

## ORACULAR DELUSION: PAUL AUSTER'S *ORACLE NIGHT*

Copyright © 2009 by James Clark

The novel, *Oracle Night* (2003),<sup>1</sup> can function for us as a much-needed rallying point for Auster's surreptitious and devastatingly incoherent induction as to dynamical power. It begins with the narrator, "Orr," being discharged from the hospital after a long period of treatment for a stroke-like collapse. "Make an effort, the doctor said, and in three or four months you'll be back in the swing of things."<sup>2</sup> The narrative traces Orr's effort, and ends with him walking to the hospital to visit his wife, "Grace," recovering from a savage beating by a friend's son, one of the outcomes of which was her miscarriage of a child fathered by that friend. There is, reminiscent of *The New York Trilogy*, a punishing clash between getting into "the swing of things" and getting seduced by the advantageousness of things. Here we don't benefit from the spiritedness of Fred Astaire, but we do encounter, thanks to Orr's convalescence regime of taking walks in his Brooklyn neighborhood, a dawning, known to Quinn, by virtue of those little rambles.

"Even at the slow pace I could manage then, walking produced an odd, airy lightness in my head, a free-for-all of mixed-up signals and crossed mental wires. The world would bounce and swim before my eyes, undulating like reflections in a wavy mirror, and whenever I tried to look at just one thing, to isolate a single object from the onrush of whirling colors---a blue scarf wrapped around a woman's head, say, or the red tailgate of a passing delivery truck--- it would immediately begin to break apart and dissolve, disappearing like a drop of dye in a glass of water. Everything shimmied and wobbled, kept darting off in different directions, and for the first several weeks I had trouble telling where my body stopped and the rest of the world began."<sup>3</sup>

Only in the most inconsequential of cameo roles---and that only from within the project's engine of obviating its dynamics--- namely, as "Boris Stepanovich" (late of *In the Country of Last Things*), now a taxi driver ferrying Orr and Grace back to Brooklyn in heavy traffic after a dinner with the friend, "John," who makes things happen, do we receive a shard of the Astaire factor, once so prominent (and all the while hidden).<sup>4</sup> But we do receive a fully recovered mastery of injecting, to critical and self-critical effect, features of both film, here *Kiss Me Deadly*, and the novelist's works from the past. In a context of medical crises--- John, too, is laid up with what proves to be a fatal condition of phlebitis --- the saga of *Oracle Night* tears forth as a virtuoso bid for recovery (more sustaining than ever) from the indisposition of the post-*Trilogy* period.

The activation device, the leather-bound container priming the work's action, is a cloth-bound *blue* notebook from that land of portals, Portugal, which Orr, a professional writer before falling to pieces, feels compelled to buy during one of his therapeutic strolls. He is at the point of "wanting to prove to myself that I still had it in me [to write]."<sup>5</sup>

Well...does he? Orr--- whose interchange with the Chinese stationer from whom he purchased the blue book spills out the English-challenged merchant's variant of "or" for his name,<sup>6</sup> thus spotlighting the issue of choice here--- chooses to launch his return to efficacy with a development of an anecdote, cued by John, concerning a man who, after a brush with death from a building beam, which falls (inches away from his head) from a construction site, becomes so impressed by the factor of chance that he abandons his ordered life in favor of submission "to this destructive power."<sup>7</sup> "He felt like somebody had taken the lid off life and let him look at the works."<sup>8</sup> "The works" ("the whatzit") haunting the Mike Hammer of *Kiss Me Deadly* could not be successfully described by the blunt sentence, "The world is governed by chance,"<sup>9</sup> nor by the chatty inference, "Randomness stalks us every day of our lives, and those lives can be taken from us at any moment---for no reason at all."<sup>10</sup> For all his inarticulate, jargon-strewn jabber, Mike's body language exudes being on the spot to perform in a most unaccustomed way. Whereas Orr could content himself, in face of the "lid off" situation of opening his new toy, the blue notebook, with the assurance, "It wasn't about control; it wasn't even about making choices. My job that morning was simply to follow what was happening inside me,"<sup>11</sup> Mike's (mis)adventure was all about do-or-die control and choices, and not *simply* following what was happening inside.

The writing exercise, concerning an abandonment of hearth and home by a book-world insider (reminiscent of both Guy the Fixer and Fanshawe, the dubious oracle, in *The Locked Room*), comes up with the name "Nick" (Bowen), for the protagonist-word-processor, who "spends his spare time at a *garage* on Desbrosses Street in

Tribeca, engaged in the long-term project of rebuilding the engine of a broken-down *Jaguar*” (my italics).<sup>12</sup> Being a habitué of a place for “brushes” [*brosses*], for brushing off irritants getting in the way of superficial cleanups (however unbeknown as such), whitewashes, *Bow* (en) would be a slave. The prototype from John’s file, “*Flit* craft,” would confirm the issue of concentration. On hitting the road, Nick teams up with an ex-G.I., Ed Victory, who collects phone books from around the world “to prove to myself that mankind isn’t finished.”<sup>13</sup> His “Bureau of Historical Preservation” would be a “house of memory” and “a shrine to the present.”<sup>14</sup> Ed had been one of the liberators of the Dachau death or concentration camp.<sup>15</sup> His quixotic and shabbily thought-through gesture moots the difficulty of “the works” and the trap of plunging from there into bathos. It is a trap Orr can’t seem to get enough of. He has Nick (whom Victory dubs “Lightning Man”) infer, “But who is he to judge another man’s passion?”<sup>16</sup> Would he have said that about the Nazis? The Bureau is housed underground in a former hydrogen bomb shelter in Kansas City (this Nick being no slouch at flitting) and Lightning Man (a name born of his remark--- to Ed well-met on his day-job of driving a cab---that the stray object and the wonky roof of the recommended hotel would be lightning striking twice) comes to the end of the trail in losing the key and consequently being trapped there, Ed, the only other key holder, having died during hospitalization.

Orr’s little composition follows “what was happening inside” him. It informs Nick’s actions from out of his own malaise with a life devoted to advantageous accomplishments in writing and in a marriage with Grace, introduced as having “already moved on to some higher state of being than the rest of us.”<sup>17</sup> Though it bears some affinities with the Jersey Guy’s gushing about Sophie in *The Locked Room*, the vigor of the present work’s counterattacks upon embarrassments can be appreciated in its improved observation, particularly in prizing his beloved’s skill in retaining poised reserves while giving fully in mundane actions.<sup>18</sup> This high ground, however, subtly erodes amidst the outset of its attainment, with the seemingly innocuous phrase, “startling absence of inner struggle,” in the following:

“...I felt a startling absence of inner struggle, an equilibrium of mind that seemed to exempt her from the usual conflicts and aggressions of modern life: self-doubt, envy, sarcasm, the need to judge or belittle others, the scalding, unbearable ache of personal ambition.”<sup>19</sup>

Orr’s (mis)adventure, so much more refined than Mike’s, but lacking stomach for the cost of war, brings us to a close encounter with the cruel drafts of compromise teeming within “the works.”

As he becomes absorbed with the rudderless (and thus presumably primal) doings of Nick, his own affairs begin to pall noticeably. For Nick-cum-Orr, “trouble has been stirring...for some time. He had become bored with his work (although he is unwilling to admit it) and...his marriage has come to a standstill (another fact he hasn’t had the courage to face).”<sup>20</sup> The “standstill” of Orr’s marriage to the angelic Grace derives from her long and very secret affair with her daddy’s good friend and superstar novelist, John Trause (rhymes with louse). The “boredom” of his work derives from “*simply*” following the inducement to bathos on tap in “the works.” Like Guy looking up to Fanshawe, Orr would be the last one to see through Trause’s mediocrity, notwithstanding a demonstrated, though inconsistent, capacity to deal out grounds seriously compromising pat literary resources. On remarking to his fan-friend and sometime screenwriter, “I don’t want you to have to waste your time fretting about movies. Stick with books,”<sup>21</sup> Trause would ensure that Orr never seriously concentrate upon taking up “the works” along the cinematic lines saturating so many of the voyages, and none perhaps more fervidly than *Oracle Night*. “Stick with books...I’m expecting great things from you.”<sup>22</sup> The greatness someone like Trause would see emanating from a literary career would have to do with advantages of world historical elaboration: being a bellwether of correct vapidity; adulation from those similarly demented; celebrity cash-flow; cute groupies, like Grace; smug one-upmanship, by which to savor references like the one regarding his deceased wife’s brother---“ ‘You have to understand about Richard. He’d always struck me as a featherweight, a person without substance.’”<sup>23</sup> And perhaps one might even wangle a soldier-of-fortune saga by which to maintain a clandestine affair under the nose of a duly impressed dupe (that would be Orr), about whose health problem involving sudden nosebleeds he would remark, “ ‘Old Faithful strikes again...Orr’s menstruating schnozz. Don’t let it get you down, Sidney. At least you know you’re not pregnant.’”<sup>24</sup> In addition to being fed by such a luminary to the tune of the *Dashiell Hammett* conceit about the world “governed” by chance, Orr has been granted the heavyweight insight that, since one’s intent has consequences for the wellspring of others, a poet (like one he had known in Paris in the early fifties), writing about a young child’s drowning, would be correct in blaming his narrative for the death of his five-year-old daughter soon after publication and therewith ceasing to write.<sup>25</sup> “French literary circles” rewarded him for “that silence.” “He was held in the highest regard for the dignity of his suffering, pitied by all who knew him, looked upon with awe.”<sup>26</sup> Trause intoned “ ‘Thoughts are real...Words are real. Everything human is real, and 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. Maybe that's what writing is all about, Sid. Not recording events from the past, but, making things happen in the future."<sup>27</sup>

That bit of what's-your-sign savviness sinks in for gullible Orr (as in "rest on one's oars" ["oar" being another confusion about his name from the immigrant retailer]. After much disorienting static from both Grace and Trause apropos of her inopportune pregnancy—one flare-up of which being the foxy friend (he's working on a book, titled, *The Strange Destiny of Gerald Fuchs*<sup>28</sup>) insisting on an abortion and, in reply to Orr's, "...what business is it of yours?"<sup>29</sup> blurting out, "Grace is my business. She's always been my business"<sup>30</sup> ---the cuckold reasons things out (in the blue book and in an entirely this-worldly way), comes to realize why Trause's son is murderously disposed toward Grace, and, even before her being assaulted by him, adopts the literary-saint freezeover cure and, reminiscent of Fanshawe's stooge with the latter's pensés,<sup>31</sup> rips out all the pages, "one by one,"<sup>32</sup> and deposits them in a "trash can."<sup>33</sup>

In face of a production so intent upon dismissing its heartbeat as trash, the reader is put on notice to discover what becomes of the quietened threads of integrity. The nub of this task seems to be installed in a dustup between Orr and Grace in Boris' cab. He starts things with the only too sadly true gambit, "...John and I have the same passion...we're both in love with the color blue"<sup>34</sup> (both being fond of working in the same brand of blue notebook). Orr, it turns out, has been a Blues Brother dating from summer camp days, at "Camp Pontiac," "named [with advantages of political correctness in view] after the Indian chief"<sup>35</sup> [and also named after the innocuous brand of car, a favorite amongst circumspect suburbanites]. There, a counsellor, Bruce Adler, a Columbia Law School student, "...scrawny, gnomish...a strict nonathlete...sharp-witted and funny, always challenging you with difficult questions" and therefore known as "the Rabbi,"<sup>36</sup> posited a "Blue Team," a "secret society, a brotherhood of kindred souls," in contradistinction to the intra-camp sports teams.<sup>37</sup> The terribly advanced gnome-nihilist regarded the motives of the blue boys as "an exercise in nostalgia."<sup>38</sup> Orr as a child---that is, remarkably, even more callow than his present incarnation--- "was chosen" by that brains trust by reason of the following, "nostalgic" qualities:

"Blue Team members didn't conform to a single type [sic], and each one was a distinct and independent person [sic!]. But no one was allowed in who didn't have a good sense of humor--- however that humor might have expressed itself. Some people crack jokes all the time; others can lift an eyebrow at the right moment and suddenly everyone in the room is rolling on the floor. A good sense of humor, then, a taste for the ironies of life, and an appreciation of the absurd. But also a certain modesty and discretion, kindness toward others, a generous heart. No blowhards or arrogant fools, no liars or thieves. A Blue Team member had to be curious, a reader of books, and aware of the fact that he couldn't bend the world to the shape of his will. An astute observer, someone capable of making fine moral distinctions, a lover of justice. A Blue Team member would give you the shirt off his back if he saw you were in need, but he would much rather slip a ten- dollar bill into your pocket when you weren't looking."<sup>39</sup>

On concluding that enumeration of a garden of independence, Orr asks Grace "Is it beginning to make sense?"<sup>40</sup> She counters with, "Good people do bad things, Sid,"<sup>41</sup> in other words noticing that Marx Brothers politics are out of control. Then she rips his clannish utopianism with, "'I'll bet you and your friends had a secret handshake, didn't you? To set you apart from the riffraff and the dumbbells, right? To make you think you had some special knowledge no one else was smart enough to have.'" He had insisted that the great Adler, "...didn't take it seriously. That was the beauty of the Blue Team. The whole thing was a kind of joke."<sup>42</sup> On being sliced and diced by his Lady Fair ("...you still believe in that junk. I can hear it in your voice."<sup>43</sup>), his capitulation to incoherence comes in the form of, "'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."<sup>44</sup>

But nostalgic nihilism would be enough to fuel Adler's career of laying down the law, of outmanoeuvring and thereby obviating "the [athletic, carnal] dregs" his bathetic blues association would not abide, and, thereby, would in fact "bend...to the shape of [their] will." Grace's contempt would be peppered with an instinctive recognition of antiquated, crude, incoherent, totalitarian motives tricked out to appear as the *ne plus ultra* of problematic sensibility. The clannish exclusivity so agreeable to Orr---"a bond of solidarity. If you're on the Blue Team, you don't have to explain your principles. They're immediately understood by how you act"<sup>45</sup> --- would take specific form in the orbit of literary intellectualism and its premium upon sentimental incoherence.

On thus exposing and exploding a mainstream respectability, what does Auster suggest about the sensuous priorities glowing from afar in that world (which he knows so well) of the deadly kiss, the deadly dawning? Two episodes not yet touched upon may provide some direction in that key, beyond the standoff, and, thereby, some purchase for "making an effort" within a current of intent perhaps slightly less viscous than that of Orr.

Both moments, where Orr is mercifully upstaged, are redolent of crises arising in *Kiss Me Deadly*. The first arises from the protagonist's having some time on his hands and opting to revisit a haunt of his college days, the folkie redoubt known as the White Horse Tavern, where the likes of Bob Dylan would lay down the law for the gratification of white-hat insiders. There he encounters that purveyor of progress through learning, M.R. Chang, whose paper goods shop has shut down after only a month. He drinks too much Scotch and allows Chang—who protests he's "*sober* [italics added] as a judge"<sup>46</sup>—to drive him (in his Pontiac convertible)—a study in crosspurposes—to the Flushing district of Queens in order to pick his brain about a business opportunity there. Like Mike, injected with truth serum by G.E. Soberin, Orr is loquacious but unhelpful. (He frostily discourages the sweatshop-cum-sex club Chang confronts him with.) Also like Mike, drunk again, at the Black nightclub, "The Pigalle," he is confronted with Frank De Vols' "Rather Have the Blues,"<sup>47</sup> as enhanced by an attractive Black entertainer (Kitty White, in the film; Martine in the novel) in a white gown. But unlike Mike—who introduced the word "no" and its link to sensual powers to the overly-accommodating Miss Friday—Orr, an exponent of simply following what was happening inside him, proves the correctness of Chang's adage, "the dick always win out over duty,"<sup>48</sup> by becoming aroused "like a teenage boy"<sup>49</sup> with a Haitian beauty<sup>50</sup> in a white G-string.<sup>51</sup> A coda to this delinquency occurs a few days later when he comes across a reprise of Chang's stationary investment, on the Upper East Side. He is reproached by the newly minted and obsessively resolved American Dreamer, for failing to muster adult solicitude in Queens.

"Never even say good-bye. What kind of friend is that?...If Martine walk in here now you do it again. Right here on floor of my shop. You fuck her like a dog and love every minute of it.

I was drunk. She was very beautiful and I lost control of myself but that doesn't mean that I would do it again.

You not drunk. You horny hypocrite, just like all selfish people...I knew you think bad thoughts about me, that's why I understand what's in your mind...

That's not true.

Yes, Mr. Sid, it's true. It's very true...You give big hurt to my soul, and now we stop."<sup>52</sup>

Orr tries to buy the last Portuguese book in the shop (a red one); Chang refuses to sell it to him; Orr takes a swing at him; and—as with Guy in Paris—he is promptly beaten with karate moves and becomes the Pink Panther's house boy.<sup>53</sup> Chang dumps him onto the sidewalk and leaves this warning, "Next time you come back...I cut out your heart and feed it to the pigs."<sup>54</sup>

In a compilation that might suggest the Blue Team were invincible, here we have a contrarian bid of some efficacy. This would seem to be a kind of maintenance of the "poetry" Tocqueville could discern within the crushing momentum on behalf of material well-being and its concomitant advantages. Similarly, Grace, an equivocal figure to be sure, would seem positioned to establish that even lives having dug themselves into pretty deep holes can muster reflective fluencies which, unlike the benighting of Orr, the would-be voodoo seer, may go somewhere. Thus there is in the aftermath of her trauma, a replay of Mike's coming out of his coma, and thereby a replay of Anna's coming out of her coma. But instead of the mature love of Velda and Victoria, she awakens to the teenage dick and Blue Team irregular. She asks, "'Why do I hurt so much? What's wrong with me?'"<sup>55</sup> Therewith—since we know there's a lot more wrong with her situation than her physiology—we are introduced to her saga of being on the spot to "make an effort" as never before, in a context of unforthcoming lives. The thematics of the *Kiss Me Deadly* superstructure has made mincemeat out of Orr; but, in an overview of Auster's rehab, it is Grace who makes a fresh start with investigation. Though inured to clandestine operations, she has her work cut out for her—as did Chekhov's Lady with the Dog.<sup>56</sup> Mike had squeezed himself into a similar comedy, though one with a much shorter fuse. Orr, like Anna, apt to put a flattering spin on things, would have missed the real pain (more an expletive than an incantation) in Grace's launch, "Sid, Sid, Sid."

"She slept soundly that night, and when she woke up on Thursday morning, she finally recognized me. I took hold of her hand and as our palms touched, she muttered my name, then repeated it to herself several more times, as though that one-syllable word were an incantation that could turn her from a ghost into a living being again."<sup>57</sup>

Thus he would get things entirely backwards apropos of the miscarriage: "Everything else is going to get better, but not that."<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Paul Auster, *Oracle Night* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1f.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 48f. Boris is to be “rewarded” by Orr with a “big tip” (*Ibid.*, p. 49) for his “patience.” He amuses the two sophisticates with his question, as to the “reward,” “What means that?” (*Ibid.*).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 220ff.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221f.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> There is also in play, by way of check-up as to recovery, the “best friend betrayed-” motif of *Carefree* as informing *Ghosts*. Orr, in wake-up-call-mode, imagines Trause addressing him (à la White), “You don’t know anything, Sidney. You’ve never known anything...” (*Ibid.*, p. 227).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 219f.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* It makes a lot of sense to someone having tracked the antics of Fanshawe.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52,

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>47</sup> “...I noticed the music playing in the background—a soft, rumbling piece that wafted in from some invisible sound system. I strained to pick out the song, but I couldn’t identify it. Some Muzak version of an old rock-and-roll number—maybe the Beatles, I thought, but maybe not” (*Ibid.*, pp. 148f.).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>50</sup> Aroused, that is, as stupidly as he embraced the voodoo thematics of chance and death-dealing foresight. An upshot of such spasmodic dynamics is the implantation of a manuscript, titled, *Oracle Night*, into Nick’s caseload in the story constituting Orr’s presumed path to recovery. There a character named Flagg, like our Tony, is a very talented (though far less self-satisfied) practitioner of prediction. He foresees his lady love betraying him and commits suicide. (The story includes Flagg’s formerly being rescued by two children, “François” and “Geneviève” [*Ibid.*, p. 61]. This little allusion to Jacques Demy’s film, *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* [1964], in light of a major, though characteristically shadowy, reflection along those lines in *The Music*

---

of *Chance* [1990]—for which, see below [pp.....] implies that the option of semi-stunned whimsy emanating there has been rejected, at least in its most egregious form.)

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 205.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 208.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 239.

<sup>56</sup> See below, p

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 239.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 240.