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From *The New York Trilogy* to *Invisible*: The Politics of Auster's 'Metaphysical' Thrillers

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A quarter of a century since its publication as a single volume, having propelled its author into literary stardom, *The New York Trilogy* (1987) is still widely regarded as Paul Auster's seminal work. The truth of this statement – somewhat self-evident in the context of this special issue – is borne out not merely by the amount of scholarly attention that the *Trilogy* has continued to receive throughout the years, but also by the volume's popularity with the general public. In a (serendipitous?) celebration of the 25th anniversary of its publication, the *Trilogy* was the subject of a special edition of the BBC World Book Club, held at the Times Cheltenham Literary Festival in October 2012, and later broadcast by the BBC World Service on 4 November 2012. The online blurb advertising the radio programme describes the *Trilogy* as "three brilliant variations on the classic detective story", and points out that "[e]ach interconnected tale exploits the elements of standard detective fiction to achieve *an entirely new genre that was ground-breaking when it was published three decades ago*" (BBC World, my italics). The originality of Auster's engagement with the much-loved formulas of mystery and crime writing is undoubtedly one of the main reasons for the text's enduring, popular appeal. It has also provided the most persistent critical angle in scholarly analyses of the *Trilogy*, which has been approached as a prime example of "anti-detective fiction" or "metaphysical detective fiction" in several essays and even in a book-length study (see Ciocia 2012, 4). Still, critical interest in Auster's 'high-brow' innovations to this popular genre – corroborated perhaps by Auster's own disavowal of the label 'detective fiction' (however much qualified) for the *Trilogy* – has steered academic discussion away from Auster's *debt* to the conventions (and the politics) of crime writing, and

privileged the analysis of his subversion of the epistemological certainties of formula.

This essay is an attempt to redress the balance: in its initial focus on the reception of the *Trilogy*, and of *Ghosts* in particular, it highlights Auster's subtle critique of contemporary American culture and of its continuing, almost unconscious, subscription to the problematic narrative of the frontier and its fundamentally racist and colonialist underpinnings. It then moves on to consider *Invisible* (2009), Auster's most recent foray into crime writing: while not at all devoid of metafictional elements and epistemological conundrums, *Invisible* departs from Auster's previous engagement with classic and hardboiled formulas and foregrounds more urgent political concerns, in part at least, through its set-up as an international thriller and a spy story.

In their definition of the metaphysical detective genre, Merivale and Sweeney explain how its parody and subversion of "traditional detective-story conventions – such as narrative closure and the detective's role as surrogate reader – [has] the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot" (2). The study of the ontological, existential and epistemological questions raised by the *Trilogy* is a well-trodden scholarly path, cutting through the self-reflectivity and intertextuality of the narrative, the presence of doubles, the challenge to authorial trustworthiness, the investigation into the nature of language, the focus on the detective's identity, and the confusion of the roles of sleuth, criminal and victim. By and large, the focus on these elements of the text has understandably sidelined the exploration of any social and political concerns lurking behind Auster's dazzling metaphysical games. Nonetheless, particularly in *City of Glass* (1985), the *Trilogy* paints a bleak picture of late-twentieth-century metropolitan life: Daniel Quinn's profound solitude, his meticulous observations on the dispossessed and the forgotten ("the tramps, the down-and-outs, the shopping-bag ladies, the drifters and drunks", 108) and his very own descent into homelessness are echoed by Professor Stillman's ramblings through the anonymous streets of Manhattan, on the lookout for broken, lost and discarded objects, the flotsam of a contemporary cityscape marred by alienation and by the absence of

strong interpersonal connections. This "urban nihilism" (Brown, 5) can itself be viewed as a legacy of the hardboiled tradition. In a sense, the inconclusive investigations of the *Trilogy*'s doomed detectives are but a natural, postmodern development of the gloomy adventures of the modernist gumshoe: the latter's quests lead to unpalatable truths, while his heroic status is thrown into relief by the moral squalor around him ("But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid", Chandler 1950, 333). Instead of the lessons on the general mood of corruption to be learnt on Chandler's mean streets, "the inexhaustible space" and the "labyrinth of endless steps" (3) that opens the *Trilogy* foreshadows the fundamental lack of resolution, and lack of coordinates, in Auster's mysteries. While at the end of his investigations Philip Marlowe acknowledges that he has become "part of the nastiness" (Chandler 1970, 220), the detective-protagonists of the *Trilogy* – and the readers – face radical, unsettling questions about the nature of selfhood and their own individual identity. Again, such focus on the figure of the investigator can be said to develop a key hardboiled innovation of the classic formula perfected by the likes of Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers: as the ultimate interpreter of clues leading to the solution of the 'whodunit', the Golden Age detective had been an otherwise mono-dimensional character, blissfully immune from emotional entanglements and moments of self-doubt. By contrast, the cynical, angst-riddled private-eye – plying his trade, and getting down and dirty, in the asphalt jungle – becomes much more than a necessary function of the plot, subjecting himself and his surroundings to a close ethical, as well as intellectual, scrutiny.

In the *Trilogy*, the moral bankruptcy and the seediness of Marlowe's L.A. are replaced by the moral indifference of Quinn's New York City, and Quinn's oscillations between surrender and reaction to this wide-spread apathy are a key theme of the first novella. As anticipated, this metropolitan anomie is momentarily punctured when Quinn pauses to write about the city's "vagabond population" (*Trilogy*, 109), whose number he later, briefly, joins. These scant reflections, and the readers' exposure to Quinn's own first-hand experience of destitution, are the most immediate instance of social critique offered

by the text. In this relative neglect of the *milieu* where both illegal activities and, of course, the ensuing investigation take place, the *Trilogy* thus seems to depart from one of the main interests, and an area of great strength, of detective fiction, particularly in the hardboiled sub-genre: its ability – indeed, its desire – to see crime as a "social barometer" (Pepper, 10), and to write about it as part of an exploration of the values (or lack thereof) and power struggles of the environment in which it originates – in other words, 'tough-guy' fiction as a pulp version of the novel of manners, probing into the dark underbelly of its culture.

Still, one such political reading of the *Trilogy* is not impossible, as demonstrated by Eric Berlatsky, whose astute analysis focuses specifically on *Ghosts*, the second and shortest narrative in the volume, as a text dealing with "the pervasiveness of racial division" (112) in the American collective consciousness. In fairness, *Ghosts* would appear to be the least likely locus for cultural commentary and political concerns, given how it is a pared-down, minimalist version of its companion pieces (Auster himself has remarked on the "fable-like", "fabular" quality of this text, in the Q&A session of the BBC World Book Club). Alison Russell goes so far as to suggest that the narrative is a "'ghost' of *City of Glass* and of the detective story genre: the 'meat' of the text is stripped down to a generic level, reinforced by Auster's rejection of nomenclature and his use of Film Noir signifiers" (77). The time is an eternal present, the place an unchangeable, crystallized New York City, the characters – all named after colours – are flattened onto their roles (whose clear-cut definitions are blurred in the course of the story): Blue is the detective, hired by the mysterious White to keep Black under constant surveillance. With Blue forced to observe and write reports on a man who spends the best part of his days sitting in his flat with his head in a book, the investigation soon turns into a lesson about the power of language, and about learning to read, or put pen to paper, with great care. Soon enough, the narrative seems to dismantle binary oppositions along colour-lines: Blue ends up living/reading like Black, Black is most probably White, not to mention the fact that "black and white" and "black and blue" are commonly associated in idiomatic expressions. Tellingly, the latter idiom provides the title for Fats Waller's classic jazz song "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue", the composition which the unnamed narrator of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible*

Man (1957) listens to at the outset of his story – a vocal, accusatory account of the insignificance and lack of power of black people in mainstream American society. Yet, in spite of its ingenious demonstration of the fundamental similarity between its characters, aided by its focus on the arbitrary connotations of colours, *Ghosts* is not completely successful in its work of deconstruction, for "the material actuality of American racial history and its psychological after-effects prove more intractable to theoretical re-vision than it might initially appear" (Berlatsky, 112).

Quick to point out Blue's naive view of the abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher, whose deep-seated racism is glossed over by the narrative, as well as Blue's obliviousness to the abuse targeted at the black baseball player Jackie Robinson, Berlatsky also maintains that blackness is ultimately reinscribed as mysterious and exotic – hence due for exploration and domestication – in *Ghosts*' faint echo of the colonial language in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (120-21). Of course, this part of Berlatsky's argument relies in no small measure on the moral connotations of the opposition between light and shadows in western culture – a binary logic which underpins Blue's perception of "the world inside him" as "an unknown quantity, unexplored *and therefore dark* even to himself" (*Trilogy*, 143, my italics). In fact, similar moral connotations had already been exploited to great effect in *City of Glass*, where the whiteness of Peter Stillman Jr. – the innocent victim represented as an eternal child and an Adamic figure – is pitted against the menacing Stillman Sr., whose *nom de plume* Henry Dark emphasises the cruel, ill-omened nature of his plan to recreate a paradise on earth – the Puritan 'City-upon-a-Hill' – through the recovery of the prelapsarian language.

The reminder, in *City of Glass*, of the expansionist project endorsed by the Puritan belief in American exceptionalism returns – with disturbing undertones, Berlatsky intimates – in the conclusion of *Ghosts*. Having shaken off Black/White's restricting influence, and ready to live in the world again, Blue is imagined to be "going out West to start a new life", a speculation immediately superseded by the narrator's "secret dreams [...] of Blue booking passage on some ship and sailing to China" (*Trilogy*, 195-96) – a journey that extends the

narrative of the frontier beyond the Pacific. With a conclusion haunted by the "'ghost' of race and colonialism", the second instalment of the *Trilogy* "is not willing to see 'existential' or 'psychological' freedom as independent from 'history,'" despite its "oddly ahistorical" set-up (Berlatsky, 134). Particularly in the most minimalist of Auster's metaphysical thrillers, the surfacing of references to the troubled history of race relations in the United States, and to the frontier narrative, underscores their close connection with the foundation of a national mythology. Even as the focus of the investigation remains elsewhere, the (subconscious?) memory of these crimes is an inescapable, if subtle, presence in the *Trilogy*. This loose political reading is supported by Sylvia Söderlind's 2011 analysis of *City of Glass* as a critical response to the neo-Puritan, neo-colonial, conservative ideology of Ronald Reagan's presidency. As I have argued elsewhere (Ciocia 2012), we have had to wait until the onset of a certain impatience with the gamesmanship of 'high postmodernism' – an impatience most likely aggravated by the desire to deal more directly with the ethical sphere, in the wake of 9/11 – for analyses of the *Trilogy* to display a renewed sensitivity to its subtle political concerns. And yet such concerns are there – less attention-grabbing than the insistent metaphysical and linguistic quandaries explored by the text – but nonetheless an inescapable legacy of a genre such as detective fiction which, both in its classic and in its hardboiled variations, engages in the observation, and the testing, of societal norms and the deliberation of moral questions.

Besides the *Trilogy*, several of Auster's novels contain an element of mystery: the search for a missing person, and the piecing together of their story, is a recurrent theme in Auster's work, beginning with the (auto)biographical reconstruction of his absent father's past in 'The Invisible Man', the first part of *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), and subsequently in novels as diverse as the dystopian *In The Country of Last Things* (1987), the 'frontier' narrative *Moon Palace* (1989), the tale of a writer-turned-terrorist in *Leviathan* (1992) and the story of a silent-film artist in *The Book of Illusions* (2002). Incidentally, with the exception of this last text, whose immediate concern is the relationship between words and images, the other three novels all have a strong political undercurrent: *Country* depicts a late-capitalist society in complete

disarray, *Moon Palace* returns to the mythical landscape of the frontier within the context of the space race and the Vietnam war, while *Leviathan* – whose protagonist goes to prison so as to avoid fighting in South-East Asia – explores the tragic consequences of radical political action for a writer frustrated with the irrelevance of his voice in contemporary society. (As remarked by Varvogli (2001) and Ciocia (2011), *Leviathan* reads like an extended reworking, with a considerable shift in focus from the 'metaphysical' to the political, of the basic plot-line of *The Locked Room*, the third part of the *Trilogy*.)

However, it is only in *Invisible* (2009), his penultimate novel to date, that Auster has decidedly gone back to the tradition of crime fiction, writing what may well be generically described as a "thriller". This term, often used as a catch-all category in the taxonomy of the literature of crime, privileges the creation of an atmosphere of suspense over the solution of a mystery through logical deduction which had been typical of classic detective stories. The crime thriller's study of the "psychology of characters" (Symons, 162), the importance it otherwise places on the setting – traits which this sub-genre shares with hardboiled fiction – and its tendency to do without the figure of the detective altogether (hence without a moral compass, however flawed) are conducive to the development of stories often set against a greater clash of values than that encountered by the private-eye in pursuit of his investigations. In his study of crime fiction, Priestman distinguishes between the *noir* thriller, whose main focus is on the genesis of the transgression and the psychology of the criminal (often cast as the protagonist and first-person narrator of the story), and the anti-conspiracy thriller, whose hero/ine find themselves caught up in a large web of intrigue, unable to draw on the help of the law, and pitted against powerful and well-connected enemies. In both variations, the thriller lends itself to the study of the place of the individual within the community, as well as of private and collective ethical codes, and to the scrutiny of the wider socio-political environment, and of the disruptive/subversive forces within and without the establishment. The scale of these power struggles takes on an even larger dimension, flagging up conflicts between different cultures and their value-systems, when the thriller meets the spy story with its scenarios of international

skulduggery. It is precisely such a combination – anti-conspiracy elements, made more sinister by the villain's likely involvement in the world of secret intelligence – that Auster concocts for the plot of *Invisible*.

Invisible begins in the spring of 1967, with the fatal encounter between the young aspiring poet, Adam Walker – a literature student at Columbia, the protagonist of the novel, and the main narrator of three of its four sections – and the cynical political scientist Rudolf Born, a French visiting professor at the School of International Affairs in the same university. Auster does not lose any time in reminding us the incendiary historical context against which this casual encounter takes place, for the two characters immediately embark on a long conversation about recent and current political events: "Vietnam and the growing opposition to the war. The Kennedy assassination. The American embargo on trade with Cuba" (10). The idealist Adam, who would "rather go to jail than fight in Vietnam" (8), finds in Born an apologist of war "as the purest, most vivid expression of the human soul" (7) – a provocative position which casts the professor as a callous, amoral, even monstrous figure, in spite of his devilish charm and intellectual verve. In fact, his villainous pedigree is established at the very beginning of the novel with the allusion to his namesake, Bertran de Born, a twelfth-century Provençal troubadour, famous for his verses in celebration of the excitement of battle, and further immortalized by Dante in the eighth circle of Hell as a sower of discord between Prince Henry and his father King Henry II. At first glance, then, *Invisible* is the story of an American innocent coming under a perverse foreign influence. It thus appears to reiterate the binary opposition between New World wholesomeness and European corruption that underpins America's perception of itself.

The idea of America's degeneration in the footsteps of France has a particular resonance within the context of the conflict in Vietnam: the United States saw themselves as having inherited a "tainted" war (Lewis) – a war blemished by the traces of French colonial interests, even if the American military intervention was configured as a necessary response to the threat of the 'domino effect' and the expansion of communism. Furthermore, in beckoning to America's self-appointed role of "redeemer nation", Vietnam promised a second chance to get the frontier narrative right: this time the American

pioneers "would protect the dark man rather than enslave him, and improve rather than destroy his natural landscape" (Hellman, 6, 35). Born's main area of expertise – "the disasters of French colonialism [...] the loss of Algeria and [...] the loss of Indochina" (*Invisible*, 7) – throws into relief a similar aspect in the American intervention in Vietnam, rather than the ideological fight against communism. In fact, Born deliberately cultivates his persona as a throwback from colonial times, looking the part with his "rumpled [...] white linen suit" (5) and his Montecristo cigars (12), a luxury habit which provides a first hint of his powerful network of connections, unheeding the US embargo against Cuba. Later on, he is described as "the perfect hidalgo" (56), a term redolent of Old World privileges and hierarchies. What is more, Born's international upbringing as "the hybrid product of a German-speaking mother and a French-speaking father" (7) and the fact that he makes Adam think "of the owner of a South American coffee plantation who had gone mad after spending too many years in the jungle" (12) are reminiscent of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*. The epitome of colonialism in modern literature, and distinctly associated with Old World values ("All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz", Conrad, 83), Kurtz of course provides a further link with the perception of Vietnam as a neo-colonial war in *Apocalypse Now* (1979), Francis Ford Coppola's memorable transposition of Conrad's novella during the American conflict in South-East Asia.

Alongside these many allusions to the European taint of colonialism, *Invisible* contains explicit references to the general climate of political and social turmoil of the summer of 1967, i.e. "the summer of the Six-Day War, the summer of race riots in more than one hundred American cities, the Summer of Love" (94). The mention of the race riots is particularly significant given that the life-shattering event at the heart of the plot is Born's violent response to a robbery attempted by Cedric Williams, an eighteen-year-old black man: with a viciousness that goes beyond the call of self-defence, Born stabs his attacker and – while a horrified Adam rushes to get help – finishes him off, hiding the body and all traces of his involvement with the crime. In this way, the spectre of racial violence takes centre stage, having been invoked – if only indirectly – by the intertextual connections of the

novel's title. Besides recalling the 'coloured' ghosts of the *Trilogy* – and perhaps also, by association, the memory that "spook" (a synonym for "ghost") used to be a racial slur – *Invisible* is an obvious, partial echo of Ralph Ellison's already-mentioned masterpiece. Like this illustrious antecedent (if much more indirectly), the novel clearly endeavours to cast a far-reaching look at the oppression of the "dark man" in the U.S.: Williams' murder is openly connected to the shameful history of race relations on American soil. As Adam points out, Born's victim has "a common slave name borne by hundreds of thousands if not millions of African-Americans" (86).

As it is often the case in Auster's novels, the pivotal, tragic incident at the core of the plot would seem to mark the beginning of the protagonist's "fall". The first part of *Invisible* ends with the revelation that, by the time Adam has summoned up the courage to report the crime, Born has safely made his way back to Paris. Adam's failure to save Williams, and to go straight to the police to denounce Born, will haunt him for the rest of his life. At one point, having given up on bringing Born to justice through official means, Adam takes it upon himself to bring retribution on a 'private' scale, by disclosing the professor's secret to his fiancée, Hélène Juin, in the hope that she will break off their engagement. Adam's interference with Born's personal life triggers in turn the professor's retaliation: at the end of Part III, Adam is summarily expelled from France on trumped up charges, in a plot presumably orchestrated by Born himself. Interestingly, this section of Part III, which contains the final segment of Adam's narrative, is entitled "Fall", a reference to the time of the year, doubling up as a(n ironic?) comment on Adam's expulsion from the French capital.

"Fall" is only one of the many intradiegetic narratives in *Invisible*, whose complex structure is worth outlining before venturing further into the interpretation of the novel's politics. While broadly following the course of the seasons in 1967, *Invisible* also has a metanarrative frame set in 2007-2008. These two levels of the story frequently intertwine, although Adam's authorial voice gradually recedes into the background, to be replaced by Jim Freeman's. Freeman (notice the racially-loaded name), an old university friend to whom Adam has entrusted his story, is therefore the 'real' writer/editor of the entire volume. Part I thus turns out to be "Spring", the manuscript

which, as we have seen, charts the beginning of Adam's acquaintance with Born, until the tragic event that brings it to a temporary end. Part II introduces Freeman, the recipient of the manuscript, sent by a terminally-ill Adam, in 2007. Freeman agrees to pay Adam a visit, and in the meantime encourages him to carry on with his difficult story: the result is "Summer" (also included in Part II), Adam's account of the few months in 1967 after Born's return to France and before his own short-lived, disastrous move to Paris. In Part III, having explained how their planned reunion was foiled by Adam's sudden death, Freeman gives way to "Fall", Adam's sketchy notes about his attempt to damage Born's private life in the autumn of 1967. Finally, Part IV is a short coda to the rest of the narrative: it tells of Freeman's endeavours to double-check the veracity of Adam's tale, and ends with an extract from Cécile Juin's diary, about her most recent encounter with Born, who never did get to marry her mother Hélène. The professor, and by now self-confessed secret agent, is revealed to have retreated to a small Caribbean island, where he lives in near-isolation in a house called Moon Hill (277) – an odd lord of the manor to a household of three local servants. ("Moon Hill" is another loaded name; in Auster's writing, lunar references are often allusions to the American west – see, for example, the following passage from *Moon Palace*, whose narrator explicitly connects different notions of the frontier through a not-so-loose association of ideas: "The discovery of America as a failure to reach China […] the Apollo Project; Apollo, the god of music; Uncle Victor and the Moon Men traveling out West. […] the West; the war against the Indians; the war in Vietnam, once called Indochina […] weapons, bombs, explosions; nuclear clouds in the deserts of Utah and Nevada; and then I would ask myself – why does the American West look so much like the landscape of the moon?", 32-3). After the events of 1967, Adam's life takes a different turn to his youthful dream of becoming a poet. Spared by the draft lottery, in 1973 he decides to "throw [him]self into the trenches" (83) of another war – a war against social injustice waged for twenty-seven years as a legal aid worker "in the black neighbourhoods of Oakland and Berkeley" (84), California.

Summarised like this, Adam's story does indeed sound like a tale of perdition and subsequent redemption, especially when we

consider that he has married a black social worker called Sandra *Williams*, an all-too-neat namesake of the young, small-time criminal whose life Adam had been unable to save. Born does remain unpunished but – we might ponder – surely Adam, no matter how compromised, has grown into a pragmatic hero and has managed to make a small difference: significantly, he has done so by leaving New York, and Paris, behind in order to settle down in the West. However, the opposition between Adam and Born that underpins this narrative of redemption does not hold to a more than casual scrutiny. Hardly the cause of a fall from grace, Born acts as a mirror for the younger man's own corruption: "[Born] had shown me something about myself that filled me with revulsion" (71), Adam is forced to admit. Similarly, Born's inflammatory harangues, personal anecdotes and fabrications – for instance, his alleged involvement with the French war in Algeria (295) or his suggestion that Hitler had looked at the history of America as a model for his racial and expansionist policies (45) – consistently draw attention (whether explicitly or by association) to the dark, colonial, genocidal side of the narrative of the frontier. A less obvious, but no less telling, example of Born's hints at America's own imperialist history is his false claim to have been brought up in Guatemala (12). The remark, which responds and panders to Adam's judgmental image of Born as a plantation owner, can also be read as an allusion to the insidious mixture of economic and political control exerted by American corporations over developing countries. The huge power of the United Fruit Company over Guatemala in the first half of the twentieth century – a power so widespread and prejudicial as to inspire the disparaging coinage "banana republic" (Page 601) – is one of the most infamous cases of U.S. neo-colonial practices in Central and South America: during Eisenhower's first term of office, exploiting their country's fear of communism, United Fruit Company lobbied for the 1954 CIA-sponsored coup against the Guatemalan President Jacobo Guzmán.

The most disturbing blow to the idea of Adam's innocence, and possibly the real measure of America's capital sin, however, comes from Adam's account of his own troubled "Summer of Love", in the near-eponymous section of his story. During the summer of 1967, Adam is hired as a page for the Butler Library (whose entrance is presided by a portrait of Eisenhower (98) – lest we forget it, the

American president to articulate in popular terms the "domino theory" in 1954). It is a menial job, in a labyrinthine, claustrophobic environment where – besieged by boredom – Adam gives in to obsessive sexual fantasies and stealthy trips to the men's room to masturbate (105). Adam's onanistic activity in the library is the prelude to the infringement of one of the last sexual taboos: incest. With his sister Gwyn, Adam reprises the one-time "grand experiment" (115) of their teenage years in a monthlong "unholy matrimony" (151): "now that you are both past twenty, the strictures of your adolescent frolic no longer hold, and you go on having sex with each other every day for the next thirty-four days, right up to the day that you leave for Paris" (145-46).

It seems to me that there is something of *The Quiet American* in Auster's dwelling on the sexual history of his protagonist and, to a lesser extent, of Born too. As is well known, in his 1955 novel, set in Saigon, Graham Greene gives us an unforgettable representation of the blind destructiveness of American idealism, embodied by the young undercover agent Alden Pyle, against the transparent cynicism and 'honest' self-interest of the older British journalist Thomas Fowler. The two men's moral character and their respective countries' political convictions about Vietnam are reflected in their attitudes to Phuong, the beautiful local woman who is the object of their desires. I would argue that, taking a leaf out of Greene's book, *Invisible* comments on the political via the personal sphere, so that we might want to read Adam's intense, transgressive sexual interest as a veiled reference to his country's expansionistic drives. (At the risk of stretching the point, the pairing of seduction and (colonial) conquest – a common literary trope – is also endorsed by the poetic tradition referenced at the very beginning of the novel: after all, love and war were the main, often interconnected themes, of troubadours such as Bertran de Born.) Seen in this light, Adam's obsession with Gwyn (whose name means "white") and their shocking, incestuous affair (the two are "so alike that [they] could have passed for male and female version of the same person", 112) gesture to America's history of colonialism *on its own soil*. On its part, Born's own perverse nature, and utilitarian view of relationships, is completely in line with his caricatural characterization

(and stereotypes about French sexual mores). His underhanded dealings, violent streak and despicable view of white supremacy leave no doubt about his villainous nature – if anything, he strikes readers as an overblown, parodic figure.

Unsurprisingly for a novel written by Auster, one thing we can never be sure about is the authoritativeness of the narrative in general and, more specifically, the truthfulness of Adam's confession of incest – the secretive, unexpected, baffling tale buried at the heart of the text. After Adam's death, Gwyn is shown his manuscript by Freeman, and denies that the incestuous summer of love ever happened. She does, however, agree that Freeman should publish a version of the story – the volume we are reading – on condition that the real identity of all the people involved in this tale of murder and sexual transgressions should be kept hidden. In a typical, Austerian narrative sleight-of-hand, about forty pages from the end of the novel comes the revelation that the names of all people and places have been made up, with the notable exception of Paris. (One suspects that this is not merely a homage to the city where Auster spent his formative years as a translator and a writer, but rather a reference to a place of major significance for the history of the United States, and a place of great resonance in its imaginary: witness the Treaty of Paris of 1793, the international ratification of American independence from Great Britain – i.e. America's shedding its colonial yoke – and, nearly two centuries later, the Paris Peace talks between the U.S. and North-Vietnam.)

In the end, therefore, for all these (often evasive and obscure) allusions, *Invisible* refuses to yield a simple, straightforward interpretation, unfolding more and more as a game of smoke and mirrors with its multiple, contradictory narratives and its discordant, undependable voices. In *The Quiet American*, Greene had managed to give us a prescient reading of the situation in Vietnam without flattening his story into a mere political allegory: he does so through his masterful creation of believable characters, fully-rounded in their foibles, weaknesses and all-too-human desires. In his own novel deliberately endowed with a high political resonance, instead, Auster adopts an opposite tack: his protagonists are so completely overdetermined, and his references to a shameful colonial history and racist ideologies are at times so overt as to send the reader on a hermeneutical (wild goose?) chase for less obvious ones, for their

interconnections and their significance. If *Invisible* avoids the trap of a mere 'drawing-by-numbers', allegorical reading, it does so *not* through carefully nuanced characters and plausible situations, but rather thanks to its metafictional games. Whether we ultimately find the novel satisfying depends in great part on our response to such games, on how impatient we get in the relay between narrators with different degrees of objectivity, partiality and access to Adam's and Born's stories, on how we feel about the various dramatic revelations in the context of a story which – whether we are susceptible to its fascination or not – is certainly designed to be a "page turner". (On this score, see Joanna Briscoe's incisive review for *The Guardian*: "With the satanic Born still at large, a desperate need to *know* – that primitive but vital fictional engine – sends the reader scurrying to a conclusion that is more satisfying in terms of its ideas than its emotional resolution", online).

Whatever our take on the elusiveness of Auster's 'allegorical' references and on the questions he raises about the authoritativeness of the various narratives, the 'metaphysical' aspect of the novel ultimately cannot staunch the readers' overwhelming feeling that they are facing – and being asked to exert at the very least their critical, if not moral, judgment on – a world of corruption and intrigue. In other words, while in the *Trilogy* Auster has written a "*metaphysical* thriller" with a discernible political strand, in *Invisible* the metaphysical is subordinate to the *thriller*: its sleek (or, for some readers, irritating) postmodern gloss does not fundamentally detract from the political scope of the narrative, which is never far from the foreground, as it befits a crime/spy story.

While Born's murder remains unpunished, and the truthfulness – let alone the motives – of Adam's tale of incest remain opaque, the novel leaves us with an image infinitely more haunting than Born's pantomime skulduggery and Adam's tortured self-accusations (whether real or fantastical): Cécile's final, uncomprehending contemplation of Quillia, the Caribbean island where the book ends. Instead of the optimistic account of Quillia gathered from library books, where its mixed-raced population is mentioned as evidence of the fact that the place is "*a laboratory of human possibilities. It explodes our rigid, preconceived ideas about race*" (280), during her reunion with Born,

Cécile is confronted by several "unpleasant echoes of the colonial past" (288); particularly jarring to her is having three black servants waiting on two white people, who are ill-at-ease with each other and somewhat incongruous in the tropical environment. Exasperated by one of Born's outburst "so vicious in [its] hatred of anyone who was not a European with a white skin" (300), Cécile runs off from Moon Hill, keen to return to France. On her journey down the mountain, she comes across a scene of great affective power: "Fifty or sixty black men and women crouching in that field with hammers and chisels in their hands, pounding on the stones as the sun pounded on their bodies, with no shade anywhere and sweat glistening on every face. [...] this was the kind of work one usually associated with prisoners, with people in chains, but these people weren't in chains. They were working, they were making money, they were keeping themselves alive. [...] together they formed a fractious, stately harmony, a sound that worked itself into my body and stayed there long after I had left [...] That sound will always be with me. For the rest of my life, no matter where I am, no matter what I am doing, it will always be with me" (307-08). Eschewing precise correspondences and a facile didacticism, this image nevertheless makes clear allusions to the history of slavery and to the economic inequalities that still exist across different national and racial communities. Auster's treatment of this theme – which has kept on surfacing in various guises throughout the novel – is also striking for its refusal to patronize the object of the white (wo)man's gaze. The music of the hammers is Auster's final, powerful allegorical image, all the more haunting for its postmodern indeterminacy, as readers join the benign, liberal, intellectual Cécile looking on, uncomprehendingly, on this scene.

Auster's loyal readers know that the heightened focus on matters of foreign policy and social justice in *Invisible* is in line with the marked concern with similar issues in his latest fictional production. Besides its powerful references to the war in Iraq, *Man in the Dark* (published in 2008, a year before *Invisible*) confronts the reader with an intradiegetic alternative history of the United States: the country is imagined to be in the grip of a second civil war in the wake of the presidential election controversially won by George W. Bush in 2000. The novel that follows *Invisible*, *Sunset Park* (2010), takes place in the eponymous, relatively down-at-heel, Brooklyn neighbourhood, where

four young friends have resorted to squatting in an abandoned house in order to make ends meet. Set in the autumn of 2008, against the backdrop of the global financial crisis, the text is vociferous in its critique of the "throwaway culture spawned by the greed of profit-driven corporations" (Auster 2010, 72). Such explicit, negative comments on the current state of America, alongside more covert references to 9/11 and its aftermath in *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005) and *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006), are no doubt partly rooted in Auster's well-known opprobrium for the presidency of George W. Bush, its conservative rhetoric and values, and the radicalization of the American political scene in recent years. This change in the political climate – and possibly also Auster's growing age, perhaps discernible in the increasing presence, in his later novels, of older characters taking stock of their lives – have brought about the development of a more pronounced social awareness in his writing. It is all too apt that what had been a subtle undercurrent in the *Trilogy* should be brought to the foreground in *Invisible*: in some ways the later novel's frequent allusions to American and French military interventions on foreign soil cannot fail to bring to mind the aggressive foreign policy of the Bush years, while references to race relations chime with the debate about whether America is a post-racial country – *the* debate which accompanied Barak Obama's first presidential campaign and subsequent election. If the *Trilogy* is run through by subterranean racial tensions that are inherent in the mythical construction, as well as the history, of the United States, *Invisible* shifts the emphasis to the here and now, drawing attention to the long journey still ahead of America – and indeed the world at large – to make true the declaration that "all men are created equal". Social justice continues to be a work-in-progress, *Invisible* seems to suggest: all the liberal piety in the world is still not enough against the weight of history and of entrenched economic differences.

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4. The New York Trilogy by Paul Auster In City of Glass, part one of Auster's trilogy, detective novelist Daniel Quinn receives several late-night phone calls, wrong numbers, from somebody seeking a private investigator named Paul Auster. He decides to play along and soon finds that he has been hired to protect a Kaspar Hauser-like child abuse survivor from his criminally insane father. For all of Auster's games, this remains a glorious detective thriller with all the feints, reversals and sheer page-turning velocity that you'd find in a classic Ellery Queen mystery. 5. Cast in Doubt by Lynne Auster associates modernism largely with the secluded, invisible, despicable Fanshawe, whose spell and influence over him the narrator of the third novel of the trilogy manages to break. Export citation Request permission. Copyright. 3 Emerson, Ralph Waldo, "Circles", in The Portable Emerson, ed. Bode, Carl (New York: Penguin, 1981), 228–40, 238. 4 Alford, Steven E., "Mirrors of Madness: Paul Auster's The New York Trilogy," Critique, 37, 1 (Fall 1995), 17–33, 18. 5 Ibid., 29. 6 Russell, Alison, "Deconstructing The New York Trilogy: Paul Auster's Anti-detective Fiction," Critique, 21, 2 (Winter 1990), 71–84, 75. 7 Ibid., 72. Paul Auster's novels include The Brooklyn Follies, Oracle Night, and In the Country of Last Things, as well as two memoirs, a collection of essays, a volume of poems, and the screenplays for several films. His work has been translated into more… More about Paul Auster. About Paul Auster. Paul Auster's novels include The Brooklyn Follies, Oracle Night, and In the Country of Last Things, as well as two memoirs, a collection of essays, a volume of poems, and the screenplays for several films. His work has been translated into more… – The Washington Post "Auster harnesses the inquiring spirit any reader brings to a mystery, redirecting it from the grubby search for a wrongdoer to the more rarified search for self." – The New York Times Book Review. Table Of Contents.