

# Ravelstein

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by  
Saul Bellow

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By

**Saul Bellow**



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### Sztranyiczki Zsófia **Saul Bellow's *Ravelstein*: Diffusion of spaces and times**

#### Abstract

The present study presents the deictic anchoring in Saul Bellow's *Ravelstein* relying on the mental space concepts of viewpoint and focus in lieu with a *deictic centering* approach to narrative comprehension. The analysis reveals a duality of the viewpoint space in terms of the intradiegetic (inner story world) experiencer-I and the extradiegetic (outer story world) narrating-I, contributing to the diffusion of spaces and times in the novel. The innovative narrative device is a proof of Bellow's inexorable talent to stretch the limitations imposed by the genre of the memoir.

#### 1 Theoretical grounding

Fauconnier's seminal work (1995 [1985]) on language and meaning introduces the notion of *mental spaces*, as “constructs distinct from linguistic structures but built up in any discourse according to guidelines provided by the linguistic expressions” (1995 [1985]: 16), which “proliferate when we think and talk, allowing a fine-grained partitioning of our discourse and knowledge structures” (ibid. 2). Mental spaces have elements and roles (such as definite descriptions) and values for roles and relations among them. Linguistic expressions that establish new spaces are *space builders*, such as verbs of propositional attitude (believe, think, etc.), temporal or spatial adverbial constructions, like “in Len's painting”, “in that movie”, “in 1929” (examples taken from Fauconnier). The base or reality space as a *parent space* sets up, or, rather, *projects into* other spaces known as *child spaces* – linked via numerous connectors – on the basis of linguistic, contextual and situational clues. In Fauconnier's famous example, “In Len's painting the girl with blue eyes has green eyes” (ibid. 12), the adverbial phrase “In Len's painting” sets up a mental space in which the model *a*, say Lisa, a girl who has blue eyes (the reality space, the model space) triggers the image connector F and maps onto the target, *b*, Lisa's representation in the painting, with the property of having green eyes (the image space). The identity principle allows the description of the trigger (the model) to identify the target (the image); the identity connector links Lisa in the reality space with her image in the portrait.

The extension of the mental space model to fictional narratives (Sanders & Redeker 1996; Sanders & Sporeen 1997) promises exciting insights into discourse comprehension and interpretation. The mental space model that I adopt is inspired by Fauconnier's model, but is supplemented by the *deictic centering* framework (Duchan et al 1995) that posits a different

premise than most mental space models adhering to communicational theories of fictional narratives do (see Sanders & Redeker 1996). Movement through the network of spaces that a given narrative instantiates starts out from a *base*, a parent space (providing the initial viewpoint) and then other spaces (child-spaces) are accessed/created from it; the base or another space may be in *focus*; viewpoint and focus are shifted at different points in the unfolding of the discourse. The reality of the narrator is *not* treated here as the basic mental space and all other spaces as embedded spaces, embedded within the reality of the *a priori* narrator. The base space is extended to comprise not only the base space of the narrator but that of the *unobtrusive story world*: a self-constitutive, mimetic world that the reader experiences before his/her 'mind's eye', and takes it as true in the world of the story. Readers can move from unobtrusive narrative passages (story-level reality) through mimetic direct discourse (interior monologues, dialogues, quotes) and subjective passages of a perceiving/experiencing consciousness (level of the experiencing character or the narrator) and their viewpoint and focus shift as the *deictic anchoring* (the viewpoint space of the focalizing entity) shifts within the narrative. I use Fludernik's term of 'story-internal position' (1993) to account for the deictic anchoring of story-level reality. The reader's *deictic shift* (cognitive-phenomenological leap) into the world of the story requires the construction of a *basic story-world deictic field* which is activated throughout the narrative as one reads. The reader takes the propositions of story-world reality as true – a reality that simply exists. The 'space lattice' (Fauconnier 1997) that builds up a fictional narrative is very complex and requires the reader to continually reset and adjust the viewpoint (deictic anchoring) aided by the 'world builders' (Werth 1999) found in the text.

I use Talmy's (2001 [2000]) concepts of *inner story world* and *outer story world* and Cohn's (1978) distinction between the *experiencing 'I'* and the *narrating 'I'* of first-person narrations to show the deictic anchoring in *Ravelstein*. Talmy's outer story world, as created by the author of a fictional work, comprises the narrator, the narratee and the inner story world. The inner story world is the story that the narrator recounts. This distinction is analogous to Genette's (1980, 1983) notions of extradiegetic and intradiegetic levels of narrative. Dorrit Cohn (1978) argues for a series of narrative devices in presenting consciousness in first-person texts. *Dissonant self-narration* presents a distance (a dissonance) between the enunciating-narrating 'I' (located extradiegetically, on the level of narration) and the experiencing 'I' (located intradiegetically, within the story world). *Consonant self-narration*, on the other hand, shows a tight relationship between the narrating 'I' and the experiencing 'I': the narrating 'I' merges with his earlier embodiments, its *displaced consciousness*, the experiencing 'I' (cf. Chafe 1994) and the information, opinion, judgments are presented without analysis or generalization of the narrating 'I's *representing consciousness*.

## 2 Deictic anchoring in *Ravelstein*

### 2.1 Introduction to the novel

Saul Bellow's *Ravelstein* is a first-person narration as well as a memoir 'in disguise', as we later find out. The first-person narrator is Ravelstein's friend, Chick. Chick begins by recounting a trip to Paris, years before, when Abe Ravelstein, a reputable professor of political philosophy, first makes him the suggestion to write his memoir. In fact, it is only many years after Ravelstein's death that Chick writes the memoir. Much of the book is about

the difficulties of writing such a memoir, and Chick acknowledges the difficulties he has in doing that. It is only after going through a near-death experience does Chick reach the stage of being able to write the memoir of his dear friend. And so we chronologically arrive at the beginning of the novel.

The fictional character of Abe Ravelstein has been modeled on Allan Bloom – a political philosopher at the University of Chicago and close friend of Saul Bellow. In 1987, Bloom published a book called *The Closing of the American Mind*, an argument against what he saw as the betrayal of American values. The book became an unexpected best-seller and made Bloom millions of dollars. Bellow contributed a foreword to the book – as a matter of fact, he was the one who suggested Bloom write it in the first place. Bloom died young in 1992, but before he died asked his dear friend to write his memoir. This novel is the result.

## 2.2 *Partitioning of spaces*

The novel begins at the Hotel de Crillon in Paris, early June, where the Bellow-like I-narrator, Chick, is having breakfast with the Bloom-like character, Abe Ravelstein, while Nikki, Abe's companion, and Rosamund, Chick's wife, are still sleeping. We soon learn that Abe wants Chick to write his memoir – and he has agreed to do it. Chick has already written – at his request – a short account of J. M. Keynes, a powerful economist-statesman from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ravelstein is pleased – and entrusts Chick with writing his biography. The reader is, at the beginning, unaware of the fact that he/she is, on a different level, reading his biography-turned-into-novel; we witness a conversation atop the Crillon Hotel, brusquely interrupted by the intrusion of the narrating 'I': "But I am not interested in presenting his ideas. More than anything else, just now, I want to avoid them. I want to be brief, here." (p. 14); and then, a page ahead, "In approaching a man like Ravelstein, a piecemeal method is perhaps best" (p. 16). In fact, Ravelstein's memoir is built up gradually, in little pieces and fragments, continuously interspersed with Chick's loose meanderings about his own feelings, relationships and stages in life.

The factual world of the story world of the novel comprises events loosely tracked and spontaneously associated in the mind of the memoir narrating Chick, who makes numerous deictic shifts to the events recalled achronologically. Chick minds shifts up and down the spatio-temporal thread of the story line, and it is Chick's mind that connects the seemingly randomly recollected anecdotes, flashbacks and reported conversations. Chick's recollections are almost all connected to Ravelstein, although many times there is somebody else in focus: Chick himself, Rosamund, his current wife, or Vela, his ex-wife. Chick, the narrator, is on a higher-level focalizing space and often emerges from the story-level experiencer 'I' to comment upon the focalized space located at the here-now of memoir writing Chick. What we, readers, experience is an unusual narrative that is bewildering in its seemingly chaotic display of different space and time coordinates. The narrating 'I's associative mind often submerges into the world of the intradiegetic experiencer 'I', into the event remembered, and then comes back to the extradiegetic narrating 'I' for additional comments or a shift of focus.

There is a condensed nesting of events in *Ravelstein*: a higher focalizing space can yield an embedded focalized space and the embedded focalized space can, in its turn become the focalizing space to another nested event. If we start from the assumption that the mind is a body moving through space and time (Turner 1996), while performing complex operations (recalling, binding, linking and integrating thoughts and events), then we come to realize that the multiplicity of spaces in *Ravelstein* form a 'space lattice' that is difficult for the reader to deal with without the aid of space builders (deictics, referential expressions) providing cues

for interpretation. For instance, at the beginning of part 3, the narrating 'I' acknowledges that he kept his promise to Ravelstein, "who died six years ago, just as the High Holidays were beginning" (p. 160). Then, the present stimulus (death of Ravelstein) pushes his mind to an earlier time, the death of his own parents, when he started to think about the memoir he had promised to write and "how to deal with his freaks, quiddities, oddities, his eating, drinking, shaving, dressing, and playfully savaging his students" (p. 160). Ravelstein's personal "oddities" make him ponder further on his sexual oddities, and the challenge that writing the memoir has posed to him. Death, as a connector of his train of thoughts, moves his mind to his own death: "in fact, I went through a rehearsal of my own with death," anticipating the future in the story line. Then the temporal coordinate shifts to times when "we [Rosamund and Chick] were only considering Ravelstein's death" (p. 161) and Chick reports exchanges (spanning along months and years subsequent to Ravelstein's death) between him and his wife. The last exchange, as he specifically points out, takes place "about two years after Ravelstein's death" (p. 169).

Thus, the here-now of the memoir writing Chick, six years after Ravelstein's death, acknowledges that he has kept his promise to his belated friend (he has almost written his memoir – we're at the end of the novel). The primary (input space) yields subspaces of the input space, where the initial viewpoint is still maintained (the deictic center does not shift). The focus space itself (the death of Chick's parents, Ravelstein's oddities), in its turn, becomes the input/parent space of the conversations Chick and Rosamund have, which span a longer period of time (until Chick himself goes through a rehearsal of his own death). The shift of focus is to an earlier period, when Rosamund and Chick were only considering Ravelstein's death and the memoir Ravelstein entrusted Chick to write (a span of two years since Ravelstein's death).

Table 1. attempts to sketch the events (in terms of places and times) recollected by Chick as the narrative unfolds, showing at the same time the deictic anchorages (narrating 'I' or experiencing 'I'). As the table shows, there is almost always a *duality* in terms of the viewpoint space or deictic center (DC) of most narrative stretches: the here-now of narrating 'I' makes a deictic shift into the mind of the experiencer 'I' and constrains him to remember events as being located at the here-now of the experiencer 'I', but the narrating 'I' is always there as a *figure lurking in the background*, as a sharp observer always prompt to distill or refine the memories evoked, and make additional comments while in the process of writing. Therefore, the process of memoir writing, the reference point for the recollected events and states through the here-now of the narrating 'I', is the *embedding point* of the earlier Chick's vivid experiences. When the DC stays in the here-now of the narrating 'I', without spatio-temporal shifts to earlier events, it is highlighted in bold (event no. 1, 3, 5, 10, 19 and 20).

Chronologically, the events of the narrative line yield the following timeline set up in terms of changes in Chick's personal life/episodes in Ravelstein's life:

<b>Numbered Event (see table 1.)</b>	<b>Time</b>
28, 30. Chick recalls a visit of R to his New Hampshire country house.	Chick's marriage is faltering
25, 29, 30, 31, 32. Episodes of Chick and Vela's marriage.	toward the end of the marriage
13. Chick takes R to his tailor to get him measured for a suit.	some time before June (year?)
7, 9. Dinner party in Paris.	an evening in June (Chick already married to Rosamund)

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2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 11. Chick's conversation with R in Paris at the hotel Crillon.	the next morning in June
12, 14, 15, 16, 18. R and Chick go out shopping in Paris and sit down to have a coffee.	June, same day
21. Chick, back in Chicago, meets Prof. Battle, one of R's favorites.	Chicago, springtime (year?)
22, 23, 24, 26, 27. R falls ill. He's in the hospital; then is brought back home.	Chicago, late autumn, same year
33, 34, 35, 37. Chick's conversations with R. R is sick and in bed. R's last days.	Chicago, late autumn
36. Chick has conversations with Rosamund on writing R's memoir.	2 y. after R's death
39, 40, 41. Rosamund and Chick go on vacation to the Caribbean. He gets food poisoning and almost dies.	2-5 years subsequent to R's death
42. Chick's hallucinates under the influence of drugs, has imagined encounters with R, Vela.	
43. Paralyzed in, hospital, he is visited by doctors and friends. Slow process of recovery.	
44. Chick is finally released from the mental vacuum and is able to start writing the memoir.	6 y. after R's death?
1. Chick ponders on mankind's benefactors.	6 y. after R's death
5. Chick describes R. (his profession, his famous book, his views on love).	6 y. after R's death
19. Chick then contemplates on R's generosity and living in France.	6 y. after R's death
20. Chick recalls R's apartment in Chicago and enumerates his eccentricities.	6 y. after R's death

The numbers in front of the events reflect the occurrence of the events in the narrative line (see table 1.). The timeline is indicative of Chick's quirky reminiscences and straying mind as he is going "back and forth with him [Ravelstein] while trying to hear what he is saying," (p. 231), "bound as an honest observer" (p. 83) to recollect, "in an after-supper reminiscence manner," "freewheeling and laid back" (p. 129) as Ravelstein himself had suggested. The exercise, a memoir as initially intended, has, in the process of writing, become an unconscious effort not only to portray and give tribute to Ravelstein, but also to ease the narrator's personal unfulfillments and disappointments by pouring them out onto paper; a perfect way to "communicate certain 'uncommunicables,' your private metaphysics" (p. 95). His presence on the margins, therefore, has to be tolerated, as he apologizes to the reader; and we find numerous 'asides' (as the narrating 'I' prefers to call it) about his unhappy marriage to Vela, his own personality and political, religious, etc. views. But all these 'asides' connect to Ravelstein – Ravelstein expresses his thoughts about Vela in different conversations, and Chick's views and personality traits are always measured against Ravelstein's.

The place and time of each event in table 1. represent the mental location/temporal coordinate visited by Chick during the course of his reminiscences. The question marks indicate the impossibility of tracing the exact time/location of the events. They can, however, be reconstructed in terms of the chronological sequence of events in Chick's or Ravelstein's life. This is indicated in the timeline of events above.

**Table 1. Deictic anchoring in *Ravelstein***

Event	Narrating 'I' Experiencing 'I'		Place	Time
<b>1. Chick ponders on mankind's benefactors.</b>	DC		<b>here-now of narrating 'I'</b>	<b>cc. 6 y. after R. died</b>
2. Chick recalls a conversation with R in Paris.	DC	DC	Crillon Hotel, Paris	a morning in June
<b>3. Chick recalls describing Morford to R. (his high school English teacher).</b>	DC		<b>here-now of narrating 'I'</b>	<b>cc. 6 y. after R. died</b>
4. R. and Chick go on to talk about Keynes.	DC	DC	Crillon Hotel, Paris	a morning in June
<b>5. Chick describes R. (his profession, his famous book, his views on love).</b>	DC		<b>here-now of narrating 'I'</b>	<b>cc. 6 y. after R. died</b>
6. Description of the Place de la Concorde atop the Crillon Hotel.		DC	Crillon Hotel, Paris	a morning in June
7. Chick recalls the previous evening's dinner party.	DC	DC	restaurant in Paris (Lucas-Carton)	an evening in June
8. Chick reports the continuing conversation at Crillon.	DC	DC	Crillon Hotel, Paris	a morning in June
9. Chick's thoughts jump back to the dinner party.	DC	DC	restaurant in Paris	an evening in June
<b>10. Chick goes on describing R's family background.</b>	DC		<b>here-now of narrating 'I'</b>	<b>cc. 6 y. after R. died</b>
11. We are back to the conversation at the Crillon Hotel.	DC	DC	Crillon Hotel, Paris	a morning in June
12. R and Chick go to the hotel lobby, spot Michael Jackson. They go out shopping.		DC	Rue St. Honore, Paris	a morning in June
13. Chick recalls taking R to his tailor to get him measured for a suit.		DC	downtown Chicago	some time before June
14. They go from one shop to the next, buying things.	DC	DC	shopping streets in Paris	a morning in June
15. R. and Chick sit down to have coffee.	DC	DC	Café de Flore, Paris	noontime
16. Chicks reports on R's table manners and recalls the wealthy Glyphs.	DC	DC	Café de Flore, Paris	noontime
17. They talk about the Glyphs while R. is having coffee.	DC	DC	Café de Flore, Paris	noontime
18. R. stains his new jacket and Chick consoles him. This reminds him that R. does not like 'foolish kindness' from anyone.	DC	DC	Café de Flore, Paris	noontime
<b>19. Chick then contemplates on R's generosity and living in France.</b>	DC		<b>here-now of narrating 'I'</b>	<b>cc. 6 y. after R. died</b>
<b>20. Chick recalls R's apartment in Chicago and enumerates his 'oddities', foibles, political views, his attachment to the university.</b>	DC		<b>here-now of narrating 'I'</b>	<b>cc. 6 y. after R. died</b>
21. Chick, back in Chicago, meets Prof. Battle, one of R's favourites.	DC	DC	Chicago	springtime
22. R comes down with an infection. Chick muses on the consequences.	DC	DC	Chicago	late autumn
23. R. is in the hospital. He tells Chick about the BMW he bought for Nikki.		DC	Hospital in Chicago	late autumn

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Event	Narrating 'I'	Experiencing 'I'	Place	Time
24. Chick is rereading the Keynes memoir, but his thoughts go back to R.	DC	DC	R's apartment building	late autumn
25. Chick remembers episodes of his marriage to Vela.	DC	DC	R's apartment building	late autumn
26. The ambulance brings R. home. On seeing him, his friends are moved.		DC	R's apartment building	late autumn
27. Chick ponders on different impressions as a child and R. in a wheelchair.	DC	DC	R's apartment building	late autumn
28. Chick recalls a visit of R. to his New Hampshire country house.	DC	DC	Country house, NH	a summer
29. Chicks recalls R and Vela's first falling out in Paris.	DC	DC	Pont Royal Hotel, Paris	?
30. Chick jumps back to the conversation with R in New Hampshire.	DC	DC	Country house, NH	a summer
31. Chick recalls how he and Vela got closer together while being married.	DC	DC	Chicago	?
32. Chick recalls the end of his relationship with Vela.	DC	DC	Chicago	?
33. Chick recalls a conversation with R. R is sick and in bed.	DC	DC	R's apartment	?
34. Chick recalls a conversation on death.	DC	DC	R's apartment	?
35. Chick remembers different episodes of R' last months, diverging to introduce and give a description of Morris Herbst and the Battles, R's close friends.	DC	DC	R's apartment	
36. Chick acknowledges that R died '6 years ago' and the difficulty of the task of writing R's memoir. He has conversations with Rosamund on this topic 2 y. after R's death.	DC	DC	Chicago	2 y. after R's death
37. Chick relates the last days of R's (his farewell trip to Paris, medical tests, his conversations with him).	DC	DC	Chicago	R's last days
39. Rosamund proposes Chick to take a vacation in the Caribbean. They fly to Saint Martin via San Juan. Description of Saint Martin.	DC	DC	San Juan	shortly after R's death
40. They dine at a local restaurant recommended by their friends. Chick begins to feel ill and his condition worsens day after day.	DC	DC	San Juan	shortly after R's death
41. Chick is very sick; Rosamund arranges to fly back to Boston.	DC	DC	San Juan/plane	Thanksgiving Day
42. Chick is examined by doctors, put on oxygen and dosed with drugs. The drugs induce different memories and hallucinations.	DC	DC	hospital in Boston	after Thanksgiving
43. Chick is out of the woods, but partially paralyzed. In hospital, he is visited by doctors, family members and friends. He is slowly recovering.	DC	DC	hospital in Boston	weeks after Thanksgiving
44. Chick is finally released from the mental vacuum and is able to write the memoir. R appears before his mind's eye as he is listening to music.	DC	DC	?	?

### 3 Conclusions

*Ravelstein* is a memoir 'in disguise'. The here-now-I of the beginning of the novel – in a gestalt view of the entire story world – is after Abe Ravelstein is dead and everything is remembrance, memory, minutiae about Abe the man, the professor. However, the genuine narrative device adopted turns the novel into something much more than a tribute to Ravelstein, more than a recounting of emotionless, dry facts. The focalized spaces (selected aspects of Ravelstein's life) often shift focus to the narrator himself, and so the novel proves to be a vehicle for intense self-analysis and scrutiny of the narrator's own feelings and personal relationships. Chick plunges into "a humanity bath," as he says, "controlling his instruments like a Prospero," at the same time controlling us, the readers, in what we vicariously experience. In controlling what and how we experience the story world, the narrative device employed allows the narrator (the narrating 'I') to move back and forth on the thread of time, submerge into the world of the experiencing 'I', and then emerge onto the higher level of the memoir writing 'I'. The result is a peculiar hybrid: it focuses on both Ravelstein and Chick from above and gives introspection into the meanderings of the narrator's mind.

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