

Dominance of Literary Space in Paul Auster's *Oracle Night*: A Maurice Blanchot Approach

Ahmadi, Amir Hossain¹  Taghizadeh, Ali ² 

- 1 M. A. in English Literature. Department of English Language and Linguistics, Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Razi University, Kermanshah, Iran. Amirgunners.londen@gmail.com
2 Associate Professor. Dept. of English Language and Linguistics, Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Razi University, Kermanshah, Iran. altaghee@razi.ac.ir

Received: 2026/04/20

Accepted: 2026/05/13

Available online: 2026/06/30

Citation:

Ahmadi, Amir Hossein and Taghizadeh, Ali. "Dominance of Literary Space in Paul Auster's *Oracle Night*: A Maurice Blanchot Approach." *Journal of Literature Across Borders*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2026. pp. 173-191

Abstract

The present study examines the centrality of the man–environment relationship in Paul Auster's novel *Oracle Night*, focusing on how the act of writing destabilizes and reshapes subjectivity. Sidney Orr, the novel's protagonist, who many times saunters in the city, turns to writing as a means of compensating for what he perceives as the failures of his life. Yet the very process through which he seeks self-restoration places him on the threshold of erasure: his narratives resist authenticity, and his authorial presence becomes increasingly fragile, approaching anonymity and symbolic "death." A similar fate befalls Nick Bowen, the character Sidney creates, whose attempt to narrate his own life ultimately confines him within a "fallout shelter," mirroring the author's entrapment. Auster thus constructs a metafictional frame narrative that portrays its protagonists as unsettled subjects, caught between authorship and an impersonal abyss. This research argues that *Oracle Night* exemplifies what Maurice Blanchot theorizes as "the space of literature." Sidney's attempt to write after failing to die parallels Blanchot's tripartite movement of writing— "Life," "Death," and "Being"—which correspond respectively to the stages of "Day," "Night," and "Other Night" dramatized in Auster's novel. Through this lens, the text becomes a meditation on writing as both survival and self-dissolution.

Keywords: Auster, Blanchot, *Oracle Night*, Space of Literature, Day/Life, Night/Death, Other Night/Being

Introduction

Among the underlying themes that Auster develops in his novel, the relationship between human beings and their surrounding environment is a subtle yet fundamental one that is often overlooked by readers. This concern is far more than a catalogue of spatial representations or a series of descriptive passages; rather, it constitutes a central dynamic in Auster's narratives, shaping the very substance of his characters' lives and, in crucial ways, determining their destinies. Auster consistently seeks to foreground the spatial coordinates of his fiction, rendering them not as neutral backdrops but as active forces that condition perception, agency, and narrative possibility. In *Oracle Night*, the protagonist's inability to map the city or to orient himself within its shifting textures stems from his flustered and unnerved psychological condition. Lost within the dense fabric of the city, he turns to writing as a means of rescuing himself from the miseries overwhelming him. Yet, he ultimately confronts the impossibility of asserting full authorial control over the narrative he attempts to produce—a struggle that, in Blanchot's terms, reflects the fact that literature is never a stable refuge in which writers can impose their thoughts upon language.

The significance of the present research lies in its attempt to encourage readers to think more critically about literature as an autonomous, self-generating medium—one that resists external impositions and continually redefines the

conditions of meaning. To this end, the researchers offer an analytical reading of Auster's *Oracle Night* in light of Blanchot's theoretical work, *The Space of Literature*. In Auster's novel, the narrative begins with Sidney Orr describing the purchase of a blue notebook and his attempt to write a story soon after recovering from a debilitating illness. The story he composes centers on Nick Bowen, a young publisher who unexpectedly receives the manuscript of an unpublished novel titled *Oracle Night*, written by Sylvia Maxwell. This manuscript—a story-within-a-story—captures Nick's attention precisely because it demands a "total surrender to be read, an unremitting attentiveness of both body and mind" (Auster, *Oracle* 66).

Auster introduces Lemuel Flagg as a World War II veteran and immediately places him under Maxwell's narrative control. Flagg's sudden and severe loss of consciousness paradoxically grants him an ability to foresee the future, yet this very rupture precipitates his eventual suicide. Significantly, his psychic collapse arises from Sidney's grimy and burdened consciousness: Sidney is compelled to write about Nick, who will find himself confined within a "fallout shelter."

The story in *Oracle Night* goes through the three stages of "Day," "Night," and "Other Night," and these stages closely correspond with the movements of meaning-making in Blanchot's *The Space of Literature*, which are "Life," "Death," and "Being." Therefore, Blanchot's

movements provide the conditions in which “the space of literature” emerges in Auster’s novel. “Day” in *Oracle Night*, which embodies what the French philosopher finds as “Life,” is the realm of work and ordinary life, the neighborhood in which one sees the writer as an ordinary person yet with the power of doing miraculous jobs in the domain of language. The “Night” of the American novel, which is the realization of what Blanchot terms “Death,” is the stage when the writers enter “the space of literature.” When the writer enters literary space, language is no longer a medium of communication and thus the concrete reality starts losing density to be changed, by the powers of the rhetorical, to the materials of art commodity. And Auster’s “Other Night,” which corresponds with Blanchot’s “Being,” stands for what the philosopher takes for a realm of impersonality and uncertainty. Here is where the laws of the genre get cancelled, representation remains pending, and so, writing becomes even impossible. Sidney Orr’s creative crisis can thus be read as a traversal through these conceptual zones, each marking a distinct transformation in the writer’s relationship to life, language, agency, and selfhood.

Accordingly, the three Auster-Blanchot conceptual binaries (or constructions) structure the central argument of this research. The first binary, “Day/Life,” which designates the realm of life and social reality, is the zone of language as a medium of communication. It is the zone of narrative control. The second binary, “Night/Death,” is the

stage when Auster’s character—alienated from the social life as he is—attempts to reclaim vitality and authority through narrative writing. However, the story shows that language is no longer instrumental, and the writer is drawn into a mode of radical uncertainty because language is exposed to him in a way that he cannot control it. Here, Auster’s character-writer cannot produce what he intends, for language inevitably turns his intention into something other, which is the story of the last stage, “Other Night/Being.” Auster’s writer is now confronted with impersonality and so his self gets undone. Here is the realm where the writer has to deal with the exposure of something which cannot be mastered. Therefore, the three-stage structure of Auster’s novel is the illustration of a narrative-existential form similar to Blanchot’s account of the three movements of writing where the writer goes from an ordinary world, through the space of literature, to a radically impersonal outside.

Review of Literature

In “Paul Auster’s *Oracle Night* as an Examination of the Hyper Simulation,” Moradi offers a provocative, if perhaps over-determined, reading of Sidney Orr’s paranoia by synthesizing Baudrillardian simulation with Blanchot’s ontological “hyper-reality.” While Moradi (173–176) effectively argues that Auster’s novel serves as a microcosm for the contemporary crisis of fabricated encounters, his analysis occasionally collapses the distinction between Blanchot’s

literary “outside” and Baudrillard’s “simulacrum.” By framing Sidney’s paranoia as a direct echo of these theories, Moradi successfully highlights the instability of modern experience, yet he leaves open the question of whether the novel offers any resistance to this dominance of the simulated over the authentic.

Filipe Alarcon’s interpretation of Blanchot’s Hegelianism hinges on the assumption that literary language functions as an inherently destabilizing force for the subject. Although he insightfully identifies a “double negativity” (145-151) that effaces the writer, Alarcon’s emphasis on “limitless interpretive possibilities” may be overly optimistic, as it tends to ignore the structural and historical constraints that bound even the most “fluid” texts. Furthermore, while he successfully underscores the emergence of “conflicting truths” within the textual world, Alarcon’s reading treats the dissolution of the author as a *fait accompli*, perhaps failing to account for the lingering traces of authorial presence that persist despite the “mad game” of the language.

Arce’s examination of Blanchot’s influence on Auster rests on the claim that writing functions for both authors as a primary mode of expressing existence. However, this interpretation potentially smooths over the inherent tension in Blanchot’s own thought—where writing is often characterized by the final disintegration of the self rather than its expression. While Arce effectively highlights the philosophical kinship between the

two, her study tends to treat “influence” as a transparent transmission of ideas. Consequently, while she underscores Blanchot’s significant role in shaping Auster’s thematic preoccupations, the analysis might have been strengthened by a more rigorous interrogation of how Auster transforms or even subverts Blanchot’s “restless negativity” within his own disparate narratives.

Richard F. Patteson provides a nuanced, if somewhat traditional, reading of the relationship between text and paratext in *Oracle Night*, arguing that Auster’s secondary narratives are vital sites for identity formation. Patteson is persuasive in linking the fear of forgetting to the necessity of self-narration; however, his study tends to treat the “paratext” as a stable diagnostic tool rather than an inherently unstable literary device. While he successfully underscores the role of storytelling in the construction of the self, the critique might be sharpened by considering how Auster’s use of footnotes and nested stories often serves to destabilize the reader’s sense of truth just as much as it illuminates the character’s identity.

Theobald provides a provocative account of the “French philosophical roots” of Auster’s fiction, though his insistence on labeling Blanchot an existentialist warrants closer scrutiny. By focusing on Blanchot’s substantial engagement with Hegel and Heidegger, Theobald correctly identifies the ontological gravity of death in these texts; however, his thesis relies heavily on the premise that the published work emerges as a fully

autonomous entity. While this perspective effectively highlights the philosophical affinities between the two writers, it risks reducing the complexity of Auster's literary imagination to a mere echo of Blanchotian theory, potentially neglecting the distinct American literary traditions that also shape Auster's treatment of self and authorship.

Foucault (53) provides a pivotal, if highly abstract, evaluation of the Blanchotian "outside," characterizing it as a realm that precludes any stable foundation for experience. However, Foucault's contention that language is incapable of "wrapping" or "gathering" the self into a unified presence suggests a total dissolution of the cogito that is more philosophical than literary. While his focus on the "nothingness beyond all being" captures the radicality of Blanchot's "restless negativity," it also establishes an extreme theoretical threshold; one must wonder whether Foucault's interpretation allows for any form of subjectivity to survive the encounter with the "outside," or if it leads inevitably to a silence that renders further analysis moot.

Existing literature on the Blanchot-Auster nexus has largely been confined to localized explorations that, while illuminating, often fail to address the underlying structural mechanisms of Auster's metafiction. This article intervenes in that discourse by applying a focused Blanchotian lens to *Oracle Night*, specifically through the neglected paradigm of psychography. In doing so, it

challenges the prevailing interpretive status quo, arguing that the novel's complexity cannot be fully decoded without a sustained engagement with the Blanchotian "space"—a move that redefines our understanding of the relationship between narrative architecture and psychological erasure.

Discussion

Day/Life

"To exist or not to exist, that is the problem" (Haj'jari 148). This, indeed, is the central concern of Auster's fiction. From Brown's perspective, it is the question that leads us to a fundamental existential challenge: "how we, as individuals, live" (1). Yet in Auster's worldview, this challenge emerges within an interdependent network of beings and things. As Haj'jari notes, "one's existence cannot exclude the existence of the 'other'" (144). This interdependence between "self" and "other" is articulated even more clearly when Haj'jari explains that "the world is perceived as constituting the subject beside others — consciousness is of something and even one's consciousness of oneself incorporates consciousness of others" (144). In other words, Auster's fiction undermines the notion of a self-enclosed subject and instead insists on the relational fabric within which any form of existence becomes meaningful.

From the opening pages of Auster's novel, the reader sees Sidney in communication with the

world around him. A telling indication of his communicative consciousness appears when, after being discharged from the hospital, he decides to go walking. Stylistically, the narrative unfolds through a first-person point of view: Sidney Orr, as narrator, speaks in notably short and fragmented stretches of language that often revolve around describing life in New York. For example, regarding his excursions into nearby districts, he recounts: "It was a monumental jam-up: honking cars and trucks, drivers shouting obscenities at one another, New York mayhem in its purest form. In the middle of all that ruckus and confusion, ..." (Auster, *Oracle* 47). In his intimate walking through the city's environs, he realizes that a pattern of chaos and disillusionment repeatedly asserts itself. It shows that he is curious about the meaning of walking in the megacity, that he hopes to regain his health through gentle-walking, and most importantly, that he desires to reconnect with a nostalgic past. Caught in the disorder of urban life, he assumes that walking may provide mental freedom and help him overcome his sense of loss. He confesses:

I was able to extend my walks into some of the more far-flung crevices of the neighborhood. Ten minutes became twenty minutes; an hour became two hours; two hours became three. Lungs gasping for air, my skin perpetually awash in sweat, I drifted along like a spectator in someone else's dream, watching the world as it chugged

through its paces and marveling at how I had once been like the people around me: always rushing, always on the way from here to there, always late, always scrambling to pack in nine more things before the sun went down. I wasn't equipped to play that game anymore. (Auster, *Oracle* 2-3)

Aspects of psychogeography, zooming in on how psyche is affected by city-life, is a reading dimension of *Oracle Night*. City life—dense with encounters, negotiations, and shared spaces—becomes central to Auster's narrative. The city not only structures the social conditions of communication but also forms the narrative core through which Auster explores identity, relationality, and the human condition.

Yet, Auster's fiction repeatedly depicts communication in city life as problematic, fractured, and unstable. In *Oracle Night*, a vein of "foundational indeterminacy, ontological skepticism" (Martin 103) is clearly traceable, which is "associated with the contemporary life" (Martin 35). For instance, Nick is deeply affected by a series of "contingent occurrences" and cannot distance himself from the consequences of the "random events" that shape his life. A similar case appears when Sidney and John talk about the former's having bought a blue notebook from "The Paper Palace, owned by a man named Chang" (Auster, *Oracle* 44-45), and Sidney feels so well about it that he hopes "it doesn't mean I'm about to become addicted" (Auster, *Oracle* 45).

Through such moments of contingency, Auster shows his character as a man in communication with his social environment; yet he also underscores how unpredictably the experience of urban life disrupts not only communication but also the characters' sense of coherence and stability.

Smith notes that such experiences, those about the filth and chaos of city-life for example, reinforce our "perceptual dispositions and behavioral routines [that] are continuously strengthened, weakened, and reconfigured through our ongoing interactions with our environment" (4). In Coverley's terms, even Sidney's psychogeographic responses to the flat buildings and houses—structures from which he consistently feels detached—reveal "the emotional and behavioral impact of urban space upon [his] individual consciousness" (89). For instance, when Sidney arranges for his sick wife to undertake a rehabilitation programme, he arrives at a building that unexpectedly triggers a powerful sense of nostalgia in him.

A maze of heterogeneous streets, narrow lanes, and dilapidated houses, coupled with a social atmosphere far removed from humane conditions, leaves Sidney physically drained and psychologically destabilized. The sheer volume of chaos he encounters upon returning to this area—after having survived a debilitating illness—induces a heightened level of emotional trauma. Initially, he finds himself confronted with a

situation he can scarcely recognize. But after several excursions into the surrounding districts, he not only more emphatically observes the unwelcoming environment but also begins to internalize the drastic changes that have taken place in public life. It is precisely this psychological distress that disrupts his sense of peace and privacy. In the second paragraph of *Oracle Night*, Sidney conveys his stunned astonishment at the altered world around him: "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" (Auster, *Oracle* 2). Here, Sidney is socially active but admits that in his initial encounter with the neighborhood he is unable to apprehend his relations with the world. Further, we see him bumping "into walls and trash bins, ..., stumbled on the smoothest sidewalks" (Auster, *Oracle* 2), which testifies to his continual lack of affinity with the district. Notwithstanding, his disconnection with life is more wonderfully dramatized when he confesses, he has "lived in New York all my life, but I didn't understand the streets and crowds anymore. Whenever I went on one of my little excursions, I felt like a man who had lost his way in a foreign city" (Auster, *Oracle* 2).

To escape the mounting pressure of their failures, both Sidney and Nick turn to what they perceive as the only genuine act left to them, which is writing fiction. Without this creative

outlet, that is, out of the secure world of writing, they risk psychological exhaustion in the chaos of urban life. In this regard, *Oracle Night* foregrounds “the act and nature of writing and self-conscious subversions of the traditional notions of story-telling in the context of urban living” (Varvogli 2). In the chaotic environment of the modern city, where meaningful communication is rare and perhaps even impossible, fiction writing emerges as a form of refuge. Auster's emphasis on urban disorientation and psychological instability can thus be read as the crystallization of what Nicola Caleffi describes as “one of the possible metaphors of our contemporary condition, a situation in which individuals lose their hopes of finding in the urban surroundings the fulfilment of their social aims” (Web). Having acknowledged his surrender to the contingencies of modern life, Sidney attempts to compensate for his failures by engaging in a new undertaking: writing a work of fiction. Therefore, “Day/Life” binary enables Auster's character to seize the opportunity to impose his voice and authority upon the narrative he is creating, thereby seeking salvation from the social maladies that surround him. Reflecting on the ease of his writing process, he states: “The words came quickly, smoothly, without seeming to demand much effort. I found that surprising, but as long as I kept my hand moving from left to right, the next word always seemed to be there, waiting to come out of the pen” (Auster, *Oracle* 14-15).

Sidney Orr is a man of social communication and productive language is an efficient tool for the fulfilment of his wishes.

Auster's inclination toward narrating through the lens of dying can be traced in *The Invention of Solitude*. He explains that he wrote this book because of his father's death. Yet, as he emphasizes, what mattered most was not the death itself but the fact that his father had left no discernible traces of his existence: “In some strange way, I was remarkably prepared to accept his death, despite its suddenness. What disturbed me was something unrelated to death or my response to it: the realization that my father had left no traces” (Auster, *Invention* 6). Thus, the death of Auster the father offered Auster the son an opportunity to recreate the father literarily through writing. In this sense, writing becomes a practical means of preventing a further loss: the father's anguish, disappearance, and anonymity.

Night/Death

Deshmukh observes that “death is not the end of life; it is the absence or disappearance of the traces of ... life. This redefinition of the concept of death creates a possibility for action: if dying cannot be reversed, the traces can be (re-)written” (22). This perspective is consonant with Blanchot's view: “In this terror before mass-produced death there is the sadness of the artist who honors well-wrought things, who wants to make a work and make of death his work. Death is thus from the start linked

to the movement, so difficult to bring to light, of the artistic experience" (Blanchot, *Space* 124).

In the chaos of urban life, writing emerges as an intellectual movement and a deliberate gesture by the writer; as the French philosopher asserts, it becomes "the silence of his most hidden secret" (Blanchot, *Space* 126). Like Auster, Blanchot believes that the writer must resist the anguish of anonymity and create something authentic in response to what he calls mass-produced death: "there is something I must do to accomplish it; indeed, everything remains for me to do: it must be my work" (Blanchot, *Space* 126). Moreover, Blanchot maintains that "we are to be artists of ourselves, to make of our life and of our death an art..." (Blanchot, *Space* 124). Within this framework, Sidney Orr's desire for writing can be interpreted as an authentic act whose purpose is to prevent what Blanchot identifies as "mass-produced death."

Anonymity is, among other things, a defining consequence of death-bearing life in megacities. Auster constructs writer-protagonists who undertake ironic quests for identity—figures who feel a genuine desire to live yet paradoxically experience radical disorientation, characters who feel that living in the metropolitan environments is hostile to them, and so they often find nowhere to escape except solitary dwellings where they can seek refuge through the act of writing. When Torkamaneh and Taghizadeh describe modern urban life as bleak and frustrated, noting that it

resembles "a recurrent twentieth-century phenomenon in which human beings have metaphorically disappeared" (199), their statement echoes Jean Baudrillard's comparison of life in megacities to a cosmos in which humanity is exhausted. Their view highlights the way anonymity and disappearance become structural conditions of contemporary urban existence, a condition Auster repeatedly dramatizes through protagonists whose sense of self is gradually dissolved into the overwhelming spatial and psychological pressures of urban life.

It is worth recalling why psychogeography privileges walking: it both triggers and satisfies a sense of nostalgia. For Sidney Orr, however, the anticipated effects of walking are repeatedly frustrated; movement through the city cannot offer him a sense of freedom, nor can it respond to his corresponding nostalgic longing for a past he can no longer access. This failure sharply unsettles him, for the transformations within New York's public sphere "threaten to make the idle pedestrian redundant," (Coverley 58) rendering some individuals ill-equipped to inhabit the evolving urban environment. The city's spatial and social changes thus deny Sidney the psychogeographic possibilities that walking traditionally promises, deepening his alienation from the modern metropolis.

Indeed, Sidney proves unable to accommodate himself to the mechanisms of urban life in New York. Writing, therefore, becomes the

means through which he attempts to compensate for his failed efforts to navigate the city. 18th of September 1982, when he enters the Paper Palace and the blue notebook starts capturing his attention, is when he enters the realm Blanchot terms “the space of literature”:

On the morning of September 20, however, two days after the day in question, 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 ... Cute, symmetrical, and ironic – but not strong enough for the kind of story I was interested in telling. I sat at my desk for more than an hour with the pen in my hand, but I didn't write a word. ... After so much excitement and wishful thinking (...), I felt disgusted, ashamed that I had allowed three dozen hastily written pages to delude me into thinking I had suddenly turned things around for myself. All I had accomplished was to back myself into a corner. Maybe there was a way out, but for the time being I couldn't see one. The only thing I could see that morning was my hapless little man – sitting in the darkness of his underground room, waiting for someone to rescue him. (Auster, *Oracle* 108-109)

This is the hinge on which Auster's narrative turns. Insofar as he passes his time here in the realm of language and literature, he becomes more deeply alienated from the surrounding world of

reality. Auster's writer has now retreated into a sedentary life devoted to writing, but his endeavor is so futile that instead of using the language to write the story he imagines, he is controlled by language, because he turns language's paraphernalia around himself so that he sees it like a coil which he cannot demystify. Thus, he is overwhelmed by language while he is helpless. This is the zone of his uncertainty and the irony of his insufficiency to control the narrative language. More than one time he gets excited to practice the use of his imagination but each time the powers of the discursive render him radically defeated. The result is that Auster's writer, feeling shameful and exhausted, seeks to escape from the space of literature to the world outside.

Confino and Fritzsche properly address this modern nostalgic feeling that “Nostalgia stalks modernity as an unwelcome double, a familiar symptom of unease in the face of political and economic transformation . . . it takes the measure of the distance people have fallen short in their efforts to make themselves at home in a constantly changing world” (62). Nick becomes estranged and trapped within the fabric of the city, and what he experiences mirrors Sidney's own condition, for Nick's sense of non-belonging remains so intense that even upon his arrival in Kansas it continues to exert a tight grip on him. In Kansas, he recalls Ed Victory's address, and the first thing he encounters in the new neighborhood is “a zone of horror and devastation, and it bears little

resemblance to the enclaves of black poverty that Nick has seen in other American cities" (Auster, *Oracle* 70). Even more unsettling in his initial impression is a deeper observation that generates the feeling "he has not entered an urban ghetto so much as a sliver of hell, a no-man's-land strewn with empty wine bottles, spent needles, and the hulks of stripped-down, rusted cars" (Auster, *Oracle* 70-71).

Here too, Nick's observations reinforce his overwhelming sense of non-belonging. What he sees in Ed's apartment "makes him think of a monk's cell or a hermit's refuge: a drab, Spartan place with no more than the barest essentials for living" (Auster, *Oracle* 73), a description that corresponds closely to the apartment's location in "a fringe neighbourhood of crumbling, abandoned warehouses and burned-out buildings" (Auster, *Oracle* 70). The character Ed later refers to it as "a troubled place" for "troubled times" (Auster, *Oracle* 72).

In contemporary fiction, the conflict between the city and the individual is perhaps nowhere explored more fully than in Auster's work. This is why Brendan Martin's observation is readily understandable when he asserts that Auster "captures the essence of the contemporary city" (175). Moreover, when Martin adds that in Auster's fiction "the postmodern city ... encourages skepticism and lack of certainty" (175), the city emerges as the realm of the postmodern writer—one who is often skeptical of

everything and therefore closely connected with urban life, continually improvising new story-worlds through revision and critical reflection within the domain of language.

Blanchot postulates that the moment a writer takes up the pen, he becomes trapped within language, and what emerges on the page inevitably diverges from what he intends to express. This insight is borne out in *Oracle Night*: as Sidney writes Nick's life story, he gradually loses control over what unfolds. For Blanchot, "Death" designates the dimension of language that induces this loss of mastery, for "whoever devotes himself to the work is drawn by it to the point where it undergoes impossibility" (Blanchot, *Space* 163). It is a notion of passivity that strongly resonates with Sidney's narrative trajectory, as Sidney becomes so deeply absorbed in the act of writing that his subjectivity verges on "dying" and slipping into anonymity; stripped of stable meaning, he experiences a dissolution of self. As his control over language erodes, Sidney cannot proceed with the narrative as he imagines, and he thus feels trapped in language. We see Nick, like Sidney, faltering in his resolve, which suggests that the story becomes the tale of Sidney's symbolic "dying" within the realm of language. Under the force of literary language, Sidney remains in a state of bewilderment, uncertain of how to direct his character—who, like himself, moves toward complete entrapment in language. Sidney openly admits his sense of loss and bewilderment:

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 put Bowen into the room. 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. (Auster, Oracle 108)

The act of writing leaves Sidney so thoroughly astonished that he appears increasingly like a reader rather than a writer, as though the book demands to write itself without the mediation of an authorial consciousness. Consequently, Sidney remains dazed under the pressures of language. In the process of writing, he gets absent-minded and figuratively disappears into Nick Bowen, indicating that writing dissolves his consciousness and replaces it with the experience of language itself. Rather than allowing Sidney to impose his intentions upon the narrative, literary language becomes the very field in which his subjectivity, seemingly his corporeality even, are consumed. The following exchange between Sidney and Grace endorses this analysis:

'I didn't know you were home,' she said.

'I got back a while ago,' I explained. 'I've been sitting in my room.'

Grace looked surprised. 'Didn't you hear me knock?'

'No, I'm sorry. I must have been pretty wrapped up in what I was doing.'

'When didn't you answer, I opened the door and peeked inside. But you were not there.'

'Of course I was. I was sitting at my desk...'

(Auster, Oracle 27)

In the realm of the imaginary, the real and the fictitious get mingled or the former is replaced by the latter. So, the writer is catapulted from the substantial world of reality to an unstable region where language is no longer referential and one's presence gets suspended. William Allen argues that writers often seek to "assert themselves over language" (75), yet despite this ambitious aim, they tend to become "more concerned" with language itself than with achieving a pure authorial voice. He further observes that "whereas he [a writer] may have begun by espousing the goal of asserting the pure creativity of thought over language, he ends up becoming ever more governed by language the more he tries to extricate himself from it" (75). In *Oracle Night*, Sidney exemplifies this dynamic: in the process of writing, he becomes increasingly absorbed in the intricate relations of language—its relationship to reality and its self-referential structures. As language gains ascendancy over him, the material dimensions of his life recede into an almost ethereal realm, leaving his consciousness dormant and outmoded. This mechanism is reinforced by Auster's frame narrative, which deliberately cultivates an atmosphere in which the protagonist appears mentally unsettled and disoriented.

The final iconic scene in *Oracle Night* produces a profound cognitive blockage for both Sidney and Nick. Ed appears suddenly, offering Nick a position in his “BUREAU OF HISTORICAL PRESERVATION” and insisting that he accompany him there. Similar to the way Sidney’s home is repeatedly viewed from both inside and outside, and to Nick’s perception of Ed’s residence in its interior and exterior dimensions, Ed’s bureau emerges as the most claustrophobic setting in the novel. Ed and Nick walk for hours in the early morning, “slowly wending their way through a network of dilapidated streets until they come to an abandoned stockyard near the river, the liquid boundary that separates the Missouri side of the city from the Kansas side” (Auster, *Oracle* 88). Nick confesses that he becomes completely disoriented in this district, and the spatial confinement he continually encounters overwhelms both his mind and perceptual capacities: “I lost track of where I was ... I wandered around the streets like a blind man, more in that underground room in Kansas City than in Manhattan, taking only the scantest notice of the things around me” (Auster, *Oracle* 138-139).

However, the most significant aspect of the location of Ed’s bureau is its placement within what appears to be a non-geographical or indeterminate spatial environment. In other words, the very setting of the bureau further reinforces the novel’s pervasive confusion regarding spatial

orientation in *Oracle Night*. Thus, the lack of clarity concerning where Nick and Ed go may be read as a subtle anticipation of Nick’s future confinement, for he will eventually be “trapped all alone in a hydrogen-bomb shelter, not an ordinary room” that Bowen considers “the most vulnerable spot, ... so solid as to be impregnable” (Auster, *Oracle* 104). This fate, foreshadowed within Sidney’s anxious and unsettled psyche, suggests that the fictional character Nick is destined to confront a hostile urban world that ultimately seals his doom.

Other Night/Being

The writer’s disappearance within his own story—stemming from his inability to command or demystify language—paradoxically implies that language not only controls Auster’s writer but also renders his self as disintegrated. In this radical transformation, the narrative emerges as a field where the annihilation of writing is experienced. This is a further realm that corresponds with what Blanchot terms “Being.” It is a state of uncertainty or impossibility where the laws of the genre get cancelled, narrative collapses, and the writer’s self becomes evaporated. Thus, if Auster’s notion of “Other Night” is juxtaposed with Blanchot’s movement, a third conceptual pairing emerges: “Other Night/Being,” which constitutes the central argument of the final section of the present research.

In deliberately granting Bowen characteristics that sharply contrast with his own, Sidney seeks to carve out a linguistic space in which a mode of “being” emerges. As Blanchot suggests in his reflections on story-writing, the writer enters an “OTHER NIGHT,” a space of dormancy from which nothing fully returns. This is a void in which stillness prevails and things lose intimacy, coherence, and resolution. Likewise, the tale Sidney attempts to tell becomes annulled by its own uncontrollability. Yet the story he produces is also guarded by its inherent inaccessibility. Following Blanchot, Sidney's failure arises from a “bad” consciousness that forces the unknowable into the knowable and collapses the open, indeterminate space of literature into the limits of subjective intention. His consciousness remains a finite entity, unable to apprehend the evasive and infinite dimensions of literary space.

This dynamic explains why Nick ultimately becomes trapped in a “fallout shelter,” a symbolic representation of the experience of automatic writing, in which the writer relinquishes originality and submits to the demands of the work itself, independent of prior intention: “Trapping Nick in the underground bomb shelter was a compelling idea to me – both terrifying and mysterious, beyond all rational explanation – and I didn't want to let go of it” (Auster, *Oracle* 108). In line with Timothy Clark's observation that “The writer becomes involved with the pull of the work-

to-be-achieved as something that does not yet exist except as this peculiar exigency, drawing memories and perceptions into itself” (49), the narrative exposes the tension between language seeking its own origin and the writer who, as Geoffrey Hartman argues, loses the possibility of first “immediacy” by losing his own voice (72). Through this conflict, the writer becomes captivated by the power of language while being reduced to the very words he inscribes on the page. In this respect, Blanchot appears to diverge from Heidegger, who defines death as an event within human power through which “the impossibilities become possible,” a formulation Blanchot reverses into the “impossibility of possibility” (Hasse and Large 52).

This sequence of events ultimately guarantees the failure of Sidney's attempts to sustain coherence both in the world of reality and in the world of hyperreality. Sidney and Nick are twin figures of psychological distress, each suffering profound mental anguish. Sidney remains in constant conflict with his environment. For example, when Chang takes him to the bar and Sidney initiates a sexual relationship with “the African princess,” the incident brings about the dissolution of his friendship with Chang, who believes that Sidney, as a married man, has betrayed his wife. The situation becomes even more complicated when Auster's narrative reveals that Grace, Sidney's wife, despite being pregnant, is herself in love with Trause, Sidney's friend.

Sidney notes the psychological tension in this triangular relationship: "Trause loves Grace, but Grace is twenty-six years younger than he is, the daughter of his best friend, and slowly but surely guilt wins out over desire" (Auster, *Oracle* 213). He further confesses that Grace and Trause nonetheless enter into a relationship: "The romance ends, and Grace returns to New York, crushed, disbelieving, brokenhearted. A year and a half go by, and then Trause returns to New York as well" (Auster, *Oracle* 214).

Sidney's story-writing becomes a source of paralysis for him, undermining his agency in both fiction and reality. His growing distress leads him to wish he had never begun writing in the blue notebook; eventually, he destroys it: "One by one, I ripped the pages out of the blue notebook and tore them into little pieces" (Auster, *Oracle* 219). Nick Bowen, Sidney's fictional counterpart and would-be savior, undergoes a similar fate when he becomes trapped in a "fallout shelter," where he ultimately dies of starvation. Sidney's tone in recounting this is unmistakably melancholic: "The only thing I could see that morning was my hapless little man – sitting in the darkness of his underground room, waiting for someone to rescue him" (Auster, *Oracle* 109). In this way, Sidney's fictional creation becomes a mirror of his own incapacity, reflecting the collapse of both narrative and selfhood.

Blanchot discusses this condition in *The Work of Fire*, arguing that the fiction writer is

deprived of intention and agency because he is engaged in a continual experience of "dying." For Blanchot, the writer confronts "the impossibility of turning the world into something meaningful" (Blanchot, *Fire* 334). On October 1, when Sidney receives a letter from Trause, he understands that she has written it by hand, and the script was so jagged, so frenzied in its execution, that I had trouble deciphering it. I had to go through the text several times before I managed to crack the mysteries of its illegible curls and scratches, but once I began to translate the marks into words, I could hear John's voice talking to me – a living voice talking from the other side of death, from the other side of nowhere. ... I saw John's ashes streaming out of the urn in the park that morning. I saw Grace lying in her bed in the hospital. ... I don't know how long I carried on like that, but even as the tears poured out of me, I was happy, 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. (Auster, *Oracle* 242-243)

Through a "genre hybridization" (Ni and Lian 542), *Oracle Night* provides a dramatization of the third Auster-Blanchot binary the present research takes to analyze, that is "Other Night / Being." With its highlighted illegibility, the letter Sidney receives transfers him to an unknowable realm where his existence gets vastly extended. This is neither a feature of "Day/Life" stage which is the zone of social interaction, nor is it a feature

of “Night/Death” stage which is the zone of narrative writing. It is a feature of “Other Night/Being,” which is the realm of the impossibility of literature, the region where the self is undone and the consciousness slides down, readily and smoothly, to become unified perhaps with the entirety of a culture. Therefore, the uncertainty of the fictitious brings the writer to an ethereal neighborhood the logic of which is different from the one we can apprehend. If “Night/Death” is the stage of productivity or the stage of writing where the main source of the narrative is (the powers of) language, “Other Night/Being” is that of the impossibility of literature. It is where language, fatal as it, undoes itself, and thus writing confronts absence, a result of which is that the narrative gets deteriorated.

Literature, in order to establish itself as an autonomous discourse, demands a form of sacrifice. Auster similarly conceives of literature “as an anonymous sphere resistant to authority and in writing as a commitment to the unknown and to [...] ambiguity” ... (Theobald 195). In Auster’s novel, Nick Bowen becomes the sacrificial figure who attempts to create meaning through negation within the literary field. The “fallout shelter” thus represents the negative power of literature, and Nick’s entrapment signifies the imprisonment inherent in literary language itself. This entrapment also allegorizes Sidney’s own radical mental blockage in the act of writing. As Sidney gradually loses control over language, he becomes

unable to create a character distinct from himself; consequently, Nick mirrors Sidney’s own faltering resolve. This parallel breakdown reveals the broader collapse within Sidney’s life, for his failure to write simultaneously becomes a failure to construct a renewed reality for himself. Through this dual disintegration, Auster dramatizes the perilous interdependence of writing, identity, and the creation of meaning.

Conclusion

The primary aim of this research is to interpret Paul Auster’s *Oracle Night* through the lens of Maurice Blanchot’s theory in *The Space of Literature*. It seeks to explore the intricacies and power of language in Auster’s novel as well as the ambiguities inherent in its narrative action. These dimensions are framed as a three-stage operation through which the central problem of the novel’s narrative structure is examined. *Oracle Night* unfolds as a multilayered story-within-a-story in which the protagonist—himself a writer—produces a new fictional work after recovering from a life-threatening illness. If both the illness and the act of writing are read symbolically, they suggest the American author’s attempt at self-renewal through the creative process. The three-stage narrative mechanism employed in this study highlights the progressively shifting effects of language and storytelling on Sidney Orr, the novel’s central figure. Each stage corresponds to a particular phase in Sidney’s life, aligned with a

key movement of meaning-making indicated in Blanchot's philosophy. The resulting nomenclature—"Day/Life," "Night/Death," and "Other Night/ Being"—is therefore intentionally evocative and analytically suggestive.

In this taxonomy, the juxtaposition within each correlative illustrates how Auster's narrative functions as a fictional enactment of Blanchot's philosophical insights. The first correlative, "Day/Life," designates the writer as a social member with active communications. In this stage, language is instrumental, which Auster's writer uses for the administration of his relations with the social environment. We often see him walking in his New York city neighborhood while he has easy and sincere contacts with the society.

However, as Sidney Orr arrives at a different level of language, he starts feeling alienated. In this second stage, "Night/Death," the intellectual writer's estrangement root in both his social misfortunes and the demands of literary language. Nonetheless, he believes he can achieve a form of revitalization through fiction writing. Initially in this stage, Auster's writer has a good mastery on literary language via which he creates his character as he likes it to be. But gradually it is the words that come to control him, and so he becomes ensnared by language itself. As Blanchot argues, literature is not a secure space in which the writer imposes meaning or discovers an authentic self, but rather "a field of experience." Thus, "Night/Death" signifies the dominance of literary

language, the zone in which the powers of literature create something other than the writer wishes. Because of its inherent power of negation, literature compels the writer to wander aimlessly within the very language he produces.

But his wandering becomes the condition of his continual self-renewal, a process which is exemplified in the third realm: "Other Night/ Being." For Auster, the writer is, at this final stage, stripped of his original intentions and gains access to the emergence of the "other." It is a void in which the writer becomes primarily a listener—a space of authentic communication where he is compelled to hear the pure voice of the "other" that issues, Blanchot says, from nowhere or from the other side of death. Rather than listening to his own voice, which Blanchot characterizes as a form of one-way communication, the writer, like Auster's, undergoes an encounter with alterity. Thus, for both Auster and Blanchot, inhabiting the pages of literature guarantees access to a genuine domain of "being." Throughout his career, Auster appears to do little else than interrogate himself, allowing the "other" to surface. In *Oracle Night*, Sidney Orr cannot reconcile himself with the city in which he lives; he fails to remap the external environment that shapes his life. But to mitigate the wounds of his non-belonging, he turns to fiction. Yet, in a certain occasion Sidney proves unable to invent a character fully distinct from himself. Nick Bowen, the character he creates, resembles him in crucial ways, especially when

Bowen becomes trapped in a shelter—a moment that exposes both figures as psychologically unsettled and deeply unnerved.

This paper argues that Sidney Orr's act of writing corresponds to the three concepts Blanchot formulates in *The Space of Literature*: "Life," "Death," and "Being." "Life" marks the days Sidney walks in the street to remap it; "Death" designates the stage at which he realizes he cannot control the narrative; and "Being" signifies the moment he encounters the voice of the "other" within literary language. Accordingly, this article has examined Auster's *Oracle Night* through Blanchot's theoretical lens to clarify the central problem of Sidney's story. The broader significance of this study lies in demonstrating literature as an autonomous, intellectually generative practice—one that evades external constraints while endlessly reinventing itself through the act of reading. Thus, *Oracle Night*, a tripartite structure materializing the three movements of writing in Blanchot's philosophy, illustrates the departure of the writer from a zone of social interactions, through a zone of narrative writing, to a final stage where writing opens to an annulment and narrative gives way.

Works Cited

Alarcon, Felipe L. "Restless Negativity: Blanchot's Hegelianism." *The New Centennial Review*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2015, pp. 141-57.

Allen, William S. "Dead Transcendence: Blanchot, Heidegger, and the Reverse of Language." *Research in Phenomenology*, vol. 39, 2009, pp. 69-98.

Arce, Maria Laura. *The Invention of the Space of Literature: Paul Auster's Fictionalization of Maurice Blanchot's Poetics*. 2014. Autonomous University of Madrid, PhD dissertation.

Auster, Paul. *The Invention of Solitude*. Faber and Faber, 1982.

---. *Oracle Night*. Henry Holt and Company, 2003.

Blanchot, Maurice. *The Space of Literature*. Translated by Ann Smock, U of Nebraska P, 1989.

---. *The Work of Fire*. Translated by Charlotte Mandell, Stanford UP, 1995.

Brown, Mark. Paul Auster. Manchester UP, 2007.

Caleffi, Nicola. "Paul Auster's Urban Nothingness." *Blue Cricket*, 1 June 2021, www.bluecricket.com/auster/articles/nothing.html.

Clark, Timothy. "Contradictory Passion: Inspiration in Blanchot's 'The Space of Literature'." *Substance*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1996, pp. 46-61.

Confino, Alon, and Peter Fritzsche, editors. *The Work of Memory: New Directions in the Study of German Society and Culture*. U of Illinois P, 2002.

Coverley, Merlin. *Psychogeography*. Pocket Essentials, 2010.

- Deshmukh, Priyanka. *'Then Catastrophe Strikes: Reading Disaster in Paul Auster's Novels and Autobiographies*. 2014. Paris East U and Northwestern U, PhD dissertation.
- Foucault, Michel. *Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside*. Translated by Brian Massumi, Zone Books, 1987.
- Haj'jari, Mohammad-Javad. *The Problem of Human Existence in Paul Auster's Selected Fiction: An Existential Study in the Light of Heidegger and Sartre*. 2019. Razi U, PhD dissertation.
- Hartman, Geoffrey H. "The Fullness and Nothingness of Literature." *Yale French Studies*, vol. 16, 1955, pp. 63-78.
- Haase, Ullrich, and William Large. *Maurice Blanchot*. Routledge, 2001.
- Martin, Brendan. *Paul Auster's Postmodernity*. Routledge, 2007.
- Moradi, Moein. "Paul Auster's *Oracle Night* as an Examination of the Hypersimulation." *The Explicator*, vol. 75, no. 3, 2017, pp. 173-76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00144940.2017.1346572>
- Ni, Hui, and Dawei Lian. "Study of the Fragmented Structure in *Oracle Night* as a Metafiction." *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2012, pp. 540-46.
- Patteson, Richard F. "The Teller's Tale: Text and Paratext in Paul Auster's *Oracle Night*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2008, pp. 115-30.
- Smith, Barbara H. *Scandalous Knowledge: Science, Truth, and the Human*. Duke UP, 2006.
- Theobald, Tom. *Existentialism and Baseball: The French Philosophical Roots of Paul Auster*. Lambert Academic Publishing, 2010.
- Torkamaneh, Pouria, and Ali Taghizadeh. "Paul Auster's *The Locked Room* as a Critique of the Hyperreal." *3L: The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2016, pp. 199-207.
- Varvogli, Alik. *The World That is the Book: Paul Auster's Fiction*. Liverpool UP, 2001.