ESSAYS

Metaleptic Confessions: The Problematization of Fictional Truth in Paul Auster's

Invisible

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ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on Paul Auster's novel, *Invisible* (2009), aiming to explore the text's intricate metafictional dimensions, especially the deployment of metalepsis as the main organizing principle of its narrative structure. The author argues that the novel employs a subtle metaleptic narrative structure, which moves beyond the classical postmodernist phase of textual experimentation, and serves as a means of raising questions of ethical and existential relevance. Metalepsis is construed in the paper as a trope of transgression, whereby its epistemological and ontological functions are regarded as a means to an end, which is the problematization of the interrelation between narrative structure and ethical agency. The main contention of the article is that the novel's surreptitiously deployed metaleptic structure results in the ontological destabilization of the narrative, which in turn undermines the epistemic function (truth-telling) of the act of confession, so its ethical purpose (atonement, absolution) remains unfulfilled. (PCS)

Introduction

This essay focuses on Paul Auster's thirteenth novel, *Invisible* (2009), aiming to explore the text's intricate metafictional dimensions, especially the deployment of metalepsis as the main organizing principle of its narrative structure. Ever since the publication of *The New York Trilogy* (1985–86), Auster has taken a great deal of interest in probing into the ontological and epistemological facets of fiction writing, such as the ontological indeterminacy of authorship, the epistemological pitfalls of the fiction/reality distinction, the materiality of language, or the linguistic constitution of one's self. While they may refrain from the more overt experimentalism of the *Trilogy*, most of Auster's novels,[1] within their own merits, remain reflexive of the boundaries of fictionality, and the interrelatedness of language, writing, and identity. *Invisible* contributes to the exploration of these typical postmodernist *topoi* by employing a subtle metaleptic narrative structure which, however, moves beyond the classical postmodernist phase of textual experimentation, and serves as a means of raising questions of ethical and existential relevance. This shift in interpretive focus can be achieved by construing metalepsis as a trope of transgression, whereby its epistemological and ontological functions are regarded as a means to an end, which is the problematization of the interrelation between narrative structure and ethical agency.

While the narration of *Invisible* is by no means a linear one, there are no explicit attempts at formal innovation and experimentation in it, thus the text at first poses little challenge to the reader. The novel's plot spans a period of forty years between 1967 and 2007, but the narrative mainly revolves around events taking place in the spring, summer, and fall of 1967. The text could be read as an initiation story, featuring twenty-year-old Paul Walker, who gets entangled in a web of ethical transgressions of varying degrees, including cheating, espionage, murder, and incest. The first-person narration along with the transgressive motifs in the first chapter might justifiably make one surmise that the novel consists of Walker's confessional

recollections of past events, motivated by a sense of guilt and remorse. As we move beyond the first chapter, however, our readerly expectations are frustrated by the novel's metaleptic narrative construction, which prevents the ultimate goal of the confession—atonement and absolution via revealing the truth—from being attained. My main contention in what follows is that *Invisible* brings into focus the interplay between the ontological, epistemological and ethical dimensions of metalepsis: the surreptitiously deployed metaleptic structure results in the ontological destabilization of the narrative, which in turn undermines the epistemic function (truth-telling) of the act of confession, thus its ethical purpose (atonement, absolution) remains unfulfilled.

The vicissitudes of narrative authority

It is important to note that metalepsis in *Invisible* is not deployed as an overtly disruptive textual technique, but rather as a surreptitious narrative strategy, much like a hidden undercurrent, which becomes visible once we have pieced all the puzzles together that are strewn across the novel's four chapters (indicated in the novel as Parts I–IV). While the first chapter seems to offer a relatively transparent and conventional autobiographical narrative, the subsequent three chapters become increasingly more problematic due to the gradual diffusion of narrative authority.[2] Rather than ensuring the truth-value of the narration through consistent focalizing, narrative authority gets assigned to a different character in each chapter. These characters, then, eventually pose as *authors* of the text, while the ontological status of "the text" becomes increasingly destabilized. What emerges from these destabilizing acts is a hybrid narrative, which is operated by various interests and exigencies. It must be noted, however, that the shifts in narration entail no corresponding shifts in perspective: the four chapters do not tell the same story from four different points of view, but serve as contributions to the "master narrative" of Walker's biography. This biography eventually shapes up as a more or less

coherent narrative, but by that point the text and its narrators have undermined the reader's trust to such an extent that the authenticity of the biography remains irreparably damaged.

The four chapters place the narrative in four different diegetic frameworks. The first chapter presents us with Walker's autodiegetic narration, in which he recounts how he met Rudolf Born, a Swiss-French guest professor of political science at Columbia University in the spring of 1967, who later turns out to be a secret agent of the French government. Walker's encounter with Born proves to be life-changing in a tragic way: during an evening's walk near Riverside Park, the two men are accosted in an attempted robbery by Cedric Williams, a young African American man, who gets brutally murdered by Born. When it transpires that the robber was unarmed and the allegation of self-defense cannot hold, Born disappears from the murder scene and flees from the authorities back to France.

In the second chapter, the narration takes a very different turn, which the opening sentence makes abundantly clear: "Back in the dark ages of our youth, Walker and I had been friends" (75). It is not long before the text reveals that the previous chapter, by all appearances the opening act of Paul Auster's *Invisible*, is "in fact" the first chapter of Walker's autobiography-in-the-making, titled *1967*, which he sent to his college friend, the now successful author Jim Freeman for professional advice, forty years after the events of the said year. Shortly afterwards, Jim receives the next chapter, titled *Summer*, which contains Walker's second-person confessional narration of an incestuous relationship with his sister, Gwyn, alleged to have taken place in the summer of 1967. The third chapter, *Fall*, is a third person narration, reconstructed by Jim after Walker's death from his sketchy notes. This chapter focuses on the time Walker spent in Paris on a scholarship in the fall of 1967, where he meets Born again, on whom he is determined to take revenge for Cedric's murder, only for Born to have him extradited to the US on fabricated charges.

The third is the last chapter that the reader gets to see of Walker's (auto)biography; in the fourth chapter of *Invisible*, it is Jim who takes over the narration. He relates his meeting with an elderly Gwyn, followed by an account of his own trip to Paris, which he spends visiting the places known to him from Walker's manuscript. Moreover, he also makes the personal acquaintance of one of the "characters" from *Fall*: Cécile Juin, daughter of Born's former fiancée, Hélène Juin. Back in 1967, Cécile fell hopelessly in love with the young Walker, but since the girl remained skeptical about Walker's accusations of Born, the two youngsters parted with mutually hurt feelings. Then, through yet another shift of narrative authority, Cécile gets to be the third autodiegetic narrator of the novel, as Jim decides to conclude Walker's life-story by her diary entries, in which she recounts her last encounter with Born on the distant island of Quillia: "I have nothing more to say." Jim concludes his narration, "Cécile Juin is the last person from Walker's story who is still alive, and because she is the last, it seems fitting that she should have the last word" (274).

By this point in the narrative, Walker's biography is more or less complete, but on closer inspection it is by no means obvious *which text* Cécile's last words are supposed to conclude: (1) Adam Walker's autobiography, *1967*; (2) Walker's biography (*1967*) chronicled by Jim; (3) Jim's own autobiographical narrative (including Cécile's narration) about his reunion with Walker through getting associated with *1967* as co-author.[3] The assumption under which the reader is led to operate is that these texts seamlessly dovetail each other to constitute a coherent story of Walker's life, aided by Jim's editorial/co-authorial efforts, whereas they in fact constitute different narrative levels which are not homologous in terms of their ontological status. Hence, the coherence and reliability of the resulting narrative remain illusory. As we move from Part I to Part IV, we can witness the gradual expansion of the scope of Jim's narrative authority, while he keeps posing in the role of a humble servant to Walker's text. My contention in what follows is that the stealthy way in which Jim assumes (and conceals) his

narrative authority is, in turn, mirrored by the surreptitiousness of the novel's metaleptic structure—in fact, the latter can be construed as a consequence of the former.

Surreptitious metalepsis and narrative truth

According to Gerard Genette's well-known definition, metalepsis occurs in the case of "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse . . ." (234–35).[4] The subtlety of the operation of metalepsis in *Invisible* is (at least in part) due to the absence of "intrusions" proper, yet the shifts in narration all entail shifts between diegetic levels. The first of these occurs at the opening of the second chapter, when Walker's intradiegetic narration in the first chapter turns out to be a metadiegetic text (*1967*) in Jim's extradiegetic narration. Then, the scope of Jim's extradiegetic narrative expands to such an extent through the third and fourth chapters that it seems to subsume retrospectively the *Spring* chapter of *1967* (the opening chapter of *Invisible*) as well as *Summer*, which are supposed to have been written by Walker. Furthermore, several (mostly subtly concealed) details in Parts III and IV point towards Jim being the *author* rather than merely the narrator/editor of those chapters. If this is the case, visiting the venues of young Walker's life in Paris and meeting Cécile Juan can be construed as Jim entering the storyworld he himself has created. Moreover, Jim bestows his narratorial/authorial privileges on Cécile ("I have nothing more to say"), whereby she traverses the whole gamut of narrative levels from the metadiegetic (Walker's "Fall") through the intradiegetic (Jim's account of their meeting in 2007) to the extradiegetic (her own diary entries).

These shifts may still seem to fall short of being metaleptic on account of their stealthy execution, and thus they appear to belie the transgressive and subversive mode of operation which is normally associated with metalepsis. Although in his definition Genette does not elaborate on the subversive and transgressive nature of metalepsis, he adds a remark to the

effect that metaleptic shifts produce "an effect of strangeness that is either comical . . . or fantastic" (235). More recent theoretical works tend to address the interrelation of metalepsis and subversion/transgression by reference to the extent to which the shifts between ontological levels contradict our own ontological reality in the "real world." Marie-Laure Ryan, for instance, differentiates between rhetorical and ontological metalepsis: the former "opens a small window that allows a quick glance across levels, but the window closes after a few sentences, and the operation ends up reasserting the existence of boundaries . . . [but] [t]his temporary breach of illusion does not threaten the basic structure of the narrative universe" (207). Ontological metalepsis, on the other hand,

> opens a passage between levels that results in their interpenetration, or mutual contamination. These levels . . . must be separated by the type of boundary that I call ontological: a switch between two radically distinct worlds, such as 'the real' versus 'the imaginary,' or the world of 'normal' (or lucid) mental activity versus the world of dream or hallucination (207).

Based on Monika Fludernik's distinction between "authorial" and ontological metalepsis, Alice Bell and Jan Alber argue that

> ontological metalepses involve disorienting transgressions of boundaries that are physically or logically impossible, and hence properly unnatural. All instances of metalepsis are physically impossible because in the actual world, entities from two different ontological domains cannot interact. For instance, a fictional character cannot literally communicate with his or her author, and an author cannot step into the fictional world s/he has created. (167)

Based on these criteria, ontological metalepses seem to be absent from *Invisible*, as we cannot find overt transgressions of ontological boundaries violating the logical and physical laws of the actual world.[5] For all the reader knows, Walker, Jim, Gwyn, Born, Cécile, and all the other characters exist within the same spatio-temporal framework, so none of their interactions involve shifts between ontological realms. Neither does it seem physically or logically impossible for a character who happens to be an author to complete an old friend's autobiography upon his request, and to visit places and to meet someone depicted in the manuscript. In this case, however, metalepses result less from blatant boundary-crossing between ontological spaces than from the logical contradictions which emerge from the interplay between the various narrations. This, to a great extent, is due to the inextricable intertwining of Jim's narratorial and authorial functions.

What happens in the second chapter is more than a mere change of narrators. In Part I, the reader is led to believe that Walker's first-person, autodiegetic narration constitutes the novel's only diegetic framework. It is all the more perplexing therefore to see Part I turn out to be a "book chapter" or "manuscript" in Part II, that is, a metadiegetic text in Jim's diegetic narrative. Moreover, Jim assumes a dual narratorial role: he acts as extradiegetic narrator in relation to Walker's (auto)biography, while his account of his friendship with Walker in the past and his correspondence with him in the present renders him an autodiegetic narrator:

It hadn't been a close friendship . . . but there was no question that I admired Walker, and I had no doubt that he looked on me as an equal since he never failed to show me anything but respect and goodwill . . . I wrote back to Walker that evening, assuring him that I had received his package [with the manuscript], expressing concern and sympathy over the state of his health, telling him that in spite of everything I was happy to have

heard from him after so many years, was moved by his kind words about the books I had published and so on. (78–80)

Walker's own narration then is ultimately relegated to a metadiegetic status. Although *Summer* is still credited to him, it appears as a lengthy quotation in Jim's diegetic framework, indicating a shift in the ontological status of Walker as a character as well as the world he depicts along with the other characters in it. The shift occurs the moment Jim receives and opens Walker's package: "A little less than a year ago (spring 2007), a UPS-package was delivered to my house in Brooklyn. It contained the manuscript of Walker's story about Rudolf Born (Part I of *this book*) . . ." (76, emphasis added). What could Jim mean by "this book," though? He cannot possibly refer to Walker's *1967*, which by this point has gone metadiegetic. If Jim is referring to the chapters narrated and/or created by him, it is not quite clear why he has chosen the first chapter of Walker's manuscript to be the introduction of his own book without the metadiegetic framing that he implements from Part II on. Should this be the case, though, the suspicion might arise that Part I has also been written by Jim, implying that Walker's story (perhaps even Walker's character) only exists in Jim's fictional narrative.

There is a third option, which may seem the least counterintuitive, namely that "this book" is meant by Jim to refer to Paul Auster's *Invisible*, the material object in the actual world that the reader is holding as they read the above-quoted sentence. Since no conventional logic can account for the presence of *that* book in Jim's or Walker's diegetic world, even a veiled metafictional reference to it entails metaleptic logic: it would constitute an "overstep," in Genette's terms, of a "shifting but sacred boundary between two worlds, the world in which one tells, [and] the world of which one tells" (236). If this were the case, Jim's reference to the extra-textual world would unmask his own fictional status, and the fact that he owes his existence to the biographical Auster in the actual world.

The latter explanation does not preclude the previous two. Brian McHale uses the term "Chinese-box-worlds" to refer to narratives in which a fictional author realizes that s/he is a character in somebody else's fiction (112–30). What results from this is a *mise-en-abyme*-effect, which goes beyond testing the boundary between fiction and reality, and generates a kind of ontological anxiety by questioning the logical principles of our actual world, and our own ontological status in it. As Genette puts it, "[t]he most troubling thing about metalepsis indeed lies in this unacceptable and insistent hypothesis that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic, and that the narrator and his narratees—you and I—perhaps belong to some narrative" (236).

The key figure in the metaleptic operation of *Invisible* is undoubtedly Jim, who moves with remarkable ease between the diegetic framework of his storyworld and his own extradiegetic reality, as the two are seemingly situated in the same ontological space: we know that Jim and Walker were college friends—later they exchange letters and phone calls. Common sense dictates that this would not be possible if Walker were a fictional character created by Jim. However, they never meet in the diegetic world of *Invisible*, and after his death Walker becomes a character in *Fall*, which is supposed to have been "reconstructed" and "completed" by Jim. The letter in which Walker asks Jim to complete *Fall* reads more like a request to *write* it up: "As for the pages in this envelope, you will see that they are the outline for the third part. Written in great haste—telegraphic style . . . I don't know if I have it in me to work it up to a proper piece of prose . . . As for the enclosed pages, do with them what you will. You are a pal, the best of men, and I trust your judgment in all things" (165). Jim then goes on to reassure the reader that he is indeed worthy of his friend's confidence: "He had given me his permission, and I don't feel that turning his encrypted, Morse-code jottings into full sentences constitutes a betrayal of any kind. Despite my editorial involvement with the text, in the deepest, truest sense of what it means to tell a story, every word of *Fall* was written by Walker himself" (166).

Interestingly, Jim does not seem to corroborate the truthfulness of the narrative (that is, that *Fall* is a faithful rendering of Walker's life in Paris). Instead, he seems more preoccupied with diminishing his own authorial role, referring to his contribution as mere "editorial involvement." He is less concerned with defending himself against the potential accusation of fact-falsification than securing the semblance that the world *in* which he tells the story is the same as the one *of* which he tells it, thus he does not open up a new ontological dimension in his *authorial* capacity.

This can hardly be a plausible option, however, which becomes apparent on a closer inspection of Walker's notes. Jim himself is telling us that the "telegraphic" notes contain no full sentences, only short-clipped scraps such as "Goes to the store. Falls asleep. Lights a cigarette" (166). Despite the scarcity of information, Jim's reconstruction is complete with detailed descriptions of places, persons, mental states, as well as conversations which could not possibly have been included in the scrappy notes. For instance, Walker's rented room in Paris is described as a "disaster area of brittle, peeling wallpaper and cracked wooden floor planks," in which "the bed is an ancient spring contraption with a caved-in mattress and rock-hard pillows" (167–68), to which the narrator goes on to add that "[t]his is the kind of room poets are supposed to work in, the kind of room that threatens to break your spirit and forces you into a constant battle with yourself" (168). These descriptions are not only too detailed for the fragmentary nature of the notes, but they are also written with the kind of artistic poise that one associates with prose fiction. The images of the dilapidated external environment quickly sublimate into the metaphoric of the internal space of poetic spirit, the source of creative inspiration, which is hardly conceivable without Jim's authorial, and not merely editorial, involvement.

The fourth chapter (Part IV) of *Invisible*—Jim's account of his trip to Paris—is basically a continuation of the third, as most of the chapter narrates Jim's exploration of the city inspired

by its representation in *Fall*. As he contends: "I wondered if I could track down some of the players from the unsuccessful revenge drama he [Walker] mounted there forty years ago, and if I could, whether any of them would be willing to talk to me" (261). Cécile is the only one Jim manages to track down, and his rendition of their meeting is not devoid of metaleptic overtones: "After my encounter with the eighteen-year-old girl in *Walker's manuscript*, I wasn't surprised to learn that she had grown up to be a literary scholar" (261; emphasis added). Reflecting on changes in Cécile's appearance, he writes: "Judging from *Walker's description* of her in the notes for *Fall,* her body had expanded dramatically since 1967. The thin, narrow-shouldered girl of eighteen was now a round, plumpish woman of fifty-eight" (265; emphasis added), but he also remarks at some point that her "sense of humor was apparently intact" (263). In a similar vein, when Jim takes a walk in the neighborhood where Walker lived, he is pleasantly surprised to find some of the old restaurants and cafés still in business, and notes that despite several decades of gentrification "most of the landmarks from *Walker's story* had survived" (264; emphasis added).

Jim's insistence on referring to "Walker's story," "Walker's manuscript," "Walker's description" borders on the comical, as it is hardly credible that the fragmentary material could have contained all the details for Jim to be able to recognize the restaurants and cafés mentioned in it, and comment on changes in Walker's neighborhood as well as in Cécile's bodily constitution and personality. Since, however, Walker's notes are not available for the reader in the diegetic framework of *Invisible*, Jim's authorial contribution can only be a matter of conjecture. Nevertheless, there are some tell-tale signs of inconsistency in his reflection on his "editorial involvement." He refers to Walker's notes as "encrypted, Morse-code jottings," and posits his own task as turning these "into full sentences." The logic of Morse-codes and encrypted signs, however, is different to that of fragments in need of being completed into full sentences, and it is not an "editor" that is required to crunch them, either. It is a task for a code-

cruncher, who is expected to decipher the *only meaning* of an encrypted code in order to fully comprehend the encoded message. The possibility of multiple meanings cannot arise, unless either the encryption or the decryption is flawed. Could Jim have indeed crunched Walker's "Morse-codes" in the only possible way so as to reconstruct his friend's former life in Paris in minute detail? Could the encrypted signs have provided any information on Cécile's sense of humor when she was young? Could Jim really have deciphered how shy, anxious, or passionate she was as a teenager to be able to detect the changes so precisely in her fifty-eight-year-old self? Jim's claim that "every word of *Fall* was written by Walker himself" (166) could only be justified if Walker's notes had indeed been encrypted codes which Jim has successfully crunched; only in that case could he have arrived at the most truthful version of Walker's narrative.

Ironically enough, while Jim's detailed descriptions aim at verisimilitude—the most conventional means of creating a semblance of truthfulness—it is precisely the minute detailing of his narrative that reveals it as a fictional construct. Does it make any sense, though, to differentiate between "truthfulness" and "artificiality" within fiction, which is by definition an artificial construction in the first place? Michael Riffaterre differentiates "fictional truth" from "fictitious truth" by contending that while the latter is an oxymoron ("fictitious truth" is basically a lie), the former is a defining feature of a legitimate genre, which "rests on conventions, of which the first and perhaps only one is that fiction specifically, but not always explicitly, excludes the intention to deceive" (1). In terms of verisimilitude, he deems what he refers to as "ethical criticism" reconcilable with a narratological/structural approach, where the former privileges "a sign system seemingly based on the referentiality of its components" (that is, a form of mimesis), while the latter holds that "verisimilitude is found in consecution . . . [that is,] the narrative sequentiality that is entirely within the text's boundaries" (2–3). According to Riffaterre, the opposition between these critical positions is "more apparent than

real," since "exterior referentiality is but an illusion," in that "the narrative sequence and its diegetic implementation (mimesis) are both intratextual . . . [and] must thus be seen . . . as complementary features of the same text" (3). Thus, fictional truth is not a matter of correspondence to a reality exterior to the text, but rather a function of an intricate grammatical system, in which the narrative sequence is posited as "syntax," and the diegesis as "lexis," "fill[ing] out" the "slots" of the former (4). This model, he concludes, produces "a double motivation and therefore an ironclad verisimilitude," which in turn "explains how the same text can be at once fictional and true, how verisimilitude can substitute an idea of truth for an actual experience of actuality . . . making truth a concept that depends on grammar and is therefore impervious to change, rather than on our subjective, idiosyncratic, and changeable experience of reality" (5–6).

By inverse logic, Riffaterre's concept can be applied easily to literary texts which aim specifically at debunking the myth of verisimilitude and mimesis (such as those of John Barth, Robert Coover, Raymond Federman, William H. Gass, Ronald Sukenick in the American postmodernist canon), insofar as their formal innovations can be construed as intentional efforts to expose the illusory nature of this neat grammatical dynamic. Apparently, no such endeavor can be discovered in *Invisible*, yet its "syntax" (the narrative sequence) cannot provide what Riffaterre calls "motivating coherence" to its "lexis" (the diegetic sequence), as the causal logic of narrative sequentiality is constantly being compromised by the incessant shifting of the diegetic frameworks and exchanges of narrative authority.

This becomes apparent at a crucial point in the narrative, when Gwyn and Jim get in touch with each other following Walker's death, and she asks him for her brother's manuscript. Jim complies with the request, and sends Gwyn a copy of the chapters completed up to that point, including *Summer*, which contains Walker's detailed account of his alleged sexual relationship with his sister. Making the chapter available to Gwyn comes to bother Jim later: "I

told her the truth [about the existence of Walker's manuscript] when I should have lied . . . It was a rotten thing to do to her, but by then I no longer had a choice. She wanted to read her brother's book, and the only copy in the world belonged to me" (252–54). Surprisingly for Jim, however, Gwyn shows no signs of distress after reading the manuscript, and she is quick to dismiss the chapter in question as "make-believe." "I loved my brother, Jim," she says, "When I was young, I was closer to him than anyone else. But I never slept with him . . . There was no incestuous affair in the summer of 1967 . . . What Adam wrote was pure make-believe" (255). Yet, she deems the book "unpublishable" in its present form, and asks Jim to revise it in such a way as to protect the characters still alive (especially herself):

> . . . if you do want to help, this is what I propose. You take the notes for the third part and put them into decent shape. That shouldn't be too hard for you. I could never do it myself, but you're the writer, you'll know how to handle it. Then, most important, you go through the manuscript and change all the names. Remember that old TV show from the fifties? *The names have been changed to protect the innocent.* You change the names of the people and the places, you add or subtract any material you see fit, and then you publish the book under your own name. (258, emphasis in the original)

Jim complies with her request:

> As for the names, they have been invented according to Gwyn's instructions, and the reader can therefore be reassured that Adam Walker is not Adam Walker, Gwyn Walker Tedesco is not Gwyn Walker Tedesco . . . Hélène and Cécile Juin are not Hélène and Cécile Juin. Cedric Williams is not Cedric Williams . . . Not even Born is Born. His real name was close to that of another Provençal poet [and not to that of Bernard Born as the

reader was led to believe], and I took the liberty of substituting the translation of that

other poet by not-Walker with a translation of my own, which means that the remarks

about Dante's *Inferno* on the first page of this book were not in not-Walker's original

manuscript. Last of all, I don't suppose it is necessary for me to add that my name is not

Jim. (260)

In addition, Gwyn asks Jim to change the names of places as well, so the reader eventually

learns that "Westfield, New Jersey is not Westfield, New Jersey . . . Oakland, California is not

Oakland, California. Boston is not Boston . . . New York is not New York, Columbia University

is not Columbia University, but Paris is Paris. Paris alone is real" (260–61).

The ontological consequence of this revelation is that an additional level is added to the

previous three, one that is solely presided over by "not-Jim." This turns out to be the narrative's

"true" extra-diegetic level, not that of "Jim's" narration, as the reader has been led to believe.

The epistemic consequences are even more significant, as Jim's unmasking gesture

retrospectively renders several of his previous claims logically inconsistent or outright untrue:

it was not Walker, but Gwyn who asked him to shape *Fall* into a coherent text, which also

means that the chapter about Walker's life in Paris must have been written *after* Jim's visit to

the city, not prior to it, as he suggested earlier. It also further confirms the insight that Jim's

alleged fleshing-out of Walker's notes could by no means have followed the linear logic of

code-crunching. Assuming that the sketchy notes for *Fall* actually existed, Jim is likely to have

followed the logic of hermeneutic circularity: the notes provided the interpretive framework for

a biased reading of the Parisian cityscape and Cécile Juin's personality. This bias must

inevitably have come to affect the way he has crafted the fragmentary notes into cogent prose,

which entails that even Paris may not be as "real" as he claims it to be.

The most pervasive consequence of what seems to be the novel's great epiphany is that the "syntax" of the narrative, that is, the narrative sequentiality, gets so fundamentally altered that it is no longer possible for the narrative (or the narrators) to provide any epistemic framework that could serve as a reliable measure of truthfulness (in a Riffaterrian sense). Ironically enough, Jim's final revelation shatters the image that he has been so keen to propagate of himself as the guardian of truthfulness. Prior to the revelatory moment, he appears to be fully aware of the epistemic and ontological risks run by the interpenetration of fiction and reality, and he stresses the utmost importance of keeping the two apart multiple times. One only needs to recall his claim that "every word of *Fall* was written by Walker himself" (166), seeking to reassure the reader that he merely helped to deliver the truth of Walker's autobiography, in his capacity as editor, but in no way did he interfere with its authenticity (as an author). He also advocates the value of archival research as a feasible method of revealing the truth when, bothered by Gwyn's dismissal of the narrative of incest as "fiction," he decides to launch his own investigation of the events: "To satisfy my curiosity, I . . . went up to the Columbia campus, where I learned from an administrator at the School of International Affairs that Rudolf Born had been employed as a visiting professor during the 1966–67 academic year . . . and then . . . that the corpse of eighteen-year-old Cedric Williams [the young man brutally murdered by Born] had been discovered one May morning in Riverside Park with more than a dozen knife wounds in his chest and upper body" (259). His findings, in their turn, confirm his doubts about Gwyn's denial: "if these other things were true, why would he [Walker] have gone to the trouble of fabricating something that wasn't true, damning himself with a highly detailed, self-incriminating account of incestuous love?" (259).

From the vantage point of the fourth chapter, however, Jim's deep concern with truthfulness looks more like sanctimonious posturing, as do his disclaimers about his authorial involvement. The overly cautious gesture of changing the names of metropolises with millions

of inhabitants or that of a major university with tens of thousands of students and faculty amounts to a narrative altogether different from "not-Walker's" original manuscript. If the events took place elsewhere than New York or the Columbia campus, Jim not only had to change the names, but alter the original story considerably in order to make it fit the made-up places. Consequently, the validity of his research at Columbia and in the newspaper archives is quickly disqualified by the revelation of the fact that the murder did not actually happen in Riverside Park, thus, it could not have happened the way Jim described it, and it happened to someone else than Cedric Williams, who died by someone else's hands other than Rudolf Born, who could not have been a guest professor at Columbia either.

Superficial as it might first seem, the change of names starts off a chain-reaction, as it were, which results in the authenticity of the narrative being destabilized at deeper and deeper levels to the point where the hierarchy among the available narrative levels (including "not-Jim's" extra-diegetic one) collapses, which produces a "strange loop"-effect, one of the distinguishing features of metalepsis. Part I plays a key role in the metaleptic operation of the text, as it is first presented to the reader as Walker's unmediated, first-person narration, yet it retrospectively turns out to have been significantly affected by the changes of names. Let it suffice to consider that since the Provençal Bertrand de Born's life, work, and views are pivotal to the chapter, Rudolf Born's name being changed for that of another Provençal poet is way more of an authorial intervention than simply substituting one name for another. Learning Born's name on their introduction, Walker goes off on a tangent of literary and historical associations: "I had already met his namesake in Dante's hell, a dead man shuffling through the final verses of the twenty-eighth canto of the *Inferno* . . . carrying his severed head by the hair as it sways back and forth like a lantern . . . [Dante] condemned him to eternal damnation for having counseled Prince Henry to rebel against his father, King Henry II" (3–4). Walker even translates de Born's "In Praise of War" into English for Rudolf Born's sake, which is quoted in

the chapter at full length (22–24), in order to highlight the proximity between the war-mongering inclinations of both Borns. Bertrand concludes his poem with a short stanza: "Barons, better to pawn / Your castles, towns, and cities / Than to give up making war" (24), while his modern-day namesake, Rudolf, echoes: "Never underestimate the importance of war. War is the purest, most vivid expression of the human soul" (7), and praises his "faux ancestor" as a "true samurai madman" who "had the courage of his convictions . . . [and] knew what he stood for" (27). The analogy clearly serves dramaturgical purposes, throwing Born's violent tendencies into relief, which culminate in the brutal murder of Cedric. This careful development of a motif is reminiscent of skillfully composed works of prose fiction rather than (auto)biographical texts, which entails that Part I, as it is presented to the reader, can at best be loosely based on Walker's original manuscript, but in any case it is stripped of historical authenticity; thus, if not-Born's actual namesake was some other Provençal poet such as Marcabrun, Jaufre Rudel of Blaye, or Bertrand de Ventadour, the reader would have a very different story at their disposal.

Hence, it is all the more perplexing to recall Jim's endeavor to reassure the reader at the outset of Part II—long before the final revelation of his having changed the names—that, contrary to appearances, *Spring* (Part I) and *Summer* tell true stories. Jim's apparent certainty is based on Walker's letter attached to the manuscript, in which he informs his friend that the text he is about to read is "not a work of fiction" (77), to which Jim responds as follows:

> If I hadn't been told it was a true story, I probably would have plunged in and taken those sixty-plus pages [*Spring*] for the beginning of a novel (writers do, after all, sometimes inject characters who bear their own names into works of fiction), and then I might have found the ending implausible . . . but because I approached it as a piece of

autobiography from the start, Walker's confession left me shaken and filled with sorrow. (79)

By hindsight, Jim's words have a ring of insidious ambiguity to them: it is no longer obvious whether he is referring to the text he has just presented to the reader, or the original version of not-Walker's manuscript. If the former is the case, he is vouching for the authenticity of a text which he himself has shaped into a novelistic story; if the latter, his claims remain unfalsifiable, and bear no relevance for the reader due to the inaccessibility of the original. In other words, one feels justified to ask the question: who is speaking? "Jim" from an intradiegetic perspective, or "not-Jim" from an extradiegetic one? Are they the same person at all? In fact, the logical inconsistencies can be explained by hypothesizing an ontological split between "Jim" and "not-Jim"—the benevolent, loyal friend, and reliable narrator, as opposed to the postmodernist metafictional schemer, who shrewdly lures the reader into the narrative with the promise of a conventional autobiographical narrative only to engage them in an increasingly more complex metadiegetic game unbeknownst to his intradiegetic narrator. In fact, the reader only encounters Jim *as Jim*, and never catches a glimpse of the shady not-Jim. Likewise, the revelation of changing the names and by implication the whole of Walker's narrative is also performed by Jim, which can be understood as an act of honesty. Therefore, differentiating between Jim and not-Jim shifts the focus from his epistemic status as narrator/author to that of his ethical function, which is most apparent in his role as a confessor to whom Walker reveals his past transgressions, among which incest figures prominently.

Failed confession versus trauma narrative

The central motif of the putative Walker's *1967* is arguably his account of his incestuous relationship with Gwyn. This account is also a revelatory gesture, apparently intended by

Walker to be a confession, thereby elevating Jim to the status of a confessor. Nevertheless, the intricacies of the narrative as well as Jim's dubious role as a friend/narrator/author destabilize both the epistemic status and the ethical value of the truth being revealed.

In Volume I of *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault challenges the traditional view of confession as an act motivated by an internal urge to reveal the truth. According to Foucault, the gesture of confessing to a sin or transgression is always the function of external constraints imposed on the subject by structures of power. Confession is a matter of power relations, which is amply demonstrated by its practical operation:

> The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (virtual or otherwise) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile . . . . (Foucault 61–62)

The power relationship obtains none the less even if the confessor happens to possess no formal authority, as is the case with Walker and Jim. It is in a phone conversation with Jim—after nearly four decades of communicational hiatus—that Walker mentions the second chapter for the first time, and makes a point of preparing Jim for what he is about to read: "Rather brutal stuff, I'm afraid. Ugly things I haven't had the heart or the will to look at in years, but I'm past it now . . . It's disgusting, Jim. Every time I think about it, it makes me want to puke" (91). Not only does Walker seek to work through the traumatic memory of a transgression in the past, he also needs a person to confess to, someone who can grant him absolution. His self-accusation takes place over the phone, which is also reminiscent of the Catholic practice of confession: the

confessant addresses the confessor directly, while neither is visible to the other. In formal practice, the relationship between confessor and confessant is traditionally asymmetrical, as it is the former who is vested with the power of passing moral judgment on the latter. In this case, however, Jim owes his authoritative status to Walker, who virtually elects him to be his confessor. Accordingly, Jim feels more honored than empowered, and after reading *Summer,* he seems overly willing to absolve Walker of his sin: "I felt it would be better to hold back from giving any comments until I saw him in private . . . I wanted him to be looking into my eyes when I told him that I was not disgusted by what he has written" (157). Besides extending a gesture of goodwill toward Walker by offering his absolution in a personal reunion, Jim seems bent on leaving the obscurity of the confessional booth, as it were, and perform the absolution face-to-face, thus renouncing the traditional role of a father confessor. The reunion, however, cannot come to pass, as Walker dies before Jim's arrival in Oakland, so he fails to perform the duty his friend bestowed on him. Jim's commitment to the cause of amending and completing Walker's manuscript could be understood as a way of working down his debt to his dead friend. Jim seems to wish to avoid the semblance of having the moral high ground, as he shows no signs of moral indignation even at Walker's confession to (moreover, detailed description of) an incestuous relationship, which is normally considered a highly transgressive act and a taboo *par excellence*. Apart from his devotion to Walker, this response on Jim's part could be an expression of his appreciation for the act of confession itself, for the gesture of revealing a truth whose abhorrent nature renders it almost ineffable. The act of speaking the unspeakable seems to be a moral feat that outweighs the transgressive content of the confession. The more excruciating it is to divulge the truth, the greater the moral import of the revelation appears to be. This is especially true of confessions to matters of a sexual nature. According to Foucault, in our Western civilization "it is in the confession that truth and sex are joined, through the

obligatory and exhaustive expression of an individual secret" (61). Even more important is his contention regarding the medicalization of sex in the nineteenth century. As he contends:

> The essential point is that sex was [for nineteenth-century medical authorities] not only a matter of sensation and pleasure, of law and taboo, but also of truth and falsehood, that the truth of sex became something fundamental, useful, or dangerous, precious or formidable: in short, that sex was constituted as a problem of truth. (56)

Foucault's point is that the medicalized, scientific discourse on sexuality (*scientia sexualis*) simultaneously privileges the paramount necessity of revealing truths about sex, and generates a normalizing tendency to repress sexual practices that are deemed incompatible with the accepted scientific truths. As a consequence, the socially constrained convention of confession has become well-nigh the only outlet for divulging such repressed truths in Western societies: "[t]he transformation of sex into discourse . . . the dissemination and reinforcement of heterogeneous sexualities, are perhaps two elements of the same deployment: they are linked together with the help of the central element of a confession that compels individuals to articulate their sexual peculiarity—no matter how extreme" (61).

Walker's urge to reveal his "sexual peculiarity" as well as his apparent plea for absolution seem to constitute a paradigm case of the operation of discursive power relations which Foucault discusses in connection with confession. Nevertheless, on closer inspection, Walker's *Summer* is devoid of any repressive qualities: there is no restraint, no shame, and no sense of guilt detectable in his sensuously detailed descriptions of his alleged sexual intercourses with Gwyn, hence his revelations fall short of qualifying as confession. The text is more reminiscent of the non-Western discourse of *ars erotica*, in which, according to Foucault, "truth is drawn from pleasure itself . . . understood as practice and accumulated as experience"

(57). Referring to their first sexual experiment in adolescence, Gwyn poses the question: "You don't feel guilty?" to which Walker replies: "No. I felt blameless then, and I feel blameless now . . . You can't feel guilty unless you think you've done something wrong. What we did that night wasn't wrong. We didn't force anyone, did we? . . . And I'm glad we did it. To be honest, my only regret is that we didn't do it again" (125).

This self-absolving reflection of Walker's as well as his minutely detailed account of sexual pleasures are strongly counterpointed by the self-accusatory tone in his phone conversation with Jim, in which he refers to the story of his relationship with Gwyn as "ugly," which makes him "want to puke." It is unlikely that Walker as an elderly man is condemning his younger self for his guilty passions, as he finishes the manuscript of *Summer* right before mailing it to Jim, and stresses that it is to be read as an autobiography, not a novel. It is plausible to assume, though, that Walker's self-deprecating tone is meant to prepare Jim—possibly a model of decorum and decency in his eyes—for the shocking details of the chapter. Nonetheless, if this is the case, Walker's strong words are hardly more than a polite nod toward what he assumes to be conventional morality rather than the expression of a heartfelt sense of guilt crying out for redemption. In any case, Walker's narrative in *Summer* fulfills none of the traditional functions of a confession: the revelation of the transgressive act is not motivated by sincere remorse; Jim refrains from acting as a traditional confessor, and eventually fails to grant Walker absolution; finally the truthfulness of the account—the quintessential prerequisite of any act of confession—remains questionable, as the only person who could validate its authenticity (that is, Gwyn) deems it fictitious.

As it turns out, however, Jim himself also has something to reveal in relation to Gwyn: right before his meeting with her following Walker's death, Jim confides to the reader that in college he was strongly attracted to Gwyn, even asked her out on a date, but then she refused

him. One night, however, both of them "wound up at a large Chinese dinner" and ended up discussing Emily Dickinson's poetry for half an hour. Jim then continues:

> A short time after that, I persuaded her to go for a walk with me in Riverside Park, tried to kiss her, and was pushed away. Don't, Jim, she said. I'm involved with someone else. I can't do this. That was the end of it. Several swings of the bat, failure to make contact on any pitch, and the game was over. The world fell apart, the world put itself together again, and I muddled on. To my great fortune, I have been with the same woman for close to thirty years now. I can't imagine my life without her, and yet every time Gwyn enters my thoughts, I confess that I still feel a little pang. She was the impossible one, the unattainable one, the one who was never there—a specter from the Land of If. (250)

This passage is likely to be the very revelation which can shed light on the intricacies of the plethora of diegetic levels. Jim's confession to his unrequited attraction to Gwyn as a youth arguably pales in dramatic force next to Walker's account of the murder of Cedric and his revelation of the incestuous affair, but the acuity of his recollection of the pain of being "pushed away" is still palpable. Gwyn's refusal proves to be so traumatic for Jim that he is unable to distance himself from it emotionally even several decades later. Notably, the incident happens in Riverside Park, where Cedric's body is found after Born kills him in Walker's opening chapter. Thus, given what we learn about "not-Jim's" prominent authorial role in the fourth chapter, which makes it impossible to verify the truthfulness of Walker's biographical narratives, it seems plausible to assume that the traumatic experience of Walker witnessing the murder of Cedric at Riverside Park might be a fictional sublimation of Jim's own trauma of being refused by Gwyn at the same venue. This assumption, in its turn, allows for the possibility that the account of the incestuous relationship is entirely Jim's fabrication, intended to be a

form of revenge for the painful rejection, and the sensuously depicted scenes of love-making can also fall in place as projections of his own sexual fantasies about Gwyn. At the same time, Jim also seems to be yearning for atonement, perhaps for the appropriation of Walker's life-story, or because the rejection scene with Gwyn might have taken a more violent turn than he lets on. If this is the case, the only genuine confession of the novel is Jim's, who after all does eventually reveal (*as Jim*) that the very text the reader has been reading up to Part IV is "not-Jim's" fabrication all through. He thereby performs a genuine metaleptic move, insofar as Jim, a fictional version—one might even say "character"—of not-Jim reveals the machinations of his own author who is supposed to occupy a higher level in the ontological hierarchy. According to this line of interpretation, Jim's act of expiation is performed via allowing his authoritative position to get dissolved among the plethora of diegeses and tangled narrative levels generated by his storytelling. He also fails to cover all of his tracks by leaving several anomalies and contradictions on the surface of his narrative, analogously to a culprit who is tormented by their conscience to the point where they yearn for being found out rather than getting away with their crime.

The construction of the narrative sequences in *Invisible* in many ways follows the patterns of a detective story or a thriller, insofar as it gradually generates a desire in the reader for an ultimate epiphany. Although the novel does offer significant revelations (mainly pertaining to Born's past and his vices), the central mystery that readers are most likely to wish to see dispelled pertains to the relationship between the siblings. The metaleptic structure of the novel, however, ironically debases the readerly expectation that any positively statable ("factual") truths should be revealed within fictional confines. The biographical Auster, in the actual world, is none the less preoccupied with exploring the interplay between fiction and factuality ("reality"), on which he sometimes reflects with the profundity of philosophical insights. A prime example of this can be found in his first autobiographical book, *The Invention*

of Solitude, which was published in 1982, before he turned these preoccupations into the subject matter of his fictional writings in the *Trilogy*. He differentiates between the "factual" and the "fictional": "In a work of fiction, one assumes there is a conscious mind behind the words on the page. In the presence of happenings in the so-called real world, one assumes nothing. The made-up story consists entirely of meanings, whereas the story of fact is devoid of any significance beyond itself" (14). Interestingly, Auster's differentiation between fact and fiction is not based on the principle of correspondence to reality, which indicates that in his account the difference is not a metaphysical/ontological question, but rather a hermeneutic one. "Meaning" is not an inherent property of a text, but a function of the reader's "assumption" ("one assumes . . ."), that is, their interpretive disposition. By introducing a tangled hierarchy of metaleptic structures, the novel exposes the illusory nature of this assumption, and dismantles the authority posited by the idea of a "conscious mind," and thus shatters the epistemic framework which could lend relevance and validity to the notions of "authenticity," "genuineness," "reality," "truth," or "falsehood."

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Notes

[1] Most notably *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), *Leviathan* (1992), *The Book of Illusions* (2002), *Oracle Night* (2003), *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006), *Man in the Dark* (2008), *Invisible* (2009), *Sunset Park* (2010).

[2] Rosemary Huisman, one of the few commentators on *Invisible*, refers to the novel's postmodernist tendencies as "accumulative," meaning that "the reader's confidence in interpretation is—perhaps only retrospectively—displaced" (274).

[3] The fourth option would be Paul Auster's *Invisible* in our actual world, but as there is no explicit or implicit reference to the biographical author (unlike in the *Trilogy*), I choose not

to discuss this option.

[4] Genette traces the notion back to Fontainer, a seventeenth-century French rhetorician (244), and, as Marie-Laure Ryan points out, rhetoricians from earlier centuries regarded metalepsis as a form of metonymy (247). Nonetheless, Ryan—just like this essay—does not concern herself with the discussion of these ancient uses of rhetorical metalepsis and finds Douglas Hofstadter's concept of "tangled hierarchy" as well as William Egginton's concept of "reality bleeding" more useful analogies to explain how ontological metalepsis operates (247).

[5] The most overt deployment of ontological metalepsis in Auster's oeuvre can be found in *Oracle Night* (2003), which is discussed in Antoine Dechêne's exhaustive study on the novel. Dechêne relies on Marie-Laure Ryan's notion of "narrative stack" and David Herman's concept of "storyworld" in explaining how the emergence of different narrative levels create a *mise-en-abyme* effect through "hierarchy-violation." Such overt violations, however, are absent from *Invisible*.

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