu* to
Robert McCrum. The dedication of *Oracle Night* reads "for
Q.B.A.S.G. (in memory)." This latter dedication stands out
dramatically. Dedications involve three actors: the author, the reader
and the actual addressee. The basic dynamics of this textual space
may be condensed in this way: the author wants the reader to know
that he dedicates his work to this or that person:

> La dédicace d'oeuvre relève toujours de la demonstration, de
> l'ostentation, de l'exhibition: elle affiche une relation, intellectuelle ou
> privée, réellc ou symbolique, et cette affiche est toujours au service de
> l'oeuvre, comme argument de valorisation ou thème de commentaire ...
> (Genette 126)

What does this acronym demonstrate and exhibit? Plainly put, at
best just one of the two addressees is reached, at worst, neither of the
two. In both cases the reader is shut out from a piece of information
which by tradition and convention involves him. What happens here
is that the dedication gives the lie to its very essence, namely, being

a public act the reader is asked to witness. The public and the cryptic strike, in fact, a jarring note. And yet Auster plays this note consciously.

> la dedicace d'oeuvre est l'affiche (sincere au non) d'une relation (d'une sorte au d'une autre) entre l'auteur et quelque personne, groupe au entité…. On ne peut, au seuil au au terme d'une oeuvre, mentionner une personne au une chose, comme destinataire privilégié sans l'invoquer de quelque manière … et donc l'impliquer comme une sorte d'inspirateur idéal. … Le dédicataire est toujours de quelque manière responsable de l'oeuvre qui lui est dédiée … (126-27)

Given the opacity of the reference, what the reader witnesses and experiences is his own bafflement. The privilege, the invocation, the inspiration and most of all the responsibility are here irremediably downplayed by Auster.

A German reviewer[1] of the novel puts forward the hypothesis that this acronym refers back to the initials of some of the characters of the author's previous novels. This hypothesis would visualize characters as forming and belonging to a sort of community. This fascinating suggestion, if true, would reinforce the perception that Auster is here playing at mining a basic expectation on the readers' part. Curiosity notwithstanding, the crucial question here at stake is once again metafictional in nature.

The dedication thus modulates the same note touched upon by the title: crossing (conventional) borders calls into question the very nature of the fictional pact between author and reader. Much more than the title, in fact, the dedication is based upon the convention of its being taken at face-value, in other words, upon the postulate of its being true. The only apparent truth seems here to be that Auster wants to problematize the relationship between internal and

external, fictional and real in subtle ways.

Auster is certainly not the first to use initials in dedications to keep them private. This choice acquires here a special meaning as it is part of the vaster game Auster plays at the margins of *Oracle Night* I am analyzing. It is not simply a matter of privacy, a sort of confidential nod to someone who will be the only one to understand, but of a (generically) ambiguous playfulness. The specification "in memory" strains the cords of this ambiguity clearly: either the initials stand for real names which remain literally missing in spite of their occupying a public space or the initials stand for fictional names which may provoke nostalgic emotions and be publicly advertised as missing. After Barthes's announcement of the death of the author, here Auster proclaims playfully his resurrection according to the rules of a game which unveils the arbitrariness of the laws of fiction-making, decomposing its constituents and recomposing them differently according to a new (arbitrary) pact and double-referentiality.

Once we leave aside these metafictionally blurred margins and approach the narrative proper, we find ourselves facing another paratextual peculiarity. The two hundred-odd pages of *Oracle Night* are punctuated by thirteen footnotes spanning at least one long paragraph, but usually covering more than one page. As in the case of the dedication, these footnotes are not matched by anything similar in Auster's other novels[2]. Let us take a step back.

The central event which sets in motion the nine-day time-span which *Oracle Night* is almost completely concerned with is Sidney buying the blue Portuguese notebook in M.R. Chang's shop and his sketching in it Nick Bowen's story. The blue notebook entrances Sidney into giving birth to a story and we immediately perceive that the process of writing itself, "the challenge of fleshing out [a] story"

(12), is what this book is at least relatively about.

Thus the typical retrospective narration in the simple past contains a narration (or at least the outline of a narrative) in the present.

> A narration in the present aims to destroy story and assert discourse, to stress the relation between the *persona,* very often overt, responsible for the narrative voice and its implied virtual reader. Simultaneity is the value elicited by this practice. It makes the identification of the processes of reading and writing possible. (Cagidemetrio 6)

We might say that here the "story-box" contains the "discourse-box" and simultaneity is achieved by staging a story-within-the-story plot which is not a rigidly framed narrative but a story which is presented in the moment of its being written. The present continuous which inevitably characterizes the reading process is paired by a (virtual) present continuous which concerns the writing as well, which is presented as provisional, perfectible, tentative:

> There were other decisions to be made, of course, a host of significant details that still had to be conjured up and worked into the scene — for purposes of fullness and authenticity, for narrative ballast. *(Oracle Night 19)*

The effect of being in the middle of the making of the fictional world and witnessing how the writer's world is progressively peopled by his fictional guests is enhanced by the presence of the peculiar kind of footnotes which characterize *Oracle Night.* A footnote is generically speaking "un enonce de longueur variable relatif à un segment plus ou moins déterminé du texte, et dispose soit en regard soit en réferance à ce segment" (Genette 293). They may contain a various array of explications, specifications and references. The crucial aspect of the notes in *Oracle Night* is that

they are not authorial. They are, in fact, fictitiously authorial footnotes in the sense that they are to be attributed to Sidney as character-narrator of the unfolding narrative. The question of attribution points to an important side-effect of their presence: the narrator is subtly invested with a verisimilar authorial function. The *effet de réel* these simulated footnotes convey is, in fact, very strong.

> Il faut surtout observer que, plus ancore que la préface, les notes peuvent être statutairement de lecture facultative, et ne s'adresser par conséquent qu'a certains lecteurs: ceux qu'intéressera telle ou telle consideration complémentaire, ou digressive, dontle caractère accessoire justifie précisément le rejet en note. (Genette 297)

How are we supposed to combine the *optional* reading footnotes conventionally imply with the *crucial* information these footnotes in fact contain? Much of the details of characterization is entrusted to the footnotes: the description of the narrator's wife, their first encounter, her job, a brief biographical sketch concerning John Trause, the life and death of John's second wife Tina and the like.

> Although the note should justify or illuminate the text in some way, it will evidently contain such alien matter as would disfigure that text if it were embedded there. (Bowersock 55)

Both Genette and Bowersock touch upon the same issue: insofar as the matter of the note is alien to the text, its reading is optional.

> Twenty years have elapsed since that morning, and a fair amount of what we said to each other has been lost. I search my memory for the missing dialogue, but I can come up with no more than a few isolated fragments,

> bits and pieces shorn from their original context. One thing I'm certain
> of, however, is that I told him my name. (8)

And yet, anything less alien to the fictional world than what we are told in this first footnote can hardly be imagined. What is optional about the information concerning the coordinates of the act of narration, the determination of the time of speaking? What is accessory and peripheral about the spelling out of the protagonist-narrator's name? How could these pieces of information have "disfigured" the text? The answer to these overtly rhetorical questions lies elsewhere in the vaster strategic usage of paratextual spaces I have been trying to map out so far.

As in the case of the title and of the dedication, in fact, footnotes provide an indirect and once again metafictional commentary upon fiction-building in the creation of an interstitial space, a diaphragm between the expectation of generic conventions and their actual unexpected-and thus jarring content. Cagidemetrio writes: "Fiction builds itself as the topos of the relation of the sign to its system, literary and paraliterary, but also acts out the epistemological problem of the creation of meaning in the sign object process" (5).

Both issues are brilliantly staged here. The intratextual relation between text and paratext, in fact, in undermining the rules of generic expectation, becomes the very place in which the creation of meaning is both investigated and exposed. "The self-reflective novel aims at detecting its own nature and its own making, at exposing that which is concealed in its illusion ..."(Cagidemetrio 7).

The process which links the sign to its referential object is transferred onto the writer-narrator/reader relationship. On the route from anecdote (the Flitcraft episode in Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon)* to sketch, from Sidney's illness and silence to artistic creation, the reader is not simply asked to witness fiction-building,

but to participate actively in meaning-creation: the sign-object process becomes a negotiable space, a work in progress.

In an interview with Joseph Mallia, Auster says: "The one thing I try to do in all my books is to leave enough room in the prose for the reader to inhabit it. Because I finally believe it's the reader who writes the book and not the writer" *(Art of Hunger* 272). The act of reading itself, potentially shorn of the obligation of linearity, becomes a fluid space in which the reader is tricked into believing he may write his own book — the text becoming "no more than a springboard for the imagination" *(Art of Hunger* 304).

The provisionality Sidney's footnoting conveys, renders *both* writing and reading open-ended processes, staging page after page "textual ambiguities, on a series of 'forks' à la Borges" (Rubeo 513). This "forking" involves the very basis of the creation of a fictional world: characterization itself, much of which is administered in footnotes, is presented as one among other possible ones, ramified[3] rather than unified.

The text thus constructed accepts and somehow invites what we might call "creative reading." A reader who may decide not to avail himself of the paratextual support represented by the footnotes is, in fact, at least theoretically imaginable. The interplay of fictional alternatives here created may be taken as a sort of hypertextual experimentation: the reader may choose not to read and in so doing he is himself responsible for the creation of a different text, filling in the blanks creating images based on his own memories and experiences.[4]

What happens on a very practical level supports this idea of hypertextuality: the footnotes are usually so long as to cross the boundary of the source-page. The reader has to go back some pages to return where the text had offered him the option of a digressive path. He has to reread partially the same pages in order to proceed.

This device disrupts linearity and opens up the eminently progressive activity of reading to an overtly spatial dimension. A Faulknerian appendix would not have created the same bi-dimensional interplay. The effects of hypertextual connectedness, of both contiguity and permeability here obtained, depends crucially on the positioning of footnotes, which are even visually speaking in/of the story.

The overall epistemological issue of meaning-creation is tackled through a double-edged approach: the involvement of the reader in the terms just outlined and the proliferation of realistic effects. Bibliographical references provide a good case in point:

> [8] *The Lid Lifts* by Patrick Gordon-Walker (London, 1945). More recently, the same story was retold by Douglas Botting in *From The Ruins of the Reich: Germany* 1945-1949 (New York: Crown Publisher, 1985) p. 43. Just for the record, I should also mention that I happen to own a copy of a 1937/38 Warsaw telephone book. It was given to me by a journalist friend who went to Poland to cover the Solidarity movement in 1981. (95)

> It wasn't until 1994, when James Gillespie published *The Labyrinth of Dreams: A Life of John Trause,* that I finally learned the details of what John had been up to from the twenty-second to the twenty-seventh. Gillespie's massive six-hundred-page book is short on literary analysis ... but it is exceedingly thorough when it comes to biographical facts ... (190)

Note number eight fits one of the most obvious functions of footnotes, namely, providing either sources or indications for further reading. And yet this function is much more in keeping with an essay than with a novel. Besides, the presence both of real bibliographical entries, as is the case with note 8, and imaginary references, as is the case with the second quotation, microscopically stages the subtle game Auster, via Sidney Orr, is playing. What is presented in a

verisimilar packaging may not be true, but simply a phony piece of true information. The very precision of the reference (italics and publishing date included) entices the reader outside the text into his/her real world — another instance of border-crossing and calling upon extratextual systems.

The authenticating function of note 8 is magnified by the xerox of two pages of the Warsaw telephone book which follows: the title page and the page in which the name Orlovskys appears. Orlovskys happens to be the name of the first Orrs who reached America. This is, by the way, another crucial item of information we got from reading a footnote.

As the pages exist in the real world, who is this "me" who "happens to own a copy"? What is the relation between fiction and document?

> ₇ Kansas City was an arbitrary choice for Bowen's destination — the first place that popped into my head. . . . Orice I had Nick on his way to Kansas City, however, I remembered the Hyatt regency catastrophe, which was a real event that had taken place fourteen months earlier (in July 1981). (55)

Auster exploits the transitional paratextual field to create the illusion of reality through hyperrealism. This other piece of reality, "a sort of reality residue" (Cazzato 31) embedded in a footnote, on the one hand gives the sense that Sidney is thinking out loud, and on the other enhances the perception that the story in the blue notebook is repeatedly interrupted by the narrator's "real" life.

The epistemological stakes are very high: should referentiality be taken as reality? The crucial point seems here to be that "my head" equals "the writer's head": the postmodern interest in making fiction

reality itself is the result not so much of scaring realism away, but of incorporating reality in reproducing the author's relationship with his own text. The author makes his narrator in his own likeness not by a literal autobiographical transfer but by creating him as author — a move which creates an overlapping of authorial and narrating voice.

"In the strictest sense of the word, I consider myself a realist" (Auster, *The Art of Hunger* 277). Auster's supreme realism is the creation of the author, a character/subject who may be considered quintessentially postmodern, as his life and job stand at the intersection of different possible worlds. Borrowing Carboni's words and adapting them to the author/character, we may say that "questo personaggio proietta e registra ... modi di gestire la complessità irriducibile e di esprimere [creativamente] identità 'possibili' in questa complessità" (77, addition mine).

All the metafictional suggestions which reverberate from the paratext to the text we have been discussing so far, prepare the final (metafictional) coup de théatre which comes at the very end of *Oracle Night:* after almost two hundred pages, Sidney destroys the blue notebook in which he has left Nick stuck in the underground in the dark:

> At the time, it felt like the correct thing to do, and as I walked back to my apartment that Monday afternoon in September, nine days after the day in question, I was more or less convinced that the failures and disappointments of the past week were finally over. But they weren't over. The story was just beginning - the true story started only then, after I destroyed the blue notebook - and everything I've written so far is little more than a prelude to the horrors I am about to relate now. (189)

We have been reading "little more than a prelude" then, and less than twenty pages are all that remains of *Oracle Night* for "the true story"

to be told: in the metafictional battle Auster's novel stages, fiction and life are coexistential — he one absorbing the other which nourishes it. In the maze of border-crossings and double referentiality the core of humanity as Auster perceives it may be guessed:

> And I understood at a certain point that the making of art is not about the making of art. . . . that the desire to make art, the desire to do it, is a fundamental *human* desire and that the results are less important than the process of doing it, the propulsion into it. What you might call the *necessity* to do it. (Chénetier 21, italics in text)

NOTES

1. Volker Frick, http://w.w.w.buchkritic.at.

2. Auster as essayist does employ footnotes, but that is another story.

3. I borrow the term "ramify" from Connor: "postmodernist fiction responds with narrative structures and processes that seek to ramify rather than resist . . . general interruptiveness" (78).

4. This is, according to Auster, the mechanism at the basis of fairy tales: "you don't know what the girl looks like, you don't know what color the house is ... You know next to nothing. But the mind won't allow these things to remain blank: it fills in the details itself, it creates images based on its own memories and experiences.... the listener becomes an active partecipant in the story" (*Art of Hunger* 305).

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