

ECHO-CHAMBER OF THE AMERICAN STAGE

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Much has been made, much of it by the writers themselves, of the fact that the American writer has no status, no respect, and no audience. I am pointing here to a loss more central to the task itself, the loss of a subject; or, to put it another way, a voluntary withdrawal of interest by the fiction writer from some of the grander social and political phenomena of our times.

Philip Roth, "Writing American Fiction"

And it may be that when this situation produces not only feelings of disgust, rage, and melancholy, but impotence too, the writer is apt to lose heart and turn finally to other matters, to the construction of wholly imaginary worlds, and to a celebration of the self, which may, in a variety of ways, become his subject, as well as the impetus that establishes the perimeters of his technique.

Philip Roth, "Writing American Fiction"

Public life, vivid and formless turbulence, news, slogans, mysterious crises, and unreal configurations dissolve coherence in all but the most resistant minds, and even to such minds it is not always a confident certainty that resistance can ever have a positive outcome.

Saul Bellow, "Some Notes on Recent American Fiction"

There is no escaping the drift of these comments: Roth and Bellow are not only critics but writers, and yet such outlook would exclude much of what goes as fiction in the United States since 1960. The main premise of Roth's and Bellow's criticism is that there are things happening out there which either the novelist must tackle, or turn aside from in guilt: the classical convergence of mimesis and morality. Coherence of the work equals coherence of the mind. There can be more or less psychology, more or less political awareness; but there are always depths to be probed. There can be no question for Bellow or Roth of forefronting language and surfaces.

The model for the fiction which Saul Bellow wrote during the 50s was all but complete by the middle of the 19th century, with little additions later on. This is not to say that Bellow had no use for later developments in narrative: simply that his themes and his outlook are in that tradition. There is a degree of experimentation in *Augie March*, but it is made compatible with mimesis. *Augie March* is therefore a highly structured and controlled novel, built up on and ordered by a few themes and patterned by the single principle of irony. The centre seems to hold. But is the mold breaking from within? That was the lesson of *Invisible Man*, full of elements of non-mimetical fiction; Bellow's novel is less innovative than that. If it were 300-page long, it would be almost a canonical *Bildungsroman*. However, beyond that basic build-up, *Augie March* sprawls on, introducing dozens of characters who flicker on and off, almost like a bazaar or chronicle. It is in that sense that *Augie March* in a way goes beyond the tradition of Mimesis.

This paper starts with a formal description of the narrative form of the novel, in an attempt to pin down the composite texture of the novel. This is summarized by the two principles of discontinuity (gap) and juxtaposition (friction) with the net result that the novel presents a wide scope of vision of American life; but whereas texture here is inclusion, thematically, *Augie March* is characterized by exclusion (on the basis of mimesis). Not surprisingly, the presiding themes (the *Bildungsroman* and the meeting of the New world and the Old) are given a structuring function, to the extent that the form of the novel is made an analogy of those themes.

1. INTRODUCTION: SOME TERMS

In order to describe *Augie March* in terms of form, this paper will follow the model worked out by Gérard Genette, first in one chapter of *Figures III* (1972), which was published separately in English under the title of *Narrative Discourse*; and later, with some corrections, in *Nouveau discours du récit* (1983).

Genette's point of departure is a triad of terms which define the object of his study: first, *histoire*, or the events which are said to take place in the narrative, their order, their connections, causal or arbitrary (*le signifié ou contenu narratif*, Genette, 1972, p. 72); second, *récit*, the report of those events in discourse; as Genette says, "*récit désigne l'énoncé narratif, le discours oral ou écrit qui assume la relation d'un*

événement ou d'une série d'événements" (1972, 71), "... le signifiant, énoncé, discours ou texte narratif lui-même" (1972, 72)¹ and, last, *narration*, itself an event, the act of narration itself, or, as Genette puts it, "acte qui consiste ... à introduire dans une situation, par le moyen d'un discours, la connaissance d'une autre situation", (1972, 243). An event is still involved here, but no longer the actions, say, of a character, but the event in itself that a story is being narrated (Genette 1972, 71).

This triad provides the basis for two important vectors: (a) that linking *histoire* and *récit* (they may be closely parallel, or diverge in one of several ways; the *récit* can shift the order of events, add things to the mere reporting of facts, etc), and (b) that linking *récit* and *narration* (the act of narration can be hidden behind the narrative itself, so as to be invisible, or it can be foregrounded; it can take place after the narrative, or, less frequently, simultaneously, etc).

The first vector is put to good use by the Premodern novel²: it gives such pairs as description/dialogue—and, strikingly, the *effets de réel* so dear to Roland Barthes, those details which are supererogatory from the point of view of the story—and gives rise to changes of tempo, and occasionally of sequence. The second vector (*récit - narration*) is responsible for striking effects in the Baroque novel, in epistolary fiction and, most significantly, in the Postmodern novel: the use of framing, of "Chinese boxes"—story within story—, discontinuity.

Moreover, Genette makes a further distinction between *histoire* (events in succession) and the universe where they take place (where the characters "live"), which he calls *diégèse*,³ and on which he comments in his more recent book: "La diégèse ... est bien un *univers* plutôt qu'un enchaînement d'actions (histoire): la diégèse n'est donc pas l'histoire, mais l'univers où elle advient" (Genette 1983, 13).

Genette's other triad of terms corresponds to the fields of study (*les problèmes du récit*, Todorov 1966, quoted by Genette 1971, 74):

Ceci nous autorise peut-être à organiser, ou du moins à formuler les problèmes d'analyse du discours narratif selon des catégories empruntées à la grammaire du verbe, et qui se réduiront ici à trois classes fondamentales de déterminations: celles qui tiennent aux relations temporelles entre *récit* et *diégèse*, et que nous rangerons sous la catégorie du *temps*; celles qui tiennent aux modalités (formes et degrés) de la "représentation" narrative, donc aux *modes* du *récit*; celles enfin qui tiennent à la façon dont se trouve impliquée dans le *récit* la narration elle-même au sens où nous l'avons définie, c'est-à-dire la situation ou instance

1. The opposition *histoire/récit* reproduces that of the Russian formalists between *fable/sujet*.

2. I understand by this the novel written before Flaubert and James.

3. Which must not be confused with *diégésis*, the mode of presentation of reality (pure narrative, as opposed to the report of dialogue). See below.

narrative, et avec elle ses deux protagonistes: le narrateur et son destinataire, réel ou virtuel... ce terme est celui de *voix* (Genette 1972, 75-76)

For Genette, the study of narrative can, thus, focus on time, mood (the regulation of narrative information), and voice. For a formal description of *Augie March*, the present paper will centre on the second and the third group of problems: considerations of time become more interesting and fruitful the more one novel abides by the Classical (Aristotelian) rules about plot-formation, which place the emphasis on rules of causality and the convention of "Fate" (itself a kind of necessity) as opposed to mere temporal succession (so that the analysis of, say, *Tom Jones*, or *Great Expectations*; and in 20th Century fiction, of *The Heart of the Matter* or more subtly *The Lime Twig*, would benefit most from such an angle); the plot of *Augie March*, on the other hand, is rather crude in this sense, Bellow's work being clearly "modern", to this extent, in its distrust of "mechanical" plots.

The other two categories need some further commentary. Genette has the following to say about *mood*:

On peut en effet raconter *plus ou moins* ce que l'on raconte, et le raconter *selon tel ou tel point de vue* . . . la "représentation", ou plus exactement l'information narrative a ses degrés; le récit peut fournir au lecteur plus ou moins de détails, et de façon plus ou moins directe, et sembler ainsi . . . se tenir à plus ou moins grande *distance* de ce qu'il raconte; il peut aussi choisir de régler l'information qu'il livre, non plus par cette sorte de filtrage uniforme, mais selon les capacités de connaissance de telle ou telle partie prenante de l'histoire . . . dont il adoptera ou feindra d'adopter ce que l'on nomme couramment la "vision" ou le "point de vue", semblant alors prendre à l'égard de l'histoire . . . telle ou telle *perspective* (1972, 183-184).

The first category within mood, *distance*, as Genette makes clear (1972, 184-190; 1983, 30-34) concerns the reporting of verbal events,⁴ and in practice translates into the different ways spoken language (and the characters' thoughts) is presented (so that, in a commonplace metaphor, one might say that the more filters we have, the more distance there is). Traditional Poetics has listed direct, indirect or reported, and free indirect speech; the system, however, can be simplified, since, as Genette points out "dans un récit, il n'y a que *rhésis* et *diégésis* — on dit d'ailleurs, et fort clairement, texte de personnages et texte de narrateur, (1983, 28, 29). A basic concern of the (traditional) novelist is how other discourses may be made a part of the narrative, the way the

4. In *Nouveau discours du récit*, Genette suggests that a more fitting title for this section would be "*des modes de (re)production du discours et de la pensée des personnages dans le récit littéraire écrit*" (1983, 34).

discourse of others (Bakhtin's *langage étranger*, 1978, 99) impinges, with a varying slant, on the discourse of the narrator, how they are juxtaposed, how they qualify each other; what, in other words, should the surface, or the texture, of the novel be like.

The second element in mood (*perspective*) is that of focalisation (in more traditional terms, point of view⁵), a question widely discussed, since the beginning of the century, in critical studies of the modern novel, and which Genette summarizes in the formula *Who sees?*: "Par focalisation, j'entends donc bien une restriction de "champ," c'est-à-dire en fait une sélection de l'information narrative par rapport à ce que la tradition nommait l'*omniscience* . . . L'instrument de cette (éventuelle) sélection est un *foyer situé*, c'est-à-dire une sorte de goulot d'information, qui n'en laisse passer que ce qu'autorise sa situation" (Genette 1983, 49). Genette goes on to enumerate the varieties of focalisation:

. . . une typologie à trois termes, dont le premier correspond à ce que la critique anglo-saxonne nomme le récit à narrateur omniscient et Pouillon "vision par derrière", et que Todorov symbolise par la formule *Narrateur > Personnage* (où le narrateur en sait plus que le personnage, ou plus précisément en *dit* plus que n'en sait aucun des personnages) . . . (1972, 206)

. . . en focalisation interne, le foyer coïncide avec un personnage, qui devient alors le "sujet" fictif de toutes les perceptions . . . En focalisation externe, le foyer se trouve situé en un point de l'univers diégétique choisi par le narrateur, *hors de tout personnage*, excluant par là toute possibilité d'information sur les pensées de quiconque" (1983, 49, 50).

The third and last field is that of *voice*: "qui raconte [l'histoire], où et quand", (Genette 1972, 225), i.e. the study of what Genette calls the *narrative entity* ("C'est donc cette instance narrative qu'il nous reste à considérer, selon les traces qu'elle a laissées —qu'elle est censée avoir laissées— dans le discours narratif qu'elle est censée avoir produit", 1972, 226-227). The two main sections of the study of voice are *narrative level* and *person*: one narrator may be "within" or "without" the story (narrative level). He may, on the other hand, be a character in the fiction, or not. To these two, Genette adds one category related to the "when": when is the story told?⁵

To start with the last mentioned, the relevance of *time* in connection with voice lies in the relative position of the narrator with respect to the narrative. Genette

5. Genette acknowledges his debt to Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, who suggested in 1943 (in *Understanding Fiction*) the use of *focus of narration* as an alternative to *point of view* (quoted in Genette 1972, 203, 206).

6. Genette points out that it is practically impossible for author to avoid locating in time the act of narrating, whereas in most cases the *place* where the narrating takes place is ignored or left in the background, and accorded any significance (Genette, 228). He gives several

distinguishes several possibilities—I omit one which is marginal in literature. Starting with the more usual:

1. *narration ultérieure* (Genette 1972, 232), when the action is said to have taken place in its integrity *before* the act of narrating begins: this is the typical form of the Mimetic novel in the tradition of Realism. The present tense is sometimes brought in for the sake of what Genette calls *effets de “convergence” finale*⁷ (1972, 232-3)—in the case of *Invisible Man*, having the present tense both at the beginning and at the end *suggests* a complex narrative structure, in several levels.

2. *narration simultanée* (Genette 1972, 230-231), when the action is said to be taking place at the same time as the act of narrating (as for instance with internal monologue).

3. *narration intercalée* (Genette 1972, 229-230), when the novel shuttles back and forth from action narrated to act of narration; this is the norm in the epistolary novel and the pseudo diary (*Frankenstein*).

According to *narrative level*, all fictional events, beings, objects, etc, are either *extradiegetic* (and take place *outside* the universe defined by the narrative —by definition the only event in this category is the act of narrating⁸) or *intradiegetic* (if they take place within the frontiers of the *diégèse*); in those cases where the universe of the novel itself includes another act of narrating (“Chinese boxes”), the narration thus produced is called *metadiegetic* (when one character in a story tells a story; for instance, the narrative of the Monster in *Frankenstein*). In this respect, the characteristic of the Mimetic novel (the School of Realism) has consistently been to steer clear away from metadiegetic narration. One of the last great novels of the 19th century to use this technique —in a particularly self-conscious way— was precisely *Frankenstein*.

The category of person (1972, 251-254) refers to the question, Who is telling? and Genette accordingly distinguishes two varieties of narrative: *heterodiegetic* (the narrator is not himself a character, and consequently cannot be referred to in the first person) and *homodiegetic* (the narrator is a character in the story, he is included in its fictional universe). The most significant system within voice is the opposition between *first-person narrative* and *third-person narrative*. There has been a consistent trend in the Classical American novel to use homodiegetic narrators (*Moby-Dick*, *Huckleberry Finn*; *Invisible Man*, *On the Road*, *The Adventures of Augie March*).

exceptions —*Lolita* where the narrating takes place in a psychiatric hospital—. Another clear example is *Invisible Man*, whose narrator is *underground*.

7. Such as, towards the end of *Lazarillo de Tormes*: “*En el qual el día de oy viuo y resido a servicio de Dios y de vuestra merced.*”

8. Which is different from the act of writing the novel, an act in the real world.

2. A CLASSICAL AMERICAN NOVEL

Augie March will be here discussed from the point of view of mood and voice, omitting consideration of time. To the reason given above for such a choice, I must add here that effects of time are in any case not very conspicuous (there are indeed changes of rhythm, which underline the paradox of Augie's development, as a character who is always *short of time*, as it were; changes of sequence, on the other hand, are practically absent from the novel⁹).

1. As to the *reporting of discourse* (included within *mood*), the inclusiveness of novelistic discourse, its openness to various dialects—in effect the preeminence of direct speech—is a permanent trait of the American novel. In *Augie March*, notably from chapter three onwards, there is a profusion of direct speech, sometimes in the form of long tirades, which are used to set up character against character. This is not to say that other forms, mainly free indirect speech, are not present in the novel.

As to focalisation, Bellow's clear choice for irony and the structure of the *Bildungsroman* practically determines *neutral focalisation*. This is what Genette has to say, in connection with *A la recherche du temps perdu*:

Comme en tout récit de forme autobiographique, les deux actants que Spitzer nommait **erzählendes Ich** (Je narrant) et **erzähltes Ich** (Je narré) sont séparés dans la **Recherche** par une différence d'âge et d'expérience qui autorise le premier à traiter le second avec un sorte de supériorité condescendante ou ironique. (1972, 259)

In other words, two aspects are brought together in the autobiographic narration: an homodiegetic narrator, and a neutral focalisation. This is especially revealing in connection with the relationship between narrator and (anti)hero: the former does not hesitate to reveal—and revel in—the hero's naivety, as a result of which the hero's discourse, his actual voice, is ignored—over the first half of the book Augie is scarcely allowed to speak for himself *as character*. As to the narrator's (later) insight into the motives of the younger hero, I will only give a few examples:

However, they couldn't get me to beg and entreat—though I wasn't unmoved by the thought of a jail sentence, head shaven, fed on slumgullion, mustered in the mud, buffaloes and bossed. If they decided I had it coming, why, I didn't see how I could argue it.

9. For the rare exception, see p. 17, with a sentence, right in the middle of a paragraph, starting "*Years after...*" This Genette calls *prolepse* (1972, 82).

But I was never in real danger of the house of correction.¹⁰(Bellow 1953, 45-46 emphasis added).

I didn't yet know what view I had of all this. It still wasn't clear to me whether I would be for or against it.¹¹ (Bellow 1953, 238)

Oh, jealousy, sure. ***But there were plenty of other defects and inferiorities. What I sometimes didn't think of myself,*** in the fine pants and the buckskins, boots, sheath knife, while I drove the station wagon as if from the court at Greenwich and along the Thames, just back from a Spanish riad, goofy flowers in my hat. This was how ***I'd note myself with satisfaction and glowing; I may ask a partial excuse, because of the swelling of my heart, that I was such a happy jerk . . . But these shortcomings, both in her and me, could have been corrected or changed.*** (Bellow 1952, 329, emphasis added).

I wasn't going to let her be rough, I thought as I went to face and to lie to Thea. ***I didn't really feel the sharpness of the lying I was prepared to do.*** I came back to her thinking I was now more faithful than before, so ***I believed*** I was going to maintain something more true than not. ***And I didn't expect*** to feel as bad as I did feel . . . (Bellow 1953, 392, emphasis added).

The narrator in *Augie March* doggedly refuses himself to espouse any individual angle: it is made inescapable that *the narrator knows more than any one character*. This does not only apply to the hero's motives (his own):

No, Grandma Lausch couldn't have been withstood, I'm convinced. Not now, not in this. Everything considered, it was, no matter how sad, wiser to commit the kid. As Simon said, we would later have had to do it ourselves. But the old lady made of it something it didn't necessarily have to be, a test of strength, tactless, a piece of sultanism; it originated in ***things we little understood:*** disappointment, angry giddiness from self-imposed, prideful struggle, weak nearness to death that impaired her judgment, maybe a sharp utterance of stubborn animal spirit, or bubble from human enterprise, sinking and discharging blindly from a depth (Bellow 1953, 56, emphasis added).

For a useful contrast, see how differently this is dealt with in two novels of the same period, *On the Road* and *Invisible Man*. Whereas in Bellow almost invariably the

10. Here the narrator might have said, more discreetly, «I did not go to a house of correction». Another point is the use of *litotes* (*I wasn't unmoved* for «I was frightened to death»), which is characteristically ironical.

11. This only makes sense if the first-person narrator has later discovered that he is in fact, «against it».

narrator is distancing himself from his younger self, in Ellison's novel, *sometimes* the narrator avoids providing an explanation or an insight which he "now" is in a position to give, adapting himself instead to the hero's mistaken consciousness (not always: the relationship hero/narrator is not fixed). And this is most often the case at important turns of the novel —points where the hero's development is about to be thrust forward:

I thought of the glee certain folks at home would feel if I were expelled. Tatlock's grinning face danced though my mind. What would the white folks think who'd sent me to college? Was Mr Norton angry at *me*? In the Golden Day he had seemed more curious than anything else —until the vet had started talking wild. (Ellison 1952, 84)

They had to investigate the charges against me, but the assignment was their unsentimental affirmation that their belief in me was unbroken. I shivered in the hot street. *I hadn't allowed the idea to take concrete form in my mind, but for a moment I had almost allowed an old, southern backwardness which I had thought dead to wreck my career.* (Ellison 1952, 329, emphasis added)

The second of those examples is especially subtle: here, as in many other cases, narratorial commentary —the little there is— seems to be made, not by the underground narrator, but from the vantage point of the values of a socially successful person (what we know from the prologue the narrator is *not*). The narrator would not now tax with "southern backwardness" his resentment at the cruel and stupid treatment the "Brotherhood" has just inflicted upon him: "southern backwardness", this is what his grandfather's words purported, is it not? *what in fact has become his outlook in the basement from which he is telling the story* (the realization that an immense joke is being played on him). Words and phrases such as *unsentimental affirmation, unbroken, for a moment, southern backwardness, wreck my career* are evidence that the narrator is presenting as his own the values of the hero at this point of the action.

These examples at least leave room for psychological insight, even if it is that of the deluded hero. Kerouac in *On the Road* goes further than this, closer to "behaviouristic" narrative (in Genette's terms, *negative focalisation*). He does not, though, cultivate the pessimistic note, as Camus or Faulkner in *L'étranger* and Bengy's section in *The Sound and the Fury*. Instead, Kerouac cultivates surfaces, and sheer action; from the point of view of psychology, it is as if character were flattened out, and psychological analysis, whether ironical or deluded, substituted by cliché:

When I got better I realized what a rat he was, but then I had to understand *the impossible complexity of his life*, how he had to leave me there, sick, *to get on with his wives and woes*.¹² "Okay, old Dean, I'll say nothing" (Kerouac 1957, 285, emphasis added)

2. The treatment of *voice* in Bellow's reveals a subtle approach beneath the appearance of "Realism". The narrator tells Augie March's life as it appears from an (unspecified) point in the future. On the surface of things, this conforms to the model of *ulterior narration*, the unmarked form of narration. Things get slightly more complicated when the temporal distance between narrative and narration is stretched on¹³ —for instance, by introducing references to *another life*, which seems to have taken place on a different waveline altogether —neither at the time of narrating, or shortly before it, nor within the span of the story:

There's an old, singular, beautiful Netherland picture I once saw in an Italian gallery . . . (Bellow 1953, 190)

I've been at Schönbrunn and in the Bourbon establishment in Madrid . . . (Bellow 1953, 237)

I remember I was in a fishmarket square in Naples . . . The war had gone north not so long before . . . (Bellow 1953, 285)

The second of those passages hesitates between the present tense and the even more striking present perfect. In another such instance, we seem be close to the intemporal present of description, were it not for the fact that the narrative of *Augie March* so consistently focuses on the past:

Now there's a dark Westminster of a time when a multitude of objects cannot be clear; they're too dense and there's an island rain, North Sea lightlessness, the vein of the Thames. (Bellow 1953, 201)

In contrast, the point of departure in both *Invisible Man* and *On the Road* is more clearly experimental; *Invisible Man* is built on the convention of *ulterior narration*, but framed by two fragments (Prologue and Epilogue) which are contemporary with the act of narration, a reflection, in fact, of the act of narrating itself. In the case of Kerouac's most famous novel, the illusion of simultaneous narration is reflected in the formal structure or division of the novel (every one of the four "parts" gives the impression of having been narrated at different times). Both Ellison and Kerouac are influenced here by the tradition of the Picaresque novel (where the narrator at the end of the novel is still "in the heat of things", telling us his plans, narrator become Picaresque hero about to get himself into another fix¹⁴). In *Invisible Man*, we get the present tense in the Prologue and

12. Even the use of alliteration here turns the whole thing into a joke.

13. And, as we shall see, combined with the manipulation of narrative levels.

14. These are the words at the very end of *Lazarillo de Tormes*: "Pues en este tiempo estaua en mi prosperidad y en la cumbre de toda buena fortuna."

just at the end, when we hear that he is “about” to leave his hideout:

I’ve already begun to wire the wall. A junk man I know, a man of vision, has supplied me with wire and sockets . . . The truth is the light and light is the truth. When I finish all four walls, then I’ll start on the floor. Just how that will go, I don’t know. (Ellison 1952, 10)

Now I have one radio-phonograph; I plan to have five . . . I’d like to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong . . . (Ellison 1952, 11)

Nevertheless, the very disarmament has brought me to a decision. The hibernation is over. I must shake off the old skin and come up for breath. (Ellison 1952, 468)

Predictably, the level-structure of *Augie March*, strictly speaking, is traditional: there is only one *diégèse* in *Augie March*, no stories within the story (and the references to Paris, Vienna, Madrid are part of the narrator’s world). There are two points to be mentioned here, however: first, the references to that *other sphere* where the narrator has been moving later on; second, several important modulations or irregularities, all related to a phenomenon which bears more than one interpretation: the use of the second-person pronoun *you*. This is a fact of the utmost importance, prompting a world of questions: where is the “you” placed? is there an addressee involved? who? is it only the addressee which is implicit in any narration (*narrataire*)? Basically, this can be justified in three ways. Leaving aside the first possibility, the English common impersonal use, the presence of the “you” can be interpreted as an irregularity (a modulation) in the form of the novel, whereby the whole of *Augie March* is bracketed, suddenly becoming a *metadiegetic narration* (like that of Captain Walton addressing his sister in *Frankenstein*). Unlike Mary Shelley’s case, where metadiegetic narrative is part of the fictional contract of the novel, in the case of *Augie March* it is transgressive. This transgression Genette calls *métalepse*¹⁵ (1972, 244-245).

But *the reason for telling you all this* is that one of the bodyguards turned out to be my old friend Sylvester . . . (Bellow 1953, 374-375)

In this last example, there are overtones of the opening of *Huckleberry Finn*: the situation is that there is an implicit addressee, or addressees, who is not totally passive or quiescent. This in itself is rather harmless, but there is a further twist, which concerns the content of the passage: it is extremely odd as a remark, since what is being

15. And our example in *Augie March* would be the equivalent of the (infinitely more spectacular) case in Cortázar’s «Continuidad de los parques», where a man is murdered by a character in a fiction which he is reading (quoted by Genette 1972, 244).

told here is how the hero met Trotsky: that surely does not require apology, and in fact it could do with a lot more detail (it is certainly more “interesting” than meeting again the hero’s “old friend Sylvester”¹⁶). In other words, it all happens as if the “built-in” addressee were supposed not to be interested at all in the possible relationship between the hero and Trotsky, as if both narrator and addressee considered it the most natural thing for someone to come across Trotsky. The narrator in a way expressly denies the addressee even the opportunity to question his priorities. And naturally, what follows is that the narrator restrains from giving us the details we are curious to hear about Trotsky.

Three more examples of this:

And, *if you want to know*, because he and Tillie had warned me in the old days not to expect anything, repeating how Arthur would come into all, I couldn’t help feeling no one had been good enough for them and now they were not good enough for one another. Now maybe was my chance to pass them by. (Bellow 1953, 430, emphasis added)

You know why I struck people funny? (Bellow 1953, 432)

Nevertheless I was getting somewhere, *you mustn’t go entirely by appearances*. I was coming to some particularly important conclusions. In fact I was lying on my couch in the state of grand summary one afternoon, still in my bathrobe . . . (Bellow 1953, 453, emphasis added)

In these examples, one gets the definite feeling of physical presence, the addressee personally interacting with the narrator (“raising his or her eyebrows,” so to say). From the point of view of strict Mimetic conventions, the “you” here is absolutely out of place, there is no question of anybody “wanting to know,” this looks impudently indiscreet.

But there is still the third possible function of the “you-passages,” and this concerns *person*. Surely on this score *Augie March* looks traditional enough: a first-person narrative, in which the narrator is the hero. Or is he? The qualification concerns a fact explained by Genette: for him, the narrator might be the hero or a witness (to illustrate the second possibility, he mentions *Moby-Dick*; *On the Road* might be added among more recent instances). But what about *Augie March*? Yes, he is the hero; but for the first 300-odd pages, he is only passively at the centre of things. To that first problem, one must add another, more striking: the possibility of a second-person narrator—the second interpretation of the passages with the *you*. In Genette’s opinion, the question of second-person narrators is extremely complex (1983, 92); in few

16. Of course, one may object that historical figures are not so relevant here: but then, why bring Trotsky at all?

words, one of the functions of the addressee (*narrataire*) is based on the identity between *hero* and *addressee*:

Why, look now, it was clear as anything that it wasn't so but merely imaginations, exaggerating how you're regarded¹⁷, misunderstanding how you're liked for what you're not, disliked for what you're not, both from error and laziness. The way must be not to care, but in that case you must know how really to care and understand what's pleasing or displeasing in yourself. But do you think every newcomer is concerned and is watching? No. And do you care that anyone should care in return? Not by a long shot You invent a man who can stand before the terrible appearances. (Bellow 1953, 401, 402)

See how this is supported by one instance where the reference of the second person is given explicitly:

If the great Andromeda galaxy had to depend on you to hold it up, where would it be now but fallen way to hell? Why, March, let the prophetic soul . . . summon its giants and mobilizers, Caesars and Atlases. But you! you pitiful recruit, where do you come in? . . . (Bellow 1953, 468)

To sum up, the *you* admits of three interpretations: either it is impersonal (“if you were the visiting albatross come to light, you’d eat the food you ne’er had eat and offer no gripe,” Bellow 1953, 74); an address to a reader (or listener?), (“We were in this woodwork bower, you see . . .,” Bellow 1953, 435); or a dialogue with himself (“In the most personal acts of your life you carry the presence and power of another; you extend his being into your thoughts, where he inhabits,” Bellow 1953, 335). The effect of these three sorts of “you” is, of course, radically different: the impersonal is not felt to be a mark of literary style in English, so the chances are that it goes all but unnoticed; the “you” which I suggest may be a mark of “second-person narrative” is loud, histrionic (and perhaps this is the reason why it comes at the end of the Mexico section), it is part of a tone which mimics that of the hero after his journey to Mexico, heightened, almost hysterical; the “you” as fictional (or diegetic) addressee —if such a thing is conceivable— is extremely discreet, seemingly gratuitous, on the surface of things, and closer to the “relaxed” narrator who is telling his story from Europe.

The narrative form of *Augie March* has implications on two different levels: that of texture and that of theme. More generally, the choices that underlie this novel have been shown to be rather conservative: neutral focalisation (“omniscient narrator”),

17. The ambiguity is heightened in this case by the use of the present tense.

first-person narrator in a straightforward narrative structure; Bellow shies away from Ralph Ellison's trailblazing in *Invisible Man*, which was published some years before *Augie March*. The conservatism of the later novel stems from the fact that form is never given free rein, is always kept within bounds, subordinate to theme. This will be explored later, but now another aspect requires attention.

3. GAP AND FRICTION: THE TEXTURE OF *AUGIE MARCH*

Also, there is the matter of the spoken language which these writers have heard . . . in the schools, the homes, the churches and the synagogues of the nation. I would even say that when the bouncy style is not an attempt to dazzle the reader, or one's self, but to incorporate into American literary prose the rhythms, nuances, and emphases of urban and immigrant speech, the result can sometimes be a language of new and rich emotional subtleties . . . But whether the practitioner is Gold, Bellow, or Paley, there is a further point to make about the bounciness: it is an expression of pleasure. However, a question: If the world is as crooked and unreal as it feels to me it is becoming, day by day; if one feels less and less power in the face of this unreality; if the inevitable end is destruction, if not of all life, then of much that is valuable and civilized in life — then why in God's name is the writer pleased? (Roth, "Writing American Fiction", 43-44)

Roth has clearly mixed feelings about the "bounciness" of *Augie March*, but it is guilt which wins the day —and there are some hints that in does so with Bellow as well—. For them, the virtuoso is still suspicious of escapism. It is easy to point to the contrast with the fiction of the 60s, when in Heller or Burroughs, for instance, the vernacular will produce masterworks of derision and outrage. But was *Augie March*, in some way, pointing to the future?

My previous point suggested interpretations of formal decisions which in effect went beyond formal analysis. The question here is that of aesthetic effect, and it is one which is independent of the author's (moralistic) intentions: it all happens as if the novel were more than what its author intended it to be, as if the author were striving constantly to bring the language of the novel under his control, whereas the language(s) of the novel are essentially refractory to this imposing of order. Thence the remark by Philip Roth on the relative autonomy of style in *Augie March*.

Texture, as used in connection with the novel —in poetry, it refers to voice, in the novel, to voices— might be a clue. This elusive term defies definition: perhaps texture is best understood as the plane on which the novel escapes its author (as opposed to *theme*, which is clearly under the control of the novelist). The reason for this lies in the social nature of novelistic discourse.

The study of texture in the novel, and the social nature of the novel-form —the

sense in which novelistic discourse is antiauthoritarian— were the central tenets of Mikhail Bakhtin's poetics. Nowadays, Bakhtin's angle appears to be particularly relevant to the study of such novels as *Augie March*, which, paradoxically, being formally conservative, can still be disruptive:

Si nous représentions l'*intention* de ce discours, autrement dit, son *orientation sur son objet* comme un rayon lumineux, nous expliquerions le jeu vivace et inimitable des couleurs et de la lumière dans les facettes de l'image qu'ils construisent par la réfraction du "discours-rayon," non dans l'objet lui-même . . . mais dans un milieu de mots, jugements et accents "étrangers," traversé par ce rayon dirigé sur l'objet: l'atmosphère sociale du discours qui environne son objet fait jouer les facettes de son image. (Bakhtin, 1978, 101)

Si les principales variantes des genres poétiques se développent dans le courant des forces centripètes, le roman et les genres littéraires en prose se sont constitués dans le courant des forces décentralisatrices et centrifuges . . . (Bakhtin, 1978, 96)

Bakhtin underlines the "impurity" of the novelistic discourse, its makeshift nature: a possible working definition of *texture* would focus on the linguistic materials which make up the novel (for Bakhtin: *unités compositionnelles*, 88): what are they? how are they brought together?:

Le prosateur ne purifie pas ses discours de leurs intentions et des tonalités d'autrui, il ne tue pas en eux les embryons du plurilinguisme social, il n'écarte pas ces figures linguistiques, ces manières de parler, ces personnages-conteurs virtuels qui apparaissent en transparence derrière les mots et les formes de son langage; mais il dispose tout ces discours, toutes ces formes à différentes distances du noyau sémantique ultime de son oeuvre, du centre de ses intentions personnelles. (Bakhtin 1978, 119)

L'originalité stylistique du genre romanesque réside dans l'assemblage de ces unités dépendantes, mais relativement autonomes (parfois même plurilingues) dans l'unité suprême du "tout": le style du roman, c'est un assemblage de styles; le langage du roman, c'est un système de "langues," (Bakhtin 1978, 88)

This is what struck Philip Roth: in conventional critical terms, the "richness" of Bellow's style. And if somehow the "languages" of the novel defy the novelist's control, it is because the languages of *Augie March* are "larger than life," because they in fact run counter to the moralistic overall intention of the author, summarized in his *parti pris* in favour of the *Bildungsroman* and the theme of "identity:"

What materials are present in *Augie March*? Primarily, they appear to be of three sorts: dialogue, description/reporting of action, and narratorial commentary. This may be further reduced, however, if one takes into account a suggestion first made by Bakhtin and later explained more technically by Dole-el (quoted by Genette): “A cette dichotomie brutale, Dole-el et Schmid en ajoutent une autre, à laquelle j’ai déjà fait allusion: il n’y a et il ne peut y avoir dans un récit, disent-ils, que deux sortes de texte: du texte de narrateur (*Erzählertext*) ou de texte de personnage (*Personentext*)” (Genette 1983, 42). Mention was made above of the importance of direct speech; Bellow, furthermore, uses direct speech to individualize characters (Einhorn or Simon, for instance). What is striking in *Augie March*, however, is that very frequently direct speech is not used in dialogue, most conspicuously in Augie’s earlier phase. Augie is not a speaker in Einhorn’s section: he is spoken to (“I was a listener by upbringing”, Bellow 1953, 72). In this sense, direct speech would appear to be cultivated in *Augie March* for its own sake (or as Roth would say as “an expression of pleasure”). But this does not prevent the narrator from intruding, and the net effect in many cases is one of counterpoint, as if the real interlocutor answering, qualifying, etc. were the aged Augie, and not the young hero. There is a striking example of this in 74-75, where Augie’s style as narrator (full of allusions, quotations and misquotations, contemporary allusion, pseudopoetic language and slang, etc) confronts that of Einhorn, two bloated egos voicing their obsessions:

This was the food of the house, in the system of its *normalcy* like its *odours* and furnishings, and if you were the visiting *albatross* come to light, you’d *eat the food you ne’er had eat* and *offer no gripe* . . . You might almost say he followed assimilation with his thoughts; all through his body that death had already moved in on, to *the Washington of his brain*, to his sex and to his studying eyes. *Ah, sure, he was still a going concern*, very much so . . . (Bellow 1953, 74, emphasis added)

What a piece of work is a man, and the firmament frotted with gold — but the whole *gescheft* bores him. Look at me, I’m not even express and admirable in action . . . But to get back to the subject, it’s one thing to be buried with all your pleasures, like Sardanapalus; it’s another to be buried right plunk in front of them . . . (Bellow 1953, 75)

But one may follow as well the categories of the premodern novel and divide the materials in two according to another criterium. In a (brief) remark about the functions of the narrator, Genette applies to narrative Jakobson’s famous definitions of the functions of language:

L’orientation du narrateur vers lui-même, enfin, détermine une fonction très homologue à celle que Jakobson nomme, un peu malencontreusement, la fonction “émotive”: c’est celle qui rend compte de la part que le narrateur,

en tant que tel, prend à l'histoire qu'il raconte, du rapport qu'il entretient avec elle . . . (1972, 262)

Les fonctions extra-narratives [e.g. the one mentioned above] sont plus actives dans le type "narratorial," c'est-à-dire, dans nos termes, non focalisé . . . l'usage du discours commentatif est un peu le privilège du narrateur "omniscient" . . . (Genette 1983, 90)

According to the relevance of this function, the linguistic materials of the novel can be divided into two: description plus report of speech, on the one hand; narratorial comment on the other. In *Augie March*, one of the striking things is the weight, the impudence of the narrator's voice. Non-narratorial discourse in *Augie March* is sequential, and roughly contemporary (i.e. if a dialogue precedes another dialogue, it means that it took place at an earlier time); on the other hand, narratorial comment — as is the case in practically all Mimetic novels — is disembodied, chronologically and geographically ambiguous (it takes place in Europe, but where? In Paris? all over the place? does one part take place in one place and another somewhere else? when? one year after the end of WW2? five years?)

The distinctive characteristic of narratorial comment in *Augie March*, however, is the way in which the narrator systematically exploits the physicality of his voice, the quality of the narrator's voice being linked to his physical movements, to the travelling that seems to take place *behind* the narrative:

Guys like the broken-down Cossack of the Mexican mountains and other spokesmen would at least have to agree that I had a breather coming. Nevertheless I have had almost none. It probably is too much to ask. (Bellow 1953, 514)

It is not fanciful to point out that, in a narrator who can occasionally make extremely long sentences, the two sentences ending this passage, coming after . . . *I had a breather coming*, betray, in a sense, a faltering in the rhythm, a failure of voice.

And now here's the thing. It takes a time like this for you to find out how sore your heart has been, and, moreover, all the while you thought you were going around idle terribly hard work was taking place. Hard, hard work, excavation and digging, mining, moling through tunnels, heaving, pushing, moving rock, working, working, working, working, working, panting, hauling, hoisting. And none of this work is seen from the outside. It's internally done. (Bellow 1953, 523)

The rhythm of the voice even puts in question the metaphoric nature of what is being referred to — making the metaphor so physical as to leave a doubt in the reader's

mind as to its figurative use, a stylistic device typical of Emerson¹⁸—: one can sense the effort, the strain, the rhythmical pauses like those of a work song.

But this physicality is equivocal, since we also get passages like this:

I have written out these memoirs of mine since, as a travelling man, travelling by myself, I have lots of time on my hands. For a couple of months last year I had to be in Rome. It was summer, and the place broke out in red flowers, hot and sleepy . . . To wake up in the afternoon I would drink coffee and smoke cigars, and by the time I came to myself after the siesta it was well-nigh evening. You have dinner, and it's soft nerveless green night with quiet gas mantles in the street going on incandescent and making a long throbbing scratch in the utter night. Time to sleep again, so you go and subside thickly on the bed. (Bellow 1953, 519)

Does he contradict himself? Very well then, he contradicts himself: the rhythm here is slower, with words filling the mouth, which the speaker obviously relishes (*memoirs, a travelling man, red flowers, drink coffee and smoke cigars, the siesta, nerveless, well-nigh evening, incandescent*). The convergence of the different senses of “you” (impersonal, self-address, personal) gives a civil, genteel tone, the mood of relaxation as opposed to Augie’s restlessness in his previous life.

In this same direction, what do we know about the proxemic quality of Augie’s narration? The narrator seems to be placed at the closest possible range from the addressee: the tone is that of cultivated intimate conversation (as Grandma Lausch liked it), with an addressee who will not get nonplussed by such an oddity as “woodwork bower” in the following passage, introducing the supreme irony of the novel—the fact that this “civic” speaker will not *now* let anybody get a word in edgeways:

We were in this woodwork bower, you see, of the Chinese restaurant, and all seemed right, good-tempered, friendly. When important thought doesn't have to be soliloquy, I know how valuable an occasion that is. Because to whom can you speak your full mind as to yourself? (Bellow 1953, 435)

An important thing about the texture of *Augie March* is that it evolves. For a large part of the novel, the narrator’s discourse plus the other “voices” (by other characters) on the one hand, and the hero’s discourse on the other, are mutually exclusive. Towards the second half of the novel, the presence of the hero’s (direct) speech, as opposed to that of other characters, increases: the hero is, to put it frankly,

18. «But his operations taken together are so insignificant, a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing, that in an impression so grand as that of the world on the human mind, they do not vary the result» (Emerson 1982, 36).

crowding out the other characters. There is one precise point towards the end of the novel where the discourse of the hero and that of the narrator blend, to be almost indistinguishable, where we are shocked into admitting that yes, Augie March, the hero speaks in the same overbearing tone as the narrator:

“Stop arguing,” I said severely. “Can’t you see something has happened to me too today?” Then he saw that I really was moved. I made a lengthy declaration, which I remember went somewhat as follows:

“I have a feeling,” I said, “about the axial lines of life, with respect to which you must be straight or else your existence is merely clownery, hiding tragedy . . . The ambition of something special and outstanding I have always had is only a boast that distorts this knowledge from its origin, which is the oldest knowledge, older than the Euphrates, older than the Ganges . . . (Bellow 1953, 454-455)

One last point is that, in this novel more than in many others, the narrator’s discourse must be kept distinct from the (absent) personality of the author: whereas with Burroughs or Kerouac, we may be tempted to listen for the author in the narrator’s style—that this is largely irrelevant is another story—it seems obvious that in *Augie March* we are invited to have a laugh at the narrator’s expense. This is basically because Bellow works this novel on the convention of traditional irony (as opposed to the Rousseauian, bragging innocence of the narrator in *On the Road* or the vicious sarcasm of *Naked Lunch*. This must be now addressed.

4. “THESE MEMOIRS OF MINE”: TWO THEMES OF *AUGIE MARCH*

My last section tried to show that, from the point of view of texture, *Augie March* is characterized by *inclusion*, with its variety of styles, contrast and antithesis, “richness,” a fact which should be obvious if one compares it with many modern European novels, which are often largely monologic.¹⁹ However, from the point of view of theme, it goes much further in its adherence to the principle of *selection and exclusion* than the typical cosmopolitan novel of the mid-20th century. There can hardly be three more traditional themes in the novel than the ones chosen by Bellow: psychological development (the *Bildungsroman*), the question of identity and, characteristically American, the clashing of worlds. What these three themes have in common is that they fit better with the aim of winning the reader’s adhesion. There is no need of inversion to reach the implied values of the work of art (compare with a novel like *Lolita*, and the classical example of Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*)²⁰: we may laugh at the young Augie, or even, more

19. Among great novels in this vein, see *L’Étranger*, *Mémoires d’Hadrien*, or the typical novel by Robbe-Grillet or Claude Simon.

20. Which does not mean, as I said before, that Augie March = Saul Bellow.

subtly, at the bombastic narrator, but we are still invited to see him as, basically, a good guy. Even here, however, there is an analogy between the thematic structure and the form of the novel; I will consider next two of the central themes of *Augie March*: first, the *Bildungsroman* and, second, the confrontation of the New and the Old world.

First of all, there is a correspondence between the psychological development of the hero and the form of the novel: as Augie March teaches “himself,” by heeding the “knocks” —his own word— he becomes more articulate, his discourse starts to converge with the narrator’s discourse and to *crowd out* other discourses. The difference is striking with a novel like *Great Expectations* where from the very beginning we get Pip impossibly voluble.

As to the working out of the theme of New World vs. Old World, I will start from the other end: does the forefronting of narratorial discourse have any thematic significance in the novel? In a 19th century novel, such invading presence might have been less noticed. In Bellow, it does not seem to me to be intended as a parody of traditional novelistic forms, but rather as a metaphor: we get here an American narrator, “Chicago born,” and possessed by the American vernacular, and by the intensity of the American experience; and yet at the same time an expatriate, an “idler,” who has taken 600-odd pages to tell the story of *one half* of his life. The place of narration is Europe, but the story takes place in America: a problem of identity. The novel is circular: Grandma Lausch’s program of gentilization has been achieved, triumphantly, by an Augie who is able to tell a story where the culture of the Old World is ever-present.

I reflect on the historical implications of the *Bildungsroman*, and I am again tempted to compare *Augie March* with *On the Road*: in Kerouac’s novel, the Old World is quite absent, and so is irony; in Bellow, the overwhelming presence of irony creates a background of knowingness, of experience, the “corruption of the Old World.”

Because in effect there are two worlds in the novel, although their limits are difficult to draw. Two travel narratives occupy a central place in the novel: the trip to Mexico, which only enables the hero hysterically to focus on himself, even contaminating the narrative; and the journey across the Atlantic, after the sinking of the *Sam MacManus*, which is the experience that brings Augie March to Grandma Lausch’s world, and by the same token, unlocks his ability to *tell* his story.²¹

CONCLUSION: RICHNESS, WHAT RICHNESS?

Augie March gives the impression of multifarious life, of scintillating reality, a feeling of tolerance, of geniality. If one analyzes in depth the origin of such a

21. A complex question is that of morality: when is Augie more genuine, more human: in his American «adventures», or in his present sit-back-and-relax mood, earning (lots of) money in an obscure business which may not be that different from Harry Lime’s?

reaction, the fact becomes paradoxical: the scope of experience (socially) is not so wide as would appear at first sight (the Marches are not that destitute, nor are the Magnuses so rich); there are not that many characters (for a 600-page novel), or more precisely, a surprising number of characters keep reappearing, with new functions and in new contexts; "adventure" itself is not so varied, if one excludes the Transatlantic phase of the novel, about which we are told little (the obvious exception is the Mexican episode; but even here, the Mexico of *Augie March* cannot match that of *Under the Volcano* for dazzling mystery).

What then is responsible for the impression of richness Saul Bellow novel conveys? I believe that it is the vocal variety of the novel. It is as a result of this that the linguistic world of a novel which, oversimplifying, can be said to be somehow parochial —its universe the world of half a dozen Jewish families of Chicago— is surprisingly large —just think of the sheer quantity of names from Greco-roman Antiquity, either myths, historical characters, philosophers, etc— in comparison with even the typical novel of the 60s or 70s. To my mind, the epitome of this is the report of a monologue by Hooker Frazer, with an impossibly wide range of reference:

Declarations, resolutions, treaties, theories, congresses, bones of kings, Cromwells, Loyolas, Lenins and czars, hordes of India and China, famines, huddles, massacres, sacrifices, he mentioned. Great crowds of Benares and London, Rome, he made me see . . . (Bellow 1953, 490)

A novel such as this resists the thematical straitjacket which Bellow's stated intentions appear to be imposing: if the problem is one of the search for identity, why dazzle the reader with so many words, so many unnecessary words? The attraction of *Augie March* could be summed up as a *virtuous circle*: to convey such a sense of richness, you need a 600-page novel; to fill up that volume, you need words, words, words.

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