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**Crisis and Search of Identity: A Postmodernist
Analysis of Paul Auster's *Leviathan***

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*A mi padre, por poner a Auster en mi camino y ser quién guiará siempre el mío.
Se que te hubiese encantado poder seguir leyendo estas páginas.*

ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyses the existential crisis which the character Benjamin Sachs, the protagonist of Paul Auster's novel *Leviathan* (1992), undergoes. Being a postmodernist work, the research uses the features of this literary movement as its central axis to study the characterization of the hero. It is structured around two postmodern themes: existential agony to find inner stability and the true identity of the self and the effects of fate and contingency in the development of a vital dilemma. Through a close reading of the passages of the text which deal with the individual under analysis, an insight on his psychology, mentality and concerns will be achieved obtaining a better understanding of Auster's creation of postmodernist characters.

Keywords: Paul Auster, *Leviathan*, Postmodernism, Existential Crisis, Identity, Fate.

RESUMEN

Este Trabajo de Fin de Grado analiza la crisis existencial que sufre el personaje Benjamin Sachs, protagonista de la novela *Leviatán* (1992), de Paul Auster. Al tratarse de una obra postmodernista, la investigación utiliza los rasgos de este movimiento literario como eje central para estudiar la caracterización del héroe. Se estructura en torno a dos temas postmodernos: la agonía existencial de encontrar la estabilidad interior y la verdadera identidad del ser y los efectos del destino y la contingencia en el desarrollo de un dilema vital. A través de una atenta lectura de los pasajes del texto que tratan sobre el individuo a analizar, se logrará una visión sobre su psicología, mentalidad y preocupaciones obteniendo una mejor comprensión de la creación de personajes postmodernistas por parte de Auster.

Palabras clave: Paul Auster, *Leviatán*, Postmodernismo, Crisis Existencial, Identidad, Destino.

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1

Introduction

When talking about Postmodernism in its literary artistic expression it is mainly Northern American authors and works that come to mind, as it is considered mostly an American literary tendency. It is thanks to writers like D. Barthelme or Doctorow, two of the greatest exponents of this field, that this literature developed in the mid-twentieth century. Among the most recent authors, Paul Auster highlights as one of the most known ones. In the following pages the focus will be put in this late twentieth-century Postmodernist novelist, more concretely in his prose work *Leviathan*, published in the year 1992.

Auster's productions are so extensive, that a wide range of novels could have been chosen to be analyzed, however *Leviathan* was selected as it is one of the least studied works by scholars. Few researchers have written about scattered aspects of the novel, but a full analysis of the protagonist had not been done. It was the wish to provide a detailed study of one of Auster's postmodernist characters which motivated the choice of topic of this dissertation.

1.1 State of the issue

Auster's works have been profoundly studied and analyzed, as he is one of the most prolific publishing authors of the twentieth century, producing almost a novel per year. Critics have approached his texts focusing on its different postmodernist traits and his particular literary techniques. Furthermore, the fact that the author is still alive and has an active engagement with the press and the different literary researchers has enabled the publication of many studies based on interviews to him such as "The Manuscript in the Book: A Conversation" by Michel Contact and Alyson Waters (1996). Moreover, Auster himself has published essays reflecting on his own writing, collected in the work *The Art of Hunger* (1998), which has contributed to have a closer contact with the writer, getting to

know not only his relationship between writing and living, but also his use of certain literary devices such as memory which is particularly used in his works.

The novels conforming *The New York Trilogy* (1987), *City of Glass* (1985), *Ghosts* (1986) and *The Locked Room* (1986), have been the most analyzed by scholars, especially *City of Glass*, as with them Auster sets the bases for his further literary productions. Studies around these narratives have been done mostly to examine its postmodern structure, to argue whether they belong to the detective genre or not and to evaluate the use of the space and the particular ontological concerns, focusing on the treatment of identity.

His work *Leviathan*, published in 1992, is one of the least studied novels. From the research conducted, scholars have focused on analyzing different aspects like narratology, symbolisms, autobiographical elements, the topic of chance or the political ideas sustaining the plot. Articles like Mark Osteen's "Phantoms of Liberty: The Secret Lives of 'Leviathan'" (1994) or Jose Manuel Barrio's "Leviathan (1992) de Paul Auster" (2002) highlight making a complete study of these different elements. For this novel the author uses different narrative voices, perspectives, and manuscripts to tell the story, and the veracity of the events gets lost in the words, which became invalid. In this line of study Arthur Saltzman's essay "Leviathan: Post Hoc Harmonies" (1995) has to be mentioned as an advocate of the main narrator's unreliability, ambiguity and lack of coherence supported by its multiple contradictions in the storytelling. Other scholars have focused on analyzing different autobiographical elements from the author's life found in the ones of the protagonists, as well as identifying religious symbolisms hidden in the title, the names of the characters and even their behaviors. In this field, experts like Ginger Danto with his article "All This Might Have Never Happened" (1992) have made important contributions. One of the possible explanations discussed for Auster's choice of the title of this novel is the reference to Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651). This was a very claimed work at the time and Auster's novel does not only share its same title, referring to a mythological Biblical beast representing the State, but also the conception of the social contract between the government and society. Hobbes' work was very influential in the sociopolitical field, talking about the repercussions this "contract" had for the individual regarding anarchism,

and Auster probably took inspiration from his ideas to sustain the plot of his own political *Leviathan*, in which his protagonist transforms into a radical and anarchist activist to protest against the government and the American way of life, what this *Leviathan*, and the Statue of Liberty hypocritically represent.

A lesser number of researchers have uniquely focused their studies on chance, as it is a widely used topic in the majority of Auster's works, and although it is greatly presented in this novel, it does not introduce any difference regarding earlier narratives from the author. Therefore, analysis of the contingencies Auster plays with in this story have been done by some previously mentioned authors like Danto or Saltzman, but merely superficially.

Regarding the figure of the protagonist Benjamin Sachs, scholars have analyzed the personal process which took him to die following different approaches. Some, such as Piperno in his thesis dissertation, propose that Sachs' death was the result of his own destruction and auto marginality. Others, following a more ontological analysis, have focused on the issue of identity, studying the evolution Sachs underwent in search of his inner stability. Later cited authors like Shostak or Roger deeply explore this crisis the individual experiences within himself, which profoundly affects him to the extent of ending his life. The protagonist's political beliefs have also been studied by authors such as Mohammad-Javad Hajjari and Nasserin Maleki in their essay "Auster's *Leviathan*: when the "voice of conscience" calls out" (2020) or Rodenhurst with his later mentioned article "The Spirit of Walden: Art, Asceticism and Coercion in Paul Auster's Early Fiction" (2021), as the ideology Sachs fervently defends conditions his behaviors, and it is therefore connected with the crisis of identity which he undergoes.

1.2 Objectives

The aim of this dissertation is to study the specific postmodernist traits which characterize the personality of the characters which Auster constructs following this movement. For this purpose, the protagonist of Auster's novel *Leviathan* has been chosen, as he perfectly reflects the characteristics of this literary style. The study will analyze the character's psychological and ideological features focusing on Thoreau and John Brown's

political theories as the motor of his behavior. The character's mental evolution through the novel will be evaluated in order to prove how he embodies postmodernist traits like dislocation and crisis of existence and believe which take him to die.

The goal of this study will hopefully be to provide an in-depth analysis of one of Auster's characters undergoing a vital dilemma as well as proving that these traits characterizing him associate to the postmodernist movement.

1.3 Methodology and structure

The methodology of this dissertation will be based, firstly, on a close reading of *Leviathan* in terms of content and ontological concerns. An analysis of Auster's prose will be done focusing on those passages which deal with the figure of the protagonist Benjamin Sachs, the crisis of existence which he confronts and the consequences which this entails. Drawing on the different authors who have analyzed this matter, Sachs' search of identity will be analyzed in relation with his unfortunate death.

This study will be structured in three different chapters, preceded by an introduction, the state of the issue and an explanation of the methodology applied. The first chapter "Auster and Postmodernism" serves as an opening to contextualize the author and Postmodernism, the literary style his works belong to. The second chapter "Leviathan: Crisis and Search of Identity in Benjamin Sachs" deals with the analysis of the features under study and will be divided in three other sections. These parts consist respectively of the examination of the political ideology which Sachs embodies, the accidents and events he suffered, and the change of identity he underwent as a result of these accidents and the consequences this change of personality had. The third and last chapter will gather the conclusions obtained from the interpretations done along this work.

2

Paul Auster and Postmodernism

Paul Auster was born in New Jersey in 1947 and started having contact with books and developing interest for writing and literature since a very early age (Kreutzer). His first publications of books and articles coincide with the beginning of literary postmodernism, and although he fails to accept that his works belong to a specific movement, stating that “he is primarily interested in storytelling” and that “his writing style cannot be as easily pigeonholed” (Martin 2), many critics have described him as a postmodernist (Martin 2).

Postmodernism starts in the 1960s as a reaction to modernism, being described by theorists as a “synonym for skepticism or anti foundationalism” (Martin 2). The historian Arnold Toynbee (338) sets the beginning of this movement as a result of “the rise of the industrial working class”, which therefore shows the technological advances that symbolize the end of the “Modern Age”. This opinion is shared by other critics such as Fredric Jameson (113), who also identifies postmodernism with the growth of media and television and sees its function as a correlation of the emergence of new formal features in culture and a new type of social life and economic order. The theories shaping postmodernist thinking focus on rejecting the ideas which found our system of thought, putting them into question in order to make value judgements (Sim 9-10). Regarding the perception of the self, Jameson proposes the idea that the postmodernist can be compared with a schizophrenic, whose experience is isolated and disconnected from reality (Martin 15).

Postmodernism is an American literary tendency, and therefore its traits also revolve around the American experience during the late twentieth century, being the Vietnam War one of its most influential events. Consequently, American literary postmodernism will explore techniques used in post-war fiction creating products which reflect the collective mindset of doubt, anxiety, lack of certainty and crisis of believe of the time (Gitlin 58). According to Hassan (44-45), modernist creations were left behind opting for a sense of

chaos and dislocation, tending towards “an artistic Anarchy in deeper complicity with things falling apart”.

Auster published his most famous work *The New York Trilogy*, composed of the novels *City of Glass*, *Ghosts* and *The Locked Room* between the years 1985 and 1987. The techniques used in these works already labeled him as a postmodernist, and although his tone later changed to a more human one, focusing on reflections upon existence and on social and political protest issues (Martin, ix), his style was kept in subsequent writings (Martin 1). *City of Glass*, the first novel of the trilogy, presents the traits that will generally characterize the author’s postmodernist works: a combination of different genres, fact, and fiction, characters who experience a sense of urban dislocation in the city of New York, which makes them “adopt a variety of disguises and personae” (Martin 104) and an ambiguous narrative voice, which has an ironic relationship with the protagonists (Martin 1).

Paul Auster’s fiction is predominated by first personal autobiographical texts like *Hand to Mouth* (1997) or *The Red Notebook* (1993), which present a blurred difference between factual and fictional spaces. There are no limits distinguishing fact from fiction, truth from lying or the authentic from the imitation. In fact, the author transforms himself into a literary character who inhabits both the fictional and the factual space (Martin 11). This ambiguity, a defining element of literary postmodernism (Martin 42), is achieved through the use of pastiche, a technique identified by Gitlin (59) as one of the main traits of the movement, consisting of combining styles, genres, or tones from different periods of time in a single work of art. Auster exceedingly does this putting together a constellation of detective and Hollywood film genres, fictional and non-fictional forms, comic and violent tones and different authorial perspectives.

The feeling of exhaustion previously described by Gitlin, always characterizes Auster’s protagonists, who struggle for survival in a chaotic, claustrophobic, threatening, and often inexplicable America where the author sets them in order to criticize modern life along with the different political administrations (Martin 6, 71, x). Auster tries to capture the essence

of New York and use it as the setting of many of his novels, such as in *Moon Palace* (1989) or *The New York Trilogy* (1987), to create a sense of urban dislocation, due to the fact that the city is haunted by an aura of alienation (Martin 146). As Brooker (130) sees it, immigration “effectively swung the city away from its European cultural affiliations and modernist identity to that of an ethnically mixed, postmodern cosmopolis”. Auster makes use of this new postmodern space which Hassan (40) describes as decentered and impersonal, a place where lots of new identities are created due to the lack of a communal one, to make his characters struggle to survive in it. According to Martin (175,104), Auster leaves behind the portray of the postmodern city as a malignant and uncontrollable force, and realistically pictures it as a chaotic pluralistic society, where his characters will adopt multiple identities. Nevertheless, some of them cannot not endure the hardships which New York presents them and the absence of meaningful connections in such a cosmopolis, lead to a sense of isolation and dislocation which, in many cases, forces a voluntarily exile. Without leaving trace (Martin 175), his characters embark upon quests of discovery and equate their newfound environments with redemption and spiritual rebirth (Martin 145). These solitary retreats with their interior selves “seem preferable to the harsh reality of the outside world” (Martin 175).

Many of Auster’s characters seem to be inspired in himself; however, he has denied this autobiographical element on many occasions. The author suggests he is merely a facilitator of fictional writings which are part of his imagination and that his novels belong to invented characters who possess a life of their own (Martin 99): “Each one of these people thinks differently, speaks differently, writes differently from all the others” (Auster *The Art of Hunger* 296). Calinescu (303-304) has described this writing style as a “new existential or ‘ontological’ use of narrative perspectivism” and as a “extreme version of ‘unreliable narrator’”. Nevertheless, according to Martin (99-100), it is undeniable that this technique constitutes a postmodernist literary device, as the fact that readers are unable to verify the author’s authenticity due the threatening of his authority along with Auster’s use of his characters to voice his personal concerns and anxieties reflects postmodern uncertainty.

Contingency is another of the most recurrent themes in Auster's works, as Martin (ix) writes in his preface, random and arbitrary events highlight in his literary universe. Personal anecdotes, like nearly being struck by lightning in a summer camp, had a profound effect on him to the extent of using chance as the motor making the plot of his novels advance. Moreover, it could be said that Auster became a writer inspired by the forces of contingency, as when he met Willie Mays, his childhood hero, nobody around had a pencil for his baseball idol to sign him an autograph and he started carrying one everywhere (Martin 52): "...if there's a pencil in your pocket, there's a good chance that one day you'll feel tempted to start using it. [...] As I like to tell my children, that's how I became a writer" (Auster *The Art of Hunger* 395).

His characters cannot escape from the power of chance, as randomness impacts upon their lives (Martin 71). This has been negated by many critics who advocate cause and effect and fail to comprehend this component of literary postmodernism (Martin 43), however it has also been seen as by others as a "well-worn postmodern literary device" (Martin 36), which enhances the lack of certainty which Auster creates with the previously mentioned techniques. The author takes his inspiration for contingency not only from his childhood anecdotes but also from the oral tradition and fairy tales (Martin 41). For him, every action triggers a rationalized reaction, and their characters are acutely affected by their own responses to random events. Sometimes, their reactions can even bring them personal salvation if they benefit from these contingencies (Martin 35), therefore, human answer to fate, rather than fate itself, becomes the author's fundamental concern (Martin 35). As Barone (5) puts it, "Auster examines the consequences of the actions taken in one's self-fashioning", something that can be perfectly seen in novels like *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), *Why Write?* (1996) or *The Music of Chance* (1980).

These mentioned traits, along with other postmodern features such as the use of irony to dissolve commitment, copies and repetitions, or the acute self-consciousness of the construction of a literary work predominate in Auster's works (Gitlin 59) proving this way his belonging to the movement.

3

Leviathan: Crisis and Search of Identity in Benjamin Sachs

Benjamin Sachs, the protagonist of *Leviathan*, undergoes what Springer (1) refers to as “the crisis of the individual”, the key element for the construction of this postmodernist character. In his article “Auster and the Crisis of the Individual”, Springer exceedingly describes what this personal dilemma consists of. Firstly, the hero separates himself from the rest of the world and communicates via his artistic works. He enters in a state of isolation which leads him to start searching for questions. At this point, the individual finds himself in a twofold quest, on the one hand the search of answers is directed inwards, but on the other he also looks for them in the surrounding environment. As Roger (1) puts it “the individual crisscross his own inner world but he also explores the outside world”. The character attempts to gain control over his confusion by writing a novel in order to examine his language to find solutions in it, and by following the political reflections of different models of thought. Nevertheless, despite his efforts do adapt to society (Roger 2), he does not reach to a solution to solve his crisis, his challenges only aggravate and take him to a sensation of loss of self-control which dominates his thinking and leads him to an unsatisfactory ending.

Sachs development through the novel perfectly adjusts to the pattern Springer presents. Auster’s hero first moves from Brooklyn to his country-side house in Vermont to concentrate on his literary production. He was formerly a successful writer, but a decline in his readership made him progressively loose the direction of his life plunging, like North America, in an absurd conventionalism and materialism (Barrio 66). In his isolation, he attempts to self-evaluate, identifying with past literary models and setting challenges for himself. He also endeavors to solve his queries by analyzing his novel *The New Colossus* and imitating Berkman’s philosophy. However, the tests he undergoes make him experience an inner emptiness and annihilation which leads him to disappear dying in a mysterious way, in an act of domestic terrorism (Schreiner 607). The first section of this

chapter will focus on analyzing the political and literary models of thought Sachs adopts, the second will deal with the challenges he undergoes, and the last part will study his terrible ending.

3.1 Political ideology: Thoreau and John Brown

Benjamin Sachs' mentality is influenced by different personalities which shape his specific ideology, distinguishing him from the rest of the characters in the novel and moving him to act in such a particular way. For its creation Auster used his own political inspirations, intellectual influences, and literary idols like David Thoreau or John Brown, and it is for this reason that Martin (177) claims that *Leviathan* is "Paul Auster's most overtly political work". Thoreau, one of the greatest representatives of the Transcendentalist movement of the nineteenth century, has been identified by scholars as the model of behavior Sachs follows, as he perfectly embodies his ideals. Consequently, as Martin (211) points out, the Transcendentalist legacy cannot be negated in *Leviathan*, which epitaph already recites a line extracted from Emerson's essay "Politics" (Zhang 542): "Every actual State is corrupt".

Transcendentalism believes that the first step for social change is self-transformation (Zhang 553), and they aim to give meaning to reality through the use of words (Bolaño 26). Being a writer, Sachs first tries to find meaning to his existence isolating himself from society and devoting time to his book, in what Springer identifies as the first stage of his crisis. As Rodenhurst (132) sees it, "retreating to a cell-like space" and "living a paired down existence encourages ideological self-analysis and confrontation of the inner-self". However, for the Transcendentalists language is flawed and the access to absolute truth is obtained through intuition and interaction with nature (Bolaño 26-27). Due to this corrupted manifestation of language, Sachs starts encountering problems to produce his narrative and find his identity and he experiences a crisis of existentialism and nihilism (Bolaño 27). Unable to deal with the situation, he "decides to start working intuitively to create his own identity" resorting to some sort of political activism and transforming himself into a "terrorist" (Rodenhurst 331). This metamorphosis not only advances what Springer

describes as the hero's fatal end, but it also represents Transcendentalist intuitive action (Bolaño 33).

Sachs' Transcendentalist traits are also found in his similarities with Thoreau, seen from the beginning of the novel, as since the moment Aaron meets him, he can notice the resemblance between them. Concerning their behavior, Sachs disagreed with American military interventionism and refused to go to the Vietnam War, while Thoreau not only refused to participate in the war but also to pay taxes that could contribute to slavery or to the war against Mexico (Barrio 63). They both could have avoided going to jail, but their principles made them stand for what they believed in, and they went to prison for defending it (Bolaño 33). This attitude connects the two characters with Auster too, as he also had a rebellious personality and took part in the Vietnam War uprisings vindicating that "all citizens should be politically active within the democratic process" (Rodenhurst 333).

The previously mentioned isolation Sachs experiences in order to find himself, also links him with Thoreau in his retreat to Walden Pond (Rodenhurst 331), narrated in his essay *Walden or Life in the Woods* (1854). In this work the philosopher tells his own journey of self-discovery immersing in the woods, making his readers reflect on the American way of life and challenging them to look into their own consciousness (Rodenhurst 332). Thoreau then leaves the pond and returns to the city in the same way Sachs "moves from being solitary to the public" (Zhang 539). *Walden* perfectly aligns with *Leviathan* (Zhang 554) and the narrative had a profound effect on Sachs. The following quote illustrates Aaron's impressions on Benjamin's philosophy and the impact Thoreau's works had in his life:

"If I had to sum up his attitude towards his own beliefs, I would begin by mentioning the Transcendentalists of the nineteenth century. Thoreau was his model, and without the example of *Civil Disobedience* I doubt that Sachs would have turned out as he did. I'm not just talking about prison now, but a whole approach to life, an attitude of remorseless inner vigilance. Once *Walden* came up in a conversation, Sachs confessed to me that he wore a beard 'because Henry David had worn one'- which gave me a sudden insight into how deep his admiration was. As I write these

words, it occurs to me that they both lived the same number of years. Thoreau died at forty-four, and Sachs wouldn't have passed him until next month." (Auster *Leviathan* 26)

The New Colossus, the book Sachs had written, also takes inspiration from Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*, as Sachs asserts in his novel that the philosopher was correct in his thinking regarding "civil disobedience" and that America had "lost its way" (Rodenhurst 338). Sachs' harsh and moralistic opinions about America (Barrio 608) can be seen in the following passage, where Aaron describes his friend's work: "I understood how deeply personal the book must have been for him. The dominant emotion was anger, a full-blown, lacerating anger that surged up on nearly every page: anger against America, anger against political hypocrisy, anger as a weapon to destroy national myths." (Auster *Leviathan* 40)

The New Colossus plays a key role in the "terrorist" project Sachs later embarks in, as he used his literature to "wake up" alienated consciences (Barrio 64). As Zhang (538) sees it, Sachs' actions cannot be separated from his writings as "pen and bomb both imply the detonation of the energy". However, it is undoubtable that *Civil Disobedience* was one of the precursors which made Sachs stop writing and communicate his ideas by means of actions instead of words (Schreiner 608).

Sachs' plan consisted in exploding all the replicas of the Statue of Liberty under the penname of the Phantom of Liberty. With these destructions, he wanted to urge every citizen to consider relations between the moral law and the social contract in order to renew the meaning of "America" with their own agency in accordance with what culture truly represented for them (Zhang 553-554). The following fragment shows the principles Sachs's plan defended and what he aimed to achieve with it:

"It represents hope rather than reality, faith rather than facts, and one would be hard-pressed to find a single person willing to denounce the things it stands for: freedom, democracy, and equality under the law. [...] 'Wake up America' the caller said 'It's time to start preaching what you preach. If you don't want any more statues blown up, prove to me that you're not a hypocrite. Do something for your people beside building them bombs. Otherwise, my bombs will keep going off. Signed: The Phantom of Liberty'." (Auster *Leviathan* 216-217)

For the creation of this revolutionary plan, John Brown and Alexander Berkman were also two of the strongest influences for Sachs. Brown was an American abolitionist militant who risked his life at Harper's Ferry Landing trying to free the slaves by giving them rifles to defend themselves, but he was captured and executed for public vilification and for taking the law into his own hands (Rodenhurst 332). Thoreau wrote "A Plea for Captain John Brown" in support of his cause (Haj'jari and Maleki 141) and, despite Brown's choice of action, he defended him as a "Transcendentalist above all" (Rodenhurst 332). Brown also negated to participate in any war "unless it were a war for liberty" (Thoreau 2054) and, therefore, Sachs also emphasizes with the ideology driving Brown (Rodenhurst 332). In fact, his own behavior can be seen as an imitation of the abolitionist, as they both opposed to the government of their days. Rodenhurst (332) affirms that people often strongly disagree with Brown because of its methods and not his politics, and this can be perfectly applied to Sachs' "terrorism" too. Berkman, the other model of thought which inspired Sachs for his project, was an anarchist writer who believed "there was a moral justification for certain forms of political violence" (Auster *Leviathan* 224). These two characters shared their philosophy regarding political activism, and Benjamin transforms into a Thoreau-Brown-Berkman figure who uses their principles as the motor which moves his operation.

3.2 Accidental events: the whims of fate

Sachs' crisis is caused by the necessity to find answer to three existential queries: who is he, what is his true identity and what is his role in the world. For this reason, Auster embarks him in a search that implies a series of challenges which shape the protagonist and determine his future (Barrio 60). The author makes Sachs decide where to go and which path to take, however, contingency plays a crucial role in the development of his existential crisis, and events ruled by fate are added to his own challenges, complicating his internal dilemmas. Sachs tries to escape from the terrible reality of his destiny (Schreiner 610), but the accidents he suffers dominate him distancing him from "his relatively stable existence"

(Springer 2) making him become a phantom, without a concrete direction and without a permanent home, following a pure postmodernist style (Barrio 60).

Schreiner tries to find explanation to this phenomenon by presenting the idea of abandoning the niche, which he defines as “indistinguishable from destiny” (Schreiner 604). The term niche initially comes from architecture, where it means “a recess in the wall of a church where a holy or symbolic artifact may be placed” (Schreiner 612). Hence, niche means “habitat” and each one has specific activities attached in order to “survive” in it. When Sachs abandons his writer’s niche he is leaving behind all the vivid human relations he had established (Schreiner 615) changing from his characteristic sphere of activity to the sphere of politics, one in which he perishes and stumbles (Schreiner 607). He alters his destiny of being a writer for being a political radical pursuing his terrorist project (Schreiner 615). This venturing beyond a niche of intimate relations into a solitary one is what makes him become an object exposed to bizarre accidents and, consequently, annihilation (Schreiner 607, 613). In other words, Sachs becomes a toy of destiny, contingency, fate, and chance as a result of being outside his niche (Schreiner 613).

Sachs’ first accident takes place on the 4th of July 1986, when he goes to a party in a friend’s house to celebrate the centenary of the Statue of Liberty (Shostak 74). Days before the celebration, Sachs already shows signs which prove he is not feeling well. A failed offer for a Hollywood production of his novel had made him lost faith in himself (Schreiner 208), not only as a writer but also as a husband and as an intellectual (Barrio 66), and he was starting to experience the first symptoms of his existential dilemma: “He had looked to Hollywood as a way to escape the impending crisis growing inside him, and once it became clear that there was no escape, I believed he suffered a lot more than he ever let on.” (Auster *Leviathan* 105)

Annihilated as he was feeling, chance played against him and made him accept Maria Turner’s invitation to see the fireworks together in the fire escape, instead of joining the rest of the people at the party in the roof. It was when they were embraced in that small space, in plain sight of the Statue of Liberty, that another guest aimed to join them causing

Maria to lose grab of Sachs and precipitating his fall four stories down the building. The fact that Sachs' misfortune coincides with America's birthday, for once in the novel, is not a coincidence. In fact, the symbol of the Statue of Liberty is not only connected to his future project but also predicted by his childhood anecdote, when in 1951 he climbed the Statue with his mother, and she experienced an anxiety attack due to the vertigo she was feeling (Shostak 74).

Despite the randomness characterizing the chain of events which lead to Sachs' fall, he torments himself believing he was the only responsible of his accident. The idea that he only accepted Maria's proposal with the hope of something happening between them in the fire escape tortures him. He is convinced that, if it had not been for his fall, he would have gone further with Maria, unable to contain the sexual desire he was feeling towards her. The following quote shows how Sachs thinks he was the one voluntarily jumping to punish himself for tempting Maria into touching him (Haj'jari and Maleki 142): "...It wasn't really an accident, Peter. I caused it myself. I acted like a coward, and then I had to pay for it. [...] I did something unforgivable because I was too ashamed to admit to myself I wanted to touch Maria Turner's leg. In my opinion, a man who goes to such lengths of self-deception deserves whatever he gets'." (Auster *Leviathan* 115)

Sachs' precipitation from the building represents an existential fall in his life, an initial acceptance of failure, as the reality was that he aimed to suicide (Haj'jari and Maleki 143). As Haj'jari and Maleki (144) put it "his suicidal attempt was not out of self-punishment for sinning, but a deeper existential agony awakened through his conscience." Despite the failure of the attempt, the fall is the turning point from which everything else started to collapse, as the accident was just the beginning of a "waltz of disasters that went on and there was no stopping it" (Auster *Leviathan* 138).

Full of guilt Sachs moves to his house in Vermont, isolating himself in order to write a second novel that would make him recover confidence in his work. However, the moment when he stops writing inside the house leaving the manuscript in his desk, can be

identified as the abandonment of his niche (Schreiner 613), and therefore the second accident occurs proving the inefficiency of his recovery.

An afternoon in mid-September, Sachs abandons his habitat going for a walk around the woods, but he gets lost here, literally, and figuratively (Shostak 75), and spends the night covered in leaves waiting until day light can guide him back. In the morning he finds a narrow road where a man offers him a ride home. Following a series of shortcuts, they find a Toyota with a man inside in the middle of their way, and Sachs' driver stops the car and approaches him to offer help. However, the man in the Toyota suddenly takes a revolver and kills him, and Sachs, afraid of being the next one dying, takes a baseball bat and kills the murderer by knocking his head with it. Once done, he examines his victim's car and finds a bag with five thousand dollars and documentation, discovering he has killed Reed Dimaggio.

Even more horrified with his deeds than when the first accident occurred, he immediately returns to Brooklyn, where he aims to find refuge in his wife. However, in the lowest moment of his crisis, when his wife could have helped him recover, he found her making love to another man in their own house. Completely devastated, Sachs resorts to Maria Turner, the only other person he still trusts, but this only worsens the situation. Fortuitous coincidence wanted that Sachs' victim, Reed Dimaggio, was Maria Turner's best friend Lillian Stern's husband, and this completely marks Sachs' destiny:

“If Sachs hadn't gone to her, I'm certain that things would have been resolved rather quickly. He would have calmed down after a night's rest, and after that he would have contacted the police and told them the truth [...] but a new element was added to the already unstable mixture of the past twenty-four hours, and it wound up producing a deadly compound, a beaker full of acid that hissed forth its dangers in a billowing profusion of smoke.” (Auster *Leviathan* 160)

Again, an unfortunate scale of events made Sachs contact Maria and, if it had not been for her connection with Dimaggio, Sachs would have not entered in the state of mental collapse he was unable to overcome. Such were his regrets, that he decides to try to

compensate his murder by imitating the person he imagines Dimaggio was, and this only takes him to the creation of his terrorist plan and, consequently, his fatal end.

3.3 Metamorphosis and change of identity: from passiveness to action

The fatal events had a profound effect on Sachs, to the extent of transforming not only his physical aspect but also his mental state, consequently changing his life forever. As Barrio (68) puts it, the accidents change Sachs' life and personality, altering his character, his interaction with others and his motivations and aspirations for living. He undergoes a stage of "symbolic death" which he overcomes by embracing the scars the tragedy left on him but also by creating his own wounds to remind him of the trauma. This inability to leave the pain behind is what leads the protagonist to change his identity and experience a metamorphosis of his being turning into a terrorist activist.

The fall from the fire escape produced an internal death in Sachs which he was unable to overcome, and this can be seen in the following quote:

"First I realized that I was dead. I don't mean that I sensed I was going to die, I mean that I was already dead. I was a dead man falling through the air, and even though I was technically still alive, I was dead, as dead as a man who's been buried in his grave. I don't know how else to put it. Even as I fell, I was already past the moment of hitting the ground, past the moment of impact, past the moment of shattering into pieces. I had turned into a corpse, and by the time I hit the clothesline and landed in those towels and blankets, I wasn't there anymore. I had left my body, and for a split second I actually saw myself disappear." (Auster *Leviathan* 117)

The accident gifted Sachs with a scar on his skull and, in an attempt to change his physical look, he decides to shave his beard and his head. This implies, not only making the cicatrix more visible, but also mutilating his previous personality (Barrio 69): "Sachs shaved off his beard and cut his hair down to normal length. It was a drastic change, and it made him look like an altogether different person [...] I felt it was a particularly violent and aggressive act, almost a form of self-mutilation." (Auster *Leviathan* 124)

According to Haj'jari and Maleki (145), this scar reminds him of his failure, and his decision to show it reflects his longing to wear a scar of existential guilt not wanting to forget his remorse. The mark also reminds of the biblical story of Cain, implying Sachs is “driven to do penance, to take on his guilt as the guilt of the world and to bear its marks in his own flesh” (Auster *Leviathan* 145). However, something much more serious than the physical injuries had happened to him: “His body mended but he was never the same after that. In those few seconds before he hit the ground it was as if Sachs lost everything. His entire life flew apart in midair, and from that moment until his death four years later, he never put it together again.” (Auster *Leviathan* 107)

After the fall, when Sachs lies in bed at hospital, he loses the faculty of speaking for a period of time (Barrio 68). According to Dimitovitz (459), the acceptance of this silence represents a mode of repeating his fall “as the power of words no longer direct a mode of expression”. This is the first symptom of what he describes as repetition compulsion (Dimitovitz 459). Instead of verbalizing the anguish the fall had produced in him in order to try to move forward from it, Sachs’ silence symbolizes his internal torturing with the accident. He avoids speaking in order to use this silent time to constantly repeat the sequence of the accident in his head. This can be perfectly seen in the following quote: “He never made a conscious decision not to speak. [...] 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. To be silent was to enclose himself in a contemplation, to relive the moments of his fall again and again.” (Auster *Leviathan* 118-119)

This can be considered the novel’s moment of apocalypse (Dimitovitz 459), as the protagonist could have mentally survived to the fall, but this first response to the tragedy symbolizes a “death in his self-imposed linguistic prison” (Haj'jari and Maleki 146). In this silence, Sachs has time to reflect on many issues surrounding his life and the guilt he feels for the accident is so big, that he reaches to the conclusion that, although he has survived, he does not deserve to live anymore. These thoughts can be seen in the following passage:

“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 responsibility for the role I played [...] I had put myself in a

position to fall, I realized, and I had done it on purpose. That was my discovery, the unassailable conclusion that rose up out of my silence. I learned that I didn't want to live. For reasons that are still impenetrable to me, I climbed onto the railing that night in order to kill myself." (Auster *Leviathan* 120-121)

The protagonist starts to develop a combination of feelings which evolve from incipient depression and suicidal thoughts to the realization of his mental problem. As Hajjari and Maleki see it (146), "his fall and silence give him insight into his future deeds", and when this recognition takes place, he changes his mindset longing to escape from his anguish and motivating himself with the wish to start living a completely new and different life. It could be said that he changes his passivity for action to try to renew his existence. He leaves behind his resigned life as writer and goes out into the reality of the world (Barrio 69):

"I knew I'd hit bottom. It meant that I understood I had to change my life. Changing your life isn't the same thing as wanting to end it'. I want to end the life I've been living up to now. I want everything to change. If I don't manage to do that, I'm going to be in deep trouble. My whole life has been a waste, a stupid little joke, a dismal string of pretty failures. I'm going to be forty- one years old next week, and if I don't take hold of things now, I'm going to drown. I'm going to sink like a stone to the bottom of the world'. [...] I don't want to spend the rest of my life rolling pieces of blank paper into a typewriter. I want to stand up and from my desk and do something. The big days of shadow are over. I've got to step into the real world now and do something." (Auster *Leviathan* 122-123)

Sachs decides that he needs to radically change his life and start a new one (Barrio 68) and in his attempt to recover he resorts to Maria Turner, the origin of his freefall. As Dimitovitz sees it (459), Sachs "tries to locate his identity in the other who seems to have determined his fall". Maria, who works as an artistic photographer carrying out innovative and original projects, proposes Sachs to participate in one. She suggests photographing him so that he can see himself from a different perspective, a more distant one with the help of the camera, in order to renew his capacity to evaluate himself, and master his trauma (Shostak 75). By seeing himself in the pictures, Sachs would be able to see his other "self" and he would forgive himself for what he had done. The idea seems to work and have a positive outcome for Sachs mental state: "He started seeing himself through Maria's eyes where the whole thing doubled back on him, and he was able to encounter himself again. They say that a camera can rob a person of his soul. In this case, I believe it was just the

opposite. With his camera, I believe that Sachs's soul was gradually given back to him. He was getting better ...” (Auster *Leviathan* 130)

However, Sachs tricks everyone showing a fake recovery when in fact he knows he is still not feeling well. He realizes he will never return to his life before the accident as he is unable to be the same person he had been. Therefore, he does not see the project as a healing opportunity, as a saving method to go back into the real world, but rather as a way to keep in touch with the “embodiment of his catastrophe” (Auster *Leviathan* 126). As it happened before with his silence, Sachs uses Maria's proposal as a chance to torture himself with the compulsive repetition of the random chain of events which lead him to fall. Consequently, his collaboration with Maria, far from helping him, proves he is unable to separate from the past (Shostak 74). As Dimitovitz suggests (460), Sachs's resort to Maria can be seen as “a return to the mother that sets up his repetition of the fall”. This idea of the mother can also be supported by the biblical symbolism of Maria's name, being Mary the mother of Jesus, and by the maternal role that the character tries to adopt helping Sachs to recover with her camera. The real effects that the relationship between these two characters had for the protagonist's mental state can be seen in the following quote: “By turning her into a friend, he would be able to keep the symbol of his transformation constantly before his eyes. His wounds would remain open, and every time he saw her he could reenact the same sequence of torments and emotions that have come so close to killing him. He would be able to repeat the experience again and again.” (Auster *Leviathan* 126)

After the second accident takes place, the protagonist already carries a baggage of emotional instability with him which causes that the events occurring in the forest affect him acutely. Sachs is tired of feeling miserable and only being gifted with misfortunes and, after a period of recovery from his spell of intense introspection, he initiates his action (Hajjari and Maleki 146). His remorse for the murder he has committed is so big that he decides to recompense Lillian for her husband's death in the only way he can think of, by offering the money he found in the car as an economic compensation. However, feeling this is not enough for such a great loss, he gradually settles in Lillian's house acting as the father of her child and as her couple, aiming to fill the empty space her husband has left.

This resort to Lillian can be seen as vehicle for his salvation (Dimitovitz 461) and as a second return to a mother-like figure. Sachs is feeling abandoned and lost, and in the same way he found refuge in Maria after the first accident, he now looks for a safe home to stay in. However, as Dimitovitz (461) puts it, “Sachs realizes that his salvation will not come from yet another replacement mother, and he must find another mode of recirculation back to his home”.

His method of recirculating consists in adopting Dimaggio’s personality. For the impersonation of his identity, the protagonist starts reading the thesis dissertation that Dimaggio had written about Berkman, the Russian anarchist with Jewish origins (Barrio 66), and he becomes thrilled with the activist and committed tone that he used, finding that he has a lot in common with his victim and with Berkman’s ideology, as the three of them feel betrayed by their State (Barrio 66). Once Sachs discovers Dimaggio’s political ideology, his fascination is such that he feels he has killed his “intellectual double”. He starts to plot a way to pay him a tribute turning into an anarchist and designing a radical environmental activist project, which he believes Dimaggio would have supported if he were alive, despite of the violence implied in it. Sachs drastic transformation into a radical leftist with anarchistic tendencies can also be explained with the effects that the fall from the building had in his ideology, as the event also symbolized the collapse of his values towards American democracy. The accident had unleashed his self-disgust, his disillusion with “the American concept of liberty” (Martin 207) and his “revulsion against America’s failure to live up to his own moral and political ideals” (Auster and Siegmundfeldt 172). When Sachs reads Dimaggio’s thesis he happens to hear the silent voice of his conscience calling him to action, waking him up from his inauthentic experience and moving him to truly liberate Americans (Haj’jari and Maleki 149). As Haj’jari and Maleki (153) put it, Sachs does not want “public recognition but rather to arouse national consciousness”. All these emotions, joined with the wish to honor his victim, make Sachs wholly blind and innocent of the violent plan which is emerging in his head. He is so desperate to finally feel well with himself and find his true identity, that he turns into a “rebel against government inefficacy” (Haj’jari and Maleki 141) believing that with this project he has found the

principle which would bring all the broken pieces of himself together. Trauma had entered his life in the shape of unfortunate chance and accidents (Shostak 77) and therefore, he is certain that he has come to the final solution to “escape from the radical contingency that stills threatens to govern his life” (Dimitovitz 461). However, what the hero did not realize, was that he was immersing himself in a greater world of contingency, and that chance would be closer to him than ever in the shape of explosions, bombs, and death.

Sachs' violent change of attitude is a direct consequence of the accidents he suffered triggered by chance. The fall, his silence, and the murders in the forest make the hero adopt a completely different personality to the one he had as a novelist. He now takes the role of an advocate of “human conscience before political corruption” (Haj'jari and Maleki 141) which can no longer conform but rather act in a harsh way. Therefore, he starts to organize his bombings of the images of the Statue of Liberty as a way of attacking every idol of worship that the Americans have made out of the symbol. (Haj'jari and Maleki 145). He uses the penname of The Phantom of Liberty and becomes a “conglomerate of identities that are not he” (Dimitovitz 161), reflecting what he has learnt from seeing the photos Maria took for her project: that a single person can have multiple personalities. He hires an apartment in Chicago under the name of Alexander Berkman in order to have a safe place to coordinate all his attacks and starts his political radical project which consists in exploding the replicas of the Statue of Liberty all throughout the different States of America one after the other. He spreads his message as a preacher of God's word, aiming to “awaken the dormant political unconscious of the Americans” (Schreiner 609).

The day the third and final fatal accident takes place Sachs is in Wisconsin building one of his artefacts, when a mistake with the managing of the explosives literally fragments him in pieces through the air. As Haj'jari and Maleki (161) point out, “the novel reinforces the repetition compulsion motif by the fact that Sachs was born on the day that the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima” and yet he balances this by dying at the hands of a bomb of his own creation. Misfortune ends the novel as the complete protagonist of it, as if the bomb had not exploded, Sachs could have restored his life adopting his new identity of the Phantom of Liberty and living committed to his conscience and to following his cause

achieving his goals. However, his death puts an end to his wish of praising Dimaggio and of becoming a successful socio-political reformer who fights for authenticity and for acknowledging the possibilities of freedom of the Americans (Haj'jari and Maleki 154)

4

Conclusions

This dissertation aimed to provide an in-depth analysis of Paul Auster's character Benjamin Sachs, the protagonist of his novel *Leviathan*. After focusing on studying the hero's philosophical and intellectual influences, the role that contingency played in his life and how this altered his vital aspirations, the research provides the reader with a closer insight on postmodernist aspects which characterize the protagonist. Through the close reading of passages of the novel, the evolution of the impending crisis growing in the character can be seen and therefore be linked to the postmodernist literary period Auster belongs to.

Politics and philosophy are an essential part of the study conducted, as the protagonist bases his plan of action on the ideology inherited from the literary and political models of thought that he has been reading along his life, which have a profound effect on him. American Transcendentalism and the philosophy of David Thoreau, John Brown and especially Alexander Berkman proved to be the ideological motors behind Sachs' project. Thoreau's works *Civil Disobedience* and "A Plea for Captain John Brown" motivate his thirst of action to make American citizens react against the injustices of the powers governing them, and the reading of Berkman's anarchist theories give him the strength to justify the use of violence in his campaign.

Chance is also taken into consideration in the analysis of Sachs' crisis not only as the major force triggering the character's metamorphosis of identity, but also as the main

protagonist of the novel, shaping the book postmodernist frame. Fate enters the story in the form of random accidents, which impact upon the protagonist's life, which were analyzed to discover how Auster adds contingency to the existential crisis his protagonist is living in order to set him challenges and study his reactions to it. After the analysis, it can be said that these unfortunate coincidences do not save Sachs from his crisis but rather aggravate it, gradually defining his new personality. The compulsive repetition of the images of the traumas in his mind affects the hero revealing a feeling of postmodern anxiety.

The irrevocable alteration of the protagonist's state of mind is shown in his decision of drastically changing the peaceful life he has been living for so many years and his adoption of a new identity as a political activist. These aligns with the postmodernist idea of the multiplicity of personalities and the obsession of finding oneself identity. Sachs' anguish makes him lose hope in living and in the American values and symbols which represent him, and this makes him hold to his dangerous and violent terrorist plan, believing it will renew his life revealing him his true self.

Sachs' death is the fatal result of his existential crisis and his change of personality as well as the direct consequence of his close involvement in the terrorist project, proving that this was not the solution to find himself but rather to dislocate him from his city and loved ones to finally put an end to his empty existence. *Leviathan* perfectly reflects postmodernist existential anguish, and its protagonist proves to embody postmodernist traits representing the failed individual search of identity, as he unsuccessfully fights not only to find his vital path, but also his reason for living coping with the constant unfortunate challenges that Auster puts in his way, which are determinant to understand his death.

5

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