Even or(r) Odd: The Game of Narration in Paul Auster's *Oracle Night*

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Abstract: *This article identifies and discusses the use of textually "playful" narrative devices in Paul Auster's* Oracle Night. *It is argued that signification only arrives in the reader through a narrative "game" with the author, or, rather, it is by exposing the effects of "doubling" in the text that the reader comes to challenge the authoritative position of the author. To problematize the framework of not only Auster's fiction, but literature as a whole, nonetheless brings an entire host of added critical inquiry to the fore: to what extent does the nature of "text" influence the subjects (writer and reader) engaged with it, for example? The contemporary literary critic needs to consider her/his own role in the processes of "framing" fiction, the degree to which s/he attempts to subject the text to pre-conceived theoretical networks of power.*

Keywords: *Paul Auster—Jacques Lacan—Jacques Derrida—narrative—authority—subjectivity—ontology—*Oracle Night*—literary criticism—deconstruction.*

I

Paul Auster's writings are typically concerned with a fascination for sudden, chance-ridden or self-imposed detours from the everyday. Many of his stories are devoted to a persistent reworking of a plot-structure which owes much to Nathaniel Hawthorne's short tale "Wakefield." Here the main character steps ever so lightly aside from his normal life, and even as he stays on in the same town (London), but one street over from his old house, his dis-

appearance is absolutely complete. This is simply because he does no longer inhabit the same specific social place in the world, and he might as well be dead.[1] Auster appropriates this plot in *Ghosts*, for example, from *The New York Trilogy*, but it lacks the return to the status quo that Hawthorne's story hints at however, by instead imagining a rather bleak outcome for the detective hero, Blue.[2] In Auster's foray into autobiography, *Hand to Mouth*, we learn that the plot of his own life (the one he decides to divulge to his readers at least) shares a great deal with the workings of his fictive texts. As he describes his motive, or lack thereof, for shipping out on a tanker as a young man, he speculates that it was "[t]o keep myself off balance . . . Or, very simply, just to see if I could do it, to see if I could hold my own in a world I didn't belong to".[3] The incessant experimenting with leading different lives, imposing new, challenging existential obstacles on the self, is heavily thematically analogous to his novels. It is no wonder then that we are introduced to the narrator-hero of *Oracle Night* as he has just been released from hospital after having "mysteriously failed to die" (1).

In his fine interpretative reading of *Oracle Night* Richard F. Patteson deals with the central theme of "storytelling and identity (or the loss of it)".[4] Patteson takes note of how the reoccurring "mirroring and doubling of narrative patterns"[5] "encapsulates both the anxiety of being . . . that pervades Auster's work and the equally pervasive struggles against it."[6] In my article I will especially recognize Patteson's interpretation in regards to one of the most important characters of the novel, John Trause, whose role in the ordering of the narrative will be discussed thoroughly. However, I will take issue with the terminology that Patteson adopts in revealing the functions of the narrative. Thus, to begin with I will indicate the background for my reading of *Oracle Night* by deliberating briefly on Patteson's muddled use of the term "paratext," and I will then move on to describe the blend of theory that will inform the remaining analytical sections of my article. On the whole, my article will present the reader with a very specific theoretical

1   See Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Wakefield," in: *Twice Told Tales*, London: The Electric Book Company, 2001 (1837), pp. 107-117.

2   See Paul Auster, *Ghosts*, in: *The New York Trilogy*, London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1992 (1987).

3   Auster, *Hand to Mouth—A Chronicle of Early Failure*, London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1997, p. 60.

4   Richard F. Patteson, "The Teller's Tale: Text and Paratext in Paul Auster's *Oracle Night*," in: *Critique*, Vol. 49, issue 2, winter 2008, p. 116.

5   Ibid., p. 124.

6   Ibid., pp. 124-25.

approach which endeavors to introduce a Lacanian concept of narratology to this Auster novel.

II

Patteson employs the term paratext in his discussion of *Oracle Night* to describe those narratives that run parallel to the main storyline of the novel.[7] Included here are well-known narratives by canonized authors that Auster either explicitly or implicitly refers to or retells in different contexts (most ubiquitously the aforementioned Hawthorne).[8] Patteson's use of paratext therefore seems to consist of an amalgamation of the term "hypertext" and the concept *mise-en-abîme*, although this is not acknowledged by the author.[9] Hypertext here refers to the practice of intentionally re-writing the plots of other, past works,[10] while *mise-en-abîme* of course covers the occurrence of "narrative worlds falling into and, crucially, resembling each other,"[11] as Mark Brown helpfully reminds us. Curiously enough, Patteson does not mention Gérard Genette's seminal work on the functioning of paratexts in literature (fictional and otherwise), *Paratexts—Thresholds of Interpretation*, even though the term frames much of his reading. This is likely due to the fact that his own usage differs substantially from Genette's terminology. Nonetheless, in a footnote Patteson mentions how Kevin Jackson in the book *Invisible Forms—A Guide to Literary Curiosities* uses the term in what Patteson calls a general way to refer to all those elements of a book that surround the text itself (titles, prefaces, footnotes, etc.), and the implied meaning is that his own manner of utilizing it is more specific.[12] Jackson appears to use paratext in much the same way as Genette, seeing that paratext for Genette indeed encompasses all those devices which present the text to the reader, or rather, in a more or less subtle manner, order the

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7   See ibid., p. 118.

8   Considering the scope of Auster criticism it would of course appear almost tautological at present to point out that Auster's stories enjoy an intimate connection with the work of such American masters of literature as Hawthorne, Poe and Thoreau, as well as a handful of European, mostly French authors (In chapter 1 of his *Paul Auster*, Mark Brown identifies Charles Baudelaire as the most notable influence here).

9   Patteson only briefly refers to *mise-en-abîme* on page 124 of his article.

10 See page xv of Richard Macksey's Foreword to Gérard Genette's *Paratexts—Thresholds of Interpretation* for a concise explanation of hypertext.

11 Brown, *Paul Auster*, Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2007, p. 95.

12 Patteson, endnote 13, p. 126.

reading itself. The combined paratexts of a given book provide the author or the author's (mostly) ally, the publisher, the initial means of censoring the reading experience and to influence it in a way that meets the perceived premise of its reception. In my reading of *Oracle Night* I will draw on Genette's description of the paratext as being the "vestibule" or "threshold" of the text,[13] and I will go on to build upon his understanding that the paratext is a "zone . . . of transition but also of transaction"[14] in my discussion.

This is done in an effort to examine the degree to which it can be said that the paratext represents the border of the text, marking the entrance to the author's realm with different signposts (from the title, reviews and interviews to any introductory notes for example). The presence of these markers supposedly ensures that the reader will always pass through the opening of the text with an authorial, sanctioned idea of how it will, or should, unfold; but does this not merely reflect the misbegotten and anachronistic ideal that the author enjoys full control over the text? In the wake of this problematic I aim to show how the paratextual zone of transaction is actually more in tune with Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic conception of the novel, rather than it embodying an exclusive and privileged author-space. Genette indeed strives to underscore the fact that it is inaccurate to say that the paratext is the property of the author, since, in the end, it is an invention of the critic who seeks to convey "a certain number of practices or effects"[15] in framing those intra/extratextual elements which, strictly speaking, are not part of the text. We will do well to keep the role of the critic in mind over the following pages.

Whereas Genette maintains that the paratext can only ever refer back to the author, as it is seen to be firmly anchored in the authorial discourse about the text, I would suggest on the other hand that the paratext can come to constitute the space where the author's discourse (or that discourse which is said to be authorial) may blend with the reader's to form the game of narration.[16] Keeping with this, the game of narration, as I shall outline it by reference to Lacanian theory, will then consist of a dialectic interac-

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13 Genette, *Paratexts—Thresholds of Interpretation*, translated by Jane E. Lewin, Cambridge: The Press Syndicate of the Univ. of Cambridge, 1997 (1987), p. 2.

14 Ibid.

15 Genette, *Paratexts*, p. 343.

16 I was inspired to use this phrase by Lacan critic Gilbert D. Chaitin's article (although he does not explicitly employ it) "Lacan's Letter," in: *MLN*, Vol. 103, No. 5, Comparative Literature, December 1988, pp. 995-1011.

tion between author and reader that will never have just one outcome (or two, or three, or . . .). To begin with, the reader must of course challenge the powerbase of the author in order to find her/himself in the text, but once this is done, the reader does not automatically inherit the position of the author in regards to the text, nor is this desirable. It will become clear that the narrative game will only come into true fruition once it has been properly understood as that active dialogue between author and reader, the object of which is to form a dynamic understanding of the text. In my reading, however, I will demonstrate that this dialogue is not tension-free, as it indeed breaks somewhat with Bakhtin's ideal setting for speaker-listener interaction. Furthermore, we shall also see how the text itself might in point of fact influence the understanding in many and myriad ways.

As I have alluded to above, my analysis of *Oracle Night* is rooted in a theory that is inspired by Jacques Lacan: intersubjectivity and the dynamics of lack and desire will be key concepts here. Intersubjectivity in literature comes into play, as I will show, when the reader challenges the word of the author and/or how the work signifies. To be sure, however, the reader and the author are not the only players in this game; something happens in the moment when we enter the textual. It becomes apparent that in all linguistic situations, not just in the language of fiction, "it is not only man [sic] who speaks, but in man and through man that it [the signifier] speaks";[17] and further, "[t]he register of the signifier is instituted on the basis of the fact that a signifier represents a subject to another signifier."[18] In this way we see how the subject is intrinsically and manifestly alienated in the meeting-point of language, and any subsequent use of language will be bound up in the desire to arrest the lack experienced by the impossibility of attaining a sense of wholeness in the linguistic domain. In relation to Auster's work, I will follow Bernd Herzogenrath[19] in recognizing the expediency of making reference to not only Lacan but fellow prominent thinker, Jacques Derrida, as well. Unlike Herzogenrath, though, I shall only rather briefly introduce Derrida's thought here. As such, his remarks on the effect of "doubling" in

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17 Jacques Lacan, "The Signification of the Phallus," in: *Écrits*, First Complete Edition in English, translated by Bruce Fink, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006, p. 578. All texts by Lacan that I quote in this article are from this collection.

18 Lacan, "Position of the Unconscious," p. 713.

19 See the introduction to Bernd Herzogenrath's *An Art of Desire—Reading Paul Auster*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999.

language will prove to be worthy of consideration, but mostly as a way to present my main theoretical discussion of *Oracle Night*. A few mentions of other post-WWII, French theorists will also occur.

After having thus outlined my theoretical interests, the goal of my article can be summed up accordingly: I submit a reading of Auster's *Oracle Night*, in which I venture a technical yet practical mode of studying fiction (at least this particular kind) that blends the fields of narratology and Lacanian psycho-linguistic analysis. But, first the novel under consideration must be properly introduced.

III

The action of Auster's *Oracle Night*[20] is narrated by writer Sidney Orr from the vantage point of 20 years on, effectively making the novel a memoir, or journal of sorts. The narrative begins *in medias res*, since the story surrounding the events of the novel actually begins approximately six months before "*the* [continually emphasized] *morning in question* [emphasis in original]" (11): "[o]n January 12, 1982, I [Orr] collapse in the 14th Street subway station and fall down a flight of stairs" (215-16). This incident lands him in hospital for four months. The plot thus begins at the end of his hospital stay, the continuing story about his recovery.

During the first months after his release from hospital, Orr feels like "a spectator in someone else's dream" (2); it is not determined, however, if this "someone" should be taken to be more than a casual, idealized point of reference to build his simile on. Regardless, for a while, Orr is left in a passive and placid condition, harboring the sensation that he is being exposed to the spectacle of the unconscious imagery of another. In the course of the narrative the reader is drawn towards the figure of Orr's friend and fellow novelist, Trause, again and again, nonetheless, as someone who lurks in the shadow of the text. Of course, Orr presents him in the end as "the other man" of his relationship with his wife, Grace, and as such it is no surprise that Orr should see the story as having "be[gun] and ended with Trause" (212). Not to be ignored, Trause's role in the novel will be explored to the fullest, as it is central to my overall discussion of the system and narrative effects of the text.

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20 Auster, *Oracle Night*, New York: Picador; Henry Holt and Company, 2004 (2003); henceforth only page numbers will be used to make reference to the text.

The narrative does not venture beyond the obvious explanation of why Trause continually and incessantly emerges in the text. It is clear, however, that he plays a significant role in *Oracle Night* which necessarily prompts the reader to further consider his function. Any given story can only come into being by way of the workings of its plot: the ordering of the action and the characters in it. More specifically, the plot is the programming of the novel by the author; it is the network, or source of power, which posits and structures meaning in fiction. Later in my article this understanding will be considerably reconsidered and expanded upon.

In *Oracle Night*, the acts of Trause in particular appear to order the events of the narrative. To be sure, it is Trause who supplies Orr with the foundation to the first novel that he attempts to write after his subway accident, that of the Flitcraft episode from Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*; as Trause hints that "'[t]here's a novel in this somewhere'" (12), it being itself a sort of reworking of "Wakefield" by Hawthorne. Later in *Oracle Night*, Trause offers Orr an old, unpublished short story of his, "The Empire of Bones,"[21] which has the possibility of being adapted into a movie: "'I [Trause] think the images would lend themselves to film in a pretty natural way'" (167). Even if this bit of hypertextuality suggests that writing can never exist in a vacuum, that no such thing as "pure" language exists, the fact that Trause has a looming, yet removed presence in Orr's life indicates that he is deeply connected to the inner workings of the narrative.

Trause even appears in Orr's re-imagining of the Flitcraft story as himself (a way for Orr to pay homage to the man who gave him the inspiration to reinvent Hammett's story, so to speak). Orr's protagonist, Nick Bowen, is thus made Trause's editor in the story (98). In this way, even if Bowen might spell Orr to the extent that they go through similar existential transformations (moments of life-altering chance), Trause traverses both the ontological level of the story in Orr's blue notebook and that of the general event, the "real" story of *Oracle Night*; Trause becomes the double of himself, but he is only mirrored in Orr's text in so far as he is already a representation in *Oracle Night*.

Indeed, a puzzle lingers within the name, "Trause." If we rearrange the letters, his name comes to spell "Auster" instead, and the reading then takes

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21 "The Empire of Bones" makes a return in a more recent work by Auster, *Travels in the Scriptorium*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007.

a different turn;[22] a reading which, nonetheless, corresponds to a specific
desire to frame the text, since "one [of course] has to know the words 'in
advance' in order to 'discover' them."[23] Be that as it may, similar to how
Trause appears in the Bowen story, the author of *Oracle Night*, Auster, is
now implicated in the general story as the double of Trause, his textual
alter-ego of sorts. And if, as Patteson would have it, we were to view Trause
as a "variant on the older Auster, the established and respected novelist,"[24]
it would certainly not be the first time that Auster plays with the idea of
having himself appear as a character in his own work.[25] As he tells Linda
McCaffrey and Sinda Gregory in an interview, he is driven by a desire to
"implicate myself [Auster] in the machinery of the book . . . I mean my
author self, that mysterious other who lives inside me and puts my name
on the covers of books."[26] Consequently, the reader is left to speculate as to
the author's motive for embedding himself in the text; or, rather, perhaps
it would be wise to ask why it is that we take this to be fact, that Trause is
indeed an anagram of Auster?

An additional question becomes, of course, if this name-jumble is ample
evidence for locating the author in the text; after-all, the sequence of letters
to form the name is no longer the same. Is it then not to say that we are deal-
ing with a different signifier, the proper name of the author, which cannot
possibly point to Trause as a signified, as it is indeed dubious whether it is
possible to assign a fictional character in a novel to a place of epistemologi-
cal certainty? Conceivably, however, the study of contemporary fiction (not
least the Austerian brand) should be less concerned with questions of epis-
temology, than with those of ontological importance. As such, it becomes
a matter of identifying the different planes, or possibilities, of existence
within the textual, not to say between the text and the world, what we call
reality.

In fact, in the same interview with McCaffrey and Gregory, Auster ac-
knowledges the ontological discordance between the author's name and the
real person behind that name: "[t]he self that exists in the world—the self

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22 This is also recognized by other, already mentioned Auster scholars, the Trause/Auster pairing; in addition
   to Patteson, p. 124, see also Brown, p. 94.

23 Herzogenrath, p. 55.

24 Patteson, p. 124.

25 This happens most conspicuously, of course, in *City of Glass* from the *New York Trilogy*.

26 Auster, *The Art of Hunger*, New York: Penguin Books, 1993 (1992), p. 301.

whose name appears on the covers of books—is finally not the same self who writes the book."[27] The author can then never come to signify a finality, or totality, of the work, since, as well as Trause, s/he, in Patteson's words, is merely "a series of reflections";[28] neither self is entirely nor completely "there." In this fashion, it is made clear that the position of the author becomes open to a radical re-structuring.

IV

Considering the theoretical import of literary criticism over the last 50 years or so,[29] the reader might even come to interpret the fact that Trause dies in the end of *Oracle Night* as the proverbial suicide of the author; and since, at his funeral, "no official from any religion is present and not one mention of the word *God* [is] made [italics in original]" (241), this would indeed point us towards a reading of the scene as that of the burial ceremony of the author, the quasi-divine entity of literature: the limit from beyond which meaning is nonetheless structured. The figure of the author as "he" (the generalized author is traditionally necessarily male) who arrests, in Foucauldian terminology, the free proliferation of meaning in literature[30] is articulated by another theorist, Roland Barthes, in a manner which indicates that "he [the author] has the same relation of antecedence with his work that a father sustains with his child";[31] the former is the symbol of the law as this is projected onto the latter, in so many words. Here, in a literary setting, the "law" refers to that which frames the specific fiction; it is the structure of the interpretative act, that which is required to establish literature as "truth." As Derrida reminds us, though, "[t]he structure of fiction is reduced at the very moment when it is related to its condition of truth."[32] But whether this is not in point of fact "an inevitable process"[33]

27 Ibid.

28 Patteson, p. 124.

29 Perhaps beginning with Roland Barthes' famous essay/manifesto "The Death of the Author" (1967).

30 Cf. Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?," in: *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought*, edited by Paul Rabinow, London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1991, p. 118.

31 Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in: *The Rustle of Language*, translated by Richard Howard, Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1989, p. 52.

32 Jacques Derrida, "The Purveyor of Truth," translated by Alan Bass, in: *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytical Reading*, edited by John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1988, p. 180.

33 See Barbara Johnson, "The Frame of Reference," in: *The Purloined Poe*, p. 233.

of reading fiction critically is a question which I will come back to later in
my discussion.

Returning to *Oracle Night* we would then view Trause's death as an
opening, through which the reader would be able to enter the text; Orr's per-
plexing, unadulterated happiness which shines through his grief of losing
Trause and witnessing his wife brutalized at the end of the novel (by none
other than Trause's son, Jacob) becomes the joy of the reader who has dis-
covered her/himself in the text: "even as the tears poured out of me, I was
happy, happier to be alive than I had ever been before . . . Eventually the
tears subsided, and I went into the bedroom to put on a fresh set of clothes"
(243). The fulfillment of the prophetic stories that make up Orr's blue note-
book effectively leaves him with the sensation of *tabula rasa*: the narrative
circle is complete.[34] In the guise of a new self ("a fresh set of clothes") Orr
can now enter the world once more and write a different future for him and
Grace, wholly removed from the presence of Trause (as difficult as his ab-
sence might at first seem to Orr); the end is thus the real beginning of Orr's
recovery: the resolution of his trauma. In this view, the novel would conse-
quently encompass the idea that writing is a therapeutic device.

To start over, however, Orr needs to first summon those elements of
Grace's past that remain inaccessible to him. He therefore begins piecing
together her whereabouts from when he was in the hospital to the time she
disappears for one night (see 174-76), and, relating this to the life she had
before him, he brings all the unknowns into focus, as clearly as he possibly
can, by the sheer will of his imagination: "[i]magine this, I said to myself.
Imagine this, and then see what comes of it" (212). As he pens a version of
Grace "that he can continue to love,"[35] Orr effectively erases her as the "im-
placable love" (59 n. 6); he assumes mastery of her story by extinguishing
"the radiant silence burning within [her]" (20 n. 3). Furthermore, it is in that
same moment of writing, the continuation of the story, that Orr establishes
an image of Trause as a man who struggles with his own position of power.
In Orr's final interpretation of the past, Trause, thus, seems to let go of
Grace, thereby ending his agency as the dominant influence in their lives.

In this way, it is evident how Orr's ending becomes the attempt to efface
the previous complexity of the narrative. This is exemplified by how Orr

34 Coincidentally, "Tabula Rasa" is also the title of one of Orr's earliest published stories (cf. 117 n. 9); and,
    again, fiction spills into the world.

35 Dennis Barone, "Chinese Boxes," in: *American Book Review*, Vol. 25, issue 6, Sep/Oct 2004, p. 24.

settles for a final interpretation of Grace (even if he does call attention to the distinct possibility that he might be wrong). By giving in to the desire to finally know "everything," he ultimately betrays Grace as that multifaceted being, which he described her as earlier in the novel.[36] Should we accept Orr's story as true, it would then be at a loss to the rich multiplicity of the text, which becomes acutely symbolized in Grace's eyes, "They were complex eyes, eyes that changed color according to the intensity and timbre of the light that fell on them at a given moment" (20 n. 3).[37] In a metaphorical reading it would thus appear that she is entirely open to interpretation, or, rather, entirely invoking the ambiguity of language and the possibility of representation itself. That Grace is made the double of a character (Rosa Leightman; cf. 17) in Orr's incomplete novel further testifies to the fact that *Oracle Night* will always escape a fixed reading, as the uncertainty of representation spreads to all levels of the narrative.

Orr dreams up the facets of Grace's affair with Trause, I would argue, as a way to vindicate himself as author, to overcome the impotence he experiences as a result of not being able to write himself out of the dead-end that the Bowen fiction resulted in.[38] His recovery thus consists of presenting himself to the reader as a writer who can now stand tall again; he is finally able to commit a story to paper that does not veer off in a direction he cannot control. This does not mean, on the other hand, that the reader should be left to blindly affirm the narrator's position. To accept Orr's story about Grace and Trause as the truth (within the fictitious universe of the novel) would be to stroke his ego unnecessarily. Rather, to see past his covert attempts at controlling the story is of the essence to the involved, active reader. One should not be fooled by the image of his past self as a near cripple who bumbles and stumbles through the world, but the reader must instead keep in mind that the events are being narrated from a place 20 years in the future.

I am not suggesting that Orr acts in an intentionally cruel or disingenuous manner here, but he does however rely on the reader to act as his accom-

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36 Orr sums up her as a young, beautiful woman using the banal description, "an old and weathered soul" (20 n. 3).

37 Here Auster could be said to extend a nod in Gustave Flaubert's direction, seeing that the latter equipped Emma Bovary in his famous novel with varying eye colours.

38 The Bowen story which is a hypertext on the Flitcraft episode which again is a hypertext on "Wakefield," ends with Bowen being locked in a bombproof shelter underground with no way out and therefore does not deliver on the premise of the plot.

plice in order to have his story be accepted as the truth, indeed to confirm the signified content of his tale. That he allows some form of doubt to creep into the narrative ("I could have been wrong, of course" [212]) does not finally matter since his version is the only one available to us; and without his words the story would sink into a textual void, leaving the reading behind unfulfilled. By thus affirming his story we can stay within the reality of the text a little while longer, since, as Patteson states, "storytelling skirts the void [of the text] by keeping alive an endlessly deferred presence, where the possibility of erasure is always consubstantial with the telling itself."[39]

This means that the "real," final meaning of the story will always be just around the corner, but entirely out of reach at the same time. To keep the story going, one must accede to the fact that the narrative, the signifier, can have no stable signified to point to, and, in this way, the text thus becomes a representation of the same endless spiral of signification which it creates. The writing is, then, a symbol of an absence, in so far as it is a "play of representation, [in which] the point of origin becomes ungraspable",[40] as Derrida writes. In this way, it becomes clear how the example of Grace in *Oracle Night*, as it happens, corresponds to the Derridean view of representation in language. In the moment of being fictionalized by Orr, Grace's being is obscured, and textual representation can, subsequently, only be thought of as the process of "doubling":

> [t]here is no longer a simple origin. For what is reflected is split *in itself* and not only as an addition to itself of its image. The reflection, the image, the double, splits what it doubles. The origin of the speculation becomes a difference [emphasis in original].[41]

Consequently, to separate Grace as a concept of reality from her "image" is ultimately doomed to fail; she can only exist in Orr's writing as the spectacle of her own absence. We can therefore agree here with Barthes when he says that writing "traces a field without origin—or at least with no origin but language itself, that is, the very thing which ceaselessly calls any origin into question."[42] The title of Auster's novel is itself split in the text as it is

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39 Patteson, p. 125.

40 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Corrected Edition, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1997 (1967), p. 36.

41 Ibid.

42 Barthes, p. 52.

simultaneously the title of the book we are holding in our hands *and* that of fictitious writer Sylvia Maxwell: it is exactly such instances of the uncanny which bring about the effect of *mise-en-abîme* in the novel.

The above view of language undoubtedly presents a problem for literary critics: how is it possible to speak about literature if one continually runs the risk of stalling the potential, the continual doubling, of the text by subjecting it to analysis? In the moment that we think to have deciphered a text, arrived at a framework for understanding its meaning, its truth, can we then do more than invoke "the desire to stop up the hole"?[43]

I would propose that the solution to this challenge is to be found in the work of Lacan, whom, ironically, Derrida specifically criticizes for establishing a limited view of literature due to the psychoanalytical structure of his readings. For Derrida, to ground a text in anything but its inherent differences, "[b]y denuding the meaning behind the formal disguises, by undoing the work",[44] would exhibit the desire of the analyst/critic to assume mastery of the text. And while it is true that the text *will* always become subject to at least a degree of framing in the analytical moment, its objectification,[45] Lacan's accent on the formation of subjectivity as resembling the game of "even and odd" brings a certain dynamic dimension to a literary reading, nonetheless, as we shall see; it is the Lacanian intersubjective dialectic which re-activates the textual as a productive scene of signification. Via Lacan's seminar on Edgar Allen Poe's "The Purloined Letter" I will here propose that this game offers a good model of literature and narration, in that "the active subject," who must think of an even or odd number for his opponent to guess,

> will at each instant attempt to convince [the] opponent that here is a law which presides over a certain regularity in [the] selection [of the active subject], in order to pull the ground of his understanding out from under him as often as possible by breaking that law.[46]

It can then be said that the author is cast as the "active subject" who presides over the law, in turn, directing the narration on the page. It is in this

43 Derrida, "The Purveyor of Truth," p. 188.

44 Ibid., p. 175

45 See Johnson, "The Frame of Reference," p. 230.

46 Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'," p. 44.

intersubjective instant that the reader attempts to first enter the position of the writer to "break" the code of the text by anticipating the plot of the text, but s/he might come to acknowledge that the limit of the text, its "interpretation," is not the end of the "literary act";[47] rather it is when we transgress against the perceived framework of the text that "reading" really begins.

It here follows that even if the law is discovered by the reader, permitting the meaning of the work to stand out, the understanding thus acquired is replaced by a new law, a re-writing, which merely takes the place of the first. This is to say that the desire which directs the literary act, the search for the other in the text, cannot but be perpetually deferred; the game of narration (the interpretative-creative act) will continue regardless of the participation of the subjects involved. The reader, however, will be able to interact with the writer as an active party to the process of the text, but only by realizing that the signified of the text, its truth (or in the Derridean optic, its presence) purely exists in the shadow realm of our imagination, and that the play of the text, which is the game, is the only "reality" of literature.

Preferable to viewing the text as the arena of a war between reader and writer, a struggle for literary hegemony, this analysis will benefit more from considering the act of narration as a game, then. Such a game would not consist of a round of "hide and seek" in which the reader pursues the author so as to remove her/him from the position of keeper of the text, in order to liberate the latter. While it does involve a certain search for the writer, it is rather to engage with her/him in a play, or performance, within the space of the text; that is to say that, in a word, the text is dialogical. If we here apply Bakhtin's insights into how discourse in the novel functions, it will become clear that the game of narration, as it has been termed in this article, exhibits a certain rhetorical modus. The speaker (author) and the listener (reader) have the potential to produce, together, an active understanding of the spoken word, or the text, which would guarantee that a dynamic approach to language can be maintained. It is then that the word of the speaker, by being introduced into a dialogue, "is indissolubly merged with the response [the answer-word]";[48] and Bakhtin goes on to say that, "[u]nderstanding and

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47 Cf. Derrida, "Force and Signification," in: *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass, London: Routledge Classics, 2001 (1967), p. 7. The term occurs repeatedly in various texts and interviews.

48 M. M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel", in: *The Dialogic Imagination*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981, p. 282.

response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other".[49] As such, within any given dialogue the impetus to meaning is formed in a signifying transaction with the listener, who responds to the speaker's initiative by "establish[ing] a series of complex interrelationships, consonances and dissonances with the word and enrich[ing] it with new elements."[50] To invoke a shared responsibility to continually renew the language that both parties are active users of will consequently ensure that the dialogical format can serve as a productive means to engage with literature. For the recipient of a literary work to claim the death of the author would consequently be myopic in scope, since we need the author, or the concept of the author at least, to be able to maintain a certain dynamics of the text. Furthermore, to allow for literature to be something more than an object, it is imperative to not turn the text into a trophy of interpretation.

This is not to suggest that we should return to an idea of the author as the "master of ceremonies" in literature. On the other hand, it is merely a way of safeguarding against reverting to a lackluster view of literary criticism, in which the doubles of the text would be ordered according to a rigid, Saussurean structural schema: the counter-point to the theoretical scale of this article.

V

So, how are we to finally confront the author of *Oracle Night*? First of all, the reader might recognize certain sensibilities of the protagonist, Orr, in the writer, Auster. If we recall how Orr exudes an undeniable affinity for the operations of chance in the novel (a stable theme of Auster's *oeuvre*, of course), we would then appreciate the following quote from Auster: "[c]hance is a part of reality: we are continually shaped by the forces of coincidence, the unexpected occurs with almost numbing regularity in all our lives."[51] The resemblance is definitely present, and Orr could just as well have been made to utter these words.

By thus identifying a part of Orr's personality with Auster's, we have begun the game of narration. In succession, the character, Bowen, of Orr's unfinished novel, is caught up in the mix, as he embodies a similar fascina-

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49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Auster, *The Art of Hunger*, p. 277.

tion with the "forces of coincidence" to the point of abandoning his wife and job after a fated encounter with a falling gargoyle. Nevertheless, in deciphering the code of Trause's name it seems that we have proceeded to the next level of the game, and the reader would perhaps be satisfied with this solution to the puzzle. But the game of narration is such that the narrator is the one who essentially "draws the first card" from the deck of the law of the author's fiction. Accordingly, we can share in Lacan's reading of Poe to pose the following question: is the author not "taking his gamble even further by really shedding light on it [his trick] for us without us seeing a thing?"; and, thus, again, it "would be the height of the illusionist's art: to have one of his fictional beings *truly fool us* [italics in original]."[52]

However, if the author should show himself as becoming absent, only to deceive the reader, wanting to have this someone think that he is really gone, is he not setting himself up to be a victim of his own trickery? Indeed, if the law of the narrative, its structure, as mediated by the author, is what orders our reading experience, in the moment of discovering the logic of the law, this can certainly be transgressed; a counter-law is sure to be established in the guise of an alternative reading than that which is proposed by the narrator. Then again, perhaps the author is all the while counting on the reader to grasp as much.

We would thus be falling into a trap, were we to remain satisfied with uncovering the "truth" of the name, Trause. Since his name so obviously refers to Auster's, it becomes a clever way for the author to have us consider him in the story; it is the postmodern author (for want of a more suitable epithet, perhaps) who calls attention to himself meta-textually, much in the same way as Orr continually directs the reader to his footnotes, in order to verify his position as a reliable narrator. In this underhanded fashion, Auster proves that the reader will still look for signs of the author in literature, despite the charges against the very same posed by critical theory of recent years.

Even so, it will not be entirely accurate to say that we here encounter an author whose aim is to permeate every corner of the text, even if the immediate act of interpretation might reveal as much. Auster has at least pointed out that he strives to "leave enough room in the prose for the reader to inhabit it".[53] But this sentiment is also marked by a conflict of involvement:

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52 Both, Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'," p. 14.
53 Auster, *The Art of Hunger*, p. 272.

which part of the book belongs to the reader, and which to the author? The space of the reader in the novel will ultimately come to rely on her/his willingness to participate in the play of the text.[54] The narrative of *Oracle Night*, then, establishes a game with the reader to explore the degree to which we are prepared to acknowledge the power of the author in the text; or if, on the other hand, we should come to call his bluff and exert ourselves as active, performative readers, who insist on the role of reading as a forceful element in producing the text: *Oracle Night* consequently exists as a textual back-and-forth play of punning on the theme of disappearance.[55] It is specifically as a result of the sequence of doubles in the text that the reader can enter the text, through the cracks in the veil of its language, so to speak.[56] That Orr is witnessed by Grace as being not-there when he writes in the blue notebook (cf. 27) seems to me to signify that he has disappeared into the paratext; along with the reader he now teeters on the "fringe"[57] of the text. And is it not exactly in this space, neither fully belonging to the text, nor to the outside, that the reader and the writer can face each other and enter into a dialogue over the meaning of the text? If it has not been made clear already, it must of course be said that the author only appears in the shape of the reader's projected sense of an authorial presence in the text. The dialogue over the text therefore essentially occurs at the time of reading: "[t]he narrative text, like every other text, has no other temporality than what it borrows, metonymically, from its own reading."[58]

VI

It is here that we can begin to adequately approach the question of the paratext, as I use it in this article. As such, in the moment when we open up to a genuine transaction of discourse between reader and author over the text,

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54 As a side-note, we must also remember, by way of Bakhtin, that participation in the text, to a certain extent, initially depends on the author's motivation to construct a text that is not self-sufficient, but, rather, is open to "readerly" alteration (cf. Bakhtin, p. 281).

55 Patteson indeed identifies this theme to be central to Auster's work (see page 117 of his article).

56 This phrasing owes to Stephane Mallarmé's influential essay "Crise de vers [Crisis in Poetry]," in: *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch, et al, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001, pp. 845-851.

57 See Genette, *Paratexts*, p. 2.

58 Genette, *Narrative Discourse—An Essay in Method*, translated by Jane E. Lewin, Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, Sixth printing, 1995 (1972), p. 34.

the boundaries of the text that were originally instated by the paratext fall aside. Subsequently, the idea that we are "just" reading a novel (as is otherwise indicated on the cover of the book) becomes secondary to the realization that even if the conventions of literary publishing might impose certain restrictions on the reader's experience of the text, the understanding of the text is finally free to move beyond any such model of framing. At the same time, the positions of author and reader enter into a transitional phase.

Hence, *Oracle Night* is now read as an invitation to substitute the author (Auster) as the double of Trause, who is the other of Orr, with that of the reader; this then becomes the true signification of Trause's death in the novel: in a playful manner, the author holds out his pen to the reader. If perceived as a game, narration undeniably becomes intersubjectivity par excellence, in that the game, writing, can only continue when the reader enters into the position of Orr's interlocutor in lieu of Trause. Thus, the reader repeats the subject of the writer to resume the force of signification in the text; the movement of meaning is activated once more. To modify Bakhtin's dialogical principle slightly, it can be said that the reader, or the listener, in responding to the sender's word assumes position 1 of the dialogue that results in the understanding that is the text. This substitution happens, then, on condition of the initial dialogical encounter with the author in the paratext. But we must go still further than this: we cannot be satisfied with merely viewing the meaning of the text as being predicated on the "motivated agreement or disagreement"[59] between the author and the reader.

The interchangeable subjects of reader and writer, as follows, are linked to the figure of the "pure signifier" in the repetition of the text: the trajectory of the narrative becomes a loop of shifting signification. In the Lacanian sense, this pure signifier, subsequently, directs all subjects to "relay each other in the course of the intersubjective repetition."[60] In turn, this is crucial to our understanding of *Oracle Night*, since the process of the text depends on the repetition of the reader in the writer to produce the literary act: that which ensures the continual promulgation of the meanings of the text in the dialectical union of reading and writing.

When Trause gives Orr "The Empire of Bones" to base a screen-play on, in Orr's interpretation, this becomes "a comment on the state of my [Orr's]

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59 Bakhtin, p. 282.
60 Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'," p. 10.

marriage—indirectly, in the finely nuanced codes and metaphors of fiction" (227). In this way, Trause bares his true involvement in Orr's life by an act which is nevertheless veiled by language. But, in actual fact, this is a trick which conceals that of another deceptive device: that, as we saw above, if Auster is the double of Trause he is necessarily the other of Orr (which Auster must first present himself as the double of, however, as was shown in the case of the shared articulation of the importance of chance); but as the reader therefore comes to occupy the place of the writer, intersubjectively, it is only a position which can be arrived at if, at the outset, the former stand in place of Orr. Put succinctly, it is by playing the game of the author that the reader can gain access to the narrative mechanism of the text. Furthermore, it is by subjecting the novel to our specific reading that we enter the text, not to overpower it and subject it to control, but to exist in it, to have agency within the textual. And so, it becomes apparent that reading is governed by a desire for the text, or the system *of* the text

Yet, it becomes necessary first to realize that the desire of the reader to "know" the text, to inhabit the same space as the letters on the page, is immediately bound up with the aforementioned operations of intersubjectivity. We encounter desire in and for the text only because it already exists as such, prior to the reading experience; the reader desires the desire of the author. Gilbert D. Chaitin explains the flow of desire between subjects in the following manner:

> [o]n the one hand, I [the subject in general] desire the desire of the other. On the other, that desire is given to me only as text, as the discourse of the other, what the other says and does in a signifying way . . . . [I]t speaks in the holes, gaps, silences, or modes of organization (for instance, repetitions, or other "figures") of that discourse.[61]

In the dialogical game of narration, the reader desires the word of the author, to make the meaning her/his own. But the point is exactly that meaning does not come into being until the dialogue between the two subjects has been begun; understanding is after-all completely dependent on the interaction itself. This paradox then creates a certain tension, which, in literature, comes out in the way that we approach the text. As has already been established, performing the task of narrator, Orr initially stands in place of the

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61 Chaitin, p. 1009.

author, and the reader, in this way, directs her/his desire for the text in his direction. In an almost magnetic way we as readers are drawn towards the position of the text's narrator, since we believe meaning to be distributed from here. As it happens, the fictive narrator is no more than a relay point of the excess desire that the author has already invested the text with: her/his own hope of overcoming the "lack-of-being"[62] that, ironically, arises from the author's own original inauguration into language (what Lacan calls the "symbolic"). It is this lack that drives what Herzogenrath aptly refers to as the "motor of art."[63] In *Oracle Night*, more than establishing and repeating "scenes of spectacular suffering"[64] to captivate the reader, this series of repetition serves to metonymically alert the reader to the crisis points of the text, where desire momentarily runs out to give way to a glimpse into that void which underlies the text, the death of signification. But, this circle of life and death in the novel really comes to form its productive power. The workings of the dynamics of lack and desire thus promise that the text will never become static in nature, since at those times when textual demise threatens, a slew of new, extra-textual cultural elements are always, theoretically, potentially waiting to be included in the discourse about the text.

Since the lack that results from involvement with the text has the potential to generate a certain feeling of "emptiness," a contract between writer and reader is formed, in which it is agreed upon that the text will be subject to a general Text: all the cultural and textual elements that are identified as the discursive formation of the text. This ensures that a reservoir of fresh signification always exists to reinvigorate the experience of the text. For example, that we can identify the plot structures of other texts in Auster's work counts towards acknowledging that parts of the text owe their existence to some outside influence (which of course would sound fairly elementary to most literary critics).

What I have just called the discursive formation of the text is linked to that which Genette refers to as "epitext," which is "any paratextual element

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62 Herzogenrath, p. 6.

63 Ibid., p. 11.

64 Rebecca E. Martin, "'I should like to spend my whole life in reading it': Repetition and the Pleasure of the Gothic," in: *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, Vol. 28, issue 1, winter 1998, p. 77. In *Oracle Night* these scenes include: "[s]tillborn babies, concentration camp atrocities, presidential assassinations" (223), and, most important of all, the vicious attack on Grace committed by Trause's son, Jacob. The knowing reader will of course already have recognized the parallels between Auster's fiction and the Gothic genre, but it lies beyond the scope of this article to do more than just acknowledge this.

not materially appended to the text . . . but circulating, as it were, freely in a virtually limitless physical and social space."[65] The interviews with Auster that I have quoted so far will then be deemed to belong to the epitext of *Oracle Night*. Also, the real-life events that Orr alludes to in his footnotes would be included here as well, and the epitext is clearly not only limited to the biographical person of the author, nor his *oeuvre*. The transaction between author and reader accordingly moves into a wider domain where it is not easy to tell whether something is actually part of the epitext or not. The cultural range of the text will after-all always be subject to expansion, depending on the specific knowledge that the reader calls upon in the interaction with the text. As this is disseminated in the work, the authorial discourse becomes contaminated, and its borders can no longer be easily defined.

Consequently, were we to read the ending of *Oracle Night* as "proof" of the prophetic quality of Orr's writings, it would only be as a result of this (ideal) mutual understanding of reader and writer, and it would, thus, rather be this actual textual liaison which would be of interest here; it would be the recognition which launched the game of narration: the metaphoric "pop of the start gun." In this way, Orr is the spark between the reading and the writing "I." That he feels as if he has become "transparent" (223) is simply due to the fact that he is, of course, "nothing" but a character in a novel, a being of discourse; he *is* the medium of a different kind of oracle than he might think.

VII

The compulsion to repeat is at once a property of the reader and the writer, as we saw above, in the manner in which the former "slides" into the position of the latter. Since Trause is the double of Auster in the text, the reader will unavoidably come face to face with the fate of Trause, death. This, in turn, is the final "hand" of the subject to play in the text. Indeed, "the signifier . . . materializes the instance of death,"[66] and, as such, to repeat the signifier becomes the inevitable attempt of the subject to defer death, the end of meaning, as it were. Therefore, both the reader and the writer have an interest in continuing the game of narration, but the demise of Trause

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65 Genette, *Paratexts*, p. 344.
66 Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'," p. 16.

nominally reminds the reader that, lastly, only one end awaits her/his (literary) subject as well. This is the tension, the expressed lack, behind the desire which generates the narrative game. It is a fool's notion, then, to think that the text can be wrestled into submission after-all, since if we would like to pretend that the text can be undermined "by a capricious, repetitive, or selective reading, that undermining nonetheless stops short of perfect analexia: one can run a film backwards, image by image, but one cannot read a text backwards . . . without it ceasing to be a text."[67] The game must end sometime, and, in spite of everything, Genette calmly goes on, "[b] ooks are a little more constrained than people [Barthes et al?] sometimes say they are by the celebrated *linearity* of the linguistic signifier [emphasis in original].[68]

Ultimately, that we believe to have deciphered the code of the author only means that we have now moved to the law of the text, which can only allow for so much repetition. Even so, the so-called linear movement of the signifier permits for a number of detours. As the trajectory of the plot (the signifier's domain) thus intersects with the subject who is reading *Oracle Night*, the text becomes vulnerable to interception by this reader, and the repetition of the text will have been secured, prolonging the life of the book. A text will appear to have been emptied of meaning only as the individual reader steps out of the game, in that instant when the "I" can no longer have one interpretation stand in for another to continue to raise the stakes of the text; to counteract the law of the text becomes a new law for the reading subject to challenge and "write" a new version of. When the understanding of the text shifts, this means in effect that the narrative game can begin again.

Indeed, interpretation (whether of a book, or the events of the past) constantly moves to a different point of entry and, simultaneously, conclusion: as one truth is established, a new one is imploring of the reader to be included in her/his interpretive archive. Accordingly, the discourse must perpetually be adjusted to fit the new law of the text, the displaced trajectory of the signifier. In *Oracle Night* this is symbolized by Orr repeating the stories of the old, now gone, blue notebook in the new notebook (the novel, *Oracle Night*). To say that a text ends is merely to say that one reading is substituted by another, and a new signifying circle "locks" with the previous interpretation; the reading subject can endure many textual deaths.

67 Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p. 34.
68 Ibid.

The Lacanian emphasis of my title, "Even or(r) Odd," accordingly refers to the continual, alternate doubling effect of fiction. As Patteson makes clear, "or" "always indicates an alternative,"[69] and Orr really does become the conjunction which his name alludes to. The multitudes of stories in *Oracle Night* bring home the point that a story can never stand on its own, but its very existence is predicated on all the different ways in which it can be influenced to assume different significations. The number of stories in the book is not only dependent on how many times they are narrated in the novel itself, but also on the number of times they have been read by any and all of its readers. Each new interpretation is, in effect, a re-writing of the novel, which, finally, appears in the interaction, or game, with the author in/of the text. Certainly, it is the latter, the highly contested element of literature, which forms the materiality of the game; the letters on the page are the markers with which the writer and reader dialogically challenge the position of each other, but this will always happen, as has been shown, by drawing on the epitext of the work.

The text can be expanded upon almost indefinitely, an act which is primarily the privilege of the reader.[70] As new information is collected about the text, the way we understand it will change; perhaps only slightly, but change it will. In my discussion of *Oracle Night* I have attempted to add a very specific element to the discursive formation of the text, namely a mode for reading the novel according to what I have referred to as the game of narration. I have thus opted for a position as critic which is not so much concerned with maintaining or establishing a regimented system for understanding or framing the text. Rather my ambition has been to construct a communicative method for dealing with, specifically, *Oracle Night*, but moreover fiction as a whole. In my article I still refer to the theme of chance in Auster for example which highlights the fact that it is virtually impossible to disregard the already established elements of the epitext; neither is this worthwhile to attempt, for reasons previously stated. Any scholarly article is then a conversation with a number of other specialists, who too, one can only hope, strive to meet the expectations of Bakhtin in laboring to establish an active, productive understanding of the specific subject under consideration.

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69 Patteson, p. 124. Another diminutive for Orr, however, might also be that of "unrefined or(r)e," in order to refer to the inherent existential "blankness" that he experiences.

70 The author can of course influence the manner in which his text is perceived by adding new remarks or opinions to the existing epitext in post-publication interviews, etc.

And while it may be true that storytelling "in Auster's work functions as a means by which the alienated individual can share with others, and reconnects to the social realm",[71] the critic, in a similar way, shares in what has already been told about the work, in order to connect her/his own contribution to the over-all academic discourse; in addition to its strictly professional function, literary criticism, in this manner, is linked to the formation of identity as well.

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71 Brown, p. 4.

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