

ORACLE NIGHT: A BAKHTINIAN READING OF PAUL AUSTER'S METAFICTIONAL NARRATIVE

Oracle Night: uma leitura bakhtiniana da narrativa metaficcional de Paul Auster

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When one is dealing with current metafiction and thus inside one of the characteristics of the postmodern novel, there is no way of ignoring Bakhtin's essay on the distinctiveness of the novel as opposed to the epic, and, specifically, his comments on the development of the novel as a genre:

The novel is the only developing genre and therefore it reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding. Only that which is itself developing can comprehend development as a process. The novel has become the leading hero in the drama of literary development in our time precisely because it best of all reflects the tendencies of a new world still in the making; it is, after all, the only genre born of this new world and in total affinity with it. In many respects the novel has anticipated, and continues to anticipate, the future development of literature as a whole (BAKHTIN, 1983, p. 7).

The relevance of these comments becomes even more evident as one realizes that, in spite of the contradictions inherent in the term "postmodernism" – as it simultaneously inscribes and subverts the artistic and theoretical conventions of a dominant culture – it is perhaps precisely the "strategic doubleness or political ambidextrousness", considered to be the common denominator of many postmodernist discourses (HUTCHEON, 1995, p. 612), that allows us to discuss Paul Auster's *Oracle Night* (2003) not only as a metafictional novel – or as "experimental fabulation" (SCHOLENBERG, 1979, p. 4) – but, simultaneously and consequently, as a postmodern Menippean Satire.

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On the one hand, as a metafictional narrative, providing “within itself, a commentary on its own status as fiction and as language, and also on its own processes of production and reception”, *Oracle Night* is a “manifestation of the postmodern” (HUTCHEON, 1980, p. xii-xiii), and, as such, concerned with its status as fiction, narrative and language. It is grounded in a verifiable historical reality, installing yet also subverting conventions; it employs traditional forms and expectations but at the same time undermines them; it challenges the fixing of boundaries between genres, while asserting itself as a novel (HUTCHEON, 1995, p. 612).

On the other hand, due to these same concerns, *Oracle Night* simultaneously inserts itself back into what Bakhtin has called the serio-comic genres: specifically, into the Menippean satire, characterized by an extraordinary freedom of philosophical invention and of invention within the plot, which become justified by a purely philosophical end, the creation of extraordinary situations in which to provoke and test a philosophical idea – the *word* or the *truth*, embodied in the image of the seeker after this truth. All the other characteristics gravitate around this most important feature. Among them, the presentation of ultimate questions and threshold dialogs, scenes of crude underworld naturalism, moral-psychological experimentation, dreams or journeys to unknown lands, a wide use of inserted genres, its publicistic quality. Bakhtin simultaneously emphasizes not only “the organic unity of all of these seemingly very heterogeneous traits” but also “the profound internal integrity of this genre”, thereby providing us with the key to the understanding of how such apparently disparate elements – an inherent characteristic of the postmodern – can still be internally justified by the very conception of this genre, throughout the centuries: a “carnivalized genre, extraordinarily flexible and as versatile as Proteus, and capable of penetrating other genres”, which “has had enormous, but as yet underestimated significance for the development of European literatures” (BAKHTIN, 1973, p. 93-97) and thus to the development of the novel. For this reason, in our reading of *Oracle Night*, as we follow the hero in his adventures through the worlds of reality and of fiction – for his life, for the brief period of twelve days, becomes inextricably intertwined with the novel he is writing – we will at the same time be dealing with its postmodern concerns through its Menippean characteristics.

THE HERO'S FIRST ADVENTURE: FROM REALITY INTO THE REALM OF THE PAPER PALACE

As the novel starts, Sydney Orr – the first person narrator – is recovering from a near- fatal illness, due to a fall in a subway station in New York. The fact that the long illness had turned him for some time “into an old man”, although he was only thirty-four, already signals that this hero is young enough to realize that, as he had “mysteriously failed to die”, his

only choice now was, as he says, “to live as though a future life were waiting for me”. On the other hand, he also realizes that, although he now gradually managed to extend his walks “into some of the more far-flung crevices of the neighborhood”, he still “drifted along like a spectator in someone else’s dream”, and that he “wasn’t equipped to play that game anymore”, as he was “damaged goods now”.

This double perspective on life that his convalescence provided him with will furnish him with the necessary detachment to live through the strange “adventures” that lie ahead of him, “either on earth, in the nether regions or on Olympus”(BAKHTIN, 1973, p. 94); simultaneously, it will reveal to us, through his dialogical attitude to himself, how his story, intrinsically enmeshed with complementary narrative lines and plots, will finally lead him to discover truth, thereby placing him, as the hero of this novel, inside the Menippea’s most important characteristic: the creation of *extraordinary situations* in which to provoke and test *truth*.

Thus, on the morning of September 18, 1982 – marking the exact day of the first extraordinary situation he will find himself in – Orr leaves the apartment he shares with his wife in Brooklyn and heads south. Having walked for several blocks, he suddenly spots a new stationery store on the other side of the street, which, in spite of the pomposity of its name – the “Paper Palace” – “looked too small to contain much of interest”. Nevertheless, the symbolic /metaphoric implications of this name, with its oxymoronic combination of size and fragility, already suggest that, by crossing the street and entering the store, attracted as he is by the ballpoints, pencils and rulers in the window, he will be crossing the line between reality and an enchanted world. The word “palace”, with its symbolic associations with the Mystic Center, often hard to find in the labyrinth of this world, and appearing as if by magic (VRIES, 1974, p. 356), with secret chambers which hold treasures (CIRLOT, 1971, p. 249), foreshadows what Orr will find inside the store - spiritual guidance and illumination. The word “paper”, in its turn, as the material in the form of thin sheets used for writing, prefigures the blue notebook that Orr will buy and that will play such an important role in the story, while simultaneously, through its symbolic associations with transitoriness (VRIES, 1974, p. 357), it foreshadows the fact that this store will suddenly be moved by its owner to another place, as will be seen.

The sight of this Paper Palace will therefore reveal to Orr, in the first place, what he had been unconscious of – his wish to start writing again. As he muses,

If I decided to cross the street and go in, it must have been because I secretly wanted to start working again – without knowing it, without being aware of the urge that had been gathering inside me. I hadn’t written anything since coming home from the hospital in May – not a sentence, not a word – and hadn’t felt the slightest inclination to do so. Now, after four months of apathy and silence,

I suddenly got it into my head to stock up on a fresh set of supplies: new pens and pencils, new notebook, new ink cartridges and erasers, new pads and folders, new everything (p. 3).

At the same time, as he enters the store, he realizes he is going into a foreign world – reminding us of how he felt at the beginning of his outings: having lived in New York all his life, but feeling “like a man who had lost his way in a foreign city”. This strange new world is characterized not just by the Chinese owner sitting behind the cash register, “writing down columns of figures with a black mechanical pencil”, or by the tinkling sound of the door when Orr pulls it open, announcing that a customer has arrived but at the same time suggesting he is crossing a threshold – from the outside world of reality into the fictional reality of the Paper Palace, this “Mystic Center” holding unknown treasures – the blue notebook, which will act as the catalyst for his writing activities; it is characterized above all by the quietness inside. As Orr comments, “I was the first customer of the day, and the stillness was so pronounced that I could hear the scratching of the man’s pencil behind me”. This stillness or silence, an essential quality in many charms (VRIES, p. 424), as well as “un prélude d’ouverture à la révélation” and thus enveloping “les grands événements” (CHEVALIER; GHEERBRANT, 1973, p. 205), enhances through its symbolism the importance of the act of writing as the only sound that can be heard inside the Palace, marking not only the official beginning of the story Orr is about to tell us – “I believe this was where it began” – but also the introduction of one of the main themes of the novel: *Oracle Night* as a metafictional narrative. As Orr acknowledges,

Whenever I think about that morning now, the sound of that pencil is always the first thing that comes back to me. To the degree that the story I am about to tell makes any sense, I believe this was where it began – in the space of those few seconds, when the sound of that pencil was the only sound left in the world (p. 4).

As these comments reveal further, Paul Auster, by projecting his hero-novelist’s concerns about fiction, narrative and language, is engaging him in a metafictional dialogue with the reader – a dialogue that will be continually problematized throughout the novel, thus reminding us that we are dealing with fiction, not with reality. Moreover, Auster is also emphasizing, in Orr’s comment “whenever I think about that morning now”, that the actual time of telling the story – the narrator’s “now” – takes place much later than the actual events, thus also foregrounding the hero’s temporal detachment from his narrative. As Orr later qualifies this time lapse, while musing on his conversation with the Chinese owner – “Twenty years have elapsed since that morning, and a fair amount of what we said to each other has been lost. I search my memory for the missing dialogue, but I can come up with no more than a few isolated fragments, bits and pieces shorn from their original

context” – he is once more stressing the metalinguistic character of his comments, and the fragmentary nature of the whole account, so characteristic of the postmodern novel.

As Orr makes his way down the aisle to examine the material on the shelves, he is attracted to one shelf “given over to a number of high-quality imported items” and, among them, a stack of notebooks. Reminding us of the symbolic associations of the palace, with its “hidden treasures”, these notebooks are “especially attractive” to Orr, making him intuit that he is going to buy one: “I knew I was going to buy one the moment I picked it up and held it in my hands”. Like a magic item, the moment he holds the notebook for the first time, Orr feels “something akin to physical pleasure, a rush of sudden, incomprehensible well-being”, as if he has received, through touching the notebook, some kind of secret knowledge which will, in its turn, release in him again his gift for writing, thereby foregrounding once more the extraordinary adventure he is experiencing.

This feeling is corroborated by the Chinese owner, as he stresses to Orr, in their conversation, that “Everybody make words [...]. Everybody write things down [...]. Everything in here important to life, and that make me happy give honor to my life”. This remark brings out another revelation to Orr, as he wonders “What kind of stationery store owner was this [...], who expounded to his customers on the metaphysics of paper, who saw himself as serving an essential role in the myriad affairs of humanity?”: the truth that, by participating in the dissemination of supplies for writing books, he was not only helping to promote the very act of writing, thereby again prefiguring the writing of the book that Orr would soon start, but simultaneously performing his role in life, a role that Orr himself needed to perform again. Even if the Chinese’s speech had “something comical about it”, taking away its authoritative nature by giving it a “jolly relativity”(BAKHTIN, 1973, p. 102), the message revealed to Orr – “the metaphysics of paper” – will impregnate the whole narrative, as more and more stories will be spun from the blue notebook. Moreover, the fact that, due to Chang’s poor English, he does not understand the spelling of Orr’s name, which he interprets first as *or* and then as *oar*, makes Orr write out his name “in block letters on the inside front cover” of the blue notebook, to avoid any further misunderstandings, which thus becomes another symbolic act of his preparation to start the writing of his novel.

Although the first part of the episode ends with Orr emerging from the store into the reality of “the raw September day”, the hero’s adventure into the strange realm of the Paper Palace will be further problematized in terms of reality/fiction as well as in terms of chronological/psychological time, as he returns to the place two days later – halfway through the novel – and finds an empty store, with a “store for rent” sign on the window. As mentioned above, the sudden “disappearance” of the Paper Palace had already been foreshadowed in the symbolic associations of paper with transitoriness,

in the same way that the Paper Palace had suddenly been spotted by Orr on that Saturday morning. As Orr muses,

Just forty-eight hours earlier, Chang's business had been in full operation [...] but now, to my absolute astonishment, everything was gone [...] I was so puzzled, I just stood there for a while staring into the vacant room. [...] For a moment or two, I wondered if I hadn't imagined my visit to the Paper Palace on Saturday morning or if the time sequence hadn't been scrambled in my head, meaning that I was remembering something that had happened much earlier – not two days ago, but two weeks or two months ago (p. 98-9).

The fact that Orr was again “feeling some of the old dizziness and discombobulation”, as he was moving down Court Street to return to the store, confirms once more the thin line separating reality and dream in his past and present adventures, placed again within a historical reality – a store on a street in New York, September 20th, 1982 – but simultaneously made unreal, and with chronological time “scrambled up” in the hero's mind, as he doubts his own reality. Besides, the dream-like situation Orr is again faced with simultaneously reveals to him, through his doubts, his non-coincidence with himself, so characteristic of the Menippea's moral-psychological experimentation – the representation of man's unusual, abnormal moral and psychic states, destroying his epic, tragic integrity – and which has taken such a preminent place again, inside the characteristics of the hero in the modern and postmodern novel.

THE HERO'S SECOND ADVENTURE: FROM THE PAPER PALACE INTO THE REALM OF FICTION

The interrelatedness of reality and fiction will now take another turn, as Orr returns home. After reading the note that his wife Grace had left him, saying that she would be back soon, and going into his workroom to prepare himself to start writing, he realizes first of all that since his discharge from the hospital, “until that Saturday morning in September”, he has not once sat down in his chair. He feels again “like someone who had come home from a long and difficult journey, an unfortunate traveler who had returned to claim his rightful place in the world”, thus reminding us not only of his journey from sickness to health but also of the impact which Chang's words about man's fulfilling a role in life have had on him.

As he settles down at his old desk, filled with joy and determined “to mark the occasion by writing something in the blue notebook”, he nevertheless suddenly becomes aware that, in spite of his desire to write, he “had no idea how to begin”. This realization, as a preamble to the ritual of writing as an initiation ceremony, projects again the metafictional roots of

Auster's narrative, as Orr reveals to us a writer's dilemma: whether to write down "any sentence" or to bide one's time until inspiration comes. As he lets his thoughts "wander in and out" of the little squares on the page, he is reminded of a conversation he has had with the novelist John Trause – an old friend of Grace's family – who had been "rereading some of the novelists he had admired when he was young", and who suggests that Orr rewrite an anecdote from one of Dashiell Hammett's books. As he says, "There's a novel in this somewhere [...]. I'm too old to want to think about it myself, but a young punk like you could really fly with it, turn it into something good. It's a terrific premise. All you need is a story to go with it".

The metafictional character of the novel, commenting on its own status as fiction and as language, and also on its own processes of production and reception, as mentioned above, is thus further enhanced not just by Auster the novelist presenting to us a hero-novelist, Sidney Orr, who is trying to write a new novel; or by Orr revealing what takes place behind the scenes at a writer's desk – the external ritual of putting a fresh ink cartridge in his fountain pen and opening the notebook, as well as the internal ritual of "biding his time" for inspiration to arrive; or by Orr's recalling a conversation with another novelist – Trause – about novelists and books. It is also strongly enhanced by Trause's advice, as a consequence of his rereading past novelists, to use an anecdote by another writer as a prototype to develop his own story. Here is the older writer revealing the secret source of inspiration to a younger one, showing how inspiration can come through the use of a source text (which Orr will then rework for his own purposes). Thus the whole episode is once again set within the *Menippea's* placing the hero in extraordinary situations, this time in the realm of fiction, in order to discover the truth about inspiration.

This advice, in turn, leads Orr to present us with a summary of Hammett's "Flitcraft episode" from the *Maltese Falcon*, "about the man who walks away from his life and disappears", as well as his comments about this source text: "I agreed that it [the story] was a good premise – good because at one moment or another we have all wanted to be someone else". A first touch of the *Menippea's* philosophical universalism is thereby added to the hero's adventures, as he muses on man's ultimate questions – "a person's ultimate, decisive words and actions" (BAKHTIN, 1973, p. 95) – a topic that will be further developed throughout Orr's two narratives: the "realistic" events of his own life and the fictional events in his novel.

Moreover, these metafictional remarks, which up to here have served as *prolegomena* to Orr's adventures in the realm of fiction, will now become intermingled with the actual process of writing his novel, as he simultaneously writes and comments on his writing, thus further enhancing and problematizing the metafictional status of his enterprise. The fact that the novel itself, which extends from page 13 to page 94, will be occasionally interrupted by episodes from his own life story, once again projects the

interrelatedness of fiction and reality.

The main plot of Orr's narrative centers around Nick Bowen, an editor who, like his Flitcraft prototype, after narrowly escaping death from a falling gargoyle on a West Village street decides to start his life over again. Without letting his wife or anybody else know, he takes a plane to Kansas City and eventually ends up working for Ed Victory, a former taxi-driver, in an underground archive, with shelves crammed with thousands of telephone books. As Bowen inadvertently locks himself in and is unable to leave the shelter, since Ed Victory is dying in hospital, Orr's novel suddenly stops, with his hero "sitting alone in the darkness" of the shelter, with no perspective of ever leaving it.

As Orr subsequently muses on how to remove his hero from the shelter, aware as he is of not hearing his "voice" any longer, his remarks once again foreground his concerns about the act of writing itself and about his loss of inspiration:

Until then, writing in the blue notebook had given me nothing but pleasure, a soaring, manic sense of fulfillment. Words had rushed out of me as though I were taking dictation, transcribing sentences from a voice that spoke in the crystalline language of dreams, nightmares, and unfettered thought. On the morning of September 20, however, two days after the day in question [the day he bought the notebook and started writing], that voice suddenly went silent. I opened the notebook, and when I glanced down at the page in front of me, I realized that I was lost, that I didn't know what I was doing anymore. I had locked the door and turned out the light, and now I didn't have the faintest idea of how to get him out of there. Dozens of solutions sprang to mind, but they all seemed trite, mechanical, dull (p. 96-7).

These metafictional concerns will be projected again in the footnote that Orr adds, later on in the novel, about his dilemma as to how to "improve Bowen's condition somewhat without having to alter the central thrust of the narrative", thus stressing the importance of keeping the driving force of the original episode - that of a man who walks away from life and disappears.

Orr's final comment on his unfinished narrative, that "Bowen would be trapped in the room forever, and I decided that the moment had finally come to abandon my efforts to rescue him", only corroborates his feeling that "the notebook was a place of trouble for me, and whatever I tried to write in it would end in failure. Every story would stop in the middle; every project would carry me along just so far, and then I'd look up and discover that I was lost". This realization that art without inspiration could lead him into a dead end, like his character Nick Bowen, that the blue notebook without "that voice" would not be enough to make a writer of him, even with a source text to guide him, thus becomes another insight of truth that his adventure into the realm of fiction has provided him with.

The fact that all the metafictional remarks and texts discussed above can simultaneously be placed within the Menippean inserted genres – intensifying the variety of styles and tones of a narrative, while also revealing the author’s “new attitude to the word as the material of literature, an attitude characteristic of the dialogical line in the development of literary prose” (BAKHTIN, 1973, p. 97) – enhances once more the way in which Auster’s narrative becomes a postmodern manifestation of this old genre.

THE HERO’S RETURN TO REALITY

The problematization of the hero’s reality through his adventures into the realms of the Paper Palace and of fiction now needs to be correlated with the other events that occurred to Orr between September 18 and October 1st, 1982 – and thus anchored to the verifiable historical reality of 20th century New York City – as these events will lead him to discover a different kind of truth than that revealed to him through art.

Thus, on that same day, September 18th, and following on after the events mentioned above, a new “extraordinary situation” lies in store for the hero, as Orr and Grace are invited to have dinner at Trause’s apartment. As Orr explains, “John loved Grace, and Grace loved him back, and because I was the man in Grace’s life, John had welcomed me into the inner circle of his affections”. Still a naïve interpreter of John and Grace’s relationship, Orr’s comment nevertheless presages the nature of their true relationship, as will be revealed further on. The fact that John has phlebitis, and looks haggard, older and in pain, upsets Grace enormously, and on their way home in a taxi she starts crying. Although Orr does not believe in her explanation – “It’s just that he looked so terrible tonight [...] so done-in. All the men I love are falling apart.” – for he suspects that “something else was troubling her, some private torment she wasn’t willing to share with me”, he nevertheless manages to make her relax.

In their ensuing conversation, and in response to Orr’s recollections of his adolescent commitment to the *Blue Team*, whose members represented “the dream of a perfect society”, Grace’s argument 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”, will become prophetic again of her feelings about her renewed relationship with Trause, and will continue to reverberate in Orr’s mind throughout the novel. Similarly, as Grace accuses Orr of still believing “in that junk”, his reply – “I don’t believe in anything. Being alive – that’s what I believe in. Being alive and being with you. That’s all there is for me, Grace. There’s nothing else, not a single thing in the whole goddamn world” – not only prefigures his decision to forget the past events when Grace decides she wants to stay married to him, but simultaneously foregrounds his very stance in life, which will be foregrounded again at the end of the novel. The fact that they were crossing

Brooklyn Bridge during their discussion, and thus crossing “the link between what can be perceived and what is beyond perception”, for “the bridge is always symbolic of a transition from one state to another” (CIRLOT, 1971, p. 33), only enhances the portentousness of the discussion between Grace and Orr of their “*pro et contra* of the ultimate questions of life” (BAKHTIN, 1973, p. 95), and the significance of their “oracle night” for the development of the novel.

A new “extraordinary situation” lies in store for Orr, however. After discovering on Monday morning that Chang’s store has disappeared, Orr is then so shaken by a newspaper article he reads in coffee shop, about a baby born in a toilet and then discarded in garbage bin, that he realizes he was “reading a story about the end of mankind, that that room in the Bronx was the precise spot on earth where human life had lost its meaning”. If Orr has already wandered through unknown fantasy lands, this episode now shows us the hero descending into the nether world, for the article is, like the story Ed Victory told Nick Bowen in the underground archive, “another dispatch from the bowels of hell”. It leads Orr to realize that real events turn out to be much more shocking than any kind of fiction, emphasizing the way in which the blow of truth he has received from reality through the newspaper article (in the guise of inserted genres) simultaneously foregrounds the novel’s publicistic quality, as it “alludes to the great and small events of the epoch” (BAKHTIN, 1973, p. 97), and also projects *Oracle Night* as an accusation against the loss of meaning to which human life has become subject in our postmodern world.

The impact of this episode will be projected again as Grace returns home and reveals to Orr that she is pregnant. She suggests having an abortion, as she is not sure whether she is pregnant by Orr or by John Trause, with whom she has resumed a past affair during Orr’s almost fatal illness, alleging that “this seems the worst possible moment”. However, Orr reinforces his reply that “married people don’t kill their babies. Not when they love each other” by making her read, like “any shyster lawyer” defending himself, that “dreadful newspaper clipping”. This not only brings tears to Grace’s eyes, but makes him realize, months later, through her answer “It isn’t fair, Sidney. What does this... this nightmare have to do with us? [...] What’s wrong with you? I’m only trying to hold our life together in the best way I can”, that it was actually his fear of losing her that was the reason for his battling to have a child together; it was about him, much more than about having a baby.

A string of further extraordinary situations leading to the hero’s confrontation with truth continue to mark Orr’s return to reality, from scenes of moral-psychological experimentation to scenes of crude underworld naturalism (BAKHTIN, 1973, p. 95-96). As he recalls them on his way home on September 27th, having tossed his torn blue notebook into a garbage can, and with it “Flitcraft and Bowen, the rant about the dead baby in the Bronx,

my soap opera version of Grace's love life",

I blundered through those nine days in September 1982 like someone trapped inside a clod. I tried to write a story and came to an impasse. I tried to sell an idea for a film and was rejected. I lost my friend's manuscript. I nearly lost my wife, and yet fervently as I loved her, I didn't hesitate to drop my pants in a darkened sex club and thrust myself into the mouth of a stranger. I was a lost man, an ill man, a man struggling to regain his footing [...] (p. 198).

Even so, he simultaneously realizes that

underneath all the missteps and follies I committed that week, I knew something I wasn't aware of knowing. At certain moments during those days, I felt as if my body had become transparent, a porous membrane through which all the invisible forces of the world could pass [...]. The future was already inside me, and I was preparing myself for the disasters that were about to come (p. 198-9).

The "horrors" Orr is about "to relate now" will alter yet again his relationship with Grace, with his stance as a writer and also with the way he faces reality. On that same night and still unaware of Trause's sudden death from pulmonary embolism, Orr and Grace receive an unexpected visit from Trause's son, Jacob, in need of cash. As Orr sees Jacob, looking like "some futuristic undertaker who'd come to carry away a dead body", and thus prefiguring what will happen to Grace's baby, Orr knows "the future was standing in front of me". Their verbal confrontation erupts "into physical violence" as Grace attempts to call the police. Jacob slams her against the wall, punches her and kicks her in the belly with his boots, leaving her moaning and nearly unconscious while Orr, unable to deter him, is also knocked down. It is only after Orr threatens to kill him with a carving knife that Jacob leaves, to be killed later on by his fellow drug addicts. Despite losing the baby and being taken to hospital in critical condition, Grace nevertheless manages to survive.

As Orr thinks back on the events three days later – Trause's burial, and the bequest he left Orr and Grace – he realizes, on his way to the hospital to see his wife, that he is "happier to be alive than I had ever been before. It was a happiness beyond consolation, beyond misery, beyond all the ugliness and beauty of the world". His latest adventures in real life have led him to discover a deeper truth than the one he has learned from fiction: that fiction can remain unfinished, but life, in spite of its horror and violence, goes on, pointing to the infinite possibilities that lie ahead for him in his new relationship with Grace.

As a metafictional narrative, *Oracle Night*, commenting on its own status as fiction and also on its processes of production while simultaneously inserting itself, through its plot, in the genre of the Menippean satire, thus becomes, through the intermingling of these concerns and characteristics, not only a manifestation of the postmodern novel, but also, through its reappropriation of an old genre, a postmodern Menippean satire. It thus reasserts the relevance of Bakhtin's prognostication of the importance of the novel as the only genre born of this new world and its ability to anticipate the future development of literature as a whole, iconic as it has become of our postmodern reality in the process of its unfolding.

RESUMO

Este trabalho pretende discutir *Oracle Night* (2003) de Paul Auster, primeiramente como uma narrativa metafictional, interessada em seu *status* como ficção, narrativa e linguagem, mas também baseada numa realidade histórica comprovável; empregando formas e expectativas tradicionais e ao mesmo tempo solapando-as; desafiando a fixação de limites entre gêneros, enquanto se afirma como romance. Mesmo assim, devido a essas mesmas características, *Oracle Night* simultaneamente se insere no que Bakhtin chamou de gêneros sério-cômicos, e, especificamente, no gênero da sátira menipeia. As características desse gênero, que impregnam o texto de Auster, irão assim projetar *Oracle Night* como um romance pós-moderno *como consequência* de ser uma sátira menipeia contemporânea, pois, como enfatiza Bakhtin, o romance é o único gênero em desenvolvimento que reflete a própria realidade no processo de seu desdobramento, em total afinidade com nosso mundo contemporâneo e assim reinterpretando-se continuamente, em sua constante trajetória como gênero na vanguarda da mudança.
Palavras-chave: *literatura norte-americana contemporânea; metaficção; sátira menipeia.*

ABSTRACT

This paper intends to discuss Paul Auster's *Oracle Night* (2003) first as a metafictional narrative, concerned with its status as fiction, narrative and language, but also grounded in a verifiable historical reality; employing traditional forms and expectations and the same time undermining them; challenging the fixing of boundaries between genres, while asserting itself as a novel. Nevertheless, due to these same characteristics, *Oracle Night* simultaneously inserts itself back into what Bakhtin has called

the serio-comic genres, and, specifically, into the genre of the Menippean satire. The characteristics of this genre, which impregnate Auster's text, will thus project *Oracle Night* as a postmodern novel *as a consequence* of being a contemporary Menippean satire, for, as Bakhtin stresses, the novel is the only developing genre that reflects reality itself in the process of its unfolding, in total affinity with our contemporary world and thus reinterpreting itself continually, in its constant trajectory as a genre at the vanguard of change.

Keywords: *Contemporary American literature; Metafiction; Menippean Satire.*

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