

ASPECTS OF NARRATIVE DISCOURSE IN PAUL AUSTER'S NOVELS

Abstract: The paper will present and discuss the aspects of narrative discourse which appear in the novels of American writer Paul Auster. The body for such a research includes 13 Auster's novels written in the period from 1985 to 2009. After some general information about Auster and his works, with a special emphasis on individual novels, the key aspects of narrative discourse in his novels will be named and listed, and then explained, analysed and discussed through references to novels they appear in. Gérard Genette's study *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* will give the theoretical basis for the research.

Key words: Paul Auster, narrative discourse, novels, Gérard Genette, American Literature, narratology

1. Introduction

Paul Auster is one of the most famous American novelists at the moment, and the body of his literary opus comprises numerous novels, autobiographical books and books of essays and interviews. Focusing mainly on his novels, the paper will try to discuss the aspects of narrative discourse within them, covering Auster's novels from 1985 (*City of Glass*, the first mini-novel of *The New York Trilogy*) to his novel *Invisible*, published in 2009. The other novels, that are between the two named, are: the other two mini novels of *The New York Trilogy* – *Ghosts* (1986) and *The Locked Room* (1986), *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), *Moon Palace* (1989), *The Music of Chance* (1990), *Leviathan* (1992), *Mr. Vertigo* (1994), *Timbuktu* (1999), *The Book of Illusions* (2002), *Oracle Night* (2003), *The Brooklyn Follies* (2003), *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006) and *Man in the Dark* (2008).

One of the key characteristics of Paul Auster as a writer is the fact that he is a skilful storyteller, and that is something that makes most of his novels strong and complex narrative structures. Whether they have been based on complex, unique, and interesting stories or on simple life moments, situations, destinies, or dramas, the way of their realization through narrative is what actually makes them interesting and peculiar. The techniques that Auster uses in such realization are different and each of them affects in a certain way the quality of a narrative as a whole. However, there are also numerous motives and topics that reoccur in his novels.

Before the presentation of aspects of narrative discourse in the mentioned corpus of Auster's novels, each of the novels will be briefly introduced, in terms of their content essential features of their narrative.

All three mini-novels from *The New York Trilogy* share, to a certain points the same narrative features, although the first two of them have been written, dominantly, in third person singular—the first of them, mostly in past, and the second in present; while the third mini-novel has been written in first person, “directly” through the eyes of the unnamed narrator, who, at the end of the third mini-novel, *The Locked Room*, introduces himself as the “background” narrator of the first two novels too, who appears at a few points in them.

What makes these novels close to each other in terms of their narratives and general contents are the detective elements—investigation, following, monitoring, observing, tracking—that their stories are based on, as well as the detective-like behaviour of their main characters, Daniel Quinn, Blue, and the unnamed narrator.

The next novel in the chronology of Auster’s works, *In the Country of Last Things* is the only Auster novel in which the main protagonist is female □ a young woman named Anna Blume. Anna goes to a mysterious, dangerous town in an unknown country to find her missing brother, and the narrative of the novel is, actually, based on the letter she sends to her unknown friend, later Auster novels describe that the friend’s name is David Zimmer, a subsidiary character of *Moon Palace* and the namesake of the narrator and main protagonist of *The Book of Illusions*. That friend is basically, the narrator of the novel, but in such a way that he mostly directly quotes the excerpts from Anna’s letter and from time to time provides explanations or comments. Anna’s letter is a disturbing, deeply emotional and personal narrative of a young and scared woman put into the unknown and deprived of all the things that made her life and identity.

The next novel, *Moon Palace*, is based on the story narrated by Marco Fogg, its main character, who narrates retrospectively, in past tense and the first person, covering the most important events and turnovers from his life, starting with the days of his early youth. However, there are two stories whose narratives, as framed ones, appear within Fogg’s narrative, and, although they are important for the main story of the novel, they are also independent enough to be observed as separate units. One of the stories is the story about the past life, Fogg’s grandfather, Thomas Effing, whom he meets accidentally when taking the job of being his personal assistant, and the second is about Solomon Berber, Fogg’s father, with whom he gets in touch via Effing. Both of the mentioned stories are written as third person narratives, narrated by Fog on the basis of what he had heard from Effing and Berber.

The Music of Chance is a novel told in third person by an omniscient narrator who focalizes the narrative through the main protagonist, Jim Nashe. Its narrative is based on a simple story of life changes, travelling and chance, and the narrative follows it in its simplicity and clarity, describing Nashe’s life circumstances, wanderings all over America and his gambling adventure with young poker player Jack Pozzi and its consequences.

The novel, *Leviathan*, is entirely narrated by a writer named Peter Aaron, one of its main characters. However, his main line of narration in the present time of the novel serves only as a frame for other stories from the past, which are, actually, of true importance for the contents of the novel and for understanding the main

narrative. Among these stories, the most important one is the story about Benjamin Sachs, Aaron's friend from the past whom he, in the present of the novel, identifies as a bomber who accidentally died on a route in Wisconsin while trying to assemble a bomb, and their relation. Such a story is, partially, based on Aaron's personal impressions and events that he witnessed, and partially deals with the events that happened after Sachs had disappeared, on the basis of what Sachs told Aaron when they met two years after his disappearance. Together with that story, Aaron also talks about his past life, as well as about the women he had relations with in past.

The narrator of the next Auster novel, *Mr. Vertigo* is its main protagonist Walter Rawley. Rawley retrospectively tells the story of his life, starting from his early childhood days, when he was famous all over the USA as Walt □ the Wonder Boy because of his ability to levitate.

Timbuktu is a novel that also stands as a specific one in the entirety of the Auster opus, due to the fact that its main protagonist is a dog, Mr. Bones, who is capable of thinking and understanding human speech. The story is told as a third person narrative focalized through the thoughts and observations of Mr. Bones, describing his life with his boss, Willy Christmas, the circumstances that brought Willy to nervous breakdown and life in the street, and the efforts to survive in the street and to find another boss after Willy's death.

The Book of Illusions is narrated by David Zimmer, a professor and writer whose wife and children have died in a plane crash. To return himself back to life, Zimmer did research and wrote a biographical book on actor Hector Mann, who had made twelve silent movies and then disappeared from the scene without any trace. The main story of the novel is focused around a time when Zimmer is contacted by a woman named Frieda Spelling who told him that Mann is alive and invites him to come to see him. At the same time, it tells the stories about the events from the past of Zimmer's life, and of what happened when he came to see Mann and later. However, a great deal of novel is dedicated to various aspects of Mann's life, which occur as framed narratives, basically covering the important periods of Mann's life.

Oracle Night is a novel specific because of the fact that it contains "a novel within a novel within a novel". Its main story is narrated by Sidney Orr, a former writer who survived a disease which almost killed him, and now spends days in New York doing basically nothing but daily routines. His narrative happens in 1982 and describes two tremendous weeks in his life together with some key events from the past. To try to restore his life, at least partially, Orr decides to start to write again, and writes down a story based on an episode from Daniel Hammet's *Maltese Falcon*, practically containing another novel, with the title *Oracle Night*, presented as a draft of ideas and characters in historical present and accelerated narration.

Narrator of *The Brooklyn Follies*, Nathan Glass, divorced and retired insurance agent who suffers from lung cancer, who came to Brooklyn to find a "quiet place to die" tells retrospectively the resuming story of his life. However, in the present of the novel, he interacts with many other people and those interactions put him in various actions and situations, and he also talks about that, as well as about the people he gets in contact with sometimes simply by using their words directly, what, as a total, makes



a complex and multi-layered narrative structure based on fates, events and actions. Nathan also writes *The Book of Human Folly*, dealing with different human mistakes, misfortunes and accidents, starting from his own to those known from history.

Travels in the Scriptorium is a book which discusses what happens with the characters of a novel after the novel has been finished. Its main narration is based on observation and monitoring, i.e. the results of what is seen on a camera that takes one picture every second and heard on microphones placed in the room where the novel takes place. The object of observation is so-called Mr. Blank, an old man who is not aware where he is and why and who is observed, visited, monitored and questioned by different characters from Auster's previous novels. The narrator writes in the third person, through what he sees and hears, and comments in the first person of plural, returning to the first person of singular at the end of the novel. However, there is also "a novel within a novel", written as the third person text that Mr. Blank finds on the table in his room and reads, dealing with a fictional story of a civil war in an alternate version of America.

The novel *Man in the Dark*, is told by August Brill, recovering from a car accident and suffering from insomnia, who spends a night in bed what and invents a story about alternative America and a hero named Owen Brick, who wakes up in that world not knowing where he is and what happens. Parallel to that, Brill tells a story about the three generations of his family—his granddaughter, his daughter and himself—and their past and present life and personal tragedies.

Finally, the story of the novel *Invisible* consists of a complex story that covers the events from almost 50 years. Although there is, practically, one central narrator, Jim Freeman, his role, and, due to that, the role of his narrative, is just to explain, adopt, coordinate, and adjust other narratives, or, to be more precise, the three chapters from a "novel" written by his college friend Adam Walker, each of which is written in a different manner—*Spring* is in first person singular, *Summer* in second, and *Fall* is written in brief, precise sentences in third person—and the extract from the diary of a person from Walker's youth spent in Paris Cecile Juin, which concludes the novel.

2. Aspects of Narrative discourse in Paul Auster's Novels

The analysis and presentation of the aspects of narrative discourse in Paul Auster's novels will be done on the theoretical basis of the famous study written by Gérard Genette, named *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1980) will give the theoretical basis for the research. Taking into account three possible meanings of "narrative"—the oral or written discourse that undertakes to tell of an event or a series of events; the succession of events, real or fictitious, that are the subjects of this discourse; the event that consists of someone recounting something: the act of narrating taken in itself (Genette, 1980: 26–27), Genette proposes the analysis of narrative discourse to be performed according to three aspects or categories: those dealing with temporal relations between narrative and story—tense; those dealing with modalities—forms and degrees—of narrative "representation"—mood—

and those dealing with the way in which the narrating itself is implicated in the narrative—voice (Genette, 1980: 32). In other words, the aspect of *tense* deals with three instances of narrative time—order, duration, frequency, the aspect of mood depends on the “distance” and “perspective” of the narrator—focalization, while the aspect of *voice* deals with who narrates and from where—narrative levels.

2.1. Tense - Order

According to Genette, *order* presents a relation “between the temporal order of succession of the events in the story and the pseudo-temporal order of their arrangement in the narrative” (Genette, 1980: 36). In Paul Auster’s novels, it can be generally said that the chronology of events at the level of the main story line is followed by the chronology of events presented in the text. What differs from novel to novel are only the degree and ways in which the chronology is interrupted by the texts of other, subsidiary stories. It is also sometimes necessary to reconstruct from the text the order and chronology of a few stories, due to the fact that one story line is connected directly with the narrator, while the other line, or a few subsidiary ones is/are related to a subsidiary character from a novel.

Pursuant to the degree of complexity and the corresponding distribution of events presented in the text, Auster’s novels can be divided into three categories.

The first category of novels are the novels with a simple story which, basically, takes place on one narrative level and in which the chronology of events is directly followed by the text, being only occasionally interrupted by shorter or longer analepses—retrospective overviews, descriptions of events and conditions, parts from the lives of subsidiary characters etc.. Such novels are: *City of Glass*, *Ghosts*, *The Locked Room*, *In the Country of Last Things*, *The Music of Chance*, *Mr. Vertigo* and *Timbuktu*. In all of them, it is very easy during the reading to follow the order of events which leads from the story beginning to its end.

The second category of Auster’s novels are the novels containing one or a few inserted—framed or embedded—text(s) within the text of the main story. Such texts are placed in such a way that they interrupt the text of the main story on the “horizontal” textual plan. Such novels are: *Moon Palace*, *Leviathan* and *The Book of Illusions*. It is important to mention that the borders of the main and subsidiary story lines are easy to notice in the text of Auster’s novels, so that the reading of the story and identification of its chronology are never brought into question.

Finally, the third category consists of the novels, which contain other novels or similar textual content created by the narrator or some of the characters. What is said for the other category of novels can also be applied here, regarding the borders of different narratives that are easily noticeable in the text so that they do not interfere with reading and following of the chronology.

The novels that belong to this category are the following: *Oracle Night*, *The Brooklyn Follies*, *Travels in the Scriptorium*, *Man in the Dark* and *Invisible*.

Due to the fact that, as it can be seen, there are longer parts of text with subsidiary story lines in the second and third category of novels, something should

be said about the organization of their textual content. Same as in the main story lines, in these stories Auster also sticks to the chronological and causal–consequential organization of the events that create a story within a text, so that the reconstruction of particular stories from the text is simple and logical. The only difference is that such stories are mostly not presented “in one piece” within the text of the novel, but they interfere with the main story line, narrator’s story or with other subsidiary stories, still keeping the story boundaries clearly visible.

It should also be stated that a certain number of Auster’s novels is characterized by a proleptic anticipation of events, which in the novels mostly occur at their beginning, presenting briefly a string of events which will happen throughout a novel, the entire contents of a novel or of one of its parts. Such novels are: *Moon Palace*, *The Music of Chance*, *Leviathan*, *Mr. Vertigo* and *Man in the Dark*.

2.2. Tense - Duration

Many of the facts named in the previous chapter can be used when talking about the duration—the rhythm and passing of story time with respect to narrative time.

In the novels placed in the first category in the previous chapter, the duration covers the narrative of the novel including retrospective and anticipating episodes, analepses and prolepses, respectively. On the other hand, in the novels from the second and third category, the observation of duration is performed on particular narrative levels in which, in relation to the characters and action of a novel, “real” events are described, not the “fictitious” ones. Each of the named levels has its own story, covering a certain time period, while the period in which the main story line takes place is still taken as the most relevant one for determining the duration. In that sense, the only exception is the novel *Invisible*, containing “a novel within a novel” the story of which is based on potentially “real” events, so that it should be included in determining the duration of the novel.

If the novels are observed in such a way, the basic impression about time which “flows” in their text is obtained from their main story lines or the framework stories from which the other stories are derived, and sometimes even from both, if the narrator and the main character are different persons placed in different time zones. In such situations, within the stories or narrative levels, the void between the two time zones is fulfilled and connected by the narrator’s narrative description of events which include the narrator and the main character, as it is the case with the novels *Leviathan* and *Invisible*.

Pursuant to that, the main story lines of particular novels include different time periods. Thus there are the novels which last for only one night, *Man in the Dark*, or one day, *Travels in the Scriptorium*. On the other hand, there are the novels which include shorter or longer episodes from the life of their main character/narrator: *City of Glass*, *Ghosts*, *In the Country of Last Things*, *The Music of Chance*, *Leviathan*, *The Book of Illusions*, *Oracle Night* and *The Brooklyn Follies*. Finally, there are the novels which, although primarily oriented to a certain period of life, actually, in a way, cover the entire life or greater periods from the life of the narrator and/or the main character. Such novels are: *The Locked Room*, *Moon Palace*, *Mr. Vertigo*, *Timbuktu* and *Invisible*.

2.3. Tense - Frequency

Genette observes narrative *frequency* as “the relations of frequency or, more simply, of repetition between the narrative and the diegesis” (Genette, 1980: 113). When talking about it, he defines four possibilities implying four kinds of frequency relations, which can then be organized into three categories (Genette, 1980: 114–116):

1. Singulative narrative:

1N / 1S: Narrating once what happened once.

nN / nS: Relating n times what happened n times.

2. Repeating narrative:

nN / 1S. Recounting more than once what happened once.

3. Iterative narrative:

1N/nS. Relating one time what happened several times.

Frequency does not play such a significant part in Paul Auster’s novels as the two previously mentioned aspects of tense. Due to the fact that in most cases Ouster organises the story lines of his novels chronologically, where events come one after another and where, during that, they are mostly not narrated more than once, the most often relation of repetition is the singulative, in which what happened once is narrated once. However, in a certain number of novels, which contain within their stories the events which include violence or possible death due to different causes, *Leviathan*, *Timbuktu*, *The Book of Illusions*, *Oracle Night*, *Invisible*, the repeating relation also occurs, because such events, which actually happened only once, are mentioned in a few places within the novel. A sort of repeating relation also occurs in the already mentioned case present in a few Auster’s novels, where the most important events are anticipated—announced or presented—at the beginning of the novel, to be later reached and further described through the narration again.

2.4. Mood

When talking about narrative *mood*, Genette states that:

one can tell more or tell less what one tells, and can tell it according to one point of view or another; and this capacity, and the modalities of its use, are precisely what our category of narrative mood aims at. Narrative ‘representation’ or, more exactly, narrative information, has its degrees: the narrative can furnish the reader with more or fewer details, and in a more or less direct way, and can thus seem (...) to keep at a greater or lesser distance from what it tells. The narrative can also choose to regulate the information it delivers (...), with the narrative adopting or seeming to adopt what we ordinarily call the participant’s ‘vision’ or ‘point of view’ (...) ‘Distance’ and ‘perspective’, thus provisionally designated and defined, are the two chief modalities of that regulation of narrative information that is mood (Genette, 1980: 161–162).

According to Genette, distance helps the reader to determine the degree of precision in a narrative and the accuracy of the information conveyed. Whether the text is a narrative of events, tells what the character is doing, or a narrative of words, tells what the character is saying or thinking, there are four types of discourse, each

demonstrating progressively greater distance taken by the narrator with respect to the text (Genette, 1980: 171□172):

1. Narratized speech:

The character's words and actions are integrated into the narration, and are treated like any other event;

2. Transposed speech, indirect style:

The character's words or actions are reported by the narrator, who presents them with his interpretation;

3. Transposed speech, free indirect style:

The character's words or actions are reported by the narrator, but without using a subordinating conjunction;

4. Reported speech:

The character's words are cited directly by the narrator.

In Auster's novels, these discourse types are combined, mostly depending on their function within a particular novel. In the basis of all his novels, there are two components: narration and dialogues, with direct, reported speech "quotations" of what the characters say. Because of the fact that Auster pays great attention to almost all the characters which appear in his novels, their characterization is primarily performed through narration, on the basis of the concrete information possessed by the narrator and general impressions, and then they are given a chance to present themselves directly to the reader, by means of direct, reported speech. It is often the case that a direct address of a character, or a group of characters, is preceded by narratized or transposed speech.

In Genette's terms, narrative *perspective* is closely related to focalization, i.e. the fact that, within a narrative discourse, the one who perceives is not necessarily the one who tells, and vice versa.

Genette distinguishes three kinds of focalization (Genette, 1980: 190□191):

1. Zero focalization:

The narrator knows more than the characters. He may know the facts about all of the protagonists, as well as their thoughts and gestures. This is the traditional "omniscient narrator".

2. Internal focalization:

The narrator knows as much as the focal character. This character filters the information provided to the reader. He cannot report the thoughts of other characters.

3. External focalization:

The narrator knows less than the characters. He acts a bit like a camera lens, following the protagonists' actions and gestures from the outside; he is unable to guess their thoughts.

In all of Auster's novels, the dominant type of focalization is internal focalization, which is, in terms of persistence, sometimes fixed, and sometimes variable, "moving" from character to character. It means that the events are presented through a character which actively participated, or is still participating, in them.

The internal focalization implies that the narrators in Auster's novels have a limited amount of information at their disposal, mostly related to a focalizer, his/

her actions, physical and psychical conditions. To “justify” and confirm the validity of information possessed by the focalizers, Auster “uses” a few sources of such information: the focalizer’s personal experiences, his or her direct participation in various events or thinking about them, facts obtained from other characters in oral form and facts obtained in written form or through different media.

An overview can be seen in Figure 1.

Novel	Position of focalization in relation to story		Degree of persistence of focalization	
	<i>Internal</i>	<i>External</i>	<i>fixed</i>	<i>variable</i>
<i>City of Glass</i>	+			(narrator – Daniel Quinn)
<i>Ghosts</i>	+		(Blue)	
<i>The Locked Room</i>	+		(narrator)	
<i>In the Country of Last Things</i>	+			(Ana Blume – David Zimmer)
<i>Moon Palace</i>	+			(Marko Fogg - Thomas Effing - Solomon Barber)
<i>The Music of Chance</i>	+			(Jim Nashe – Jack Pozzi)
<i>Leviathan</i>	+			(Peter Aaron- Benjamin Saks- Maria Turner)
<i>Mr. Vertigo</i>	+		(Walter Rawley)	
<i>Timbuktu</i>	+			(Mr. Bones - Willy Christmas)
<i>The Book of Illusions</i>	+			(David Zimmer- Hector Mann)
<i>Oracle Night</i>	+		(Sidney Orr)	
<i>The Brooklyn Follies</i>	+			(Nathan Glass- Tom Wood – Harry Brightman- Aurora...)
<i>Travels in the Scriptorium</i>	+		(narrator)	
<i>Man in the Dark</i>	+		(August Brill)	
<i>Invisible</i>	+			(Adam Walker- James Freeman – Cecille Juin)

Figure 1

2.5. Voice

In terms of narrative *voice*, Genette distinguishes “two types of narrative: one with the narrator absent from the story he tells (...), the other with the narrator present as a character in the story he tells”. The first type he named as heterodiegetic, and the second type as homodiegetic (Genette, 1980: 244□245). He also distinguishes three types of narrative levels (Genette, 1980: 227□230). The narration of the main (first-

level) narrative occurs at the extradiegetic level. The event-story being narrated on this first level fills a second-level position, known as intradiegetic. Finally, the events being told through the second-level narration are metadiegetic.

Discussing the issue of narrative voice in relation to Paul Auster's novels, being mostly first- or third-person narratives, an important thing that should be taken into account is the fact, already mentioned in the previous text, that the novels differ in complexity among themselves, and that the complexity is largely based on the existence or non-existence of embedded narratives in particular novels, further affecting both the types and levels of narrative. Figure 2 presents the typology of narrators in Auster's levels based on two criteria: the level that a narrator takes in relation to the story and the degree of the narrator's participation in the story.

Novel	Narrator	Level taken by the narrator in relation to the story			Degree of narrator's participation in the story	
		extradiegetic	intradiegetic	metadiegetic	heterodiegetic	homodiegetic
<i>City of Glass</i>	unnamed	+		+	+	
<i>Ghosts</i>	unnamed	+		+	+	
<i>The Locked Room</i>	unnamed		+	+		+
<i>In the Country of Last Things</i>	Anna Blume		+	+		+
	David Zimmer	+			+	
<i>Moon Palace</i>	Marko Fogg		+	+		+
<i>The Music of Chance</i>	unnamed	+		+	+	
<i>Leviathan</i>	Peter Aaron	+	+		+	+
<i>Mr. Vertigo</i>	Walter Rawley		+	+		+
<i>Tomhuuta</i>	unnamed	+		+	+	
<i>The Book of Illusions</i>	David Zimmer		+	+	+	+
<i>Oracle Night</i>	Sidney Orr		+	+		+
<i>The Brooklyn Follies</i>	Nathan Glass		+	+		+
<i>Travels in the Scriptorium</i>	unnamed	+		+	+	
<i>Man in the Dark</i>	August Brill		+	+	+	
	Adam Walker		+	+	+	
<i>Invisible</i>	James Freeman	+	+	+	+	+

Figure 2

According to the fact that, as it can be seen, each of Auster's novels essentially has only one narrator, or, as in the novels *In the Country of Last Things* and *Invisible*, two the narrator-editor and the narrator-participant, it is inevitable that these narrators, besides the extradiegetic or diegetic, mostly occur on metadiegetic level too, telling stories they heard from someone else or invented.

3. Conclusion

In terms of construction of narrative discourse, Paul Auster is a skilful storyteller, capable of building remarkable stories and characters in his novels. It can be said that is dominantly preoccupied with fates and destinies of both main and subsidiary characters, and such events are the key elements of his writing. All such elements are combined into unique narrative creations, which still share some common and characteristic features. In all the presented novels, all three fundamental

aspects identified by Genette as *tense*, *mood* and *voice* are treated with care and balance, creating solid and convincing narrative structures.

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Darko Kovačević

ASPEKTI NARATIVNOG DISKURSA U ROMANIMA POLA OSTERA

Rezime

Rad predstavlja i razmatra aspekte narativnog diskursa koji se pojavljuju u romanima američkog pisca Pola Ostera. Romani koji su tom prilikom uzeti u obzir obuhvataju one nastale u periodu od 1985. do 2009. godine. Nakon opštih podataka o Osteru i njegovom djelima, sa posebnim naglaskom stavljenim na pojedinačne romane, aspekti narativnog diskursa u Osterovim romanima su analizirani i razrađeni, pri čemu je studija Žerara Ženeta *Narativni diskurs: esej o metodi* poslužila kako teoretska osnova za istraživanje.

dax1978@gmail.com

