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LIKE THE PORTHOLES IN A JULES VERNE
SUBMARINE: OTHER LIVES AND SECONDARY
NARRATIVES IN THE FOOTNOTES OF
PAUL AUSTER, NICHOLSON BAKER,
AND MARK Z. DANIELEWSKI

...footnotes are the only form of graphic digression sanctioned by centuries of typesetters.

The Mezzanine

The layperson as well as the scholar enjoys footnotes.

The Devil's Details

TALES OF THE LESSER TEXT

This essay examines the use, style, and function of footnotes in Paul Auster's *Oracle Night*, Nicholson Baker's *The Mezzanine* and Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*. Recently, certain fiction has been utilizing endnotes and source notes but *footnotes* are the focus here: the reader glances down to process the extra information, rather than having to physically turn to the last signature bound into the spine¹. The footnotes in these three chosen novels operate as a secondary text, complete with plot, characterization, and dialogue. The characters, and situ-

¹ While the David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* contains a copious, and staggering, amount of endnotes, and fellow 'important writer' William T. Vollmann has footnotes scattered about *The Rainbow Stories*, those are mere tidbits, short asides, added data, explanations, and in the wrong place for this particular essay. *Infinite Jest* makes grand and imaginary use of the endnote that requires the reader to physically turn to the back of the book, disengaging from the text proper, not dealing with the novel as a linear object. I would be remiss not to discuss, in some form and fashion, Wallace and

ations, of these annotations are nothing more than bottom-dwellers, existing in a parallel textual universe. 'The move away from typewriters', Larry McCaffery says in an interview with Danielewski,

seems to be having an impact on writing today that some people are comparing to the impact that the printing press, and later the typewriter, began to have on writing practices [...] more and more writers are breaking up the linear flow of the narrative [...] to deflect the reader's eye from its usual left-to-right, front-of-the-book-to-the-end movement (p. 117).

Are these secondary narratives necessary, are these writers simply showing off what they can do with word processing software? Could the novels still function the same without them? *The Mezzanine* and *Oracle Night* are first-person accounts, the footnotes operate as asides, with the same authorial voice that is in the primary text. *House of Leaves* has

Vollmann's contribution to the use of academic effluvium in their fiction. *Infinite Jest* offers 388 endnotes, 96 pages of them in small type, beginning with the scientific name of crystal meth (methamphetamine hydrochloride) to the stock trade name of a company, Talwin-NX. His endnotes, like Danielewski's, have their own footnotes, which are lettered a, b, c, and so on, respectively. The notes contain letters, dialogue, narrative prose, and mathematical formulas. In some cases, the notes act as further explanation of a character's motives: 'Because he's been sworn to secrecy, Green doesn't tell Lenz that Charlotte Treat had shared with Green that her adoptive father had been one-time Chair of the Northeast Regional Board of Dental Anesthesiologists, and had been pretty liberal with the use of old N20 and thiopental sodium' (1044). It seems that these would have worked better as footnotes, operating the way Auster is aiming for in *Oracle Night*. Certainly, *House of Leaves* proves that this many notes can work at the bottom of the page rather than the end of the book. Wallace makes use of footnotes, however, in his stories 'The Depressed Person' and 'Octet,' from *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. One is a meditation on depression and therapy in the Lacanian mode, the other a reflection on human interaction and the author's recursive ramblings. Footnote 5, in 'The Depressed Person,' goes on for five pages, one single paragraph, and reads like an excerpt from an academic journal on psychotherapy.

In *The Rainbow Stories*, Vollmann uses his footnotes for itemizing and explicating. In 'Ladies and Red Lights,' he makes note of what each encounter or interview with a prostitute, pimp, or street person cost him, whether it be \$8 or \$15. In footnote 15, he comments: 'Jamaika was beautiful [...] There is often a certain coarseness or woodenness to a whore's face. This coarseness is accentuated by makeup, sometimes to the extent of making her seem like a painted corpse. Yet Jamaika's face was still young, expressive, loving' (103). His use of footnotes in this book, and others, are not consistent throughout, nor do they act as secondary narratives, otherwise I would have included him as part of this essay.

everal narrators, three only found in the footnotes – e.g., number 174 is a note from the editor, one of the many narrators, stating, 'Mr. Truant de-struck the last six lines in footnote 171' (p. 137).

While each novel employs numbered footnotes, presentation differs. Auster's contains a total of thirteen in consecutive order; they are lengthy, going on for pages, each telling a sub-story in true Auster mode, the story-within-the-story, a labyrinth of dueling yarns. Baker's footnotes are numbered '1' every new page; that is, there is footnote # 1 on page three, and another footnote # 1 on pages 4, 5, and 7. Danielewski has 450 that are numbered, with a few designated by typographical symbols and images—depending on attribution, they are set in different typefaces 'in an effort to limit confusion' (p. 4).

To distinguish each novel, I will refer to the main parts as: the text proper for *The Mezzanine*, the parent text for *House of Leaves*, and the über-text for *Oracle Night*.

THE JOY OF NEW SHOELACES

The Mezzanine is a plot-less meditation of an office worker as he rides an escalator going up. He has just purchased a new pair of shoelaces in the mall on the lower level. The use of top and bottom levels mirrors the novel's presentation – the upper level mezzanine, where the narrator's office is, reflects the text proper while the bottom level, where the shops are located, symbolizes the footnotes and the consumer themes within those footnotes. The style is *homage* to Proust and Joyce (and perhaps Raymond Federman's *Take It or Leave It*). occurring in real time, mere seconds: the duration of an escalator ride. Inside the narrator's mind, however, years go by: a whole lifetime of observations and ruminations on the nature and history of objects. These footnotes, like the text proper, do not tell a story but mull over the existence of socks, staplers, shoelace knots, doorknobs, ties, desk clocks, sliced celery, ice cube trays, Polaroid cameras, cardboard from new dress shirts, t-shirts, railroad spikes, photocopy machines, photocopied documents, grooves in metal and vinyl records, pens, paper perforations, cigarette packs, coffee cups, men's toilet stalls, business cards, clothing drawers, straws, popping popcorn, Band-Aids, pinkening shears, earplugs, shampoo tubes, CVS pharmacies, coin rolls, Penguin Classics imprints, and back to shoelaces: deconstructing the history, use, and manufacturing of such. The footnotes are preoccupied with the acquisition of objects, either from the

mall or the pharmacy. The narrator is proudly carrying a bag of his newly purchased shoelaces. Here is a man who apparently has little stress, drama, or concern in his life: most people, their minds wandering, will contemplate bills, relationships, the news; instead, this fellow reflects on how 'the ice cube tray deserves a historical note' (p. 45) or 'the fairly important development of the history of the straw' (p. 94). He also ruminates on his body riding the escalator and that

escalators are safe: their safety the result (I now believe) of a brilliant decision to groove the surfaces of the stairway so that they mesh perfectly with the teeth of the metal comblike plates at the top and bottom, making it impossible for stray objects, such as coins or shoelace ends, to get caught in the gap between the moving steps and the fixed floor(p. 65).

New shoelaces in hand, the purchase is at the forefront of his thinking process, on the object he has collected. 'This makes it easier to understand the structure of the system of possession', writes Jean Baudrillard in his treatise on consumer shopping, *The System of Objects*, 'any collection comprises a system of items, but the last in the set is the person of the collector' (p. 97). Indeed, the collector-narrator's mind goes from escalators, shoelaces, back to socks, and finally to sneakers:

The great advantage of sneakers [...] was that when you had tied them tightly, without wearing socks, and worn them all day, and gotten them wet, and you took them off before bed, your feet would display the impression of the chrome eyelets in red rows down the sides of your foot, like the portholes in a Jules Verne submarine (p. 18).

The footnotes are obsessed with the mundane; they are a list of the insignificant objects and components of reality. These items, dull as they are, have (like the straw, stapler, and ice cube tray) curious origins-as does the birth of the footnote! Toward the end, the final moments, Baker is absorbed in reflexivity, moving from the subject of biting into cookies and drinking milk to the act of reading books where 'you always had to pick up again at the very thing that made you stop reading the day before' (p. 121). He recalls William Edward Hartpole's *History of European Morals* 'which I had been attracted to, browsing into the library one Saturday, by the ambitious title and the luxuriant incidentalism of the footnotes' (p. 121). Baker launches into a defense of

the form, arguing on how Spinoza, Hobbes, Aubrey, Boswell, Milton, and Gibbon made effective uses:

They knew that the outer surface of truth is not smooth, welling and gathering from paragraph to shapely paragraph, but is encrusted with the rough protective bark of citations, quotation marks, italics, and foreign languages, a whole variorum crust of 'ibids' and 'compare's' and 'see's' that are a shield for the pure flow of argument as it lives for a moment in one mind (p. 122).

He contends that footnotes are a necessary digression for the eye: the gaze needs to move in a different direction from time to time, rather than consistently right to left and back again. 'Footnotes are the finer-suckered surfaces that allow tentacular paragraphs to hold fast to the wider reality of the library' (p. 123). Baker's novel doubles as critical essay with fiction, perhaps akin to Raymond Federman's call for the sub-genre critifiction, a 'discourse [...] that is critical as well as fictional' (*Critifictions: Postmodern Essays*, p. 49). Federman warns that 'discourse impregnate us', and admonishes on the 'importance of always questioning, always doubting, always challenging these discourses' (p. 48). Likewise, Baker questions the form of the novel - modern, post-modern, avant-pop, whatever current label there is - that requires plot, action, form; and does not utilize the methodology of scholars, seeking only to entertain. Baker's footnotes are symbolic interaction for the way memory and thoughts operate in every day life, randomly moving from one arcane subject to something that is important to something that is obscure and possibly useless. *The Mezzanine* represents the inner life of pure thought.

LOOKING THROUGH THE LENS

The footnotes in Mark Z. Danielewski's first novel are concerned with the outer, physical life of sex, strippers, film, long lists of contemporary photographers, and erroneous citations of non-existent publications. The use of varied fonts represent different characters and themes. The commentary by Johnny Truant is in Courier and the explications of the blind cinema scholar, Zompanò, are in Times Roman. Truant and his friend, Lude, have come across a manuscript written by Zompanò, who recently passed away in a cluttered apartment. The manuscript is a critical study of an obscure documentary, *The Navidson Record*, that fol-

lows one family's experiences moving into a house that defies physics: it is bigger on the inside than it is on the outside. The study is a disorderly work,

reams and reams of it. Endless snarls of words, sometimes twisting into meaning, sometimes into nothing at all, frequently breaking apart, always branching off into other places I'd come across later - on old napkins, the tattered edges of an envelope, once even on the back of a postage stamp; everything and anything but empty; each fragment completely covered with the creep of years and years of ink pronouncements; layered, crossed out, amended; handwritten, typed; legible, illegible; impenetrable, lucid; torn, stained, scotch taped; some bits crisp and clean, others faded, burnt or folded and refolded so many times the creases have obliterated whole passages of god knows what (xviii)

Truant's footnotes go on for pages - he falls into a warren of fixation with both the manuscript and the documentary, connecting the dots, turning to Heidegger's *Dasein* for answers, where 'there's some kind of connection between my state of mind and *The Navidson Record*² or even a few arcane sentences on the existence penned by a former Nazi tweeking on who knows what' (p. 25). Whereas Baker's footnotes are calm mediations on everyday things, Danielewski explores a slow decent into psychosis. Truant is just another lost soul in the empty landscape of Los Angeles, working at a tattoo shop in West Hollywood and searching for substance, for *something*, to fill the emptiness of his heart: the answer is Zompanò's preoccupation, and now his. Zompanò's words are the parent text (always impersonal and scholarly) and Truant's reality is below, displayed as frantic autobiography.

Two other important characters live with Truant inside the footnoted world: Lude and a stripper named Thumper, whom he likes because she is 'uninhabited, I mean uninhibited, about everything' (p. 105). Lude and Truant are two typical single men in Los Angeles, competing for the attention of women when they go out: '[We] quarreled over who would approach her first' (p. 116). At times, the footnotes get so bogged down in Truant's personal life it is easy to forget the subject matter of the parent text. This must be kept in mind: Truant's gradual depreciation into madness is a direct result of Zompanò's manuscript progressively ta-

² Italicized words are underlined in Truant's *Courier*.

king over all of his thoughts, 'haunt[ing] my every hour' (p. 179). He is prescribed medication to help cope with the anxiety, 'a low-grade sedative of some kind' (p. 179), but that doesn't stop his life from becoming exactly like Zompanò's, his room engulfed in 'books, sketches, collages, reams and reams of paper, measuring tape nailed from corner to floor' (p. 323). The use of footnotes operates as a parallel story line rather than addendum or annotation. Whereas Baker maintains a connection to standard academic protocol, Danielewski rejects the convention and re-creates the technique for his use, in his own way. When interviewed about his intentions with this, he replies that the footnote format

is a lot less interesting to me than the issue of the context of those notes - of who's responsible for creating them and what they tell you about that person - because footnotes become another lens through which the reader must look at everything. The problem is that it's a lens that many people don't want to look through. It is much easier for some readers to dismiss the whole thing by saying, "Oh, Danielewski is just making fun of scholarly work," and leave it at that, rather than trying to work out all the math and keep track of all these voices, to say nothing of the footnote numbers (which admittedly can get very complicated once you get into them)" (p. 112).

The footnotes desire to take over the parent text, peppering the pages with L. A. nightlife and sexual exploits. These lascivious interludes and narratives distract the reader from the main theme; they are a disruption of body parts and sexual positions, competing with the textual world above, *demanding more attention*. These are aggressive footnotes, hard to ignore - for instance, Lude presents Truant with a list of women he had sex with in the past thirty days, making 'a great show of sharing with me his official and most prodigious tally for that month' (p. 262). The list includes nineteen women, with their sexual preferences and requests, and what bits of past history (rape, incest, drug use) Lude was able to get out of them - this way he can compare and contrast their past to the present, and the experiences of one woman to the other. Not to be one-upped, Truant composes his own list of encounters.

Gabriella was the first. Her body was covered by a terrible birthmark which ran from her collar bone across one breast, over her belly and down both legs [...] Barbara came next. She'd been spending a lot of time at the Playboy Mansion. Said she didn't want to be a centerfold

but liked the atmosphere there [...] People frequently comment on the emptiness of one-night stands, but emptiness here has always been just another word for darkness. Blind encounters writing sonnets no one can ever read. Desire and pain communicated in the vague language of sex (pp. 264-265).

Thumper's presence is also a diversion. She is a mystery to him.

I had never even asked her for her real name [...] which I suddenly resolved to find out [...] who she really was, see if it was possible to mean something to her, see if it was possible she could mean something to me (p. 366).

It is evident that the footnotes in *House of Leaves* act as a search for meaning: of reality, of the film, of the strange house, life and love in southern California. Each is a qualitative inquiry of human experience. In the search for that meaning, the footnoted space—often taking up half of each page in the book – is where the reader gets to know Truant, intimately. The reader either identifies or condemn Truant for the way he lives, but the reader cannot escape Truant's insanity. While Baker's footnotes are representations of a psyche at leisure, Danielewski's show a mind coming apart at the synapses.

LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

Idle thoughts and the ramblings of madness are not to be found in the footnotes of Paul Auster's *Oracle Night*. They are secondary fictions that expand, and comment, on the uber-text. There are three divergent storylines running parallel and bouncing off one another (unlike *House of Leaves*, these are not competing for the reader's attention). The first concerns Sidney Orr (his father had changed his Polish name 'Orlowsey' when emigrating to the U.S), a writer in Brooklyn, composing, in a blue notebook, a novel about Nick Bowen, a New York book editor who is carrying around, and working on, a manuscript titled *Oracle Night*, about a World War I soldier who goes blind³.

³ The most common motif in all of Auster's work is strange and opportune coincidence in the lives of his characters, and here I will say it is only curious coincidence that Zompanò in *House of Leaves* is blind and that the manuscript is being edited by editors. Furthermore, it is but mere coincidence that Sydney Orr is writing in a blue

Orr is a minor fiction writer, recovering from a physical ailment that nearly killed him. He ponders the past, like Baker's narrator, and the events that have transpired, bringing him to this present life. The first footnote announces that the opening scene in the uber-text-where Orr purchases a blue notebook at a stationary store – happened twenty years ago. Orr is aware that facts are missing 'and a fair amount [...] has been lost. I search my memory for the missing dialogue, but I can come up with no more than a few isolated fragments, bits and pieces shorn from their original context' (p. 9). He goes to visit his long-time friend, John, an older, well-known writer (who seems to resemble Don DeLillo⁴). The second footnote tells how Orr met John, and of John's place in contemporary letters, having 'published six works of fiction between 1952 and 1973' (p. 13). The third footnote describes in lengthy, loving, painful detail how Orr met, dated, lost, and won back his wife, Grace. She is a tall, slender woman in her late 20s, works in the art department of his publisher, assigned to create the dust jacket to his latest book. Upon meeting her, it is love at first sight,

...abrupt, that conclusive, that unexpected. I had read about such things in novels, had always assumed the authors were exaggerating the power of the first look—that endlessly talked-about moment when the man gazes into the eyes of his beloved for the first time. To a born pessimist like myself, it was an altogether shocking experience (p. 17).

It is not all bliss and days filled with wine and roses, though. He dates Grace but knows little about her past or what she does when she is not at work or with him. He suspects there is another man but dares not ask. She will not allow him inside, not easily anyway. And then, in footnote six, 'the first six months proved to be tempestuous to me', he confesses,

and they ended badly, with Grace telling me she wanted to break it off and that I shouldn't call her anymore [...] but six or seven weeks later

notebook and in one edition of *House of Leaves*, the word "house" appears in blue ink throughout. (The edition I am citing from, however, is the red one, where letters that are struck through and the word "minotaur" appears in red ink.)

⁴ There is a similar older, mentor-writer character to the younger writer narrator of Auster's *Leviathan*, who is a blatantly based on DeLillo (the book is dedicated to DeLillo as well). Auster and DeLillo are close colleagues and friends in life. Likewise, the novelist in DeLillo's *Mao II* has been rumored to be based on Auster.

she contacted me out of the blue and said she had changed her mind. [...] Not only did she want to start seeing me again, she said, but she wanted us to get married. [...] I had resigned myself to living out the rest of my life with a shattered heart, and now she was telling me I could live with her instead in one piece, my whole life in one piece with her (p. 59).

He wins the woman of his dreams, publishes more books, a story of his is made into a movie, Hollywood calls for screenplays, his books get bigger advances, he quits his day job – it would seem Orr and bride will live happily ever. And they did, for a while.

Then he gets sick, almost dies, and now he has to find new meaning in his existence, not unlike the meaning that drives Johnny Truant out of his mind. Like Truant, texts are the keys to discovering meaning. First is the blue notebook that he starts writing his new novel in (re-connecting to his identity as an author); second is a 1938 Warsaw telephone book that his parents are listed in (connecting to a heritage, and Holocaust, he is estranged to). He is dangerously obsessed with the phone book, the same way Zompanò and Truant become over *The Navidson Record* – similar, perhaps, to the way Baker's narrator is over shoelaces. Orr's experience is positive, as his passion for notebook and phonebook rejuvenates his ailing body and soul, and he remembers who he really is: a man who loves his life, his work, and his wife. The notebook contains two fictional narratives about men who are also in love, and searching for their true; they set out on a journey with the author, all presented in the uber-text. The footnotes in *Oracle Night* are where Orr re-discovers himself, where the reader vicariously experiences his deepest, most honest thoughts and feelings. In the uber-text, he is a lost and broken man; in the bottom text, he is the creator of words, filled with fascination and wonder for the possibilities of serendipity and wonder. This, of course, is not the case with Daniekewski and Baker-Truant's footnoted reality is madness and the escalator rider's is simply one more benign moment in a life without events, other than the Zen-like joy in the purchase of new shoelaces.

The footnotes in each novel are a space for fixation, where whimsies and spontaneous philosophical rants are free to expand. This is what footnotes were made for – the extra verbiage, the sidebars, the explications. 'They can be charming,' Chuck Zerby states in his monograph on the history of the footnote, *The Devil's Details*, 'an encouragement to read on, worth every penny of the extra expense' (p. 3).

USAGE

'As the Eighteenth Century approached', Zerby continues, 'the footnote became the young hero of a picaresque novel', likening it to Tom Jones and Barry Lyndon, traveling across Europe 'from one hair-raising adventure to another [...] mov[ing] through every stratum of society and across national borders' (p. 59), and finding mentors.

For the footnote, those tutors were most importantly the exuberant Frenchman Pierre Bayle; rhetorical Englishman Edward Gibbon; and the meticulous, somewhat dull German Leopold van Ranke. All of them, with very different methods, took the footnotes into their homes, gave him lessons – sternly or gently – and sent him on his way better equipped to make a living [...] That the footnote sat still long enough to be usefully instructed by such contradictory masters proves his resilience, his determination to make his mark on the world, however unprepossessing his origins (59-60)⁵.

Still, the Eighteenth Century footnote was an exercise for the intellectual elite, never meant for the common citizen and layperson. In contemporary fiction, the footnote is a literary device that has moved from the mechanics of the scholar to the artistic imprint. 'When people wrote books on typewriters', McCaffery points out, 'the act of creating a footnote was very laborious, time-consuming work, whereas now, you can almost effortlessly insert [them]'. These textual layers 'seem to have encouraged writers to think of what they are doing less in terms of developing linear narratives than in presenting works that are 'textual assemblages' (p. 117). The footnote's easy, contemporary availability makes it a more attractive and pleasurable narrative device than it was twenty, fifty, two hundred years ago. Commenting on *The Mezzanine's* footnotes, Ross Chambers explains in *Modern Fiction Studies* that 'the

⁵ Zerby does not mention contemporary fiction that uses footnotes, but does consider two recent memoirs that do: Martin Amis' *Experience* and Dave Eggers' *A Heart-breaking Work of Staggering Genius*. Amis' memoir is filled with many footnotes, long and short, "numerous as they are artful and dramatic [...] his annotating art is sly" (pp. 139-140). Eggers only has two footnotes in his book; Zerby points out that one, found within the 21-page Acknowledgement, is a clever promotion, commenting on Eggers' offer to send \$5 to the first two hundred readers who write in with a proof of purchase: "It should go without saying that if you've checked this book out from the library, or are reading it in paperback, you are much, much too late" (Eggers, p. xxxv).

poverty of narrative interest is an indicator [...] that Baker's text seeks ways to give pleasure and earn authority other than those that are characteristic of narrative' (p. 765). It would seem there is no problem with the usage, but the footnote is not a delight to all. Critic John Lanchester, in the *London Review of Books*, accuses the employment as a way 'to deflect, or escape from, the strength of [the narrator's] own feelings'. He believes they are nothing more than a 'huge repertoire of Post-Modern⁶ tricks'. Zerby defends the 'Postmodern sensibility [...] in double narrative, second thoughts, multivoice effects, palimpsests, distancing devices, disjunction, irony, and the jokey' as the 'tendency of the Postmodern to do the double take' (p. 144).

So it comes down to proper usage – is there meaning, or are they present only because the software makes it easy to do so? There are no tricks in these three novels. A poet's numerous free verse options of stanzas (or lack thereof) and lines breaks are never viewed as 'tricks' but as method appropriate to subject and theme. This is the footnote's truth as well; yet with its allies and enemies, it struggles on to be a completely, wholly accepted component in today's fiction⁷.

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⁶ Lanchester's spelling.

⁷ Zerby calls for a "successful footnote movement," but knows that "success is not a certainty, but we can take hope from the long history of the footnote; the footnote is a tough old bird and is not going the way of the auk or the dodo" (p. 150).

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JAK ILUMINATORY W ŁODZI PODWODNEJ JULIUSA VERNE'A:
DRUGIE ŻYCIE I OPOWIEŚCI POBOCZNE W PRZYPISACH U PAULA AUSTERA,
NICHOLSONA BAKERA I MARKA Z. DANIELEWSKIEGO

Streszczenie

Niniejszy esej bada użycie stylu i funkcję przypisów w *Nocy wyroczni* Paula Auster, *The Mezzanine* (1988) Nicholsona Bakera, i *House of Leaves* (2000) Marka Z. Danielewskiego. Niedawno liczne powieści używały przypisów końcowych oraz konkretnych odniesień do źródeł, jednak przedmiotem zainteresowania tego artykułu są przypisy u dołu strony, nie wymagające dodatkowego wysiłku czytelnika oraz nie opatrzone całości powieści sygnaturą. Przypisy w tych trzech wybranych powieściach funkcjonują jako tekst poboczny, uzupełniający fabułę, opisy i dialogi. Charakter i pozycja tych przypisów określony jest przez autora artykułu jako typowe 'głębinowce' (ang. *bottom-dwellers*), funkcjonujące w paralelnym uniwersum tekstowym.