Journal of American Studies, **53** (2019), 2, 536–555
© Cambridge University Press and British Association for American Studies 2018
doi:10.1017/S0021875817001967 First published online 15 March 2018

Pen and Bomb: Creative Agency in Paul Auster's *Leviathan*

MEIPING ZHANG

The Transcendentalist legacy in Auster's *Leviathan* faces many questions posed by postmodern cultural politics. Previous studies of the novel have highlighted the irresolvable tension between writerly solitude and political engagement, which largely accounts for Benjamin Sachs's undoing. Departing from this interpretation, the present essay provides an alternative reading that links Auster's Thoreauvian representation with Cavell's idea of Emersonian Perfectionism. It seeks to cast further light on the idea of America, examine its relation to self-transformation, and reevaluate Sachs's life and work within a philosophical framework.

I am not a man, I am dynamite.

Friedrich Nietzsche[1]

American Transcendentalism has been a source of inspiration to Auster. One may recall the kind of prelapsarian solitude depicted in his first major novel, *City of Glass*, and take the urban quest for gnosis as a unique response to Transcendentalist ideas. Later this incorporation of them, and dialogue with them, began to take a different turn. *Leviathan* is a prime example that in many senses defines the Transcendentalist moment in Auster's early work. When comparing *Leviathan* with DeLillo's *Mao II*, Aliki Varvogli notes that "whereas DeLillo is preoccupied with postmodern consumerist culture, Auster negotiates his writer's position in the world by invoking … the spirit and the rhetoric of nineteenth-century American writing."[2] Similarly, Brendan Martin in *Paul Auster's Postmodernity* discusses the link between *Leviathan* and American Transcendentalism, claiming that "Sachs's goals are synonymous with those formerly associated with the social foundation

Department of English and Comparative Literature, Goldsmiths University of London. Email: en101mz@gold.ac.uk.

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 96.

[2] Aliki Varvogli, *The World That Is the Book: Paul Auster's Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), 145.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817001967 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and cultural articulation of the American nation."[3] Both critics thus recognize the importance of the Transcendentalist legacy in *Leviathan*.

Meanwhile, some ticklish issues emerge from other readings. For instance, recalling "Fredric Jameson's descriptive model of cultural and linguistic schizophrenia," Mark Brown shows how Sachs regresses toward social disconnection.[4] And if withdrawal entails the dissolution of the social contract, transgression is no less problematic. The inability to question the system from within, as some may insist, accounts for Sachs's downfall; or else his case illustrates a political struggle that "is reduced to nothing or, more precisely, to mere exchange value."[5] These postmodern diagnoses, in one way or another, clash with the Transcendentalist legacy embodied in Sachs's life and work. With this in view, I think it worthwhile to reinterpret the legacy in question, so that we can rebalance the series of arguments about the relationships between solitude and political engagement, between writing and responsibility. What is needed, then, is a deeper understanding of agency and its economy, not by contrasting the two protagonists, Peter Aaron and Benjamin Sachs, but by reevaluating Sachs's relations to thought and action, as well as his capacity for freedom and transgression. In this regard, Stanley Cavell's formulation of Emersonian Perfectionism is particularly illuminating.

The key to Emersonian Perfectionism lies in the perception that human existence is, as it were, split between worlds. To elucidate the significance of this doubleness, I draw on Cavell's readings of American Transcendentalists and Continental thinkers (Kant, Emerson, Thoreau, Nietzsche, and Heidegger) and embed them in my own reading of *Leviathan*. A unique combination of these readings can provide new insights into Sachs's situation, in particular the distance between what he thinks and represents in his writing of America and what he experiences in the place called America. This coincides with a major theme in Cavell's philosophy: what it means to discover an America that has already and never happened. The quest is pre-political in the sense that it does not conform to political norms and patterns (which can mean it *is* political, but only in a different sense). In other words, it is not meant to serve ideological agendas; nor does it fit neatly into the logic of collective action. That in a way explains why writing is a crucial part of the quest: straddling the lines between private and public, existence and nonexistence, hope and despair, writing performs a special function of ethical expression. It is both an experience and a responsibility – a medium for

[3] Brendan Martin, *Paul Auster's Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 2008), 211.
[4] Mark Brown, *Paul Auster* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 91.
[5] Linda L. Fleck, "From Metonymy to Metaphor: Paul Auster's *Leviathan*," in Harold Bloom, ed., *Paul Auster* (Broomall, PA: Chelsea House, 2004), 207–22, 214.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817001967 Published online by Cambridge University Press

creative agency. In this light, Sachs's writing is inseparable from his action. Although in *Leviathan* the one seems to be set against the other, essentially they belong to the same dynamic of creation. Likewise, though the "pen" and the "bomb" might be treated as conflicting concepts or tropes, both imply, among other things, the detonation of energy.[6]

The main body of the essay comprises three sections. The first section is an introductory analysis of some fundamental questions presented in the novel: the relationship between thought and action, the nature of writing, and the partialness of knowledge. Reflections on them prepare the way for an in-depth analysis of Sachs's work in the second section. I propose to incorporate Cavell's ideas (particularly from his reading of Emerson's "Experience") into a dissection of Sachs's novel *The New Colossus*. With no rehash of familiar theories about postmodern textuality, the Cavellian message sheds new light on Sachs's work. It also sets the tone for the last section, which is devoted mainly to a discussion of the value of agency in Auster's Thoreauvian figure. By showing how Sachs's capacity for change is tested to the full in the aftermath of his sudden and nearly fatal fall, my discussion emphasizes the power of transcendental aspirations and struggles in a moral existence. This existence is not simply one's own; its social dimension is always already implied in the idea of America.

I

Before I use Cavell's Emersonian Perfectionism to illustrate Auster's Thoreauvian figure, it is helpful to start with a primary concern of Auster's early works: the reflexivity of writing. This narrative and linguistic reflexivity is often accompanied by the writer's conscious inquiry into his/her strangely solitary condition. What makes a philosophical reading of Auster apposite and rewarding is precisely this particular concern about writing as a mode of existence, which exposes an individual to a singular, interior space seemingly inaccessible to others. Without it the ontological thread in such stories as *Ghosts* – its connection with the Thoreauvian experiment with solitude – would be substantially undermined. Yet it is also worth noting that in *Leviathan* Auster's Thoreauvian representation is framed within a different discursive landscape, more sweeping and multifarious. One can detect its initial sign in Sachs's character and his relation to writing, which are quite uncharacteristic of an Austerian writer–protagonist who, with a mind

[6] Not to mention that the words "dynamic" and "dynamite" are etymologically related, and that I lend a Nietzschean sense to these words.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817001967 Published online by Cambridge University Press

chronically brooding over the past and itself, is accordingly mired in a difficult relationship with words and thoughts:

> Work was like an athletic contest for him, an endurance race between his body and his mind, but since he was able to bear down on his thoughts with such concentration, to think with such unanimity of purpose, the words always seemed to be there for him, as if he had found a secret passageway that ran straight from his head to the tips of his fingers.[7]

It tallies with other impressions Sachs leaves on Aaron: "he was so utterly lacking in self-consciousness"; "He was too out there, too fascinated by other people, too happy mixing with crowds for such a lonely occupation, I thought" (*L* 16, 17). Thus the receding of a solitary state of life (and mind) from the center of the story seems to correspond to Sachs's inclination for interpersonal ties and intimate his eventual turning away from writing to action, from the insubstantial to the pragmatic, from the private to the public. As he declares to Aaron, "The days of being a shadow are over. I've got to step into the real world now and do something" (*L* 122). It is as though Sachs, standing in stark contrast to Black (a character in *Ghosts*), intertextually rebuked him for inaction and exemplified another side of the Thoreauvian figure – leaving the woods and returning to the city, literally and metaphorically.

This picture throws into relief a conflict between writing and action, which is not unrelated to the contested legacies of Transcendentalism. However, does this conflict amount to nothing but antagonism? What are its significance and consequences, apart from those spelled out in the context of postmodern culture? To answer these questions, we need to both read between the lines and widen the scope of our investigation. In order to better understand the contradictory pulls, which simultaneously inhere within the Thoreauvian character, and which concern not only Thoreau (writing as "labor") and Emerson (writing as "vocation") but also, as "doubtfully" referred to by Cavell, Heidegger (thinking as "handicraft"),[8] we might consider the following

[7] Paul Auster, *Leviathan* (London: Faber & Faber, 1993), 49; references hereafter are given parenthetically with the abbreviation *L*.

[8] "[T]his is his [Emerson's] vocation, what he does and what he suffers"; "Thinking is a handicraft." See Stanley Cavell, "What Is the Emersonian Event? A Comment on Kateb's Emerson," in David Justin Hodge, ed., *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 183–91, 188, 187; references hereafter are given parenthetically with the abbreviation *ETE*. By saying "doubtful" Cavell indicates, according to my understanding of what he articulates in other essays on Emerson ("Finding as Founding" and "Aversive Thinking"), that Heidegger's formulation "Thinking is a handicraft" – in association with "hand" and "grasping," thus "a mode of necessary, everyday violence" (similar to the "unhandsome part of our condition" in Emerson) – should be differentiated from his thoughts on "being *drawn* to things" and "getting in the draw, or the draft, of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817001967 Published online by Cambridge University Press

possibility: the antagonism in question might first and foremost bear on our early overconfidence in, and thereafter growing mistrust of, thinking and writing in modern times (namely their dubious practicality and effectiveness in the empirical and political realms), both of which betray a fear of confronting our distance from language and, moreover, our alienation from the self, the world, and other minds. This fear consequently induces our repeated attempts to recover something, anything, from this distance, this loss *überhaupt*. The paradox or double bind is that we try to seek solace in the source of insecurity. In other words, we want to use language to dispel doubt, to secure our place in the world, our grasp of things, our understanding of others, which apparently works but potentially backfires on us; put otherwise, increasing our sense of loss.

In *Leviathan* this sense of doubt and loss is harbored and handled by Sachs and Aaron in different ways. For Aaron, it mainly derives from memories and actualities, whose consistency and unity always appear tantalizing. Admittedly, he can by no means restore this unity, if there is one. Nor is he in a position to analyze Sachs's innermost feelings even though, as he puts it, "Sachs confided a great deal to me over the years of our friendship" (*L* 22). While looking back on their first meeting by chance, he finds it hard to absorb Sachs's death without feeling strange: "it's difficult for me to imagine that the person who sat with me in the bar that day was the same person who wound up destroying himself last week" (*L* 13). Memory and experience – comprehended by our empiricists "as made up of impressions and the ideas derived from impressions" (*NYUA* 92) – sometimes fail one, which is but an essential fact of everyday life. It is a kind of strangeness less about unpredictable twists and turns – though they count, especially in Auster's stories – than about one's chance of being deluded or else shocked by the familiar, ineluctable separation from his/her closest friend, and distance from the self. One of the most definitive expressions of the passing of the world as a whole can be found in Aaron's reflection on his failure of knowledge concerning Sachs's disappearance:

> his absence felt less and less like a personal matter. Every time I tried to think about him, my imagination failed me. It was as if Sachs had become a hole in the universe. He was no longer just my missing friend, he was a symptom of my ignorance about all things, an emblem of the unknowable itself. (*L* 146)

---

thinking" (similar to what Emerson calls "attraction"). See Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 86–87; references hereafter are given parenthetically with the abbreviation *NYUA*. See also Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 39, 41; references hereafter are given parenthetically with the abbreviation *CHU*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817001967 Published online by Cambridge University Press

However, in the midst of those mind-boggling and irresolvable uncertainties, one thing is certain and human; that is, Aaron's striving to do justice to Sachs. This can be fulfilled only through writing, which proves that words are, at least in this case, nothing less than deeds. They are reborn and last regardless of one's death. That is why Aaron's book is named after Sachs's unfinished one, *Leviathan*: "I owed it to him to write this book. He was brave enough to entrust me with his story, and I don't think I could have lived with myself if I had let him down" (*L* 243).

Like Aaron, Sachs is also sensitive to the partialness of knowledge, the basic condition of being human. Yet unlike Aaron, for whom writing proceeds as private recollection in a disturbing yet recuperative way, he cannot wait for this process to slowly take effect. For him the ontological and epistemological limitations are not neutral; he feels emphatically that they intersect with one's conscience, from which it follows that one shares responsibility (for a lack of absolute knowledge and freedom, and, perhaps more acutely, for one's disappointment at this lack): "I always wanted something else, but I never knew what it was" (*L* 236). Does this moral character have anything to do with his unease about the tie between writing and inwardness, and further about a writer's ethics under the pressure of the prevailing political, social circumstances? Struggling with the weakness of the former and the crisis of the latter, does he wind up losing conviction in writing altogether, as expressed in his last letter to Aaron, "I admire you for your innocence, for the way you've stuck to this one thing for your whole life. My problem was that I could never believe in it" (*L* 236)?

II

In one sense he does, and in another does not. But this ambivalence is, strictly speaking, not his; instead it should be attributed to writing per se. A private business, it isolates one from the outside and seems to deprive one of the power to act in the real world. I have touched upon its origin in the previous section. Now I want to take a closer look at the connection of writing with the outside, and demonstrate its potential power of enhancing one's experience and moral outlook. This can lead to a deeper understanding – not only of Sachs's predicament but of the conditions of possibility for overcoming it. Cavell's interpretation of human doubleness, as derived from Kant and Emerson, is especially relevant here. What I am suggesting, however, is not that the ambivalence of writing can accordingly be overcome; rather, by transfiguring this ambivalence, one may discover the ontological and ethical import it conveys.

The first thing we should note is that a book is a piece of work relating to this world; more precisely, it is in this world and not. The same is true of the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817001967 Published online by Cambridge University Press

one who writes it. I do not think that anyone who has written such books as *The New Colossus* can miss the point unless he wants to. (It is very likely that a sense of urgency impels him to dismiss it.) What Sachs has experienced in prison becomes all but concealed beneath the facade of his self-deprecation, which, remaining his own secret, connects with the birth of *The New Colossus*. Meanwhile, their connection has to be conceived as an absence of connection:

> *The New Colossus* had nothing to do with the sixties, nothing to do with Vietnam or the antiwar movement, nothing to do with the seventeen months he had served in prison … The idea of prison was so terrible to me, I couldn't imagine how anyone who had been there could not write about it. (*L* 37)

Given the title of his book, it is hard not to call up Emma Lazarus's namesake sonnet dedicated to the Statue of Liberty, and it goes without saying that, like Thoreau, the young Sachs faces incarceration remorselessly with his thinking and writing. Their similar resistance calls to mind what Thoreau claims in "Civil Disobedience": "I could not but smile to see how industriously they locked the door on my meditations, which followed them out again without let or hindrance, and *they* were really all that was dangerous. As they could not reach me, they had resolved to punish my body."[9]

To "unjust laws" and "a corrupt State," what is truly "dangerous" is the *thought* of a nonconformist individual who does not yield to "the machinery of society" and seeks to claim his rights out of his own conscience. "I didn't want to run away." Sachs remarks, "I felt I had a responsibility to stand up and tell them what I thought. And I couldn't do that unless I was willing to put myself on the line" (*L* 19–20). Notably what Thoreau calls "a corrupt State" harks back to the epigraph to *Leviathan* – "Every actual State is corrupt," a line extracted from Emerson's essay "Politics." Here my interest primarily lies in the juxtaposition of individual thought (and conscience) and the actual State, not least that which the word "actual," alongside its obverse, "ideal," connotes in philosophical terms. More specifically, one of the implications of this Transcendentalist resistance or disobedience on the part of the individual subject, apart from its potential use for political guidance, consists in a dialectical structure of the inner (say, the mind and book) and the outer at play in thinking and writing: a writer lives in two concurring and colliding worlds, one suffered and the other envisioned; one denies the other yet beckons. It recalls Emerson's observation stressed by Cavell in several places: "I know that the world I converse with in the city and in the farms, is not the

[9] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience: Complete Texts with Introduction, Historical Contexts, Critical Essays*, ed. Paul Lauter (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 29, original emphasis.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817001967 Published online by Cambridge University Press

world I *think*" (original emphasis; *NYUA* 111; *ETE* 190; *CHU* xxxiv). Moreover, Cavell interprets this Emersonian picture as a modification of Kant's "two standpoints" in human existence, which should not only be ontologically construed but also have a moral dimension:

> The intelligible world would be the scene of human activeness, the sensuous world that of human passiveness. Then Kant's moral imperative, his "ought," which the doubleness of human inhabitation is meant to explain, or picture, is also an explanation, or shows the place for one, of the self's identity, that it is the *same* self that is active and passive. (*CHU* xxxvi)

Yet it should be noted that this "ought" as a matter of fact does not reveal itself a priori – that is to say, "there is no ought about it" (*CHU* 59), which crucially distinguishes Emerson from Kant – and that the noumenal shadow of the self is (always) lost. It furthermore suggests that the self's unfulfillment is accompanied by its dissatisfaction with the actual world/society it is inevitably flung into. Needless to say, whether for the "unattained self" or for the world compatible with that self, the process of (re)finding has significance in its own right and the ideal cannot at any rate be subject to some specific criterion or ultimate end, or be closed off from countless changes and possibilities.

The reason why I particularly ascribe this "law of two worlds" (*NYUA* 112) to the writer as, to borrow Kant's phrase, his/her "conditions of possibility of experience" – despite the likely objection that this kind of "difference," "discrepance" (words used in Emerson's "Experience"), or "non-identity" (*CHU* xxxv) *should* happen to any human being – is that writing amplifies the Kantian doubleness to such an extent that the writer can no longer remain utterly passive or indifferent to the imagined world: "There is a point at which a book begins to take over your life, when the world you have imagined becomes more important to you than the real world" (*L* 218). Contrariwise, for those neighbors not yet "awakened," it does not occur to them that genuine imagination (which promises the genuine experience that may lead to a certain stage of the ideal) works in a way distinct from both wild fantasy and an absence of dreams, and that the former encourages and even requires them to change, always already, themselves.[10] (Differently put, one does not begin to change after this experience; one has already begun to change in or even before it. Otherwise, one could not be drawn to this imagination in the first place.) This is the importance of *experiencing* or, shall we say, *pre-sensing* the ideal or the ideas of new selves and new worlds, which are bound

[10] For Thoreau one cannot imagine (change) the individual without imagining (changing) the state at the same time; meanwhile, the motivation for change definitely pivots on the individual. We just need to refer to his closing remarks in "Civil Disobedience," wherein he shows us the state in his mind.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817001967 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to be together at various stages. When citing *Walden* as a "perfectionist work," Cavell remarks, "As Thoreau sees the matter in the fifth chapter ('Solitude') of *Walden*, a grand world of laws is working itself out *next* to ours, as if ours is flush with it" (*CHU* 8, original emphasis). It is the same with reading Emerson: "To recognize the unattained self is, I gather, a step in attaining it" (*CHU* 12). In this regard, a book, as a step, a site, or a locus for this event to take place, would be wrongly excluded from the empirical realm and, in the case of *Leviathan*, the (quasi-)political realm, insofar as a part of the self is embedded in these realms and this fact affects one's vision of another part that is not. This leads us to reexamine the role of writing in the field of action, which is accordingly to be reframed. Bearing this in mind, we arrive at "a different field of action" for writing, which operates on the premise, as well as the imperative, that "the writer must establish or create his mode of presence to the word, he must admit or create the reader's mode of presence to it."[11]

Over and above *Walden* and the Emersonian text, this is, I think, precisely what Sachs's *The New Colossus* has achieved, albeit in its own fashion. If "Walden was always gone, from the beginning of the words of *Walden*" (*SW* 119), if "this new America" is "yet unapproachable" (*NYUA* 91), then *The New Colossus* carries some messages comparable to them, ironic and poignant, romantic and gloomy. Lazarus's visit to Emerson's house and Walden Pond, Channing's handing of Thoreau's compass to her as a *gift* (to my ear, a curious ring of Cavell's Heidegger and Emerson), a cluster of images has been conjured up in this "historical novel," which counts more to it than "the major events"; "these [small events] are finally what give the book its texture, what turn it into something more than a jigsaw puzzle of historical facts" (*L* 38). These personal moments are as much the turning points as the events recorded in American history, in the sense that they are "recorded" in Sachs's novel and emblematize the very idea of America in a conflictual combination of hope and its loss. They constitute a world, which is there and presented to us through words, as Cavell observes in *The Senses of Walden*, "A fact has two surfaces because a fact is not merely an event in the world but the assertion of an event, the wording of the world" (*SW* 44). Then comes the question: is this world fact or fiction? Before that we may consider an alternative question raised by Cavell in his reading of Emerson's "Experience": "Has America happened?" (*NYUA* 114). No doubt, here America is meant to be an event, whose happening hinges on the individual awakening and involvement of its "invisible" readers/members (*ETE* 189). Thus if the happening of

[11] Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden: An Expanded Edition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 62; references hereafter are given parenthetically with the abbreviation *SW*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817001967 Published online by Cambridge University Press

America is perchance momentary and cannot be fixed on any specific time in any common or empirical sense, then to clearly tell the factual from the fictitious becomes well-nigh impossible. Besides, the distinction is far from consequential to the philosophical/literary work as and of this happening. The fact of the death of Waldo, the writer's son, as mentioned in "Experience," can be transferred to the awareness of our fallen state, our loss of ourselves and of the promise of America. The opening question in Emerson's piece ("Where do we find ourselves?"), which figures prominently throughout Cavell's interpretation, coincides with Aaron's reading of *The New Colossus*: "Thoreau was the one man who could read the compass for us, and now that he is gone, we have no hope of finding ourselves again" (*L* 38–39). Yet we vaguely feel that the tone of the novel is relatively darker and, according to Aaron's comments, "strident" and "polemical" (*L* 40). This mood is evinced not only in Thoreau's death well preceding the beginning of the story, but more strikingly in the subsequent death of Lazarus, who inherits Thoreau's compass (again the topic of inheritance is also what Cavell discovers in "Experience"), and who dedicates her work to the Statue of Liberty as a gift in the same way Thoreau does his to Walden. Their death, along with Waldo's death, represents what Cavell calls "the testator's death": "If 'Experience,' like *Walden*, is a testament, it is the promise of a gift in view of the testator's death. Then the gift is the young Waldo's promise, as kept or founded in the old Waldo" (*NYUA* 100). How can one transfigure the death of founder(s) into a promise of finding oneself in "this new yet unapproachable America"? If it appears somewhat possible for Emerson to approach – to "be born again into" (*NYUA* 90) – this place through his writing (or his writing amounts to nothing less than the place), then where is this promise placed for Sachs? Can *The New Colossus* at the same time register the withdrawal of the promise of realizing America even though it has already witnessed death; that is, the removal of foundation? And if Emerson's prophecy cannot find its voice without "aversion" (*NYUA* 92), which means turning at once away and toward America, what can Sachs do in order to find his own voice? Given the moral imagination (often indissociable from the historical) which permeates his writing and, according to Aaron's account, his frequent reference to the bomb as "a central fact of the world," "an ultimate demarcation of the spirit" that "separated us from all other generations in history" (*L* 24), it strikes one as almost ironic and portentous that in the end he, as the Phantom of Liberty (or, suggestively, the fantasy of foundation), resorts to the bomb instead of the pen to break silence, to demonstrate his aversion, his civil obedience. It is as if his turn of mind finally reached the sort of desperation Cavell attaches to the precipitation of philosophical/utopian dreams: "America has deprived us of reasons. The very promise of it drives you mad, as with the death of a child" (*NYUA* 95).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817001967 Published online by Cambridge University Press

At the same time, it is not all about madness and desperation. Actually they are more palpably associated with Dimaggio than with Sachs. If these ingredients do encroach upon the latter's disposition, they are nevertheless mixed with other contrary qualities. It follows that Sachs's *raison d'être* in effect involves more complexities that are concerned not only with politically aggressive action – which may be easily pigeonholed as a form of counteraction within the whole social system – but also with self-knowledge and constantly renewed demands for individual perfection. It is worth noting that this potential is often downplayed within postmodern political discourse. Even a constructive reading centering on agency, creativity and expressivity might present Sachs's action in an unfavorable light. For instance, Emma Hegarty claims that

> Auster illustrates the consequences for Benjamin Sachs, a postmodern novelist, of losing the ability to question naturalising discourse from *within the structure* itself, as his increasingly radical means of expressing anger at political hypocrisy and decline in values, as he defines them, result in a loss of agency, a fractured identity and ultimately self-destruction.[12]

Put otherwise, his problem consists in cleaving to an "absolutist" mode of being, which rejects his "implicated position" in society.[13] There is some truth in this criticism. Yet Sachs strikes me less as an "absolutist" than as a transcendentalist, who grounds ethical life in becoming and self-transformation. To discover his relation to truth and freedom, to pursue the path of moral responsibility, he has to speak out, to, in his words, "put myself on the line." The risks and dangers that this form of agency involves bring to mind Foucault's formulation of *parrhesia*, as well as certain aspects of Cavell's "passionate utterance."[14] In the rest of the essay I want to trace the course of Sachs's "fall" and, moreover, give due weight to his perfectionist struggle and creative transgression.

III

The key to Sachs's life is buried in the word "precipitation," which now takes on a new significance. A salient resonance between two traumatic moments with regard to falling from a height is writ large:

[12] Emma Hegarty, "The Practice of Solitude: Agency and the Postmodern Novelist in Paul Auster's *Leviathan*," *Textual Practice*, 23, 5 (Oct. 2009), 849–68, 853, original emphasis.
[13] Ibid., 865, 856.
[14] For a comparison of Cavell's "passionate utterance" and Foucault's "*parrhesia*" see Daniele Lorenzini, "Performative, Passionate, and Parrhesiastic Utterance: On Cavell, Foucault, and Truth as an Ethical Force," *Critical Inquiry*, 41, 2 (Winter 2015), 254–68.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817001967 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> I [Aaron] don't want to make too much of it, but just moments before Ben fell, we drifted onto the story that he and his mother had told about their visit to the Statue of Liberty in 1951 … no sooner did we both laugh at the idea of falling through the Statue of Liberty than Ben fell from the fire escape. (*L* 108)

Meanwhile, it is difficult not to look into this meaning by bringing forward another one, namely bringing about something quickly or suddenly. For one thing, this pair brings into play two general states of the human subject, as unfolded in Cavell's discussion of Kant and Emerson: the sensuous and the intelligible, passiveness and activeness. In our context, they throw into relief the structure of Sachs's precipitation. More often than not he finds himself caught up in a situation he has not expected, owing to either a roll of dice, so to speak, or an unconscious act. But he will not leave it at that. Every time a "fall" happens to him – whether figuratively or literally, and however uncontrollable – he brings himself to account for it, as though what happens to him and what he makes happen were one and the same thing. His fall on 4 July 1986, "the one hundredth anniversary of the Statue of Liberty" (*L* 107), is regarded by him as an "accident" he helps to precipitate: "the fact was that my accident wasn't caused by bad luck." He tries to explain to Aaron, "I wasn't just a victim, I was an accomplice, an active partner in everything that happened to me, and I can't ignore that, I have to take some responsibility for the role I played" (*L* 120). What's more, mere lust and unfaithfulness cannot explain away his problem: "I don't think sex had much to do with what happened that night" (*L* 120); "It wasn't a question of being unfaithful to Fanny, it was a question of self-knowledge" (*L* 114). Doubtless there is something more upsetting and inscrutable deep within him, something so decisive and fundamental that he cannot continue his life without coming to grips with it, rather than coming to terms with it; the latter choice bespeaks nothing other than one's moral weakness, which includes ignorance of frailties and "self-deception" (*L* 115): "it must mean there's something fundamentally wrong with me. It must mean that I don't believe in my life anymore" (*L* 121–22). In short, the nature of his problem is faintly reminiscent of the classical question "to be or not to be"; yet, in Sachs's case, meditation does not prove a hindrance but rather makes him all the more resolute to get to the bottom of it (which means he has to first hit bottom) and, unquestionably, to end or change his life with no delay.[15]

One may say that the fall enacts a moment of sudden revelation, crystallizing a taste of death in a "feeling of absolute certainty" (*L* 116), which can but

[15] Obviously Aaron assumes that Sachs will revert to normal life after this crisis, but, as we can see, Sachs's conclusion is a far cry from his "I want to end the life I've been living up to now. *I want everything to change*" (*L* 122; my italics).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817001967 Published online by Cambridge University Press

be grasped by a dead man. As with other accidents befalling him, the implications of encountering death do not dawn upon him immediately. That expression always lags behind experience does not defeat him but rather provides him with sufficient time for reflection with meticulous care. His silence in hospital is a case in point, which, to a certain extent, is not caused by shock as such: "Looking back on that scene from my hospital bed, I finally understood that everything was different from how I had imagined it. I had gotten it backwards, I had been looking at it upsidedown" (*L* 120). Therefore not only does an occurrence amalgamate both active and passive factors for him, but also coexistence of the sensuous and the intelligible works itself out in the process of "reliv[ing] the moments of his fall again and again" (*L* 119). Sachs's reason for retrieving that dreadful sensation, it seems to me, is to find out what, after all, is projected in them, something not apparent but real. Although in one sense this reconstruction can be identified with a kind of compulsion, in another it registers his infinite responsibility to respond to the ineffable, as Cavell speaks of *Walden*: "True silence is the untying of the tongue, letting its words go" (*SW* 44), or of "The American Scholar": "The absolute responsibility may be perfectly discharged, in a given case, by a willingness to stammer, as prophets, for example, will" (*CHU* xxviii). We perceive a family resemblance in Sachs's silence as interpreted by Aaron:

> Something extraordinary had taken place, and before it lost its force within him, he needed to devote his unstinting attention to it. Hence his silence. It was not a refusal so much as a method, a way of holding onto the horror of that night long enough to make sense of it. (*L* 119)

From this "absolute responsibility of the self to itself" or "the absolute responsibility of the self to make itself intelligible" (*CHU* xxvii), Sachs seeks (moral) power to keep himself from being silenced and broken by another power that tends to overcome human speech. The more he is overwhelmed by the excessiveness of that experience, the more necessary he feels it to unrelentingly search for and articulate its origin, however inadequately. Thus, if Sachs is a moral perfectionist, it is because, as a human being, he is morally imperfect. What perfectionism signifies is not an acquired state of perfection and self-complacency but perfectability and one's shame at maintaining the status quo.

> He accepted everyone else's frailties, but when it came to himself he demanded perfection, an almost superhuman rigor in even the smallest acts. The result was disappointment, a dumbfounding awareness of his own flawed humanity, which drove him to place ever more stringent demands on his conduct, which in turn led to ever more suffocating disappointment. (*L* 131–32)

This is Aaron's comment on Sachs's "overly refined conscience" that seems to continuously aggravate hopelessness and futility. But he thinks so only because he is not a moral perfectionist. Let us recall Nietzsche's words in Cavell's

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817001967 Published online by Cambridge University Press

explication: "one is ashamed of oneself without any accompanying feeling of distress" (*CHU* 52).[16] Sachs's disappointment is not a sign of surrender. Nor is his will to power a manifestation of frenzy. On the contrary, if perfectionism "has its foundation in rethinking" (*CHU* xxix), then in *Leviathan* it is reinforced by and performed with self-discipline and method. Only through an interminable process of scrutinizing and responding to the self as other can one learn to face others and reexamine one's society and culture. From this standpoint we begin to understand the way in which Sachs turns to silence to enable him to speak again. Also revealing is his strenuous effort to make himself understood in the lengthy conversation with Aaron, which shows not so much a sufferer's agitation as a thinker's composure. "[I]nfinitely subtle, infinitely labored and complex," his "absolutely precise account" (*L* 117) somehow runs parallel to a Wittgensteinian "endless specification" (*CHU* xxvii). But just as Cavell cautions against taking the "[a]bsolute responsibility of the self to make itself intelligible" to mean "responsibility of the self to make itself absolutely intelligible" (*CHU* xxviii), Sachs cannot penetrate the mystery of his fall through and through; nor has he succeeded in convincing Aaron of his complicity in the matter. That said, this does not prevent him from changing his life, for better or for worse.

The last phrase lays bare one of the truths about change: one can never get ahead of oneself and no end can be seen. Though vision works, it works as no more than a guide. Hence it does not seem fair for us to judge Sachs's action with hindsight, as if we could be any wiser than he is. It is important to move backward, to reflect, and to rethink; but it is equally important to think about how to move forward. This is precisely Sachs's strategy, after he is lost in the woods (to be sure, a reminder of Walden), gets help from Dwight, sees him being killed, kills the man killing him, and finally learns that that man, Dimaggio, is the husband of Maria's friend Lillian: "he understood that the nightmare coincidence was in fact a solution, an opportunity in the shape of a miracle. The essential thing was to accept the uncanniness of the event – not to deny it, but to embrace it, to breathe it into himself as a sustaining force" (*L* 167). Once again, he manages to integrate the passive and the contingent into part of his decision and action by acknowledging and receiving them, instead of denying and rejecting them. This is an oblique way of maximizing his freedom – to be as resilient as he can, as though his will were at one with that of the world. Thus even though we cannot see any necessary

[16] When Cavell expounds his idea of Emersonian Perfectionism, he pays particular attention to Emerson's influence on Nietzsche and situates their affinity in the region of perfectionism. Also noteworthy are his attempts to defend Nietzsche against John Rawls's criticism and to value moral perfectionism (say, its aesthetic dimension) in the context of democracy and justice.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817001967 Published online by Cambridge University Press

connection between these events transpiring after he loses his way (in the woods) – all of them come out of the blue – they still strike one as indispensable in finding himself or, more precisely, in finding in others his next selves.

This is not to imply that Sachs has simply found in Dimaggio his "unattained but attainable self" (*CHU* 12), because the pair of Sachs and Dimaggio is, I think, one of the most ambiguous relations in *Leviathan*, much more so than that between Sachs and Aaron. On the one hand, it is not likely that Dimaggio *himself* represents the kind of unattained self according to Cavell's formulation of Emersonian Perfectionism, not least on account of his atrocious killing of Dwight. On the other hand, this deranged Thoreauvian character does function as a moral incentive for Sachs to transform himself.[17] Suppose Dimaggio stands for what is unattained in Sachs; then the fact that the latter should kill the former with his own hands would sound eerie. This wild supposition is not without its profundity. In any event Sachs does recognize the unattained part of his self, but not in Dimaggio sinking in his actual state but in him as a would-be existence in ideas, given his study of the anarchist Alexander Berkman. It is precisely after witnessing and ending Dimaggio's deterioration in fantasy and violence that Sachs begins to (re)discover, (re)affirm and strive for his own ideal on behalf of not only this man but also himself. An inadvertent usurpation becomes a faithful exchange and alignment: "As long as I was devoting myself to Dimaggio, I would be keeping him alive. I would give him my life, so to speak, and in exchange he would give my life back to me" (*L* 225). This is as much a new journey as a return to what he has once believed in; or, in Cavell's words, "a series of rememberings, say disfragmentings, reconstitutions of the members of, and of membership in, one's stranded state" (*CHU* xxx). Additionally, it hints at what Emerson calls "the infinitude of the private man" or what Cavell calls "the process of individuation" (*CHU* 10–11), which does not aim at any *existing* individual but at the *infinite possibility* of continuously recovering from one's partiality.

Again, this Emersonian Perfectionist project, far from teleological, rests on "the relation between the instance and the individual other – for example, myself – for whom it does the standing, for whom it is a sign, upon whom I delegate something" (*CHU* 50–51). As a result, the emphasis is placed on the partial, attained self and its *relation* to an unattained self, not on the "specimen" independent of "its effect on you." It reinforces the Emersonian/

[17] A deranged Thoreauvian character in this story gives an impression of pertinent exaggeration insofar as we, like Cavell, "keep in mind the question of insanity to which the writer of *Walden* recurs – or at any rate, the extremity and precariousness of mood in which he writes" (*SW*, 87).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817001967 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Nietzschean/Cavellian sense that the unattained self cannot once and for all be grasped and settled: "'a higher self as yet still concealed from it.' It is my own, *unsettlingly* unattained" (*CHU* 51, my italics). The term "exemplar" adopted in Cavell's text recalls what Sachs has in mind when he flies to San Francisco:

> It wasn't that he was afraid of what might happen if he did the wrong thing (although he never doubted that the situation could turn on him, that she could back up her threat and call the police), but rather that he wanted his conduct to be *exemplary*. That was the reason he had come to California in the first place: to reinvent his life, to embody *an ideal of goodness that would put him in an altogether different relation with himself*. But Lillian was the instrument he had chosen, and it was only through her that this transformation could be achieved. He had thought of it as a journey, as a long voyage into the darkness of his soul, but now that he was on his way, he couldn't be sure if he was traveling in the right direction or not. (*L* 197–98; my italics)

It turns out that Sachs's plan is no less than reinventing Dimaggio with his own moral aspirations, taking on the roles of father and husband, which the latter might not virtually live up to in his lifetime. Apparently this is done wholly out of personal repentance; yet it is more than that. Repentance alone, a purely passive force, cannot sustain and suffice for self-transformation. An "altogether different relation with himself" cannot be entered without Sachs's willingness and hope to become a better self, much better than he has ever been before. Given his broken marriage and the fact that Fanny is not able to get pregnant, those roles are fulfilled by him less as a duty than as an opportunity. In other words, he does so mainly because it helps shorten the distance between the self he *is* and the one he *thinks*. If, as Cavell suggests, "the conditions for my recognizing my difference from others" are "a function of my recognizing my difference from myself" (*CHU* 53), then in *Leviathan* it means that how Sachs conceives his relationship with Dimaggio depends on how he conceives his relationship with himself. With this in mind, one will not be surprised at his later decision of leaving Lillian and her daughter after his dream of an ordinary, happy family turns sour with a slap given by the mother to the daughter. Consequently, the ideal self he has been holding onto in this family is at stake as well.

But this is not the end of his transformation. Repentance has long since faded. A sign of moral decline in Lillian's family does not so much frustrate him for good as stimulate his old disobedience and arouse his yearning for social justice and democracy.[18] Hence a transition from a family man to an anarchist. This is astounding not because it contains a juxtaposition of the

[18] It is likely that Lillian's slap reminds Sachs of the "turning point" of his childhood, namely the "absolute dictatorship" he experienced when visiting the Statue of Liberty with his mother: "There we were, about to pay homage to the concept of freedom, and I myself was in chains" (*L* 33).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817001967 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ordinary and the extraordinary, but because for Sachs being a family man should be more difficult than being an anarchist. This irony corresponds to an individual's everyday "self-dissatisfaction":

> the state of perceiving oneself as failing to follow oneself in one's higher and happier aspirations, failing perhaps to have found the right to one's own aspirations – not to the deliverances of rare revelations but to *the significance of one's everyday impressions*, to the right to make them one's ideas. (*CHU* 51, my italics)

One way of looking at this irony: an anarchist molded in Sachs's fashion more or less resembles a writer in that he works alone – almost self-sufficiently – and constantly resists any unjust order or hegemonic principle imposed on his will. In addition, his moral conviction, self-determination, and discipline to a large extent reinforce his performance of the task set by himself. In this regard, as long as he maintains the responsibilities of examining and critiquing the self, and of searching for the unattained part of that self, at least he will not lose his way; whereas family life involves other components outside one's relationship with the self and thus becomes even more complicated and unstable than the process of individuation. However, what Cavell insists on, and what is reiterated in this essay, is that individuation cannot be postponed for it is the point of departure: "the process of individuation (an interpretation of perfectionism) before which there are no individuals, hence no humanity, hence no society" (*CHU* 11). This is not to say that individuation is the first principle and only after its fulfillment can one begin to handle one's relationship with others. Individuation is not to be fulfilled but to be continued. The point is that awakening, if it happens, happens to an individual. Let us recall Thoreau's temporary retreat to Walden and *Walden* and adduce Emerson's confession: "I shun father and mother and wife and brother when my genius calls me" (*CHU* 135). Therefore it would be less than just to say that the role of a family man played by Sachs is a total failure. If anything sets in, it is the fact that merely improving the self does not necessarily ensure interpersonal understanding. But then what can a moral perfectionist do when a mother stakes a claim to her kid and thinks she can do whatever she wants, as though parental authority were nothing but a microcosm of political authority?

Here the Foucauldian–Cavellian line of ethical utterances is pertinent. As Foucault states in *Fearless Speech*, "*parrhesia* is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself)."[19] Likewise, Sachs does not remain silent when he sees

[19] Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001), 19.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817001967 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Lillian mistreat her daughter. He must at once tell her that she is wrong, even though it means imperiling his dialogue and relationship with the family (hence with part of his own life). Meanwhile, he is aware that he can tirelessly exercise moral vigilance against his own lapses but is not entitled to force others to measure up to his expectations. Or it will be nothing but another form of tyranny. What he can do is persuade, call for attention, remind citizens of what they have "forgotten," including "the nature of institutional power" (*L* 224); and one's awakening still largely depends on whether one hears the call or not; that is to say, on one's (potential) willingness to change oneself. To my understanding, because his concern lies in the ethical life of each citizen rather than in some "impossible," "belligerent demands," it is only natural that Sachs "sound[s] less like a political revolutionary than some anguished, soft-spoken prophet," and that "[a]t bottom, he was merely articulating what many people already felt" (*L* 217). It can hardly be imagined that, without his (private) conscience and determination, Sachs could get as far as approaching the (universal) exemplar in an Emersonian/Nietzschean sense. He turns each turning point in his life "creative" rather than "crushing" (*CHU* 51), which directs him toward a new self, a new identity. At the same time, it is also a way back to his original belief and vision, which he enhances with the unattained/attainable, and which makes his lifetime project at once a repetition and an alteration. What he might not be aware of is that performing his work as the *Phantom* of Liberty harks back to writing in *shadow*, namely writing *The New Colossus* and *Leviathan*, the latter of which is "no more than the promise of a book" (*L* 142). This last identity indicates that, whether a writer or an anarchist, he has no fixed identity but always something beside it; in other words, he is nobody and anyone and, precisely in this regard, a citizen-to-come. It brings us back to the beginning of *Leviathan*: a loss of identity is not simply equivalent to a loss of agency but signifies the excess of transgression. State power can neither recognize nor ignore the Phantom, because identification is based on a true understanding of the social contract, which is experimental in nature, and which resists absolute authority and its corruption.

In the introduction I mentioned briefly what the two concepts – the "pen" and "bomb" – imply: the dynamic of creation, the detonation of energy. As my discussion reveals, their manifestations in *Leviathan* always connect up with the idea of America. This idea is grounded in a double world that affects one's moral vision, and it exists only in the motivation for change. From a Transcendentalist perspective, self-transformation is the first step that should be taken immediately; otherwise there is little chance that a social transformation can take place. By destroying the replicas of the Statue of Liberty, by transgressing the limits of the present culture, the Phantom urges every citizen to consider relations between the moral law and the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817001967 Published online by Cambridge University Press

social contract, to understand his/her distance from what culture truly represents, and to renew the meaning of "America" with his/her own agency. In the beginning Aaron confesses that he wants to "defend" Sachs "since he's no longer in a position to defend himself" (*L* 2). To be sure, he is not just defending his friend; he is defending a voice that struggles to express truth and justice, to keep alive "the promise of a book." "Like the *Leviathan*, and the *Second Treatise of Government*, and the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*," Cavell asserts, "*Walden* is, among other things, a tract of political education, education for membership in the polis. It locates authority in the citizens and it identifies citizens – those with whom one is in membership – as 'neighbors'" (*SW* 85). Perhaps we can add that Auster's (also Aaron's and Sachs's) *Leviathan* in a way aligns itself with these works. And if, as observed by Cavell, Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience" constitutes a key step in perfecting his act of civil disobedience and making "the appeal to the people from themselves," then *Leviathan* pays its tribute by doing the same job. (To say nothing of the memorable date, the Fourth of July, for both *Walden* and *Leviathan*.)

It is in the light of this Transcendentalist spirit that I integrate the concept of the bomb into my interpretation of Sachs's character and actions. In the middle of my discussion I asked whether the bomb signifies a final transition of his Emersonian aversion to despair. The answer is no, and my view is partly based on the particular way in which the object is conceived. According to Cavell, the *Bomb* with initial capital conveys "the will to nothingness" (Nietzsche's warning) and "the end of time" (Kant's warning) (*CHU* 131).[20] Given his knowledge of what the bomb means to the latter half of the twentieth century ("the power to destroy ourselves" (*L* 24)), as well as his detestation of nihilism, mere (self-)destructiveness cannot account for Sachs's "creative" use of it. What he tries to destroy is not humanity as such; nor does he hanker after the *End* of all things. "I'm going to keep on giving them hell for as long as I can" (*L* 236). His words might sound bitter, but, as I said, we need to read between the lines and reconsider their effects upon us. If writing belongs to "a different field of action" (Cavell's phrase cited above), then Sachs's "action" seems to gesture towards a different field of writing. It is not intended to harm anyone; what it asks for

[20] In his essay "Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of Beckett's *Endgame*," Cavell expands on the image of the Bomb (or what he calls "the phenomenology of the Bomb") as he perceives a possible link between it and *Endgame*: "one dimension of our plight can only be discovered in a phenomenology of the Bomb … it [the Bomb] has finally provided our dreams of vengeance, our despair of happiness, our hatreds of self and world, with an instrument adequate to convey their destructiveness, and satisfaction." See Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 136–37.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817001967 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is change, which should come from the heart of every citizen. With nothing more, and nothing less, than this, his hope can rest only on a paradoxical combination of patience and impatience. And I take it to be a translation of Emerson's suggestion: "Patience and patience, we shall win at the last … up again, old heart! – it seems to say, – there is victory yet for all justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize will be the transformation of genius into practical power."[21]

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Meiping Zhang has recently completed her PhD in English at Goldsmiths University of London.

[21] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. Larzer Ziff (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 310–11.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817001967 Published online by Cambridge University Press