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New Avenues in Paul Auster's Twenty-First Century Work

Language, History and Politics

“And he adjusted himself to them not falling”, A Reading of *Oracle Night*

« *Et il s'était adapté au fait qu'il n'en tombait pas* », Une lecture de *La Nuit de l'oracle*

ANTOINE DECHÊNE

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Résumés

English Français

This paper addresses Paul Auster's *Oracle Night* (2004) through the lens of storyworld theories. This approach seeks to reveal the transfictional and metaleptic dimensions of the novel while also analyzing recurrent Austerian motifs such as the figure of the writer-investigator, the porous border between fiction and reality, and the mise en abyme of the writing experience itself.

Cet essai aborde *La Nuit de l'oracle* de Paul Auster (2005) au travers du concept de « mondes narratifs ». Cette approche tend à révéler les dimensions transfictionnelle et métalectique du roman tout en proposant l'analyse de motifs récurrents de la prose austerienne tels que la figure the l'écrivain-enquêteur, la frontière poreuse entre fiction et réalité ainsi que la mise en abyme de l'expérience d'écriture elle-même.

Entrées d'index

Index de mots-clés : métalepse, mondes narratifs, mystère métacognitif, La Nuit de l'oracle, transfictionnalité

Index by keywords : metacognitive mystery tale, metalepsis, Oracle Night, storyworlds, transfictionality

Texte intégral

1 Much has been written about the influence of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Wakefield" and what has been called the Flitcraft parable in Auster's work, especially in *The New York Trilogy*. Few papers, however, have addressed this topic through the lens of storyworld theories. This essay offers a reading of Auster's 2004 novel, *Oracle Night*, as a palimpsestic work in which multiple fictions, possible worlds, coexist and affect each other. Consisting of embedded storyworlds engendering disturbing metaleptic effects, the narrative presents an engaging case of what Richard Saint-Gelais and Marie-Laure Ryan after him have called transfictionality. Simply put, there is transfictionality when fictional elements from one text are reused in posterior texts.¹ For Ryan, transfictionality "consists in producing and posting texts that complete, modify, or stretch in time the worlds of preexisting literary texts or that transpose their plots and characters into new environments."² Saint-Gelais does not really concur with Ryan on the last part of her definition, yet both insist on the importance of a boundary between texts as well as between authors. The border is there to be overstepped, but never totally erased in order to maintain the transgression's full impact on the readers.

2 Narrative rules are bound to be transcended, so do literary genres. Many critics have discussed Auster's *New York Trilogy* as a metaphysical or metacognitive detective story.³ Following Claire Maniez (2009) in her reading of *Oracle Night* as another example of the genre, the aim of this article is not to propose yet one more analysis of Auster's playful deconstruction of detective fiction codes, but to draw a parallel between the investigative task Auster confers on his writer protagonist and the transfictional effects that result from it. This paper thus first presents a comparative reading of *Oracle Night* with regard to Dashiell Hammett's Flitcraft episode in *The Maltese Falcon* and Hawthorne's foundational short story through the lens of metacognitive mystery tales. The analysis leads to a closer study of the use of metalepses in the novel before proposing a reading model based on the narrative concepts of transfictionality and storyworlds defined by Saint-Gelais, Ryan, and their followers. The article concludes with a note on *Oracle Night's* paratextuality, revealing how Auster playfully transgresses, as he exposes, the very materiality of the writing experience.

Wakefield Orr Flitcraft?

3 *Oracle Night* is based on not one, but two subtexts. First, there is the Flitcraft story inherent in Auster's project, whose ambition, more or less avowed, is to "exhaust" Hammett's digressive fable and its possible outcomes.⁴ Second, perhaps less straightforward and certainly less discussed, is the presence of Hawthorne's "Wakefield," implicit throughout the novel. These hypotexts⁵ hint at a possible reading of *Oracle Night* as a metacognitive mystery tale, a terminology that accounts for the cognitive questions that lie at the heart of the investigation and the absence of professional detective to lead that investigation.⁶ Merivale and

Sweeney discuss “Wakefield” as one of the earliest tales of the genre, introducing a vision of the *flâneur* as a detective in the making.⁷ Rather than share Dupin or Holmes’s self-confidence and trust in their ratiocinative method, Wakefield opens the way to a type of investigator whose flaws and unreliability turn him into an urban castaway.

- 4 Hammett’s Flitcraft presents a variation on the same theme. While Wakefield leaves his wife and family only to spy on them from nearby and come back twenty years later as if nothing happened, Flitcraft has a near-death experience when a falling beam crashes next to him on the sidewalk during his lunch break. Flitcraft decides to give in to the forces of chance and simply leaves. Hired by his wife, Sam Spade discovers that he is now living a brand new life, without feeling remorse for what he has done:

For a couple of years he wandered around and then drifted back to the Northwest, and settled in Spokane and got married. His second wife didn’t look like the first, but they were more alike than they were different. [...] He wasn’t sorry for what he had done. It seemed reasonable enough to him. I don’t think he even knew he had settled back naturally in the same groove he had jumped out of in Tacoma. But that’s the part of it I always liked. He adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell, and he adjusted himself to them not falling.⁸

- 5 *Oracle Night* explores another outcome to these missing men stories. Pushing the Flitcraft parable to its limits, the novel reasserts the Austerian mantra that the “world is governed by chance”⁹ while questioning the possibility of reliable knowledge and the nature of reality at the same time.
- 6 While Maniez sees Auster’s narrator and protagonist as a detective searching for the reasons of his marital difficulties, Sidney Orr appears as a metafictional detective investigating the powers of literary creation. Sid discovers two things: “words [can] alter reality” and, quoting Beckett, “to be an artist is to fail.”¹⁰ As will become clear, his investigation transgresses the borders between storyworlds as well as the boundary between reality and fiction, leading him into a dead end. His quest also turns him into a victim and even a criminal, another leitmotif of the genre which subverts “the triadic multiplicity of detective, criminal, and victim” that characterizes traditional detective fiction.¹¹

A Metaleptic Investigation

- 7 *Oracle Night* offers a *mise en abyme* of the detective-writer’s investigation through the repeated use of metalepsis. The embedded storyworlds that form the novel indeed constitute distinct diegetic levels that are repeatedly transgressed in a “playful subversion of narrative logic.”¹² Metalepsis in Auster’s hands, however, does not appear as a “relatively harmless game”¹³ and its “effect of strangeness” is not necessarily “comical [...] or fantastic.”¹⁴ Rather, its consequences can be tragic, at least for his characters.
- 8 Moreover, as John Pier suggests in his thorough definition of the concept, metalepsis defamiliarizes, in the formalist sense of the word: it “lays bare the device” thereby highlighting “the artificial relations between ‘form’ and ‘material’.”¹⁵ The materiality and physicality of writing is precisely what Sid experiences at the very beginning of the narrative – the moment he later refers to as “the morning in question” on September 18, 1982.¹⁶ At the time, Sid is recovering from a bad fall that put him in a coma for months. His convalescent strolls recall Poe’s “Man of the Crowd” (1840), not only establishing a link between that day’s errand and the pursuit of the mad *flâneur*, but also instilling

the idea that he, too, might be a “genius of deep crime.”¹⁷ The figure of the New York stroller is one of Auster’s trademarks, another leitmotif that turns his protagonists into absent selves, perpetually in search of a proper place and a stable identity.¹⁸

- 9 It is worth noting that most of the (male) characters in the novel are physically ill and mentally fragile. Sid can “barely remember who [he is] supposed to be”¹⁹ and has unpredictable nosebleeds, his friend John Trause suffers from a severe case of phlebitis that eventually kills him, and John’s brother-in-law nearly falls into a depression after spending too much time “communing with the dead” watching 3-D pictures of his defunct family members.²⁰ “We’re the goddamn gimps of the universe,” jokes John,²¹ a remark which would perhaps be funnier if it did not echo Hawthorne’s warning against the risk of becoming a universal outcast:

Amid the seeming confusion of our mysterious world, individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another, and to a whole, that, by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever. Like Wakefield, he may become, as it were, the Outcast of the Universe.²²

- 10 The metacognitive detective always gambles with his own mental soundness. A contemporary version of “The Man of the Crowd,” he can never be sure that his quest will find answers and thus be granted a cathartic resolution.

- 11 That morning, Sid decides to start his tour by going south instead of north as he usually does. The random change of itinerary guides the recovering man to the Paper Palace, a new stationery store run by a certain Mr. Chang. While walking through the shop’s two alleys, Sid experiences the very “materiality of writing.”²³ All he can hear is Mr. Chang’s pencil scratching on paper: “I believe this was where it began – in the space of those few seconds, when the sound of the pencil was the only sound left in the world.”²⁴ The physical sensation then felt by Sid and his “oracle” *a posteriori* reverberates throughout the novel. First, in the blue Portuguese notebook that Sid eventually buys and then in his very struggle to write about his own creative difficulties and ontological precariousness. Through various metalepses and *mises en abyme*, his quest deepens into a perverse loop that can only end where it began. In fact, Sid’s nightmare truly starts when he destroys the notebook that is physically absorbing him: “everything that I’ve written so far is little more than the prelude to the horrors I’m about to relate now.”²⁵ Like Quinn in *City of Glass*, “Not only had he been sent back to the beginning, and so far before the beginning that it was worse than any end he could imagine.”²⁶

- 12 What Sid eventually realizes is that “words [can] kill”; words can “alter reality.”²⁷ This persistent claim is suggested to him by John Trause, himself a writer who happens to use the same brand of notebooks. John even warns Sid against the possible dangers of writing in them: “Those notebooks are very friendly, but they can also be cruel, and you have to watch out that you don’t get lost in them.”²⁸ Three strange episodes confirm John’s admonition before the final acknowledgement that writing is not about “recording events from the past, but making things happen in the future.”²⁹ The first two episodes occur while Sid is writing in his notebook. His wife swears that she did not see him in his office when Sid is convinced that he did not leave the room. The second time, Sid did not hear the phone ring, which he normally always does. The destruction of the notebook triggers the horrors that conclude the novel – the obsessive intuition that John and Grace were lovers, Grace’s beating by John’s son Jacob, and the two men’s deaths.

- 13 Furthermore, John is the one who brings up the idea of adapting the mysterious

story of Flitcraft narrated by Spade in chapter 7 of *The Maltese Falcon*. Sid remembers his friend’s hint as he returns to his desk for the first time in months. He writes for the next three hours, losing himself in the flow of words. This gesture is representative of Auster’s poetics, as Richard Pattenon remarked: “Although writing may be an assertion of being, it is also, antithetically, an act of self-annihilation.”³⁰ In this perspective, the narrative becomes a “metabolic force” that can erase and rewrite the individual whose identity is renewed with “every act of cognition.”³¹

14 Sid completely immerses himself in the notebook. His Flitcraft is Nick Bowen, an editor who has been ruminating on his life and marriage for some time. He just received a new manuscript to read: *Oracle Night*, a 1927 novel possibly written by Sylvia Maxwell and never published. The book is brought to his attention by Maxwell’s granddaughter, Rosa Leightman with whom Nick falls instantly in love. That same night, after an argument with his wife Eva, Nick decides to go for a walk and, like Flitcraft who is nearly stricken by a falling beam, he comes close to be hit by the “head of a small limestone gargoyle” broken loose.³²

15 Sid does not want to stick to Hammett’s version of the story. He wants his storyworld to be more complex. He thus decides to give Eva a life and will of her own and fills his narrative with secondary characters. He even develops the meta-narrative of Maxwell’s novel. The creative process is laid bare. Auster’s *Oracle Night* is indeed very much centered on the writer’s experience: the ways he/she struggles in order to channel the “power of words”³³ as well as the emotions felt throughout the act of writing. It reveals how the literary imagination works. Sid thus comments on how Nick and Eva’s apartment is modeled on John’s own duplex. He designs Nick to be his perfect opposite while Eva should have the features and temperament of his own wife, Grace. Hence when Nick chooses to face the randomness of his life and takes the first plane to Kansas City, Eva does not sit still like Wakefield’s wife, nor does she hire a private eye to investigate like in Flitcraft’s case. After a week without hearing from him, she sets out to look for her missing husband.

16 A thousand miles away, Nick makes friends with the only man he meets on his journey, his taxi-driver, a WWII veteran who calls himself Ed Victory. Ed has one big project: “The Bureau of Historical Preservation.”³⁴ A daunting enterprise, the Bureau is located in an underground bunker where he has classified thousands of telephone books of all cities to ensure their conservation. The purpose is to save mankind from its own oblivion. His archive is a Holocaust memorial. Ed is indeed convinced that he has witnessed “the end of all things” when his unit liberated Dachau in April 1945.³⁵ One scene is particularly vivid in his memory: the mad distress of a woman begging him for some milk to feed her dead baby and rejoicing abjectly when he satisfied her request. The image of the white liquid on the infant’s blue lips is unbearable, but should not be chased away. He must face it. In the same way, he commits to keeping a trace of all the people that once existed, at least since the origins of telephone books. One of the volumes is particularly intriguing to Nick – a 1937/38 directory from Warsaw, a book of ghosts that the editor cannot help but link to Ed’s stories about the war. Surely, he thinks, the people registered in it disappeared in a concentration camp.

Metalepses and Storyworlds

17 The Warsaw phonebook epitomizes one of the biggest metaleptic mysteries in Auster’s novel. Its analysis requires to come back on what exactly is a metalepsis, a concept that Ryan explains through the metaphor of the stack.³⁶ Simplifying a

little, a stack can be described as a pile of superposed storyworlds which are entered from bottom to top and are resolved from top to bottom. What then is a storyworld? H. Porter Abbott defines the concept in his glossary of narratological terms as the “diegesis or world in which the story takes place.”³⁷ Going a step further, Ryan conceives a storyworld as “an imagined totality that evolves according to the events in the story.”³⁸ To David Herman, a storyworld is a model “for understanding narrative discourse.”³⁹ More specifically, storyworlds are “mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which recipients [i.e. readers] relocate [...] as they work to comprehend a narrative.”⁴⁰

18 In this sense, the concept of storyworld is different from that of “fictional world” because “it covers both factual and fictional stories, meaning stories told as true of the real world and stories that create their own imaginary world, respectively.”⁴¹ Herman makes another interesting point when he specifies that he uses the concept “to suggest something of the world-creating power of narrative.”⁴² This idea is most relevant to the approach of literary creation developed in *Oracle Night* and in Auster’s work as a whole. In fact, one may argue that the detective’s task consists in better apprehending the essence of narrative, that is the “basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change.”⁴³ Such task also lies behind the understanding of possible worlds and multiple realities as imagined by Borges in “The Garden of Forking Paths” (1941), an allegorical text introducing a palimpsestic and infinitely renewed vision of time as a “series of times” containing “all possibilities.”⁴⁴

19 If *Oracle Night* does not go as far as Borges’s short story, Auster is still captivated by the way time is humanly perceived, a reflection that he pursues in his latest work, *4 3 2 1* (2017). Early on in this vertiginous *Bildungsroman*, the young protagonist is amazed by the endless possibilities of what his life is, has been, could be, could have been, and could become:

Such an interesting thought, Ferguson said to himself: to imagine how things could be different for him even though he was the same. The same boy in a different house with a different tree. The same boy with different parents. The same boy with the same parents who didn’t do the same things they did now.⁴⁵

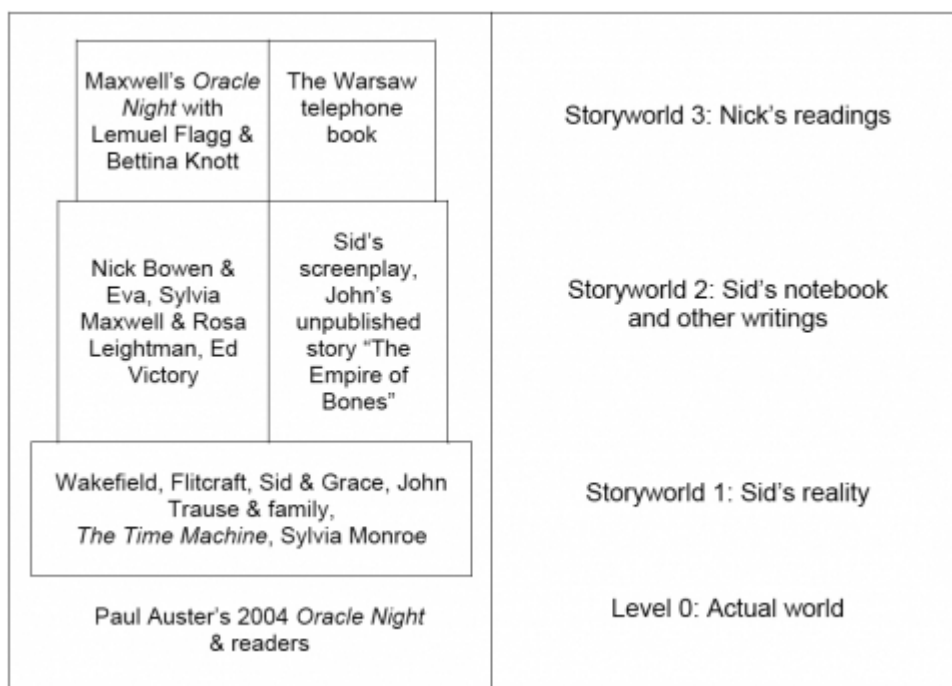
20 Then follow a number of “What if?” questions to which he answers that “Yes, anything was possible, and just because things happened in one way didn’t mean they couldn’t happen in another. Everything could be different.”⁴⁶ In the same way, Sid as a detective-writer is confronted with the impossibility of experiencing all realities at the same time. His narrative does not take the form of Borges’s labyrinth, but of a stack of embedded storyworlds. “The novel within the novel,” he tells his editor, is perhaps the one piece that he should “salvage” from his enterprise.⁴⁷

21 How then does *Oracle Night* fit into Ryan’s stack theory? The level zero of the stack is the actual world which includes the author (Paul Auster) and the readers (us). That extradiegetic level could also be conceived as a bubble surrounding the stack and to which the different storyworlds may refer.⁴⁸ In other words, the embedded storyworlds form a sort of pyramid that the readers climb before coming back down, making sure to visit every chamber on each level. Once back on the ground – and this is particularly the case in detective fiction – readers should experience the emotionally and intellectually gratifying sensation of having reached and contributed to the resolution of the narrative.⁴⁹

22 In this context, metalepsis is, for Ryan, “the operation by which narrative challenges the structure of the stack.”⁵⁰ Metalepsis crosses the boundaries between fictional levels creating gaps and breaches. Transfictionality is the filling

of these gaps by a same or different author.⁵¹ In this case, Ryan’s concept of ontological metalepsis, following Brian McHale,⁵² seems more useful than Genette’s definition of rhetorical metalepsis. As previously noted, in *Oracle Night*, the breaches between levels are not without consequences for the characters and can be somewhat disturbing for the outside readers. Unlike rhetorical metalepsis, whose “temporary breach of illusion does not threaten the basic structure of the narrative universe”; the ontological model “opens a passage between levels that results in their interpenetration, or mutual contamination.”⁵³ A stack outline of Auster’s novel would come down to something like this:

Figure 1: *Oracle Night* narrative stack



23 The lines drawn between the different levels are repeatedly transgressed in the novel, blending the storyworlds together. The interrelation between levels appears to work according to the codes of transfictionality on the way up and of what Douglas Hofstadter has called a “tangled hierarchy” on the way down. Hofstadter explains that “A tangled hierarchy occurs when what you presume are clean hierarchical levels take you by surprise and fold back in a hierarchy-violating way.”⁵⁴ Hofstadter’s argument can also be related to possible worlds theories,⁵⁵ or rather impossible worlds.⁵⁶ Jan Albert’s taxonomy of “strategies” implemented to help “naturalize unnatural scenarios”⁵⁷ constitutes a good example of how readers can achieve narrative comprehension, but also of how writers can subvert these anticipated strategies to estrange their audience even more. To give but one example, the first strategy consists in “reading events as internal states,” that is in explaining impossible experiences as dreams or hallucinations.⁵⁸ *Oracle Night* nicely twists that stratagem when Grace has a most vivid dream in which she gets trapped with Sid in an underground library. Indeed, her nightmare uncannily mirrors Nick’s story, which explains why Sid finds such a coincidence “more than weird. It’s chilling.”⁵⁹ In this case, the dream does not provide an explanation. Instead, it increases the metaleptic confusion.

24 There are many other occurrences of “hierarchy-violation” and storyworlds contaminations in the novel. SW2 is largely based on SW1 since Sid develops the story of Flitcraft through Nick’s story. Eva is Grace’s clone and her apartment is a reproduction of John’s. Nick Bowen becomes John Trause’s editor. John is still a writer and a WWII ex-soldier, but instead of having fought in the Pacific, he is a young private in Ed Victory’s regiment. In the same vein, Sid realizes that Sylvia

Maxwell's name was unconsciously inspired by that of Sylvia Monroe, an author of detective novels in the twenties and thirties.⁶⁰ His screenplay is a free adaptation of *The Time Machine*, just like Maxwell's *Oracle Night* is a fable about time travel. Sid, however, having Lemuel's story in mind, does not want the movie to be about seeing or visiting the future. He concludes: “We don't want to know when we will die or when the people we love will betray us. But we're hungry to know the dead before they were dead, to acquaint ourselves with the dead as living beings.”⁶¹

25 Going backwards is not an easy task either. Things become more complicated as soon as one wants to come down from the stack which “curves back on itself.”⁶² A few examples: SW3 presents a *mise en abyme* of Nick (SW2) and Sid's (SW1) destinies. Lemuel Flagg, a British lieutenant in WWI, is capable of predicting the future, an ability which progressively destroys him. Nick, because he is “susceptible to the power of books”,⁶³ sees a connection between the soldier's fortune and his own. The two of them will be crushed by the forces of chance. The former knows it while the latter is standing oblivious on the threshold of an inescapable locked room. Rewinding his own life based on SW3 and SW2, Sid ends up writing backwards in his notebook about the possible affair between his wife and John before tearing the pages apart, triggering a horrific ending in SW1.

26 FW2 seems to drip through the cracks on SW1. Grace's “more real than real” dream,⁶⁴ for instance, appears as another oracle foreshadowing her near death at the end of the novel. What is more, Grace turns into Nick/Flitcraft when she leaves Sid for twenty-four hours to ponder on her life. At that point, Sid experiences his character Eva's anguish, thereby also giving a voice to Wakefield and Flitcraft's wives. He laments that Grace has become a “blank” to him: “every thought I had about her that night turned into a story, a gruesome little drama that played on my deepest anxieties about our future—which rapidly seemed to be turning into no future at all.”⁶⁵ The turning upside-down of roles not only highlights the amateur detective's ontological insecurity, it also offers an engaging metacommentary on women's lack of agency or sheer absence in metacognitive mystery tales.⁶⁶

27 Like Wakefield, Grace eventually comes home, and this time we are allowed to follow inside. She asks her husband to trust her and discuss the matter no further. Pregnant with either Sid's or John's baby, she had to step back from her life, pretend that she did not know him anymore, to figure out what she wants to do next in all good conscience. Sid, as for him, remains speechless, “so taken aback” that he is “literally unable to get any words out of [his] mouth.”⁶⁷ The feminist perspective leaves the male protagonist at a loss. He who thought that he could rewrite Flitcraft's story is once more into a dead end. Just as Nick is trapped in an underground locked room condemned to read *Oracle Night* forever, Sid must accept that he will not be able “to pull the truth from her”,⁶⁸ simply because there is no truth.

28 Sid understands that he only has access to an infinitesimal part of the story. Consequently, his crime consists in not accepting it, in trying to fill in the blank at all costs. Like Quinn who imposes meaning on Stillman's wanderings, his mistake is to write the story of his wife's love affair with John, turning conjectures into something real. Again, language offers mankind the possibility to imagine and reflect upon multiple realities. The Beckettian artist, however, cannot but fail to represent the infinite variations and transfictional potential of narratives. This is Sid's conclusion when he declares: “If words [can] kill, then I [have] to keep a careful watch over my tongue and make sure never to express a single doubt or negative thought.”⁶⁹ Sid's life is the reflection of his writing. The various metalepses have made him a victim and a criminal, whose only task is to accept ignorance.

Metalepses and Paratexts

- 29 But the most disturbing of ontological metalepses remains the 1937/38 Warsaw telephone book, which contaminates all the storyworlds and even spills out on reality. The directory is the cause of Nick’s absent-mindedness and entrapment in SW2. In SW1, Sid explains in a footnote that he actually owns a copy of the phonebook containing the names of Janina and Stefan Orłowski, the Polish version of his own family name. If one may take the narrator’s comment as an indication of his reliability regarding his inspirational sources, boundaries are shattered when, on the next page, the readers of Auster’s novel discover a photocopy of the real telephone book with the above-mentioned names. The ontological metalepsis exceeds *Oracle Night*’s storyworld as the voices of the narrator and the author blend into each other. While the first-person narrator remains Sid, one cannot help but feel that Auster owns a copy of the directory that inspired the novel itself.⁷⁰
- 30 The same thing can be said of the use of the novel’s paratexts, and especially the footnotes which bring the readers’ attention back to Auster’s process of composition, itself mirrored by Sid’s own obsession with the materiality of writing and the metafictional form of his narrative. Sid’s story is indeed deceptively linear. The plot of SW1, told twenty years later, roughly covers the two weeks after “the morning in question,” maintaining a “sense of integrity” despite the “complex narrative framing.”⁷¹ The narrative is interrupted by the embedded fictions Sid writes in his notebook (leading to SW2 and SW3) and the expository footnotes (leading back to level 0). As Maniez remarks, the footnotes do not simply fulfill the role of explanatory analepses.⁷² They are clues for the readers to decipher. Introduced as digressions, each piece of information is more than significant in order to understand the main plot.⁷³ Overall, the footnotes, which keep reminding us that we are reading Auster’s novel, work as further embedded stories, possible forking paths that distract the readers while also pointing at their very significance. They work as bridges between the different storyworlds as well as between the storyworlds and the actual world. Paratext here, as Pattenon argued, “is not a subplot, but an alternate plot [...] displaying the role of narrative in the construction and reconstruction of a human reality that constantly hovers on the edge of extinction.”⁷⁴
- 31 A similar argument can be made about the newspaper article reproduced by Sid in the middle of his story.⁷⁵ Sid claims that he is able to “quote the article *verbatim* because [he has] it in front of [him]” while writing.⁷⁶ The news relates another dead-baby story born in a toilet. With its sordid details, the *fait divers* further points at the idea that “human life [has] lost its meaning.”⁷⁷ The paratext, itself a tiny storyworld within the storyworld, opens an alternate plot which, along with Ed’s remembrance of the Dachau dead infant, prophesies the outcome of Grace’s pregnancy. Beat up by Jacob, Grace loses her baby, symbol of her own doubts. The novel’s bleak ending makes one final assertion: these narratives not only attest “the end of mankind”,⁷⁸ they also reveal the absence of God. This is already what Jacob tells Sid when the latter visits him in rehab.⁷⁹ The twelve-step program, Jacob claims, is for “cretins” and “All that crap about trusting in a higher power [is] like some baby-talk religion.”⁸⁰ The last phrase is particularly ill-suited in the context of the previous dead-baby stories. It also implies that religion is for babies who, in the novel, are not absent, but dead. Finally, while Jacob is murdered by his creditors, Sid notices that “not one mention of the word *God*” is made at John’s funeral.⁸¹ Yet, tragic as these disappearances may be, they also reflect the cathartic effect achieved by the detective-writer who, by forging his own transfictional and metaleptic stack, is eventually able to create a *tabula rasa* for

him to rebuild his own story.

32 Auster’s *Oracle Night* does not end as desperately as Maxwell’s. In fact, Sid’s metafictional experience allows him some form of redemption. The novel indeed concludes with him “walking toward the hospital to see Grace”,⁸² the embodiment of a possible recovery and renewal. But “Grace” is not to be found in a higher authority. Rather, it emerges with the detective-writer’s acknowledgement of his own shortcomings and the acceptance that failure is his business. Grace also appears as the most knowledgeable character in the novel. Recalling Richard’s story, Sid realizes that he is himself coming to terms with his own depression after living for too long through the stories of others. The end of Richard’s narrative marks a moment of disagreement between John and Grace. After spending two months watching 3-D pictures of his dead family members, Richard’s viewer broke down. John immediately offered his help to find a way to fix the machine, but Richard is not so sure. Perhaps it is for the best, he tells his brother-in-law, “You have to live in the present, right?”⁸³ John is disappointed by the story’s ending, which, to him, lacks a form of philosophical epiphany. But Grace understands it – Richard was putting himself in danger and, like Wakefield and Flitcraft, was running the risk of “losing his place forever.”⁸⁴ Sid was also losing grip. Detective, victim, and somehow guilty of trying too hard to understand, he is ultimately happy because he manages to let go of the infinite possibilities created by the exploration of storyworlds.

33 A transfictional narrative, *Oracle Night* keeps reminding its readers that what they have in their hands is a work of fiction playfully transgressing its own boundaries to expose its very materiality. The oracle – “words can alter reality” – is only true as long as one believes that words and reality are palpable, reliable things. Storyworlds, however, are another matter entirely; the next level in Auster’s creation.

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Notes

1 Richard Saint-Gelais, *Fictions Transfuges: La transfictionnalité et ses enjeux*, Paris: Seuil, 2005, 19-20. Saint-Gelais defines the concept as “the phenomenon by which at least two texts, by the same author or not, jointly relate to a same fiction, be it by taking over characters, extending a prior plot or sharing a fictional universe” (translated by Pier n.p.). In French: “Par ‘transfictionnalité,’ j’entends le phénomène par lequel au moins deux textes, du même auteur ou non, se rapportent conjointement à une même fiction, que ce soit par reprise de personnages, prolongement d’une intrigue préalable ou partage d’univers fictionnel.” *Ibid.*, 7.

2 Marie-Laure Ryan, “Fictional Worlds in the Digital Age”, in *A Companion to Digital Literary Studies*, ed. Ray Siemens and Susan Schreibman, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, 257.

3 See for instance Alford, Barone, Dechéne, Duperray, Eckhard, Kugler, Russell, Shiloh, Sweeney, and Swope among many others.

4 Jeffrey Ross, “Where Flitcraft Lives: An Examination of Chance, Choice and Fate in Paul Auster’s Fiction”, Collection: Theses and Dissertations, Ottawa: Carleton U, 2005, 11.

5 Antoine Dechéne, *Detective Fiction and the Problem of Knowledge: Perspectives on the Metacognitive Mystery Tale*, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018, 38.

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*, 327-337. See also Merivale and Sweeney’s introductory chapter to *Detecting Texts* (in Patricia Merivale and Susan E. Sweeney (eds), *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism*, Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1999).

8 Dashiell Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon* (1929), New York: Vintage Crime/Black Lizard, 1992, 64.

9 Paul Auster, *Oracle Night*, London: Faber, 2004, 12.

10 *Ibid.*, 188, 154.

11 Patricia Merivale, “Gumshoe Gothics: Poe’s ‘The Man of the Crowd’ and His Followers”, in Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney (eds.), *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism*, *op. cit.*, 107.

12 Marie-Laure Ryan, “Fictional Worlds in the Digital Age”, *op. cit.*, 211.

13 *Ibid.*, 210.

14 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1972), trans. Jane E. Lewin and Jonathan Culler, Ithaca and New York: Cornell UP, 1980, 235.

15 John Pier, “Metalepsis”, in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, ed. Peter Hühn, *et al.*, Hamburg: Hamburg U, 2016. <<https://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/node/51.html>>, accessed on February 17, 2020.

16 Paul Auster, *Oracle Night*, *op. cit.*, 2.

17 Edgar Allan Poe, “The Man of the Crowd” (1840), in *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (1840), New York: Vintage Books, 1975, 481.

18 Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), trans. Steven Rendall, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: U of California P, 1988.

19 Paul Auster, *Oracle Night*, *op. cit.*, 1.

20 *Ibid.*, 35.

21 *Ibid.*, 26.

22 Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Wakefield” (1835), *Twice-Told Tales* (1837), vol. IX, *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1974, 140.

23 I borrow the phrase from a very recent collective volume which discusses, from a multidisciplinary perspective, “the profound impact graphic traces have on large-scale human cultural patterns as well as on individual-scale cognition” (Christian M. Johannessen and Theo Van Leeuwen, “Introduction”, in Christian M. Johannessen and Theo Van Leeuwen (eds.), *The Materiality of Writing: A Trace-Making Perspective*, New York: Routledge, 2018, 2).

24 Paul Auster, *Oracle Night*, *op. cit.*, 4.

25 *Ibid.*, 189.

26 Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy* (1987), New York: Penguin Books, 1990, 124.

27 Paul Auster, *Oracle Night*, *op. cit.*, 188.

28 *Ibid.*, 39.

29 *Ibid.*, 189.

30 Richard F. Patteson, “The Teller’s Tale: Text and Paratext in Paul Auster’s *Oracle Night*”, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 49.2 (2008), 117.

31 *Ibid.*

32 Paul Auster, *Oracle Night*, *op. cit.*, 22.

33 Paul Auster and I. B. Siegmundfeldt, *A Life in Words*, New York and Oakland: Seven Stories Press, 2017, 221.

34 Paul Auster, *Oracle Night*, *op. cit.*, 76.

35 *Ibid.*, 78.

36 Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story*, Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006, 205.

37 H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Second ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008, 242.

38 Marie-Laure Ryan, “Texts, Worlds, Stories: Narrative Worlds as Cognitive and Ontological Concept”, in *Narrative Theory, Literature, and New Media: Narrative Minds*

and *Virtual Worlds*, eds. Mari Hatavera, et al., London: Routledge, 2015, 13.

39 David Herman, *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*, Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 2002, 5.

40 *Ibid.*, 9.

41 Marie-Laure Ryan, “Story/Worlds/Media: Turning the Instruments of Media-Conscious Narratology”, in *Storyworlds across Media*, Ed. Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon, Lincoln/London: U of Nebraska P, 2014, 33.

42 David Herman, *Story Logic*, op. cit., 14.

43 David Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative*, Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, 2.

44 Jorge Luis Borges, “The Garden of Forking Paths”, trans. Andrew Hurley, in *Fictions* (1941), London: Penguin Books, 1998, 85.

45 Paul Auster, *4 3 2 1*, New York: Henry Holt, 2017, 54.

46 *Ibid.*

47 Paul Auster, *Oracle Night*, op. cit., 160.

48 Genette interestingly notes that “The most troubling thing about metalepsis indeed lies in the unacceptable and insistent hypothesis, that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic, and that the narrator and his narrates – you and I – perhaps belong to some narrative.” Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, op. cit., 236.

49 For an engaging analysis of the figure of the reader as detective see Jeffrey T Nealon, “Work of the Detective, Work of the Writer: Auster’s *City of Glass*” (in Patricia Merivale and Susan E. Sweeney (eds), *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism*, Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1999). Of course, metacognitive mystery tales subvert the readers’ expectations by refusing to indulge in narrative closure.

50 Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story*, op. cit., 206.

51 Yet, by staunching a gap with one narrative, an author is always creating new gaps to fill in, new questions to answer.

52 Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, New York/London: Methuen, 1987, 119-130.

53 Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story*, op. cit., 207.

54 Douglas Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, New York: Penguin Books, 1979, 686.

55 See Thomas G. Pavel, *Fictional Worlds*, Cambridge and London: Harvard UP, 1986.

56 Marie-Laure Ryan, “Impossible Worlds and Aesthetic Illusion”, in Walter Bernhard and Werner Wolf (eds.) , *Aesthetic Illusion in Literature and Other Media*, Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2013, 131-148. To be precise, Ryan distinguishes two types of approaches to possible worlds, the analytic and the cognitive: “The possible worlds of analytic philosophy are used in literature to solve such problems as the definition of fiction, the truth value of statements about fictional entities, the ontological status (complete or incomplete?) of these entities, the semantic classification of literary worlds (historical, realistic, fantastic, impossible), the relationships between the worlds of distinct texts (expansion, transposition, modification), the description of the mechanisms of plots in terms of conflicts, and the general organization of the semantic domain of texts as a universe in which an actual world is opposed to a variable number of alternate possible worlds created by the mental activity of characters. As for the worlds of cognitive approaches, they focus the attention of scholars on how they are constructed and ‘simulated’ in the mind of the reader, on what kind of cues trigger this process of simulation, or on his description of the narrative experience as one of immersion.” *Story/Worlds/Media*, op. cit., 31-32.

57 Jan Alber, “Impossible Storyworlds—and What to Do with Them”, *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 1 (2009), 82. Alber defines physically and/or logically impossible scenarios and events as “unnatural”.

58 *Ibid.*, 82.

59 Paul Auster, *Oracle Night*, op. cit., 115.

60 The Freudian slip further hints at a possible reading of Sid’s narrative as a detective story.

61 Paul Auster, *Oracle Night*, op. cit., 104.

62 Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story*, op. cit., 209.

63 Paul Auster, *Oracle Night*, op. cit., 52.

64 *Ibid.*, 113.

65 *Ibid.*, 150.

66 Susan Elizabeth Sweeney acknowledges and tries to counterbalance this gap in her analysis of Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and Gibson’s *Pattern Recognition* (2003). See Susan E. Sweeney, “Traces gothiques dans le roman policier métaphysique: la lumière dans *Vente à la criée du lot 49* de Pynchon et *Identification des schémas* de Gibson”, in Antoine Dechène and Michel Delville (eds.), *Le Thriller métaphysique d’Edgar Allan Poe à nos jours*, Liège: PU de Liège, 2016, 91-106.

67 Paul Auster, *Oracle Night*, *op. cit.*, 151.

68 *Ibid.*, 155.

69 *Ibid.*, 203.

70 Auster has confirmed that the Warsaw phonebook, like most of the other reality-inspired stories in the novel, is in fact real. It was given to him by his Polish publisher and he randomly picked up a name for his protagonist in it. Paul Auster and I. B. Siegumfeldt, *A Life in Words*, *op. cit.*, 218. As for its “physical” inclusion in the book, Ryan has shown, following Barthes, that a photograph makes “a determinate and almost irrefutable truth claim”. Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story*, *op. cit.*, 38. As it were, the scanned image of the phonebook does not only open a “window on the world,” but opens a breach between usually well separated diegetic worlds. In a different but related way, Saint-Gelais notes that transfictionality “exacerbates the referential illusion.” Richard Saint-Gelais, *Fictions Transfuges: La transfictionnalité et ses enjeux*, *op. cit.*, 14 (my translation).

71 Arkadiusz Misztal, “Time, Body, and Imagination in Paul Auster’s *Oracle Night*”, in *Time, Narrative, and Imagination: Essays on Paul Auster*, Ed. Arkadiusz Misztal, Gdańsk: U of Gdańsk, 2015, 251.

72 Claire Maniez, “Suspendu entre passé et avenir: *Oracle Night* de Paul Auster”, *Revue française d’études américaines* 3.121 (2009), 62.

73 Footnote 1, for instance, enables the narrator to introduce his name; footnote 2 presents John Trause; footnote 3 tells Sid and Grace’s love story; footnote 4 gives the first hint of a possible past liaison between John and Grace; footnote 8 is Sid’s confession that he owns a copy of the 1937/38 directory; in footnote 10, Sid metafictionally reflects on Grace’s dream and the impossibility of his narrative; footnote 11 gives Mr. Chang’s story; etc.

74 Richard F. Patteson, “The Teller’s Tale: Text and Paratext in Paul Auster’s *Oracle Night*”, *op. cit.*, 118.

75 The story is also based on a real newspaper article Auster read and slightly modified (Paul Auster and I. B. Siegumfeldt, *A Life in Words*, *op. cit.*, 218).

76 Paul Auster, *Oracle Night*, *op. cit.*, 98.

77 *Ibid.*, 99.

78 *Ibid.*, 99.

79 Of course, Jacob the junkie himself incarnates the fall of the “Hebrew patriarch.”

80 *Ibid.*, 169.


81 *Ibid.*, 205.

82 *Ibid.*, 207.

83 *Ibid.*, 35.

84 Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Wakefield”, *op. cit.*, 140.

Table des illustrations

	Titre	Figure 1: <i>Oracle Night</i> narrative stack
	URL	http://journals.openedition.org/lisa/docannexe/image/11624/img-1.jpg
	Fichier	image/jpeg, 174k

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Auteur

Antoine Dechêne

Antoine Dechêne est Docteur en langues et lettres de l'Université de Liège. Sa recherche porte sur le genre policier produit aux USA et en France. Dechêne est notamment l'auteur de *Detective Fiction and the Problem of Knowledge* (Palgrave MacMillan 2018) et le coéditeur, avec Michel Delville, du premier ouvrage dédié au genre en français : *Le Thriller métaphysique d'Edgar Allan Poe à nos jours* (Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2016).

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