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MEMORY IN A POST-APOCALYPTIC LANDSCAPE: PAUL AUSTER'S *IN THE COUNTRY OF LAST THINGS*

This paper aims at understanding the postmodern victims' 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 the 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, which are the dominant topics in this novel published in 1987. Individual as well as collective memory emerge from violence, destruction, war and despair in a fictional landscape of destruction and chaos. Auster's imaginary country, which can be easily understood as an allegory, is peopled by characters trying to emerge from chaos, to preserve any memory mainly through narrative. As it appears, narrative is one way of preserving identities and language, memory and surviving.

Keywords: Auster, memory, post-apocalyptic, city, destruction, survival, writing, narrative

*Writing is no longer an act of free will for me,
it's a matter of survival.*

Paul Auster

In the Country of Last Things opens with the following line: "These are the last things, she wrote. One by one they disappear and never come back. I can tell you of the ones I have seen, of the ones that are no more, but I doubt there will be time" (Auster 1989: 1). This is an apocalyptic, dystopian novel which has the form of a letter written by the young protagonist, Anna Blume, to her childhood friend from the country of her origin. Anna travels to this city in search of her long lost brother William, and quickly becomes absorbed in the everyday life of the city. She finds shelter with Isabel and her mad husband, William, falls in love with Samuel Farr, a journalist, who wants to write the story of the city. The novel takes place in a decaying landscape of the city, where everything gives the illusion of future resolution that is always delayed. The imaginary city undergoes a terrifying disintegration. Crumbled objects, streets and buildings are dispersed all around, disappearing each day:

A house is there one day and the next day it is gone. A street you walked down yesterday, is no longer there today. (Ibid)

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But I had not realized that the streets would be gone. It wasn't that not (...) It wasn't that the office was empty or that the building had been abandoned. There was no building, no street, no anything at all: nothing but stones and rubbish for acres around. (18)

Slowly and steadily, the city seems to be consuming itself, even as it remains. There is no way to explain it. (21-22)

This city is lifeless and people are faced with isolation, fear, despair. People try to survive by mugging, stealing, scavenging and killing if necessary:

In similar situations, people in this city have been known to kill each other. It is almost nothing to murder someone for a room, for a pocket of change. Perhaps what prevented us from harming each other was simple fact that we did not belong here. We were not people of this city. (105-106)

Furthermore, people can end up in a butcher shop, killed in order to be sold and eaten as beef meat:

(...) there was no mistaking what I saw in there: three or four human bodies hanging naked from meat-hooks, and another man with a hatchet leaning over a table and lopping off the limbs of another corpse. There had been rumors circulating in the library that human slaughterhouses now existed, but I hadn't believed then. (125)

The streets in this city trace a border between life and death; they prevent every memory of the past by their disappearing, and any escape in the future. Escaping the city seems to be impossible, and thus in order to survive, the protagonist, Anna, has to become an object hunter, a scavenger. People walk through dehumanizing street labyrinths, and wander in circles with no sense of direction. Houses are destroyed in the warlike city and their inhabitants are forced into the streets without protection for themselves. The city is divided into nine zones – an image that recalls Dante's hellish circle in the *Inferno*. Orders break down. There are no schools, art has disappeared, and the only ritual that is practised with some order and ceremony is suicide that can be arranged in different ways depending on the financial situation. Social breakdown has triggered an economic breakdown that affects the production of basic goods such as food and clothes. These are extremely rare to find since nothing new is made: "You would think that sooner or later it would come to an end. Things fall apart and vanish, and nothing new is made" (7). The increasing scarcity of materials forces Ferdinand², another character, to build smaller and smaller miniature ships: "From whiskey and beer bottles, he worked his way down to bottles of cough syrup and test tubes, then down to empty vials of perfume, until at last he was constructing ships of almost microscopic proportions" (55). As the result of the disappearance of objects,

2 According to Linda Hutcheon's designation of historiographic metafiction, Blume's narrative is embedded with historical figures and events: we can find Ferdinand and Isabel, the Spanish monarchs who sent Christopher Columbus on his journey; Anna Blume and Otto Frick whose names remind us of Anne Frank and her father, Otto; the expulsion of the Jews from the library as a reference to the Holocaust.

people forget the names of things all the time, and therefore, communication becomes very difficult. As Anna says:

How can you talk to someone about airplanes, for example, if that person doesn't know what an airplane is? It is a slow but ineluctable process of erasure. (88-89)

In effect, each person is speaking his own private language, and as the instances of shared understanding diminish, it becomes increasingly difficult to communicate with anyone. (89)

Words tend to last a bit longer than things, but eventually they fade too, along with the pictures they evoked. (98)

At the end, language makes no sense anymore since words have gradually become "only sounds, a random collection of glottal and fricatives, as a storm of whirling phonemes, and finally the whole thing just collapses into gibberish" (89).

In this story, everything means violence, aggression and death. Isolation is to be found everywhere, in the general obsession with death and survival at any cost. The other person is always a potential enemy that one has to fight with, with no mercy; walls of death are everywhere, the city itself is divided by the Fiddlers' Rampart and the Millennial Gate. There is also the 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. Whoever manages to enter the city is imprisoned by the horror of the city, and taken to an unknown place.

The only way to explore this world is to treat it as an enigma to be deciphered. The writer's mission is to explore this enigma, to turn it into a text, so that he can find a way out through the chaos of the city.

THE BOOK OF MEMORY

This is the case of Samuel Farr, who is secluded in the rooms of the destroyed National Library. He is dedicated to a book which will commemorate the catastrophe of the city. The book is supposed to be a collection of testimonies, and his work consists of organizing disparate materials into something coherent. His decision is to spend the rest of his life writing the book: "The story is too big, you understand, it's impossible for any person to tell it" (102). While being chased, Anna Blume finds refuge inside the Library, which is the shelter of a group that includes not only researchers and writers who managed to escape the Purification Movement³, but also the last surviving Jews:

"I thought all the Jews were dead," I whispered.

"There are a few of us left," he said, smiling at me again.

"It's not so easy to get rid of us, you know."

"I'm Jewish too," I blurted out. "My name is Anna Blume, and I come here from far away. I've been in the city for over a year now, looking for my brother. (95)

3 "The residents were all scholars and writers, remnants of the Purification Movement that had taken place during the tumult of the previous decade" (110).

Entering the library, a place of shelter surrounded by chaos, means entering the world of books and fiction, which seems to be the only chance of survival when the reality is unbearable: "I lived in the library with Sam, and for the next six months that small room was the center of my life" (107). It is a place of miracles since Anna gets pregnant in a city where children have not been born for a long time. She has a goal now. But then, the spell is broken. As Anna leaves the protected room, catastrophe ensues: her child dies before birth, a fire destroys the room, the library, and Sam's book. Sam is willing to die in order to save this book since its writing keeps him alive: "I can't stop. The book is the only thing that keeps me going. It prevents from thinking about myself and getting sucked up into my own life. If I ever stopped working on it, I'd be lost. I don't think I'd make it through another day" (104). Sam seems to be punished for having devoted so much time and energy to the aimless project of writing, in the solitude of a room, excluded from the external world. The room and the book disappear in the same time in fire, we could say, a purifying fire.

Anna Blume's last chance in her effort to fight self-destruction is similar to Sam's: alone, she writes the letters that are the fictional source of the book. Writing letters keeps her alive: "I feel there is something to say, and if I don't quickly write it down, my head will burst. It doesn't matter if you read it. It doesn't even matter if I send it" (3). She starts to write after Isabel's death, and it is a symbolic gesture of mourning: "(...) there was the notebook with all those blank pages in it, and suddenly I felt an overwhelming urge to pick up one of the pencils and begin this letter. By now, it is the only thing that matters to me: to have my say at last, to get it all down on these pages before it is too late" (79). Writing is an attempt to escape from a past trauma, loss or pain. She would have gone mad if she hadn't had the possibility to write down all her experiences. After another painful experience, the loss of the rabbi, she says:

Everything disappears, people just as surely as objects, the living along the dead. I mourned the loss of my friend, felt pulverized by the sheer weight of it (...) Sam's book became the most important thing in my life. As long as we kept working on it, I realized, the notion of a possible future would continue to exist for us. (113-114)

Her act of writing is an act of survival: she tries to re-establish her identity by narrating stories from the past and the present.

Memory and remembering are related to identity. The city is vanishing, things do not last, and once they are gone, it is forever. At first, Anna is trying to disappear, therefore denying her identity: "Never think about anything (...) Just melt into the streets and pretend that your body doesn't exist. No musings; no sadness or happiness; no anything but the street, all empty inside, concentrating only on the next step you are about to take" (57). Loss of identity equals forgetting the past and memories. It is possible to think that the desire of erasing the past is in fact the desire of a new beginning:

You no longer know how to act, and because you cannot act, you find yourself unable to think. The brain is in a muddle (...) One change follows another, each

day produces a new upheaval (...) That is the dilemma. On the one hand, you want to survive, to adapt, to make the best of things as they are. But on the other hand, to accomplish this seems to entail killing off all those things that once made you think of yourself as human (...) In order to live, you must make yourself to die. (20)

Forgetting is a necessary act in order to remember and to reconstruct identity: "(...) each day brings the same struggle, the same blankness, the desire to forget and then not to forget. Her letters are a "calling out (...), screaming into a vast, terrible blankness" (183). At the end of the novel, Anna defines her own storytelling as an act of survival:

The closer you come to the end, the more there is to say. The end is only imaginary, a destination you invent to keep yourself going, but a point comes when you realize you will never get there. You might have to stop, but that is only because you have run out of time. You stop, but that does not mean you have come to the end. (Ibid)

Anna Blume regains her life through writing and the text itself is an image of the process of reconstruction: the fragmentation of the first pages turns into a structured narrative, and although most of her narrative is written in retrospect, there is a precise chronological order that reflects her will to write. But like Sam's project, Anna's never reaches the end: there is always more to say, that could have been written, the writer cannot produce a perfect account of the whole reality. So we must consider Anna's letters as a double process of survival: a personal survival joined with an attempt to use words so they would not disappear. Therefore, Anna is reducing the font of her letters, being economic with them so they would be part of her book. She is not the only one in the novel who resorts to the process of reduction –Ferdinand has already done that while constructing his ever more reduced fleet. The motif of "history in reverse"⁴ is present throughout the novel, and symbolizes the criticism of the idea of historical progress associated with the American Dream myth.

Anna's book becomes a means of bypassing the unreal city and universe; it is a collection of missing words, while providing new definitions for some of them. The book is living while it seems that life has disappeared from the city. Anna cannot have children, but she will give birth to her letters. It is a way for her to exist after her death, in the same way she is trying to save the words and make them alive. Also, the open-ended mode with which the narrative closes points to the impossibility of a conclusion; everything is almost at the end, but it is never completely exhausted: "Time is running short now, and I mustn't waste any more words than I have to" (183). Storytelling functions as a form of resistance against death and it takes place in order to postpone the end of the narrative.

The very last words of the novel are: "This is Anna Blume, your old friend from another world. Once we get to where we are going, I will try to write to you again, I promise" (188). Relying on the thought of Paul Auster quoted at

4 For a more detailed analysis of the pattern of history in reverse, see Wesseling 1991.

the very beginning of this paper, Anna Blume's could be ... *écrire pour ne pas mourir encore* ...

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**SEĆANJE U POST-APOKALIPTIČNOM PREDELU: U ZEMLJI
POSLEDNJIH STVARI POLA OSTERA**

Rezime

Teme izolacije, uništenja i otuđenja jedne su od glavnih tema u romanu Pola Oстера *U zemlji poslednjih stvari*. Individualno, kao i kolektivno, sećanje izranjaju iz nasilja, razaranja, rata i očaja u fikcionoj zemlji destrukcije i haosa. Osterova imaginarna država, koja se može lako razumeti kao alegorija, naseljena je likovima koji pokušavaju da izađu iz haosa, da sačuvaju sećanja uglavnom kroz naraciju. Kao što se može videti nakon analize ovog dela, narativ jeste jedan od načina čuvanja sećanja, identiteta, jezika od zaborava, kao i jedan od načina preživljavanja.

Ključne reči: Oster, sećanje, post-apokalipsa, grad, razaranje, preživljavanje, pisanje, narativ

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