

The Spirit of Walden: Art, Asceticism and Coercion in Paul Auster's Early Fiction

NIGEL RODENHURST

The image of the storyteller, actually or metaphorically imprisoned because of dominant social conditions, attempting to make an impact on consciousness and avert tragedy from the margins, interacts with the figure of the ascetic writer throughout Paul Auster's fiction. In several novels Auster's protagonists retreat to a small room and emerge as something other than a storyteller, acting within a supposedly "democratic" process. Indeed, the scenario often outlined in Auster's fiction is that the protagonist encounters obstacles to the production of narratives that can influence the consciousness of the reader, and resorts to some form of political activism, coercion or "terrorism". In many respects it could be argued that Auster's interaction with writing, politics and direct political action mirrors that of one of his literary idols, Henry David Thoreau.

As I will outline below, Thoreau's writing and documented career can be taken as an exemplary illustration of the paradox between the literary writer's drive to move readers' hearts and minds as part of the democratic process of publication, and the drive towards coercion, a drive to impose one's own world view on one's subject. This is a true paradox, as often a coercive figure such as a terrorist and a writer can work from a point of opposition to exactly the same political issue, and only differ over which method to adopt. It could also be argued, conversely, that in certain instances the terrorist, in common with the dominant social order, uses methods of coercion to assume total authority over its subject. This may bring to mind Richard Rorty's succinct summary of the central problem of contemporary literary theory as being: "the problem of how to overcome authority without claiming authority" (105). This "Thoreauvian paradox", it will be demonstrated, is present in Auster's early work and could be used to challenge some of the tunnel-visioned "postmodernist" readings that seemed to pervade the critical response.

In this essay, I will first outline how the career of Thoreau can be seen as an exemplary illustration of the competing drives in a literary writer towards asceticism and political activism. After this I will demonstrate similarities in Auster's approach to these subjects before providing an alternative reading of *Ghosts* set in the context of *The New York Trilogy* as a whole, arguing that Auster consciously uses both *Walden* and Thoreau as a literary figure to investigate contradictions which concerned him as a young writer. Having established the presence of these competing drives in Auster's early works, I will conclude by focusing on the way that this tendency was revisited and evolved in later works.

Thoreau's literary legacy rests heavily on *Walden*, his acknowledged masterpiece. This, as most readers will know, is the narrative of Thoreau's retreat to a cabin at Walden Pond, an experiment in solitude at a time when America was in political turmoil. Because of this, he is often stereotyped as an example of the figure of the ascetic writer, extolling solitude, inwardness and study as remedies for social ills on an individual level. The idea that retreating to a cell-like space and living an ascetic, paired down existence encourages ideological self-analysis and assists the participant in confronting her/his inner self (perhaps mirroring the process of reading literary narratives) resurfaces in Auster's fiction frequently. To reduce Thoreau's influence on Auster to such a narrow scheme, however, is to overlook the fact that Thoreau was a writer of manifold contradictions and competing impulses, as Auster himself is well aware.

This is evident in Thoreau's strong support of John Brown, the militant abolitionist who led an assault on Harper's Ferry in a bid to equip slaves with rifles so that they could free themselves. As Brown faced execution and public vilification for taking the law into his own hands, Thoreau made a stirring speech entitled "A Plea For Captain John Brown", defending the felon's "character".¹ Thoreau's own activities in opposition to the government of the day were largely confined to his writing, speech making and his approbation of occasional "civil disobedience" (non-violent resistance), although he did clearly empathize with the impulse behind Brown's actions. At one point Thoreau admits that he does not wish to kill or be killed for political reasons, but that he can "foresee circumstances in which both these things would be by me unavoidable" (842). He concedes that where people strongly disagree with Brown it is often because of his methods, not his politics, and at several points reiterates his intention to spend his own life "in talking and writing" (842). Despite their differing ultimate choice of action, Thoreau sees Brown as a kindred spirit in his stance against slavery, describing him as a "transcendentalist above all" (830).

In publishing *Walden* Thoreau set about the aims of the storyteller as discussed above, hoping to have a positive impact on political consciousness. He did not do so obliquely but by direct appeal in the narrative, detailing his experiment and polemically challenging readers to look into their own consciences on matters relating to slavery, the environmental impact of technology and the American way of life in the period before the American Civil War. It should be acknowledged that Thoreau's artifice as a storyteller is utilized in *Walden* and many critics choose to think of the speaker not exactly as Thoreau himself, but as a radically textualized narrator who narrates his own journey of self-discovery. On one level Thoreau undertakes an ascetic experiment or retreat, a solipsistic gesture, but as the protagonist of Auster's *The Brooklyn Follies* asserts a "sensible alternative to the conditions of the time" (16). On another level Thoreau acts in the hope that skillfully written narratives can move hearts and minds, that readers will be influenced. Thoreau remarked of Brown that it was a pity that he "did not make a book of his observations", and in this statement makes it clear that he ultimately saw writing as his vocation, as his genuine chance to make a difference (828). It could be argued that this brief profile demonstrates the ambivalence in the writer's position between hoping to influence his reader against collusion with an undemocratic or tyrannical dominant order, and the undemocratic or tyrannical urge to coerce a change in consciousness through "direct action".

Auster's work, however, is rarely discussed in the context of these different responses to political events, except in the case of *Leviathan*. This is perhaps because the main protagonist (beside the narrator), Benjamin Sachs, resorts to terror, and many of his responses to the politics of the Regan years bring to mind those of the "real life" terrorist Theodor Kaczynski (the "Unabomber"). It could be argued though, that the range of responses to historical events discussed thus far; art, asceticism and direct political action, is investigated throughout Auster's fiction. Indeed, Auster's early experiences as a politically driven young man mirror those of his literary antecedent Thoreau in several ways. Auster came of age in the Vietnam years and was a student at Columbia during the 1968 uprisings. These were in part provoked by the university's complicity with the Vietnam Draft Board but were also a reaction to America's durable racism. Auster was marginally involved in the student uprisings. In *Hand to Mouth* he recalls the extent to which he was politically involved:

In the summer of 1969, I walked into a post office in western Massachusetts with a friend who had to mail a letter. As she waited in line, I studied the posters of the FBI's ten most wanted men pinned to the wall. It turned out that I knew seven of them. (36)

From that time to the present day, Auster has been outspoken about American politics, particularly capitalism and foreign policy, and if one had to fit his comments and attitudes towards successive administrations into any category, one could perhaps describe them broadly as "leftist". Auster has perhaps become a more public figure and certainly a more regular contributor to media interviews since the September 11th attacks, which provoked him to heavily criticize the Bush

administration on a number of occasions. Comparing the politics of the war on terror to the political discourse of the Vietnam years Auster told John Reed that he was appalled by the lack of active protest in early twentieth century America:

The thing that shocks me about what's going on is not so much that it is happening – but that no-one is really screaming about it. I would think now, after more than two years of Bush the whole country would be hysterically, passionately against it, but he's rolling over everybody. That's appalling to me. (23)

Auster has also spoken of his sense that all citizens should be politically active within the democratic process and advocated the idea of protest:

I'm a writer, but I'm a citizen. I'm both, and I also happen to have strong political opinions. When circumstances require it, when I'm asked to do something or say something or write something, I do it – as a citizen. (Purgatory, p.95)

In this statement Auster has given support to different approaches to political conditions towards which he feels a sense of revulsion, as Thoreau did in the above profile. His main activity has, however, remained his writing, as Auster has remained committed for over forty years to spending time in his small room studio in Brooklyn churning out novels and screenplays.

At the beginning of the 1980s Auster emerged from a long period of self-imposed exile (touring Europe and writing poetry that very few people read) and published *The Invention of Solitude*. In this semi-autobiographical work Auster introduced his readership to his sense of a small room ascetic existence as an ideal scenario for self-study, and also his version of the storyteller's ideal achievement, giving his endorsement to the potential impact of words and stories. The example is taken, we are told, from the beginning of *The Thousand and One Nights*. King Shehriyar has been cuckolded, and in his disappointment resorts to taking only physical pleasure from women before ordering their execution (150-51). Shehrzad, the vizier's daughter, volunteers to go to the king and tells him a "story about story telling" (151). In the process she delays her execution, but not by directly pleading her case – the function of the story is to "make a man see the thing before his eyes by holding up another thing to view" (152). After being moved by stories within stories the king is a new man. He cancels executions and distributes largesse. The narrator proclaims that Shehrzad's feat is an achievement "with all the unalterable gravity of a miracle", and asserts that a "voice that speaks stories of life and death, has the power to give life" (154). In Auster's comments that address his approach to writing and citizenship one can detect the Thoreauvian paradox between art, asceticism and political activism.

The above discussion provides a fresh framework in which to approach Auster's early novella *Ghosts*, the second and shortest book of *The New York Trilogy*, in the context of the trilogy as a whole. This trilogy has often been analyzed in contexts of postmodern theory, including the works of Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan, among others. Marc Chenetier gestured towards the presence of *Walden* in *Ghosts* and the main protagonist's struggle to get to grips with the canonical text. Rather than evaluate the possible influences of Thoreau specifically in this work, however, Chenetier chose to discuss the novella as a meditation on "language, words and writing ... thus prolonging the meditations of Melville and Poe" (42). Ilana Shiloh made the case that Auster refracts the conventions of the detective novel in ways that highlight the existentialist thinking of Sartre. Shiloh also overlooked the direct influence of *Walden* in this novella, particularly in her assertion that "no crime was committed, no mystery was involved, except the mystery of the self" (66). I will challenge this below when I discuss the protagonist, Blue, as the victim of an errant writer's "coercion". Shiloh's response is typical of the line taken in early responses to *The New York Trilogy*, discussing the genre of "anti-detective" fiction. Alison Russell's reading was underpinned by the idea that the trilogy is "amenable to the deconstructive principles of Jacques Derrida" (71).

This type of critical response is not entirely surprising for a number of reasons. One of these relates closely to the current era of literary criticism, and the tendency of many academics to

foreground the subtext of a literary work, disregarding any perceivable pretext or authorial intentions. Another factor that would encourage such a series of readings is that the first book of the trilogy, *City of Glass*, revolves around a quest for a prelapsarian language in which the protagonist Quinn (also a victim of coercion) identifies a void similar to that found in Beckett's "postmodern" fictions. Indeed, Auster was profoundly influenced by Beckett, a leading figure of the literary generation in which he came of age. Auster told James Campbell that:

You have the sense, when you read Beckett for the first time, that he reinvented the novel, and at the same time made it impossible for anyone to write a novel again. And I was in a sense crushed by him. It took me a while to get out from under the burden of Beckett.

Besides this, each novella of the trilogy could be characterized as stylistically "stripped down" with "bared concepts", as Russell noted (78). Frequent disclaimers concerning partial or imperfect knowledge of the plot, the repeated use of doubles and the "disappearances" of protagonists may also encourage readers to evaluate the trilogy in terms of "postmodern" motifs.

The idea that these novels are "postmodern", simply on the grounds that they may be "amenable" to themes and concerns common to theorists of the late twentieth-century, has already been challenged. As J.M Tyree began to point out, *The Locked Room* could validly be read as an engagement with some of the timeless concerns of authorship, such as neurotic narcissism and fretfulness over reader reception. Tyree based his argument on the novella's acknowledged "borrowing" from Nathaniel Hawthorne's juvenile effort *Fanshawe*, and the story of the novelist's tortured relationship to it. Hawthorne recalled every copy of the novel, itself about a struggling novelist, and destroyed it because he was embarrassed by it. Whilst it is acknowledged that *Fanshawe* is no masterpiece, Tyree pointed out that:

mediocre writing is hardly the worst of man's inhumanity to man. Yet Hawthorne hides Fanshawe almost pathologically [...] as if he really had committed some terrible crime. (77)

Discussing his novels with Mark Irwin, Auster commented that writing for him was a way to "express my own contradictions" (113). Bearing this in mind, and that Auster produced these novels as he himself departed from a long period of exile followed by a small room existence, in which he resolved, to the extent that it is possible, the obstacles and conundrums which faced him as a novelist, it could be argued that the themes of these novellas are "coming of age", or more accurately, "phase of career" related. This "quest" to work out personal doubts and contradictions, could also be used to explain the "stripped down" style of the novels. If Auster expresses his concerns with language and authorship in *City of Glass* and with having the courage to publish and own up to one's own work in *The Locked Room*, in *Ghosts* he attempts to resolve his contradictory impulses towards the aims of the writer and of those who use direct political action. As I will demonstrate in my summative analysis of *Ghosts* below, Auster empathizes with one character's impulse to impose a world view on his reader through "terror", but ultimately dismisses this coercive method as undemocratic and opposed to the aims of the literary writer.

Ghosts commences with the narrator presenting to the reader the information that Blue, a private detective, has been given an assignment to watch Black, by a mysterious client called White. Although the location of this stakeout is deemed "unimportant", the narrator decides to set it in the district of Orange, historically related to Walt Whitman and Henry Ward Beecher (9-10). Initially, Blue observes Black reading *Walden*, and makes nothing of it. Blue is endowed by the narrator with sympathetic human qualities, such as being touched at the disappearance of a child, and feeling pleasure at successfully solving a case which brought about a happy reunion between a wife and her amnesiac husband. We also learn, however, that Blue is not self-analytical, and has "never given much thought to the world inside him" (19).

A pattern soon emerges which is similar to that found in *City of Glass*. In this, the first novel of the trilogy, the writer Quinn takes on the guise of a private detective only to be presented with

a strange case that he is at a loss to comprehend. In *Ghosts* Blue is disturbed to find that his usual procedures do not help him to resolve this case, and that he can only surmise what the case is not. He also begins to feel that the words he uses in his report do not exactly fit what is happening, "words do not necessarily work", which troubles him (26). The reader is made aware of a psychological area of repression in Blue's character at an early stage, involving his inability to relate successfully to "the future Mrs Blue", and this side of the character is not entirely attractive. At one point he excuses a sexual encounter with a lady he meets at a bar, by likening himself to a soldier at war, who needs some "comforts" (43). Shortly afterwards, Blue runs into his intended, who has ended their relationship because of Blue's desertion while he was on the strange case of Black. He has tears in his eyes and feels "a fool" (51).

Besides this, we learn that Blue is impressed with superficial aspects of America's historical development, such as the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge, the rise of a young black baseball star, and Robert Mitchum movies. The facts are that Blue is secure with his place in the world, as a man, as an American, and has spent little time alone with his thoughts. He is certainly not the type to read novels in order to be spiritually challenged or rejuvenated, as he is aware of no necessity for this. As the case continues, and Black seems to do nothing but work at his desk, Blue starts to ponder subjects such as mortality and the death of his father when he was young. Immediately he feels embarrassed and concludes that this is "what happens when you have no-one to talk to" (31). This in some ways replicates Thoreau's descriptions of his experience of solitude (in the chapter of that name) at Walden Pond, although Thoreau, a convert to self-experiment sees this as something to embrace rather than avoid. As this continues, Blue begins to brood, and at one point is described as harbouring suicidal thoughts (40).

Blue decides to read *Walden*, as a way of staying engaged with Black, but on first impression calls it "blather, an endless harangue about nothing at all" (48). It may be significant that the narrator intervenes here to say that whilst many have found it a difficult book, and although Blue persists, if he had found the "patience to read the book in the spirit in which it asks to be read, his entire life would begin to change" (48). The narrator's assertion here mirrors Thoreau's assertion in *Walden*, that the classics should be read as "deliberately and reservedly as they were written" (312). This compounds the notion that the narrator, the storytelling character who features in *The Locked Room* and ultimately has exercised the demons that prevented him from publishing, is himself a partial convert to Thoreau's thinking on ascetic study and feels that Blue could benefit from the reading experience. It is perhaps at this point that the reader begins to get a sense of Blue being set a coercive challenge. It seems he is being asked to examine himself and his relatively narrow (American) outlook, and consider the implications of a text like *Walden*, which calls for an ascetic quest for self-knowledge. The reader may also be led to suspect, as Blue does shortly afterwards, that Black is behind the whole idea of setting Blue this obtuse assignment.

Feeling oppressed and disorientated, Blue decides to resort to measures similar to those adopted by Quinn, disguising himself as a street person named Jimmy Rose, who begs change from Black and eventually has a conversation with him. As was the case with Quinn, Blue's motives for wanting to speak to Black under a disguise are, up to a certain point, morally justified by his occupation, his lack of success through other methods, and the generic conventions of detective fiction. Black's motives on the other hand are less than clear, but one suspects that he is one step ahead of Blue the whole time. He tells "Jimmy Rose" anecdotes about Whitman, and about Hawthorne locking himself away for twelve years, saying that writing is a "solitary business [...] it takes over your life" (66). Here it seems that Black is trying to impress upon Blue the idea of the writer as a sacrificial figure, devoted to creating art that will affect people, and worthy of appreciation.

The problem with this, if it is Black's rhetoric, and he is a "writer" who wants to make an impact on Blue's consciousness, is that he has gone beyond the democratic process of publishing literature available to all and started to actively coerce Blue, in an attempt force a world view on

to him. Blue himself has started to change as a person, and on more than one occasion after reading *Walden* thinks of his circumstances in ways that relate to the book. When he considers abandoning the case and becoming “free”, he imagines himself “somewhere else, far away from here, walking through the woods and swinging an axe over his shoulder” (82–83). Next, Blue disguises himself as a retired Vaudevillian salesman, and learns that Black is a writer and that he does not know if he will live to complete his book. To this, Blue makes an uncharacteristic philosophical reply about mortality, further evidence of the way in which he is being changed by his experience as a “reader” (81).

Finally Blue convinces himself that Black is inciting him to make some sort of move, and breaks into his apartment. It seems that the book Black is writing is simply an account of Blue’s behaviour, and that he has been entirely dedicated to his “project” with the young detective. Later Blue confronts Black, who is lying in wait with a gun. Black claims that his own problem is that he is “too much in (his) mind”, the opposite of Blue’s original condition (92). It seems he intends to commit suicide, and he tells Blue: “I’ve had my job to do [...] and I’ve done it” (93). He then passively allows Blue to attack him, and Blue apparently beats him to death before disappearing without trace. The narrator concludes by stating that we do not know what happened to Blue after this, but in his “secret dreams” he likes to think that Blue travelled abroad, making one of several enigmatic references in Auster’s fiction to China as a possible destination for his sympathetic characters (96). The fate of Black (does he live or die?) is not judged relevant enough to speculate upon.

In *Ghosts*, Auster apparently presents a similar case to that found in *City of Glass*. A despotic “writer”, in this case Black, attempts to impose his world view upon an unsuspecting dupe, by setting him a case that brings into question the certainties of the “reader’s” subjective outlook. The novella is also similar in that there is a certain amount of ambivalence in the narrator’s response to the protagonists. The narrator clearly, when he describes Blue reading *Walden* for the first time, empathizes with Black’s project and would perhaps like to witness Blue’s conversion from a shallow private detective to one influenced by transcendentalist thought. This is partly achieved, it seems, as Blue does become more likely to think in ways associated with transcendentalism. The possibility of a voyage to China may hint that the narrator hopes Blue will continue his voyage of self-discovery, perhaps with a spiritual experience in the stereotypically “mystical” east.

Furthermore, whilst the narrator does not discuss the eventual fate of Black, he does not wholly condemn him either, as he did with “Paul Auster”, a solipsistic writer who did nothing to help Quinn in *City of Glass*. Indeed, as the last we hear of Black, project complete, is of his passively allowing himself to be destroyed by Blue, he becomes something of a martyr to a cause which is not entirely unsympathetic. The reader is, after all, made aware of Blue’s faults, as a man that felt he was “never wrong” (38). Those with strong opinions that literature can effectively move hearts and minds might enjoy reading as Blue begins to question things that he had previously taken for granted. One is thus tempted to relate Black’s ascetic efforts to those of Thoreau, Emerson, Hawthorne and Melville, all mentioned by this stage in *The New York Trilogy*, in terms of the sacrifice that he has made for his “art”.

An ambivalent approach is thus evident in this early novella to the borderline between challenging readers intellectually through fiction and “coercing” them. This “coercion” can be thought of as either the production of inscrutable, unsettling texts or the act of actually stepping into reality and coercing citizens like Quinn and Blue, who are vulnerable for differing reasons, with fictional “cases”. Whilst Auster clearly understands and shares the compulsion, by his own career and lifestyle choices, and through his fiction, he makes clear his overall preference for and commitment to attempting to affect consciousness through literary narratives. In this respect, *Ghosts* could be re-evaluated as the young novelist’s attempts to “work out the contradictions” implicit in his dilemma, as Thoreau did through his writing. I will now move on to looking at

the ways in which this tendency to meditate upon the outlined Thoreauvian paradox evolves in Auster's work.

It has often been noted that as Auster's career has progressed, while he often returns to his favoured motifs of chance, stories about writers, and stories within stories, his work has become less paired down and with a more solid grounding in a quantifiable time and place. Arthur Salzman pointed out that *Leviathan* at the time was Auster's "most realistic novel to date", but because of the narrator's frequent disclaimers concerning imperfect knowledge added the caveat that:

Whatever document results from the novelist's efforts is essentially a record of incomplete transactions whose authority must be taken under advisement. (162)

The broad outline of the novel is that Peter Aaron, a writer, narrates his account of the life and demise of his friend and fellow writer Benjamin Sachs. Sachs is characterised as a writer with clear political views, having been imprisoned as a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War. He is also described as being profoundly influenced by Thoreau, who he admired for "his attitude of remorseless inner vigilance" (29). The Thoreauvian paradox is in evidence at an early stage of the narrative as Aaron recalls meeting Sachs for the first time and sensing his divided nature: "he resembled Ichabod Crane, perhaps, but he was also John Brown" (13). The motivation to act in an ascetic and politicised way, and the contrast between the drives to write effective narratives and to act as an activist, are the underlying forces at work as Sachs completes his trajectory in the narrative from prisoner, to writer, to man in small room and finally to terrorist.

Auster falls back upon the technique employed throughout *The New York Trilogy* of using doubles who have some similar characteristics but in other ways are diametrically opposed. Salzman does not fully acknowledge this as he argues that the relationship between narrator and protagonist is similar to that of *The Locked Room*, as in this novel the narrator realises that his "success—indeed his identity — is inextricably bound to Fanshawe" (166). As I will contend shortly, Aaron is partially sympathetic towards Sachs and at times in awe of him, but an important aspect of the narrative is Aaron's assertive censure of Sachs's actions and mentality. As mentioned, Aaron is himself a writer, and like Sachs has hit a metaphorical brick wall in his career. Sachs, we are told, gave up on writing novels in the early 1970s as a "sham", and reverted to writing essays, a perhaps more polemical form than good fiction should be and certainly less likely to influence the American public in the late twentieth century (55). Aaron persists with his career, struggling at working in a bookstore and working on his translations before his lack of success leads to the demise of his marriage to Delia. This storyline parallels Auster's own career trajectory as outlined in *The Invention of Solitude*, as does his retreat to a small apartment that Sachs approvingly calls "a sanctuary of inwardness, a room in which the only possible activity was thought" (63). Faced with his solitude and isolation Aaron, unlike Sachs, never turns his back on writing.

Aaron tells us that Sachs's early novel, "The New Colossus", seems to assert that Thoreau was correct in his thinking (we may perhaps assume regarding ascetic self-analysis, individualism and solitude, as well as "civil disobedience") and that America had "lost its way" (43). We also learn that the dominant emotion "was anger [...] against America, anger against political hypocrisy, anger as a weapon to destroy national myths" (44). When Aaron describes the political scene of America in the Regan years, he could hardly be more simpatico with Sachs:

The era of Ronald Regan began. Sachs went on doing what he had always done, but in the new American order of the 1980s, his position became increasingly marginalized. It wasn't that he had no audience, but it grew steadily smaller and the magazines that published his work became steadily more obscure. Almost imperceptibly, Sachs came to be seen as a throwback, as someone out of step with the spirit of the time. The world had changed around him, and in the current climate of selfishness and intolerance, of moronic chest-pounding Americanism, his opinions sounded curiously harsh and moralistic. (116)

As is often the case in Auster's work, the direction of the narrative changes abruptly because of a barely plausible chain of events that a fatalistic character responds to. In the case of *Leviathan*, Sachs falls from a window ledge at a July 4th Party. Whilst he escapes death, both Aaron and Sachs himself see the fall as a kind of metaphorical fall from grace, described in various religious terms. Aaron and another artist character, Maria Turner, rally around Sachs and try to encourage him to persist with writing as a constructive and therapeutic response to his underlying antagonisms and recent trauma. Sachs retreats to a small writing studio in Vermont and Aaron is optimistic that the product of this ascetic retreat will be "a great and memorable book" (158). Sachs's life then converges with that of a terrorist, Reed DiMaggio, and after further traumatic events he becomes a convert to the thinking that inspired DiMaggio. He confesses that he has begun to feel like a "hypocrite", "ashamed" about being a writer and not having the "balls to act" (252-53). Sachs then becomes the "Phantom of Liberty" and carries out a series of bombings on replicas of the Statue of Liberty. Again, Aaron is partly sympathetic towards the "Phantom". He dismisses him as a "crank", but concedes that he only wants "America to look into himself and mend its ways" (243-44). Aaron also shares the bomber's appraisal of the symbolic meaning of the statue, and how it symbolizes:

The best of what America has to offer the world [...] however pained one might be by America's failure to live up to those ideals. (242)

To the very end of the narrative, Aaron expresses empathy towards Sachs regarding the political scene in America and the dwindling impact that novelists could hope to have. At the conclusion Aaron remarks that while Sachs is in hiding "the Berlin Wall was torn down, Havel became president of Czechoslovakia, the Cold War suddenly stopped", all allusions to the collapse of the historical left, and as Sachs continues to carry out his lone protest Aaron admits that wherever Sachs was "I was with him now" (266). At the point at which Aaron had learned that Sachs was the bomber, however, he had assertively condemned Sachs's methods, if not his impulses:

but who on earth picked you as the conscience of the world [...] last time I saw you, you were working on a novel. (250)

Ilana Shiloh discussed the way that Sachs may have been influenced in his bent for political protest by linking Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" to Sachs's conscientious objection to Vietnam. Shiloh goes on to assert that this non-violent resistance is "diametrically opposed to terrorism", and that when Sachs later changes his tactics, he forsakes the teachings of his former idol (112). Again, this overlooks the mention of John Brown in Aaron's original description of Sachs and also Thoreau's qualified support of Brown. If Sachs is described as an overly fervent young man, Aaron also reveals his similarity in appearing to have harboured strong, almost militant drives. Sachs's wife Fanny recalls seeing him at college and thinking he was one "of those young men who was either going to kill himself or change the world" (52). To conclude, the Thoreauvian paradox is in evidence in *Leviathan*, as two writers faced with similar conditions, and with similar feelings towards America during the Regan years, share similar impulses to write, but also to assertively criticise the way their readers think. Where Aaron differs from Sachs it is a question of methodology rather than politics, and whilst Aaron shrugs off his early tendency to look up to Sachs, he persists in his assertive support of many aspects of his thinking.

Notes

- ¹ The 'Plea' was delivered in Concord Town Hall on the evening of October 30th 1859, while Brown was imprisoned and awaiting execution. As Henry Seidel Canby noted, the "usually ineffective" Thoreau was highly animated, and Emerson testified that the Thoreau was heard "by all respectfully, by many with a sympathy that surprised themselves" (827).

Works Cited

- Auster, Paul. *The Brooklyn Follies*. New York: Henry Holt, 2005.
Ghosts. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1986.
Hand to Mouth. Los Angeles: Sun Press, 1982.
The Invention of Solitude. New York: Holt, 1997.
Leviathan. New York: Viking, 1992.
The Locked Room. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1987.
Bewes, Timothy. "The Novel as an Absence: Lukács and the Event of Postmodern Fiction." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 38.1 (Fall 2004): 5-20.
Campbell, James. "The Mighty Quinn". *Guardian* "Review" 12 November 2005, 11.
Canby, Henry Seidel. *Thoreau*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1939.
Chenetier, Marc. "Paul Auster's Pseudonymous World." *Beyond The Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster*. Ed Dennis Barone. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995. 34-43.
Irwin, Mark. "Memory's Escape: Inventing *The Music of Chance* – A Conversation with Paul Auster" *Denver Quarterly* 28.3 (Fall 1994): 111-122.
McCaffery, Larry and Gregory, Sinda. "An Interview with Paul Auster." *The Art of Hunger*. London: Faber, 1998. 287-326
Reed, John. "In Conversation: Paul Auster with John Reed". *The Brooklyn Rail* August/September 2003, 23-24.
Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
Russell, Alison. "Deconstructing *The New York Trilogy*: Paul Auster's Anti-Detective Fiction." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 31.2 (Winter 1990): 71-84.
Shiloh, Ilana. *Paul Auster and the Postmodern Quest*. New York: Peter Lang, 2002.