Postmodern and existential ethics in Paul Auster's Moon Palace and Leviathan

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Postmodern and existential ethics in Paul Auster’s *Moon Palace* and *Leviathan*

by

Dominic John D’Urso

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has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
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CHAPTER 1: A SYNTHESIS OF POSTMODERN AND EXISTENTIAL ETHICS

City of Glass, the first of three postmodern detective novellas in Paul Auster’s The New York Trilogy, is a story about a man making choices. Quinn, the novella’s protagonist, chooses to play the role of a detective. He chooses to accept a case, and in a train station, he chooses to follow one man instead of another. The story begins due to faulty telephone wiring. A woman tries to call a private investigator but gets Quinn’s apartment instead. After several similar calls Quinn decides to play along and accepts the case offered by the woman’s husband. Doing so leads Quinn to more choices, and he is quickly overwhelmed by the mounting decisions he must make. At one point he is asked to follow his client’s father. Before he can begin this task, Quinn identifies two men in a train station that equally meet the description provided by his client. The situation nearly paralyzes Quinn with indecision: “There was nothing he could do now that would not be a mistake. Whatever choice he made—and he had to make a choice—would be arbitrary, a submission to chance. Uncertainty would haunt him to the end” (68). Quinn’s decision is bound to uncertainty. He cannot consciously make the right choice because neither is undeniably correct. By choosing one, he will not choose the other. This forces Quinn to live with the possibility that the other man is the one he was asked to follow.

I will argue that Auster’s characters in Moon Palace and Leviathan are often faced with a similar dilemma. They recognize the world as fragmented. When they act well, they also recognize that there is nothing they can do about this fragmentation, no way of uniting the various aspects of existence, no system of knowing that will confidently allow them to choose one fragment over another. When his characters act poorly, they deny what they know; they deny fragmentation and pointlessly strive for unity.
A postmodern worldview permeates Auster's work, and finding ways to act within this worldview is a major concern of his, one he frequently finds existential answers to. That said, I need to take a step back and define my terms. Postmodernism and existentialism are two concepts that are widely and differently defined. My first chapter seeks to arrive at a usable definition and synthesis of these terms in an effort to reveal Auster's answers this question: recognizing a postmodern world, how does one act? I will begin my study with a discussion of the relevance of ethical criticism. Then I will turn my attention to an examination of the pertinent elements of postmodern and existential ethics for the study of Auster's fiction.

Ethical Criticism and Literary Analysis

Auster's concern for the ways in which individuals act is a relevant one. In *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Wayne C. Booth defines the role of ethical criticism in a contemporary world. For Booth, narration is bound to advice; one cannot tell a story without providing some type of instruction. While this instruction may be moral, it is not necessarily so; in fact, the types of instruction and advice presented in narratives vary greatly. Booth demonstrates the wide range of possibilities: "Narratives, fictional and reportorial, can offer to teach me how to get rich quick, how to behave socially as if I were rich, what wines to serve on what occasions, [and] which modes of stroking or stabbing rivals are most effective in various situations" (210). His point, obviously enough, is that advice is present within narration. Booth goes on to note that when the advice becomes overly didactic readers have a tendency to dismiss it as something other than literature. In other words, overtly moral
tales lose their power. Dismissing the clearly pedagogical, however, does not mean that non-didactic narratives are without moral and ethical dimensions.

Booth identifies the stories that maintain a presence in the lives of readers as the ones that offer “a distinctive, engaging way of being together, one of many possible ways of addressing a world of conflicting values” (216). As I mentioned earlier, even non-didactic stories offer advice, and because they do so, they are subject to ethical criticism. For Booth, however, discussing the ethical elements of a work does not depend upon the type of advice the work propagates. Consequently, “Such talk will never lead to flat judgments like ‘true’ or ‘false’ or ‘virtuous’ or ‘wicked,’ and it will thus not satisfy those who want an ethical criticism that will provide fixed conclusions” (217). Booth’s criticism will not and cannot provide a set of concrete rules for ethical judgment; on the other hand it will adamantly deny the notion that art can only be judged on aesthetic grounds.

While ethical criticism will not provide “fixed conclusions,” Booth believes it can offer a wide range of insight into the narratives it examines. Understanding virtue and ethos and their role in ethical criticism is important. Booth defines virtue as “every kind of genuine strength or power,” and ethos as “the total range of…virtues” (11). According to this definition ethos is used in its classical sense; it comprises character. And in this sense the virtues that make up an individual’s character are not strictly those that have traditionally been considered morally good. In light of these meanings, Booth defines ethical criticism as “any effort to show how the virtues of narratives relate to the virtues of selves and societies, or how the ethos of any story affects or is affected by the ethos—the collection of virtues—of any given reader” (11). Ethical criticism addresses the connection between the virtues of a story and those of a reader. It also provides an avenue into the study of Auster’s fiction.
Jean Paul Sartre makes a similar argument in *What is Literature?* He believes the role of the prose writer to be one of disclosing. Sartre notes that, “If you name the behaviour of an individual, you reveal it to him; he sees himself. And since you are at the same time naming it to all others, he knows that he is seen at the moment he sees himself” (36-7). By naming something, the author marks and changes his environment. As Sartre states, “To speak is to act; anything which one names is already no longer quite the same; it has lost its innocence” (36). Naming, or disclosing, allows a reader to recognize that he is seen, that he exists in the world; it also alters the reader—it cannot do otherwise. To use Booth’s terminology, the ethos of a narration will necessarily affect the reader, and the influence it has on a reader is the proper study of literary criticism. Sartre argues that we have a right to ask of a writer: “What aspect of the world do you want to disclose?” And, “What change do you want to bring into the world by this disclosure?” (37). Paul Auster wants to disclose the postmodern nature of existence. And he wants to provide for his readers a way of acting honestly and well in such a world. This is his way of offering a “distinctive, engaging way of being together” (Booth 216).

**The Ethics of Postmodernism**

One of the defining characteristics of a postmodern worldview is the conviction that no view of the world can be universal, absolute, or permanent, including a postmodern one. David Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity* presents an understanding of the postmodern condition that can help to illuminate Auster’s conception of the world. Harvey begins his study by setting postmodernity and postmodernism up as a reaction to modernity and modernism. He quotes from the architectural journal *PRECIS* to quickly define the latter,
"universal modernism has been identified with the belief in linear progress, absolute truths, the rational planning of ideal social orders, and the standardization of knowledge and production" (9). At its heart the modern pursuit is a noble one, with what it hopes will be the singular and absolute truth for all humanity as its goal. Modernism, however, has not been able to meet its desired result. As seen throughout the twentieth century, the modernist pursuit if taken to its logical ends is a flawed and at times tragic endeavor.

The nobility of the modern idea, for Harvey, finds its home in the Enlightenment. He uses J. Habermas to define the Enlightenment’s “project of modernity” as a massive effort “to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic” (qtd. in Harvey 12). The hope driving such “intellectual effort” was the encouragement of freedom, and the improvement of life. The problem with “linear progress” leading to “absolute truths” or “universal morality and law” is that everyone is required to improve according to the structure’s definition of progress; and once the truth has been discovered and laws have been established, everyone is bound to adhere to that singular truth and its laws. The hoped for freedom is then set aside in order to coerce everyone to follow what a few have declared to be universal. Harvey paraphrases Horkheimer and Adorno’s *The Dialect of Enlightenment* to note that for the burgeoning postmodern thinkers “the Enlightenment project was doomed to turn against itself and transform the quest for human emancipation into a system of universal oppression in the name of human liberation” (13). It was doomed because “the logic that hides behind Enlightenment rationality is a logic of domination and oppression. The lust to dominate nature entailed the domination of human beings” (13). For Harvey, modernity—from its inception—was structurally flawed.
Harvey moves from a critique of modernity to its aesthetic presentation, modernism. To do this, he uses Baudelaire’s understanding of the role of the artist. For Baudelaire, the modern age “is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is the one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immutable” (qtd. in Harvey 10). The artist’s role in such a world is to be “someone who can concentrate his or her vision on ordinary subjects of city life, understand their fleeting qualities, and yet extract from the passing moment all the suggestions of eternity it contains” (20). In other words, while the philosophers and scientists were trying to use reason and logic to construct universal norms, the artist recognized difference as a core component of humanity, but tried in presenting various scenes to extract from this difference what is universally or absolutely true.

Postmodernity and its aesthetic presentation, postmodernism, on the other hand, give up the hope that universal or absolute truth can be obtained, regardless of the amount of knowledge one can acquire. To explain this shift, Harvey appeals to Brian McHale’s Postmodernist Fiction. Using McHale, Harvey argues that the focus of postmodern novels moves away from epistemology toward ontology. It is “a shift from the kind of perspectivism that allowed the modernist to get a better bearing on the meaning of a complex but nevertheless singular reality, to the foregrounding of questions as to how radically different realities may coexist, collide, and interpenetrate” (41). It is a movement away from a belief that one reality exists and that understanding reality is dependent on the quantity of knowledge one can collect of it, to a concern that multiple realities exist and living within them can be challenging. As a result of this shift, Harvey notes that “postmodernist characters often seem confused as to which world they are in, and how they should act with respect to it” (41).
It may be important to note McHale’s use of ontology. He uses Thomas Pavel to define ontology as “a theoretical description of a universe” (qtd. in McHale 27) and then focuses on Pavel’s use of the indefinite article attached to “universe.” This detail is important for McHale’s understanding of postmodernism as essentially an ontological aesthetic, because “an ontology is a description of a universe, not of the universe; that is, it may describe any universe, potentially a plurality of universes. In other words, to ‘do’ ontology in this perspective is not necessarily to seek some grounding for our universe; it might just as appropriately involve describing other universes, including ‘possible’ or even ‘impossible’ universes” (27). Plurality is important for both McHale’s and Harvey’s understanding of postmodernism. Postmodernist fiction then describes, or as Sartre would say, names and discloses, the characteristics of multiple universes, and modes of being.

A description of a “plurality of universes” often includes the ways in which individuals create personal universes through language. Harvey discusses this phenomenon through his use of Jean Lyotard whose work also contrasts modern and postmodern conceptions of the world. Harvey suggests that Lyotard takes the modernist preoccupation with language and pushes it to extremes of dispersal. While ‘the social bond is linguistic,’ he argues, it ‘is not woven with a single thread’ but by an indeterminate number of ‘language games.’ Each of us lives ‘at the intersection of many of these’ and we do not necessarily establish ‘stable language combinations and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable.’ (46)

Each individual uses language differently depending on the social situation. The language I use to write this paper differs from the one I might use on the athletic field, which differs
from the one I might use among close friends. Each individual has a cache of such language situations, and a different "language game" is appropriate for each one, but even within each game, the rules are never explicitly developed or followed.

For Harvey the shift to postmodernism has several unwelcome consequences. In its reaction to modernity, postmodernity rejects the concept of progress. Harvey sees the consequence of such a rejection as an abandonment of "all sense of historical continuity and memory, while simultaneously developing an incredible ability to plunder history and absorb whatever it finds there as some aspect of the present" (54). According to Harvey, history for the postmodern observer has no reality, and cannot be seen as a meta-narrative. As a result, individuals can pick and choose what elements of history to present based on what seems appropriate for the present. Harvey's interpretation of the postmodern world is one in which the historian can only compile facts, and the cultural critic "can judge the spectacle only in terms of how spectacular it is" (56-7). Harvey concludes that while positive achievements have come from postmodernism, it is ultimately a negative movement.

The good that postmodernism has achieved, Harvey admits, is a constant awareness of the other. Harvey suggests, "That in its concern for difference, for the difficulties of communication, for the complexity and nuances of interests, cultures, places, and the like, it exercises a positive influence" (113). Unfortunately, this positive influence is limited; in his reading of the situation, the good of postmodernism is ultimately undone by itself. The otherness of postmodernism becomes too great. He argues that, "The superimposition of different worlds in many a postmodern novel, worlds between which an uncommunicative 'otherness' prevails in a space of coexistence, bears an uncanny relationship to the increasing ghettoization, disempowerment, and isolation of poverty and minority populations in the
inner cities of both Britain and the United States" (113-14). The very element Harvey sees as the one positive of postmodernism works against it and society, contributing to some of the more ghastly ills of contemporary life. He further suggests that postmodernism's focus on the ephemeral and fragmentary leads it to a "preference for aesthetics over ethics" (116) and ultimately to an apolitical stance.

Harvey's conclusions come directly from his interpretation of postmodernism, an interpretation that is not, obviously enough, universally shared. Postmodernism does not demand the deletion of history, nor does it relegate history to simply a collection of facts. It does, however, argue that even a simple collection of facts is interpretive. Harvey suggests that meta-narratives have been erased from existence. This is not the case. Meta-narratives are alive and well in a postmodern age. They are, however, seen as narrative, not as absolute truths, or ways of finding absolute truth. Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* presents a far more sympathetic look at the issue.

For Hutcheon, interpretations of history are an important component to a postmodern worldview, and everything (including history) must be examined in light of its context. Hutcheon's definition of postmodernism reflects this focus; she identifies the postmodern as "a problematizing force in our culture today: it raises questions about...the common-sensical and the 'natural.' But it never offers answers that are anything but provisional and contextually determined" (xi). Far from abandoning ethics in favor of a strictly aesthetic approach, this questioning force that refuses to provide anything more than momentary answers—answers dependent on context—can provide a fresh reevaluation of ethics.

Hutcheon continues her interpretation of postmodernism by addressing meta-narratives. She disagrees with writers who, like Harvey, attack postmodernism on the
grounds that it seeks to destroy our way of knowing the world. While she sees meta-
narratives as illusory, she doesn’t believe postmodernists deny their existence: “such systems
are indeed attractive, perhaps even necessary; but this does not make them any the less
illusory” (6). She goes on to point out that, “those who lament the ‘loss of meaning’ in the
world or in art are really mourning the fact that knowledge is no longer primarily narrative
knowledge” (6). While postmodernists deny the Enlightenment notion that knowledge is
acquired in a progressive fashion and that the more knowledge one acquires the closer one
will be to the truth, they do not deny that one is capable of acquiring knowledge. Harvey
complained that the loss of a belief in meta-narratives leads to a shallow understanding of the
world. Hutcheon disagrees and argues that understanding the world has become even more
complicated than modernists believed. It is more complicated because postmodernists refuse
to take comfort in illusory meta-narratives.

Postmodernists believe that we place knowledge in narrative form because to know
anything seems to require some type of narrative framework. In this light, postmodernism
needs to be careful to avoid becoming another meta-narrative. With this in mind,
postmodern thinkers begin to understand and describe the world by challenging the
perspectives of narrative. As Hutcheon points out, many thinkers including Baudrillard,
Foucault, and Lyotard, have addressed this concern and have determined that, “any
knowledge cannot escape complicity with some meta-narrative...What they add, however, is
that no narrative can be a natural ‘master’ narrative: there are no natural hierarchies; there are
only those we construct” (13). Individuals are responsible for constructing or assenting to
the framework through which they understand the world. Starting here allows one to see the
possibility of multiple frameworks, multiple ways of knowing and functioning in the world. It also allows one to recognize a flaw when one meta-narrative claims to hold universal truth.

Some have taken the postmodern idea of knowing through narrative and distorted it, claiming that in a postmodern view everything is fictionalized. This has happened through the presentation of postmodern history as something that did not exist, as something that is simply meaningless. Hutcheon rejects such a reading: “History is not made obsolete: it is, however, being rethought – as a human construct. And in arguing that history does not exist except as text, it does not stupidly and ‘gleefully’ deny that the past existed, but only that its accessibility to us now is entirely conditioned by textuality” (16). In other words, our knowledge of the past is available only as text. Such an approach does not ruin history, nor does it make history something that is no longer valid. Instead it focuses on the structure of knowledge before it examines the content.

Postmodernists question our assumptions about history, and other systems of knowledge. As Hutcheon argues, “Postmodernism questions centralized, totalized, hierarchized, closed systems: questions, but does not destroy...It acknowledges the human urge to make order, while pointing out that the orders we create are just that: human constructs, not natural or given entities” (41-2). No system exists prior to humanity’s construction of that system, and when postmodernists see systems functioning as if they were givens, as if they were a priori absolute truths, they are inclined to question them. It is not that such systems don’t have value; they certainly do. But the systems are by no means permanent and eternal.

In light of this understanding of postmodernism, Harvey’s claim that postmodern thinking is strictly aesthetic, with little to no regard for ethics, seems hollow. In fact, in
Hutcheon’s discussion of history, and the telling of history, ethics seem to be a primary concern. At the very least it is far more important than aesthetics. Hutcheon’s conception of postmodernism and its interpretation of history indicates that past events did exist. Our understanding of history, however, is textual and only textual. She argues that postmodernism, “reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in so doing, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge... And the implication is that there can be no single, essentialized, transcendent concept of ‘genuine historicity’” (89).

While modern writers and thinkers recognized a complexity in searching for and finding the truth, a postmodern view of the world implies that one can never get at an absolute truth; there is not transcendent reality. The writer in the modern age then seeks to find one meaning or truth, whereas the postmodern writer questions how we can know what we know.

The shift from searching for the truth to searching for truths is seen in what Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction. She defines this postmodern form of fiction as one that, refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refutes the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity. (93)

Historiographic metafiction blurs the lines between history and fiction. In doing so it asks the reader to focus on important postmodern questions. If what we know of our past is as much a human construct as the fictional stories we tell one another, then when we read history, we must ask why the historians made the choices that were made. Why is one history given favor and precedence over another? Why is American history taught as a
history of the rich and powerful instead of the poor and migrant? Postmodernism in this light becomes anything but apolitical. Further, this questioning impulse of postmodernism is not limited to larger national histories, but individual histories also are questioned. How one tells the story of his or her life becomes a matter of choice, not a "natural" or "given" truth.

The concern of postmodern ethics is directly addressed by Zygmunt Bauman. His work *Postmodern Ethics*, like many studies that explore postmodern issues, begins by setting up postmodern ethics in relation to its modern counterpart. Bauman identifies "the great issues of ethics" as "human rights, social justice, [and the] balance between peaceful cooperation and personal self-assertion, synchronization of individual conduct and collective welfare" (4). These issues are alive and well in a postmodern world; they are just looked at differently than they were through modern eyes. Bauman argues that during the modern era "men and women [were forced] into the condition of individuals, who found their lives fragmented, split into many loosely related aims and functions" (6). As a result of this fragmentation modern ethicists sought "an 'all-comprising' idea promoting a unitary vision of the world" (6). In order to establish this "all-comprising" idea, freedom needed to be limited. According to Bauman, "It was the tacit, but virtually exceptionless assumption of modern ethical thought and of the practice it recommended, that when free...individuals would need to be prevented from using their freedom to do wrong" (7). In other words, one could choose to be irrational, but the choice would be a poor or harmful one.

Again, like Harvey's distinction between the modern and the postmodern, Bauman's rests on the validity of universalizing. Modernists believed that after enough time and work one could eventually discover concrete universalizing rules for moral conduct. But as Bauman notes, "It is a disbelief in such a possibility that is postmodern" (10). Seeing
morality through postmodern eyes means rejecting any notion of universalizing tendencies. Bauman also suggests a handful of positive points that are unique to a postmodern perspective. Some of the more important ones for a study of Auster’s novels include human ambivalence and moral responsibility. Bauman states that understanding postmodern morality means understanding that “humans are morally ambivalent” (10). As a result, no one code can be created as a guarantee for good moral choices. The first step of a postmodern ethics is the ability to “learn how to live without such guarantees, and with the awareness that guarantees will never be offered—that a perfect society, as well as a perfect human being, is not a viable prospect, while attempts to prove the contrary result in more cruelty than humanity” (11).

Another major concern for Bauman is moral responsibility. He believes that a universal code of ethics cannot exist and that we must cease presenting our individual or societal ethics as universally moral and then coercing others into our “universals” (10-13). This belief, however, does not free one from moral responsibility. Bauman argues that the postmodern moral individual is for the “other.” “Being for the other,” according to Bauman, is “the first reality of the self...It precedes all engagement with the Other, be it through knowledge, evaluation, suffering or doing” (13). For Bauman the self and the moral self are the same thing. Consequently morality is as diverse and fragmented as are individuals.

The first concern for Bauman’s postmodern morality is human ambivalence. This ambivalence asserts itself, oddly enough, in our desire for a set of unbreakable ethical guidelines. We want “firm and trusty rules which may reassure us that once we followed them, we could be sure to be in the right” (Bauman 20). It soon becomes obvious, however, that even if these rules did exist, we would not be free from moral responsibility. As
Bauman notes, “After all, it is each one of us on his or her own who has to decide which of
the conflicting rules to obey and which to disregard. The choice is...between different sets
of rules and different authorities preaching them” (20). There are multiple sets of rules that
claim to be universal. Therefore to follow a set of rules implies a choice, and therefore the
individual choosing is still responsible. As a result, the postmodern era is a period of
“strongly felt moral ambiguity. These times offer us freedom of choice never before enjoyed,
but also cast us into a state of uncertainty never before so agonizing” and consequently “we
cannot help being suspicious about any claim to infallibility” (21). Not only does the
freedom of postmodernism come with uncertainty it also cautions individuals against people
who claim to have certain and unchanging answers.

Localized or situational systems of ethical conduct are not anymore helpful. They fall
prey to the same problems as their universal counterparts: “Both intend to expropriate the
individual from moral choice; or at least from exercising free choice in such areas of life as
are considered relevant to the ‘common weal’: in the case of conflict, they want the
individuals to opt for the action that promotes the common cause—over and above all other
considerations” (Bauman 46). While localized ethical codes do not seek to limit ethics to a
singular system, they do place a limit on the number of ethical systems. One’s local
community takes on the same properties as a universal system of ethics and as a result
individual freedom is limited, or has the appearance of being limited.

Bauman’s postmodern ethics is then focused on the freedom of the individual. Using
Emmanuel Levinas, Bauman draws a sharp distinction between “being with the other” and
“being for the other.” The former is a symmetrical system, one dependent on reciprocity.
The latter is an asymmetrical system, one that depends solely on the individual. Bauman explains his position in traditional terms:

Being a moral person means that I am my brother’s keeper. But this also means that I am my brother’s keeper whether or not my brother sees his own brotherly duties the same way I do; and that I am my brother’s keeper whatever other brothers, real or putative, do or may do. At least, I can be properly his keeper only if I act as if I was the only one obliged, or even likely, to act this way…It is this uniqueness (not ‘generalizability’!), and this non-reversibility, which puts me in the moral relationship. (51)

Being “my brother’s keeper” is the only way to “be for the other.” It requires each individual to freely choose the freedom and autonomy of others. “Being with others” creates morality only to the extent that my actions will be appreciated by others, and to the extent that they will do the same to me. Such a morality creates rules and regulations that connect individuals in a society, but also consequently limit the freedom and autonomy of others.

While much of postmodern ethics contains echoes of existentialism, in particular the sense of human ambiguity, Bauman—again using Levinas—takes care to distinguish his ethics from the ethics of existentialism. Bauman and Levinas suggest that “First philosophy is an ethics…Ethics comes before ontology…Moral relationship comes before being” (71).

If ontology is first, if it precedes everything, according to Bauman, all we can hope for from ethics is a “being with” structure. Bauman and Levinas believe this because, as they argue, “From the perspective of ontology, moral relationship can be only a later addition, an artifice, never fully legitimate, forever an alien and awkward body, forever questionable and cast in a position in which apology is constantly demanded and never really accepted: one cannot
derive the ‘ought’ from the ‘is’; one cannot argue values starting from facts" (71). This may be the case, but their assessment of ontology sounds far more postmodern than does their own “first philosophy.” It sounds, and Bauman suggests as much, that this “first philosophy” is a given, and if it is a given it has with it the taste of modernity, the taste of the universally applied.

Postmodernists will not deny that morality could have a transcendent universal nature, but what they insist upon is that the only way humans can have an understanding of such a nature is through the text we give it. In this sense, morality is still very much a human construct, and it certainly comes after being. Existentialism, while not designed to be an answer to the problem of postmodern ethics, can provide some insights. Jean Paul Sartre’s “Existentialism is a Humanism” addresses some of the difficulties individuals have in making decisions, and the anguish, abandonment, and despair that accompanies these choices. In this way Sartre’s ethics are similar to Bauman’s.

**Existentialism and Existential Ethics**

Sartre begins “Existentialism is a Humanism” by defining existential thought as the notion that each human exists prior to having an essence. The individual is not defined by how he or she measures up to some preexisting concept of human nature. Instead, one is defined by his or her actions. As Sartre argues, “Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself” (349). Sartre then claims that by choosing, the individual gives his or her choice meaning and value. While this situation may provide an initial sense of liberation, it is ultimately a situation that bestows a great amount of responsibility on the individual. In fact, the responsibility is for all humanity; as Sartre argues, “the first effect of existentialism is that
it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his 
existence squarely upon his own shoulders. And, when we say that man is responsible for 
himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is 
responsible for all men” (349-50). The action chosen has no value until it is chosen. Once 
this happens an action has value, and by giving it value the individual (who cannot do 
otherwise) argues that what is, ought to be. While Baumann and Levinas believe we cannot 
“derive the ought from the is,” Sartre shows that we can and must. The individual who 
shrinks from this responsibility lives in bad faith or self-deception; he or she lies to him or 
herself about existence. Being asked to make these decisions leads to the anguish, 
abandonment, and despair mentioned above.

Choices and the action based on those choices create anguish because of the 
enormous weight of choosing for humanity. Sartre states that, “When a man commits 
himself to anything, fully realizing that he is not only choosing what he will be, but is 
thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind...[he] cannot escape 
from the sense of complete and profound [sic] responsibility” (351). The source of such 
anguish rests in the difficult question one must ask him or herself, “So every man ought to 
say, ‘Am I really a man who has the right to act in such a manner that humanity regulates 
itsel by what I do’” (352). And yet, as Sartre maintains, if one is honest, one recognizes this 
plight as the condition for action.

Abandonment accompanies anguish, because once one comes to terms with the fact 
that he or she is responsible for humanity, he or she becomes upset that a universal system is 
not readily at hand to help. Sartre looks at the absence of a universal system as a 
condemnation, “Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in
consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself…one will never be able to explain one’s action by reference to a given and specific human nature…That is what I mean when I say man is condemned to be free” (353). This explanation for existential abandonment lines up well with the postmodern notion that universals do not exist and that there is no human nature, no absolute truth. The individual must choose and he or she must choose without help of any kind, because even if it is offered, the choice still rests with the individual. Consequently one feels anguish and abandonment.

With anguish and abandonment, existential choice also creates a sense of despair. Despite the enormous responsibility the individual does not have hope that his or her choice will last beyond the moment. The individual has no hope because, as Sartre states, “I cannot count upon men whom I do not know, I cannot base my confidence upon human goodness or upon man’s interest in the good of society, seeing that man is free and that there is no human nature which I can take as foundational” (357-8). In other words, each individual feels anguish and abandonment because of the responsibility of choosing, but he or she must also recognize that everyone is confronted with the same responsibility and others may very easily choose differently.

These “others” who create in the individual a sense of despair are also responsible and necessary for the individual to understand his or her own freedom. They are not the cause of such freedom, but they are crucial to an understanding of it. Sartre describes the confrontation of the self and the other as indispensable, “I cannot obtain any truth whatsoever about myself, except through the mediation of another. The other is indispensable to my existence, and equally so to any knowledge I can have of myself. Under these conditions, the
intimate discovery of myself is at the same time the revelation of the other as a freedom which confronts mine" (361). It is not only important for the individual to be confronted by another, but that the other is free to do so, therefore the other’s freedom is as important to the individual as the individual’s own.

It is in terms of freedom that Sartre suggests one can judge another. He sums up the existential condition, “Since we have defined the situation of man as one of free choice, without excuse and without help, any man who takes refuge behind the excuse of his passions, or by inventing some deterministic doctrine, is a self-deceiver” (365). Other translations refer to this self-deception as bad faith.

Joseph S. Catalano’s book, *Good Faith and Other Essays: Perspectives on a Sartrean Ethics*, defines ethical choices in terms of good and bad faith. For Catalano, abandonment reaches into an individual’s personal history. He compares life and the choices that come with it to an unfinished painting. A painting can seem to depict a serious situation until the protagonist is given a smirk, “In a similar way, for Sartre, although we have only one life to live and cannot change our past, our real freedom is that we are free to perform acts that give new meanings to our past and open new possibilities for our future” (79). Living and acting in existential good faith requires one to recognize abandonment and its connection to freedom. In this way one cannot defend his or her actions by arguing, “it’s in my nature to act in this way.” While one’s past actions define who one is, they do not determine one’s future actions; an individual is always free to act differently. The inability for an individual to rely upon his or her character heightens the sense of abandonment, but it also provides an almost infinite amount of hope for existential ethics.
In *Sartre’s Two Ethics*, Thomas C. Anderson’s presents a scenario and demonstrates an application of existential ethics. In the scenario an individual has consistently acted cowardly. He or she cannot honestly deny his or her cowardice, and at the same time he or she cannot say: “I am a coward.” To do so would suggest that individuals are fixed in their current and past situations and deny those individuals freedom to choose differently.

Appealing to his scenario, Anderson argues that such “I am” statements are made in bad faith, because “he is a coward (in terms of facticity) but is not a coward (in terms of freedom)” (15). One is in bad faith then when he or she either denies the impact and influence of previous choices, or when he or she denies the freedom to choose against past choices. Denying either the facticity or the freedom of existence is an act of bad faith, and so an application of existential ethics involves identifying those who choose to embrace self-deception.

Catalano would agree with Anderson’s understanding of bad faith, and develop it. Concepts of good and bad faith are not limited to absolute “I am” statements; they touch our daily choices. According to Catalano’s reading of Sartre, the way one makes choices will determine if one is in good or bad faith, and how one makes choices depends on how he or she appeals to the available evidence. Catalano argues that, “good faith always confronts the evidence first, or at least is willing to examine the evidence of its beliefs. The fact that there is no absolute norm does not prevent one in good faith from seeing that there can be a critical difference between having more or less evidence about belief” (139). Evidence for an existentialist, and for a postmodernist, cannot be perfect; it will never rise above the level of ambiguity. This, however, does not mean evidence should not be consulted or evaluated. To deny the place of evidence in a world without absolutes, arguing that anything is possible, is
to live in bad faith. As Catalano argues “Bad faith aims at stability of beliefs that evidence cannot provide. It is thus more a belief in belief itself rather than a belief arising from evidence” (140).

Simone de Beauvoir addresses the “anything goes” notion of existentialism in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. In it she quotes from *The Brothers Karamazov* to set the foundation for her discussion: “If God does not exist, everything is permitted” (15). Similar to Sartre’s argument in “Existentialism is a Humanism,” Beauvoir argues that the source of human values is in human actions. If one chooses the conditions and values under which he or she lives, it is logical to conclude that “everything is permitted.” Beauvoir agrees that this is a logical conclusion, but she will deny that such a conclusion leads to the end of ethics. Instead, “man is abandoned on the earth, because his acts are definitive, absolute engagements. He bears the responsibility for a world which is not the work of a strange power, but of himself, where his defeats are inscribed, and his victories as well” (16). It is because one is abandoned to create values for him or herself that an individual’s decisions are charged with ethical concerns. There is no one else to appeal to, no guide to turn to so as to avoid making the difficult decisions.

Beauvoir continues her argument by stating that “it is not impersonal universal man who is the source of values, but the plurality of concrete, particular men projecting themselves toward their ends on the basis of situations whose particularity is as radical and as irreducible as subjectivity itself” (17-18). All humans choose and the results of these choices are what we call values. Beauvoir comes back to a similar point at the end of her work. She notes that “no behavior is ever authorized to begin with, and one of the concrete consequences of existentialist ethics is the rejection of all the previous justifications which
might be drawn from the civilization, the age, and the culture; it is the rejection of every principle of authority" (142). At its heart this is a postmodern belief. A combination of existential and postmodern ethics leads to the rejection or dismissal of any authority that aims to be universal.

Conclusion

The criticism of existential ethics is that it does not provide a practical scale for doing good and avoiding evil. Beauvoir addresses these concerns: “It will be said that these considerations remain quite abstract. What must be done, practically? Which action is good? Which is bad?...Ethics does not furnish recipes any more than do science and art. One can merely propose methods” (134). It would be disingenuous for existentialists to offer an ethics that favors certain actions over others. Instead they propose methods, and it may be for this reason that they feel more comfortable showing how those methods work in situations.

For the study of Auster’s fiction, the bridge between postmodernists and existentialists can be constructed out of their shared concern with fragmentation. Postmodernists insist upon this fragmentation, and like McHale, Auster is willing to embrace it to such an extent that he can freely believe in multiple universes. This belief in fragmentation is further codified (at least to the extent that anything in pieces can be codified) by Hutcheon’s insistence upon the textualization of knowledge. This insistence continues to point to an underlying uncertainty to life.

Bauman accepts this uncertainty and argues that as a result no one code of ethics can guarantee good moral conduct. For Bauman, the role of postmodern ethics is to help people
“learn how to live without such guarantees” (11). Bauman’s way to live without guarantees is to “be for the other,” a proposal that relies on the freedom of both the self and the other. Such a freedom allows for a multiplicity of views and possibly a multiplicity of realities.

While Bauman tries to distance himself from existentialism, there is certainly a connection between his postmodern ethics and existential ones. At the heart of Sartrean ethics is individual choice. Choices are made independently and consequently bring about a feeling of abandonment. In line with postmodern ethicists, Sartrean existentialists recognize the impossibility of a universal moral code. This recognition causes the sense of abandonment, and with abandonment feelings of anguish and despair. For Sartre, and other existential ethicists, seeing the condition of humanity as alone and condemned to freedom, and acting with this knowledge is a sign of good faith. To deny either one’s freedom to choose or the significance of choosing is to act in bad faith.

Wayne Booth argues that narratives providing ethical advice offer “a distinctive, engaging way of being together” (216). In *Moon Palace* and *Leviathan*, Auster’s “distinctive, engaging way” embraces the postmodern condition and sees in existentialism a method for acting in such a world. As it is for Bauman and Sartre, freedom is essential to Auster. When his characters act in good faith they accept personal freedom, the freedom of others, and the ramifications of freedom. When his characters act poorly, or in bad faith, they find some way to deny these elements of freedom.

In my second chapter I will address *Moon Palace* and focus my attention on M. S. Fogg. By and large, Fogg fails to achieve the blending of postmodern and existential ethics. But by demonstrating Fogg’s failure, Auster shows the reader how not to act in a postmodern world. At times when Fogg is at his most lucid, he sees the postmodern condition and tries to
embrace it. Auster, however, won’t fully experiment with a character of good faith until *Leviathan*.

I will cover *Leviathan* in my third and final chapter. In it I will split my focus between the novel’s two protagonists, Ben Sachs and Peter Aaron. In Sachs, Auster is again experimenting with a character of bad faith. Sachs routinely deceives himself, and he does so by attempting to impose universal laws on the world. Aaron, on the other hand, is Auster’s first attempt to draw a character of good faith. While Aaron stumbles at times, ultimately he accepts both the fragmentation of postmodernity and the freedom of existentialism.
CHAPTER 2: MOON PALACE AND FOGG’S FAILURE

Before beginning my examination of *Moon Palace*, I will summarize some critical approaches to Auster’s fiction. In many discussions of Auster’s work, critics point to his postmodern tendencies as something obvious, almost a given. They find throughout his work concerns with the uncertainty in epistemological and ontological foundations, a strong presence of intertextuality, and an unmistakable blurring of the imaginary line that separates “reality” from “fiction.” One example of this approach to Auster’s works is Aliki Varvogli’s *The World that is the Book: Paul Auster’s Fiction*, a study of Auster’s novels through *Leviathan*. In a discussion of *The New York Trilogy*, Varvogli argues that Auster “crosses ontological boundaries by creating a character named Paul Auster in *City of Glass*, and by an authorial intrusion in *The Locked Room*” (4). He also suggests that within the collection of detective novellas is an astonishing amount of explicit references to other literature including, but not limited to, Hawthorne’s short stories, Thoreau’s *Walden*, *Don Quixote*, Borges, Kafka, and Beckett (5).

Varvogli sees ontological indeterminacy and intertextuality as the most remarkable elements of Auster’s fiction. Working from interviews and memoirs, Varvogli notes that Auster sees Quinn, the protagonist of *City of Glass*, as an exercise in authorial imagination. Auster imagines what his life would have been like had he never met his second wife, and the result is Quinn. Varvogli also notes that Auster knew a man who distributed fifteen thousand dollars in fifty-dollar increments to strangers (*Moon Palace*) and another who accidentally killed himself when a bomb he was making detonated in his hands (*Leviathan*). In addition to Auster’s personal imaginings and friendships, “The practice of constantly blurring the line that ought to separate fact from fiction is nowhere more pronounced than in those novels in
which Auster deals with history and politics, and tackles some of his country’s most cherished myths” (Varvogli 8). In this way Varvogli’s sense of Auster’s postmodernism aligns it with Hutcheon’s historiographic metafiction.

Dennis Barone is fully aware of the mingling of history and fiction in Auster’s work. In his introduction to Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster, Barone argues that, “Auster’s work always contains aspects of the author’s own life, references to other literature, and descriptions of actual historical figures and events. This is historiographic metafiction as Linda Hutcheon defines it” (5). According to Barone, however, Auster uses metafictional devices differently than his postmodern predecessors and peers; he does not “frustrate or disrupt the reading process” (7). Consequently, Barone sees Auster as popular and postmodern. Auster’s accessibility, according to Barone, rests in his ability to address postmodern ideas in ways distinct from other contemporary writers through his presentation of “the signifier and signified” (7). Barone believes Auster attempts to “return thing and thing named to a state of tenuous stability. This approach to reference is part of [Auster’s] synthesis of postmodern themes and premodern moral questions” (7).

Auster is clearly a postmodernist, and to suggest that he seeks a reconciliation of signifier and referent is to deny a major element of his fiction. A misunderstanding of some of the more widely explored ideas of postmodernism is only one of the problems with Barone’s analysis. Auster can’t seek a “tenuous stability” between “the signifier and signified” and be a postmodernist, at least using the definition of postmodernism developed in the first chapter of my essay. The former is a modern goal akin to the argument that although the world is incredibly complex, with enough study one will be able to understand it at a fundamental level. Secondly, Barone’s argument suggests that, “moral questions” are
somehow unconnected to “postmodern themes.” For Auster, questions of morality walk hand-in-hand with many of the themes of postmodernism.

In *An Art of Desire: Reading Paul Auster*, Bernd Herzogenrath reading differs from Barone’s in his understanding of signifier and signified. For Herzogenrath, Auster never attempts to reconcile “thing and thing named.” He defines postmodern fiction as works that explore “the dichotomy of ‘reality’ and ‘fiction,’ focusing on questions of intertextuality, the narratological structure of a text, strategies of representation, epistemological and ontological consequences of the questioning of hitherto ‘fundamental certainties,’ such as the possibility of representation, the author as origin of the text, consciousness as origin of the subject” (3). Herzogenrath suggests that operating under this definition the “First Generation” of American postmodernists (he uses Barth, Barthelme, and Sukenick as his sample class for this generation) experimented with and at times cast aside “traditional” elements of storytelling “such as plot, character, [and] the linear/logical structure of ‘beginning-middle-end’” (3). He then looks as Auster as an American postmodernist and claims that although he may “revert” back to some more traditional storytelling tropes, his “realism” never suggests a clear or notion of referentiality, a system in which language has “mimetic” relation with reality (3). In other words, Auster’s postmodernism still contains the blurring of “reality” and “fiction,” intertextuality, and a questioning of “fundamental certainties”; his fiction, however, accomplishes these themes through plot and character driven stories, in what Barone might call premodern narratives.

Aside from a few exceptions, the way Auster critics discuss the postmodernism in his novels is consistent with the definition of postmodernism outlined in my first chapter. *Moon Palace* fits within this postmodern outlook. It suggests, as Harvey notes that no view of the
world can be absolute and universally true. The novel also foregrounds, as McHale suggests, the notion of multiple realities and how one can function within “a plurality of universes” (27). And like Lyotard, the novel suggests that the way most of these universes are experienced in *Moon Palace* is through “an indeterminate number of language games” (46). In addition to these postmodern elements, *Moon Palace*, like many of Auster’s critics have pointed out, is an example of historiographic metafiction in that it actively seeks to point to the illusions, and at times overwhelming illusions, of meta-narratives. This chapter will address these elements of postmodernism in turn. I will start by addressing M. S. Fogg’s recognition of postmodernism and the Jamesonian schizophrenia that results. Then I will turn to *Moon Palace*’s historiographic metafiction, and conclude the chapter with an exploration of Fogg’s choices, in light of existential ethics.

**Fogg’s Hunger and Schizophrenia**

The opening of the novel confronts the theme of fragmentation. The first part of *Moon Palace* is dominated by Fogg’s attempts to cope with the death of his uncle Victor. Fogg, functioning as the story’s narrator, alerts the reader to this death by suggesting that the news causes a profound change in his life and, as a result, he “began to vanish into another world” (3). Throughout the course of the novel, Auster will present multiple worlds through his narrator. The personal histories of Fogg, his grandfather Effing, and his father Barber, and the various means of presenting them are just a few of the worlds. They are also combined with the various ways Fogg restructures his own past.

Operating in multiple realities is familiar to Fogg and has been since his time growing up under the care of his uncle Victor. On a small scale, Victor himself is Fogg’s model for
operating in "a plurality of universes." While a talented musician, Victor never became successful because he saw many worlds outside the music realm, "So many things, in fact, that he was often overwhelmed by them. Being the sort of person who always dreams of doing something else while occupied, he could not sit down to practice a piece without pausing to work out a chess problem in his head, could not play chess without thinking about the failures to the Chicago Cubs" (5). Baseball leads him to Shakespeare and Shakespeare leads him back to his clarinet. These distinct realms may not be considered separate universes, but Victor operated in many fantasy worlds as well. To offset the harsh world they lived in, Victor and a young Fogg would create universes. Fogg narrating in retrospect sees this game as a means of coping with loss: "we had developed a game of inventing countries together, imaginary worlds that overturned the laws of nature. Some of the better ones took weeks to perfect, the maps I drew of them hung in a place of honor above the kitchen table. The land of Sporadic Light, for example, and the Kingdom of One-Eyed Men" (6).

From an early age Fogg is asked to see the world as a fragmented place, one in which other worlds are possible, if only in the imagination. With this fragmentation and multiplicity comes the notion that objects, words, and events can have various and at times contradictory meanings. To a certain extent the adolescent and collegiate Fogg recognizes this, but he is also quick to assign absolute meaning. When he moves into his apartment, after his freshman year at Columbia, he realizes that if he stands in the right place he is able to see a sliver of Broadway. What he sees in this sliver is a neon sign for Moon Palace, a Chinese restaurant. He knows that the sign is an advertisement for the restaurant, "but the force with which those words assaulted [him] drowned out every practical reference and
association. They were magic letters, and they hung there in the darkness like a message from the sky itself” (17). The sign creates an association with his uncle Victor’s band, the Moon Men, and at the time Fogg concludes, “that this small apartment was indeed where [he] was meant to live” (17). A decidedly un-postmodern idea, Fogg will occasionally force the concept of fate into the narrative to comfort himself, to help him believe in a meaningful universe. The scene described above is only a minor example of such self-deception, or bad faith. Fogg has moved into an apartment of his own for the first time in his life. He is understandably apprehensive and a bit frightened. As a result, he searches for solace in a belief in fate. By painting such a picture, Auster shows how the concepts like fate, and other beliefs in a natural order, are human constructs. Auster doesn’t condemn Fogg for embracing fate, instead he rationalizes Fogg’s actions, but he does show it as an act of bad faith.

Shortly after moving into his apartment, Fogg learns of Victor’s death. This death brings about Fogg’s self-imposed starvation and more blind grasps for absolute meaning. As the narrator, Fogg tells the reader that he began to vanish into another world. At the time of his vanishing, Fogg believed his access to this different world gave him special insight into the fundamental nature of reality. Such an understanding starts with a free association that resembles his uncle’s, but without any of his uncle’s control. Fogg describes the mental acrobatics accomplished after his vanishing:

The words *Moon Palace* began to haunt my mind with all the mystery and fascination of an oracle. Everything was mixed up in it at once: Uncle Victor and China, rocket ships and music, Marco Polo and the American West. I would look out at the sign and start to think about electricity. That would lead me to the blackout during my freshman year, which in turn would lead me to the baseball games played at Wrigley
Field, which would then lead me back to Uncle Victor and the memorial candles burning on my windowsill. One thought kept giving way to another, spiraling into ever larger masses of connectedness. The idea of voyaging into the unknown, for example, and the parallels between Columbus and the astronauts. The discovery of America as a failure to reach China; Chinese food and my empty stomach; thought, as in food for thought, and the head as a palace of dreams. I would think: the Apollo Project; Apollo, the god of music; Uncle Victor and the Moon Men traveling out West. I would think: the West; the war against the Indians; the war in Vietnam, once called Indochina. I would think: weapons, bombs, explosion; nuclear clouds in the desert of Utah and Nevada; and then I would ask myself—why does the American West look so much like the landscape of the moon? It went on and on like that and the more I opened myself to these secret correspondences, the closer I felt to understanding some fundamental truth about the world. (32-3)

The narrating Fogg frames this impressive association with indications of insanity. Prior to telling the reader what was going through his mind, he suggests that he may have been “delirious with hunger” (32). After describing the attainment of fundamental truth he admits, “I was going mad, perhaps” (33). The narrator then tells us that such “clarity” only lasted for a few days; afterwards he woke to find himself “back in the world of fragments” (33).

Fredric Jameson’s description of postmodern schizophrenia may help us understand Fogg’s mental state.

In *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson argues for a non-clinical understanding of schizophrenia, by appealing to Jacques Lacan: “Lacan describes schizophrenia as a breakdown in the signifying chain, that is, the interlocking
syntagmatic series of signifiers which constitutes an utterance of a meaning” (26). Jameson goes on to further detail Lacan’s understanding of language and meaning:

His conception of the signifying chain essentially presupposes...the proposition that meaning is not a one-to-one relationship between signifier and signified...Meaning on the new view is generated by the movement from signifier to signifier. What we generally call the signified...is now rather to be seen as a meaning-effect, as that objective mirage of signification generated and projected by the relationship of signifiers among themselves. When that relationship breaks down, when the links of the signifying chain snap then we have schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers. (26)

In other words, within a postmodern context meaning can only be hinted at, and such hints only come from gleaning an understanding from signifiers playing off of each other.

Schizophrenia is the consequence of no longer being able to obtain the “meaning-effect.” Instead, one can only see “a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers.” Fogg’s hunger induced delirium is an excellent example of this type of schizophrenia.

The signifying chain has fallen apart for Fogg, and consequently he moves illogically from one unrelated signifier to another. What is frightening about Fogg’s schizophrenia is the way he understands it. As Jameson tells us, there is a tendency in postmodern culture to read a schizophrenic reaction like Fogg’s with “joyous intensities,” because it can displace “the older affects of anxiety and alienation” (29). The most one can hope for in a postmodern world is an uncertain glimpse of meaning, one found by playing with signifiers. This is an unwelcome state, and when Fogg is schizophrenic he feels close to “understanding
some fundamental truth about the world." When he leaves this state he sees only fragmentation, he returns to anxiety and alienation.

When Fogg, both as narrator and character, is thinking clearly, he sees in the world nothing but uncertainty. After a meal courtesy of Kitty Wu and friends, the young Fogg concludes that he must plan for his future, but he “had lost the ability to think ahead, and no matter how hard [he] tried to imagine the future, [he] could not see it, [he] could not see anything at all...The moments unfurled one after the other, and at each moment the future stood before [him] as a blank, a white page of uncertainty” (41). It is during moments like these that Auster’s characters most accurately reflect the philosophic vision in his novels. If the future is a white page, Fogg has the opportunity to write on it whatever he chooses, but this freedom plagues him because of the uncertainty of an unfinished page.

Auster’s character’s, however, rarely maintain this vision, instead they choose to flee into a world with inherent meaning. On Fogg’s first day as a homeless man, he finds a ten-dollar bill on the sidewalk. The narrating Fogg describes the scene and the significance he attributed to it at the time: “My mind was already in a tumult, and rather than simply call it a stroke of good luck, I persuaded myself that something profoundly important had just happened: a religious event, an out-and-out miracle...Everything was going to work out...everything was going to come out right in the end” (51). Again, Fogg takes a chance event and assigns it meaning that it does not inherently have. Moreover, while he assigns a natural meaning to events, he simultaneously admits to having a clouded perception of the world; he claims his mind was in “a tumult.” While not quite schizophrenic, Fogg is acting poorly by consciously deciding to deny his postmodern condition.
In “Chance in Contemporary Narrative: The Example of Paul Auster,” Steven E. Alford suggests that Auster’s characters assign meaning to chance events because they do not want to admit the unpredictability of the universe. They do not want to admit this because to do so would admit a frightening world. Alford argues that, for Auster, “the very act of attempting to understand the world and ourselves is itself a fictional construct, one born of our timorous epistemological cowardice. The world and the lives we live in are literally ‘meaningless’; meaningfulness, the act of signification, is for Auster a supplementary act on our part...to keep away the frightening beast of chance” (61). In spite of the meaninglessness that is professed in Auster’s works, Alford sees indications that coincidences are signs to unlocking the mystery of the universe. Looking at the scene of delusion brought about by hunger, Alford suggests that “Although [Fogg] later loses this sense of mystic insight, the feeling remains that correspondences—coincidences, chance connections among disparate elements of the world—are an entry point to revealing the world ordinarly shielded from us by our intrusive consciousness” (68). Alford then concludes from this reading that, “Both Fogg and Auster claim that coincidence, properly understood, gives one an insight into the nature of the world” (68).

Auster seems, then, to put forth two arguments, one claiming that the world is meaningless and unknowable, the other suggests that with enough understanding of coincidence one can unlock the mysteries of the universe. Alford reconciles these two views by suggesting that they operate under differing notions of time. For Alford, “Auster’s random world is that of a life (or text) lived forward; it’s one damn thing after another, with no seeming meaning. Meaning arises owing to an act of signification that ascribes acts as meaningful insofar as they are part of a causal chain linked to an event deemed significant”
In other words, for Auster, life lived in the present is bound to be meaningless because of the uncertainty of living. When we tell the story of our lives we can ferret out what has become significant and look at chance events as meaningful forerunners to moments of significance. Problems arise for Auster's characters when they begin to see the events of the world having significance beyond the significance assigned to them by individuals telling stories.

Fogg makes such a mistake with his self-imposed starvation. His goal was to find a meaning to the universe, outside of his own personal understanding of it. He was looking for universal and absolute truth, and was necessarily going to fail. He describes his intentions to an army psychiatrist, "I thought that by abandoning myself to the chaos of the world, the world might ultimately reveal some secret harmony to me, some form or pattern that would help me to penetrate myself...I failed miserably...I nevertheless believe that I'm a better person for it" (80). This is one of the first indications that Fogg has taken on a modernist view of a postmodern world. He believes that if he can get close enough he can grasp some universal truth.

The world Auster has created for Fogg to live in presents him with evidence to suggest that no matter how much knowledge he acquires, or how many insights he has access to, the world will still be constantly changing. When Fogg begins his work for Effing he is initially puzzled by the way Effing presents himself. On one day he would be "wearing a pair of dark blind-man's glasses" on another, a black patch covering each eye. On yet another day he was wearing "normal prescription glasses." The result is disorienting for Fogg, "It was hard for me to tell if those eyes could see or not. There were moments when I was convinced that it was all a bluff and that he could see as sharply as I did; at other
moments I became just as convinced that he was totally blind” (109 emphasis added). The evidence presented can lead equally to two contradictory readings. Fogg sees this for himself, “It was as though I was trying to discover some truth in [Effing’s eyes], some opening that would lead me directly into the darkness of his skull. I never got anywhere with it, however. For all the hundreds of hours I spent gazing into them, Effing’s eyes never told me a thing” (110). And for all his attempts neither will the universe.

Ultimately Fogg is asked to assume that Effing is blind. One of his duties as Effing’s body man is to describe New York to Effing during their walks. Fogg assumes that this task will be simple, but Effing’s bombardment of insults convinces him otherwise. Fogg finds it difficult to connect the signifier with the signified, because of “the mutability of those things, the way they changed according to the force and angle of the light, the way their aspect could be altered by what was happening around them: a person walking by, a sudden gust of wind, an odd reflection” (122). The objects and people of the world are constantly changing, not only because of their interaction with each other, but also because of their existence in time. In the latter sense, “the same brick was never really the same. It was wearing out, imperceptibly crumbling under the effects of the atmosphere, the cold, the heat, the storms that attacked it, and eventually if one could watch it over the centuries, it would no longer be there” (122). Moreover, even if one had the ability to freeze time and stop change, the world is finally only understandable through language. Consequently Fogg’s world is going to differ from Effing’s because the way they describe the world will differ. When Fogg is successful he understands this point: “I discovered that the more air I left around a thing, the happier the results, for that allowed Effing to do the crucial work on his own: to construct an image on the basis of a few hints, to feel his own mind traveling toward the thing I was
describing for him” (123). To use Jameson’s words, Fogg allows Effing to move from “signifier to signifier” and create his own “meaning-effect.” By doing this, Fogg embraces his postmodern condition and acts in good faith. His time as Effing’s body man is as close as he ever gets to representing Auster’s postmodern and existential ethic.

Moon Palace as Historiographic Metafiction

The subjectivity involved in connecting the world and the language used to describe the world is a major element of Auster’s fiction, according to Aliki Varvogli. Fogg’s description of the world moves beyond describing objects to describing events. Varvogli notes that “In Auster’s fiction, the emphasis is always on subjectivity which stems from the loss of faith in grand, totalizing narratives...By rejecting notions of authenticity, or unadulterated reality, the author is seen to question not only the status of the past he inherits, but also his own contribution, his own interaction with the world around him” (117). For Auster everything falls into the territory of language, so just as objects change based on the descriptions of those objects, so does the past change based on how we discuss the past. In this way, Auster’s novels and particularly Moon Palace and Leviathan can be read as historiographic metafiction.

Hutcheon sees the role of historiographic metafiction as one that challenges the notion of a clearly defined line between history and fiction. In this way historiographic metafiction asks readers to see the narrative qualities in ideas that have traditionally been regarded as absolute truths. Moon Palace, as historiographic metafiction, tackles the American myth of Manifest Destiny. The major historical elements incorporated into the novel are that of the 1969 moon landing and the settlement of the American West. The idea
of new frontiers and settling those frontiers is addressed early in the novel. The first sentence sets the story during “the summer that men first walked on the moon” (1). Additionally, when Fogg goes off to school, Victor gives him 1,492 books, his entire collection. It is a number Victor gives significance to and tells Fogg that 1,492 is “A propitious number...since it evokes the memory of Columbus’s discovery of America, and the college you’re going to was named after Columbus” (13). Historiographic metafiction places the fiction in a historical setting, and it questions the telling of that history. Auster does both.

Auster not only places *Moon Palace* within a specific time, he calls into question our assumptions about that time. On the day he sells the last of his 1,492 books, Fogg takes the money and stops by a bar for a few beers. It is at this bar that he watches the moon landing. After the broadcast of the landing, “the president spoke. In a solemn, deadpan voice, he declared this to be the greatest event since the creation of man...But for all the absurdity of that remark, there was one thing no one could challenge: since the day he was expelled from Paradise, Adam had never been this far from home” (31). While the concept of Manifest Destiny is not explicitly addressed, its spirit is present. Ilana Shiloh’s study *Paul Auster and the Postmodern Quest* argues for “the symbolic significance of the space program in American history and ideology. The conquest of the moon was imprinted on the collective consciousness as the 20th century version of the conquest of the West, the final stage in the fulfillment of Manifest Destiny” (130). By connecting the moon landing to creation Fogg suggests that the president views the history of humanity as a history of progress: out of the garden, across the Atlantic, through the American West and finally into space. The patrons at the bar with Fogg laughed at the idea, and Fogg himself reads the event differently than the
president. He doesn’t see it as a progression to something great, but as a movement away from home.

Fogg also consciously blurs fact and fiction in his lecture on the history of moon landings. He delivers his performance to Kitty Wu’s friends on the day she took pity on him and allowed him to join them in their breakfast. Midway through his talk someone tries to correct him and tell him that Cyrano de Bergerac was not a real man, but a creation of a playwright. Fogg corrects this person with a biography of Cyrano and he finishes with, “This was no figment, my friends. He was a creature of flesh and blood, a real man who lived in the real world, and in 1649 he wrote a book about his trip to the moon. Since it’s a firsthand account, I don’t see why anyone should doubt what he says” (38). This argument is interesting on a few levels. First, Fogg as the narrator of Moon Palace is providing a first hand account, so in some ways it is a plea for belief. Secondly, the story Cyrano gives via Fogg suggests that the Garden of Eden is on the moon, directly contradicting Fogg’s own insight into the Apollo moon landing. If we are to believe firsthand accounts as truth we must believe simultaneously that the moon is both the Garden of Eden and the farthest man has been from Paradise.

Interestingly enough both accounts of the moon landing can be tied to the American West; the former through manifest destiny and the latter through Cyrano’s claim that his successful voyage to the moon was the result of a launching that took place “among a tribe of naked Indians in New France” (39). Moon Palace directly addresses the myth of the American West through the influence and stories of Effing. As Effing begins to tell Fogg the story of his life, he realizes that Fogg has never seen a Robert Blakelock painting, so he sends Fogg to the Brooklyn Museum to see Blakelock’s Moonlight. Fogg sees in the
painting "an American idyll, the world the Indians had inhabited before the white men came
to destroy it...I thought to myself, this picture was meant to stand for everything we had lost.
It was not a landscape, it was a memorial, a death song for a vanished world" (139). Fogg
sees this picture of the west as an idyll. It is not the actual world Native Americans inhabited
prior to the Euro-American "settlement" of the land, but an idealized vision of what that
scene might have been like, particularly to an American conscience that might feel guilty for
Manifest Destiny. Auster, here, addresses the myth of a vanishing world. Such a world
could not have vanished since the idealized version of it, because of its idealized nature,
could never have existed.

Effing's journey out West is no less an American myth than the Blakelock painting.
Its culmination with a Wild West shootout is only one example of its mythic elements. After
presenting Effing's story Fogg addresses the "truth" of it:

After a while, I stopped wondering whether he was telling me the truth or not. His
narrative had taken on a phantasmagoric quality by then, and there were times when
he did not seem to be remembering the outward facts of his life so much as inventing
a parable to explain its inner meanings...It did not seem possible that anyone could
have made it up, and Effing told it so well, with such palpable sincerity, that I simply
let myself go along with it, refusing to question whether these things had happened or
not. (183)

Fogg may have been able to simply go along with it, but he doesn't let the reader of his
narrative do the same. By bringing up the truthfulness of Effing's testimony, even if he has
accepted it to be true, Fogg forces the reader to suspect its validity. Historiographic
metafiction requires the reader to question "centralized, totalized, hierarchized, closed
systems” but at the same time recognizing “the human urge to make order, while pointing out that the orders we create are just that: human constructs, not natural or given entities” (Hutcheon 41-43). If this is the case, then certainly Moon Palace and Fogg’s rendering of Effing’s story can be considered postmodern historiographic metafiction.

Shiloh suggests that fundamentally, at both personal and historical levels, Moon Palace is a novel about guilt. She argues that, “Effing’s reaction to the death of his friend’s young son echoes Fogg’s reaction to the death of his uncle. Both experience a terrifying void; both attempt to ‘vanish into another world,’ Fogg seeks to literally vanish...Effing decides to change his life and his identity” (125). Effing’s story is the most obvious embodiment of this guilt. Shiloh suggests that the guilt drives Effing, like Sachs in Leviathan, to seek a “cruel and inexorable form of justice” (125). This is exactly what Effing believes he receives after his accident and the loss of his legs.

The guilt Effing harbors reflects a larger American guilt; Shiloh notes that, “By going west, the heroes of Moon Palace re-enact in their individual histories the history of the nation, tacitly accepting the mythical value of the West in the American tradition. But their experiences run counter to their expectations, shedding a different light on the ideology that helped shape their dreams” (130). The ideology that is reshaped is that of the American West as a virgin land waiting for a second Adam. Shiloh claims that while this is not news to such scholars as “Henry Nashe Smith, Kolodny, Jehlen and Baym,” it is to Effing. While he does encounter “The vast expanses of wilderness” he must also recognize that “the consequences of his journey undermine the promise of freedom and self-fulfillment associated with the West. He loses the young man entrusted to his care and kills the outlaws who attack him in the cave. His experiences in the Utah desert brand him with guilt and
mark the beginning of his downfall” (130). In this way both the reader and Effing see the “sin and the guilt bred on his journey west as the reflection of America’s sin and guilt” (131). The story that Effing tells himself and the one he has heard from those who encouraged him to go west, was the meta-narrative of the American West: a journey west was a journey to an empty paradise. What Effing finds is paradise, but also sin, one that leads him to murder.

Carsten Springer’s reading of Effing’s westward journey, in Crises: The Works of Paul Auster, echoes Shiloh’s. He suggests that it “can be read as an allegory on the settlement of the American West and the pushing back of the frontier” (143). Effing, Springer argues, is like America; he feels an irresistible urge to move west and once there sees it as an opportunity to renew, and possibly to reinvent himself. Springer then discusses the points of connection between Effing and a Wild West hero. He sees that, “The elements of the rags-to-riches tale are as present as standard ingredients of the Western genre such as the struggle of man against untamed nature and a shoot-out. Effing’s narrative therefore appears like an imitation, an intertextual game which renders any claim for factual ‘truth’ obsolete” (143-4). Springer believes that Effing’s narrative is consciously intertextual and as a result of this consciousness he is able to exert some control. He further concludes, “As the artistic creator of his own identity in a story, which even finds its addressee in Fogg, Effing becomes Auster’s first character to unify himself by means of his own ‘metanarrative.’ Effing ignores the postmodern conditions of life” (144). Springer accurately demonstrates Effing’s control over metanarratives. His interpretation of this control, however, is flawed. While Effing may ignore his postmodern condition—he often denies the possibility of coincidence—this does not mean that he isn’t influenced by it. The notion that Effing is the first to try and ignore the fragmentation of postmodernism by creating a unifying
metanarrative seems off the mark. In fact, creating one’s own metanarrative seems to be a recurring theme in Auster’s fiction. One could even argue that *Moon Palace* is metanarrative designed by Fogg to give meaning to his life. By doing so, according to Springer, Fogg “ignores the postmodern conditions of life.” He does, but it doesn’t accomplish anything. It only places him in a position to act in bad faith.

**Fogg’s Existential Errors**

Varvogli also addresses the historicism in *Moon Palace*. He claims that “*Moon Palace* is saturated with references to historical events” (124), in an effort to establish chronology. The moon is then seen, as has been previously suggested, as the last frontier. Varvogli goes on to argue that for Auster, no frontier can bring ultimate knowledge, “Although *Moon Palace* is a quest narrative, there is not a fundamental truth waiting to be discovered by the narrator/protagonist” (126). Finding a fundamental truth would deny the historiographic metafictional, and for that matter, postmodern root Auster is careful to cultivate. Moreover, finding a fundamental truth would suggest that a clear system of ethical guidelines can be established. Varvogli argues that fundamental truth cannot be found in *Moon Palace*, and then he quickly contradicts himself. Later in his study he claims that, “Having filled in the blanks of his family history, [Fogg] now takes full control of his own life, and embarks on his final journey of discovery across the desert. It is here that he will finally reach adulthood and make peace with himself” (128). While Fogg has certainly filled in the blanks of his history, it is difficult to say that he is now in control of his life in a way that he wasn’t at the beginning of the novel. In addition, the idea that he reaches a benchmark like adulthood to achieve some inner peace, suggests a permanence that runs counter to the fragmentation of
postmodernism, and the abandonment of existentialism. Varvogli, however, is consistent in his assessment of a fully developed Fogg. He argues that, "The fundamental truth that Fogg seeks is not a universal truth, the truth of historical fact. The only accessible truth, which is the truth of art, is to be arrived at by finding one’s own place in the world and its events" (131). Auster is certainly concerned about the importance of finding one’s place in the world. But to suggest that finding one’s place is a fundamental truth, although not universal (a case of hair splitting) is to suggest that one’s place is permanent. This is an idea that doesn’t fit with the rest of Moon Palace.

Fogg has not found his place in the world, but he tries to convince himself otherwise. While Moon Palace does not fully develop Auster’s ethical existentialism, it does present a character who consistently lies to himself, and in this way, acts poorly, or in bad faith. As a young man Fogg is presented with existential ideas by his uncle. When they first move in together Victor gives an elaborate meaning to his nephew’s full name. Marco Stanley Fogg is the name that alludes to three explorers, both historical and fictional. Later, however, Fogg decides to provide his own definition. As the narrator describes it, “When I was fifteen, I began signing all my papers M. S. Fogg, pretentiously echoing the gods of modern literature, but at the same time delighting in the fact that the initials stood for manuscript” (7). Victor likes the idea and provides Fogg with an understanding that will last a lifetime, “Uncle Victor heartily approved of this about-face. ‘Every man is the author of his own life,’ he said. ‘The book you are writing is not yet finished. Therefore, it’s a manuscript. What could be more appropriate than that?’” (7). At the age of fifteen Fogg gets his first lesson in existentialism. Each individual is in charge of his or her choices, and while those choices
may shape the appearance of the manuscript; the book is never finished until the day one
dies.

Fogg demonstrates some of this thinking after he is saved from starvation and brought
to Zimmer’s apartment to recover. There he begins to contemplate the selfish nature of his
starvation and pledges to be different. The pledge is long and complicated and deserves to be
quoted at length:

The days went by in Zimmer’s apartment, and as I slowly put myself back together, I
realized that I would have to start my life all over again. I wanted to atone for my
errors, to make amends to the people who still cared about me. I was tired of myself,
tired of my thoughts, tired of brooding about my fate. More than anything else, I felt
a need to purify myself, to repent for all my excesses of self-involvement. From total
selfishness, I resolved to achieve a state of total selflessness. I would think of others
before I thought of myself, consciously striving to undo the damage I had done, and
in that way perhaps I would begin to accomplish something in the world. It was an
impossible program, of course, but I stuck to it with almost religious fanaticism. I
wanted to turn myself into a saint, a godless saint who would wander through the
world performing good works. No matter how absurd it sounds to me now, I believe
that was precisely what I wanted. I was desperate for a certainty, and I was prepared
to do anything to find it. (73-4)

Fogg’s pledge sounds like it fits into both Catalano’s and Anderson’s rendering of Sartrean
ethics. For both ethicists, the chance or opportunity to choose against the decisions of one’s
past is a clear indication of existential hope. Fogg recognizes that he need not be who he is.
He understands that he is defined by his past actions and looks to repair the damage those
actions have created, but he also knows that he can change. And at one point he even recognizes the impossibility of his program for total change. The problem with his pledge as seen through postmodern existential eyes is his hope that if he achieves his goals he will be finished. He desires to become a "godless saint who would wander through the world performing good works." Saints, the ones with a god, are saints for eternity; once this status is achieved it is rarely lost. And in the end this is what Fogg desires; he "was desperate for a certainty." The desperation for certainty can be seen as Fogg's postmodern and existential flaw. While he recognizes the chance for change, he refuses to accept that the world is in a constant state of flux. Once he changes for the better, he wants that change to be permanent. Consequently, his actions can be regarded as actions done in bad faith.

This desire for certainty begins to exert itself in the way Fogg assigns meaning to the events he experiences. After his and Effing's encounter with Orlando, the man with the topless umbrella, Fogg describes the scene as having substantial meaning. He describes the reasons for the unusual feeling the meeting gave him, it "was not so much its lightheartedness, but the mysterious way in which it seemed to exert an influence on subsequent events. It was almost as if our meeting with Orlando had been a premonition of things to come, an augury of Effing's fate" (210). Over the next few pages the reader sees Effing remain in the storm, "like some midget Lear" (212) using the ineffective umbrella as a prop. When Effing subsequently catches pneumonia and dies, the "premonition" and "augury of Effing's fate" come true. These, however, are not the key words or phrases of the passage, but they do forecast for Fogg a movement away from the acceptance of a postmodern reality. He has almost reached a point similar to his sickness of the early chapters. While it is easy enough to create stories out of past events to argue for a natural
course of history, the postmodernist recognizes that this is only storytelling. There is no way of assigning meaning to events as they happen, and yet Fogg is close, once again, to doing this. Of course, in the passage quoted above, he does use the words "seeming" and "almost" suggesting that, as of Effing's death, he still understands that this kind of meaning making is the product of his own narrative.

Some critics have taken Fogg's understanding of the world and suggested that Auster is pushing postmodern ideas into the background. Springer suggests that "Behind these 'coincidences' in *Moon Palace*, however, lies the concept of fate, which in turn goes the way of inheritance" (151). In other words, according to Springer, the chance happenings in the novel are, in reality, clues that Fogg uses to understand his family tree. Through an impressive display of close reading Springer connects the elements of the fortune cookie, "The sun is the past, the earth is the present, the moon is the future" (Springer 150 Auster *Moon Palace* 97) to the three generations of Fogg's family. Effing is the sun and past, Barber the earth and present, and Fogg is the moon and future (Springer 150-52). Springer concludes from this reading that, "ambivalence and plurality, illustrating the postmodern living conditions, are pushed into the background in favor of the 'metanarrative' of family relations and inheritance. The journey reaches its destiny; in contrast to many deconstructive postmodern texts...*Moon Palace* reaches its destination when answers are indeed found" (152). Springer suggests that the form of *Moon Palace* remains consistent with Auster's postmodern style, but that its themes and the development of Fogg suggest that the novel is more concerned with developing meta-narratives. While I believe Fogg moves in such a direction, I do not think Auster advocates such a move; the novel suggests that Fogg's movement is in error.
After Effing’s death, Fogg encounters the same message found in his fortune cookie, in an essay written by Tesla, a man he was researching. He is astounded by the coincidence, and understandably so. He then begins looking for meaning in it. He says, “The synchronicity of these events seemed fraught with significance, but it was difficult for me to grasp precisely how. It was as though I could hear my destiny calling out to me, but each time I tried to listen to it, it turned out to be talking in a language I didn’t understand” (233). He then equates the quest for meaning to a “crackpot solution...strange conspiracies of matter, precognitive signs, premonitions, a view of the world similar to Charlie Bacon’s” (234). Again, Auster demonstrates that searching for signs to one’s destiny or fate is similar to seeing the world through the eyes of the mentally ill. By doing so Fogg approaches the Jamesonian schizophrenia encountered in the early chapters. The reality, as Fogg sees it, is a world of fragmentation, a meaningless world, but he is desperate to betray this knowledge. He wants to find absolute meaning and significance in events as they happen.

The conflict within Fogg culminates with his trip out west. This movement begins with a conversation he has with Barber and Kitty. Barber asks the two if they thought Effing’s Wild West tale was true. Kitty responds in a truly postmodern fashion, “Kitty leaned forward on her elbow, looked to her left at me, looked to her right at Barber, and then summed up the whole complicated problem in two sentences. ‘Of course he was telling the truth,’ she said. ‘His facts might not always have been correct, but he was telling the truth’” (276). This response mirrors Fogg’s initial reaction to Effing’s story. Fogg, however, has moved away from what he knows to be real, he has practiced lying to himself enough that at this point in the novel he is unable to respond.
Kitty's abortion pushes Fogg beyond himself. The possibility of the event echoes his understanding of his mother's heroism. He sees in her past actions a strength of character, and he owes his life to that strength. Fogg describes his mother's past: "A less willful woman would have given me up for adoption—or, even worse, have arranged to have an abortion...if my mother hadn't been who she was, I might not have made it into the world. If she had done the sensible thing, I would have been dead before I was ever born, a three-month-old fetus lying at the bottom of some garbage can in a back alley" (239). Fogg presents a difficult image, but it is clearly one that has left an influence on him. This influence allows the reader to understand Fogg's reaction to Kitty's pregnancy. As he sees it, and describes it to the reader, "the baby had begun to exist the moment Kitty told me she was carrying it inside her. Even if it was no larger than a thumb, it was a person, an inescapable reality. If we went ahead and arranged for an abortion, I felt it would be the same thing as committing murder" (279). Moon Palace doesn't argue against Kitty or Fogg, it does, however, point to Fogg's actions and ask that he recognize their motivations. He doesn't fall on the pro-life side of the debate because it has any more natural validity than Kitty's argument; he feels the way he does because the narrative he has created for himself suggests this feeling. Recognizing his self-created narrative and acting with this knowledge would demonstrate existential good faith. Fogg, however, routinely acts in bad faith. Nowhere in his description of their arguments does this come up as his reason for wanting the child. What is addressed is his desire to be a father. Fogg describes his impatience, "The baby was my chance to undo the loneliness of my childhood, to be part of a family, to belong to something that was more than just myself, and because I had not been aware of this desire until then, it came rushing out of me in huge, inarticulate bursts of desperation" (280).
Ultimately Fogg has little knowledge of himself and the narrative he has created. As a result, he begins to see things as inevitable.

Fogg heads to the desert after the abortion because as he says, "so many things had been smashed and destroyed, that my initial feelings no longer mattered. I went because I had no choice. It wasn't that I wanted to go; it was simply that circumstances had made it impossible for me not to go" (278). At this point Fogg is fully involved in self-deception. He believes he can no longer choose; he has given into his desire for certainty. Fogg agrees with Barber to look for Effing's cave because he wanted a journey to lose himself in. He describes his intentions, "We would search, but we would not find. Only the going itself would matter, and in the end we would be left with nothing but the futility of our own ambitions. This was a metaphor I could live with, the leap into emptiness I had always dreamed of" (288). The abortion and subsequent separation from Kitty has placed Fogg in the same mental place he was in after the death of his uncle. He wants to abandon himself in the hopelessness of a cause because he hopes it will remove from him the need to choose. In reality it only creates an illusion that he is no longer choosing. As the existentialists argue again and again, no choice is choosing not to choose.

When Barber begins to make plans for their journey to the Utah desert, he suggests a stop in Minnesota; among other things it would give Fogg a chance to see Effing's paintings. This is something that Fogg had avoided doing earlier in the narrative. His reasons, as he explains them are simple and postmodern, "After listening to Effing for so many months, I had gradually begun to imagine his paintings for myself, and I realized now that I was reluctant to let anything disturb the beautiful phantoms I had created...I had dreamed them for myself from his words, and as such they were perfect, infinite, more exact in their
representation of the real than reality itself' (232). For the postmodernist the world exists through narrative, it is how it is described. Such a reaction to the world would carry over to the details of the world including paintings. In this sense the paintings described by Effing would differ from their referents. When Barber suggests a viewing, Fogg agrees. Again, agreeing to see the paintings is not a wrong choice, but Fogg agrees simply because he doesn't want to choose. He claims that, "In the spirit of the expedition we were about to embark on, I said yes to everything" (288). Had he chosen to view the paintings to explore the multiplicity of objects, or to look at the differences between signified and signifier, he would have been behaving as a postmodernist, and what's more, he would have been acting in good faith. Instead he deceives himself into believing that he no longer needs to choose.

After Barber's death, Fogg continues the trip to Utah and he continues to look for the cave. He finds the man-made lake that drowned the cave and while exploring it in a boat has his car stolen. That night he sleeps by the side of the road and he wakes up railing against the universe, "By the time I woke up the next morning, shivering against the cold, it struck me that the theft had not been committed by men. It was a prank of the gods, an act of divine malice whose only object was to crush me" (305). By this point Fogg has regressed beyond his early self-imposed starvation. When he finds ten dollars on the street as a homeless man, he gives the event a supernatural significance, but he recognizes that he is assigning meaning to the purely haphazard. In this final scene he feels as though a chance occurrence is evidence of gods plotting against him.

From this point on Fogg walks to the ocean, and his happiness increases. He is happier believing in a supernatural force, even if it is malevolent, than he is in a meaningless universe. When he reaches the end of the continent he pledges, again, "This is where I
start...this is where my life begins” (306). If this is where his life begins, what is the reader to make of the already written pages of his manuscript? Not only does such a statement disregard all of his actions prior to reaching the ocean, it also suggests a permanence that is unsustainable. Springer argues that *Moon Palace* “reaches its destination” and that “answers are indeed found.” This simply doesn’t fit with the novel. While Fogg makes claims to a new start, the novel ends with him looking at the ocean. He has recently, although inadvertently, brought about the death of his father, and lost his girlfriend and unborn baby. His history with coping with loss is not great, and yet Springer argues that answers are found. This doesn’t hold. The argument becomes particularly weak when one considers that Auster’s next two novels involve characters crisscrossing America in search for meaning.
CHAPTER 3: LEVIATHAN AND AARON’S SUCCESSFUL TELLING OF SACH’S FAILURE

As I suggested in my previous chapter, *Leviathan* tells the story of Ben Sachs crossing America in search of transcendent universal truth. It is also about Sachs’s best friend, Peter Aaron, and Aaron’s attempt to tell Sachs’s story. By telling both of these stories, Auster is able to explore the existential bad faith of believing in absolute truths as well as possible ways of living in good faith. Before I begin my examination of *Leviathan*, I will briefly look at Walter Oberman’s reading of *The Music of Chance*. This novel is Auster’s sixth major work of fiction, published between *Moon Palace* and *Leviathan*. While the length restrictions of this paper will not allow me to examine the ethical vision presented in the novel, a cursory look at the ideas developed in *The Music of Chance* may help clarify the postmodern and existential concerns present in the other two novels considered in my study.

Like *Moon Palace*, *The Music of Chance* develops characters who travel America. Jim Nashe inherits a large sum of money and uses it to aimlessly drive. As his money begins to run out, he meets Jack Pozzi, a professional gambler. Nashe decides to use the rest of his inheritance to back Pozzi in a high-stakes poker game. After Pozzi loses the money, he and Nashe find themselves indebted to the victors. Oberman’s “Existentialism Meets Postmodernism in Paul Auster’s *The Music of Chance*” provides an excellent understanding of Auster’s sixth novel, in terms of both intellectual movements.

Oberman points to Auster’s denial of absolutes; in particular, he argues that Auster continually denies cosmic or divine justice: “there is no correspondence between a man’s moral character and what happens to him. In this respect [*The Music of Chance*] is merciless in its denial of justice, as if justice were a natural right. The novel makes no concession to
this and other assumptions predicated on absolute values” (202). For Oberman, Auster is an author dedicated to the destruction of the belief in universal truths. Oberman continues his assessment of *The Music of Chance* by noting that Nashe, the novel’s protagonist, refuses to recognize what Auster believes to be absent. Moreover, Nashe’s refusal presents itself as an active attempt to reassert some universally held value. These attempts only reaffirm “the existing power structure of society” (203). The lesson that Nash doesn’t learn, but that is presented to the reader is that “life is full of ethical choices that are not necessarily governed by absolute values and that all choices take place within a context. One must act and choose from a position of ignorance, existential contingency, and moral uncertainty because one’s choices are neither self-justified, nor supported by external foundations” (203). Like Nashe, Sachs—*Leviathan*’s protagonist—refuses to learn this lesson. His denial of himself, and the multiplicity and fragmentation of postmodernism places him on a path to destruction.

Oberman’s most astute observation is his understanding that Auster portrays characters that cannot live up to the existential demands of the postmodern world. He focuses on Nashe’s failure, but one can easily see that Auster routinely portrays characters that fail. Fogg is desperate for a universal truth and therefore fails, and Sachs may be the most extreme example of failure. The novels, however, also give the readers a reason for hope. As I have already demonstrated, Fogg, while deceiving himself, is still alive at the end of the novel. If he can somehow manage his grief, he might be able to act in good faith. Less hope is present in *The Music of Chance*. Pozzi is gone and Nashe ends the novel by driving himself, Murks, and Murks’s son-in-law into another vehicle. But the novel ends ambiguously with the crash, not the carnage afterwards. If the movie by the same name can
be considered an interpretation of Auster’s vision (and the author’s cameo in the final scene suggests that it can), Nashe survives the crash and like Pozzi is picked up by a passing driver.

Oberman draws a connection between existentialism and postmodernism and suggests by drawing this connection that Nashe acts in bad faith when he denies his postmodern condition. But because he lives at the end of the story, there is hope for him. In existential good faith, he has the option to choose against his previous choices. Sachs doesn’t have this choice. That said, Leviathan can be seen as a hopeful novel, as well; its hope, however, does not rest in the protagonist. Sachs, like Auster’s other principal characters, rejects the existential demands of a postmodern world, but because of his literal fragmentation, Auster leaves the reader with no hope that Sachs can be redeemed. The hope in Leviathan, therefore, rests with the secondary character. Peter Aaron, unlike the minor characters from the other novels of this period (Effing, Barber, and Pozzi), is a multi-dimensional character. More importantly, this full development allows Auster to use Aaron as his model for living an existential ethic in a postmodern world.

In “From Metonymy to Metaphor: Paul Auster’s Leviathan,” Linda L. Fleck argues that the novel is composed as both a comedy and a tragedy. She notes that the division into five chapters even follows the traditional five-act story arc. Aaron’s story reads like a comedy; after suffering, he finds true love. Sachs’s story moves in the opposite direction. Fleck notes that his “emergence from the dark woods ends in murder rather than marriage, and his entire tale corresponds to the inverted U structure of tragedy” (209-10). Fleck goes on to suggest that the novel is as much Aaron’s as it is Sachs’s, that it is a tragedy within a comedy. This assessment doesn’t seem to hold, as Aaron’s story is primarily confined to the second chapter. While I disagree with Fleck and see Aaron’s story as secondary, I recognize
its importance as commentary on Sachs’s, and will divide the rest of this chapter accordingly. The first section will deal with Sachs’s failure to meet the existential demands of a postmodern world. Aaron’s ability to succeed where his friend fails will fill out the second section.

Sachs’s Failure

Almost every critical discussion of *Leviathan* points to Sachs’s most obvious failure, his literal fragmentation. Aaron sees it as his job to help the reader understand how Sachs accidentally killed himself. Sachs and Aaron meet in 1975; in 1990 Sachs blows himself up. According to Aaron, during the span of those fifteen years, “Sachs traveled from one end of himself to the other” (15). One could read the two ends of Sachs’s self as related to his understanding of a postmodern condition and existential freedom. Aaron’s narrative details Sachs’s gradual movement away from a reluctant acceptance of postmodernity and existential good faith. This journey ends with Sachs’s death, and this ending is preceded by his desire for absolute and universal truth, a desire that leads to existential bad faith, or self-deception. *Leviathan*’s first chapter looks at Sachs’s life prior to his friendship with Aaron. The decisions he makes at this early point in his life come close to embracing a postmodern and existential ethic.

The significant choices of Sachs’s youth concern the time he spent in jail for refusing to be drafted and writing *The New Colossus*, the novel Sachs begins while in prison. Carsten Springer’s work on *Leviathan* in his book, *Crises: The Works of Paul Auster*, points to *The New Colossus* as Sachs’s first attempt to explore what he sees as the three elements of freedom: liberty, self-determination, and disorientation. For Springer, two events shape
Sachs's concept of freedom, namely his mother's vertigo (experienced initially in the Statue of Liberty) and Sachs's own experience in prison as a protester of the Vietnam War (167-9). Sachs's self-professed lesson learned after his first visit to the statue is that “freedom can be dangerous. If you don’t watch out, it can kill you” (39). The same event that granted Sachs a freedom over his wardrobe, also profoundly frightened his mother. From Sachs’s boyhood, liberty and self-determination are coupled with disorientation.

Springer sees The New Colossus as a failure. He looks to Sachs’s dependence on Thoreau (both politically and artistically) as ineffectual, and questions Thoreau’s relevance for the 1960s, “The Thoreau model, and along with it the principal of self-determination, has little in common with the facts of the twentieth century and provides the protagonist with no valid answer to the freedom question (167-8). Springer then points to the difference between Sachs and Thoreau, one of both duration and achievement. Sachs’s time in jail, significantly longer than Thoreau’s one day, brings about little change. The error of Springer’s analysis is rooted in his assumption that both Thoreau and Sachs expect significant changes and solutions to “the freedom question.” Existentially, addressing the notion that freedom is problematic is as far as one can go. There are no solutions. To use Springer’s terms, freedom provides one liberty and self-determination, but it also creates disorientation, or as Sartre would call it, anguish, abandonment and despair. That Sachs can hold these three elements of freedom together, and accept all three, argues for an existential success, not a failure.

As Aaron tells the reader, “political action for [Sachs] boiled down to a matter of conscience. That is what made him decide to go to prison in 1968. It wasn’t because he thought he could accomplish anything there, but because he knew he wouldn’t be able to live with himself if he didn’t go” (29). From what Aaron tells the reader, it seems reasonable to
assume that Sachs is acting in good faith. He chooses to go to jail with little expectation concerning the outcome of his choice, and realizes that he is solely responsible for that choice. *The New Colossus* coupled with Sachs’s decision to go to jail suggests that he accepts the liberty, self-determination, and disorientation that come with freedom. In doing so, Sachs is as close as he will ever come to demonstrating a postmodern and existential ethic.

Unfortunately for Sachs, Springer is right; *The New Colossus* is a failure, just not for the reasons Springer suggests. Sachs, in his decision to go to jail and in the vision for America he presents in his first novel, is overly dogmatic. Aaron also sees the work as a success, but he too misses the potential tunnel vision suggested by the novel. While Aaron recognizes that the book has “definite flaws” (44), he also argues that it proposes a “very sensitively handled” (41) vision for America. The vision is that “America has lost its way. 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” (43). For Aaron, the content of Sachs’s book is less important than his ability to create a vision. Later, after Sachs’s accident, Aaron comments on the elation he feels when he hears that Sachs had started a new novel: “He had started work on something new, he told me, and I took this as such a momentous event, such a turn around from his previous state, that I suddenly allowed myself to stop worrying about him” (153). The very fact that Sachs was creating fiction suggested that Sachs was healthy. Sachs is creating a vision, and by creating a vision he is participating in the multiplicity at the heart of a postmodern understanding of the world. Aaron’s optimism, unfortunately, doesn’t hold, and within *The New Colossus*, one can see a hint of the attitude that will come to dominate Sachs in the future. While Sachs argues that America has lost her way, he also suggests that
there is "no hope" of finding it again. Sachs does not simply propose a vision for America, he suggest in absolute terms that America is lost.

A minor example from the first conversation between Sachs and Aaron might help clarify this point. The two discuss their immediate pasts and Sachs suggests that despite their various paths, they both came to the same place (literally, Nashe's Tavern in the middle of a snow storm). Aaron agrees, and says, "That's one way of looking at it" (24). Sachs's reaction is interesting. He responds, "It's the only way of looking at it" (24). I don't want to make too much of this distinction because at one level, it can easily be argued that the only thing revealed by the conversation is that strangers rely on cliché's when they first meet and talk with one another. However, this conversation is an interesting parallel to the ways in which the two characters handle larger issues. Early on, Sachs suggests a stubborn nature that can't abide multiplicity. Aaron, on the other hand, is capable of seeing multiple conclusions.

After the publication and initial critical success of The New Colossus Sachs began work on a new novel, "but once he was a hundred pages into it, he tore up the manuscript and burned it. Inventing stories was a sham, he said, and just like that he decided to give up fiction writing" (54). Presumably inventing stories is a sham because it does not address reality, a decidedly un-postmodern point of view. Even the way Sachs writes suggests a denial of postmodernism: "Sachs never had any of [Aaron's] difficulties. Words and things matched up for him, whereas for [Aaron] they are constantly breaking apart, flying in a hundred different directions" (55). In postmodern terms, the signifiers and the signified easily match up for Sachs. He believes that the words on the page have a direct relationship with reality.
Sachs may be able to create this one to one relationship between the signifiers and signified, or believe that he can, because he has a peculiar way of reading the world, as if it was a book. Aaron notes that Sachs “was a great one for turning facts into metaphors” (26). One example of this is the title Sachs created for himself, “America’s first Hiroshima baby” (25). For Sachs, the world has specific meaning. He was born on the day of the Hiroshima bombing, and for him, this amounts to more than coincidence—it becomes a metaphor for his life, it takes on meaning. In *Paul Auster and Postmodern Quest*, Ilana Shiloh argues that, “By treating reality as if it were fiction, Sachs seeks to endow it with significance and purpose. Extremely knowledgeable, he is familiar with a host of facts and details, among which he establishes the most preposterous connections” (108-9). Whether or not the connections are preposterous, Sachs sees connections; he sees meaning inherent in the facts of the world. This is a fundamental postmodern error, and by believing that such meaningful connections exist, Sachs is perpetuating his self-deception.

As Aaron progresses with the story of Sachs there are hints that Sachs is willing to accept the fragmentation of the world. When he is living with Lillian there are moments when he is struck by an inability to pinpoint reality. After two weeks of depositing money into Lillian’s freezer, Sachs is puzzled by the fact that she hadn’t withdrawn any of it. Sachs couldn’t assign meaning to these facts:

[He] had no idea what to make of this detachment, this strange disregard for what he had given her. Did it mean that she wanted no part of it, that she was refusing to accept his terms? Or was she telling him that the money was unimportant, that it had nothing to do with her decision to allow him to live in her house? Both interpretations made sense, and therefore they canceled each other out, leaving him
with no way to understand what was happening in Lillian’s mind, no way to decipher
the facts that confronted him. (228)

Instead of accepting that there are two interpretations of the facts, Sachs is deeply bothered
by his inability to “decipher” them. Then, after Lillian opens up to him, he becomes
convinced that, “nothing was meaningless, that everything in the world was connected to
everything else” (231). Sachs is not comfortable until he can come to such sweeping
conclusions.

On the few occasions Sachs allows for multiple meanings, he seems to do so in a
pacifying and patronizing way. When he confronts Aaron about the affair between Aaron
and Fanny, he allows for multiple responses. Aaron is hurt and mocks Sachs’s seeming
passivity, “I hadn’t realized there were so many options available to us” (103). In a near
reversal of their first conversation, Sachs responds, “Of course there are. More than we can
count” (104). While Sachs’s ability to accept multiple meanings for the affair provides hope
for a postmodern recovery, more than likely, he claims to be open to multiplicity because he
is telling Aaron what Aaron wants to hear.

Sachs is increasingly obsessed with absolute and universal truth. While signs of this
concern are present early in the novel, it doesn’t reach harmful dimensions until after he falls
from the fire escape. He initially believes that he went to the fire escape to get Maria to touch
him. After Aaron and Fanny’s affair, Sachs made an effort to repair his marriage, and in
doing so, he vowed to avoid situations that could be construed as unfaithful. At the Fourth of
July party he was surprised by his desire for Maria, but he refused to touch her, so he devised
a way for her to touch him. As he tells Aaron, “I stuck to the letter of the law like a good
little Boy Scout, but I utterly betrayed its spirit...In my opinion, a man who goes to such
lengths of self-deception deserves whatever he gets” (128-9). Looking back on the events, Sachs realizes his own self-deception, and yet at the same times continues to deceive himself. Falling from the fire escape was something Sachs believed he deserved. He sees the specific lie he told himself concerning fidelity, but misses the existential bad faith of believing in divine or cosmic punishment.

Ilana Shiloh’s *Paul Auster and Postmodern Quest* connects this punishment to *Moon Palace*. She notes that Sachs refuses to see the fall as bad luck and instead sees it as punishment, and that Aaron “discerns in Sachs’s account the same motif that Fogg had discovered in *Kepler’s Blood*: a subterranean cycle of guilt and desire, guilt turning into a desire to expiate itself through a cruel and inexorable form of justice. This pattern determines Sachs’s entire course of actions subsequent to his fall” (110). Shiloh continues her analysis by arguing that everything that happens to Sachs happens as a result of chance or accident, and yet, “every course of action on which Sachs decides results from his belief in cosmic justice” (110). Sachs’s readiness to turn the facts of the world into metaphor translates into his increasingly destructive tendency to turn existential contingency into predetermined necessity.

This self-deception, even after Sachs has identified it, continues until the end of his life, and is rooted in his desire to start his life over and deny the choices of his past. Returning home after his accident, Sachs realizes that he can no longer live with Fanny. He does not want to hurt her, however, so to avoid doing this he begins to convince her that she should leave him. Aaron assesses the situation positively for his friend, “He was ruining her life, he said, and before he dragged her down with him into hopeless misery, she should cut her losses and run. I don’t think there’s any question that Sachs believed this. Whether on
purpose or not, he had manufactured a situation in which these words could be spoken in
good faith” (146). Aaron’s assessment is wrong; Sachs’s ability to do this speaks to his bad
faith. In order to lie to Fanny, Sachs first needed to lie so thoroughly to himself that he
believed it. What is more, this excessive lying is done so that Sachs can start a new life for
himself; as Aaron points out, “Within a month of coming home from the hospital, I think he
was already looking for a way to break free of his marriage. It was a unilateral decision, a
product of his need to wipe the slate clean and start over again” (146). His reaction to the fall
stands as example of what Sartre would call bad faith.

In “Existentialism is a Humanism,” Sartre covers the basic tenets of existentialism
and defends it from its critics. As I noted in the first chapter of my study, Sartre believes an
individual “is nothing else but that which he makes of himself” (349). Sartre wants to stress
that humans do not have an inherent nature. An individual is freed from rules set forth by
God or universal concepts of humanity. His or her essence is not established until after he or
she exists. While existence does precede essence, it does not eliminate one’s past or
memories. Once an individual has acted, he or she begins to define his or her self. Sartre
clarifies this point by arguing, “What we mean to say is that a man is no other than a series of
undertakings, that he is the sum, the organization, the set of relations that constitute these
undertakings” (359). Sachs’s desire for a clean slate is a desire to wipe out his past
existence. As Sartre understands this, it is an impossible proposition; Sachs cannot remove
his past choices, he can only hope to make different choices in the future. Choosing
differently is certainly an existential choice. It is even the great hope of existentialism. But
one can’t avoid responsibility for the decisions he or she has made. This is what Sachs has
done, and his desire to do so is an act of self-deception, an act of bad faith.
As if he was trying to prove Sartre's points, Sachs continues his self-deception in California. After literally losing himself in the woods of Vermont, seeing a man shot to death, and then killing the murderer with a baseball bat, Sachs looks for and finds a meaning in the events. As Fleck points out, "Dimaggio shoots Dwight, end of discussion. There neither is nor can be an explanation or justification for this act. It just is. It is pointless, indeed impossible to ask why" (212). And yet, Sachs does exactly that. He must know why. Maria's connection to Reed provides him an answer:

Once Maria had told him about Dimaggio and Lillian Stern, 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. Where all had been dark for him, he now saw a beautiful, awesome clarity. He would go to California and give Lillian Stern the money he had found in Dimaggio's car. (187)

In and of itself, this decision is neither wrong nor representative of bad faith. In fact, Sachs's desire to give the money he found in Dimaggio's car to a stranger is not only understandable, but admirable. For Sachs, however, this is not a choice, but a matter of doing the necessary thing. In response to Lillian's hesitant reply, Sachs tells her, "It's that simple. I didn't choose you. Circumstances gave you to me, and now I've got to make good on my end of the bargain" (198). He sees his actions as being mandated by a cosmic justice, and on the cosmic scale he has no choice. It is at this point that Sachs's bad faith exerts itself.

What Auster makes clear through Aaron's narration is that Sachs is not the product of some cosmic manipulation, nor has he been able to wipe his slate clean. Sachs is a product of the decisions he has made. His refusal to learn from his self-deception creates more self-
deception. While staying with Lillian he tries to create a situation almost identical to the one that sent him falling off of the fire escape. Lillian told Sachs that she was a masseuse, and Sachs devises a way to get her to touch him. He planned to stop by her work, "If she happened to be free at that moment, he would ask for a massage. That would give him a legitimate excuse to be touched by her again, and even as he savored the feel of her hands along his skin, he could still his conscience with the thought that he was helping her to earn her living" (234). Sachs is so fully capable of deceiving himself that he can use this argument and at the same time plan to give Lillian over a hundred thousand dollars. While this self-deception does not push him off a fire escape, or blow him into several pieces, it does place him in great danger.

Sachs honestly believes that, "He could still his conscience with the thought that he was helping her to earn her living." What is remarkable about this lie is that the money he would use to pay for the massage is essentially Lillian’s money anyway. From the moment Maria makes the horrible connection, Sachs planned to give Lillian all of the money he found. This act of self-deception tied up with money and lust is only an immediate and superficial lie. More disconcerting is the fundamental self-deception Sachs must subject himself to in order to believe that his actions are mandated by a universal law. Lillian is understandably skeptical concerning Sachs’s plan and she wants to know why he is giving her the money. He tells her, "I didn’t choose you. Circumstances gave you to me, and now I’ve got to make good on my end of the bargain" (198). Sachs has convinced himself that he doesn’t have a choice, and yet he is constantly choosing. Shortly after this conversation he goes out to his car and gets five thousand dollars. Lillian wonders why he doesn’t give her the whole sum and Sachs says, "That was the original plan, but things changed after I got
here. We’re on to Plan B now” (201). While talking with Maria he believes that giving the money to Lillian is required of him, and yet he doesn’t just wire her the money or send her a check. When he meets Lillian, he decides to follow plan B, and yet he still believes that he has no choice in the matter, that he is simply following some universal code.

After his relationship with Lillian fails, Sachs’s tries to wipe the slate clean again by becoming the Phantom of Liberty. Even in this role of violence, Sachs perpetuates his self-deception. Linda Felck’s “Metonymy and Metaphor” argues that Sachs “blow[s] up shrunken replicas, mere simulacra of the Statue of Liberty. In addition, his attempt to engage in old-fashion political action would appear to fall victim to late capitalism’s seemingly infinite power of co-optation...In Sachs’s case, the reappropriation takes the form of t-shirts and buttons” (214). His attempts to criticize capitalism turn into elements of profit. As pointed out earlier, Oberman sees this motif in much of Auster’s work. Any attack on “the existing power structure of society” only strengthens that structure. Like Nashe, Sachs doesn’t see this. He is aware of those capitalizing on the Phantom, but he sees that as an opportunity, “He was making a mark, he said, a much greater mark that he had ever thought possible” (263).

What’s more, Sachs’s reasons for becoming the Phantom sound similar to his reasons for giving Dimaggio’s money to Lillian. He tells Aaron, “All of a sudden, my life seemed to make sense to me. Not just the past few months, but my whole life, all the way back to the beginning. It was a miraculous confluence, a startling conjunction of motives and ambitions. I had found the unifying principle, and this one idea would bring all the broken pieces of myself together” (256). Sachs sees the contingency of his life as having inherent meaning. He responds to this meaning with “one idea” to make him whole. Of course, as the reader
knows and as Aaron knows writing the piece, “this one idea” physically separated “all the broken pieces.” By the end of his life, Sachs is fully denying existential contingency and looking for ways to reject postmodern fragmentation.

**Aaron’s Success**

*Leviathan* is Auster’s seventh novel, and as of this novel, Aaron is Auster’s most articulate view for a postmodern and existential ethic. As I have demonstrated, Sachs fails to live up to an existential ethic in a postmodern world. He fails because he cannot quit his desire for absolute truth, a truth impossible to find in Auster’s fiction. Aaron succeeds, at times, in embracing an existential ethic and living in good faith. He does so because he allows for multiple truths. He accepts his postmodern condition. This acceptance is best demonstrated in Aaron’s ability to construct Sachs’s story in a way that can be seen as historiographic metafiction. Before I examine Aaron’s connection to Hutcheon, it might be helpful to look at where other critics have touched on this idea without explicitly addressing it in Hutcheon’s terms.

In “(The) Playing Author,” Karin Esders argues that as Aaron reconstructs Sachs’s story, he also constructs his own autobiography. As a result, binary distinctions “between reality and fantasy, truth and deception, self and other” (76) begin to fade. Esders’s idea coincides with Fleck’s argument that Aaron’s *Leviathan* exists because Sachs’s doesn’t. Fleck goes on to suggest that there are two types of chance in the novel, “When the ‘it happened this way’ is transformed into the ‘it had to happen this way,’ when the contingent is turned into the necessary, we have moved from the world of metonymy to that of metaphor” (209). Fleck’s ideas are interesting, but using Jameson, she casts “the metonymic
postmodern age" in a starkly negative light. She sees in the postmodern era, "A refusal (or mere 'why bother') to ask why, to search for a reason for things" (212). This refusal is "an acceptance of the radically contingent and the formula for action that flows from it: Just do it—for no reason, just because" (212). Fleck's essay allows us to see Sachs and Aaron in terms of metaphor and metonymy. I hope to show, however, that Aaron's acceptance of the "radically contingent" doesn't lead to apathy and inertia, but instead allows him to embody Auster's existential and postmodern ethic.

While Sachs is the author of The New Colossus, (a novel that can easily be described as historiographic metafiction), he quickly abandons these ideas. It is Aaron that uses the motifs of postmodern fiction to create the biography of his friend. As I explained in the first chapter of this study, Hutcheon defines postmodern fiction, or historiographic metafiction as, "a problematizing force in our culture today: it raises questions about...the common-sensical and the 'natural.' But it never offers answers that are anything but provisional and contextually determined" (xi). Aaron embraces this idea. He is sure to mention both the context of the story and that it is his account, or narrative, allowing for other possible narratives.

On the surface of his narrative, it may not seem like Aaron is as willing to embrace the provisional and contextually determined. Before beginning the story of his friendship with Sachs, Aaron states:

One thing leads to another, and whether I like it or not, I'm as much a part of what happened as anyone else. If not for the breakup of my marriage to Delia Bond, I never would have met Maria Turner, and if I hadn't met Maria Turner, I never would have known about Lillian Stern, and if I hadn't known about Lillian Stern, I wouldn't
be sitting here writing this book. Each one of us is connected to Sachs's death in some way, and it won’t be possible for me to tell his story without telling each of our stories at the same time. Everything is connected to everything else, every story overlaps with every other story. (57)

It seems as though Aaron is arguing for something greater than contingency. It’s as though he is suggesting that Maria’s choice to pick up the lost black book—through a series of highly improbable events—determines Sachs’s choice to blow up replica statues. In “Phantoms of Liberty,” Mark Osteen discusses Aaron’s statement of interconnection. Understanding this discussion requires a brief summary of his Hobbesian reading of the novel. Osteen argues that Sachs is the multiple “Artificial Man” Hobbes envisions in his *Leviathan*. Accordingly, Sachs’s multiple selves are forged together through the secrets he shares with various characters. His secrets parallel the various ways individuals come together and form the “Artificial Man” of societal government. Aaron’s purpose, in light of Osteen’s reading that places Sachs as the leviathan, is to put the pieces of Sachs back together. As a result he comes to the conclusion that everything is connected to everything else.

I think this is a fascinating reading of Auster’s *Leviathan*, and provides an interesting insight into the title. That said, Osteen’s reading of Aaron, and in particular Aaron’s claim that everything is connected is short-sighted. Osteen notes that Aaron claims that “Everything is connected to everything else” but he doesn’t mention the second part of Aaron’s sentence, “every story overlaps with every other story.” The second part of the sentence shows that Aaron is thinking along the lines of historiographic metafiction. Aaron
sees a connection, but not because a connection naturally exists or is inevitable. He sees a connection through the act of telling a story.

Aaron addresses the significance of creating narratives as he begins to tell the story of his affair with Fanny. He believes that this affair saved him from returning to his first wife, Delia. He can only make this assessment by narrating the events of his past. As Aaron confesses, “Fanny was the one who saved me from what would have been a terrible decision. I can say that now in the light of what happened later, but back then nothing was clear to me” (87). What Aaron later realizes is that the meaning he assigns to his affair is provisional, and by no means necessary, and that the meaning he is capable of assigning to it can only happen in light of historical perspective.

From the beginning of the novel, Aaron insists that his rendering of Sachs’s story is one of many possible versions. Aaron endeavors to speak the truth about Sachs’s life to the best of his abilities. He, however, recognizes the possibility for other truths. The reason such a possibility exists is because, as Aaron claims early in the narrative, he is rushed. He tells the reader, “I’m forced to work quickly, I have nothing to rely on but my own memories. I’m not saying that these memories should be doubted, that there is anything false or tainted about the things I do know about Sachs, but I don’t want to present this book as something it’s not. There is nothing definitive about it” (25). Even if Aaron had the time to do interviews and research documents, his story could never be definitive. No story can acquire such status because of the fragmentation of the postmodern world. Aaron understands this logic.

Shortly after setting his terms, Aaron demonstrates where multiple truths can exist. In relating the events of his first marriage, he addresses the reasons for his divorce: “She
must have understood that I would notice [her diary]. Assuming that was true, it was almost as if she were inviting me to read what she had written. In all events, that was the excuse I gave myself that night, and even now I'm not so sure I was wrong. It would have been just like her to act indirectly" (61). Either Delia left the journal for Aaron to read, or it was an accident. Aaron has no way of knowing for sure, and he lets the reader see both possibilities, and suggests that there could be others that he doesn't see. Aaron uses a similar technique in detailing the first marriage of Lillian Stern. He knows that she becomes a prostitute, but he doesn't know how this line of work started; he doesn't know the reasons. Consequently, he gives the reader as many reasons as he can.

Not everyone sees Aaron's constant awareness of multiple stories as admirable, or a success for Auster. In "Leviathan: Post Hoc Harmonies," Arthur Saltzman argues that "Leviathan is riddled with Aaron's disclaimers and misgivings, so much so that the story of Sachs quickly evolves into a book long delineation of the inevitability of storification. For every insight there is an apology" (164). I suppose if the ultimate purpose of Leviathan is to tell the one and only story of Sachs, then Aaron's asides might seem obtrusive. They get in the way of coming to a singular understanding of Sachs. These asides, however, are crucial to a telling of Sachs in light of historiographic metafiction.

In The World that is the Book, Aliki Varvogli also addresses "Aaron's disclaimers and misgivings," but argues that Leviathan "is a novel in which the categories 'fiction' and 'reality' collapse into one another as the world and the book become indistinguishable" (142). He then argues "Above all, what emerges from his narrative is the realization that writing about someone else's life is a process of fiction making" (154). In other words, it is
impossible to detail the events of someone’s “real” life without resorting to narrative. This is a concept at the heart of historiographic metafiction and one embraced by Aaron.

As I mentioned earlier the possibility of multiple meanings and readings of any given situation begins in earnest with Aaron and Fanny’s affair. Aaron learns that any meaning can only be had in the light of narrative. With this understanding comes the loss of certainty. When Fanny comes on to him, Aaron is thrown: “now that she had turned my secret into a blunt and vulgar proposition, I scarcely knew who she was anymore. Fanny had become someone else. Ben had become someone else. In the space of one brief conversation, all my certainties about the world had collapsed” (94). When he tries to pinpoint Fanny’s motivations, he is lost. He finally concludes that she knew it was going to be a temporary affair, but then he feels that he should reject this meaning: “The only problem is that it contradicts everything she said and did during the three weeks we spent together. What looks like a clarifying thought is finally no more than another snag. The moment you accept it, the conundrum starts all over again” (98). It’s interesting to compare this reaction to Sachs’s when he can’t figure out Lillian’s motivation. While Sachs is uncomfortable until he can decipher Lillian’s actions, Aaron accepts the multiplicity and eventually goes with a reading that sees Fanny’s actions as selfless. But, as he tells the reader, “Of all the interpretations I’ve considered over the years, this is the one I like the best. That doesn’t mean it’s true, but as long as it could be true, it pleases me to think it is” (99). His reaction makes sense; as Aaron’s marriage was failing he looked to Sachs and Fanny’s as perfection. It is plausible that he should be confused by Fanny’s proposition. His choice to embrace ambiguity is also understandable.
This attitude continues into his confrontation with Sachs about the affair. After their conversation, Aaron is confused. He feels as though he doesn't know the people he loves: “After that lunch I no longer knew what to believe. Fanny had told me one thing, Sachs had told me another, and as soon as I accepted one story, I would have to reject the other” (109). The two stories about Sachs's fidelity are equally convincing and Aaron believes them both. He believes them both because while each story contradicts the other, they're both true. Aaron is certain that “Fanny and Ben had been telling [him] the truth. The truth as they saw it, perhaps, but nevertheless the truth” (109).

Some read the openness to multiple truths as a flaw of Aaron’s. In “Multiple Personality Disorder, Literature, and the Politics of Memory,” Robert Scott Stewart and Paul Dumouchel argue that, “unable to decide what is the Truth, Aaron comes up with an explanation on his own” (115). The two writers are frustrated with Aaron for what they see as laziness; they believe he creates a fictitious explanation because he didn’t want to work to find the truth. Directly contradicting Aaron’s assessment that both Fanny and Sachs were telling him the truth about their marriage, Stewart and Dumouchel argue that, “No matter what may be the explanation for their actions it most probably is not what they pretend” (116). To back this reading, the critics argue that Sachs is obviously holding back, and not telling the truth. Later, they go so far as to suggest that Aaron is in bad faith, when he reads Fanny’s actions as selfless. Stewart and Dumouchel claim that the reason Aaron accepts Sachs’s explanation of his marriage is because it relieves both Sachs and Aaron of their guilt and turns Fanny into a saint. They believe that Aaron is in bad faith because believing Fanny was selfless “constitute[s] a refusal to face the indeterminacy of what happened...What
Aaron does not want to accept is that Fanny’s actions are to some extent indeterminate” (119).

I don’t see how Stewart and Dumochel can come to this conclusion. Aaron does choose to believe that Fanny’s actions were selfless, but he doesn’t choose this because he believes that he has ferreted out some indisputable truth. He fully accepts that he may never know why Fanny acted the way she did. What’s more, to chastise a character for not being able to determine a truth and then turn around and condemn that same character for not allowing for indeterminacy seems to ask for the impossible.

Esders comes closer to assessing Aaron’s understanding on the grounds Aaron provides the reader. She suggests that Aaron is in a tough position: “There is no single identifiable source of truth; rather, there are contradictory, multiple versions which are dependent on personal perspectives and cultural conventions; truths which oftentimes are mutually exclusive and leave the narrator and reader in a state of confusion and distraction” (81). It is the state of confusion that Aaron embraces, and that Auster sees as part of a postmodern and existential ethic. The world of Auster’s novels is a fragmented and multiple place. As a result there can be no foundation for choosing, and yet choose one must. Aaron recognizes this and acts accordingly.

Maybe the best example of Aaron’s success and Sachs’s failure can be found in their reaction to Maria’s knowledge of Dimaggio. As I mentioned earlier, Sachs refuses to see this as coincidence or improbable chance. Instead, he sees it as a message from the universe for cosmic justice. He denies the postmodernity of Auster’s world and in doing so deceives himself. Aaron on the other hand is consistently trying to act in good faith. While he is not completely successful (no one is), he tries. He tells the reader that the connection between
Maria and Reed shocked him, “that is because the real is always ahead of what we can imagine. No matter how wild we think our inventions might be, they can never match the unpredictability of what the real world continually spews forth. This lesson seems inescapable to me now. *Anything can happen.* And one way or another, it always does” (180). Aaron wants to reject this idea, and like Sachs live in a world where there is cosmic justice. But he can’t. He recognizes the existential contingency of the world and does his best to act within it.
CHAPTER 4: CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Postmodern and existential ethic developed in *Moon Palace* and *Leviathan* is anecdotal. Taking into consideration postmodernism’s fragmentation and existentialism’s abandonment, it seems impossible for any ethic to be anything but situational. Consequently, Auster’s ethics are displayed through the telling of stories. What can we derive from the stories of ethical choices Auster presents the reader? Or to phrase the question using Booth’s terminology, how does Auster “offer a distinctive and engaging way of being together?”

More often than not, Auster’s characters fail, and yet his vision for acting in a postmodern world is clear. The author accepts the fragmentation and uncertainty of the world even if his characters do not. In *Moon Palace*, Auster paints the world in terms of Hutcheon’s historiographic metafiction. He questions large national myths such as Manifest Destiny and the moon landing. In addition to this he demonstrates how historiographic metafiction can be applied to personal histories. Fogg never fully takes on Auster’s vision. He is desperate for certainty and consequently doesn’t see his own complicity in the creation of his historical narrative. This leads to the destruction of his relationships and existential bad faith. By the end of the novel he has deceived himself into believing that he no longer needed to choose. Through Fogg, Auster is showing the reader the flaws of denying postmodernism.

Auster takes a similar approach in his depiction of Ben Sachs. Auster again presents a postmodern world and a character eager to deny the fragmentation and uncertainty of life. Sachs, like Fogg, acts in bad faith. He deceives himself in his attempts to get both Maria and Lillian to touch him. More importantly he deceives himself into believing that he has found some unifying principal, some way to remain whole in a fragmented world.
Unlike *Moon Palace*, however, *Leviathan* isn’t just a compilation of ways not to act. For the first time in Auster’s fiction he presents a fully developed character who tries to act in good faith. While not always successful, Aaron’s acceptance of postmodern fragmentation and multiplicity is Auster’s best example of how to act in the world. Aaron recognizes the possibility for multiple truths, most noticeably in his acceptance of both Ben’s and Fanny’s explanation of their marital fidelity. More importantly he acts knowing that nothing can be done to guarantee the morality of his choice. By doing so, Aaron becomes the embodiment of Auster’s postmodern and existential ethics.
Works Cited


