

## *Phantoms of Liberty: The Secret Lives of Leviathan*

Mark Osteen

"BY ART," WRITES HOBBS, "is created that great LEVIATHAN called a COMMONWEALTH OF STATE . . . which is but an artificial man" (23), a "multitude unified in one person" (142). United by their "pacts and covenants" (23), individuals elect to relinquish some personal liberty for mutual peace and defense. In his novels, Paul Auster has repeatedly examined the "artificial men" generated by contracts and covenants and explored the "multiplicity of the singular" (Auster, "Interview" 18), the multitude unified in every human identity. In his latest novel, *Leviathan*, Auster and his alter-ego, Peter Aaron, investigate the multiple selves of Benjamin Sachs. A leviathan (from the Hebrew *leviath*: "What is joined or tied together" [*Calmet's Dictionary*]), Sachs exemplifies how a life "touches one life, which in turn touches another life, and very quickly the links are innumerable, beyond calculation" (Auster, *The Locked Room* 131). The tangled skein of connections among Sachs, Aaron, and their acquaintances grows from the secrets they share. These secrets, in turn, generate second selves, "artificial men," phantoms who embody the liberty those covenants both permit and prevent. Seeking liberation from the leviathans of personal history and guilt, Sachs ultimately severs all connections but secret ones and invents an underground identity as the terrorist Phantom of Liberty. Ironically, in dropping out of the commonwealth but entrusting his secret to two friends, he more firmly attaches himself to the leviathans of personal and political affiliation. Through his secret life Sachs both fulfills his destiny and finds genuine liberty.

Like the narrator of *The Locked Room*, Aaron "locked up the secret inside" himself (*The Locked Room* 69): the identity of the Phantom of Liberty. The novel is Aaron's confession and thus, like all writing according to Auster, is meant to "relieve some of the pressure caused by these buried secrets" ("Interview" 7). Pressure is inherent in secrecy. As Georg Simmel notes, "the secret is surrounded by the possibility and temptation of betrayal; and the external danger of being discovered is interwoven with the internal danger, which is like the fascination of an abyss, of giving oneself away" (334). Thus Aaron oscillates between concealment and revelation throughout the novel, telling us Sachs's story but withholding information at key moments. His tale is a preemptive identification of the scattered parts of Sachs's body, found blown to bits; he is seeking to collect the fragments of Sachs's personal history to produce a unitary leviathan from the "multitude of contradictions" and connections his life displays

(19). As he relates the story, he comes to understand how "Everything is connected to everything else, every story overlaps with every other story" (57; cf. 231), how, in fact, every life is a leviathan of overt and covert connections. At the same time he explores the "possibility and temptation of betrayal" involved in all secrets.

Born 6 August 1945 and claiming to be the "original bomb child" (25), Sachs "bombard[s]" (26) Aaron with a personality as powerful—and as split—as the uranium atom. From the outset of their friendship, Aaron feels Sachs "storming through [his] most secret dungeons and hiding places, opening one locked door after another" (18). Their friendship emerges from shared secrets, which generate a composite self that Aaron senses early on when he perceives through a drunken haze that Sachs is "a man with two heads and two mouths" (24). Aaron's narration is similarly two-headed, as he speaks both for himself and for his friend. Thus both Sachs himself and his friendship with Aaron are leviathans. But the secrecy that gives birth to their friendship also complicates it: as Sachs's social bonds draw Aaron into his network, those bonds also create new ones from which Sachs is excluded. For example, Aaron undertakes a relationship with Sachs's wife Fanny because she represents a "phantom of secret desire buried" (51) in his past; "a clandestine drama hidden from the rest of the world" (86), the secret affair begets a second phantom, an artificial self that is at once both and neither of them. Ironically, the result of this betrayal is that Aaron becomes more closely attached to Sachs and now sees him through Fanny's eyes as "a man burdened with secrets he had never shared with anyone" (96). He and Sachs have now "crossed over into the other's life," and their relationship becomes "infinitely muddy and complex" (110).

They are also connected by mutual friends such as the photographer Maria Turner. Maria's discovery and investigation of an anonymous address book exemplifies how a single life—even one that remains mysterious or unfathomable in itself—throws out tentacles of connection. The address book is a kind of anonymous autobiography, a "storehouse of obscure passions and unarticulated desires" (74). A web with a hole in its center, it leads Maria to her childhood friend Lillian Stern, a prostitute whose acquaintances "ripple out in concentric circles, weird networks of information" (81). Because the address book also leads Lillian to Reed Dimaggio, and thus indirectly connects Sachs to Lillian, it is a phantom version of Aaron's own book. Like Aaron's book, it both conceals its author and identifies him through social contacts. And like all books, according to Aaron, it is "a mysterious object . . . and once it floats out into the world, anything can happen"; it enters "the lives of strangers" (5) and acquires a separate existence of its own. But it also serves as a warning about the dangers of stepping over "the boundaries" of the self (85): after Maria and Lillian exchange identities, Maria is assaulted as she attempts to photograph one of Lillian's customers. The lesson—which also applies to Aaron's authorship of Sachs's life—is that nobody can fully possess or become another person, not even by appropriating the other in a work of art.

Sachs's second life begins during the Statue of Liberty centennial when, at-

tempting to become intimate with Maria, a “goddess of the unpredictable” (113), he accidentally falls from a fire escape. The fall reiterates what he learned in his first encounter with the Statue and what Maria learned from the address book: that “freedom can be dangerous” (39). Whether the fall makes Sachs’s life “break in two,” or whether it merely makes “visible what had previously been hidden” (119), it foreshadows his shattering demise. As he falls, Sachs feels a powerful conviction that he is dead; indeed, although he survives physically, he dies spiritually. He is reborn out of silence, which gives him the same sense of freedom he claims to have found while in prison for dodging the draft (22). Silence becomes a “secret challenge to keep faith with himself” (133), a clean break from his previous life. After the fall, Sachs vows to stop “being a shadow,” to “step into the real world now and do something” (137). Through impersonation games with Maria, his own Ms. Liberty, he begins to learn “who he was” (145) and who he may become.

Soon after, through a series of coincidences and chance encounters, Sachs kills Lillian’s ex-husband Reed Dimaggio and discovers the man’s secret—bomb-making tools and a huge sum of money. Now “the earth suddenly swallowed him up” (159): like Jonah, Sachs disappears into the belly of the leviathan. Like Jonah’s life, Sachs’s becomes more than ever a “story of solitude,” a story that can, however, be told only “from outside that solitude, as if, by plunging into the darkness of that solitude, the ‘I’ has vanished from itself. It cannot speak about itself, therefore, except as another” (Auster, *Invention* 125). Sachs speaks about himself first by sharing his secret with Maria. His revelation of Dimaggio’s identity affects her like a bomb; she feels “as if her head were about to explode” (181). For Sachs, however, as for Jonah, this apparent destruction is actually salvation (*Invention* 126). Once shared, his secret becomes her secret and thereby engenders a spectral child made from both of them, a phantom that both liberates him and constrains her.

Playing the music of chance, Sachs finds “opportunity in the shape of a miracle” (187) and tries to use the money to repay Lillian and forge a bond with her. Even after they begin their love affair, however, Lillian remains mysterious. She seems constantly to be following “some secret train of thought” (212), and even when he invades her bathroom, her “secret realm, the place where she enacted her most private rituals” (214), she remains unfathomable to him. In fact, it is her very secrecy that fascinates him. A mysterious center of a “weird network” of connections, Lillian resembles the anonymous address book. Her relationship with Sachs creates interlocking triangles—one with Maria Turner and Lillian, one with Lillian and her daughter Maria, and another with Lillian and her dead husband—that further implicate Sachs in the social leviathan. Eventually, Sachs begins to explore Dimaggio’s writings, and finally reenacts Dimaggio’s secret life as a terrorist. Sachs becomes his victim’s phantom self and, like Aaron narrating his friend’s story, attempts to appropriate it for himself. Ironically, by living someone else’s life, he seems to discover his own. Becoming the Phantom of Liberty—a terrorist who blows up replicas of the Statue of Liberty and leaves Jonah-like messages behind him—Sachs again

speaks about himself by becoming another: "Do something for your people besides building them bombs. Otherwise, my bombs will keep going off" (243). Like the Bomb itself, the Phantom of Liberty is Born Secret.<sup>1</sup>

His old life shed like a husk, Sachs dons disguises and begins to write what a character in Don DeLillo's *Mao II* calls "the new tragic narrative," the narrative of terrorism (157; DeLillo is also the dedicatee of *Leviathan*). In these political parables, Sachs is both anonymous author and mysterious protagonist. But although DeLillo's character claims that "Only the terrorist stands outside" (157) of the leviathan that is the postmodern State, actually Sachs's terrorism binds him more firmly to it. His phantom life is more effectively political and public than his previous life as a writer. Indeed, his secret life embodies the directive implied in the novel's epigraph: if "Every actual State is corrupt," then "good men must not obey the laws too well" (Emerson 353). By destroying the phantoms of Liberty (replicas), he seeks to affirm and embody the meaning of the original. That is, Sachs believes that his secret life—a life simultaneously public and private, singular and collective—gives him genuine liberty, that "right of nature . . . each man has to use his own power . . . for the preservation of his own nature" (Hobbes 109). He tells Aaron that he has "found the unifying principle, and this one idea would bring all the broken pieces of myself together. For the first time in my life, I would be whole" (256). Certainly Sachs's fixation on Liberty seems destined: his first lesson about freedom comes during a visit to the Statue; his first novel, *The New Colossus* (named after the Emma Lazarus poem inscribed on the Statue), depicts the social context of its construction; his fall into secrecy comes on its anniversary. Ironically, however, while Sachs's new narrative assembles the parts of his individual leviathan, it also results in his being blown to bits.

By sharing his secret with Aaron, Sachs again speaks about himself through another. Aaron at first feels dominated by it: "the longer I kept his secret, the less I belonged to myself" (266). Sachs's "tragic narrative" becomes Aaron's, and he borrows the title of Sachs's unfinished novel for the book we are reading. But just as Sachs finds his identity in reliving Dimaggio's life, so Aaron comes to perceive his own authority through the prism of Sachs's identity. His friend's tale becomes his own tale, and in telling it, Aaron wrests control over his own life story. Thus Aaron ultimately speaks about himself through Sachs. Like his biblical namesakes, then, Peter Aaron is both Sachs's mouthpiece and his betrayer. By exploring and authorizing his friend's secret lives, he authorizes his own. In telling Sachs's story, he simultaneously reforges their connection and breaks it. In becoming Sachs's phantom, he finds his own liberty.

The narrator of *The Locked Room* claims that "No one can cross the boundary into another—for the simple reason that no one can gain access to himself" (80-81). *Leviathan* revises that perception by suggesting that only through others can one gain access to the locked room of self. If each person remains ultimately unfathomable, nevertheless his or her secrets inevitably chain him or her to the lives of others. The intertwined lives in Auster's *Leviathan* comprise a kind of secret society in which shared confidences yield a "measure of freedom" from

the larger state (Simmel 360); at the same time, they establish bonds that limit individual autonomy and give it meaning. At once liberating and binding, secrets are phantoms of liberty. Thus, although concluding that "We never know anything about anyone" (107), Aaron nevertheless comes to understand that every life is a leviathan, that connections stop nowhere, and that a person's public self is merely the tip of a colossal iceberg shaped by chance, destiny, and secrecy. The novel thus reaffirms Auster's idea that every single life contains a multitude; moreover, it suggests that the liberty of absolute solitude is a phantom and that true liberty emerges only through the covenants and bonds of social life. Those bonds are themselves phantoms, secrets, specters; they weave the nets that both ensnare us and catch us when we fall.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup>Under the Atomic Energy Act all research on atomic energy and weapons production becomes classified the moment it is conceived. Thus the Bomb is said to be "born secret" (Bok 166).

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