Getting out of Strange Spaces

A Reconstructive Reading of Paul Auster’s *Oracle Night*

Cia Gustrén

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Abstract


As the title of this essay suggests, Paul Auster’s 2003 novel Oracle Night is studied with regard to what is here considered to be a search for a way out of estrangement. This search, as narrated from the point of view of the protagonist, is followed by a certain recognition of the limits of human existence – which may be essentially meaningless but is nevertheless portrayed as an intentional state of being, not least through the act of writing as a means of subjectification. Thus, the novel is read with a special focus on the thematic representation of writing and human subjectivity. These overarching themes may be approached with reference to two different philosophies or theoretical positions – postmodernism and existentialism. The purpose of the essay is to study the extent to which Oracle Night may be understood in terms of an existentialist (reconstructive) critique of, or challenge to, a postmodernist (deconstructive) perspective. In order to follow this line of inquiry, the analytic method rests on narrative thematics. This kind of narratological study answers the question what Auster’s novel is about and in what ways the theoretical perspectives in question are expressed in the novel. Thematic motifs are examined within the frame of a six-step model of narrative units. These units are based on Carsten Springer’s (2001) elaboration on the theme of identity crisis in Auster’s fiction and made it possible to put different motifs into a context and convey the point of view of the text in a systematic way.

Keywords: critique, deconstruction, desubjectification, estrangement, existentialism, literary theory, narratology, postmodernism, reconstruction, strange spaces, subjectivity, subjectification, thematic analysis, themes, thematic units, thematic motifs, writing.
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1. Introduction

Paul Auster’s novel *Oracle Night* (2003) deals with the events unfolding during the span of two weeks in the story about Sidney Orr – a New York writer and the novel’s central protagonist. At the opening of the novel, Orr looks back on the day when he returns from a long stay in hospital. He has been sick from a near fatal collapse on January 12, 1982 and all the doctors and medical experts had been sure that he was going to die. It turns out that they were wrong and to everybody’s surprise, Orr walks out of hospital in May. A long recovery awaits after he “mysteriously failed to die” (*ON* 1). The following weeks and months are a struggle to get back on feet but also to come to terms with what is going on in his life.

The summer goes by, and Orr is slowly getting better. One morning when he is on his daily walk, he happens to encounter a small stationery shop called the “Paper Palace”. It’s September 18, 1982 – the date referred to as “the morning in question” (*ON* 2). This is when Orr feels the urge to stock up with fresh supplies and start writing again. The struggle to make sense of what is going on in his life now turns into a process of writing in a very particular blue notebook. What follows is an account of writing and storytelling as something intrinsically human and real as life itself. The way events that take place in the protagonist’s own life coexist with the events in his stories, may be part of the novel’s concern with the question whether writing can determine, and thus be a way to predict, the future.

For one thing, a story in Auster’s novel does not turn out as purely fictitious as opposed to a “real” world in which an author or reader belongs. Each character in the novel may be understood as a story of their own, brought alive and to a large extent shaped by the act of writing. This is an example of the recurring features of postmodernist thought that often characterise Auster’s novels and means that the opposition between real and fiction is often proved to be undecidable and shifting. However, the novel also signals that stories are social constructions whereas the act of writing them nevertheless depends on the functioning of a human body. *Oracle Night* shows how fragile a human body is and how it may change and be out of control when something is wrong with it. In this sense, *Oracle Night* is concerned with the existential boundaries of life and the way the characters, mainly the protagonist, are affected by these boundaries. Even though a body itself is not a static, biological entity but a shifting and dynamic process which is subject to time and space, the novel largely seems to suggest that the working of the human body is a condition of possibility for any story to be written in the first place. Thus, a postmodern outlook is clearly confronted with existential matters in Auster’s work.
According to Carsten Springer, Auster is known for employing “the characteristic tools and themes of postmodernist literature to express his view of life […]” (2001: 3). Nevertheless, Springer points out that there is also a development in Auster’s writing which may be characterized as a reconstructive or existentialist mode as opposed to a deconstructive or postmodernist one. Such a reconstructive style has mainly been identified regarding Auster’s use of “realistic” components to depict a physical reality and the boundaries of human life in contrast to social constructions marked by constant undecidability and contingency. Instead of fragmentation and instability, Auster turns to stability, meaningful relations and moral (Ibid.). Thus, Auster’s attitude towards language may be postmodern whereas his meditations on themes like time, chance, disappearance, solitude and memory have been told to have more traditional underpinnings.

1.1 Aim and purpose of the study

Even though Auster creates a setting in Oracle Night that largely takes on the characteristics of postmodern life, the purpose of this essay is to study how the novel also may be read as a critique of, or challenge to, postmodern conceptions of the world. I thus describe and analyse how Oracle Night may be read as a reconstructive or existential account, mainly with a thematic focus on issues related to writing and human subjectivity. Such an approach may be motivated in view of how Auster’s writings often involve a mixture of fiction and literary theory. The intention is not to set Oracle Night against a realist genre however, or to analyse the novel in terms of oppositions such as Real/Fictional, Life/Death or Body/Mind. Rather, I am interested in the way the novel adheres to or differs from the postmodernist view – or how the novel juxtaposes the constantly shifting modes of postmodern life with conditions of fixity, unity and stability. In other words, it is a matter of how the relative and constantly shifting modes of the postmodern may also be based on that which cannot possibly change.
2. Previous research

Although *Oracle Night* was released more than fifteen years ago, in 2003, it has not been subject to previous research to the same extent as Auster’s earlier works – such as *The New York Trilogy* (1987), *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), *The Invention of Solitude* (1988), *Moon Palace* (1989), *The Music of Chance* (1990) and *Leviathan* (1993). There is an extensive amount of analyses done on these popular novels, several of them applying a variety of postmodernist perspectives. Auster’s novels may be understood as a critique of the notion of authorship as well as the novel genre at large, based on the many examples of negativized forms such as decreation, diffusion and dislocation. Also, one can see a thorough use of concepts like contingency, ambiguity and coincidence – especially in the negotiation of multiple identities and relationships. Clearly, previous research has taken an interest in the postmodernist stage of Auster’s writing, which may be explained by the postmodern turn that took place in literary studies in the mid- to late 20th century.

*Oracle Night* has previously been read in terms of a postmodernist as well as an existentialist perspective. One example of the former is Rasmus R. Simonsen’s deconstructive approach to the novel, in which he discusses how the playful notion of text influences the reader. Above all, he studies how a so called paratext – such as the use of footnotes to frame the main narrative – may be understood as the border or threshold of text. In a Derridean sense, a paratext refers to a text beyond which there is nothing. Simonsen also draws on psychoanalytic theorists like Jacques Lacan for the sake of illustrating how the use of language is “bound up in the desire to arrest the lack experienced by the impossibility of attaining a sense of wholeness in the linguistic domain” (2009: 87). In other words, language is characterized by a sense of lack of meaning which is impossible to fill. The study concludes that no story can stand on its own, since its very existence is predicated on the ways in which it can assume different significations. The way texts infinitely refer to other texts may be understood as a form of intertextual abundance – a chain through which a given work is continually ascribed new meanings.

Sigrid Renaux (2009) also states that the novel manifests itself as a postmodern one in studying Auster’s metafictional narrative – defined as a narrative that provides a comment on its own status as fiction. In Renaux’s view, the novel is a still developing genre that is contradictory in the sense that it both inscribes and subverts the conventions of the traditional novel. The postmodern novel is also said to experiment with boundaries and turn itself into satire. *Oracle Night* does, according to Renaux, yet employ traditional forms of
narrative in a way that corresponds with the thesis statement at hand. In this sense, the meaning of the postmodern novel seems to lie in its inherent contradiction. Richard F Patteson also concludes in regard of Auster’s metanarrative that *Oracle Night* is obviously a novel in which narrative plays a significant role in the construction and reconstruction of a human reality that hovers on the edge of oblivion (2008: 115). Whether one refers to a postmodern understanding of being in the world or a reconstructive one that builds on the unchanging nature of life and death, *Oracle Night* has a rather fateful and momentous undertone, not least regarding the cruel and sometimes ironic destinies of its characters.

William Dow describes how Auster’s work both “uses and questions the validity of postmodern typologies” (2004: 51). In my opinion, *Oracle Night* emphasises moral and existential choices on the part of the protagonist. In the sense that the novel reflects on the human condition and the ethical position of being a writer, an existentialist perspective on writing as well as a way of extending and contravening postmodern theory is presented. Patricia Merivale finds that even though Auster’s novels are ascetically philosophical in their winks at postmodernism, their heroes are on a moral quest (1997: 186). This is indeed true of the novel’s protagonist – whose moral quest nevertheless ends up with the brutal aftermath of failing to live according to the moral standards he otherwise holds high. Some critics argue that such moral quests would disqualify a novel from being postmodern. In comparison to other works classified as postmodern, Auster’s novels are described as much more classical and whose hints at the postmodern are in vain.

Auster’s placement among his contemporaries proves to be shifting over time. From the earlier “postmodern” novels, Auster has returned to “some form of contemporary ‘realism’, a direction which is exactly the opposite [...] from what is implied in the privileging of *The New York Trilogy* (1987) by most critics” and what is, according to Patricia Merivale, “overtly stated in previous research” (1997: 189). For the same reason, Auster critique points to a shortage of analyses done on other theoretical assumptions than the postmodern – such as the existentialist perspectives which is the concern of this essay. In the following section, I present some of the assumptions underlying postmodern theory as opposed to an existential point of view.
2.1 Postmodern theory vs existentialism

Postmodernism, used here as an umbrella term for a variety of post-structuralist approaches, is a theoretical and philosophical tradition which emphasizes a critique of totality and objectivity of social structures and identities – rooted in the wider project of modernism, which is often described as unfinished and still ongoing. The basic assumption of postmodern thinkers is that social and cultural meaning is produced out of language. However, they reject the idea that language, society or identity are possible to describe in terms of “a complete or coherent signifying system, since systems are always changing” (Culler 1997: 125). The point is instead that language constitutes reality, but also disintegrates it because of the constant change, indeterminacy and contradiction in our way of assigning meaning to the world. Likewise, postmodernism questions the modernist strive towards totalisation and harmony. It is important to underline though, that the postmodern is not to be considered a break altogether with previous models of meaning-making. Postmodernism does not deny the reality of underlying structures of meaning but argues against the belief in unity, totality and invariability of these structures.

The basis of a postmodernist approach to literature and narrative is understood here as a matter of analysing how texts may be used to support what seems to be irreconcilable positions, which according to Ross C. Murfin is to grasp the implications of language as already filled with intertwined meanings and discourses (1996: 185ff). Thus, the construction of reality and subjectivity may be studied regarding the contradictions and fissures that are characteristic of the postmodern world. Linda Hutcheon also refers to the cultural enterprise called postmodernism as a contradictory phenomenon characterised by a flow of “negativized rhetoric: we hear of discontinuity, disruption, dislocation, decentring, indeterminacy and antitotalization” (1988: 3). According to Hutcheon, the fundamental contradiction of postmodern theory is that it constantly refers to something it purports to move away from, that inherent in postmodern thought is the presence of the past. Again, postmodernism is not so much a break with history as a critical revisiting or dialogue with it, which is key to the narrative of *Oracle Night*. The novel indeed takes this statement as a point of departure and explores its implications for the main character.

As outlined by thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Soren Kierkegaard and others, existentialism may be understood as contrary to the postmodern flux. Existentialism is understood here as a philosophy according to which we are defined through and subjected to our actions and thus ascribed a certain responsibility. In other words, it is
defined as a matter of thinking and making moral choices as human beings, whose existence is characterized in this case by a certain sense of permanence and solidity. An existential humanism is further defined by Warren Oberman as a negotiation between positive and negative views of life. Thus, a fundamental loneliness and meaninglessness may be opposed to acts of trust, responsibility and faith (2004: 194). This has similarities with Auster’s existentialist account, which is understood in this case as a return to traditional values. At the same time, a traditional ethos is clearly framed by the postmodern discontinuity to which the characters are continuously exposed and left to orient themselves as human subjects.

To understand the process by which the protagonist in *Oracle Night* is made aware of himself as a living subject or, alternatively, experiences a loss of self, I apply the concepts of subjectification and desubjectification. These concepts are mutually related and get their constitutive strength and energy from each other, meaning on the one hand that the protagonist recognizes himself as being a human subject and on the other hand that he experiences a sense of estrangement. It may also be captured by the notion of a strange space, which are depicted throughout *Oracle Night* and may be defined as André Jansson and Amanda Lagerkvist (2009) puts it: “those bewildering and sometimes unspeakably bizarre spaces where disruption or disarray leave social subjects estranged and out of place” (2009: 2). In this sense, strange spaces are also taken to entail a loss of self and, in the long run, it may signify the postmodern notion of “the lost subject”. However, strange spaces also offer a certain sense of recognition, even if it is a recognition that something is not quite right, meaning that they capture both subjectification and desubjectification at the same time.

Above all, existentialism has a bearing on my interpretation of *Oracle Night* and its thematic representation of subjectivity as dependent upon what could be called the life-support system of the body. As Nietzsche also points out, the human body is not so much an “instrument of a subjectivity [as] the essential ‘starting point’ for thought” (1968: 271; 289, in Gibson 1996: 32). To embrace the multi-faceted concept of subjectivity, it may also be defined as a set of different roles or subject positions. As Springer points out, Auster’s novels may often be understood with special emphasis on the experimentation with roles (2000: 17). This makes it possible to emphasize the active part played by the subject in the production of social and cultural meaning, not least in the telling of stories.
3. A narratological approach

Narratology is concerned with the way stories are told, how the telling of stories achieves certain effects, and which narrative components or functions that stories are made of (Culler 1997: 125; 83). In other words, narratology deals with the fictional structures given to objects and events that are told about in a text. Narratology stems from classical modes of thinking about literature and has found expression above all in the notion of narrative space as a geometry of isolated components that can be measured accordingly (Gibson 1996: 4). The geometrization of narrative has been a basic principle in narratology from the start yet is much criticised by a postmodernist theory of literature since it presupposes a belief in objective knowledge. It has also been criticized for the formalization of narrative, bound into a set of “given” characteristics and closed systems.¹

According to Michel Serres, one may use metaphors of text to describe a multiplicity of narrative space instead of treating narrative as a “unitary, homogenous space, determined by and organized within a given set of constants” (Serres 1982, in Gibson 1996: 7). The classical geometrical thought about narrative may thus be substituted for a description which is itself open to variation and makes for a multiplicity of meanings: “There can be no fixed or stable representation of the text” (Gibson 1996: 13; 16). For instance, one way of moving beyond the static view of narrative is speaking about narrative as a compound of forces or desires.

There is also a difference between story and plot – the latter being the most basic feature of narrative. Plot is the way of organising events to make a story, and it may therefore be understood as the logic of story. A reader can follow this logic or principle because of a certain “narrative competence” that we have in common regarding “the basic shape of stories” (Culler 1997: 83f). To make sense of a text, a reader infers a plot out of certain events that make up the significant elements of a story. Plot is also a narrative structure that makes it possible to present the same story in different ways, depending for instance on the order of events. In Oracle Night, plot is referred to as “the premise of the story” (ON 12). The word ‘premise’ may denote a locale, a basis or foundation as well as a state, condition or order of something. In other words, there is a certain order of events that will always remain the same in a story, and therefore allows others to recognise the same story in several different versions.

¹ Above all, geometrical representation has been evident in the discussion of narrative levels and Chinese box narration, which is very much the case with Oracle Night and its stories within stories.
A narrative structure may follow for instance the classical Aristotellean view that a story should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. In existential terms, life itself is a simple way to put such an order into picture. The fact that mortal life is temporary and inevitably comes to an end means that there is a beginning and an end: first we are born, then we live and finally we die. This order of events cannot possibly change, unless somebody invents a magic pill that allows us to live forever. In Oracle Night however, there is a reversed plot in the sense that the protagonist nearly dies in the beginning and then struggles to get back to and recover a sense of life. This is an example of how existential facts of life and death may sometimes be twisted around and in the end come forward as just as random and undecidable as the social world. On the one hand, stories and storytelling in Auster’s novel may be compared to social constructions of reality, including identities and relations, whereas plot may be said to represent an existential dimension. The human body, as compared to plot, is the construction site where stories and identities come alive. On the other hand, the telling of stories is also portrayed as an inherently human activity whereas plot is associated with a certain constructedness which causes the characters some trouble.

Many times, a story moves between different relationships, characters and events in a way that is impossible in lived experience. The organization of events into sequences differs from lived experience regarding both temporality and knowledge. For instance, the story in Oracle Night unfolds in the same way as lived experience at the same time as it is retrospective in the sense that the narrator, Sidney Orr, is telling the story based on events that already have taken place. The condition of fictional narrative is precisely the way events are organised and thereby gain significance as elements in a chain of events. As to the narration of chance, it occurs only in the story since the story that is unfolding before a reader has always already happened from the point of view of the narrative voice (Alford 2004: 128). In other words, chance occurs if the telling of a story is read as a story that unfurls in the same way as lived experience, whereas a narrator like Sidney Orr knows that an event is significant. Chance events do not really exist except outside or beyond the chain of events established through fictional narrative, whereas lived experience is in need to be retrospectively related to other events in order to be meaningful. Again, the presence of the past is important because otherwise a sequence of events remains nothing more than a descriptive account – or “exposition without story”, as Tomashevsky calls it (Culler 1997: 84; Tomashevsky 1925, in Rivkin & Ryan 1998: 24f).

The telling of human experience may be understood as playing a major role in narrative and the structure of plot depends on different ways of narrating or telling the story.
Stories involve not only events and objects as though they were isolated from the social world, but also to some extent a subject who speaks, sees, feels, knows, hears, and so on. Narrative voice, which in Oracle Night is the voice of Sidney Orr, is described by Gérard Genette as “inseparable from the sense of a subjectivity intimately inhabiting a text, a communicative human presence as source and origin” (Genette 1980, in Gibson 1996: 143). As such, voice may also represent an existential view of narrative; yet, without having to refer to a real subject or an author behind a text. Narrative voice is thus understood as a certain presence in the text rather than a singular authority. Genette comments too that “the narrating instance does not ‘remain identical and invariable in the course of a single narrative work’” (1980: 214). A subjectivity or narrative voice may change depending on the different narrative contexts in which it is situated. The role of the narrative voice is not so much a middle point as a point to which other elements may refer, a site at which a multiplicity of narrative elements intersects.

Since the narrative voice does not have to be the same as the point of view of the text, there is sometimes a distinction between voice (who speaks) and focalisation (who sees). This distinction may sometimes complicate narrative when stories are embedded within stories and clearly allows for contradictory meanings in a text. Moreover, Ann Banfield argues that the discursive point of view expressed in language – that is, the representation of consciousness in a text – is what constitutes voice (Banfield 1982: 250; 253; 17, in Gibson 1996: 146-147). The position taken towards voice in this essay does not distinguish between narrative voice and point of view as long as they represent a sense of subjectivity. This is in accordance with a thematic approach to human subjectivity, meaning that I study certain states of the text. In order to study Oracle Night from an existentialist perspective, the essay will analyse the narrative themes, units and motifs that are central to the novel. The method of approach in this essay is narrative thematics, which is further described below.

3.1 Narrative thematics

A thematic approach means that I study Oracle Night with a focus on narrative themes, thematic units and motifs. Narrative themes and thematization may be understood as a categorization of the various meanings in a literary work, based on a reader’s or analyst’s interpretation. An aggregate of mutually related themes, units and motifs is tied together in a

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2 In Oracle Night, narrative voice is marked by first person narration throughout the novel and may thus be distinguished from focalizers that are written about in third person.
story. The same thematic units and motifs may occur in various works and be preserved in
different versions of the story depending on the historical context. As Boris Tomashevsky
once explained it:

The idea expressed by the theme is the idea that summarizes and unifies the verbal material in the
work. The work as a whole may have a theme and at the same time each part of the work may
have its own theme. The development of a work is a process of diversification unified by a single
theme (Tomashevsky 1925, in Rivkin & Ryan 1998: 24f).

Regarding the above quote, the centrality of a theme is unmistaken. The thematization of
narrative has been crucial to the interpretation of narrative and literature at large, especially in
the sense that it generally asks the very basic question what a literary work is about.
According to Peter Brooks, “interpretation proper” is the ‘thematising of a text’.
Thematization, which may be seen as one of the most widely practiced approach to narrative,
can thus be understood as a process of interpreting the parts of a text in relation to a larger
context. It is a claim that may as well apply to the study of literature in general, since
thematization is associated with both conscious and unconscious processes of interpretation.
Thematics may thus be viewed in terms of judgment or valuation of a text and its narrative
components. The judicial process implies a relation of power in the sense that a text or literary
work is contrasted to a theorist’s position, by which centrality is ascribed to a certain theme.
In a wider sense, thematization may be equivalent to the way we, as subjects, structure and
make sense of lived experience – and as such, thematization is again subjected to literary
criticism at large.

Above all, there is one aspect of thematization that is subject to critique. This is
described by Gibson as “the determination of the function of every element of a narrative text
according to the structure of a single matrix” (1996: 112ff). There have been different
attempts to overcome this totalizing mode of thematization, yet unsuccessfully. The process
of generalizing conceptions within the literary text may be understood as moving towards a
wider framework and exposing the ideological codes of contemporary culture. A work is then
seen as a unique version of a cultural system yet lapses back into a traditional approach to
literature in which primacy is given to the author’s intentions. To avoid this, it has been
helpful to keep in mind that I am not concerned with the question whether the novel is meant
to be an existential mediation on writing and human subjectivity or not but whether it is
represented as such at the level of the text. As mentioned above, I also study narrative in terms of different states of the text rather than a geometry of fixed elements.

3.2 Analytic strategies

To thematically analyse *Oracle Night*, I have chosen to depart from three levels of the narrative: themes, thematic units and thematic motifs. As to the definitions of these concepts, by theme I refer to the main issues dealt with in the novel and which tell of the very meaning of a literary work. Subjectivity is, together with writing, considered here as the main themes of the novel which in many ways permeate the narrative structure of *Oracle Night*. These themes are mutually related since the novel is clearly an inquiry into the relation between the main character’s sense of self and his process of writing. Writing is not only an activity but also interpreted as a matter of *being* a writer, just as the protagonist experiences a certain sense of subjectification by the act of putting words on a paper.

Thematic units may be understood as different states of the text and the context in which different motifs are situated. In this case I largely follow Carsten Springer’s (2000) typology of an identity crisis, meaning that thematic units are in a sense pre-defined and thus deductively derived from a theoretically and empirically elaborated model of Auster’s narrative. The typology of what I regard as thematic units thus includes the following stages: an initial situation, a state of solitude versus isolation, the beginning of a quest, a struggle for control, consequences and finally, a search for possible solutions. These stages suggest that there is a certain order to the story in *Oracle Night*, and even if they are presented as such it does not exclude the possibility that these stages occur in a reversed order. Especially do the beginning and the end of the story prove to be variable, which may be understood as an example of Auster’s postmodern play with narrative structure.

According to Springer, the initial situation is characterized by some kind of loss – whether it is a loved one or, as in the case with *Oracle Night*, the protagonist’s (almost) loss of himself. The state of solitude versus isolation refers to two different forms of being alone, whereas the (moral) quest may be described as the beginning of the journey that the protagonist embarks on when he starts writing a story in the blue notebook. The protagonist’s struggle is really his character’s – and his own – struggle not to think about the past, but the dire consequences turn out to be annihilation and emptiness in the sense that there is no way
of continuing the story. Finally, the search for possible solutions is where the protagonist finally deals with the events of his own life.

Whereas the narrative units or stages denote a certain state of the text, narrative motifs may generally be understood as the driving force of the narrative. Importantly, I do not regard motifs as fixed elements but as abstractions such as the sense of love or estrangement expressed in the text. In a way, this approach is about describing the features of the novel which are not relative but based on what, in reconstructive terms, may be understood as representing the constant and unchanging aspects of human existence. Each underlying motif is discussed regarding the concern of this essay with the way the postmodern is questioned from an existential or reconstructive perspective. My way of approaching the thematic levels of narrative may be summarized as the figure (Figure 1.) below, where themes be understood as the overarching framework for thematic units and the very motifs that are present in the text.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure. 1** Thematic levels of narrative

With the above model, my intention is not to fix the elements of the narrative in terms of a geometrical space but to visualise the relationship between different narrative levels. I study the themes, thematic units and motifs along with three different and parallel stories in *Oracle Night*: the life of Sidney Orr, the metafictional story about Orr’s process of writing and the story within the story.
4. *Oracle Night* through a thematic lens

In the following sections, the narrative in *Oracle Night* will be studied from a thematic point of view – focusing on the overarching themes, thematic units and motifs of the novel. In other words, I study the thematic representation of writing and subjectivity with regard to thematic units and the various motifs that occur within the frame of these units. I follow the stages set out by Springer (2000), meaning that my analysis rests on the assumption that the protagonist indeed experiences a crisis in losing both himself and his loved ones on the way back to life.

4.1 Initial situation

As the novel begins, the protagonist struggles to recover from a collapse that nearly killed him, meaning in a way that he has returned from the dead – as though a second life has somehow been given to him. Then again, *Oracle Night* is a novel characterized by “a concentration on the interface between life and death” (Patteson 2008: 116). Death is indeed a thematic motif that recurs throughout the novel in several guises and serves as a reminder of the inevitable and threatening Other that constantly lingers in the background of the protagonist’s initial state of being on the mend. Throughout the summer, he takes care of his daily routines: short walks around the block from where he lives with his wife in Brooklyn, preparing meals, taking his medicines, reading newspapers in coffee shops, watching other people as they come and go and listening to the conversations that randomly take place around him. Yet the surrounding world now seems distant and surreal to him and after somehow had escaped death, Sidney Orr no longer recognizes himself as part of it. Before the collapse, Orr used to be one of those people always on the rush from one place to another. Now he refers to himself instead as hardly knowing which foot to put in front of the other (*ON* 2003: 2). From the very start, the novel shows the impact of the body on a subject’s sense of self, which in this case is portrayed as the vital connection between a subject and the surrounding world.

In this initial situation of the novel, the protagonist loses the sense of being part of the world due to the experience of himself as a “free-for-all of mixed up signals and crossed mental wires” (*ON* 1). Inescapably, he is subject to his own body – frail and flimsy because of illness, which not only adds to the sense of estrangement that Orr experiences but may even be the actual cause of estrangement. In other words, there is a sense of
desubjectification of the protagonist which makes orienting himself in the city environment more difficult. This is also highlighted by the way he tries to find his way in the streets of New York, stumbling over the sidewalks and feeling like he is “lost in a foreign city” (ON 2). At this stage, it is also apparent how the large anonymous city as experienced by Orr represents a postmodern state, as well as a space in which he no longer knows himself. In other words, the city stands for estrangement and a loss of self – although there are elements of recognition as well. After all, Orr has lived in New York for his whole life.

The protagonist narrator further describes how he “drifted along like a spectator in someone else’s dream […] marveling at how I had once been like the people around me” (ON 2003: 2). The city is thus experienced as strange, almost surreal space and thus captures the very notion of what may be called strange spaces – spaces in which the boundaries of life become visible and the subject is made aware of his or her existence. Jansson and Lagerkvist also refer to the “postmodern city” as a “largely illegible ‘text’, a shifting complex entity, an unfathomable, heterogeneous web of practices and relations” (2009: 7). The city as a strange space can be appropriated in different ways depending on where we stand, and it cannot be understood as a totality but only as an ambiguous and contrary space where voices, practices and cultures collide. Furthermore, it is a space which is nowhere and somewhere at the same time, space without place, a space of illusion. Such spaces give rise to uncertainty, estrangement, otherness, in-betweenness, cognitive loss, fear as well as thrill and exhilaration (Ibid.). This shows in the sense that Orr experiences his home town as floating in all directions, and he comes to know the city in a way he has not been able to see it before. Again, this disintegration of reality may be understood as a critical standpoint towards a postmodernist view in that there is a certain sense of insecurity and danger to it. The experience of strange spaces may further be understood as a thematic motif related to the notion of desubjectification.

Orr’s sense of estrangement causes him immense vulnerability in that everything would “bounce and swim” in front of him and he cannot look at anything without it starting to break apart and dissolve “like a drop of dye in a glass of water” (ON 1). On the one hand, this is portrayed as a state of the postmodern, on the other hand it is due to his physical condition. The indeterminacy and blurring of boundaries characteristic of the postmodern state shows in the way Orr no longer can discern the limits between himself and the rest of the world, how things “shimmied and wobbled, kept darting off in different directions” (Ibid.). This indeed causes an identity crisis in the sense that we need to distinguish between ourselves and the surrounding world to have a clear sense of who we are.
In terms of a reconstructive or existentialist critique, these signs of the postmodern may be understood as a state of illness, a condition in which the protagonist is unable to see things clearly. Even though Orr may seem to be aware that it is his physical condition that produces the effect of being lost, the negativity of the postmodern is literally portrayed as a sickness of being in the world – especially as it is portrayed as a constantly shifting and changing place.

But rather than being a consequence of the surrounding world, Orr’s loss of self is due to his physical condition. At the same time, it means that the protagonist is made highly aware of himself as a living being and thus subjectified. This is an example of an existentialist perspective – even though the setting takes on the meaning of being highly postmodern, there is an existential or reconstructionist dimension to subjectivity which means that the protagonist is inevitably reminded of his existence. Even though it may be experienced in as many ways as there are people, the human condition of being in the world – being alive – remains the same despite the irregularities of the postmodern. The facts of life and death are thus portrayed as given and absolute, even though the novel also subverts them and makes them subject to irony.

The reconstructive mode in the narrative also gives the impression that characters are ascribed essential qualities. For instance, Orr’s wife Grace is portrayed as the genuinely loving and morally good woman who would never steal a paper clip from the art department where she works. Likewise, Jacob (the son of their friend John Trause) is pictured as a truly bad and evil person who always hated Grace. These traits may be interpreted as fundamental to these characters and their actions. However, such an essentialist portrayal of characters contradicts an existentialist perspective in so far as it withholds that existence precedes essence and human beings are defined through their actions only (Flynn 2006: 9). The novel nevertheless signals distrust of the notion that Jacob is not an altogether evil person and seems to suggest that there is a naivety in thinking that Jacob is just an innocent kid who got himself in trouble. Hence, he is made personally and morally guilty of his actions rather than being a victim of social circumstances.

The view of human subjectivity as a rather stable and unchanging nature may be contrasted to a postmodern account according to which it is understood as a fragmentary patchwork of multiple meanings or roles. It is at the heart of postmodernist theory to emphasize an absence of unity as the reason why subjects are thought to be “decentered” [or even impossible] in the era of postmodernism” (Harvey 1989: 11, in Springer 2000: 15-16). The fundamental uncertainty whether subjectivity can be established at all is a postmodern issue in most of Auster’s novels. The question is how to reconcile this seemingly impossible,
scattered structure of self with a sense of being constituted in the world. In existentialist
terms, a firm sense of self is not only possible but necessary for our consciousness of being in
the world. The search for personal unity – however temporary – may be considered a
necessary horizon of expectation, not only for the sense of self but for meaning to be created
at all in a world which is otherwise characterized by instability and constant change. This is a
fundamental assumption in the story of Oracle Night, and a driving force in Orr’s struggle to
regain his footing.

Possibly, the shaping of characters as though they were essentially good or bad
and the return to traditional values in general may be interpreted as a way of dealing with the
contingency, disruptions, contradictions, mixtures, impurities and indistinctness underscored
by a postmodern approach to subjectivity, whereas ideals such as truth, knowledge, unity and
essence may be part of the sense-making process of human beings as well as to navigate
through postmodern culture. Oracle Night does to some extent demonstrate a reconstructive
critique of postmodern conceptions of subjectivity by withholding the importance of unity for
a sense of meaningful existence. How to reconcile personal and cultural ideals with constant
change and contingency is one of the issues that are often thematised in Auster’s writing.

The fact that Orr no longer knows who he is “supposed to be” (OR 1) in this
world suggests that the postmodern world expects us to play a role apart from our mere
existence, whereas Orr is no longer able to do that yet appears to be fully aware of what it
means to be alive compared to the people rushing by. Although Orr considers himself to be a
living being, he is unable to follow the rules of the city as he once did. The postmodern is also
described as a game that the protagonist no longer can play, not even understanding how he
ever could to that, because of his near-death experience. This is especially clear as Orr refers
to himself as “damaged goods” (ON 2). The novel suggests a reconstructionist mode of being
in which the protagonist is aware of being alive as compared to being part of the social world.
In this context, an identity or sense of self seems to be secondary to the consciousness of his
own existence. Patteson however, points out in his study of Oracle Night that “every act of
cognition constitutes consciousness and therefore identity” (2008). It thus implies that the
consciousness of being in the world is the condition of subjectivity, which cannot be
constituted without this consciousness.

The term subjectivity may generally be used for a person’s self-awareness in the
role of being a human subject. Subjectivity is social in the sense that we become subjects only
in relation to others, in relation to the surrounding world. Rollo May, referring to philosopher
Alfred North Whitehead, argues that Cartesius was wrong for the very same reason. It is never
simply thoughts or existence that a subject is aware of, the subject actively experiences the surrounding world, and this is what makes a subject experience a sense of self (Whitehead, in May 1975: 123). But in Orr’s case the surrounding world as represented by the city rather seems to be a source of estrangement, which indeed points to a critique of the postmodernist conception of reality.

The social environment of the city appears in many ways to occupy all space there is. In terms of a postmodernist conception, the city reminds of the Derridean notion of a text outside of which nothing exists. Compared to Auster’s way of often portraying the large city as missing an identity of its own, *Oracle Night* is firmly set in a New York environment at the same time as danger and hostility follows from the uncertainty and unpredictability of city life. It is easy to lose oneself in the city, but as Orr recovers from his sickness, he finds his way through the streets and is aware of his movements in different directions. As Markus Rheindorf points out, the city streets also work like “a giant checkerboard for the characters’ interior journeys” (2002: 4). In *Oracle Night*, this is obvious in the protagonist’s daily outings. When he moves around the city, his thoughts are embodied by the physical movement – walking is like travelling between his own thoughts. In terms of a writer position, the act of walking may be compared to writing a text with the body (2002: 10). The fact that this requires a living subject often proclaimed dead by postmodern theory, may to some extent be interpreted as part of the reconstructionist critique which is raised by the novel.

As time goes by and Orr is getting better, he extends his daily walks into longer excursions through the city. It is September 18, 1982 and Orr decides to walk the opposite direction from where he lives. This morning marks another initial situation, as the protagonist suddenly encounters a small stationery shop called the Paper Palace and feels an urge to get himself some new equipment and start writing for the first time since he left hospital. It turns out that the Paper Palace has a rather remarkable selection of goods, and above all it is a stack of Portuguese handmade notebooks that captures Orr’s interest. As soon as he held it in his hands, Orr knew that he was going to buy this blue, clothbound book, with its unusual shape and sturdy paper, which is told to be the last of its kind. This is the beginning of the protagonist’s process of writing a rather fateful story about a man who, like Orr himself, escaped death on a close call.
4.2 Solitude vs isolation

The protagonist’s initial struggle to live as though he had a future (ON 1) may be regarded a solitary one. Seeing to this distinct form of being alone, Orr is on his own in the sense that the surrounding world is not aware of what he is going through, and he does not speak to other people. But rather than being isolated, Orr spends his days in the middle of city life and is thus not totally out of touch with the surrounding world. Although not feeling like he is part of what is going on around him, it is an irrefutable fact that Orr is alive, physically situated in the city and presently “whiling his days away” in the middle of people. In other words, Orr is situated in a social context in which he slowly gains a sense of himself – which shows how subjectivity takes on the meaning of a social construction.

In contrast to the frantic city streets, entering the Paper Palace is like stepping into a world of silence apart from the sound of the scratching of a pencil, as if that was “the only sound left in the world” (ON 4). Writing is thus represented as an isolating practice apart from what is outside. Orr could notice how quiet it was as he went down one of the aisles, which adds to the sense of this shop as a strange space in which the outside world seems to drift away and the subject is again made aware of being alive. A state of isolation thus occurs in the sense that the Paper Palace seems to be a world of its own that shuts off its surroundings. The protagonist feels somewhat out of place at the same time as there is some recognition on part of the protagonist of residing in this writer’s nest.

Also the shop owner, a small Chinese man with a heavy accent, turns the Paper Palace into a world of its own. Orr starts a conversation with the man whose name turns out to be M.R Chang at the cash register, and the Paper Palace is presented as a symbol of life itself. As Chang proudly puts it, paper and pens matter to life in the sense that “‘everybody make words’ […] ‘everybody write things down’” (ON 6). Whereas there is an existential undertone to the act of writing, the Paper Palace does also refer to the nature of the postmodern world as text – which the Paper Palace is a refinement of in its very silence and concentration on what is written. The world seems to be condensed into the cleverly displayed objects of the Paper Palace, but the fact that the Paper Palace disappears further on in the novel suggests a withdrawal of life as defined by writing – or else it may represent the precariousness and instability of the postmodern, which appears to be as temporary as the meanings it confers upon human existence. Instead, the protagonist is about to get lost in the writing of a story in the blue notebook.
Back in the apartment, Orr enters his workroom for the first time since he returned from hospital, a room which is marked by the solitude of the writer. Orr feels like he is “back from a long and difficult journey” as soon as he sits down on the wooden chair, like he has returned to “his rightful place in the world” (ON 10). In other words, there is a clear sense of subjectification as Orr sits down at his desk which contributes to the reification of the author position. After all, being a writer is connected to the protagonist’s sense of self. In *Oracle Night*, Orr describes his room as “hardly bigger than a closet” (ON 10). This room is simply said to contain a table and a chair and a small bookcase, what Orr always thought is enough for putting words on a paper. Even if writing appears to be a mental activity, it is also a physical activity in terms of the very placement of the author. For instance, Stephen Fredman (2004) points out how the protagonist’s writing room becomes a space in which physicality and the story on paper meet with the story in the writer’s head.

An aspect of the opposition between isolation and solitude is the artist’s or writer’s productivity in carrying out his work alone. According to Fredman, the scene of writing has been expounded on by many critics as both a mystical and a social room. It is a room where the writer both writes and lives. It is through the written book that the writer “makes contact and enters an exchange with society [...]” (Fredman 2004: 13; 18). The writing of the book is thus inseparable from the social construction of subjectivity – yet, the question, as Fredman puts it, is how to get out of the room of writing which also isolates the writer from the world. This isolation means that the writer often exceeds the limits his or her own physical and mental wellness. In regard of the protagonist’s recovery, he puts his health at risk for the sake of being a writer again. Auster’s work is thus described by Fredman as: “a place where life and writing meet in an unstable, creative, and sometimes dangerous encounter” (2004: 7).

The physical space in which the writer resides as well as the space on paper may be understood in terms of emptiness. On the one hand, Auster takes a critical stance to the way the world is covered with secondary meanings through our way of constructing reality. On the other hand, this is contrasted to a belief that we can catch a sight – or glimpse, as Auster himself might prefer to call it – of the universe that is normally hidden from us (Alford 2004: 126). This may be criticized by postmodernist thinkers for suggesting that there exists an objective and morally true reality beyond our way of ascribing it meaning. The thematic motif in question nevertheless refers to an (existential) emptiness that the writer constantly strives to fill. The beginning of filling the blank pages in the blue notebook marks such an encounter with emptiness. It is an emptiness that even goes so far as to completely absorb the
author, to the extent that Orr’s wife can’t see him when she opens the door and peeks inside. Although Orr claims to have been sitting by his desk all the time, Grace can't see him in there. Orr disappears into the story he is writing in the blue notebook, in the sense that, to get started, he lets writing show the way. Writing becomes a mechanical act, with the pen moving almost by itself in much the same way as Chang had written down figures at the counter in the Paper Palace the very same morning. In Oracle Night, the mechanical writing without quite knowing where it leads also points at the dangers of not knowing what one is writing. At this instance, the novel takes the argument that reality is constructed through language and literally shows how words are not merely abstractions but also may have the power to change people’s lives.

Orr steals Trause’s apartment for the story he is writing in the blue notebook, which is why visiting this place gives the impression of entering an imaginary space – or, again, what I have chosen to call a strange space – in which there is both estrangement and recognition at the same time: “I had the strange, not altogether unpleasant feeling that I was /…/ walking into a room that wasn’t there” (ON 26). In other words, Orr finds himself in a place which seems to be as fictional as it is part of a physical reality. Estrangement shows in the way he feels cut off from what was going on around him, yet he is fully engaged and present. Being in both places at the same time means that there is no authentic ‘there’ anymore (ON 26). This account of what Orr himself refers to as a “double consciousness” (ibid.) is an example of a typically postmodern state of being. However, it does not necessarily refer to space as illusory and only existing in Orr’s head, since postmodern theory does not deny a physical presence as well. What may count as a reconstructionist critique is the way it eventually causes Orr to get lost or reach a dead end in the story he is writing, possibly because of this blurred out conception of reality. It seems that if everything is possible, nothing is possible.

4.3 An author’s quest

Beginning to write a story in the blue notebook marks a new dawn of the protagonist’s authorship and thus a rebirth of the author in contrast to its death pronounced by postmodernism. In terms of a postmodernist perspective, Jon Zilcosky points out how the author is a role or position experimented with and criticised in Auster’s fictional practice as a construct, a falsity. However, one way of reconciling the death of the author as sentenced by postmodern advocates is to perceive the author as “a being that abides only in the process of
writing” (2004: 65). This means that Orr's writer position is one whose existence is only marginal, but nevertheless an instance of subjectivity or agency situated in the narrative. In other words, Orr's role as an author or narrator may be understood according to Alford as “a locus of textual space” (2004: 5). The conventional category of author thus collapses into a field of textuality and may be understood as fragments or glimpses of the author position.

At first, Auster’s author protagonist has no idea what to write in the blue notebook but then comes to think about a parable once mentioned by Trause as “a terrific premise. All you need is a story to go with it” (ON 11). It was called the Flitcraft episode, an anecdote originally told in Dashiell Hammett’s The Maltese Falcon about a man who decides to walk out of his life after nearly being hit in his head by a beam falling from a construction site. He walks away unhurt with the conviction that life is ruled by chance rather than being the orderly place he thought it was. Auster’s work is especially known for this kind of elaborations on the culturally charged phenomenon of chance. It is indeed characteristic to Auster’s postmodern world, which confers that life is essentially meaningless – like the empty sheet of paper – and that we are continuously shaped by chance events.

Because of the suggestive power of coincidence, the world is often assumed to have “a meaning independent of our constitutive ascription of meaning to it” (Alford 2004: 113f). Orr’s Flitcraft man decides to stop trying to keep away the randomness of everyday life and fathom it instead, letting chance rule his life rather than abiding by the human urge to explain and cover the world with certain meanings. In Auster’s world, this is said to be a kind of supplementary act (Alford 2004: 116). It seems to say that the more people try to track down the meaning of life, the more lost they will be. The Flitcraft man realises that life can be taken away from him at any moment and decides to “submit to this destructive power, to smash his life through some meaningless, wholly arbitrary act of self-negation” (ON 12).

Although he is described as a man who lives a happy and successful life, the Flitcraft man decides to go to another city to become someone else.

To some extent, life may be compared to a game of chance because subjects take chances even though they cannot predict the outcome. The consequences are sometimes referred to as fate, “events that fall out in a manner predetermined” (Alford 2004: 123f). However, this may be understood as the opposite to chance. The difference between chance and fate is then a matter of causality. As the same author points out, chance as experienced in the unfolding of a story has no reason or agent behind it, whereas fate is ascribed powers – “the will of God” or “force of the universe” (ibid.). For instance, the Flitcraft man seems to submit to the rules of the universe, as though it was a predetermined destiny for him to leave
his life behind. When chance and fate are confused, chance takes on the meaning of intentional acts or the unforeseen consequences of “an intentional stance towards a certain state of affairs” (ibid.). What is meant by chance in Auster’s novel, however, is the constant presence of the unpredictable that allows subjects to glimpse into the meaningless, atemporal world of flux where anything can happen from one moment to the next. Auster’s novel may be said to bring insight into a realm that goes beyond fictional constructs that obscure the world and its utter meaninglessness.

Although the novel depicts a world concealed by imaginary constructs, Alford points out that there is still a promise of access to the mystery of life through a certain understanding of the world as one in which everything coexists simultaneously. From this point of view, the only ‘time’ that is real is the simultaneity of the present – any other time is an illusion, because everything happens at the same time and events that seem to repeat themselves could even be one and the same event through their timeless connection (Alford 2004: 116f). In Oracle Night, this becomes especially evident in the sense that the characters (although in the wrong place at the same time) and their actions are correlated in the narrative present.

The Flitcraft parable was the premise that Orr would give a chance to write something for the first time in nine months. Even if Orr uses this parable merely to get started, the consequences and significance of this story is mutually related to the novel’s concern with writing as a way of life, not only creating fiction but also getting a deeper understanding of human subjectivity. As the words began to flow, Orr gives life to his own Flitcraft man. The story about the Flitcraft man turns into an inward and outward quest that makes Orr forget about time and space. Springer compares the characters’ quest to a challenge in the sense that they are pushing themselves to the extreme by hard work. This self-destructive behaviour seldom provides any valuable insights and may even bring the characters close to death (2000: 29f). Again, there is a certain danger related to the act of writing. In Orr’s case, he works steadily for several hours – knowing that it might have a negative effect on his recovery. The Flitcraft story he is writing is an excuse to get back into writing and see where it might lead him, just as the Flitcraft man is about to see where chance leads him by unconditionally obeying this strange force of life.

Orr’s Flitcraft man is called Nick Bowen, modelled as the opposite to Orr himself. Initially, Bowen is described as a man who feels his marriage has come to a standstill. The same goes for his job as an editor at a publishing company, which he has slowly begun to feel bored with. One day he receives a manuscript of an unknown novel
called *Oracle Night*, supposedly written by a Sylvia Maxwell in 1927. Thus, the title of Auster’s novel is also referring to the story within the story within the story. *Oracle Night* was sent to Bowen’s office by a Rosa Leightman, granddaughter of Maxwell and the woman Bowen falls in love with at first sight as she visits him at his office to discuss the manuscript.

One evening, Bowen feels restless and decides to go out to mail some letters, still with the manuscript in his briefcase. This is when the chance event occurs: a gargoyle falls off a house façade and nearly kills him. Another inch and he would have been crushed by the gargoyle, which knocked the briefcase out of his hand before it struck the sidewalk next to him and shattered into a thousand pieces. Without saying good-bye to his wife, he decides to go to the airport and get on the first available flight – which happens to go to Kansas City. This is where the Flitcraft saga begins and Bowen begins his journey toward the unknown. As the story goes, Bowen has no regrets as to what he is doing but rather has a growing sense of calm. He is, as Orr puts it, in search of things as they are – as they appeared through that glimpse of life he had earlier that evening. Although this assumption is often criticised from a postmodernist perspective for suggesting a morally true and pre-existing order of things rather than a lack of totality, the novel seems to say that our sense of ourselves and the surrounding world is obscured by a false consciousness.

As he arrives in Kansas City, Bowen asks a taxi driver whose name happens to be Ed Victory to take him to the best hotel in town. It turns out to be a hotel known for a disaster some years ago, where parts of the hotel came loose from the ceiling and crashed down into the hotel lobby. There is thus a striking resemblance between this event and Bowen’s experience of nearly being hit by the gargoyle. It seems that Bowen is further drawn to places where similar events have taken place. By blindly following chance, Bowen thus comes close to real danger. There is also a similarity between Bowen and the hotel in that they are in the same situation: “both of them trying to forget their pasts, both of them trying to begin a new life” (*ON* 58). The hotel becomes an embodiment of Bowen and his quest to become someone or something else from before.

What is fundamental to *Oracle Night* and its protagonist, and even more so to the protagonist’s protagonist, is memory. This thematic motif may well be the answer to the question of how to make sense of the postmodern world and its fundamental uncertainty. Memory is a means to understand coincidence in the first place – that is, how two seemingly unrelated events are connected. In the story within the story, memory becomes crucial for the man who decides to walk out of his past. As it is formulated in a previous novel by Auster: “To remember is not to go back in time, but to bring the seemingly past event into its proper
place in the present [...]. Memory, then, is not so much as the past contained within us, but as proof of our life in the present” (The Invention of Solitude 1988: 138, in Alford 2004: 116). It seems, in postmodern terms, as though the past is only a matter of recollection in the present – just like the modernist project is still part of postmodernism. The fact that memory to Bowen is crucial in such a way as not to remember, not to think about the past, indeed turns out to have serious consequences. Without memory, and thus without history, the subject has no way of navigating through the present.

However, in a sense Bowen stays in touch with his past by calling Rosa from his hotel room several times – leaving messages on her answering machine about having read the manuscript again and again and that he could not stop thinking about her. In other words, he doesn’t fully follow the plan to leave his past behind – love gets in the way and prevents a total break with Bowen’s awareness of himself and his past. In this case, love may be understood as a feature that puts the postmodern or even posthuman view of life in question by evoking memories and feelings of the past. Possibly, trying to keep this self-awareness at a distance is a reason why Bowen gets into trouble. Even though Ed Victory does not ask him questions about his past and Bowen himself is careful not to think about it, he cannot fully escape it and eventually lets the recognition of the past distract him from the present.

In Oracle Night, the story bears evidence of what may be understood as a kind of inverted coincidence, when characters constantly are in the wrong place at the wrong time rather than accidentally running into each other. For instance, Bowen’s wife is struggling to understand the disappearance of her husband and tries to track him down. Even though she is always one step behind, it turns out that she is following in his footsteps. She goes to the same hotel and almost stays in the same room with the same view over the city landscape. Likewise, Rosa Leightman is out of town when Bowen calls her from the hotel room, and when she finally listens to his message, Bowen has not only left the hotel long ago but is trapped in the darkness of an underground room that nobody knows about. Orr, who cannot figure out how to possibly get him out of there, in a way gets trapped too. The relation between writing and subjectivity is made visible in the sense that there is a correlation between the destiny of Bowen and Orr’s unwillingness to see what is going on in his own life.

Further on in the novel, Orr is about to write a film manuscript because, after all, he needs to bring in some money to pay his medical bills. Working on a manuscript for a film about time travel, what becomes clear to him is that people would rather visit the past than the future. Most people would surely prefer to find themselves among those who are no longer with us than with the unborn, he reasons, which again is an example of how the novel places
emphasis on meaningful relations and ascribes primacy to the past. It does not mean that the novel favours living in the past or adopting a philosophy according to which things should remain the way they always were – this is indeed impossible, as illustrated by the postmodern milieu in which the story is set.

Even though the film manuscript was rejected, it connects to an anecdote told by Trause about a man who found an old 3D-viewer in his garage. The viewer not only allowed him to look at old pictures but also relive the past, since the pictures were so vivid that the people on them seemed to be alive: “The viewer was a magic lantern that allowed him to travel through time and visit the dead” (ON 35). He looked at the pictures several times a day, always on his own, in the garage. However, one day the viewer was broken. Since the pictures were not conventional photographs, the viewer was the only way to look at them. This was the end of meeting up with the dead and is described as an immense loss: “Another round of grief, another round of sorrow – as if, after bringing them back to life, he had to bury the dead all over again” (ON 35). This story seems to stress the joy of living in the past and the pain of returning to the present, which is the direct opposite to the way Orr’s Flitcraft man attempts to run away from his past and only live in the present – in both cases a person would eventually get lost.

4.4 The struggle for control

As mentioned above, Orr’s Flitcraft hero, Bowen, is struggling for control in the sense that he is careful not bring up his past. It is a struggle to stay in the present only, which he tries to do by staying in his hotel room and repeatedly reading the manuscript of Maxwell. But the primacy of the past is a recurring motif in Oracle Night in the sense that the past is said to bring meaning to the present. In order to understand the present, Bowen must look back in time. Since Bowen struggles to forget who he used to be, he also deletes himself both from the present and future. The reconstructionist critique suggests that the past is a still ongoing life project, that there is no such thing as a complete break with the past since the past is always part of the present. Bowen thus must watch every word he speaks and be careful not to give himself away.

In a sense, Bowen – much like Orr himself – is running away into the world of fiction instead of truly embracing the realities of his new life. Practicalities are soon becoming a pressing matter, as his wife back in New York – struggling to understand Bowen’s
disappearance – cancels all his credit cards. It forces Bowen to leave the hotel. Short on cash, 
he decides to look for a job and gets in touch with Ed Victory in hope for a job as a car repair. 
It turns out that the retired Victory needs help to reorganise his “Bureau of Historical 
Preservation”, an underground archive consisting solely of old telephone books. This is where 
Bowen walks into a contradiction, seeing again that he is trying to leave behind his past but is 
 hired to preserve what resembles a history of mankind. Bowen struggles to forget who he 
 used to be and makes a careful effort not to talk to Ed Victory about it, but nevertheless finds 
himself in a place in which the past is highly present.

In the life of Orr, the protagonist’s struggle is one of trying to make sense of 
what is going on in his life – more specifically what is wrong with Grace, who seems to be 
troubled for some reason that is beyond Orr’s control. In this sense, the struggle for control is 
really to be understood as a lack of control on part of the protagonist. For instance, one night 
when Orr and Grace are in a cab on their way home from visiting Trause, Grace reacts to a 
story told by Orr about so called “colour war” – based on a childhood memory from summer 
camp. In the camp, everyone was divided into teams that competed against each other. There 
were a red team and a white team, but eventually a third and secret team was formed: the blue 
team. It was a team that represented “a human ideal, a tight knit association of tolerant and 
sympathetic individuals, the dream of a perfect society” (ON 46). Orr claims that blue team 
members didn’t conform to a single type of person, yet describes them as independent, 
modest lovers of justice. Although the blue team was a bit of a joke, there is a more serious 
undertone of sorting people into a morally superior elite, recognised by the way they act and 
thus not in need of explaining themselves.

In contrast to a postmodern perspective, Springer points out that “the ideal of 
personal unity is [essentially] maintained [in Auster’s novels]” (2000: 16). As in Orr’s talk 
about the blue team, Oracle Night displays several personal and cultural ideals that are 
presented but also contradicted by the characters. This is also what upsets Grace, the novel’s 
image of the morally good, who belligerently argues that “people don’t always act the same 
way. They’re good one minute and bad the next. They make mistakes. Good people do bad 
things, Sid” (ON 48). In this instance, what is referred to as being a good person is contrasted 
to a more complex and indeterminate view of human behaviour. Yet this reaction of Grace is 
portrayed as inexplicable and strange, as if the notion of ascribing people essential qualities is 
an innocent and humorous act of reason. Orr ends the discussion by saying that all he believes 
in is being alive and being with Grace, suggesting that the essentials of life and death is all 
 that really matters.
Orr is puzzled by and tries to make sense of his wife’s sudden emotional outcries, which is another instance of the struggle for control. In the novel, Grace disappears after having told Orr that everything will be fine if he just “keeps on loving her” and Orr realizes that Grace had been “hinting at something she refused to name, some kind of inner turmoil that seemed to be dogging her conscience” (ON 70). It turns out that Grace is pregnant and considers an abortion. Orr strongly objects to this, arguing that “married people don’t kill their babies” and who “wore down her resistance, hammering away at her until she gave in and promised to keep the child” (ON 115f). Orr insists on keeping the baby after having read a newspaper article about a prostitute who gave birth to a baby in a toilet and discarded the baby in a garbage bin. Orr describes it as the worst story he ever read, a story about the end of mankind, which is a thematic motif that occurs at different stages in the novel. This way of framing the issue of abortion in the novel points to a supposedly moral and conservative standpoint at the level of text, but it is not necessarily a position taken against abortion but rather a descriptive device to illustrate the sometimes-cruel destiny of being born into this world and the lack of dignity of life itself.

As already mentioned, the narrative voice of Orr at some points seems to suggest that there are good people and bad people. Above all, the latter is manifested in the portrayal of Jacob – who is clearly a representation of an unreliable and even dangerous person who cannot be controlled. As the reader is introduced to Jacob, he has been put in a voluntary drug rehab program – not because he truly wants help but because he does not want to be cut off from his allowance. Trause asks Orr to visit Jacob, who seems to trust Orr, and make sure he stays on the facility. Again, a reconstructionist critique appears in that Jacob is made a character who is impossible to trust. Also, Jacob’s story about his group leader who used to steal things dressed as a priest points to the way social roles can be deceiving and may be read as a critique of the postmodern notion that subjectivity is socially constructed. In terms of an existentialist perspective, it is nevertheless actions that define what the characters are or become – not the supposedly essential or given qualities of the characters in the novel at hand. In this sense, the novel’s take on existentialism may well be an example of Auster’s play with different subjectivities.

The lack of control is also related to the physicality of the human body, which makes itself reminded in Orr’s sudden and persisting nosebleeds: “I hated not to be in control of myself. /…/ Every time my nose gushed blood, I felt like a little boy who’d wet his pants” (ON 36f). Again, this is an example of how the protagonist is subjected to his own body. The nosebleeds had started before Orr was put into hospital and represent what is left of his
illness, but also the fact that Orr is alive and struggling to regain his footing. In this context, colour is once again a thematic motif. Compared to other human excrement, the redness of blood is described as the most vivid and shocking colour: “running invisibly through our veins, the very stuff that kept us alive, was the crimson of a mad artist – a red as brilliant as fresh paint” (*ON* 38). Life as symbolized by Orr’s nosebleeds may again be understood as an interrupting force that Orr cannot fully control. The same goes for John Trause, whose pain in the leg is due to a clot waiting to break loose. Whereas Orr is on the mend, waiting to recover, there is an opposite direction as to the way Trause is about to denote the postmodern image of the death of the author.

Another example of the loss of control which has physical undertones occurs as Orr meets the proprietor of the vanished Paper Palace, M.R Chang, for the second time. In *Oracle Night*, this turns out to be an example of a chance meeting. Orr enters a bar and happens to recognize the man sitting on his right: “something about his posture had set off a little signal in my head. Concerning what I didn’t know. Recognition, perhaps. Or perhaps something more obscure: a memory of another man /…/ a lilliputian fragment from the ancient past” (*ON* 125). Thus, the encounter is characterized by coincidence in that Chang suddenly reappears in a whole new setting, as well as the strange recognition of a man that Orr thought he would never see again. As Orr speaks his name, Chang turns his head and soon recognises Orr.

When Orr asks what happened with the Paper Palace, which disappeared a couple of days after Orr entered it for the first time, it turns out that Chang had been in trouble with the landlord and had to close his store because the rent was raised. “They are all mafia men”, he tells Orr and for the same reason he describes his Big American dream as a flop: “They shoot you dead if you don’t play ball” (*ON* 126). This account may be interpreted as a reference to the postmodern state in which you have to play the social game to survive, a game that again may refer to the rules of the large city and the dangers associated with it. Also, not playing the game is clearly portrayed as an act of resistance. Following this, Chang tells about his childhood in Beijing and the Cultural revolution. It is described as a story about how Chang “learned to hate China” and began to dream about America – a country that turned out to be a disappointment: “there is no dream in America. This country is bad too. Everywhere the same. All people bad and rotten. All countries bad and rotten” (*ON* 128). This is an account that punctuates the myth of the American dream and thus suggests a postmodernist critique of the Big story that has structured much of Western thought.
Still, the novel suggests that Chang himself is far from an innocent man. Above all, this shows in the way Chang tells a story about how his father, a math teacher, was carrying books to be set on fire by the Red guards. The man was beaten by the Red guards and forced to lean forward into the flames. Chang’s way of describing the book burn was so vivid that Orr wonders if Chang was present at this event. In that case, Chang would have been one of the Red guards himself. Against this background, the novel suggests that Chang’s failure was his own fault and not to blame America – which may be compared in this context to the story about the blue team as a self-proclaimed symbol of the conservative and morally good values.

What happens next is that Chang offers Orr a lift home, despite the quantities of scotch in the bar that afternoon. However, instead of driving Orr to his apartment Chang wants some advice on a business proposal. This is when Orr ends up in the dim light of a sex club hidden behind a sweatshop. Chang, who says he sees great potential in what he refers to as a place for relaxation for working men, seems to want to prove the weakness of all men by introducing Orr to a woman called the African princess. Orr is clearly rendered helpless as soon as he is presented with the naked skin of the African princess, as though it was an essentialist characteristic of the male gender. In other words, Orr seems to be driven by some predetermined and inevitable rule of desire, which may be set against the notion of gender as socially constructed.

The encounter with the African princess is thus presented as a loss of control, which at the same time is caused by passivity, or perhaps indifference, on part of Orr. The protagonist again seems to be helplessly subjected to desire. The way desire is articulated with a lack of control on part of the protagonist is subject to the novel’s morally inflected critique of losing, or even escaping, one’s agency and responsibility as a human being. The notion that actions are excused by desire is thus questioned, but so is the act of covering over our mistakes with causal explanations. The episode ends with Orr returning from one of the booths where “the whole transaction seemed to last no longer than the time it takes to fill a bathtub” (ON 136). In a way, this suggests that Orr’s meeting with the African Princess was an innocent and commonplace act, something that is so ordinary that we hardly think about it. Even though the protagonist had been drunk and in loss of control, the novel fosters a certain scepticism to this account and takes a critical stance to doing things as though they happened by themselves – thus, in a reconstructionist fashion, ascribing the protagonist a certain responsibility for his actions. Unable to find Chang, the protagonist decided to leave the brothel and go home.
4.5 Consequences

The struggle for control, which in many ways is a struggle not to think about the past, will ultimately lead to consequences at different levels of the narrative. One of the cruelest destinies is the way Bowen gets locked up in the underground, in the darkness of the small apartment located in one end of the Bureau of Historical Preservation. To get out of the apartment, Bowen will need the keys to open the self-locking door – but one day, without paying much attention to what he was doing, he accidentally left the keys on one of the metal shelves in the large storeroom. The door happened to be left open at the time Bowen enters the apartment, immersed as he was in one of the telephone books, and thus more in the past rather than in the present. Bowen also happened to be alone, since Ed Victory had to go to the hospital because of heart problems. What Bowen does not know is that Ed dies on the operating table on Thursday morning, the day after “Bowen commits one of the great blunders of his life” (ON 91). Ed Victory is the only person who knows about the Bureau, and Bowen thus depends on a dead man to come and rescue him. This is where the Flitcraft saga ends, since Orr cannot come up with a single solution to get his hero out of his confinement – even though Orr is the author and the story is merely a fictional construct which could have been altered in some way or other, it comes to a definite end. Ironically, Bowen becomes a prisoner of the past he was trying to walk away from.

Mostly, Warren Oberman points out, Auster’s characters come to learn the consequences of freedom in a negative way because of their failure to perceive freedom as something that requires personal responsibility and awareness of the choices they make. The characters associate their “freedom” with irresponsibility at the same time as they think they are in total control of their actions despite the powers of chance and contingency: “Auster’s text... focuses directly on whether one’s actions are freely one’s own or are conditioned a priori by predetermined circumstances or radical chance, forcing his characters to confront the ontological uncertainty of their actions” (Oberman 2004: 199). In the end, the characters’ “freedom” results in the opposite to freedom – be it a lack of will power, a loss of control, a bad faith, or death: “imprisoned by [their] own desire for what [they construe] to be a notion of freedom” (ibid.). In each case, these characters are subjected to circumstances they cannot control rather than being subjects with a certain agency. The nature of chance and contingency is mistaken for fate and order, and events are therefore thought to be the expected or predictable things to happen.
There are also consequences of Orr’s visit at Chang’s prospective club the previous day. The second time that Orr spots a small shop across the street and it happens to be the Paper Palace, it nevertheless strikes him as incredible – although at the same time it was likely given the speed of Chang’s “closing up his store in one night, rushing around town in his red car, investing in dubious enterprises, borrowing money, spending money /…/” (ON 181). Even though Orr reasons that it could be a mere coincidence, in the sense that it could be someone else than Chang who is the owner of a stationery store with the same name, Orr decides to cross the street to find out.

Orr finds the display in the shop window even more clever this time. Instead of the New York skyline, it now depicts a man sitting at a desk with a miniature typewriter. Looking closely, it was possible to read the words that had been typed: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us” (ON 181f). These words in part refer to the night before and suggest things to be black-and-white compared to the first Paper Palace. It is as if reality is divided in the binary opposites criticized from a postmodernist perspective, at the same time cautioning the inversed relation between Orr and Chang.

As Orr steps inside the Paper Palace, Chang is unwilling to recognize Orr. In contrast to the evening before, he says “Sidney Orr is no friend of mine. I used to think he’s good guy, but no more” (ON 182). The reason for this was that Orr had left him at the ‘dress factory’ without saying good-bye and for thinking Chang was involved in “nasty business” (ON 183). It appears as if Chang had put Orr to the test, and Orr had ultimately failed it – in fact, Chang claims he would do the same thing again if the African princess walked into the room. For the same reason, Chang accuses Orr of being a “horny hypocrite” – not drunk and in loss of control of himself as Orr himself chooses to believe. This points to existential aspects of being a morally responsible human being. Chang indeed finds the weak spots in Orr, not only in what he did but also how he thinks about it. Orr indeed finds that “what made the attack even more uncomfortable was that most of his accusations were correct” (ON 183). Thus, Orr finds it difficult to defend himself against Chang’s accusations.

Orr realises, as he is telling this story retrospectively, that he should have left the Paper Palace immediately, but he could not resist the temptation to see if there were any Portuguese notebooks in stock. Again, desire is a central motif that is to some extent problematized in so far as it causes the protagonist to get himself into trouble or misfortune.
There was one notebook left, a red one, and the desire for this notebook was so strong that, again, he could not help himself. At the cash register, Orr apologized for any embarrassment he may have caused Chang. Yet Chang shook his head and told Orr that the notebook is not for sale, at least not for less than ten thousand dollars. As Orr is getting more and more frustrated with the absurdity of the situation, he leaves a ten-dollar bill on the counter and tries to force his way out of the store with the notebook in his hands. But Chang cuts him off and gives Orr a karate blow that makes him drop to his knees. As Chang begins to kick him in the back until he rolls out of the store, yelling at him to stay away from there or he will kill him, the encounter with the second Paper Palace also comes to a definite end. The Paper Palace again takes on the meaning of a strange space in the sense that there is recognition of the first Paper Palace yet estrangement in the sense that everything has been inversed and turned into non-recognition.

The way Orr is kicked out of the Paper Palace means that *Oracle Night* may be read as an example of a novel in which the male protagonist is confronted with his own freedom. The notion of freedom seems to characterize to a large extent an American approach to existential themes in literature. Absolute freedom such as thematised in *Oracle Night* is clearly rendered impossible, whether the characters live by a positive (e.g. free to do whatever they want) or negative (free from social and economic constraints) definition of freedom. Auster’s existential narrative is basically, Oberman points out, about his characters’ way of dealing with freedom under responsibility, or the inescapability of the realities of freedom when the only thing they are left with is the ontological uncertainty of their existence and a lack of justification for their actions (2004: 203). The question raised in Auster’s novels is how to live responsibly when the ideas of individual freedom and morality are so radically questioned, and this, I would say, summarizes to a large extent the struggle between a postmodernist and an existentialist perspective in *Oracle Night*.

### 4.6 Search for possible solutions

The solution which is the beginning and the end of *Oracle Night*, is John Trause. It is not until Orr begins to write an imaginary story about the relationship between his wife and Trause, that he begins to understand what is really going on in his life – a story which is proved to be as real as life itself. This story is based on what he can imagine is the reason behind the last months of bewildering events – not knowing whether it is fact or fiction (ON 195). In either
case, writing turns out to be a way to make sense of both the past and the present and bears a postmodern as well as existentialist significance.

In the story that Orr is writing, Grace and Trause have had a romance going up and down for many years – until Grace married Orr. Orr’s collapse makes Grace miserable and she turns to Trause again, gradually falling in love with him again. As Orr has staggered around for the last months, he has not noticed that she has continued to love them both. Grace finds out she is pregnant and does not know who the father is and disappears to be alone and put doubt behind her. She returns willing to believe that the baby is Orr’s, meaning that the past does no longer matter – what matters is that Grace loves him.

After having written the imaginary story about Grace and Trause, Orr’s writing in the blue notebook reaches the end. This is when Orr “ripped the pages out of the blue notebook and tore them into little pieces” (ON 196). The Flitcraft story, the imaginary story about Grace and John Trause and the piece he wrote backwards in the blue notebook about the discarded baby – everything went into a plastic garbage bag, which he carried with him on his walk that day. Far away from home, he drops the bag into a trash can. This is related to the novel’s concern with the question whether words can predict the future. A subject’s consciousness of what is put on paper thus seems to matter, as seen from a reconstructionist perspective. It is not simply words on paper but also carries an anticipatory dimension. In other words, the reason why Orr destroyed the blue notebook was the connection between imagination and reality, and although Orr used to think that writing can’t make things happen in the future, he could not be sure. As Trause once said about thoughts and words: They are real just as everything human is real: “sometimes we know things before they happen, even if we aren’t aware of it. We live in the present, but the future is inside us at every moment” (ON 197). Thus, the story does not end here – in fact, it did not start until after Orr had destroyed the blue notebook. In this sense, writing was a mere distraction from the events that were about to unfold. There seems to be an existentialist insistence in Oracle Night that the “real” story begins where writing ends.

What happens is that Trause’s hateful son Jacob breaks into the apartment of Grace and Orr and steals what is valuable. Marking the personal grudge against the one who he calls his “sort of unofficial stepmom” (ON), Jacob also tears a photograph of Grace into pieces. Later, Jacob returns to the apartment to borrow money, claiming that people want to kill him. The moment Orr opens the door and Jacob stands in front of him is described as if “the thing that had been building inside /him/ over the past days was suddenly real: the future was standing in front of /him/” (ON 207). Grace is about to call the police, but Jacob stops
The episode ends with the pregnant Grace being slammed and kicked without Orr being able to stop it. Jacob vanishes before the ambulance arrives yet is found dead in a dumpster a few days later. This may be understood as a parable to the news story of the discarded baby. It may seem as if Jacob finally got what he deserved and only has himself to blame, although at the same time it suggests to some extent that individuals and their actions may be isolated as though independent of social circumstances.

In the end of the novel, also the father, John Trause, dies from the blood clot in his leg travelling through his body until it found its target. The day of his funeral, a letter from Trause arrives to Orr. As Orr reads the handwriting, it is like Trause is speaking to him from the other side. He also finds a check to cover the extent of his medical bills, which makes Orr’s eyes water with tears: “/He/ was happy, happier to be alive than /he/ had ever been before. It was a happiness beyond consolation, beyond misery, beyond all the ugliness and beauty of the world” (*ON* 217). This may be read as an expression of both relief and sorrow at the same time. Mediated by Trause in the intersection between life and death, it is as though Orr has been given a second chance – not only to live but also to be able to make a living. One may critically reflect on the way a Western idea of freedom from economic restraints as a source of joy and relief takes hold of the narrative. From an existential perspective however, it comes down to being able to cope with the realities of everyday life. Although Grace loses the baby, this is the initial situation from which the rest of their lives will continue.
5. Conclusions

In this essay, I have found that Paul Auster’s 2003 novel *Oracle Night* adheres in many ways to a postmodern sense of the world as characterized by constant flux and indeterminacy. This is a world in which writing is not only a way of making sense of oneself and the surrounding world. As a form of story-telling, writing clearly constitutes the characters of the novel as stories of their own. Yet, writing is not merely an act of covering the world with fictional constructs but is also rendered as a significantly human and somewhat fateful way of bringing meaning – however temporary – to the vagaries of postmodern life. A theoretical tradition according to which the surrounding world is merely a social construction as valid as any other, is clearly posed against meaningful relations and stability. In many ways, the novel calls for a return to an understanding of the constancy and invariability of human existence – such as the intricate and sometimes ironic facts of life and death. Although not always clear-cut, it is often said that the only thing we can know for sure is that we are going to die. For the same reason, the narrative centers to a certain extent on the life-supporting workings of the human body as the very condition for being in the world.

It is indeed possible to conclude that postmodern elements show, mostly regarding the setting in which the story and its characters are situated. However, the descriptive tools and assumptions of the novel rest on a different basis. According to Springer, Auster’s reconstructive mode brings with it some degree of unity as opposed to the chaos and indeterminacy of the postmodern world. The reconstructive mode is associated in this essay with the way postmodernism meets with or is challenged by existentialism. This shows in the deployment of thematic motifs such as emptiness, memory, desire, depravity, colour, love and death. These motifs have in common that they remind subjects of their existence, whether it subjectifies or desubjectifies them. They can also be regarded timeless concepts in the course of human existence, irrespective of the cultural values ascribed to them in different contexts. Importantly, the thematic motifs are conceptualizations or metaphors of text rather than definitions.

Memory and love are seen here as motifs that involve the subjectification of the protagonist. They all remind of what it means to be a human subject and may even be a necessary horizon of expectation for a meaningful existence even though it also leads the characters into troublesome situations. Memory refers to the past through which a subject understands his- or herself in the present, whereas desire is more directed towards the future. Love is the force that runs through the novel and is what eventually leads the protagonist to
realise what is going on in his life. Death and depravity appear as the desubjectifying forces that cause a loss of self. Death obviously and inevitably means the end of a story, compared here to the story of a human being. The death of Trause signals the death of the author, but the protagonist is nevertheless the continuation of authorship in the sense that he survives death or returns from the dead. Depravity refers to the instances described in the novel as the end of mankind. Here, Auster seems to put on view the cruel turns of mankind which are always present. It does not, with reference to a seminar once held by phenomenologist Harald Fawkner (2002) at Stockholm university, mean that humans are essentially evil. It means that there is always already a possibility that humans commit evil deeds. The novel contradicts and subverts the notion that we are either good or bad, even though some characters (Grace versus Jacob) may seem to confirm such a view. Still, an existentialist perspective holds that it is actions that can be good or bad rather than the characters themselves. In the novel, characters are thus defined by and held responsible for their actions.

Estrangement is a motif that implies both subjectification and desubjectification. As the protagonist finds himself in what I refer to as a strange space, it might be described as leaving him dislocated or out of place. This failure to take in the realities of the world he encounters makes him aware of the limits of his existence at the same time as it forces the subject to find a way out of estrangement. It is recognition and non-recognition at the same time. Another recurring motif is that of desire, which may be understood as a force that makes the subjects aware of themselves at the same time as it sometimes is associated with a loss of control and thus desubjectification. As with the intentional act of writing, desire may be understood as a necessary force to create meaning in a world characterized by constant change and indeterminacy.

To twist things around, one could ask whether Oracle Night is a novel that puts on show the existentialist assumptions not so much as a critique of postmodern theory as an attempt to argue for it by displaying its very opposites and rendering them inadequate. In other words, one may ask whether Auster’s novel is a demonstration of existentialist values and conceptions of reality only in order to argue against them. After all, the postmodern seems to stand for the inevitable contingency of the world, which turns into a constant rather than being a sign of the undecidability and insecurity of our times. Yet, the existentialist token of the novel is unavoidable and unmistaken as to the sense of the physical limits of our existence. The conditions of mortal life are clearly contrasted to social reality. Despite a combination of different postmodern elements, the reconstruction of meaningful relations persists. One of the explanatory models in Oracle Night is that the world is ruled by chance;
however, this notion is challenged in the sense that the novel signals the agency and responsibility of subjects. Of course, nobody can completely control the course of actions since actions will always result in unforeseen consequences. Nevertheless, the characters of the novel are brutally faced with the consequences of their actions. The point made in *Oracle Night* is that subjects may be held to account for their own deeds, not so much by some higher power as by human beings themselves.

According to Springer, the postmodern stage that used to characterize Auster’s novels have shifted to a more conventional descriptive style (2000: 15). It seems that there is a return to a stage in which the characters’ identities are relatively stable. At a distance from the deconstructive writing, the reconstructive turn is described as going back in time. Auster’s novels return here to a thematic emphasis on stability, unity and meaningful relations. In a wider sense too, “a formal change in direction from deconstruction to reconstruction corresponds to a thematic change [in American literature of the late 1980s]” (Schöpp 1990: 253f; Springer 2000: 213f). This transformation corresponds to the thesis statement in the essay at hand, in the sense that a reconstructive mode may be interpreted not only as a return to some of the elements of classic modernist literature but also as a critical standpoint towards postmodern theory.

As to the relation between writing and subjectivity, writing appears to require the conscious thought of a human subject rather than a pre-existing structure or model of text. Writing may thus be understood as an intentional act contrary to the way the protagonist gets lost in the text by letting writing show the way or Chang mechanically jotting down figures behind the counter at the Paper Palace. Even though the protagonist is in search for a way to get started and merely writes for the sake of writing, simply going with the flow according to a prefabricated structure soon leads to a dead-end position – one which is impossible to escape. One may argue that writing in the blue notebook had a meaning in that he wrote for himself, in order to understand things. *Oracle Night* nevertheless calls for a certain caution, or awareness, when it comes to writing and storytelling because of its potential to anticipate or, in its constructive capacity, even alter reality. This is not to say that we are able to control the consequences of what we write, but the novel calls for attention to the fact that writing has actual consequences to human beings.

Although the postmodern view is prevalent in Auster’s previous novels, it seems to be replaced here by a more reconstructive mode of writing. *Oracle Night* even expresses a certain primacy of the past, not only in the sense that the story is told retrospectively but also in view of an articulated desire to connect with the past in order to gain a fuller understanding
of human subjectivity. The novel also exemplifies the dire consequences of letting chance govern our lives and is a reminder not to take life for granted, as is often the case when speaking about the momentary constructions that constitute reality. In so far as Oracle Night is a critique of the postmodern sense of ambiguity, ambivalence and distance to the world – it is a novel that raises awareness of different aspects of what it means to exist. On the one hand, Oracle Night may be read as an existential account on the awareness (or unawareness) of being a human subject. On the other hand, the novel combines aspects from both postmodernism and existentialism to demonstrate how they work together. As mentioned in the introduction, the setting or context may be postmodern whereas the narrative components are derived from an existentialist or reconstructionist perspective. It is thus not so much a matter of which perspective is more valid than the other, but how they can enrich each other in different approaches to literature.
Works cited


