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## Lost in the textual maze? : concealments and doublings in Peter Straub's "Mr. X"

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## LOST IN THE TEXTUAL MAZE? CONCEALMENTS AND DOUBLINGS IN PETER STRAUB'S *MR. X*

**Key words:** textual intricacy, doubling, lack of closure, motif of doppelganger, subtext, *mise en abyme*

The present article aims to explore the textual intricacy and the epistemological uncertainty projected by the 1999 novel of Peter Straub titled *Mr. X*. Despite its literary merits the novel has failed to attract serious attention, which, regrettably, is symptomatic of the attitude that literary critics display to Straub's fiction in general. One reason of this neglect may be that the American novelist is usually associated with contemporary horror fiction, the type of literature that in the opinion of the literati is written according to well-established patterns and predictable in its effects. However, such labels as "horror" or "macabre mystery" usually employed with reference to Straub's novels or short stories certainly do not give justice to the quality of his work. What is especially surprising is the fact that Straub's novels have not even been listed in recent comprehensive surveys of Gothic fiction such as, for example, David Punter and Glennis Byron's *The Gothic*<sup>1</sup>. One of very few publications that acknowledge his position in contemporary American Gothic is the anthology *American Gothic Tales*<sup>2</sup>, compiled and edited by Joyce Carol Oates, where he is duly acknowledged alongside Shirley Jackson, Ray Bradbury, Stephen King and Anne Rice<sup>3</sup>.

Straub's texts have failed to attract as much critical attention as the horror novels written by Stephen King, which may be due to the fact that they escape

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<sup>1</sup> D. Punter, G. Byron, *The Gothic*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing 2004.

<sup>2</sup> J.C. Oates (ed.), *American Gothic Tales*, New York, Plume 1996.

<sup>3</sup> His work is also briefly discussed by S.T. Joshi in *The Modern Weird Tale*, Jefferson, McFarland & Company 2001, but the approach taken there does not seem fair to the author. Straub also figures in the study of American Gothic titled *A Dark Night's Dreaming*, edited by T. Magistrale and M.A. Morrisson, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press 1996.

easy generic classifications. In addition, they exhibit a high degree of literary self-consciousness and complexity, which the present article undertakes to demonstrate on the example of the novel *Mr. X*, focusing on its dominant strategy of concealments and doublings. Already the title of the novel posits a mystery and hints at hidden or shifting identities, and indeed, the elusive character from the title changes his name from Cordwainer Hatch to Edward Rhinehart, finally going on to assume a new identity, Earl Sawyer, but he is also known as Black Death, the nickname given to his dark nocturnal self. The novel itself seems to be conceived as a cryptogram, full of coded messages and hidden meanings, which is signaled in the statements made by various characters. It is verbalized, for instance, by Ned, the narrator, in the following remark that may be taken as a self-reflexive comment on the novel itself: “The story always hides some other, secret story, the story you are not supposed to know”<sup>4</sup>.

The cryptogram trope is closely related to the motif of mystery and concealment which is conveyed through the “Russian doll” metaphor. First of all, the metaphor applies to the identity of the narrator, who at some point confesses: “I felt as though I, too, were a kind of Russian doll, hiding secrets inside secrets that led to an unknowable mystery” [Straub 301]. But the metaphor of the Russian doll can also be extended to the construction of the plot, pointing to its layers upon layers of mystery and deception. The plot hinges on hidden truths and deceptive appearances, but above all, there are seemingly inexplicable and extraordinary events or phenomena experienced by Ned himself, such as his mysterious “dream encounters” with his shadow or sudden seizures during which he is transported to another place and time. These enigmatic and baffling incidents occur to Ned regularly like clockwork on his birthday. He himself admits the difficulty of writing about what he calls “the internal story of my birthday”:

Even now, writing about this is like trying to reconstruct a half-destroyed mosaic. Many patterns and images seem possible, and even after you think you have identified the design, you cannot be certain that you have not merely imposed it [Straub 23].

Hence his description of the event is a reconstruction of the mosaic, but not an accurate one; it is only an imaginative reconstruction, which contributes to the overall pattern of hidden truths and deceptive appearances.

The motif of concealments and secret meanings, the depositing of layers upon layers of mystery and deception, all these devices produce in the implied reader the sense of being lost in the textual maze, and the sense of confusion is compounded by the abundant instances of doubling and mirroring, which in effect blur textual and ontological boundaries in the novel. This reduplication is first observed in the composition of the novel as a “dual-level narrative”. The dual-level or split-level narrative is the term coined by Lee Horsley referring to the construction of many serial-killer novels. As she points out, “part of the

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<sup>4</sup> P. Straub, *Mr. X*, London, Harper Collins Publishers 2000, p. 46. All the quotations come from the same source, henceforth referred to as Straub.

narrative is given over to enough minutely detailed investigative technique to have impressed Sherlock Holmes; the other part offers us a disturbingly intimate view of the psychopathology of the serial killer"<sup>5</sup>. Peter Straub's novel is thus composed of two layers, Ned's part and Mr. X's part, set apart by chapter divisions and headings. Ned's narration is interlaced with the chapters narrated by Mr. X in the form of entries in his diary. These entries indeed offer a disturbing insight into the mind of a serial killer who cherishes a powerful delusion of being the tool of the apocalypse of the human race. Mr. X's journal opens with the invocation of "Great Old Ones", cosmic deities from the Cthulhu Mythos, to whom he, as their devout worshipper, addresses his words. He speaks in the messianic voice of "the culmination of the Sacred Mission" that he believes he has been entrusted with.

However, the style in which the diary of Mr. X is written changes, which reflects the alterations in the mental and spiritual condition of its author. Initially, Mr. X emulates the hyperbolic language of his beloved Master of Providence, adapting Lovecraft's concept of cosmic fear, and of humanity as being at the mercy of the alien and hostile universe, as can be seen in the following extract:

Around our tiny illuminated platform suspended in the cosmic darkness, the ancient Gods, my true ancestors, congregate with rustlings of leathery wings and rattlings of filthy claws to witness what their great-grandson shall accomplish [Straub 11].

But the mood of exultation and supreme confidence gradually gives way to Mr. X's doubt and uncertainty concerning his messianic mission. With its disrupted phrases, abundance of dashes and reduction of verbs, the diary starts to look like an Emily Dickinson poem. Following Gérard Genette's classification, such a phenomenon represents an example of *imitation*, as "the imitator essentially deals with style, and with text only incidentally; the target is a style and the thematic motifs that it involves"<sup>6</sup>. Hence as the object of literary translation, Emily Dickinson's poetic style with its concomitant thematic motifs becomes a sign, and in the new textual context functions as a metonymy of pain and suffering. Especially the last entry in Mr. X's diary bears visible traces of its author's torment, with its interpolations and erasures, broken and unfinished sentences:

You Swarming ~~Majesties~~ Cruelties, Who Giveth with one hand and Taketh Away with the other – I begin to see –  
First I must address a ~~more~~ crucial point. ~~Only now~~  
It is bitter, bitter, with a bitterness I only now begin to comprehend [Straub 17].

Some of the words are crossed out as inadequate, which shows his struggle to best convey his despair, and replaced with more suitable ones. Some are capitalized to give them more emphasis. In this way the text becomes a mirror of its author's spiritual condition.

<sup>5</sup> L. Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2005, p. 139.

<sup>6</sup> G. Genette, *Palimpsests. Literature in The Second Degree*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press 1997, p. 83.

The function of the inserted diary is to primarily illustrate Mr. X's painful struggle to confirm his unearthly origins, his growing disappointment and the final sense of betrayal, which is accomplished by giving verbal and also graphic equivalents of its author's mental and spiritual condition. However, Mr. X in his entries also refers to the events and characters of the main plot, assuming as it were the role of the manager of the performance, "the puppet master". He alludes to the future developments of the action as if he were shaping it, usurping the authorial control over the plot:

Here, on the second floor of a rooming house, Otto Bremen, a grade-school crossing guard, slumbers before his television screen with a not quite empty bottle of bourbon nestled in his crotch. The last half inch of a cigarette burns inexorably toward the first two fingers of his right hand. The conjunction of the cigarette and Frenchy's secondary occupation suggests a possibility, but many things are possible, Otto, and whether or not you are to die in a fire – as I rather think you are – I wish, with the puppet-master's fondness for his insensate and pliable creatures, that you might know a minute portion of the triumph rushing toward me [Straub 11].

Such remarks complicate the question of who is in charge of the narrative and throw into question its dual-level construction, suggesting the blurring of the textual boundaries between Ned's narration and Mr. X's diary. This uncertainty is reinforced by the fact that Ned's narration and Mr. X's journal are founded on basically the same pattern: Ned's attempts to find out the truth about his origins, to establish the identity of his father, are mirrored by Mr. X's (his father's) futile attempts to confirm his own unearthly origins. Hence, the doubling occurs here both on the textual level and on the level of the plot – the textual division into two separate parts finds its reflection in two separate but parallel quests – Ned's and Mr. X's

To provide some parallels between Mr. X's and Ned's quests, Mr. X's mistaken "initiation" into his origins and his role takes place in a ruined house in Johnson's Woods, and his initiation is mirrored by Ned's experience in Jones's Woods, and the mirroring is suggested even by the very names of the places. Ned, as a student at Middlemount College, is also allured to the ruined cottage in the woods. He is so much overpowered by the place that he slowly loses his mind and sense of being; he is saved from extinction by his fellow student. The whole experience seems then a sort of false quest or homecoming: "I had been wrong. This had never been the right place for which I had mistaken it" [Straub 63]. The instances of mirroring and doubling discussed so far are strengthened by many allusions to the physical resemblance between Ned and his father, known as Edward Rinehart, and to the identity of their first names, in effect suggesting that Ned is the counterpart of his father. Overall, such devices produce the uncanny effect of destabilized or merging identities, whereby the characters in the novel sometimes become indistinguishable from their fictional counterparts.

Furthermore, the principle of duality in the novel is also extended to places, which involves the existence of a darker, hidden and shameful counterpart or

aspect of the officially accepted reality. Thus, Ned's home town, Edgerton, has its murky underside: Hatchtown, the sinister, neglected, and dangerous downtown area, and Hatchtown, in turn, has its invisible dark artery, the narrow alley called Horsehair:

Horsehair is *small*, and it is *dark*. Horsehair winds *back* and *forth*. In Horsehair, you can get to where you are going without no one knowing you are already gone. The general public never sees it, on account of its being the kind of thing it is [Straub 496].

But Hatchtown conceals another dark secret, the true locus of horror called the Knacker. The Knacker with its pit containing the lethal, all-dissolving acid is the metaphor of the moral decay and corruption of the town community, which is hidden, whose existence is denied. It is the heart of Hatchtown's darkness, its poisonous core, but the contagion spreads to the outer layers, which manifests itself, for instance, in the fact that the local water is contaminated.

Another instance of doubling stems from the existence of two families, Dunstans and Hatches, each having its own both official and secret inheritance passed from generation to generation. The pairing of these two legacies produces yet another pattern of replication in the text. What might be called the "Dunstan legacy" is their difference from ordinary humanity. Their unnaturalness or "Otherness" is signaled by what can be called "the river-bottom subtext"<sup>7</sup>. The "river-bottom subtext" is first introduced in a conversation between Ned and one of his relatives:

River-bottom is what is supposed to be kept out of sight. River-bottom is the ugly part of nature, where everything gets broken down and turned into something else. It has a lot of death in it, and death carries a powerful charge of smell [Straub 157].

Frequently in the novel, Dunstans' "Otherness" is bespoken by "the river-bottom smell", which begins to function as its metonymy. "The river-bottom smell" is associated with Aunt Joy's house, which harbors the horrible family secret, "Mousie", Aunt Joy's unnatural, largely inhuman offspring, a creature that is the product of the river-bottom, of the suspension or disturbance of the laws of Nature. But Dunstans' "Otherness", deriving from ancient and non-human sources, also carries with itself extraordinary abilities such as telekinesis, levitation, time travel, the ability to be in two places at the same time.

The Dunstan "legacy" with its "unnatural" gifts is in the novel set against the Hatch legacy. Literally and officially, the Hatch legacy is the trust established in

<sup>7</sup> The notion of a subtext has been introduced by Michael Riffaterre, who defines its role in a narrative text in the following way: "These subtexts operate as models of reading, as hermeneutic signposts, not unlike themes or motifs, except that a theme or a motif has a matrix of its own that is born elsewhere and exists before that of the larger text". A subtext is specific to a narrative in which it is included; unlike a motif, it has no existence outside of the text. As Riffaterre points out, subtexts are "dispersed along the narrative, either because their development is interrupted and the thread picked up later, or because a subtext reappears in successive variants like a paradigm of synonymic statements. [...] being idiosyncratic, [a subtext] becomes increasingly difficult to understand unless one connects it with the previous occurrences" (M. Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth*, Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press 1993, p. 55).

the past. But the true Hatch legacy is the dark underside of the town, the shameful origins, the criminality, the corruption located in Hatchtown, with the Knacker as the heart of its darkness. When in the past the town authorities started to use it for garbage disposal, diseases in the area became widespread, children were “born blind, deaf, severely retarded, with deformed or missing limbs, or with combinations of all the above. The original business had folded long before. The owners opened a fairground” [Straub 593]. The mystery of “the original business” of the Hatch brothers, the founders and owners of Hatchtown, remains unresolved, but the Knacker is its leftover, and its hidden presence still poisons Hatchtown. Paradoxically, these two horrible legacies, Dunstan’s “Otherness” and the criminality and corruption of the Hatches, come together in the frightening figure of Mr. X, who as it is finally revealed, was born as a result of an illicit relationship between members of the two conflicted family – Howard Dunstan and Ellie Hatch.

But doubling in the novel is most powerfully conveyed by the motif of the doppelgänger and the inserted narrative that serves as the textual mirror of the novel itself. The motif of the double that has become one of the hallmarks of Gothic fiction has its roots in German Romantic works, especially Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann’s *Die Elixiere des Teufels*, which according to Morse:

is unquestionably the most intricate treatment of the problem of identity to be found in Romantic literature. In Lewis the hypocritical monk exemplified a contradiction between a false social appearance and an immoral but authentic deeper self. But for Hoffmann the notion of hypocrisy points to a situation of non-correspondence in which identity is slipping away from and eluding the forms in which it manifests itself<sup>8</sup>.

The motif of the doppelgänger has proved an extremely potent vehicle for exploring the duality of human nature or inner conflicts and unknown dimensions of the self. But Straub’s novel is more than just a rehearsal of the familiar as the figure of the double gathers to itself new meanings. Ned’s being is matched against that of his not entirely-human brother, Robert, who represents Ned’s “shadow self”, his “dark half”. This doubling of identities goes back to the times of the two great great-grandfathers of Ned and Robert, Omar and Sylvan Dunstans. Omar and Sylvan were identical twins, but opposites in many ways: Sylvan was suspected of having killed his brother Omar, and he in turn may have been murdered by his own son Howard. The history of the supposed fratricide and patricide in the family raises the question whether Ned and Robert will reenact the story of Omar and Sylvan.

The uncertainty of Robert’s coming into this world, allegedly as Ned’s twin brother separated from him at birth, is never properly cleared: he mysteriously disappeared from the nursery in the hospital. It is from newspaper clippings collected by his mother that Ned gradually learns more and more about his double’s past – “her second son was loose in the world, wandering from one tragedy to another like a furious ghost” [Straub 301] – and about his unusual features such as lacking the usual markers of human identity: “the tips of his

<sup>8</sup> D. Morse, *Romanticism: A Structural Analysis*, London, Macmillan 1982, p. 76.

fingers were devoid of the ridges and whorls that make up individual prints" [Straub 299]. As Robert explains to Ned: "I'm not really a human being, after all. I'm pure *Dunstan*" [Straub 336]. His sphere of existence is "the formless void" from which he materializes himself, from which "he releases himself into the human world" [Straub 370]. Trying to explain their double existence, Robert hints at their original split, their rise as separate entities:

We weren't supposed to be like this, we were supposed to be one person, but we were separated in the womb, or on the night we were born, I don't know, it happened anyhow [Straub 366].

Not only the narrator-protagonist Ned has his shadow self. Also the novel *Mr. X* is equipped with its double, the story written by Mr. X titled *Blue Fire*, which acts as its textual mirror. *Blue Fire* is a supposedly fictional story, in which Mr. X gives an account of his life and his mission as he understands it. It includes the crucial episodes from the life of Mr. X, who believes himself half-man, half-god, hence the name of the protagonist, Godfrey Demmiman. Demmiman returns to his "ancestral house" and just like Ned in his visions, he is drawn to a forbidding manse. The special significance of this text results from the fact that *Blue Fire* was the only story written by Mr. X that developed out of his control, independent of his will; he lost control over his text and surrendered to the strange overpowering impulse. In the story, Godfrey Demmiman confronts the Other, who reveals himself to be the older, secret monstrous version of himself. Demmiman obeys the strange summons of the Other, recognizes his fate and embraces self-destruction as he, the Other, the ancestral house and its dark secrets are consumed in a blazing fire. Mr. X rejects and recants the story as he sees in its ending his own personal destruction.

Ned's reaction to the story is telling, as he also perceives his own reflection in Demmiman, whose experiences, as he puts it,

sometimes resembled nightmare versions of my own, and for all my fascination I had to struggle against the impulse to set the book on fire and toss it into the sink [Straub 266].

Furthermore, Ned identifies the two central themes of *Blue Fire*: the obsession with the ancestral house, and the simultaneous flight from and pursuit of the Other, which, in fact, describe not only the content of Ned's strange dreams but also capture the dynamics of the main plot of the novel. In addition, the ending of *Blue Fire* anticipates the resolution of Mr. X's quest, his own death in the ancestral house on New Providence Road. Thus the ending of the story *Blue Fire* is reenacted in the fictional reality, and "fiction within fiction" or "fiction squared" imposes itself on "reality within fiction". *Blue Fire* then is, in a crucial sense, a miniature version of the novel, encapsulating its two central themes. It reveals its function as the *specular text*, a text whose

structure is identical to the matrix of the novel: this is the phenomenon French theorists have called *mise en abyme* (a term of heraldry designating at the center of a coat of arms

an area containing the essential bearings of the escutcheon and summarizing its symbolism) or specular text<sup>9</sup>.

All the devices discussed so far, all these instances of the intricate patterning and doubling in the plot produce the cumulative effect of the blurring of ontological and textual boundaries, the destabilization of identities, the sense of the audience being entrapped in a virtual hall of mirrors, where reflections become indistinguishable from the real things. The textual maze thus created gives rise to the epistemological uncertainty, which is reinforced in the novel by the lack of closure and the ambiguity of the ending. Thus at the end, instead of the expected open confrontation – either fight or reconciliation between Ned and his sinister double, their conflict remains unresolved and the tension is not defused.

While trying finally to get out of his native town and break with his past, Ned loses his way in the thick fog that shrouds everything. He cannot turn around from the wrong route he has taken and seems unable to leave Edgerton, as if still bound by his past. He is somehow deprived of volition and agency, which is compounded by his loss of direction; he cannot read the road signs that he encounters – they are undecipherable for him. Unknowingly to himself, he is trapped by his being Dunstan, by his “Otherness”, and he is brought back to New Providence Road, to “the ancestral house”. This seems to be the proper place for his final confrontation with Robert: “*Where we were* was the place we all along had been fighting to reach” [Straub 620].

Robert as Ned’s double embodies the monstrous part of the Dunstan legacy, which Ned wants to repudiate. However, the awaited confrontation does not take place; instead of fighting Robert, Ned escapes into the past, he uses his time travel ability, “the one thing [his] furious double could not” [Straub 620]. He chooses to revisit the concert that had made so indelible impression on his mother, and some part of his stays there forever; thus, in effect, he “stops time”. This condition, the immersion in the world of music and the achieved in this way freedom from the dark hereditary burden of the past embodied in Robert, seems to be “the right place” that Ned has searched for all along:

Sometimes I think that everyone I’ve ever known has had the feeling of missing a mysterious but essential quality, that they all wanted to find an unfindable place that would be *the right place*, and that since Adam in the Garden human life has been made of these aches and bruises [Straub 64–65].

But in his present he is haunted by Robert, flying from his shadow: “in my endless flight, the ticking of Robert’s footsteps sounds in my awaiting ear” [Straub 623]. In this time dimension, in Ned’s and Robert’s present, they are locked in a stalemate: the endless pursuit of and flight from the Other, from the shadow. And the paradoxical nature of the bond that ties them together is evidenced by the quotation from Ben Johnson:

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<sup>9</sup> M. Riffaterre, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

Follow a shadow, it still flies you;  
Seem to fly it, it will pursue [Straub 304].

The motif of the fog that blurs everything, the “undecipherable signs” that Ned sees along the way, his loss of agency and direction can also be understood as a trope that projects the implied reader’s disorientation and replicates his sense of being lost in the textual maze. However, thanks to the numerous clues planted in the right places, it is possible to find one’s way through this literary maze and, in the process, appreciate the artistry of Peter Straub’s novel. But the novel ends on an unsettling note, questioning the implied reader’s assumptions about the narrator’s identity. The narrator, Ned (?), asks at the very end : “Are you sure – really sure – you know who told you this story?” [Straub 623], hinting at yet another mystery, requiring the addressee to unravel it. This kind of open ending confounds the implied reader, by suggesting an unexpected reversal of identities or shifting of narrative roles.

However, there is apparently yet another way of approaching this final enigma, namely in racial terms, as the implied reader is expected to guess that Ned, the narrator, is black. This is the thesis advanced by Bill Sheehan, the author of the only critical study of Straub’s fiction to date, on the basis of the explanatory letter sent to him by Peter Straub himself. Sheehan claims that “the information is there, of course, embedded in the details of the text: in the speech patterns of the Dunstans, in descriptions of food, in the social dynamics at work in several of the scenes, in the edgy bits of dialogue that only make complete sense when seen in the context of racially motivated tension”; interestingly, he notes “Straub’s deliberate refusal to limit our perspective by telling us, directly, that the Dunstans are black”<sup>10</sup>. It is hard to argue with the author himself, but it seems that even upon rereading the novel, these clues are not so obvious, and somehow the explanation of the final mystery of the narrator in racial terms smacks of political correctness and turns the complex, elusive, self-referential text into yet another example of “committed” fiction. But more importantly, it detracts from the semantic potential of the novel’s haunting and disturbing ending.

### Summary

#### Lost in the Textual Maze? Concealments and Doublings in Peter Straub’s *Mr. X*

The article explores the textual intricacy and the epistemological uncertainty projected by the 1999 novel of Peter Straub titled *Mr. X*. Already the title of the novel hints at secrecy, hidden identities, and cryptic messages. Indeed, the novel seems to be conceived as a cryptogram and a kind of literary “Russian doll”. This applies as much to the person of the narrator as to the construction of the narrative, its layers upon layers of secrecy and deception. This cryptic character of the novel is reinforced by the lack of closure and the ambiguity of the ending: “the fog” that shrouds everything as well as “undecipherable

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<sup>10</sup> B. Sheehan, *At the Foot of the Story Tree. An Inquiry into the Fiction of Peter Straub*, Burton, Subterranean Press 2000, p. 304.

signs” that Ned meets along the way serve as a trope that projects the implied reader’s loss of certainty. The sense of being lost in the textual maze is compounded by the abundant instances of doubling and mirroring in the text. This is first observed in the composition of the novel as the dual-level narrative, consisting of the part narrated by Ned, and of the diary of Mr. X, the mysterious figure seen by Ned in his dreams, later revealed to be his father. The two, Ned and Mr. X, in their own peculiar ways act out the same pattern: Ned’s quest to find out the identity of his father is paralleled by his father’s (futile) attempts to confirm his own unearthly origins. However, duality is most powerfully expressed by the motif of doppelgänger: Ned, the narrator, in time realizes the existence of his not-entirely-human brother, Robert, his “shadow self”, his “dark half”. Finally, even the novel, *Mr. X*, finds itself reflected in the work of fiction written by Mr. X, a story titled *Blue Fire*. *Blue Fire*, introduced at length into the narrative, serves as its specular text, *mise en abyme*, encapsulating its two central themes, as verbalized by the narrator: “the obsession with the ancestral house” and “the flight from and the pursuit of the Other”.