

HOW NOIR IS DARK?

PAUL AUSTER'S *MAN IN THE DARK*

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The *recovery*, bruited in *Oracle Night*, in light of the platinum-class metatagging of *The Music of Chance*, plays itself out as an arresting “farmer’s breakfast” in *Man in the Dark* (2008).¹ Of course the methodology of filmic metaphors, deployed as passwords into the heart of a darkening power, spins along as cannily as ever. There is a counterspin to that martial gait in the form of a dialogue regarding a primacy of female initiatives in film classics revered by art-house audiences not apt to take seriously the mall-plex entertainments of Jacques Demy (becoming increasingly dear to Auster). That leading interactive motif stars an aged Pulitzer Prize winning book critic and his twenty-three year old granddaughter, living together along with her mother, and both driven to chronic insomnia by personal traumas, which they assuage by copious DVD movie viewing. The girl is enrolled in a college film studies program and thinks highly of her own advanced skills in that field. “I wouldn’t have chosen it (Satyagit Ray’s *Apu*) unless it was good. No junk. That’s the rule, remember? All sorts of movies, from the wacky to the sublime, but no junk.”² Her grandfather, “August Brill,” who narrates the account, is particularly fond of the Indian masterpiece because it’s about a writer. Both of these inquiring minds feel compelled to trot out a little explication after each viewing, and the session comprising *Apu*—and also Jean Renoir’s *Grand Illusion* [hold that thought] and Vittorio De Sica’s *The Bicycle Thief*—brings forth her “theory of film-making that impressed me with its originality and acumen,”³ namely, that inanimate objects [a box would not be one of these selections] caught up in the action express “human emotions.”⁴ She observes that in each scenario a long-suffering woman is revealed in her glory by the pathos [which could readily curdle to bathos] elicited by some domestic object. Brill then shoots from the lip that each is revealed to be a confirmation of feminist dogma to the effect that women “are the ones that carry the world. They take care of the real business while their hapless men stumble around making a hash of things.”⁵

“At last, Katya said, giving me a small poke in the ribs. A man who gets it.

Let’s not exaggerate. I’m just adding a footnote to your theory. A very astute theory, I might add.”⁶

While these two smug and strategically troubled night owls pin badges on each other, we are well to notice something else, along lines of their explicitly formulated blind spot, the “junk” movies of Jacques Demy. In his last film, the critically *mouéd*, *Trois Places pour le Vingt-Six (Three Seats for the Twenty-Sixth)* (1988), there is business in which the highly-acclaimed (in France) and self-styled inspiration for progressive politics, Yves Montand, unknowingly has an incestuous affair with his daughter, long-abandoned along with her mother. In the novel in question, Brill does an inordinate amount of caressing of Katya and adopts the following register of the seraglio in regard to his little soulmate’s inertia: “... unmoving for hours on end, refusing to stir herself even to pick up the phone, showing little or no signs of life except when I’m touching or holding her. It’s probably my fault. I’ve encouraged her to lead this flattened out [brill being a flat-fish] existence, and maybe I should put a stop to it—although I doubt she’d listen to me if I tried.”⁷ (This latter clause taking us back to Orr’s assignment to “make an effort.”) Brill’s daughter’s name is Miriam. Montand’s lover is “Marion” and her mother is “Mylène.” Demy delicately eviscerates that charming bounder in Marseille, all the while—clouds from *Kiss Me Deadly* hovering at the Château d’If—advising that the slapdash trio in question is not to be sniffed at. Auster also adopts that game of mildly dyspeptic compromise in regard to the easy-does-it trio introducing White Nights to their retreat in Vermont.

Notwithstanding his high stature in the literary world (under considerable pressure for dovetailing with the illiteracy of “Yves” (Montand—-from “Ivo,” *Monta!* as to being called to rise to a major challenge), Katya finds “August” “hard to get...out of your mouth,” and he proposes “Ed,” as in “me little ole ‘ed’”⁸. Brill the intellectual lacks the conviction to so much as finish producing a memoir and lies awake at night dreaming up stories in order to “prevent me from thinking about [remembering] the things I would prefer to forget.”⁹ Eventually he does divulge the lion’s share of his malaise as further whitewashed by Demy’s *The Young Girls of Rochefort* (1967). Brill is slotted into the Gene Kelly role of falling for a pretty, French music student (studying at the Juilliard) first encountered by chance on the street wearing supersaturated-color clothes (a bright red coat). On becoming his wife--some time after their first kiss, in 1955(the year Mike got down to some dangerous kissing), characteristically

described by Brill as, “A kiss for the ages”¹⁰ --- Sonia (Demy’s “Solange”), “was walking down the street one afternoon on her way home, when all of a sudden a feeling of joy rose up in her, an inexplicable, overwhelming joy. It was as if the entire universe were rushing into her body...and in that instant she understood that everything was connected to everything else, that everyone in the world was connected to everyone else in the world...”¹¹ Though she perceived that strike (that kiss) of power to be unique, a “binding force,” Sonia, like Solange opting for musical composition that could have been produced centuries ago, understood her best interests to lie with a take upon such a ground in terms of “God,” to whom she spoke and prayed and from whom she was “comforted.”¹² Be that as it may, her excursion into a sensual (musical) uncanniness, met with, in Brill, a canny, intellectual bemusement, studiously tolerant and adamantly scandalized.¹³ Having, in addition to that, discounted her culinary skills, her taste in fashion and her reading abilities,¹⁴ there came a time for the literary elite to recast her as but one of his lovers¹⁵ (something Montand would have been expert at), and Sonia divorced him, only to return nine years later, to a pairing of conventional sophisticates, and grandparents,¹⁶ and a wall set against her ownmost motives. Proud as he was of the widely celebrated refinements of his cognitive penetration, Brill could recognize, in a refracted, self-flattering way, that---for all his feminist credentials---he had failed to respond to the non-rationalist priorities of her carnal gifts.

“I’ve thought about this for years, and the only half-reasonable explanation I’ve ever come up with is that there’s something wrong with me, a flaw of the mechanism, a damaged part gumming up the works. I’m not talking about moral weakness. I’m talking about my mind, my mental makeup. I’m somewhat better now...”¹⁷

As a college student (and no doubt even then a presumed moral genius) he would write about “the tragic shittiness of fate...”¹⁸, a slice of *profondeur* elicited by thinking that he’d never see Sonia again after their first brief encounter on the street. After she discovers his weakness for the Tenderloin District, she fires back his way the trope he used to cover the dynamic heartland, (“fate”)—“I’ve always thought you were a man with a great soul, but it turns out you’re just another lying shit.”¹⁹

It was the fearful securement of a Pandora’s Box, containing compositional challenges like those, which kept the long-term convalescent, from a *car crash*, intent on absorption with “stories” in the dark and putting a long-term hold on *remembering* in print what could only lead to major embarrassment. The saga he teases along at the point of reportage has the makings of a left-wing comic book with a cast of characters courtesy of Spillane and Bezzerides.²⁰ Orr had his Nick to help him feel good about himself, and Brill has a “Brick” (a gamine-like professional magician doing children’s birthdays as the *Great Zavello* [as in {Carl} Evello, one of the more amusing of Mike’s nemeses]), hearkening to the far-cry from Fred Astaire, namely, “Stone” of *The Music of Chance*. (That Brick has a lovely but hot-tempered and overbearing wife, “Flora” [“Flower”], who hails from Argentina, presses the Astaire mockage with respect to Rita [Hayworth], his Argentinian romantic interest in the film, *You Were Never Lovelier*. That Brick is the name of police-saint James Cagney in the film, *G-Men* tends to accentuate the matinee-market implication of Brill’s oeuvre.) Brick finds himself in a deep hole and makes his way out of it by virtue of a military man who brings him up to speed with an assignment to murder a key figure in the crisis bearing down on them. A contact, “Frisk,” reminiscent of Mike’s not very good (flatfoot) friend, Pat, pronouncing names referring to the American atomic power program, gets Brick on track by way of the gambit, “Is the name Giordano Bruno familiar to you?”²¹ In the sixteenth century, Bruno had proposed an infinite number of worlds due to God’s infinite powers. This bastardization—for which Bruno *burned* at the stake—of the quantum factor of “many worlds,” hearkening to finite freedom of choice, installs Brill’s nocturnal laying down the law in the form of a Harry Potter-like (or voodoo-like) playground whereby the author of that particularly dismal scenario (namely, Brill) would have to die in order to restore the players to a more comfy homeland.²² “The old man invented you in order to kill him.”/ “So now it’s a suicide.”/ “In a roundabout way, yes.”²³ The combative crisis to be expunged consists of a second civil war in America, triggered by the affront to liberal rectitude represented by the ballot fiasco of the year 2000 and the ascendancy of the unspeakable Dubbahya. The latter and his fascist honky goons are pitted against the modern saints of NYC, Massachusetts, Minnesota et al. That would be a war that the “George” of Demy’s *The Model Shop* would be really liking.²⁴ In auxiliary roles to Brick’s rendezvous with Brill are two women who ring bells for us, however much they may miff the reluctant hit man, and thereby cast the melodrama in a light designed to expose its preposterousness. There is “Molly,” “a waitress,” “a thin, pale blonde with a weary look in her eyes and the hint of a smile on her lips”²⁵—“Come in, Mike”—who shifts (for a commission) the special forces guy into “the Exeter [as in Exit-er] Hotel and, then, after that proves to be a bit depressing, puts him up at her place—“My boyfriend lives with me, and he has a bad temper...”²⁶—(for a hefty toll). There is “Virginia,” “a tall, attractive woman with dark hair,”²⁷ very efficient (as was Velda) in seeing to the would-be lone-wolf killing machine’s making the most productive

contacts. "It's good to see you again, she whispers into his ear. Brick remains mute, his arms at his sides..."²⁸ Virginia/Velda brings Frisk onstream, "carrying a black satchel that resembles a doctor's bag"²⁹ and the pseudo-Soberin propels Mike the Brick toward Brill by way of an injection inducing, as the sonorous rhetoric of the invasive doctor puts it "The black void of oblivion, a nothingness as deep and dark as death."³⁰ She re-emerges (on the *twenty-seventh*)³¹ to help him cut to the chase ("Something big")³², perishes in her bombed house—the first of "Two places" she wants him to attend to³³—Brick being unable to *mount* the fiery stairs³⁴; and he is killed by enemy bullets,³⁵ Brill having prudently done the math to sidestep the voodoo-magic, creationist minefield.

On polishing off his plucky players, Brill, "lying in bed and staring into the dark," can only think, "the war goes on."³⁶ And here we must ask what kind of war, what kind of killing ground, is on his mind? He's scribbled in the night air a contretemps in the spirit of Orr and his Blue Team xenophobes. He's smothered *that* declaration of eternal war by way of the supposed *bon mot* from his daughter's research on Blue State Yankee, Nathaniel Hawthorne's daughter, namely, "As the weird world rolls on."³⁷ The soap opera lineage of that pronouncement (close cousin to *As the World Turns*) ---for Brill, "as good as anything I've ever read"³⁸ --- should give one pause.³⁹ So should Brill's proposal that they buy a camper and travel together,⁴⁰ presumably, then, watching choice television at trailer parks, cheek by jowl with Red State escapists.

Adopting Orr's perspective of nostalgic nihilism, Brill, the ascetic sex-addict,⁴¹ readily finds his way to concupiscence of ideological crusading. That war goes on, and so does the one in which he smothered his wife, a conflict whose molten components would seem to entail unrestrained ---because terror-driven--- carnage. Watching Katya's boyfriend in Iraq on the internet, being beheaded by zealots united in fearful cowardice, would also entail a terrifyingly uncontrollable, unexploitable partisanship. Bereft of any coherent, adult purchase upon overcoming resentment while roiling in nostalgic profits, he has become a long-term user of diversions, his career coming to the appropriately shabby point of proposing to co-script with Katya screenplays akin to the cartoon about Brick, but with a Demy touch.

"... we should work on something light --- a frothy bagatelle, as frivolous and diverting as possible...
...We've turned into a couple of sad sacks, you and I, and I'm proposing a cure, a remedy to ward off the blues."⁴²

Brill and the girls hit the rural routes in a manner reminiscent of Montand and the girls boarding the train to Paris. While the latter would never lose sleep over the cheesiness of his choices, you know Brill would. Pondering his exit-strategy apropos of Brick, the story spinner offers a glimpse into his engagement with real history. "Hope or no hope? Both options are available, and yet neither one is fully satisfying to me. Is there a middle way after such a beginning...?"⁴³ (This logic is put under quite insupportable pressure in coming within the third-way orbit of that other randy, self-admiring liberal, Bill.) Effectively frozen by the fearfulness of dynamic power (dynamic love) and choking on the tainted love of his ruse of public beneficence, Brill (like Demy) contrives some kind of deliverance by the middle way of personal affections, however clumsy and jaded. Though he killed his marriage along lines of a fatuous violence (far less bloody but no less cheap than that of the video avengers), his efforts toward his daughter and granddaughter prove to be at least marginally more positive. But in view of the exigencies implicit in *Kiss Me Deadly*, what are the odds of making some waves that count while stupefied by fear? Is there a hope that heartfelt familial and otherwise personal attentions can steady a sensibility to the point of some efficacy in response to the workings of sensual power? Like Demy, Auster recites cruel ironies about popular securements, the better to establish the magnitude of integral accomplishment. Also like Demy (and Tocqueville), he can't believe that anyone (let alone any association) can lift majoritarian world history to a currency of serious power. Hence the narrative complements the subtle death-camp machinations of Sonia's marriage with episodes regarding her family members or their acquaintances coming under the aegis of, severally, Nazis and Communists. One of the vignettes consists of a woman, a professional musician, and her loving husband, who disappears and is found, murdered, due to his running afoul the Soviets while acting as a spy.⁴⁴ The woman's name, Françoise Duclos, shows a kinship with Sonia's Solange, played in the Demy film by Françoise Dorléac. Another of the stories features a Resistance volunteer in Belgium in 1942 being captured and then drawn and quartered⁴⁵ (thus implying a solid provenance for the Islamist vigilantes). As if to leave open a chink in this wall of slaughter, there is a tale of a Jewish family being saved by a captain in the SS, who had fallen in love with their daughter.⁴⁶

¹ Paul Auster, *Man in the Dark* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2008), p.180.

² *Ibid.*, p.18.

³ *Ibid.*, p.16.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 21.

⁶ Ibid., p. 22.

⁷ Ibid., p. 15.

⁸ Ibid., p. 131.

⁹ Ibid., p. 2.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 135.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 148.

¹² Ibid., p. 149.

¹³ Auster's deposition of Brill's slick, arrogant damage-control here brings to mind Chekhov's investigations of self-promotional academicians unaware of having opted for crudity. "...she didn't want to tell me because she was afraid I would think she was stupid. I was so much smarter than she was, so superior to her when it came to intellectual matters--her words, not mine--and she was worried that I'd burst out laughing at my ignorant wife when she told me that she'd found God. I didn't laugh. Heathen that I am, I didn't laugh. Sonia had her own way of doing things, and who was I to make fun of her?"(Ibid.).

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 146f.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 155f.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 161-163.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 153.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 137.

¹⁹ The shortfall blighting Sonia's life has been traced along lines of film appreciation in face of the noirish emanations coming from the story of Brick. Brill comes to regard Yasujiro Ozu's *The Tokyo Story* as the feel-good epic to end them all. Seizing upon a daughter-in-law's solicitude toward aged in-laws which far surpasses that of their children (Ibid., pp.73ff.), the professional reader typically misses the cinematic point. Setsuko Hara's rectitude in caring for the seniors is not in fact a display of paradigmatic, feminist ethics. Her *physical* poise in lovingly dealing with family history was, to anyone not blinded by nostalgic ideology, Ozu's overriding focus. We'd be far less thrilled sitting through two hours of one-upmanship and Salvation Army service, than beholding that amazing round-the-clock ballerina's barely perceptible sensual stardom.

Bolstering the account of Brill's bathetic, astigmatic rudeness as impinging upon Sonia is his paean to brother-in-law, Gil, a labor lawyer and conciliation specialist for the City of Newark who distinguished himself by indiscriminately siding with the rioters during the race upheaval of the 1960's (Ibid., p. 82). As a law student—something like Orr's councillor, Bruce Adler, he prided himself (and certainly Brill was onside) in serially ripping off a restaurant, from out of a gambit of pretending to be waiting for a date and thus consuming free buttered rolls before leaving due to a putative no-show (Ibid., pp. 83f.). He "achieved a personal record of twenty-seven free rolls consumed at a single sitting..." before going on to "a growing involvement with...Idealistic, left-wing liberalism" (Ibid., p. 84).

And then there was the moment—very unlike an Ozu film—when his mother babysat during one of Sonia's recital tours, and toddler Miriam "clamped her mouth on her grandmother's right breast, and then came up shouting : Now, *that's* a pizza![inspired by a TV commercial]. My mother laughed so hard she let out a fart, a gigantic trumpet blast of a fart. That got Miriam laughing so wildly, she peed in her pants. She jumped off the sofa and started running around the room, yelling at the top of her lungs: Fart-pee, fart-pee, *oui ,oui, oui!*"(Ibid, p.151).

Sonia, predeceased, chose to be buried in *La Cimetièrre Montparnasse* (Ibid. , p.102). She had striven to sustain an uncanny love as comprising "forbearance" from resentment—a poise of which Setsuko Hara was a master—and had been met by canny and therefore cleverly guarded incredulity, discreet ridicule and patronizing, gauchely deformed forbearance.

"Dear God, fill the emptiness inside me and teach me how to live, to forbear, to give myself to others. She looked and sounded like a child, a small simpleminded child, and I have to say that I was a little thrown by it—but also moved, deeply, deeply moved. It was as if a door had opened, and I was looking at a new Sonia, a different person from the one I'd known for the past five years. When she realized I was in the room, she turned around and gave me an embarrassed smile. I'm sorry, she said, I didn't want you to know. I walked over to the bed and sat down. Don't be sorry, I told her. I'm just a little puzzled that's all. We had a long talk after that, at least an hour, the two of us side by side on the bed, discussing the mysteries of her soul"(Ibid., p. 148).

Brill was sure that Sonia had inspired Miriam in her concentration upon writers like John Donne and Rose Hawthorne, who demonstrated that "people have the power to change" (Ibid., p.46). Both of those figures converted

from individualistic self-absorption to pious self-sacrifice along conventional Christian lines. To Miriam and Brill those episodes were extremely noteworthy. They were also impressed by a line of poetry from Rose's pre-conversion experience, "*As the weird world rolls on*" (Ibid., p. 45), which, to say the least, casts some doubt upon their judgment. Could Sonia have been referring to powers on behalf of change which neither Donne, nor Rose, nor Miriam, nor Brill could comprehend?

²⁰ "...more often than not, my mind eventually drifts away from the story I'm trying to tell to the things I don't want to think about" (Ibid., p.2). The unthinkable intercedes not only in reveries about Brill's past, but in the content of the self-seeking fantasy itself.

²¹ Ibid., p. 68.

²² Ibid., pp. 68ff.

²³ Ibid., p.71.

²⁴ "Foreign policy: no meddling anywhere...Domestic policy: universal health insurance, no more oil, no more cars or planes, a fourfold increase in teachers' salaries (to attract the brightest students to the profession), strict gun control, free education and job training for the poor..." (Ibid., pp.62f.).

²⁵ Ibid., p. 26.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 40.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 34.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 38.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 66.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 72.

³¹ Ibid., p. 108.

³² Ibid., p. 110.

³³ The second being Brill's house (Ibid., p.113).

³⁴ Ibid., p. 117.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 118.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 45f.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 180.

³⁹ The work signs off with this bit of Emmy Award winning dialogue:

"When I was typing up the quote, I said to myself, He's going to like this one. It could have been written for him.

The weird world rolls on Miriam.

Crutch in hand, she walks back to the bed and sits down beside me. Yes, Dad, she says, studying her daughter with a worried look in her eyes, the weird world rolls on" (Ibid., p. 180).

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 165.

⁴¹ Brill's being measured against Mike's rising to Pandora's Box is signalled by, "solid marriage in one box, lively mistress in another box, and I...with the skill and cunning never to open both boxes at the same time" (Ibid., p. 156).

⁴² Ibid., p. 168.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 88.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 125-128.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 121.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 122-125.