

Constructing the Self in Paul Auster's *Leviathan*
(Penn State University, English 436.1: Fall 1998)
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Most readers might readily assume that an author and text are two entirely distinct and separate entities, that the artist may be totally divorced from his or her work and stand comfortably outside the act of creation. However, this supposed line of demarcation and detachment between writer and the words set upon the page is, in fact, patently absurd, as many modern authors have attempted to demonstrate in their work. A novel is, at the *very* least, a reflection of reality, and for many writers it may often supercede and replace that reality. This, I believe, is especially true in the works of Paul Auster – particularly in his novel *Leviathan*, the story of one novelist's attempt to reclaim the past and understand the present through the process of writing. I hope to explore how the author and the *authored* are one, if not necessarily the same, in *Leviathan* by examining the evidence of the text itself – what Auster's protagonist attempts, why he does so, and then what the ultimate possible consequences of his actions are – briefly discussing the relation and similarity of this evidence to Auster's own documented life, and finally exploring how this relationship fits into a fairly modernist literary view of the writer and self, drawing parallels primarily between Auster's work and Marcel Proust's long novel *Remembrance of Things Past*.

Individuality, or at least our basic understanding of it, is an odd thing in the works of Paul Auster. His characters quite often inhabit a world wherein personality, the self, is infinitely malleable, given to various permutations, being continually rebuilt and reformed through our own decisive action, our indecisiveness and inaction, or through pure, unpredictable chance and coincidence. We are our own interpreters in Auster's tales, the authors of our lives, if not exactly our destinies; like archaeologists sifting through the rubble and ruins of lost cities, we delve into memory, rebuilding and rediscovering the self that we thought we knew. And that which we cannot control, we attempt to understand, to classify and clarify, to interpret. The characters in Paul Auster's fiction attempt to make sense of what Auster himself dubs (in another, later eponymous novel) “the music of chance” – the remarkable coincidences and seemingly unexplainable nuances that a life is built upon – and, in so doing, they endeavor to understand themselves, to recreate life as an author crafts a story.

Leviathan begins, therefore, with an author – in this case cleverly named Peter Aaron, the similarity to Auster's own name unmistakable – and his uncertainty, his almost obsessive need to make sense of the nonsensical, to create a story where before there were merely rumors, supposition, and incomplete, inconsistent fact. “Six days ago, a man blew himself up by the side of the road in northern Wisconsin,” Auster's novelist (and, therefore, novel) begins, not knowing this man's identity or the full details of the event, but believing the man to be his longtime friend Benjamin Sachs – believing that he, Aaron, must tell the story as if the man *were* Sachs, as if everything hinged upon this being true. “The story I have to tell,” Auster/Aaron writes, “is rather complicated, and unless I finish it before they come up with their answer, the words I'm about to write will mean nothing. Once the secret is out, all sorts of lies are going to be told, ugly distortions will circulate in the newspapers and magazines, and within a matter of days a man's reputation will be destroyed.”

However, one might easily, and perhaps even rightly to an extent, argue that the novel Aaron is endeavoring to construct – this complicated tale of Benjamin Sachs and how he may have indeed reached that fateful spot in northern Wisconsin – may itself be a distortion, an intricate fabrication, that the dead man mentioned briefly in the newspaper – and about whom the FBI have, admittedly, questioned Aaron – may not be Sachs at all, that *Leviathan* is, at its heart, a lie. And yet, Auster (through this adopted guise of Aaron) seems to indicate that this does not, ultimately, matter – that truth is not as important as our understanding of it.

We fictionalize ourselves, Auster says, to understand ourselves; we tell the stories that we *think* happened, for only then may we comprehend what truly *did* happen. Indeed, Aaron does realize that “the whole time I'm here in Vermont writing this story, they'll be busy writing their own story. It will be my story, and once they've finished it, they'll know as much about me as I do myself.” The act of writing is, then, akin to

the act of being born. It is the act of discovery, wherein even a lie can be a truth. The trick, the novel suggests, is understanding that a wealth of difference often exists between a lie and a falsehood.

Thus, when Aaron claims that “I can only speak about the things I know, the things I have seen with my own eyes and heard with my own ears...” and then proceeds to tell a story based, at least in part, on an assumption that may be ultimately false, he is not being dishonest or hypocritical, but rather attempting to discover what *is* true, to use those eyes and ears to delve into his memory and to create some semblance of truth, to understand what happened to his friend. This, above all else, is the function of the novelist. As Auster once said, “I think that we are all hungry for stories, and novelists tell the best stories.” Through the process of writing (and, furthermore, of reading), Auster claims that “you’re actively engaging your own history, all your soul, your memories...” and allowing imagination to fill in the gaps. The novelist, then, *must* lie honestly and can only tell falsehoods if he or she ignores the truth, not if that truth is reworded and reworked to reflect the author’s own self and knowledge. As Auster himself once said, “art is not opposed to anything but falsity.”

Auster/Aaron is quick to point out, therefore, that while there is nothing “false or tainted about the things I do know about Sachs...I don’t want to present this book as something it’s not. There is nothing definitive about it. It is not a biography or an exhaustive psychological portrait....I want to tell the truth about him, to set down these memories as honestly as I can, but I can’t dismiss the possibility that I’m wrong, that the truth is quite different from what I imagine it to be.” Sachs may in fact be alive and well; Aaron admits that “we hadn’t talked in close to a year” and that he has little upon which to base his argument – that Sachs *was* that man in Wisconsin and that he now is dead – than a hunch, a gut feeling, and a late-night conversation a year earlier that “convince[d] me that he was in deep trouble, rushing headlong toward some dark, unnamable disaster.” Aaron – and consequentially Auster – realizes that his interpretation of the truth may in the end prove to be nothing more than mere imagination.

Yet if the imagined truth were unimportant – if only the documented and the definitive were to be believed – why bother telling stories at all? Why not simply allow the FBI and police (presented in the form of Agents Worthy and Harris) to discover what, if anything, happened to Sachs, rather than construct an elaborate account of what *might possibly* have occurred, rather than race against the proverbial clock to write a tale that might be proven false when the heart of the mystery is revealed? The role of the novelist, Auster would appear to argue, is merely to be honest and to recognize that fiction is, as another modern author, Stephen King, once said, “the truth within the lie.” Aaron’s tale of Benjamin Sachs can only truly be a lie if it is false, and it can only be false if Aaron is not honest in the process of telling it. Whether the story he sketches for us is *right*, Auster suggests – whether events happened strictly, or even chronologically, the way he envisions them – is secondary or of no importance whatsoever.

When Aaron discusses Sachs’ own novel, *The New Colossus*, therefore, the reader might very well believe that he or she is listening to Paul Auster describe the nature of his own text: “...even when the characters are imaginary, they are not inventions so much as borrowings....Otherwise, all the events are true – true in the sense that they follow the historical record – and in those places where the record is unclear, there is no tampering with the laws of probability. Everything is made to seem plausible, matter-of-fact, even banal in the accuracy of its depiction.”

That “truth within the lie,” then, for Auster, appears to exist within the idea that the novelist and his creations are one, inhabiting the same strange territories, wandering the same winding streets (in this case the labyrinthine avenues of New York City and Brooklyn or the country back roads of Vermont), sharing an umbilical connection with each other, inseparable. Through Peter Aaron, therefore, he can write, “I had become interchangeable with my work,” and the line between Auster and Aaron, the creator and created, is blurred even further. We cannot, perhaps, understand Aaron, or his compulsion to write about Sachs, completely unless we also understand his striking similarity to Auster and how one – a living, breathing, tangible human being – is related to (and in many ways actually *is*) the other – one that exists merely upon the page and in the minds of Auster and his readers.

"I am not a confessional writer," Auster once told an interviewer. "I am not interested in presenting my private life to the world – that is not my ambition." But the connection and parallels to his protagonist, even beyond their shared monogram, cannot be denied. Both are writers of moderate fame and success, the titles and subject of their work often markedly alike (e.g. Auster's *Moon Palace*, published the same year as Aaron's *Luna*); both have spent time abroad in France as young men because, as Aaron claims, they "needed some breathing room"; and both have gone through failed early marriages, have had children by that marriage (Daniel and David, respectively) and experienced extended periods of intense poverty, after which both have remarried (to Siri and Iris, respectively). Indeed, Aaron once tells Sachs that he "was pretty much living hand to mouth" at one time, and Auster's most recent, autobiographical work – detailing his early struggles as a young writer – was entitled *Hand to Mouth*. These and countless other parallels, small, mundane and perhaps even inconsequential by themselves, together make any attempt to divorce the author from his work – Auster from Aaron – a futile and meaningless exercise.

One of the more telling connections in *Leviathan* – telling in that the link reveals much of Auster's view of the author, reader and characters as interrelated beings, connected upon the page – is also perhaps one of the more amusingly surreal sections of the text, provided we know something of Auster's own life. "Without even knowing it, I enter the lives of strangers," Peter Aaron tells the FBI agents who have come to question him at the outset of the novel, "and for as long as they have my book in their hands, my words are the only reality that exists for them....Just last year...I discovered that someone had been impersonating me – answering letters in my name, walking into bookstores and autographing my books, hovering like a malignant shadow around the edges of my life." This shadow, later revealed to be Benjamin Sachs (at least as far as Aaron is concerned), does in fact have a counterpart in Auster's own life, as he, too, has been the victim of impersonation. The writer's life is his text, and the strangers whose lives he enters are often merely the characters wandering inside his mind.

The more we know of Auster's life, one might therefore inevitably conclude – the more details in *Leviathan* that we can recognize and match to the author's own biography – the more we can understand Aaron and the less we will find ambiguous or confusing in the text of the novel he chooses to write. Decode the text properly, this argument asserts, discover precisely where Aaron begins and Auster ends, and all our mysteries will be solved, all our questions answered. If we know the artist, we know the art. We can become interpreters as well.

There is, no doubt, much truth to this, and much to be said for understanding the author as well as the work itself – a fact often strangely ignored or overlooked by many readers – but it is also rather misleading, and we must not rush to make such assumptions. Auster and Aaron are, as has been previously stated, one but *not* the same; they are one man in two bodies: parallel lives, separate but not disconnected. "Technically speaking," says Auster, "each time I use the first person I push myself far away and see myself from a certain distance. Like a patient in the operating theater. I use the biographical mode, taking myself as an example. Because I've had experiences which in themselves are interesting."

But Auster is not a journalist, nor is *Leviathan* the unabridged, unadulterated story of his life. The act of simply remembering, of sitting down to construct a novel – "rolling blank pieces of paper into a typewriter," as Sachs once calls it – and dredging these moments of life to the forefront of the mind, must inevitably cause the author to rethink and revise as he recaptures, to rebuild memories from the perspective of the current self and to reinvent that self as he writes. Auster *is* Aaron, but by the same token he is also Sachs...or Maria Turner...or Fanny, Iris, Agents Harris and Worthy...or any of the countless others who appear throughout the text, whose lives interconnect and mesh in the mind of the novelist, who is in this case, Auster argues, "the place where everything begins." The novelist, according to Auster, creates himself through his characters; *Leviathan* can be, therefore, the story of Paul Auster without becoming autobiography.

How, then, does Auster's novel relate to the modernist view of the self and, in particular, to Marcel Proust's long and vaguely autobiographical novel *Remembrance of Things Past*? Many modernists (and later postmodernists, in whose company Auster at least ostensibly falls) have attempted to define the self, to answer fundamental questions about existence which had either gone unasked or been deemed

unimportant. Who are we, and how can we truly *know* anything? these writers ask themselves and their readers. Where does fiction separate from “real life” and how can we make this distinction?

At the heart of Marcel Proust's voluminous text lies the question of the nature and power of memory. Are we indeed what we remember, and can we recapture the past? This, even more than the individual memories and details that comprise the novel (and, in turn, comprise a life), is central – not merely for Proust and his fellow “modern” authors, but for contemporary writers like Auster as well. Through memory, both appear to believe, we recreate our lives; through remembrance we are reborn. Whether the events we remember occurred precisely as we see them in our mind is unimportant. Strict, detailed and chronological order is not the ultimate object of reminiscence or the writing of fiction. The object is, instead, to rediscover and understand ourselves through our memories and our crafted words, to build our lives anew, like a phoenix rising from the ashes of recollection and storytelling.

In *Swann's Way*, the first volume of Proust's opus, therefore, the novelist recreates himself as narrator and then further as the character of Swann, fictionalizing his story as he does so. What, then, is real; what truly *happened*? For Proust, this does not matter. “...all these objects which he contemplated,” the narrator writes of Swann, “with as much curiosity and admiration as gratitude – for if, in absorbing his dreams, they had delivered him from them, they themselves in return had been enriched by them, they showed him the palpable realisation of his fancies...” In memory and fiction, reality is whatever we choose to make of it; illusions and dreams become real. In creating stories, we recreate ourselves; we recover lost time and craft it how we please.

Perhaps, then, these fancies and later “theatrical properties and pasteboard fruits” that Proust imagines through Swann, and that memory and imagination may sometimes provide, are not entirely false images or lies that a reader ought to look beyond. They are, instead, our recapturing and revitalization of the past; we remember and recreate, and if we embellish, so much the better. Plato once wrote that “the life which is unexamined is not worth living.” Proust, I believe, would add (finding Auster in complete agreement) that “the life which is not recreated is not worth remembering.”

Undoubtedly, many modern authors – including Proust and, to an even larger extent, Auster – are interested in toying with the conventions of fiction, in crafting imagined worlds that reflect what they view as an interconnectedness between the author and his or her work. Therefore, in reading *Leviathan* we cannot always draw clear distinctions between Paul Auster and his narrator, Peter Aaron, but nor can we immediately assume that *Leviathan* is simply a thinly-disguised autobiographical work. Rather, it resides somewhere in the strange territory between the two, between confession and untruth – a territory, it would seem, Auster believes *all* fiction inhabits. The novelist, he and other writers claim, create stories of people that never were, never will be, but yet somehow always are. Fiction is, indeed, “the truth within the lie.”

Such a connection between an author and his or her work is often, strangely, overlooked by many readers, dismissed as unimportant or never considered at all. This connection is, however, often over-emphasized by academics and those who wish to view the author's own biography as the basis for all his or work – who wish to argue, in fact, that if we know the artist, we will automatically be capable of deciphering the work. Such assumptions (on either side) fail to recognize, as Auster attempts to demonstrate, that the novelist's function is to honestly reflect the world, to recreate it, to explore themselves at work upon the page. The novelist, ultimately, is neither journalist nor liar, but interpreter.

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