Entropy and Loss: Paul Auster’s *In the Country of Last Things*

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Abstract

This paper aims at understanding the postmodern victim’s struggle for survival in a post-apocalyptic, unnamed metropolis depicted in Auster’s novel *In the Country of Last Things*. It is a story about the loss of a known, recognizable world and the struggle to stay alive in a dystopian space. On the city streets, Auster’s characters experience loneliness, disconnection and personal disintegration; individual memory is of no consequence in a place where everything is constantly shifting. With his depiction of a city in ruin, Auster offers a critique of Western civilization: this country of last things is what remains of an affluent society. The ruins, the inhumanity, the gradual disappearance of language all create a sterile urban landscape which is the result of hundreds of years of civilization. The lives of these urban individuals do not belong to them anymore, but to ‘the city being’ which has given up on its dwellers, on its history and on its language; everything is left to chance and the outcome can be surprising: the beginning of nothingness or of utopia. This article will explore issues such as the (post)apocalyptic paradigm, the entropy of space in an urban novel, the labyrinth as ‘central metaphor of postmodern fiction’ and the loss of identity through the loss of words.

Keywords: post-apocalyptic paradigm; entropic space; urban labyrinth; loss of identity; postmodern victim

1. Introduction

*In the Country of Last Things*, published in 1987, is a story about the loss of a known, recognizable world and the struggle to survive in a dystopian space. The action is set in a post-apocalyptic anonymous metropolis, (which paradoxically, is both real and imagined), where exacerbated poverty, homelessness and the lack of order create an almost uninhabitable world; where the only goals of the individual are to survive by scavenging, to murder in order to survive, or to die and regain the lost freedom. Anna Blume, the protagonist of the book, sets out on a...
quest to an uncanny place, to find her missing brother, William; only to fail and get trapped in a whirlpool of violence, fear and dehumanization. Yet, Anna and her friends manage to maintain their sanity and moral integrity as they contemplate ‘the extreme derangement’ of a civilization on the verge of collapse and ruin (Washburn, 2004). The novel closes as this group of survivals tries to leave the ‘famous City of Destruction’.

The city depicted has given up on its dwellers, on its history and on its language; and when this occurs, all is truly lost. From one moment to the next anything can happen. The lives of these urban individuals do not belong to them, but to ‘the city being’. Once there is nothing more to recycle, the outcome could be surprising: the beginning of nothingness or of utopia.

2. **The Apocalyptic City**

The title of this book, *In the Country of Last Things* is itself an invitation to read it as an example of apocalyptic fiction of “the dystopian or post-holocaust tradition of science fiction” (Auster, 1997, p.320). From the very beginning, the author warns us that we are about to enter ‘the famous City of Destruction’ which lies beyond ‘the gate of dreams’, thus emphasizing the possibility of no return.

The lives and aspirations of Auster’s characters are determined by the confines of the environment in which they place themselves. Auster depicts the city as impersonal and restrictive. His characters struggle to survive within this oppressive regime, and endure numerous hardships. As their former lives and associations seem no longer relevant, they adapt to a new identity.

Anna Blume undergoes an urban nightmare in a distant and apocalyptic dystopic city. Turbulent metropolitan spaces, language, places of sanctuary and their effect on identity are the key themes in the novel. Auster presents Anna’s experience of human suffering and cruelty, and the metropolis at the limits of change, disorientation and alienation. Anna’s personal narrative takes the form of an extended letter detailing her experiences in the city. The very first words of her ‘blue notebook’ bear witness to the degradation of ‘the unnamed city’: “[t]hese are the last things, she wrote. One by one they disappear and never come back. […] Once a thing is gone, that is the end of it” (Auster, 2005, pp. 1-2). Anna witnesses an uncertain and unpredictable environment “at the confluence of competing social forces, which constantly erase and reinscribe social relations” (Brown, 2007, p.143). As everything around her is unstable, (even her private thoughts), Anna cannot establish a sense of where and who she is, she tries to invest the city with a sense of meaning, which becomes another futile attempt, as there cannot be meaning in a place constantly devolving and heading to its demise.

Christian theology associates the notion of *apocalypse* with that of *revelation*, with the destruction of the human kind and the revelation of a new divine order, a process regarded as irrevocable and absolute. Nowadays, the concept has become somewhat blurred, when used in a contemporary literary context. Wesseling notices that in Auster’s work, his apocalyptic speculation about the end of the world begins and ends in the period of transition which supposedly precedes the apocalypse. One must mention that, in the novel, the transition towards the end is governed by decadence and regression. This process, which Elizabeth Wesseling calls ‘the motif of history in reverse’ (Wesseling, 1991, p.498), pervades the whole novel and functions as one of its major structural patterns. Auster’s *In the Country of Last Things* takes civilization back to where it started long ago. This regression can be seen in the dissolution of cultural institutions, but also in the breakdown of social conventions that once gave meaning to human life. From hence forward, the inhabitants of this city belong to an ethical, spiritual and cultural chaos. As Bernd Herzogenrath argues: “[i]n a way, then, apocalypse is always inside and outside” (Herzogenrath, 1999, p.90).

In Anna Blume’s chronicle of her failed quest, we are presented a dystopian present: the society depicted has ceased to evolve culturally and economically: the only employment one can find is as scavenger or murderer. However, these apathetic people gather the objects not only out of a desire for survival, but also because of a sense of nostalgia. As we have already stated, this urban environment is unstable, and anything or anyone, people or object, can disappear at any time. To remember is not to go back in time, but to bring the
seemingly past event into its proper place in the present. Memory is proof of our life in the present: “[i]f a man is to be truly present among his surroundings, he must be thinking not of himself, but of what he sees. He must forget himself in order to be there. And from that forgetfulness emerges the power of memory. It is a way of living one’s life so that nothing is ever lost” (Auster, 1992, p.138). Temporally, the only ‘time’ that is truly real is the simultaneity of the “present,” the knowledge of which is given to us through memory. Thus, a desire for remembrance of things past emerges; every object/event comprises within itself the memory of a distant experience, one that can no longer be relived or even translated to others (some people experience a more rapid process of mental and linguistic disintegration than others do). As a general rule, in this country of last things, memory has become an atrophied faculty of the brain. And if memory does not serve us anymore, then our very present has failed us.

Chaos is the primary dominant: ‘there are no schools anymore’, art has disappeared, the legal system has vanished, ‘there are no politics in the city as such’, and the only ritual that is practiced with some ceremony is suicide, which can be arranged in a variety of ways. As the narrator comments: “death is the only thing we have any feeling for. It is our art form, the only way we can express ourselves” (Auster, 2005, p.29). In a world where life is insufferable, the wish to die brings about the emergence of a true industry. There are a thousand ways a person can buy their death, from the euthanasia clinics, which offer a last spree of hedonism before the injection is administered, to the cheaper assassination clubs, whereby the participant joins a society that guarantees to contract his or her murder. Nevertheless, there are people who do not kill themselves: these are the absurd heroes. Their image is reminiscent of Camus’s Myth of Sisyphus: people who at the last crossroads choose life. In her book Sobre Paul Auster – Autoria, Distopia, Textualidad, Ivonne Saed considers that the urban space Anna is a prisoner of, is also a reflection of her flux of consciousness and from the moment she departs for this place, she will constantly repeat the phenomenon of the city within her mind (Saed, 2009). Both the city and Anna are threatened by imminent annihilation, also, they both had a time of flourishing, which has come to an end; and now, they are both heading to oblivion through a process of gradual and inevitable destruction. The cause for this, Saed argues is an overstimulation in all aspects of life, and once the desires and whims are surpassed, then a powerful nihilism is born, in which there is no place for creation, evolution or development, this type of nihilism will send everything and everyone into a void of last things. This is the dystopia after the utopia. It is as if the city consumes itself little by little: from people and objects, to history and language.

In this metropolis, Anna undergoes an intense struggle for survival, as she gradually discovers that this unidentified location unalterably subverts her established preconceptions. However, Anna realizes that she is “a constant outsider, looking in on this life in the city, which she always appears to treat as a temporary nightmare” (Auster, 2005, p.35). This nightmare becomes her reality and she must learn to reconstruct her thoughts and actions. In order to survive, she becomes an object hunter, a scavenger, an activity which is emblematic of a society which has ceased to invent and produce any type of goods (Washburn, 2004). Nevertheless, this activity takes its toll on Anna, as she openly confesses that “constantly looking down at the ground […] must surely affect the brain” (Auster, 2005, p.35); the pieces are so broken and so disintegrated that she can no longer discern what they are and what are they used for. Her task is ‘to examine, dissect and bring back to life’ whatever object or piece of an object she may find; in a way, the scavenger’s purpose is to undermine the general chaos and reconstruct language and history. We consider that in this twisted world, the scavenger plays the role of a ‘messiah’ who records the last means of human interaction: the word. She is responsible with keeping alive the transitory relationship between signifier and signified. However, as the city is everywhere, outside and inside, Anna partially loses the control over her thoughts: it is getting harder and harder to follow every thought and consequently every word; this prevailing urban disease manifests itself so strongly also because Anna does not have a stable home, a room of her own. She is alone, on the streets, in parks or in the subway. But all of this is about to change as she encounters Isabel, another scavenger, who will offer her a place to stay and will teach her ‘the way of the city’ and give her a second chance.
As we have seen, In the Country of Last Things follows a pattern of regression, ‘a motif of history in reverse’, the process of history is shifted in reversed gear, and the established order is gradually dismantled so that the old may finally give way to the new. It is a country where industry has come to a standstill, where nothing new is made, where children are no longer born; social institutions and signifying practices which give purpose to human life have been forbidden and forgotten. People do not receive education anymore and the legal system has partially evaporated. Art has disappeared, and the only rituals practiced with a certain degree of ceremony are suicide and scavenging. Even language hardly makes sense, as objects disappear from the material world, and along them, their signifier. In a dislocated urban environment, the alienated individual knows that everything comes down to uncertainty and chance, the chance to live another day.

3. Entropic space: the labyrinth and the streets

“The central metaphor of postmodern fiction” observes Gerhard Hoffmann, “the crucial figuration for its content, design, narrative, strategies, the paradoxicality of its intention, is spatial: it is the labyrinth” (Hoffmann, 1994, p.414). The term labyrinth derives from pre-Greek labyrinthos, a word denoting “maze, large building with intricate underground passages” and possibly related to Lydian labrys, which signifies “double-edged axe”, symbol of royal power. Both derivations evoke the royal palace in Knossos, commonly believed to offer the prototype and inspiration for the myth of the Cretan labyrinth (Matthews, 1922). Other properties of the labyrinth are comprised in its related term ‘maze’, a word that is probably of Scandinavian origin. In its oldest sense it signifies bewilderment, confusion or the state of musing, of being wrapped in thought (Matthews, 1922).

Ilana Shiloh draws our attention on two types of labyrinths: the multicursal and the unicursal. In the unicursal labyrinth, the walker simply follows the path, as his movement is constant and steady, the direction may vary as the path changes its orientation, but no choice of changing direction is required, he can be closer or farther from his/her goal: reaching the center. This unicursal pattern Shiloh argues ‘traces an arbitrary and inescapable itinerary’. The other type of labyrinth is the multicursal one, where ‘the wanderer’s progress is contingent on the choices he makes at each forking path’ (Shiloh, 2007, p.92); thus, in such a labyrinth, the maze walker’s chances of getting out are far grater than those in a unicursal structure.

Getting lost in the urban labyrinth is a method of gaining insight into modern society: “The city is the realization of that ancient dream of humanity, the labyrinth. It is this reality to which the flâneur, without knowing it devotes himself” (Benjamin, 2007, pp.429-430). To know the city means to experience its paths and bifurcations, its labyrinthine structure, to reach its centre or exit, to feel the ‘way of the street’: the direction shifts constantly, according to the direction of the paths and the decisions of the maze walker, a decision based, most of the time, on intuition. In a labyrinth, one can never be sure of choosing the correct path, thus emerging a feeling of frustration and disorientation, as there is nothing stable in such a place. The labyrinth is dangerous even without the Minotaur, “it represents the danger of inextricability, of eternal imprisonment” (Shiloh, 2007, p.92). Shiloh also argues that the labyrinth is an ambiguous structure, as it encompasses two perspectives: of those who are trapped inside, disoriented and terrified; and of those outside the labyrinth who admire its structure and intricacy. Shiloh states that: “[l]abyrinths thus simultaneous embody order and chaos, clarity and confusion, unity (a single structure) and multiplicity (many paths) [...]. They may be impenetrable – when one cannot find the centre – or inextricable – when one cannot find the exit” (Shiloh, 2007, p.93).

While most mazes constructed until modern times are centre-oriented, the opposite is true of postmodern labyrinths. Here, the terror of the Minotaur has been replaced with the terror of the void. A structure without centre is terrifying, it is unorganized and lacks any kind of balance; one can never know whether he/she has reached the end of his/her journey, and completed the quest. Gerhard Hoffmann argues that is the postmodern writers who have changed the meaning of the traditional labyrinth: its structure has become decentered, comprising an infinity of paths and directions without centre. This ‘decenterment’ gives the labyrinth the choice of infinite possibilities, as well as flaws such as destructiveness, sterility, failure, or nihilism (Hoffmann, 1994).
The postmodern labyrinth is a structure of endless steps, and when, metaphorically associated with the image of the city, it is the perfect trap: an unthinkable prison.

At some level, the city of Auster’s dystopic novel is always a trap. This bleak statement brings into mind images of tall buildings with people at the same time too close and too far away from one another, of nature almost smothered by grey walls and of many, many streets – so many that walking on them equals getting lost. In a way, Auster’s urban postmodern landscape is defined as an immense “social experience of lacking a place” (Jarvis, 1998, p.86). In a city like this, people are both trapped and lacking a place. They suffer either from being limited or being lost – or both. Auster’s city dwellers try to avoid these confusing feelings by walking a lot. They roam the streets of Manhattan forming their own language, the language of space.

Anna Blume of *In the Country of Last Things* resembles the anti-detectives of *The New York Trilogy*. She is trying to find her brother in an unknown and frightening world and walking in the streets of the city is an important part of her life. She, too, has to find the right way to move in order to survive. The language of the city changes everyday, new barricades materialize as if out of thin air, and danger lurks everywhere. This city of unpredictable barricades is ‘a space without history: her [Anna’s] life is a spatial rather than temporal experience’ (Woods, 1995, p.120).

We can clearly see that what characterizes the journey of the protagonist is ‘endlessness’, as the city is always experienced as an endlessly unfamiliar, endlessly repetitive space, thus enhancing the motif of the labyrinth. She begins her letter with the description of this uncanny labyrinth: “these are the last things. A house is there one day, and the next day it is gone. A street you walked down yesterday, is no longer there today” (Auster, 2005, p.1). The city thus becomes an all powerful living being, who dehumanizes all of its inhabitants, it “makes people too small to be human anymore”. The devastated metropolis is experienced by Anna Blume as a lifeless, objectless, godless place, in which people are faced with isolation and anonymity in the midst of similarly nameless masses: “Slowly and steadily, the city seems to be consuming itself, even as it remains (…) the streets are the worst, for there you are exposed to every hazard and inconvenience” (Auster, 2005, pp.21-22).

In the devastated city of *In the Country of Last Things*, terrible barricades, the “tolls”, appear and disappear like mushrooms in every street. The city itself is walled by the Fiddler’s Rampart, its westernmost barrier, and, to the south, by the Millennial Gate. There is also the cyclopic Sea Wall project that would take at least fifty years to build. There is no reliable news about anyone who had survived the crossing of those walls of death, which calls into our mind the memory of the Berlin Wall.

People suffer from hunger and cold and have started to degenerate into an almost primitive level. The fact that they are spontaneously building barricades to gain power can also be seen as a sign of some kind of primitive instinct. Barricades are people’s way to try and govern space that has betrayed them. They feel that barriers are their only chance to get even momentary power over something. They do not want to build traditional shelters, they build walls instead. The barricades of the city are not permanent, however: they can disappear overnight and be replaced by others in altogether different places.

Auster describes the act of walking as a concrete manifestation of mental processes: “what we are really doing when we walk through the city is thinking, and thinking in such a way that pure thoughts compose a journey, and this journey is no more or less than the steps we have taken” (Auster, 1992, p.122). Ana’s paths and her act of writing and/or thinking become analogous with her prolonged act of wandering in the City:

“The streets of the city are everywhere, and no two streets are the same. I put one foot in front of the other, and then the other foot in front of the first, and then hope I can do it again. Nothing more than that […] Unless I write down things as they occur to me, I fell I will lose them for good […] The words come only when I think I won’t be able to find them anymore, at the moment of despair of ever bringing them out again” (Auster, 2005, p.2-38).

From these wanderings we can see that the characters are forced to confront their interior selves, that they are compelled to fight against the dystopic exterior space, in order to reconfirm their identity. Through her writing,
Anna Blume rejects the idea that the city streets are a reflection of her own interiority; this is her own personal version of survival.

4. At a loss for words

Language is what places us in the world. It is the way in which our inner self communicates with the exterior, tangible reality of the world. Language is also the medium we use as isolated individuals to form connections and bonds in a social environment, which consists of fleeting and inconsequential contact.

The disorienting nature of the darkly urban world that Auster represents in *In the Country of Last Things*, calls into question the capacity of language to provide a stable mediation of the metropolitan world for the individuals who inhabit it. Through the experiences of Anna, Sam Farr, Isabel and Victoria Woborn, in this overwhelming environment, Auster explores what potential calamities can befall the individual when language begins to fail them, and the word and the world no longer correspond. In addition, Auster demonstrates that language and storytelling have the power to create an illusion which is able to obscure the reality of a cruel, incomprehensible and intolerable existence. However, storytelling can also supply a refuge from an unstable and complex world, providing the necessary means to make sense of the urban landscape. By using language, the individual is able to distort reality by wishing, dreaming and speaking of a better life. The inhabitants of this entropic space use words to conceal their misery, to conquer their feelings of hunger and despair. When a group gathers, they describe to each other in great detail, the sensation of a meal, submitting to a rigid protocol: “you must allow your mind to leap into the words coming from the mouths of others. If the words can consume you, you will be able to forget your present hunger and enter what people call the ‘arena of the sustaining nimbus’. There are those who say that there is nutritional value in these food talks – given the proper concentration and an equal desire to believe in the words among those who take part” (Auster, 2005, pp.9-10).

The inhabitants indulge in storytelling to alleviate the symptoms of their suffering – specifically hunger. As we have already mentioned, Auster believes the telling of stories to be a powerful social practice, through which we might begin to make sense of a complex world. Unfortunately, in this city, even storytelling cannot impose order on this relentless chaos. Consequently, the inhabitants use stories to create an intangible and insubstantial reality, indicating that “it is no longer possible to locate the self in relation to this city” (Brown, 2007, p.155). Storytelling defers reality for the individuals of this dystopic metropolis. Vargoli notes how Anna is a figure much like Scheherazade from *1000 Arabian Nights*, a narrative Auster has frequently cited as influence (Vargoli, 2001, p.7). Scheherazade owes her life to the stories she tells each night, to defer the moment of her death. Anna too remains alive by writing down her story. We know that Anna’s story survived, as it reached its destination, in the hands of the unknown narrator. When the end of the notebook comes, we know her story carries on, but her fate remains uncertain. Mark Brown asserts that “[t]he city is already a story, generating its own narrative, with its own casual paths and outcomes” (Brown, 2007, p.141). Thus, one might say that the city’s story frames Anna’s, possibly directing its outcome. The question that arises from this affirmation is: if the city is already a story, then who is the narrator, and who lies behind the narrator?

Anna’s identity is preserved through words, through her storytelling, and in saving herself; she also tries to salvage what is left of language. The city’s sinister controlling forces are involved in a constant process of eradication of all certainties. As the reality of daily life is continually altered, nothing can be taken at face value. During her stay in the city, Blume witnesses the disappearance of her friends, of established locations, and eventually of her thoughts and words. Devoid of all meaning, the language is reduced to the level of a series of nonsensical noises: “little by little, the words become only sounds, a random collection of glottals and fricatives, a storm of whirling phonemes, and finally the whole thing just collapses into gibberish” (Auster, 2005, p.89).

Unless she writes things down, Anna fears that she will lose the words along with their meaning. Mark Brown notices that the intensity of Anna’s urban experiences creates a conflict between the world and the word. Most of the time, she is unable to represent the horror of her existence in the city, except under the conditions of absolute
despair. Her difficulties are a consequence of both the mental instability that results from the constantly changing physical world and social environment, and the effect this has on the language of the city (Brown, 2007, pp.149).

In the novel, language has an illusory quality and the power to obscure, which translates into Anna’s lack of comprehension of this particular ‘cityness’. The breakdown between language and the physical realm (world and word) is driven by the constant destruction of the cityscape. As Anna writes at the beginning: “[o]nce a thing is gone, that is the end of it” (Auster, 2005). This is clearly illustrated when Anna seeks a way to escape the city: when she enquires about an airplane, she finds that the word has disappeared from the language. She rationalizes this uncanny disappearance from the collective vocabulary as follows: “[i]t’s not just that things vanish – but once they vanish, the memory of them vanishes as well” (Auster, 2005, p.2).

However, this erosion of language is different for each individual: when individuals forget different things at different times, their capacity to use language to generate shared meaning is eroded. Anna puts it this way: “In effect, each person is speaking his own private language, and as the instances of shared language understanding diminish, it becomes increasingly difficult to communicate with anyone” (Auster, 2005, p.87).

Conclusions

Despite the bleakness and hopelessness of the world Anna lives in, In the Country of Last Things is nevertheless able to communicate certain “absurd” hope. Auster considers this novel to be an optimistic one; as he points out, the anonymous narrator who introduces the story and appears two or three times in the course of the narrative is used as a device aimed at showing that Anna’s letter ‘somehow or other’ reached its destination (Auster, 1997). The stress, in other words, is placed on recovery, symbolized here by the letter reaching a recipient. Also, while reading this novel we came to a startling conclusion: we noticed that this letter was meant to survive no matter what: it survived during Anna’s struggle for survival on the streets, during riots, after the library burnt down, only to find its way back to its owner. We can acknowledge the presence of a superior force working at safely delivering the word of Anna to a recipient, outside the walls of the metropolis. The story of the anonymous city in ruin and its inhabitants is a warning against what might happen if God is replaced with Civilization: this country of last things is what remains of the affluent society; the junk, the crumbling buildings; the vanishing words all create a sterile urban landscape which is the result of hundreds of years of civilization. Once Anna decides to leave the city, there is no need for her to write in the notebook: she knows who she is, what she must do and how she must do it in order to survive. Her writing is no longer relevant, as a matter of fact it was never her story, but the narrative of an urban entity made up of people, objects and words. Anna and her friends managed to separate themselves from the ‘city being’ through language and memory, and what they must do next is to find another space of existence which could accommodate their new found selves. Once Anna is gone, the notebook must disappear too, or in this case, it must reach a recipient.

The notebook survived because it was something experienced first hand, something true, as opposed to Sam’s research work on the city, which was something sterile, lacking personal understanding. We could even say that the letter survived because the writer used a language that the ‘city being’ was not able to comprehend.

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