

# THE SAGA OF JACQUES DEMY: PAUL AUSTER'S *THE BOOK OF ILLUSIONS*

Copyright © 2010 by James Clark

Of all the Paul Auster novels, the title for the text, *The Book of Illusions*, carries us farthest into the heart of its discernment. Whereas a cursory reading (utterly pointless, when it comes to that most nuanced of projects) would settle upon the “illusions” dished up by a set of films under the auspices of one “Hector Mann,” a more fertile line of initial engagement would twig on to the name of the narrator/protagonist, “David Zimmer.” *Zimmer* denotes an enclosed space, a room. The Zimmer in question would thereby fall in line with a horde of Auster players the centripetal energies of whom render them, as extirpated from a wide, cogently sensuous dynamic, ascetic (illusory and delusory) figures whose compensatory bids on behalf of carnal frappe sour to the level of bathetic insistence, the interpersonal range of which would tend to *hectoring*, harassment of others for the sake of bending them to its will. Woven into the illusory exploits, thus structured, of Zimmer, the locked room, and Hector, the loose cannon, is a very familiar motif (chimaeric, illusory in its location as overtone to banal events) drawn from the 1955 film noir, *Kiss Me Deadly*, namely, Pandora’s Box, a fountain of dynamic power to master or misplay with destructive, and sometimes deadly, consequences.

As it happens, the silent movies from 1928, which Hector directed and in which he starred as a comedian, come with titles imparting another crucial vein, in the form of overtone of illusory vigor deriving from the work of another filmmaker, namely, Jacques Demy (1931-1990). One such title, *Jumping Jacks*, represents a geyser of factors redolent of that topspin with regard to which he installed, as epigraph to his first feature film, the phrase, “Cry who can/ *Laugh* who will.” The bouncy Jacks would be Jacques (Demy) and Jacques (Tati) (1908-1982), filmmaker-comedian and inspiration of the former. Another “Jack” caught up here, is “Jackie,” the sometimes lovely, obsessive roulette-wheel, jumping-ball, devotee in Demy’s *Bay of Angels* (1963). Also it would refer to the jacking system of the pal of the investigator in *Kiss Me Deadly*, rendered unstable by the investigator’s nemesis. Then, too, it would cover the donkey of Demy’s film, *Donkey Skin* (1970), whose skin becomes the disguise of a beautiful but limited princess fleeing (bounding away from, in graceful slow-motion) her father’s attentions. Finally, it would include the donkey, “Balthazar,” in the film, *Balthazar at Risk* (1966), who was cruelly made to jump by a thug attaching firecrackers to his tail. (Production of this film was facilitated by Demy for his compatriot, Robert Bresson [1901-1999].)<sup>1</sup>

Zimmer has lost his wife and two children by way of a plane crash, and has proceeded into a bathetic, alcohol-fuelled extravaganza of grieving, extending for months on end and putting an end to his career as a professor of comparative literature. As a priest of classical rationalism, he has allowed the “chain of cause and effect,” surging from his father-in-law’s cancer to the responsive visit by the daughter and grandchildren to the mechanical failure of the vehicle, to send him into near-suicidal torpor, only to be struck one night by the elicitation (somehow proof against the dreaded determinism) of *laughter* (“Laugh who will”) by one of Hector’s movies on late-night television. (During his long venting of blues [“Cry who can”] he has sought a resurrection of sorts for his wife, in the form of dressing in her clothes and applying her makeup and perfume. “It seemed to bring her back more vividly, to evoke her presence for longer periods of time.”<sup>2</sup>) Though by instinct and training a practitioner wedded to mundane eventuation, he does go on to recognize in film, particularly silent films, an incidence of special dynamics, “...a grammar of pure kinesis.”<sup>3</sup> (For what it is worth, Demy was bi-sexual, maintaining a less than constant marriage with filmmaker, Agnes Varda (b. 1928), by which two children ensued, and eventually succumbing to AIDS.)

So impressed by Hector's art in its offering him a lifeline out of (resurrection from) self-destructively preserving the "tragedy" of his family's misadventure as against the vagaries of material causality<sup>4</sup> --- thereby accomplishing a (less than cogent) resurrection of their presence ("resurrection" being a keynotal trope of *Kiss Me Deadly*)--- Zimmer (flush with massive accident insurance payoffs) resolves to seek out Hector's full output, ensconced in six film museums around the globe, and subsequently feels compelled to write a book on that hitherto neglected enterprise. Until then he had confined his publications to straightforward humanist investigation --- for instance, the topic of fascist writers like Celine and Pound in light of warfare in its most blunt form (the title of the treatise being, *Voices in the War Zone*.)<sup>5</sup> Auster's work persistently maintains Heraclitean contradiction toward such limp-wristed constructs, especially resorting to Heraclitus' contrarian sense of "war" as endless struggle against drift toward self-exaggerating ---Zimmer-like--- stasis and its bluesy personalism. As such, it covertly recommends scrutiny of the theme-song of *Kiss Me Deadly*, "Rather Have the Blues" (than what I've got). Zimmer's academic prejudices, including the assumption that movies are "fluff,"<sup>6</sup> as measured against the supposedly grown-up business of literature, thereby begin to come under fire, that "fire" by which Heraclitus alluded to an unsuspected constellation of dynamics as including human intent, and that fire Zimmer himself could tentatively touch upon at the outset of his explorations, when he observed that such silent productions as those by Hector Mann were "thought translated into action, human will expressing itself through the human body, and therefore...for all time."<sup>7</sup>

The logistics by which Zimmer becomes an authority on the twelve extant films of an antique figure curiously radiating up-to-the-minute urgencies make clear that there is nothing really authoritative about this protagonist's unusual action. His fear of flying, entwined with an insistence upon transcendent machinations befalling his family, drives him to the sober ministrations of one "Dr. J. M. Singh" (an illusory colleague of whom would be *Kiss Me Deadly's* Dr. G. E. Soberin, a self-absorbed, blues-loving menace and truth-serum enthusiast) who, after rigorous and sentimental consideration of his petition on behalf of "a pharmacological solution to the problem" prescribes a pill as follows: "Just use as directed, Mr. Zimmer, and you'll be turned into a zombie, a being without a self, a blotted-out lump of flesh. You can fly across entire continents on this stuff, and I guarantee that you'll never even know you've left the ground."<sup>8</sup> He backs into the writing task by way of the prerequisite that the Vatican-like academic repositories of the films he wants to see will only make them available to PhDs researching publish-or-perish homilies. Using the writing about such preciously distributed material as a species of tranquilizer for his fit of grief, Zimmer has more in common with a patient in Intensive Care than with someone able to address full-bodied humans with significant discoveries.

"I was in the book, and the book was in my head, and as long as I stayed inside my head, I could go on writing the book. It was like living in a padded cell, but of all the lives I could have lived at that moment, it was the only one that made sense to me. I wasn't capable of being in the world, and I knew that if I tried to go back into it before I was ready, I would be crushed."<sup>9</sup>

Teetering between "going back" to a world in thrall to talk and proceeding into a world of silences, Zimmer is presented with creative possibilities in the form of an invitation to meet the intriguing artist, who had disappeared in 1929 and had been presumed dead. Having gone through the well-worn channels and had his book, *The Silent World of Hector Mann*, published by the University of Pennsylvania Press, Zimmer had become the author of record concerning the filmmaker, and hence a lightning-rod for any vestiges of the powers latent in those elicitations of laughter. The leadup to this moment of decision comprised an excruciating drunken discharge of hectoring at a party with his former colleagues and signing on to translate Chateaubriand's *Memoirs of a Dead Man* for Columbia University Press. While the former context appeared to have lost its hold on him, that free-lancing apropos of an author capable of Heraclitean paradox appeared to hold promise of traction for his breakaway.

*"The changing forms of my life are thus intermingled with one another. It has sometimes happened to me in my moments of prosperity to have to speak of my days of hardship; and in my*

*times of tribulation to retrace the periods of my happiness. My youth entering into old age, the gravity of my later years tingeing and saddening the years of my innocence, the rays of my sun crossing and blending together from the moment of its rising to the moment of its setting, have produced in my stories a kind of confusion—or, if you will, a kind of mysterious unity. My cradle recalls something of my tomb, my tomb something of my cradle; my sufferings become pleasures, my pleasures sufferings...*"<sup>10</sup>

The attention to such sensibility uniquely remote from the academe entangling the protagonist serves as a bridge of sorts to the all-but-dead Hector (and all-but-dead Demy). The correspondence with someone purporting to be the artist's wife includes the enticement of work produced after the silents but never released to the general public. That would further confirm a link to the reflections of "Chateaubriand"—a term denoting grilled meat, but, with the "Chateau" aspect, springing into the issue of the big fire, grilling everyone for miles around, emanating from the big house in *Kiss Me Deadly*—whose memoirs were to be seen only after his death. That web of suggestion would especially pertain to the career of Demy, most of whose films have never been widely distributed and some of which have, for various reasons, almost literally never been seen.

The upshot, then, of the protagonist's spanning a small-market book and small-market films—all of which carry a payload of unorthodox intent and monstrous complication, as well as biographical issues—is to bring forward not simply—as in so many others of Auster's novels—flickering of highly charged vignettes from Demy's films, but the persona of Demy himself, and his wife, Agnès Varda. The correspondent, who prefers to be known as Frieda Spelling (a feminist hard-liner like Varda, not apt to be comfortable calling herself "Mrs." [Mann], a gambit recalling the "M. Dame" in *The Young Girls of Rochefort*) has met the love of her life in his rescuing her from an armed and deranged bank robber, "Nutso Knox," whose poor but amusing grammar and past history as an auto mechanic<sup>11</sup> evokes the "Nick" of *Kiss Me Deadly*. Thereby Hector Mann, H.M., would be M.H., Mike Hammer, and Frieda would be Velda, one of whose attributes was to fret about and ridicule Mike's appointment with abysmal mystery, which she sneeringly refers to as "the Great Whatzit." Would we, then, be far off the mark in noticing how her name, Spelling, comes close to (Mickey) "Spillane," the writer of the first version of *Kiss Me Deadly*, found to be inadequate due to a no-nonsense simplism no one but an ideological brute could prefer?

Just before he is accosted for the sake of getting a move on—out to New Mexico, home of not only Mann but also the Manhattan project so central to *Kiss Me Deadly's* wild ride—a beery Zimmer drives along a dark and rainy road in the hills of Vermont and swerves to avoid a dog, "a wet and ragged creature blundering through the night"<sup>12</sup> (curiously having chosen to be in the middle of the road), and smashes his truck into a utility pole. This action recalls Mike Hammer's being flagged down by Christina to kick off the noir, their being ambushed a few minutes later by Soberin's School of Hard Knocks; and also it is very reminiscent of a film by Demy's crony, Alain Robbe-Grillet, namely, *L'Immortelle* (1961), where Mike and Velda's stand-ins are smashed up *twice*, by, severally, a clutch of Dobermans; and it recreates a scene from Auster's *Timbuktu* (1999) (published just prior to *The Book of Illusions*), where Mr. Bones, a much put-upon dog, talks himself into committing suicide on a busy highway, with a view to accessing the paradise his loopy master has filled his head with. Dragging himself to his hideaway after this injury by reason of both inertia and intent, he is clipped all over again by the intrusion of a woman having *driven* up to him and drawn his attention with a large red umbrella, a flashlight and a gun. One other thing: she has a birth mark over one side of her face, and, "Her hair was cut in such a way as to obscure most of it, and she held her head at an awkward tilt to prevent the hair from moving."<sup>13</sup> Christina again, but with tinges of Geneviève in Demy's *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* and also the princess of *Donkey Skin*, whose face and head movements are inflected by her donning a donkey's head and pelt to maintain some semblance of viability while attempting to reinvent herself.

Alma ("bountiful"<sup>14</sup>) Grund ("origin"), though a secondary player in the narrative (an emissary for Hector and Frieda) and prone to missing the point about the pros and cons of Hector's strange output, had imbibed that topspin which was the whole issue about the works: "An immense and horrifying beauty had

opened up before me, and all I wanted was to go on looking at it, and to go on looking into the eyes of this woman with the strange double face as we stood in that room, listening to the rain pound on top of us like ten thousand drums scaring up the devils of the night.”<sup>15</sup>

In the course of inducing blue and frozen and vulgar Zimmer to hurry down to the *Blue Stone Ranch*, Alma, who has written a biography of the elusive master, paints a picture of a voracious womanizer with a weakness for wallowing in guilt. A squalid lovers’ triangle leaves one woman dead from a bullet in the eye; Hector buries her body and hits the road, bringing his career as a handsome comic to a sudden end. Adopting the name, “Herman Loesser,” from a name tag on a cap he found and used as part of his disguise, Hector goes through several self-despising and self-dramatizing episodes of atonement to confirm the realization that pronouncing his new name *Lesser*, or *Loser*, would make no difference. “Either way, Hector figured that he had found the name he deserved.”<sup>16</sup> Zimmer has described one of the early comedies, *The Teller’s Tale*, clearly feeling the heat from Demy’s *Bay of Angels*, where a mild-mannered bank teller has a quite harrowing fling at the roulette tables of Nice and Monte Carlo. In Hector’s take upon the range of the clerk, there is the employee, rooted to the office, a pretty secretary to flirt with and money to count while amusingly coping with sawdust falling from a construction project upstairs.<sup>17</sup> That is the vignette which first made Zimmer laugh. He and Alma have, along such sightlines, to engage the bewildering reverence for banality in their little hero, and in their own discernment.

On reaching the Home of the Blues, Zimmer notes that Hector shares with Chateaubriand a love for tending trees. “*They are my family. I have no other, and I hope to be near them when I die.*”<sup>18</sup> His preoccupation with the challenges entailed in meeting the spinner of cinematic magic renders him oblivious to sensual concomitants, like the gleaming moon.<sup>19</sup> He is given a brief audience with Hector, in which they feel a bond in having both “wanted to be dead.”<sup>20</sup> The whole course of the narrative to this point has made very clear that both Zimmer and Hector lack that sharpening of consciousness by which to depart with cogency the doldrums of world historical orthodoxy. But Hector has something up his sleeve, and his death-bed summons to Zimmer concerns the latter’s publication record of interest in the strain of iconoclasm running through French literature. “It is no accident that you have spent years on the question of Rimbaud. [But course listings tend to solidify, thereby implying concentration that is in fact illusory.] You understand what it means to turn your back on something” [Zimmer’s expertise would center upon turning his back on that zone of special rigor superseding the blues].<sup>21</sup> Turning one’s back on “something” flares through this architecture like a Times Square fireworks cannonade. Not only (and not primarily) does it speak to iconoclasm, to turning--- in fact, or, more likely, implicitly--- against all the venerable “truths” driving world history. It speaks to the historical (socio-economic) wages to be paid by those thus stepping out of line, wages almost universally found to be insupportable. Auster’s novels over the past decade have been galvanized by the phenomenon of hearts ardent to the point of striking discoveries, and being subsequently throttled by the supposedly tender ministrations of “loved-ones,” whose main motive is to maintain a fatuous, arthritic, predictable, death-denying and totalitarian mechanism of civilizational comfort. There was Willy the Santa Claus, forcing damaged goods upon his faithful mutt, Mr. Bones, in *Timbuktu* (1999); there was Orr, the exponent of blues, nauseating his wife, Grace, in *Oracle Night* (2003); there was Brill, the humanities bard, suffocating his wife, Sonia, in *Man in the Dark* (2008); and there was Adam, the justice activist with “tons” of friends, out for the blood of far-from-beloved but shockingly impressive Born, in *Invisible* (2009). And here there is Frieda (Spelling/Spillane), putative saint on behalf of her husband’s invention. Although Frieda wrote the letters of invitation, the final pages make clear that it was Hector and Alma who prevailed in bringing Zimmer into the twilight moments of the comedian, in order to circulate at last the body of work he produced in exile, and, being persistent in self-flagellation, to which he affixed an edict to have destroyed at his death (thus not only negating his most ardent moments but also denying to the world what initiatives he has managed).

Frieda, as Zimmer deduced in retrospect, was wedded to that factor of negation. Zimmer infers, from the violent denouement, that, “There was no anger in her, no sense of betrayal or revenge—simply a fanatic’s devotion to a just and holy cause.”<sup>22</sup> But the murder of her husband before he could fully expatiate to Zimmer his renewed gusto for sharing his understanding with others and the scorched earth

meticulousness of the erasure of every trace of his later work shot far beyond mere resolute cooperation with a loved-one's grotesque self-destructiveness. "Sense of betrayal and revenge"—*resentment*—would be the only cogent basis for her rampage; and the narrative's delineation of her Surrealist—Bretonian—slant helps to make this warfare transparent. In the course of a youthful Frieda's bedside attentions to her critically wounded man of action,<sup>23</sup> a situation wafting the positioning of Velda's at Mike's bedside in *Kiss Me Deadly*—she is described as "one of those liberated Bohemian girls," indulged by a wealthy and un-hip family—"they...belong to what Frieda liked to call *the inner circle of the midwestern* [cf. Varda's Belgian] *haute booboisie*."<sup>24</sup> "...she had nothing but contempt for Sandusky."<sup>25</sup> Reading an entry from Hector's diary from the period of his convalescence, through the eyes of Zimmer (at the Ranch financed by Frieda's worthless family), we learn she had a dog "*named Arp, after the artist. Dada man*" and a brother, "Fred" whose little girl, Dotty" was "always dressing up in wild costumes [like Ginger]."<sup>26</sup> On that walk with Arp, Hector spied "*A glow on the sidewalk...It had a bluish tint to it—rich blue, the blue of F.'s [Frieda's] eyes.*"<sup>27</sup> On closer inspection he found it to be "*a gob of human spit,*"<sup>28</sup> a bit of Surrealist *trompe l'oeil* turned against one of their mainstream disciples, characteristically adept at spitting (in the face of bourgeoisie irritants). Frieda knew her rescuer to be the funnyman with the moustache, because as a budding New York intellectual she'd seen many of his films. Instead of her declared destination of Paris, she scoops up the offbeat star and they go into their way-cool but increasingly disturbing site-specific career. Unfortunately for her, Hector (now corporately known as Hector Spelling) and his intriguing moustache evolved into a Salvador Dali (Jean Cocteau, Jacques Demy) type of Surrealist, running with the following adage which would be regarded as heretical, poetic decadence by prosaic ascetics like Breton, Louis Aragon and Frieda. "I try to create fantastic things, magical things, things like in a dream. The World needs more fantasy. Our civilization is too mechanical. We can make the fantastic real, and then it is more real than that which actually exists."

Seized by the pretext of extermination provided by her fearful husband, Frieda mows down any further communication with Zimmer, who constitutes an unwelcome potential dispenser of unwholesome thoughts, by leaving haplessly struggling Hector's death-bed sheets soiled with mucus, excrement and blood<sup>29</sup> and proceeds with what the overmatched academic does manage to felicitously (even if unwittingly) refer to as the "auto-da-fé,"<sup>30</sup> the death-by-fire favored by priests of the Spanish Inquisition in polishing off heretics. She orders Zimmer's immediate expulsion from the ranch, and includes Alma's manuscript in the slaughter. (Alma was to join Zimmer in Vermont to continue the love affair that had only just begun, and to ready her work for publication. In the brief interview with Zimmer, Hector had shown an interest in the circulation of that work's revelations about him, in its possibly making people "laugh."<sup>31</sup>) In a brief struggle, Alma knocks her to the floor, killing her, and proceeds to kill herself with an overdose of Zimmer's extra-strength tranquilizers. Being a member of that strange family and their antics in the desert—her father was Hector's cameraman; her library included the writings of Breton<sup>32</sup>---she was locked into their penchant for the oblivion of bathos. A suicide fax declares, "I've never belonged to anyone but them."<sup>33</sup>

More revealingly, that same good-bye comprises a passage the anguish of which touches upon the venture of "Laugh who can," in regard to which Hector had high hopes for her. "*I can't help it. I'm not strong enough to carry around a thing like this. I keep trying to get my arms around it, but it's too big for me David, it's too heavy, and I can't lift it off the ground.*"<sup>34</sup> Zimmer, who has legions of his own problems with lift—he was at it again in tallying up the precise number of hours he had been with Alma, the number of meals they ate together, etc.<sup>35</sup>—speaks from an eleven-year distance from the auto-da-fé: "I had no proof, no evidence to support my case. Hector's films had been destroyed, Alma's book had been destroyed, and the only thing I could have shown anyone was my pathetic little collection of notes, my trilogy of desert jottings...Better to keep my mouth shut, I decided, and let the mystery of Hector Mann remain unsolved."<sup>36</sup> Like Chateaubriand, he has produced his account (the contents of the book at hand, titled with gale-force irony) with a view to being published after his death. Like Alma, he gets overwrought about the little pest that was Frieda; but, in expressing his pain, he alludes to something much bigger, Mike's "Something big," the great Whatzit, decried by Velda. "There are thoughts that break the mind, thoughts of such power and ugliness that they corrupt you as soon as you begin to think

them. I was afraid of what I knew, afraid of falling into the horror of what I knew, and therefore I didn't put the thought into words until it was too late for the words to do me any good."<sup>37</sup> The measure of how far he is from deriving any good from those dynamic, movie-like grounds comes in the form of his exactly wrong conclusion about Hector's change of heart being an instance of buckling "in to doubts and indecision..." after "years of steadfast courage."<sup>38</sup> He also deduces—more wishfully than lucidly—that Alma has produced copies of the desert output and that they are hidden away somewhere. On their discovery, "the story will start all over again."<sup>39</sup>

What is to be savored may be found in the accounts of the one film he saw prior to Frieda's presumptuous violence. Then again, it may not—leading a reader's reflection to the bizarre accomplishment of Demy and Varda, and where it leaves Auster (who busies himself with a similarly bizarre accomplishment), and where it leaves us. Zimmer prefaces the synopsis of *The Inner Life of Martin Frost*, first screened for the strange cadre in 1946, in terms of its being "the only one of his late works with any connection to the slapstick two-reelers of the twenties."<sup>40</sup> He also describes Alma's excited anticipation of seeing her mother in one of the starring roles, a moment bringing us back to the daughter's wearing the mantle of Donkey Skin, apropos of the film whose domestic eccentricities prompt the question, "Who's your daddy?" and spike attention to Nathaniel Hawthorne, an author she explicitly cherished, for a story pertaining to her birthmark, but, as being included in the inventory of her library, rushing forward in the form of *The Scarlet Letter*. (She launches the screening by giving Zimmer "a little peck, a schoolgirl's kiss."<sup>41</sup>) Also streaming out of the perfume spray of essences from the realm of film are the fugitive daughter as played by the "Delphine" of *The Young Girls of Rochefort*, linking to the actress, Delphine Syrig, of *Last Year at Marienbad*, and the novice philosophizing of the star of *Lola*. Zimmer remarks, "It took me a while to settle into it, to figure out what was going on."<sup>42</sup> He cites *Marienbad* factors--- "the accidental meeting between a man and a woman, the misunderstanding that pushes them apart..." --- as "like any other love comedy" (sic),<sup>43</sup> and then goes on to conclude it's about a man's "inner life" and his "muse".

The setting was the ranch house (as distinct from Marienbad spa), as visited by a guest of the absent owners, who was recuperating after a difficult struggle with meaningful work, his "book." He is curiously bound for vegetating—"All I wanted was to be there and do nothing, to live the life of a stone"<sup>44</sup>—but all of a sudden he latches on to a short story project, falls asleep and wakes up to find a woman in bed with him. She shapes up as a co-ed majoring in philosophy and preparing for an exam at the PC finishing school of Cal Berkeley, particularly regarding the thinking of George Berkeley, and eventually comes across as wearing "a lacy black bra—hardly the kind of garment one would expect to discover on such an earnest student of ideas."<sup>45</sup> But it would be perfect for a gal who talks (and sings!) incessantly about such things as "...sometimes I'm blue...Life's great, isn't it?...I'm lost in a dream...First love is so strong...There's a bit of happiness in wanting happiness." A gal, that is, like Lola. In Hector's film, she's "Claire" (Claire, the café-bar owner was also a bit of a philosopher, but with a preference for down-to-earth precepts very unlike those of the romantic Bishop of Cloyne, for whom the world at large was run, extensively, by one's consciousness.) As these connections whiz by, we are struck by something else: the amateur thinkers brought *their* pensées to light in a personal and social thrum of sensual suspense and charming reverence for the difficulties of making headway in a weave of stunning viscosity. The pros gallop through predictable technical productions—Claire with her term papers, Martin with literary footage—with blasé self-satisfaction, which carries over to subsequent love-making. This pat procedure extends to the scenario's "climax." Claire comes down with a "mysterious," life-threatening disease; and Martin cures her by way of destroying his work-in-progress which beams tinctures of Mike and Velda,<sup>46</sup> the progressions of which have cast an evil spell upon his beloved. (Auster has cited that "voodoo logic" to critical effect, in *The Music of Chance*, *Oracle Night* and *Man in the Dark*. Here the initiative of Hector/Demy ushers in the problematic of a populace in many cases disposed to be injured by that current.) Berkleyian theological hijinks aside, that strain of blunt melodrama would trace to doctrinaire, Surrealist affronting directed against the "fantastic things" confronting those taking action without ideological medicine. Thus the scenario of retreat would ring a wry tempering of Chateaubriand's upbeat declaration, "Moments of crisis produce a redoubled vitality in man. Or, more succinctly perhaps: Men

don't begin to live fully until their backs are against the wall."<sup>47</sup> Zimmer had opened Alma's copy of the *Memoirs* at the page bearing this remark, as underlined by someone whose suicide provides another take on "*les moments de crise*."

Alma has informed Zimmer that Frieda played a big part in the cinematic fruits of her family's fortune. "She had enormous gifts, a real passion for making art. She once told me she didn't think she had the stuff to be a great painter, but then she added that if she hadn't met Hector when she did, she probably would have spent her life trying to become one. She hasn't painted in years but she still *draws* [italics mine] like a demon... a terrific sense of composition. When Hector started making movies again, she did the storyboards, designed the sets and costumes, and helped establish the look of the films. She was an integral part of the whole enterprise."<sup>48</sup> Though Hector was the driving force and nominal creator of that peculiar business, the leaden cast of the products would be an endowment of someone with many axes to grind, with a special interest in appalling violence, and quick to bring to dull efficacy the adage, "He who pays the piper calls the tune." There was no musical component to those films, just a deadpan voice-over and natural sounds. Hector would have to slip into Frieda's tableaux what "...magic [there was] embedded in the heart of the story" [vaguely glimpsed by Zimmer], by means of leeway provided by such sonic and other sensual touches.<sup>49</sup>

This is, to say the least, an incendiary take on the partnership of Jacques Demy and Agnès Varda. (Further to that breathtaking aggressiveness, is the allusion to their two children, and subsequent operatives in the family film business, by way of ominously efficient deaf and dumb midget servants at the ranch.) Two moments from Varda's documentary output following Demy's death resonate in this regard. Varda, apparently overcome with grief, declines to speak at the dedication of a street named after him in Rochefort, handing the task to Catherine Deneuve, in *Les Demoiselles ont en 25 ans* (1993); in a long autobiography, *The Beaches of Agnès* (2008) there is astoundingly brief reference to Demy, merely a rather dry protestation of deep emotion about him, and the briefest of visual reminiscence—slashed short by a throbbingly joyous, and quite extensive, account of a neighbor, Alexander Calder.

But it is unlikely a subtle investigator like Auster, who read very well the subtleties informing Demy's films, would want to bring the rich orchestration of *The Book of Illusions* to a conclusion in the form of an object lesson in cultural dogmatism as a significant factor of the problematic of contemporary war. More probably, the saga of circulating intentional coherence from out of corruption would consist of melodramatic contrivance of torpid love as a crude foretaste of subtleties of distraction infecting the real inventory of Demy's work, and, by that token, Auster's work. The hidden gems supposedly deduced by the now-deceased Zimmer would not in the last analysis include tortured hybrids like *The Inner life of Martin Frost*. They would come to life in the real products of Jacques Demy, so lovingly restored and distributed by his partner, Agnès Varda, whose truly surreal energies would stand as an arresting spectacle of conflicted daring and possible harbinger of many such graceful fumbblings to come. Auster's subsequent novels would carry such critical acumen into a probe of the viability of such solvency, and also into self-criticism in the form of putting to his personae the test of daring, infusing the logic of *Kiss Me Deadly* and the films of Jacques Demy and preceding novels of Paul Auster, particularly in their deployment of Heraclitus and Fred Astaire.

## ENDNOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> Other titles haunted by Demy's work are: *Tango Tangle (Lola)* [1961] --- "... one of his wildest, most effervescent productions..." (Paul Auster, *The Book of Illusions* [New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002], p. 26); *Cowpokes (Lola)* again; *The Teller's Tale (Bay of Angels)* [1963] ); *Hearth and Home (The Umbrellas of Cherbourg)* [1964] --- "...one of the most careful [productions]" (Ibid.); *Country Weekend (The Young Girls of Rochefort)* [1967]; *Mr. Nobody (The Model Shop)* [1969] and *The Pied Piper* [1972] )--- where "...he allows himself to indulge in a certain bitterness. The future was grim, and the present was clouded..." (Ibid., p. 39); *Double or Nothing (Donkey Skin)* [1970], *Three Seats for the Twenty-Sixth* [1988] --- "an anthology of gags...improvisations" [Ibid., p. 53]; *The*

---

*Jockey Club* (*Donkey Skin* again and *Lady Oscar* [1978]); *The Prop Man*--- “... perhaps his funniest film... [concerning] a three-day run of *Beggars Can’t Be Choosers*, a bedroom farce by noted French dramatist Jean-Pierre Saint Jean de la Pierre” (Ibid., pp. 35f.) (*Parking* [1985], *Donkey Skin* again, *The Model Shop* again, *The Pied Piper* again and *Lady Oscar* again); *Scandal* (*A Slightly Pregnant Man* [1973], *A Room in Town* [1982], *Three Seats for the Twenty-Sixth* [1988], *Lady Oscar* again and *Donkey Skin* again). Getting back to *Jumping Jacks*, we notice the boys in *Lola* and the boys in *The Young Girls of Rochefort*. *The Book of Illusions* is jammed with such convolutions, confirming that Auster never really stopped writing poetry.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 66f.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 194f.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 108f.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 10f.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 220.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 221.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 224.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 319.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 198.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 201.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 286.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 235.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 277.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 283.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 309.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 308.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 315.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 316.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 318.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 319.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 321.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 241.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 242.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 245.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 253.

<sup>46</sup> “Nordstrum (North storm) has left the house. Anna is on her way, but he doesn’t know that. If she doesn’t get there soon he’s going to walk into the trap” (Ibid., p. 265). The evocation of such uncanniness leads her to “some new understanding of herself, as if her whole body were suddenly giving off light” (Ibid., pp. 265f.), like Lily’s body.

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 205.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 242. As in "...whereas Claire's face was motionless as she watched Martin make his exit, now it is animated, brimming with delight, expressing what seems to be an almost transcendent joy. *She was so alive then.* Alma had said, *so vivid.* No moment in the story captures that sense of fullness and life better than this one... (Ibid., p. 261).

For more commentary about the novels of Paul Auster, visit: [www.springtimepublishers.com](http://www.springtimepublishers.com)