Postmodern Narrative Strategies in Paul Auster's Novels *Man in the Dark* and *Invisible*

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Abstract: In many of his novels Paul Auster uses characteristic postmodern narrative strategies in order to tell their stories, introduce the characters and depict the atmosphere. The two novels that are the central topic of this paper, "*Man in the Dark*" and "*Invisible*", belong to the category of his recent novels, and, observed both as separate units and as a whole, present an excellent example for the identification and analysis of such strategies. After a brief general introduction about postmodern narrative strategies in literature, the strategies used in the named novels will be identified and analyzed, with respect to various narrative theories that exist in present time, and that will bring to some general conclusions at the final part of the paper.

Introduction

The term postmodern literature is mostly used to describe certain characteristics of the literature that appears in post–World War II period and a reaction against the ideas of Enlightenment that appear in Modernist literature. However, it does not present the opposition to the expression techniques of modernism, but more to modernistic sensibility. Postmodernists do not possess "modernistic nostalgia for an earlier age where the belief in some eternal values of life was still possible" (Lešić 2008: 416) but are aware of all the changes that happened after World War II and support the progress in technology and communications, being aware of the fragmentation of society that occurred, often using such fragmentation in their writing. Same as postmodernism as a whole, it is hard to define postmodern literature, and there is little agreement on its exact characteristics, scope, and importance. A feature of postmodern writers is that they often celebrate chance over craft and use metafiction to undermine the author's narrative primacy within a text, the presence of a single all-powerful storytelling authority. They also attack the distinction between high and low culture, with the employment of pastiche, the combination of multiple cultural elements that include subjects and genres that have not previously been considered adequate for literature. Postmodernism in literature is not an organized movement with leaders or central figures; therefore, it is more difficult to say if it has ended or when it will end.

Narrative Strategies in Postmodern Literature

The narrative strategies that postmodern writers use in their books are based on the mentioned general attitudes of postmodernism. Lešić (2008: 419)[47] defines four important features: disappearance of "the real", autoreferentiality, hybridity and intertextuality.

Disappearance of "the Real"

Disappearance of "the real" in postmodern literature comes as an opposition to realistic concepts of novel, "the concept of "omniscient narrator" that has an insight into everything that happens in the novel, the concept of "character" who develops consistently from the beginning to the end of a novel, the concept of "plot" being a systematic connecting of events in a novel and, finally, the concept of "real" as the measure of credibility in a novel discourse." (Lešić 2008: 420). Because of that, many authors use fragmentation through experimenting with time, place, continuity of action, narrative levels and voices, while some other experiment with the very structural foundation of novel, convinced that the reality is, actually, presented in what is said about it. There is also "historiographic metafiction" (Hutcheon, 1988), referring to works that fictionalize actual historical events or figures or simulate new ones, what is based on the fact that both historians and novelists use the same linguistic and rhetorical structures to present their "realities", so that the past is always constructed ideologically and discursively (Lešić 2008: 420). However, there is also a group of postmodern novelists that "came out with an open criticism of "the late capitalism" society and that returned truly definite referentiality

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[47] Translation of extracts from the book into English is done by Darko Kovačević.

back to novel. But, even when it gives the images of reall life, the novel strives to make them intensified and more eloquent than the reality, often with the effect of shock."(Lešić 2008:421). Among such writers, Paul Auster is probably the most known one.

Autoreferentiality

Autoreferentiality presents a turn to fictionality and textuality of the novel itself, based on the awareness of postmodern novelists that a novel cannot express the complexity of a present-time life experience. In such way, metafiction occurs, as one of the main phenomena in postmodern literature, stating that "the job of a writer is not to present the world anymore, but to make it out of words" (Lešić 2008: 422). Metafiction is a type of fiction that self-consciously addresses the devices of fiction, exposing the fictional illusion. It is the literary term describing fictional writing that self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in posing questions about the relationship between fiction and reality, usually using irony and self-reflection. Essentially, it is writing about writing, making the artificiality of art or the fictionality of fiction apparent to the reader, not letting him/her to forget that he or she is reading a fictional work. It is often employed to undermine the authority of the author, for unexpected narrative shifts, to advance a story in a unique way, for emotional distance, or to comment on the act of storytelling.

The term fabulation is sometimes used interchangeably with metafiction and relates to postmodern tendency of novel to show its literal character openly and thus marks out the unreal character of its contents. For the same tendency, the term surfiction was also suggested, denoting the novel that investigates the limits of its own art and brings its conventions into question. Both fabulation and surfiction challenge some traditional notions of literature, the traditional structure of a novel or role of the narrator, for example, and integrate other traditional notions of storytelling, including fantastical elements, such as magic and myth, or elements from popular genres such as science fiction.

Hybridity

"A postmodern novelist is aware that there are various systems of representing the reality, and is ready to check the usability of every of them and to change the narrative discourse within one text" (Lešić 2008: 422). In that sense, postmodern writers prefer lack of congruency in parts, stylistic variations, mixing of narrative techniques and discontinuity of narration. That includes the erasing of boundaries between fiction and history, simulation and reality and dreams and true events, and also the mixing of various genres.

Postmodern novelist also try to explore the relation between writing and the subject who performs it, showing that the writing is, actually, the way that makes the subject to exist. In constructing the subject, the autobiographical elements are also used, having the function to build the subject that is brought to existence by writing. However, once included in a novel, such autobiographical elements change their status and become equally fictional as all the other elements of a novel.

Intertextuality

Intertextuality is the shaping of texts' meanings by other texts. It can include an author's borrowing and transformation of a prior text or to a reader's referencing of one text in reading another. Since postmodernism represents a decentered concept in which individual works are not isolated creations, much of the focus in the study of postmodern literature is on intertextuality: the relationship between one text and another or one text within the literary history. Intertextuality in postmodern literature can be a reference or parallel to another literary work, an extended discussion of a work, or the adoption of a style. Often intertextuality is more complicated than a single reference to another text, being a kind of response to other works, or even to some notions and challenges of modern world and culture.

Related to postmodern intertextuality stands pastiche, the technique of using phrases, motives, images or episodes taken from work(s) of other author(s), or "pasting" together, of multiple elements. It can be seen as a representation of the chaotic, pluralistic, or information-drenched aspects of postmodern society. In postmodernist literature this can be a hommage to or a parody of past styles. It can be a combination of multiple genres to create a unique narrative or to comment on particular situations, or can refer to compositional technique.

Postmodern Narrative Strategies in the Novels *Invisible* and *Man in the Dark*

Introduction

Paul Auster (1947) is an American writer who used various narrative strategies in all 15 novels that he has written up to now, and many of these strategies belong to those marked as postmodern in the previous chapter. Auster experiments with form and narration of the novel, creating compound, multi-layered or polyphonic narrative structures, with complex characters. Such novels reflect his special relation to reality – either by fictionizing it in an "alternative" way or by criticizing it and making it cruel or shocking. In terms of hibridity, the mixture of different narrative approaches, techniques and voices, and also of different genres can often be found in Auster's novels. Also, most of them are metafictional, dealing, in one way or another, with the process of writing as seen or performed by its protagonists, and also with the self invention of a writer through writing. These also include a lot of autobiographical elements, so that the characters share Auster's experiences, mixed with fiction. Such a blurring of fact and fiction contributes to the lack of any definitive sense of coherent certainty. In other words, "Auster resorts to self-invention in the course of his fictional narratives, and composes 'autobiographical' fictions based upon his own experiences. The predominance of narrative perspectives evident within Auster's writings ensure that Auster distances himself from authorial authenticity and accountability" (Martin, 2008: ix). Finally, intertextuality occurs at various levels in Auster's novels. Sometimes it is used "internally", with references to other Auster's novels, while in some other novels it is connected with direct or indirect references to works of writers Auster appreciated, such as Hawthorne, Thoreau and others, but also to other forms of art, such as movies.

Man in the Dark

Story

Man in the Dark is the novel that Auster wrote in 2008. For its main character, he has chosen August Brill, a 72 years old former Pulitzer Prize-winning literary critic, now a depressed widower confined to a wheelchair after an accident, who lives with his divorced daughter Miriam and his granddaughter Katya in the same house in Brattleboro, Vermont. It seems that pain is what binds these family members together. There is Brill, who is mourning the loss of his wife to cancer and mending from a car crash that shattered his leg. Brill's daughter Miriam is recovering from a divorce and his granddaughter Katya watches film after film to exclude herself from the reality of her boyfriend's horrific murder. Brill suffers from insomnia, and in order to get through the sleepless nights, he creates imagined stories while lying in the bed.

In the night when the novel happens, he imagines an unreal war story about a man called Owen Brick happening in 2000 in a kind of an alternative reality. Owen Brick, wakes up, perplexed, wearing a military uniform, in an unfamiliar landscape, trapped in a deep hole with smooth sides, unable to escape. It turns out that he's in an America in which the 2000 election led to states seceding from the federation in protest; in which the World Trade Centre still stands and Iraq is un-invaded, but the civil war rages. There are, as Brick learns, many worlds, each dreamed or imagined or written by someone in another world; the civil war, and Brick himself, have been imagined by an old man, and to put the end to the war Brick must kill him. Brill has invented an intriguing postmodern story allowing it even to interact with his reality, but he suddenly loses his interest at around two-thirds of the book and decides to "kill" Brick and thus ends it. At that point, he actually becomes ready to face with the things that really torture him and to try to restore his identity. Thus he finally tells Katya the whole rise-and-fall story of his relation with his wife Sonia, and later, after Katya is asleep, finally speaks about the circumstances and the mere act of Katya's former boyfriend's horrifying and brutal death. Such an inner determination and self-revelation presents a kind of catharsis to him and his thoughts, and at the very end of the book it seems as though he is finally ready to go on.

Disappearance of "the Real"

Even he situational contest of this novel, created from the perspective of a man, former writer, who is lying in the bed inventing stories and thinking of past, gives in a bit of an unreal and at the same time deeply subjective tone. On the other side, the sad, tragic and shocking events that all three protagonists faced with during their lives, with the description of the video showing Katya's boyfriend's cruel execution a sort of their culmination, accumulated within less than 200 pages and narrated by Brill through many interwoven stories with different focalizations, give rather cruel, depressive and tragic tone to the world of the novel in general. On the other side, the invented story of Owen Brick at the same time includes a sort of historiographic metafiction, imagining an alternative version of American history, together with social criticism and unreal, science fictional

elements. In that way, the entire novel, being a combination of a narrative coming from the "reality" of the novel containing an imagined "unreal" narrative, leaves the impression of a chamber, internal reality burdened with tragic, cruelties and horrors of the modern world.

Autoreferentiality

Autoreferentiality that occurs in the novel *Man in the Dark* exists both on the level of the "real" life narrative of August Brill and the imagined story that he invents lying in bed. During the most of Brill's narratives, the world outside it seems completely irrelevant, or important only to give the narrated events correct time, place and context. It seems that his story exists only because of itself, simply to be told. It is the same with the stories he invents, and, in accordance to that with the story of Owen Brick, only with the difference that, through Brill's words, a reader can get the idea on how the stories are composed.

Hybridity

The novel *Man in the Dark* is a hybrid structure in many ways. At first, although it is written as a first-person narrative, that narrative is only a framework for the events and situations seen and told from the perspective of different focalizators, which do not appear in a straight narrative line but in longer or smaller fragments that eventually get their meaning and sense toward the end of the novel. On the other side, it is a true mixture of genres. On the surface, there is a tragic, retrospective quasi - autobiographical story that also includes biographical details on other characters. It is at the same static, happening objectively in the head of a man during one night, and dynamic, covering retrospectively many events that happened over a great period of time. However, at it end it also turns to be a deeply antiwar novel. On the other side, the invented story about Oven Brick and the alternative American history presents an unrealistic, fictional and dreamlike version of action stories of war, conspiracies and special agents, and gives its contribution to the diversity of genres that occur within the novel.

Intertextuality

The intertextuality that exists within the novel *Man in the Dark* is not based on direct borrowings from other books that would influence the novel or have effect on some of its parts. However, it is present in two narrative points of the novel. The first of them is directly connected with Brill's story of his daughter and her passionate investigation and writing about the life and work of Rose Hawthorne, where the manuscript that she periodically gives her father to check is the only connection she has with the external world. On the other side, there are movies – Brill's granddaughter Katja has escaped from the "real" world into solitary, leaving the film school and spending all the time in her mother's house watching old movies on DVD and commenting them with her grandfather from time to time, so that the text of the novel, based on Brill's retrospective narrative, contains some detailed, frame-by-frame analyses and comments of scenes from particular movies.

Invisible

Story

To be able to discuss the postmodern narrative strategies within Paul Auster's novel *Invisible* (2009), i t is necessary to tell its story in much more detail that it has been done with the novel *Man in the Dark*. The novel *Invisible* starts in the spring of 1967, telling the story of Adam Walker, a student at Columbia University and a poet. In an occasion Adam meets Rudolf Born, a visiting university professor and his strange girlfriend Margot. Born soon gives Adam the opportunity to be the editor of a literary magazine that he is about to finance, and accepts. However, soon after that, while Born is out of country, Adam establishes a love and sexual relationship with Margot. When Born comes back, Margot leaves back to Paris, and after some time Born invites Adam to have a dinner. They meet in Born's apartment and discuss the matters about the future magazine, with Born almost ignoring the fact of Adam's relationship with Margot. On their walk to the dinner place, a boy with a gun suddenly appears wanting to rob them. To Adam's shock, Born takes a knife out of his pocket, stabs the boy and kills him. Adam wants them to take the boy to the hospital, but Born refuses, and they separate. In the day that follow, the Adam finds that the body of the boy, named Cedric Williams has been discovered, with more than twelve knife wounds in chest and stomach. Soon after that, Adam gets a threatening letter from Born, which makes him reluctant for almost a week before he finally goes to the police to report the case. However, Born has already gone to France, and nothing can be done.

After the end of the year of college, Adam decides to sign up for the Junior Year Abroad Program and go to Paris. He also decides to stay in New York during summer. He shares the apartment with his sister Gwyn, who has also come to Columbia to study, and earns some money working in a library. The complex relationship between Adam and his sister, originating in the love that their feel for each other, further burdened with the memories on their past and the sudden accidental death of their younger brother Aron, which has had the breakdown of their family life as a consequence, becomes incestuous, and they spend the summer as a couple.

At the end of the summer, Adam leaves to Paris, suffering because of the separation from Gwyn. However, after some time, he reestablishes his contact and relation with Margot. He also meets Born, who is about to marry Helene Juin, a woman who is taking care of her husband being in coma after a car accident. Adam decides to prevent the marriage, so he gets close with Helene's 18-year-old daughter Cecile in order to find a suitable way to tell them the horrible things he knows about Born. However, when he finally does that, it does not produce the reaction he has expected, and, with the assistance of Born's influential friends, he eventually gets expelled from France and deported back to America.

In America, he finishes his studies and, after successfully avoiding going to Vietnam, he goes to London in 1969 and spends some years there. Making a decision to give up of writing poetry, he returns back to the USA In 1973 and finishes a law school and decides to dedicate his life to the struggle for rights and justice. He spends twenty-seven years in legal aid work. In the meantime, he marries a social worker Sandra Williams, an African-American with a daughter Rebecca from the previous marriage. They do not have children. During the time, Sandra dies of cancer and Adam gets leukemia.

Dying slowly of the disease, during 2007, Adam decides to write a book about his life, particularly the events that took place in 1967, and he sends parts of it to his college friend, Jim (James Freeman), who has become a famous writer. They even arrange a meeting, but it does not happen, because Adam dies. Not sure about what to do with the pieces of the book, and also deeply interested in finding out if the described events are true or not, Jim firstly decides to talk to Gwyn, who, after reading the parts her brother wrote, describes the incestuous part as something absolutely fictional and untrue, but she still gives him permission to publish it with some radical changes in terms of names and locations. Later, when he goes with his wife to Paris, Jim tries to find some of the survived characters from Adam's story, but he manages to find only Cecile, now a scholar in her fifties. They meet in a café and have a long conversation about Adam's stay in Paris during 1967, and she also gives him a part of her diary describing the time in 2002 that she spent visiting Rudolf Born and with the extract the story of the novel ends.

Disappearance of "the Real"

The story of *Invisible* is presented to the reader in four chapters, by voices of different narrators speaking in different periods of time from different narrative points of view. Thus the first chapter of the book is written – narrated by Adam Walker in the first person singular and past tense, covering the events from 1967 starting from his meeting Born and Margot to the horrifying murder he witnessed. On the other side, the second chapter of the book is much more complex than the first one. The time of its action is 2007, and it is narrated by Jim, describing the events from the moment Adam had contacted him for the first time, to the moment when he sent him the second part of his book. The second chapter actually makes clear that the first chapter is the first part of the book that Adam Walker wrote and sent to his friend from college, named Spring. Besides Jim's first person narrative, the chapter also contains the two letters written by Adam and the entire text of the second part of Adam's novel, named Summer, which actually makes the bigger part of the chapter. Adam uses second person narration and historic present tense to describe the events of the summer of 1967 that he spent in New York sharing a flat with his sister and working in a library. Summer presents probably the strangest and the most compromising topics in the book talking about the specific features of Adam's relation to his family after the tragic death of his brother, and also about his rather strange, passionate and incestuous relation with his sister, which had started to develop in 1961 and reached its climax in the summer of 1967. The third chapter consists of the continuation of Jim's narration up to the point when he goes to meet Adam and finds about his death, the letter that Adam has left him and the third part of Adam's book named Fall, consisting of brief, reporting sentences, written in third person singular and in present tense what gives the narration a feeling of permanent acceleration, with the events that seem directly connected one to another, without any unnecessary details. The text itself describes the events from the fall of 1967 from his arrival to Paris to the moment of his deportation back in the USA. Finally, the fourth chapter of the novel *Invisible* brings a sort of conclusion and calming down to the entire narration. It consists of two parts: Jim's narration, a brief letter that Cecile wrote to him and a part from her diary describing her meeting Rudolf Born in 2002.

In such a way, with a novel based on the writing of one man about the novel he got from his friend, the notions of truth and reality are completely dim and subjective, and, at the level of the novel, almost treated as irrelevant. The novel exists as such, and the readers are left to answer and interpret the questions that come from it. On the other side, its other purpose is to shock, both through the uncertainty and relativity of the protagonists' identities and through the detailed description of an incestuous relation.

Autoreferentiality

Many of the things stated in the previous chapter might be applied in discussing the autoreferentiality of the novel *Invisible*. It is a novel for itself that exists within itself, creating a closed story covering almost 40 years, that can be reconstructed from its narration. During the entire novel, and, eventually, after reading it, a reader is fully aware of its fictionality, sometimes even a double one (in relation to real life and in relation to the narrators form the novel). At the same time, it is deeply connected with writing and all the events from the storyline exist as such only because they were written down by some of protagonists. The opposite thing can also be said: the protagonists exist as identities with certain features only because someone wrote about them, or they wrote about themselves.

Hybridity

It can clearly be seen that *Invisible* presents a novel whose story is told by use of various narrative techniques, what makes it a sort of narrative collage. Various genres are embedded into its "novel within a novel" structure, starting from ordinary autobiographical stories, over love and sexual affairs to a crime story based on a murder. The only thing that connects each of these genres is the permanent quest for truth that exists on all narrative levels. Some Auster's autobiographical elements, especially in Jim's character, are also present.

Intertextuality

The intertextuality in the novel *Invisible* primarily occurs on the relation of the textual units – narratives that make the novel. In other words, Jim's story, being the framework of the novel, its development, legitimacy, validity and truthfulness are completely dependent on the validity and truthfulness of the texts written by Adam, while the conclusion of the novel is based on the testimony coming from Cecile's diary, what, on the level of the entire novel makes a grid of mutually dependent stories that exist and make sense only observed as a totality.

Also, at the very beginning of the book, there is a sort of intertextual association connected with the man who later turns to be the main (or the only) villain of the novel – Rudolf Born, whose surname Adam associates with Bertran de Born, twelfth-century Provencal poet. Henry II believed Bertran had supported the rebellion of his son Henry the Young King and, as a result, Dante Alighieri portrayed him in the Inferno as a sower of schism, punished in the eighth circle of Hell (Canto XXVIII). Later in the book, there is also Auster's translation of one of de Born's war poems, which presents the correction of a previous translation done From French.

Conclusion

The novels *Man in the Dark* and *Invisible* belong to the category of most recent Paul Auster's novels. Both of them use different postmodern narrative strategies, and that usage is in a mutually dependant relation with their stories, structures, contents and characters. While *Man in the Dark* is relatively simple both in terms of its story and narrative, *Invisible* is much more complex and the identification of narrative strategies that might be found in each novel is directly related to that fact, with all the of them being logically and tastefully distributed in both novels. Finally, it can be said that the named novels present some general postmodern narrative features of Paul Auster's prose works.

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