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THE APOCALYPTIC URBAN LANDSCAPE IN PAUL AUSTER'S *IN THE COUNTRY OF LAST THINGS*

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Broadly speaking depictions of urban life in recent American fiction unfold in two major directions. One main strain would be epitomized by what Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney call «Post-punk, Downtown or Blank Generation» authors (*Shopping in Space* 14). The most prominent of them are Tama Janowitz, Jay McInerney and Brett Easton Ellis, a trio also identified with the label of «brat-pack» writers, although this derisive term has little meaning beyond being a convenient media label. As different and heterogeneous as they may be, their fiction tends to portray the urban experience of young, white, middle-class postmodern pilgrims living in a decontextualized city, where bohemian street-life, drugs, sexual excess, underground nightclubs and totemic bits of mass culture have replaced traditional urban images like residence or workplace. In this new wave trend of writing what shapes the identity and the social relations of the characters are artificial icons of comsumption such as the cars they drive, the clothes they wear, the bars where they hang out and the music they listen to. This urban rhetoric usually gives way to a prefabricated language as bizarre as the gifts one of Tama Janowitz's characters gets for her birthday in *Slaves of New York*, namely a Godzilla cigarrete lighter, a «cassette tape of Teenage Jesus and the Jerks», a book about wrestling, and «a statue of Liberty hat—a spikey helmet of flexible foam» («Spells» 154).

The other major group of current city writing would be representated by works such as Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980), Denis Johnson's *Fiskadoro* (1985) or Madison Smartt Bell's *Waiting for the End of the World* (1985). These novels portray an urban landscape of total devastation, where the struggle to decipher the meaning of the city is far more desperate than in the novels of the «brat-pack» writers, if only because even the most widely shared emblems of the city have become symbols of private alienation. This specific urban vision is well illustrated by the words of one of

the characters of Paul Auster's *City of Glass* who, engaged in the process of inventing a new language that could really correspond to things, goes to New York because, as he says:

> it is the most forlorn of places, the most abject. The brokenness is everywhere, the disarray is universal. You have only to open your eyes to see it. The broken people, the broken things, the broken thoughts. The whole city is a junk heap ... I find the streets an endless source of material, an inexhaustible storehouse of shattered things. (78)

In the following pages I would like to discuss another novel by Paul Auster, *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), where the author emphatically explores a similar chaotic topography in his attempt to wrest narrative and historical meaning from the city's junkyard of broken images.

In her seminal study *The American City Novel*, Blanche Gelfant defines the city novel as a literary genre whose main aim is «to explore the city, to show what it is, what values it lives by, and what effect it has upon the individual's character and destiny» (8). This concise definition can be applied perfectly well to Auster's fourth novel, which, furthermore, may be placed within the twofold literary tradition of the *bildungsroman* and the novel of decay.

In the Country of Last Things, a novel that took Auster fifteen years to write (*Quimera* 26), is a nightmarish tale of complete breakdown set in an apocalyptic and anonymous metropolis where exacerbating scarcity, impoverishment and homelessness create an almost uninhabitable world which reduces daily life to a raw struggle for survival. The plot revolves around a young Jewish woman named Anna Blume who, at age nineteen, comes to this city in search of a lost brother only to be trapped in its spiral of violence, physical and spiritual uncertainty, and dehumanization. As she explains at one point:

> Life as we know it has ended, and yet no one is able to grasp what has taken place... All around you one change follows another, each day produces a new upheaval, the old assumptions are so much air and emptiness. 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 those things that once made you think of yourself as human. (20)

Like Anne Frank in her famous diary or Anna Wulf in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, Auster's Anna reports her personal experiences in a lengthy letter which is addressed to a friend in her country of origin. Anna's retrospective account (the text of the novel itself) covers a time span of «years and years» —she can't even remember how many— and is full of reflections on the inadequacy of words to describe a world

where people scavenge viciously for garbage or plot their own suicides. Yet, Anna, her lover and her two remaining friends manage to retain their moral integrity in this wasteland of desintegration. The novel closes when this small group of survivors hopes to leave this city of destruction the following day. This wishful thinking matches Anna's final desire: «The only thing I ask for now is the chance to live one more day» (188). The truly lost, Auster suggests, are only those who have given up on life, language and history.

Auster's apocalyptic speculation about the end of the world is less religious than historical. But like the biblical apocalypse, it is deeply concerned with the process of finitude or, echoing Frank Kermode's classic study about the subject, with the sense of ending. The paradoxical interrelationship established in the Book of Revelation between destruction and construction is also explored by our author. This biblical pattern materializes in the fact that it is precisely Anna's experiences in this devastated Gomorrah-like city that eventually drive her to write *In the Country of Last Things*, her literary testament. Anna's last name also hints somehow this apocalyptic dynamic tension. When she introduces herself to Sam Farr, her future lover, as William Blume's sister, this character comments: «Blume. As in doom and gloom, I take it.» Anna replies «That's right. Blume as in womb and tomb. You have your pick» (101). As we see, the dual nature of the apocalyptic archetype, here presented in terms of death and fecundity, is symbolically enacted by means of the rhyming words «womb» and «tomb.» [1]

Nevertheless, Auster moves away from the apocalyptic paradigm at least in one important respect. While Judeo-Christian theology conceives of human history as a linear process leading to a new divine order, Auster reverses this historical development, since in his novel this transition towards the end is governed by decadence and regression. This process, which Elizabeth Wesseling calls «the motif of history-in-reverse» («*ICL*: Auster's Parable of the Apocalypse» 498), pervades the whole novel and functions as one of its major structural patterns.

Like Kurt Vonnegut's *Galápagos* (1985), Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* takes human civilization back to where it started long ago. But, while this process of regression in Vonnegut's novel turns out to be positive (as it transforms the last survivors of a deserted Pacific island in penguin-like creatures living in a harmonious clan), this reversion, in Auster's case, is utterly negative and it is intended to criticize the idea of historical progress associated to the American Dream myth.

In the narrative world of the novel the regression proper is appreciated in the

1. In *The Invention of Solitude* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), Auster's autobiographical book, the author also reflects upon the power of rhyming words and says: «At the heart of each language there is a network of rhymes, assonances, and overlapping meanings, and each of these occurrences functions as a kind of bridge that joins opposite and contrasting aspects of the world with each other» (160).

dissolution of practically all socio-cultural institutions and communal conventions that once gave meaning to human life. *In the Country of Last Things* «there are no schools anymore» (29), art has disappeared, the legal system has vanished, «there are no politics in the city as such» (17), 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» (13). This atmosphere of social disintegration has brought about an almost complete economic breakdown, affecting even the production of basic goods such as food and clothes, which are extremely hard to find since «nothing new is made» (7). As a result of the disappearance of the world of objects, people forget the names of things all the time, and consequently communication becomes highly difficult. As Anna says: «Words tend to last a bit longer than things, but eventually they fade too, along with the pictures they evoked» (98). So, in the end, language hardly makes sense anymore. Words have become «only sounds, a random collection of glottals and fricatives, a storm of whirling phonemes» (89). In this regressive and primitive world so destitute of conventions, the law of the jungle has taken over again, and survival itself is a triumph.

The regression pattern is also evinced in the features of some of the characters of the novel that, as Elisabeth Wesseling has pointed out, «form dimished duplicates of once powerful historical persons who were instrumental in the onset of America's documented history» (498). In this sense, it is worth noticing that Anna's first acquaintances in the city are a couple called Ferdinand and Isabella. These names bring to mind those of the founders of the Spanish empire, who commissioned the expeditions of Christopher Columbus in the late fifteenth century. Significantly, Auster's Ferdinand amuses himself with the construction of miniature ships in bottles, a faint reminiscence of the mighty fleet of the Spanish king. Furthermore, this character is an avid persecutor and torturer of mice, which may be regarded as a diminutive reminder of the cruel Inquisition established under the reign of the historical Ferdinand. Anna relates to American history as a modern Columbus figure, who reports her experiences in the new world in a diary, just like the famous discoverer. Another historical analogy can be seen in the fact that Auster's protagonist starts making her living in this country as an «object hunter», an occupation that reminds us of Columbus' efforts to find gold and treasures in the new continent. Anna's own name also serves to highlight the «history-in-reverse» pattern, since as one of her friends remarks, her name is a palindrome: it reads the same forwards and backwards.

As we may see, *In the Country of Last Things* bits and pieces from the early American past are actualized, as if history was nothing but a permanent recycling of the same material. This historical approach comes to illustrate Eleanor Wilner's words when she states that «the most original and effective visionaries are precisely those who transvalue the new in terms of the old. All forward movements or radical turns to a different future require an imaginative return to the past» (*Gathering the Winds* 21-22).

To enlarge this imaginative return to the past, Auster sprinkles his novel with

some references to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. So, for example, we are told that Anna comes into this city of destruction by boat, a clear reminder of Charon's ferry. She also learns that the city is divided in «nine census zones», an image that recalls the nine hellish circles in which Dante's inferno is structured. Besides, Anna explicitly evokes the dreadful inscription Dante sees at the entrance of the hell-gate when she remarks that in this city «Entrances do not become exits, and there is nothing to garantee that the door you walked through a moment ago will still be there when you turn around to look for it again» (85).

There is no denying that Auster's narrative geography is widely informed by the apocalyptic tradition, the regression pattern or Dante's inferno. But the author also creates his own imaginative mythology bearing in mind the problems one may find in a city like New York in the present or near future. This process of transformative actualization may be viewed in the light of Kermode's opinion, when he argues that the status of the apocalypse has changed objective truth into an imaginative scheme. It is not so much the literal contents of apocalyptic thought which matter nowadays, but its overall structure of teleological coherence welding past, present and future together into one single process. «Apocalypse», this critic remarks, «depends on a concord of imaginatively recorded past and imaginatively predicted future, achieved on behalf of us, who remain 'in the middest'» (*The Sense of Ending* 8).

Although the predicted future in Auster's novel could not be gloomier, for «babies don't get born here anymore» (128), an absolute end never materializes. The protagonist manages to survive, and we continue to read her letter up to the last page of the novel, where she promises a new one if she ever gets where she is going. This deferral of the end is a logical necessity, since obviously we can only talk and write about the apocalypse as long as it has not yet taken place. In other words, the apocalypse can only exist as a text or a fiction, never as a reality. To quote Derrida: «The terrified reality of a nuclear conflict can only be the signified referent, never the real referent (present or past) of a discourse or a text» («No Apocalypse, Not Now» 23).

Auster develops this particular nature of the apocalyptic paradigm using the technical device of the *reductio ad infinitum*, This device, which may be considered as a variant of the «history-in-reverse» pattern, serves to signal man's conflictual nature as embodied in his desire of going as far as posible in his search for understanding, but without ever reaching the ultimate and final point that would prevent him from narrating that understanding. This paradoxical quest is well illustrated by Quinn, the protagonist of Auster's *The City of Glass*. This character, we are told, is engaged in a curious experiment that consists of the reduction of his daily need for food. He believes that the more one eats, the more one's stomach expands, which induces a greater need for food. Quinn's objective is to begin a process in the opposite direction. By eating less and less he hopes to reduce the size of his stomach and therefore his need for food. According to his calculations, it should even be possible to reach the point where one should be able to go through life without food.

In the Country of Last Things contains similar speculations about reduction. Ferdinand, for example, driven by the increasing scarcity of materials, is forced to ever build smaller miniature ships. As Anna reports: «From whiskey bottles 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). Anna also practices this art of reduction *ad infinitum*. She writes her long letter in a blue notebook which is bound to contain a limited amount of pages. However, she never reaches the end of it, because her writing becomes increasingly smaller and smaller, almost up to the point of invisibility.

These extreme cases of reduction resemble each other in that they are carried out under the threat of a real full stop. This point is never reached, however, because as Anna acknowledges:

> 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. (183)

Anna comes to this final understanding when she realizes that she is writing her lengthy letter in the same notebook she bought for Isabella in the past. This notebook served as the only vehicle of communication for Anna's friend, since she suffered from a disease that affected her capacity for speech. When Anna rereads the short and simple messages Isabella wrote there right before dying, messages such as «thank you», «water» or «my darling Anna» (182), the protagonist suddenly realizes that their brevity is in inverse proportion to their significance: «those simple messages no longer seemed very simple at all. A thousand things came rushing back to me at once» (182), she will say. This experience turns into an epiphany for Anna as it reveals to her and the reader that even in the depleted country of the last things, disinterested goodness, frienship and love —as exercised by Isabella, Sam or Victoria Woburn— are enough for sustaining one's will to live endlessly. With this revelation Anna completes her painful initiation and acquires full growth. Borrowing Anne Frank's words, Anna seems to realize that «In spite of everything, I still believe people are really good at heart» (*The Diary of a Young Girl* 237).

As a conclusion we may say that *In the Country of Last Things* Paul Auster presents two opposing views as regards the human condition in the modern world. By means of the structural pattern based on the process of historical regression the author underlines that man has learned nothing from history, since the same examples of brutality and devastation that staked out the discovery of America are to be found in the world inhabitated by Auster's characters. However, our author counterbalances somehow this negative vision by exploring simultaneously how little is really necessary to make life

liveable. In this sense, Auster's experiment in reduction shows that even in the most apocalyptic world there is hope if we learn to live and appreciate whatever is available to us. This train of thought leads to the consideration that in Auster's novel those apparently small and insignificant things available are more than enough to lend meaning to our lives because, in a society depleted of almost everything, they increase their value in inverse ratio to their availability. In historical terms, this formulation based upon the reduction *ad infinitum* implies that paradoxically the more we seem to be approaching the full stop in human history, the more elusive this ultimate end becomes. As a last reflection we may add that while there is one Anna Blume in this world the apocalypse will have to wait.

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