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Constructing the apocalyptic city in Paul Auster's "In the Country of Last Things"

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Introduction

During the 2011 seminar on English Literature, we have focused our readings around the phenomenon of the city and the urban subject, mainly how one relates to the other.

Whether it is in a sense of influence or in a sense of companionship, both concepts are closely related. Where there is a city, an urban subject is without a doubt going to appear.

How far back can we go in the study of cities and citizens in literature? Probably back to the Iliad, even Homer showed us in what way Troy was guarded against any outside enemy by its fortress, and how this influenced the life of its inhabitants. However we would be greatly of topic if we had decided to start there.

Our research began through Blake's poetry, by seeing how the people he portrayed were engulfed by the city, how this new modern construct affected their daily living. As Heather Glen has very accurately stated in her Blake's London: "The eighteenth-century London street was [...] a place where that sense of the other as object –often as feeble and wretched object- [...] was the dominant mode of relationship (148)." This new type of urban mode of living is extreme to the 18th century Englishman, a place where the rule becomes to survive, if you can, in this distant society. "This world simply is. Reciprocal human relationships in which otherness is acknowledged and the needs of all harmonized do not exist: the only relationships [...] are instrumental ones. People have become objects (155)." As is very well shown through Glen and Blake in this case, this is a very bleak prospect. Cities become in a way, object-enemies, by this I mean that the city is distant and unfamiliar, in much the same way people are according to Glen, and each citizen has to do what he can to survive in this hostile world. Glen specifically focuses her analysis on Blake's London, a portrayal of this growing metropolis that pushes the common Londoners further into 'their' corner; they watch it with fear because it is becoming distant. They belong in the city, for without them the city would not function, yet they are mere objects, they are not part of its creation or development. They are not free in the city.

However hope is not completely lost: “Blake makes it very clear that the disaster portrayed here is not inevitable. It has not been imposed by an unchangeable social order, nor is it the product of [...] the inborn evil of mankind, In ‘London’ it is shown to be the inevitable result of particular, chosen modes of relating to others, here manifested throughout a whole society. [...] what has been humanly chosen can be humanly reversed (157).”

From Blake we move toward the mid-nineteenth century, with Baudelaire and Poe who allow us the view through the eyes of bourgeois characters who have already settled in their city houses, and have already managed to adorn the city in such a way as to have the freedom to go anywhere (inside its borders), and to enjoy the great amount of people who begin to occupy the street; in a way, they have dominated this alien object. Both authors, Baudelaire and Poe, begin to create a new way of enjoyment of the city, the roamer, or to honor its name in French, the *flâneur*. People (generally men) who occupy the streets without really doing anything, they tend to walk around as mere observers, trying to take in as much as they can, learning from their surroundings without wanting to be noticed.

Moll Flanders also had an important appearance in our study around urban subjects, she as a thief and a prostitute knows her way through the city better than any of our *flâneurs* probably did. She had a way of getting lost in it, to lose the trail of anyone who could follow her after she had committed her crimes.

Our reading went on with Mrs. Dalloway’s roaming through London, her London which we can relate to her personal history and daily life, and more specifically to one day in her life; how every different nook and cranny of this 1920’s London reminds her of a different aspect of life, and how they relate to the other people present in the city.

We then took a leap forward and entered the 1980’s with Doris Lessing focusing on events that are happening at the moment, writing about observers that include remembrances, to accompany the present moment stories. They are stories of London; of the multiculturalism brought on by the creation of a metropolis such as is London.

The reading also of Orwell’s 1984 allowed us to study the usage of streets, surroundings and limits of a city in a totalitarian world, a world where “nothing was illegal, since there

were no longer any laws (Orwell 9).” And that includes the way in which Big Brother carries out his dominance, he exercises his power everywhere, all the time, not allowing contradictions, and there are no restrictions that can bind his actions.

And last, but most definitely not least, Paul Auster’s 1987 novel ‘In the Country of Last Things’, which is the novel which I will be working with.

The idea is to provide an explanation of why Anna might be regarded as a post modern flâneur, why the country she lives in (at the time of her narration) could be viewed as a post modern city, and how this is relatable to the concept of adventure as presented by sociologist Georg Simmel. In “The Adventure” (1911) and “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903) he conceptualizes adventure; my intention is to project this into a post modern viewing, how it is lived and how it affects the daily habits of people. With the help of quotes and analysis on how the concept of city might be changed throughout a post modern viewing of it and also, of the concept of what is considered a citizen, a crowd, a flâneur, adventure and discipline in the city.. All of these mark the keywords, key concepts of what my thesis will be about: Is it possible to have a flâneur in a post modern environment? And its relation to the idea of adventure as exposed by Georg Simmel.

These elements are all part of the analysis the seminar has done regarding everyday life in the city. How does everyday life unfold itself when it comes to literature? Gardiner offers an interesting analysis in his book ‘Critiques of Everyday Life’, he offers readings of different authors who refer to everyday life and how it is possible to create a study relating to this singular concept which has been generally overlooked and embedded into social studies as a quaint aside. Gardiner also allows me to relate the concept of adventure with modernity, and modern studies, by explaining that

“When such disruptions of daily routines occur, and actors can no longer rely on commonsensical notions and typified behavioural responses, we are able to examine critically prevailing traditions and received ideas, and our receptivity to alternative modes of being, what Bakhtin called the ‘buds and shoots of new potentialities’, is heightened dramatically (20).”

The disruptions he mentions refer to what we can call ‘adventures’, which in this specific quote are related to the fractures in the daily routines that allow us to see, to observe, the way power is constructed in our day to day medium. When somebody takes a step outside the line of what is commonly done, or accepted, it allows for a revision of why this is a ‘step outside the line’. In other words, when someone contests routines, even if he or she does so unwillingly, he or she bares the mechanisms that construct these routines. This is what makes this work take on a postmodern focus.

The Postmodern background

Most of the postmodern theory revised will stem from Selden’s “Practising Theory and Reading Literature: An Introduction”, as well as his “Literary Theory” and Terry Eagleton’s “Literary Theory: An Introduction”, both authors will help specify the theoretical framework of post modernism, or post-structuralism, I wish to work with.¹

The postmodern focus comes from the idea that post modernism allows us to better understand the scope of Auster’s novel, the idea that the world we know no longer exists, that we have to forget, or start forgetting everything we know to be certain and accurate. Habermas has introduced in “Modernity: An Unfinished Project”, pronounced originally as an acceptance speech for the Adorno Prize in 1980, a viewing of why we are currently in a postmodern era of history. He says:

“In an interesting book Bell has developed the thesis that the crisis manifested in advanced Western societies can be traced back to the bifurcation between culture and society, between cultural modernity and the demands of the economic and administrative systems. Avant-garde art has supposedly penetrated the values of everyday life and thus infected the lifeworld with the modernist mentality. Modernism represents a great seductive force, promoting the dominance of the principle of unrestrained self-realization, the demand for

¹ As well as many other smaller, may be in size, but not in content all of which will be duly mentioned and quoted as the work develops.

Most of these texts, it should be noted, center around the propriety of literary theory, and how it is viewed nowadays, since this has affected, in a way, my personal viewing of how I should face the challenge of analyzing Auster’s novel.

authentic self-experience, the subjectivism of an overstimulated sensibility, and the release of hedonistic motivations quite incompatible with the discipline required by professional life, and with the moral foundations of a purposive-rational mode of life generally. [...] Bell locates the blame for the dissolution of the Protestant ethic, something which had already disturbed Max Weber, with an ‘adversary culture’, that is, with a culture whose modernism encourages hostility to the conventions and the values of everyday life as rationalized under economic and administrative imperatives. (Habermas 42).”

He explains that avant-garde art at one point was exactly what it names states it to be, avant-garde, something that nobody had ever done before. However, eventually it was accepted into the mainstream culture. In much the same way we have managed to adopt Modernism in such a way that it is no longer apart from us, it has become us. But, wishing to loosen the grip Modernity has taken on our everyday life, through the binary division of culture/society, no longer do we look at it as something to strive for (self-realization through economic independence, which leads to freedom and independence) rather we wish to liberate ourselves from the constraints (‘mind-forged manacles’ in Blake’s words) we have managed to get caught up in. This is where postmodernism stems from, the idea that we need to be released from the power that restrains culture and society. We need to stop accepting what is given to us as ‘natural’ and begin to consider the option of looking at the ropes that tie us to ‘normality’. How do we begin to do this? This is a long and complicated process, but when it comes to literature it would be accurate to state that we should read critically. In better words, we need to denaturalize while reading:

“[...] it is built into a reader’s acquired responses to make sense of everything and to find sense even in non-sense. [...] the assumption remains that all literary works should be readable in principle, and that, if a work resists the reader’s efforts to make sense of it, the writer is at fault. [...] we interpret a text as merely stating what is ‘really’ the case – the way things are. This is related to the idea that a text speaks of accepted knowledge – attitudes and ideas which are part of common knowledge [...] Next, there are the conventions which a particular work observes and the reader interprets. [...] we allow ourselves to absorb the atmosphere and point of view of a fiction we are reading; we try to interpret everything according to the special viewpoint which the text provides. [...] The

essential point is that readers always look for some sort of coherence however bizarre or fragmented it may be (50).”

This theory is called Naturalisation and is described by Selden in his chapter on Structuralism in *Practising Theory and Reading Literature*, it is relevant for a post-structuralist thesis, in my opinion, to include the way in which we, readers, ‘make sense’ of that which should not have it.

To analyze a postmodern text we should first understand where the theory comes from, structuralism sought to imbue texts with a certain structure and therefore, easier access to analysis. However in this quote we can see how Selden explains that readers (not theorists, who tend to analyze the deeper structure) can understand a text without necessarily needing a thorough understanding of a certain theory. It is possible to make sense of a post modern text, such as Auster’s novel, where the world presented is not one that any reader (as far as I would know) can relate to since we are seeing an apocalyptic work but, would it be post modern just because of that?

Saussure was the main thinker behind the idea that there is a **natural** bond between a signifier and a signified. All concepts we have stored in our mindset is somehow related to a thing in the real world, and it was his belief that these bonds were inseparable. However this idea became outdated, too many arguments against it could be found, not the least of which that elements created in the imagination of people such as mermaids and leprechauns could hardly be related to things in the real world. Poststructuralists began to introduce the idea that signifiers ‘called the tune.’ According to them ‘the authors of works has no power to control or fix their meanings’ (maybe something that could be contested by Orwell’s *Newspeak*). Barthes introduced the phrase ‘the death of the author’, the author has been lost he simply takes whatever he can from the entire network of significations that has been layed out for him and uses those to create his work (Selden 1989: 76). We could then say that the main idea behind post structuralism or postmodernism is that nothing is fixed or completely natural. We can see it in Foucault’s “*Surveiller et punir*”, where he exposes the existence of a disciplinary society that has established itself almost without people noticing

the extend of its power and knowledge (pouvoir/savoir) on the places it controls². And we can see it with Anna, who lives in a world that does not function according to what one would call “normality”. This may allow a complete discussion, perhaps on a different occasion, of what is called normality; however that is not my priority of analysis. What I am trying to show is the fact that, nothing is completely stable, that the world and the signifiers and signified (to use adequate wording) we have assigned it, are neither stable nor natural. They are all fictively created. Anna in her post modern world is a very good example for this situation. Her world is no longer relatable to anything we would know.

Analysis

The Postmodern focus and Anna Blume

Upon our first “meeting” with Anna her description of the city allows us to see how far it has veered from what we consider a modern city. Buildings have crumbled, efficiency in its citizens is overlooked and not relevant, and most importantly, streets do not exist. In other words, signifiers and signified, which we have associated to the natural world, do not have a natural relationship, semiotics allows us to see that: “We can never say that a particular signifier or string of signifiers (an entire literary work, for example) has been interpreted once and for all (80).” There is no end to what we can construct from different literary texts, and though it is not appropriate here to discuss Literary Theory, this allows a future understanding of what will later be deconstruction.

However it could be possible to argue that this idea is not solely mine (it is not) as Selden himself states:

“The concept of naturalization makes it possible for us to see that defamiliarised perceptions may be accommodated to different reading strategies. [...] This structuralist concept helps us to understand how particular ways of reading can support particular forms of ideology.” (54)

² See Foucault 1975. His study of the “naissance de la prison” allows us to see the interconnected system the French Government (in this case) has created to watch over and punish those who step outside of what is normatively correct.

This is why Iser's reception theory is also of interest to me on the specific point where he ascertains that to read literature you need to be open-minded enough so that it can affect you, according to Terry Eagleton's criticism of Iser's theory, this becomes a vicious circle where the 'enlightened' reader is the one who can be most affected by a text of literature, yet is at the same time unaffected since it is already predisposed to read that certain text in a certain way. Though interesting, and putting Eagleton's criticism aside, it would be to study the necessity to put one's ideology 'to the side' when reading, this study would be never-ending. No one ideology is completely the same, and although this might be a cliché, every person is unique, the way in which he perceives his own ideology might be different from another person's (Eagleton 69-70). However it is Selden who also completes the viewing of Iser's theory by stating:

“By resolving the contradictions between the various viewpoints which emerge from the text or by filling the ‘gaps’ between viewpoints in various ways, the readers take the text into their consciousnesses and make it their own *experience*. It seems that, while texts do set terms on which the reader actualized meanings, the reader's own ‘store of experience’ will take some part in the process. The reader's existing consciousness will have to make certain internal adjustments in order to receive and process the alien viewpoints which the text presents as reading takes place. This situation produces the possibility that the reader's own ‘world-view’ may be modified as a result of internalizing, negotiating and realizing the partially indeterminate elements of the text: to use Iser's words, reading ‘gives us the chance to formulate the unformulated’ (Selden, Widdowson, Brooker: 54 italics in the original).”

We are, in some way, affected by the experience of a text. However I would like to note that, it is my belief that this can be possible when there are blanks to fill. In Eco's words, an 'open' text is bound to leave blanks (Selden, Widdowson, Brooker: 54). Auster's novel certainly does, as I mentioned before, what happened to Anna after she stopped writing? Did she and the rest, get a chance to leave? How far did the car make it? Did they eventually forget all those last things? Is there anything they remembered from their past lives? Questions that remain unanswered may allow us to experience a text more, this does not necessarily mean that all novels that leave questions unanswered will, in some way,

give us a new perspective, as one might conclude. Rather, I believe it important to point out that the adjustments we make in our way of understanding the world, when reading a text, are more likely to happen when the text itself does not offer an opportunity to resolve an issue, or answer a question.

Eagleton explains that a narrative naturally loses elements; this is what makes its existence possible in the first place. Since an object is lost we, readers, get interested in the story and will want to find out if the element is restored in the end; we are worried for this loss but at the same time this lack captivates our attention. However he also mentions the possibility of the element never appearing, which would cause us to become annoyed. He emphasizes the idea that, as readers, we need to know that this missing object will return (Eagleton 161). This is a complicated idea when we wish to relate it to Anna's story in *Auster*. However we see it in all the elements that are lost along the way of the narrative, how we see that all objects can acquire new meaning when sold by Restoration Agents, or when Anna and Isabel as object hunters try to instill life into what we would normally consider rubble and garbage. When it comes to the story line specifically we see that Anna will never be able to find her way home (or at least not that we know, it could maybe happen, or have happened, but the book ends on the open note that we will never know), and words or objects that are lost will never come back. She even states it herself, when people forget things they forget the word (*Auster* 88 – 89) the main problem is that most of the time people “do not always forget the same thing”, the signified loses its signifier and we are left with a hole. If we were ever to recuperate the lost object in any way, we would have to 'name' it all over again. Things are forgotten, people are forgotten, places are. There is nothing left except whatever the future may grant us. There is no fort, there is no da³. Therefore the only thing left is hope; hope that the future may give them something better. The only way to get up is having something to look forward to. What is lost in this narrative is almost everything else, but the reader is not left with a fulfilled desire, that Anna will go back to her own country and live happily ever after with Sam, we can only hope they do. The only closure we are able to get is the fact that the story ends where it

³ This phrase is adopted from the theory Freud developed, as mentioned by Eagleton, where he observes that for every 'fort' (gone) there is a 'da' (here); this Eagleton relates to literary theory as objects lost and the found in the narrative of a story (160-161).

began, with Anna writing in her notebook, Anna's last words are: "This is Anna Blume, your old friend from another world. Once we get to where we are going, I will try to write you again, I promise (188)." But she does not, as evident when those are the final words in the novel, we still do not know who she is writing to, but we do know she has managed to tell her story the way she wanted to.

There is a need to put ourselves in a disadvantaged position, we have to assume (as literary theory very accurately suggests⁴) that we do not understand anything in Anna's world. We can empathize as we read but it is fair to admit that in the beginning, everything is new. The elements we encounter throughout the narration, such as the constant loss of knowledge, Anna's reminders that we are in fact reading a story dedicated to someone, Anna's resilience to join in with the societal hopelessness of never being able to abandon the city, constantly relating herself with people or projects that will keep her high-spirited; help us envision this "new world", a Postmodern era where individualization has reached a highly individualized point. A world so consumed by its industriousness to the point it has imploded on itself.

The need for an understanding of everyday life

Knowledge of everyday life is relevant when it comes to analyzing life in cities since it permits analysis on how citizens will relate to each other. When it comes to Anna Blume it allows us to understand that she is trapped in a world she will come to understand only through observation of how citizens trapped in the country of last things interact; it allows us to see how it is possible to adapt even to an extreme situation as is a desolated country. Not only is Anna presented with the difficulty of trying to adapt in a country she is unfamiliar with, but she also has to learn how to survive it every day in a manner she never has been confronted with before. Gardiner admires "the remarkable ability that human beings display in adapting to new situations and coping with ongoing existential challenges (6)," which can be shown through an observation of people in their everyday life. It is not easy in this country. Anna herself notes: "Until they have learned the ways of the city, these

⁴ See Eagleton.

newcomers are easy victims (7).” And yet they stay and try to overcome all the difficulties they are faced with until they understand what is happening around them.

Gardiner’s book presents an interesting perspective to study Auster’s novel from. Since it focuses on everyday life it opens up the possibility of studying this novel not only from the point of view of a certain literary theory, but from the general point of view of everyday life. And every day life is constantly open to transformation, both positive and negative; it is constantly seeking empowerment in the daily aspects of life. This is not to be seen at expense of culture, or art, or intellectual development, they are complimentary. One cannot function without the other; the everyday life needs “strength and resilience”. Mainly because the everyday world is constantly working towards identity-planning, the intellectuals, technocrats and urban planners try to create a rule-abiding and managed world, which is one of the ideas in Orwell’s novel 1984, there aren’t any places people can go to and be free, everything is limited somehow. Be it by streets or be it by restricting their behavior, offenses are punished and called out in front of the rest of society⁵. However “perfectly controllable systems are simply not possible (as chaos theorists are fond of reminding us), but also because we subvert the total commodification and homogenization of experience through myriad (if sometimes fleeting) expressions of passion, non-logicity and the imaginary.” (Gardiner 15)

This is what we see in everyday life, that anything is possible, that not all things can be labeled or boxed into categories. As we can see, in the paragraph above, Gardiner presents an inherent criticism - which we can see in most works used to base this thesis on - to modernism, and the idea that it is possible to create a society which is based solely on the idea of efficiency. The criticism also points towards ‘higher’ culture and the studies most social sciences make of society, I said before that every day life has been disregarded as an object of study, Gardiner also believes this. It is everyday life that allows citizens to relate to each other, whether it is the flâneur strolling around 19th century Paris and observing his fellow citizens, or Anna trying to adapt to a country she has never known before by

⁵ See Foucault 1975.

observing what others do, everyday life is essential to comprehend the way in which a society, and the culture that comes with it, function.

This is seen in Auster's novel when the library burns down. This library was the last symbol of knowledge the city had. Anna had spent six months there; this is the place where she met Sam. Her first encounter with the library is an element of recognition to the reader that knowledge is still somehow valued, even in this society where everything has been neglected in favor of surviving, knowledge is still valued. To refer again to Gardiner, the everyday life is important, it is necessary to know how to keep up with the cities ever changing geography and new situations that arise (16). The library, with all the knowledge it contains (professors, scientists, religious figures), is an emblem of how the institutionalized knowledge is kept safe from the crumbling country, how it and the people who guard it are still considered 'apart', on another level, when compared to 'commoners', or better said, the 'other' citizens.

"This was the first time I had been in the National Library. It was a splendid edifice, with portraits on the walls of governors and generals, rows of Italianate columns, and beautiful inlaid marble – one of the landmark buildings of the city. As with everything else, however, its best days were behind it. A ceiling on the second floor had caved in, columns had toppled and cracked, books and papers were strewn everywhere (94)."

Even the description Anna offers of this building contrasts with all other descriptions encountered throughout the narration; and 'landmark' is nothing else we can find in this city. It is interesting to note, though, that the books are 'strewn', so even if this place is protected from the rest of the chaos in the country it still cannot avoid eventually becoming prey of it. The knowledge that was once considered above all else is beginning to be handled carelessly. It can be more specifically seen when she mentions:

"The books [that could be found strewn all over the library] were how we kept warm during the winter. In the absence of any other kind of fuel, we would burn them in the cast-iron stove for heat. I know it sounds like a terrible thing to have done, but we really didn't have much choice. [...] The curious thing about it was that I never felt any regrets. To be honest, I actually think I enjoyed throwing those books into the flames. Perhaps it released some secret anger in me; perhaps it was simply a recognition of the fact that it did not matter

what happened to them. The world they had belonged to was finished, and at least now they were being used to some purpose (116).”

Priorities have changed. What once seemed unimaginable (the disappearance of knowledge), and what would be unthinkable to do (burning books), no longer applies. Surviving comes first and foremost. But what is more important there is a deep acceptance in Anna, she says she enjoyed the fact of burning the books as a symbol that everything from the world she used to know is slowly crumbling and vanishing. Nothing matters anymore, except learning how to live in a world that is constantly threatening to have you vanish too, it is a hostile city, a hostile country; citizens must accept it or fight a lost battle. Anna has accepted all of this by the time she has arrived in the library, at this point of the narrative she has already fought to many battles with the city that she has lost. She came into the country thinking she would be able to move within it with the same ease she did in her native country, however it did not go how she intended. The books represent the way in which the ‘old’ society was construed, one where knowledge and education came first; this ‘new’ society only answers to survival of the fittest, whatever book-knowledge or scientific knowledge, or religious knowledge you might have is not relevant, and will burn when faced with the outside world (the world outside of the walls of the library).

This sort of small ‘protest’ Anna exemplifies through the books, comes to a completion upon the burning of the library, of which Anna is informed after she has arrived at Woburn House. Not only is at this point of the book knowledge literally ‘burned’, she also has lost her baby, Sam, and the book they were writing together. Everything vanishes in this country, nothing lasts, even the scientists and religious figures the government tried to protect. In this new society everything functions differently, and people have to adapt or vanish.

Control over the city: A comparison of the usage of the street with Orwell’s 1984

This is not the only form of ‘new order’ we have to learn upon reading ‘In the country of last things’. The usage of streets is especially interesting in Auster’s novel, a comparison with Orwell’s 1984 allows for the understanding of a world that is dominated

by one ideology in the latter, and a world that seems to be dominated solely by uncertainty in the former. It is clear that both use the streets for different purposes.

While with Orwell we explore a totalitarian world, the street is not the focus of the story, it is rather a stage where Winston plays out his hatred towards Big Brother in a physical way, and it is an element he can use to let out his frustration to the world he is stuck in. In Winston's analysis of the city: "The reality was decaying, dingy cities where underfed people, shuffled to and fro in leaky shoes, in patched-up nineteenth-century houses that smelt always of cabbage and bad lavatories. He seemed to see a vision of London, vast and ruinous, city of a million dustbins [...] (Orwell 63)." It is a city that is not cared for anymore. It is secondary to everything else; the domination of Big Brother, the existence of Big Brother makes everything else secondary. The fact that Winston envisions a decaying city is a reflection of how a new city is created, one that is a mere podium for an all controlling entity to display its power. For power is the main element in this novel by Orwell, power in the form of a totalitarian entity that will not, at any cost, relinquish it. There is an absolute dominance, and that is all that matters. No matter the cost, power is to be held by Big Brother and no one else, it controls everything: "The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became truth (Orwell 63)." However this does not trump Winston's necessity for rebellion, and as mentioned before, he does try to use the city to his advantage, to look for hope in it. He does this rashly as he explains:

"He had walked several kilometers over pavements [...]. This was the second time in three weeks that he had missed an evening at the Community Centre: a rash act, since you could be certain that the number of your attendances at the Centre was carefully checked. In principle a Party member had no spare time, and was never alone except in bed. It was assumed that when he was not working, eating, or sleeping he would be taking part in some kind of communal recreation: to do anything that suggested a taste for solitude, even to go for a walk by yourself, was always slightly dangerous. [...] But this evening as he came out of the Ministry the balminess of the April air had tempted him. The sky was warmer blue than he had seen it that year, and suddenly the long, noisy evening at the Centre, the boring, exhausting games, the lectures, the creaking camaraderie oiled by gin, had seemed intolerable. *On impulse he had turned away from the busstop and wandered off into the*

labyrinth of London, first south, then east, the north again, losing himself among unknown streets and hardly bothering in which direction he was going (Orwell 69 italics mine)."

Winston makes a rash decision; "on impulse" he goes on a walk about. The city should not be as enticing to him as it presents itself in this quote, but it is. The open air represents a certain freedom that the interior does not; inside he is forced to interact and to be a part of this totalitarian world, outside of the party-build-buildings he is free. Outside there are no restraints put on his free will, at least not as much as when he has to be inside of a community centre. When he presents himself in the centre his freewill is bound, in theory he is free to do as he pleases inside, but he knows that every activity he engages, or will engage in is something already prepared by the party. By going outside, both metaphorically and literally, of what he is allowed, he has a taste of a controlled kind of freedom. Through his musings we can read that the parts of the city he explores are where the proles live, exactly where he believes hope lies; yet, as seen in his own narration, he knows how dangerous this is. Winston is being adventurous; this is the vitality that allows us to avoid becoming completely blasé: "an unresponsiveness to stimulation; refusal or inability to be emotionally moved by or involved in people and things (Wolff)." This moment represents that exact moment when Winston first looks for a stimulation of his nerves, a 'pursuit of pleasure'. He knows, he is perfectly aware of the foolishness of his decision, nevertheless he goes on anyway, and then when he understands he simply does not care anymore. In Simmel's words, "an incapacity [...] emerges to react to new sensations with the appropriate energy." This blasé attitude emerges from "a life in boundless pursuit of pleasure [which] makes one blasé because it agitates the nerves to their strongest reactivity for such a long time that they finally cease to react at all." He is uninterested in what may happen to him, he simply does not want to grasp the power and extend of dominance of Big Brother.

"A twinge of fear went through him. [...] the instant that he allowed his thoughts to wander, his feet had brought him back here of their own accord. It was precisely against suicidal impulses of this kind that he had hoped to guard himself by opening the diary. At the same time he noticed that although it was nearly twenty-one hours the shop was still open. With the feeling that he would be less conspicuous inside than hanging about on the

pavement, he stepped through the doorway. If questioned, he could plausibly say that he was trying to buy razor blades (Orwell 78).”

In the city you take yourself to places you remember, Winston always prepares himself to be questioned, wandering brings on thinking which brings on questioning of the power that hangs over the city, and this is a crime. Everything that Winston does outside of what is considered “normal” behavior in the city, such as wandering, or missing his reunions at the Center, falls into the category of questioning of authority which is not permitted. Every activity Winston realizes while interacting solely with the city distances him more from the society he lives in. The city is not given importance, it is looked upon as secondary, because it is pushed aside (or hidden if you want, under its decaying aspect) by the dominant power. The city is foreign, separate from society; and society in 1984, is where bonds are formed that will allow its members to restrain each other from deviating from ‘proper’ behavior.

On the other side, there is Auster, who shows us a world where the street has been lost in such a way that it has become a character in itself. It is no longer the street we could recognize as a modern street but rather a character that looms in Anna's horizon and threatens her constantly.

However different their treatment of the streets may be, we can still see in Auster that same existence of the blasé attitude mentioned before, “Food theft is so common in the streets that it is not even considered a crime anymore (4).” But it is only existent in some situations, or adopted by some people. Anna warns about becoming blasé:

“The essential thing is no to become inured. For habits are deadly. Even if it is for the hundredth time, you must encounter each thing as if you have never known it before. No matter how many times, it must always be the first time. This is next to impossible, I realize, but it is an absolute rule (7).”

It is important to emphasize that both books present the characters in different city landscapes. As already mentioned during the introduction to these novels, the manner in which the main characters interact with the street is different, also the fact that Winston is subject to an omnipresent narrator, whereas Anna is relating her story directly to us.

However, neither can live without their urban landscape. Winston is subjected to it as it is constructed by the party. Every place is watched over, every nook and cranny is build up in such a way that it does not have free spirit, it has been built in such a way to merely be a support of the party, a means to an end. A construction built up for control. On the other hand, Anna's urban landscape has let her roam free, as it has been left to its own devices. The roughness of the city has permeated every being that inhabitates it. While Anna lives in constant fear of the city's capacity to engulf and oblivate her entire being, Winston lives to rebel against it. The city, both cities, have taken these characters and transformed their way of behaving in the world. Anna seeks nothing but to escape, for freewill has been set loose and no longer do men have any control over this menacing entity that is the city; Winston chooses to use the city as a way to confront the existing power that has interpenetrated everything.

As different as these novels might seem, they do belong to a narrative tradition which allows the character to become one with the city, these characters belong in the city, without it, their story would not be. We can also notice this when reading "The Catcher in the Rye"; a novel that uses the city to tell the story of a boy who is searching throughout the city an identity that he has lost.

Every moment must be new, an adventure of sorts. The city "robs you of certainty. There can never be any fixed path, and you can survive only if nothing is necessary to you (6)." This is why I have included this concept of Simmel's into this analysis; the adventure is something constant in Anna's life. However blasé attitude is something that intermixes with her narration. The episodes she recounts after Isabel's death, during the Terrible Winter, after being admitted to the Woburn House and when she begins to work there, all involve moments when she has to consider placing a wall between shocking events and her feelings. A distant sentiment which we can relate to Glen's first mention of London's distant society, in this case this post-society⁶, with a city that is constantly threatening the people who live within its perimeters.

⁶ A society, as defined by the American Heritage Dictionary (see ref.), is "A group of humans broadly distinguished from other groups by mutual interests, participation in characteristic relationships, shared institutions, and a common culture." In this case Anna has landed in a society that, though at one point existed as a common country - which is shown in the fact that they still all people who reside inside the city's limits recognize the municipal garbage, police, the Transformation centers,

Anna, a postmodern flâneur?

Though it might be interesting to enter upon the subject of Anna as a postmodern *flâneuse* (a female flâneur), by broaching the subject of her being a woman, ‘alone against the world’, and wandering the city for a means to survive, this would take an entire thesis on its own. Feminist theories would permit us to study Anna’s viewpoint, although written by a male author, we could argue that by breaking the common mold of a lone female against the world, without the necessity of a male character coming in to “save the day”, he allows the reader to submerge him/herself into a different ideology; one where gender is no longer fundamental, male or female, no one survives in the lost and forsaken world. Whoever you are, from what origin, it does not matter; nothing and no one can stand in the way of human beings, animals and things being forsaken and forgotten. Maybe it could also include an analysis into Anna’s approach to sexuality. The fact that even in this post-society we find a repressed expression of her sexuality, seen when she fears that Ferdinand and Isabel can hear her masturbate. Later on when she sees that sex is one of the motors keeping her alive (when she meets Sam), and lastly when the need for company finds her turning toward Victoria, only to leave her when Sam reappears.

These are various subjects, all can be studied singly or by interrelating them, however since this is not my main topic, I have decided to rather focus on Anna as a flâneur, regardless of her gender, or her capacity to survive by her own means. Could we say that Anna is a true flâneur?

Gardiner offers a general vision of the ‘state of affairs’ we encounter upon entering the 19th century, a time dominated by post-industrialization, where working classes are clearly divided by the division of labor.

“With the consolidation of capitalism and bourgeois society, however, this state of affairs changed dramatically. Social activities became highly differentiated, and ceased to be

as representatives of government – this group of people does not interact, it does not have a place to, and sincerely is scared to fraternize too much. To survive no matter the cost is the main law.

consolidated into a unified whole. Labour is increasingly fragmented, regimented and specialized; family life and leisure are detached from work.” As he accurately presents, there seems to be a clear separation from what private life is and what public life is. And not only when it comes to what can be seen and measured but “consciousness is split into a public and private self, and labour divided into its mental and manual components (Sohn-Rethel 1978) (76).” This subject is broached in Simmel’s essay “The Metropolis and Mental life”, a new type of consciousness is developed as a result of a world that is focused on being practical in its construction, people should keep up with the rapidly changing times, and their mentalities should adapt also.

Gardiner amply focuses on Lefebvre’s ideas, in the chapter exclusively dedicated to the French sociologist; he explains how modernity affects people. Much like Simmel he states: “Modernity encourages an inward-looking, solipsistic consciousness, one that is centered on an individual’s particular occupational specialization, family life, and class-determined forms of commodity consumption.” This results in a relationship based on necessity, towards other people and also to the ‘object-world’. Since most relationships are economical an individual will become highly de-sensitized, modernity makes us see relationships in terms, solely, of possession of both object and others. The world becomes an instrument instead of an element that is a part of our existence. An individual is created with ‘individualistic tendencies’, he creates a barrier between him and the rest of the world. Everything that would seem ‘natural’ is now seen as rare and distant, his life becomes a constant being between two poles ‘public vs. private life’. One cannot interrupt the other. His happiness is based on that which he possesses; house, family, work, income. And it is only through small aspects of life, of a loosening from this sense of power that he feels human, feels free (Gardiner 149). This is what is seen in both of Simmel’s essays and also in what will become of the flâneur.

The concept of flâneur is first traceable, in literature, to Charles Baudelaire who, with his prose poems depicted instants in Parisian life of men walking around the city and observing what was around them. The idea for this character stems, as Walter Benjamin explains,

from ‘panorama literature’⁷ where multiple authors would present stories comparable to dioramas, a moment where everything stood still and the character observing could explain what was happening around him to the smallest detail.

These first description of modern life in the city were called ‘physiologies’, “From the itinerant street vendor of the boulevards to the dandy in the foyer of the opera-house (Benjamin 35).” The way in which they described these characters intermixed in city life helped pave the way to create the flâneur, “who goes on botanizing the asphalt (36).” This could not have been possible without the creation of streets adequate for wandering. The influence of Hausmann on 19th century Paris helped create the arcades, which were the first roaming habitats for flâneurs. Streets were dangerous places for pedestrians, the arcades allowed for a creation of the indoors, outdoors; a place where the flâneur was free to walk around and observe without being hindered. Why would the flâneur need to go outside of his house?

Since this is a mainly bourgeois character, the interior in which he lived has been decorated to suit his needs. Everything in his house, decorations and art pieces, has been chosen to entertain him while at home. However this new city has created the opportunity for him to venture out, and observe art, culture and social interaction not only in his home or in stories printed in the newspaper; there is a chance to see it happening in the moment. The arcades have offered an opportunity to appreciate the modernity the city is being imbued with, as well as the development of the fellow citizens.

Staying with the idea that modernity has somehow separated us from our ‘humanity’, Gardiner offers: “Indeed, modernity creates a generalized *need* for leisure as a separate activity and generates specific (though debased) needs via the advertising industry, which can only be satisfied through the accumulation of commodified objects, images and experiences (84 italics in the original).” The advertising industry in Baudelaire’s Paris was presented through window-shops, which opened up the possibility of seeing everything in a perfect display of how it should be organized, therefore inviting the observer to buy the exact elements put on display. And the need for leisure, as seen in Simmel, is highly

⁷ See Benjamin, Walter. “Charles Baudelaire.”

organized, there is a moment for it, time reserved for its unraveling, and slowly the spaces are also being created where one can be 'free' and enjoy leisure activities when parks are created.

The flâneur is a person who opposes himself to the creation of the fast-paced life the city was slowly being controlled by: "There was the pedestrian who wedged himself into the crowd, but there was also the flâneur who demanded elbow room and was unwilling to forego the life of a gentleman of leisure [...] It is also his protest against their industriousness (Benjamin 54)." The flâneur refuses to give in, he likes being in the crowd for it gives him a sense of commodity⁸, and he is able to feel empathy⁹ when he wanders around the city crowds and interests himself with them in material objects (this is where the displays shown in shop-windows become important), in commodities. We could argue that he is therefore a misunderstood character, he wants to belong in the crowd somehow: "The flâneur only seems to break through this 'unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest' by filling the hollow space created in him by such isolation, with the borrowed – and fictitious – isolations of strangers (Benjamin 58)." We go back to arguing that the flâneur enjoys the city, he wants to enjoy it as a safe haven of urban development. Nevertheless, it is good to remind ourselves that this character does come, with these beliefs, from a bourgeois class; he enjoys the city and its development because he sees it as a further modernization of society. The development of the city, the creation of urbanity, allows this point of view, but it obscures the part of society which is helping create this city.

There is a part of society which does not enjoy watching commodities, and it is also this part which will duly take over the flâneur himself in some time:

"To be sure, insofar as a person, as labour power, is a commodity, there is no need for him to identify himself as such. The more conscious he becomes of his mode of existence, the mode imposed upon him by the system of production, the more he proletarianizes himself, the more he will be gripped by the chill of the commodity economy and the less he will feel like empathizing with commodities (Benjamin 58)."

⁸ Benjamin 55

⁹ Idem.

These new people, the city was creating, were not interested in becoming flâneurs, to roam the city without any means; they had been pushed into this system. But Baudelaire did not take them into account, nor does the flâneur notice them, he does not therefore have an understanding of the entire metropolis. He is limited to what has been opened to him.

And the night life has also opened up to the flâneur in Baudelaire; the appearance of city by gaslight, which the flâneur also used to stay out later and observe the city. There was no limit to the time he could spend outside, the flâneur was a person able to know the city at all hours; and it also allowed a greater safety when wondering out. “This increased safety in the city made the crowds feel at home in the open streets even at night, and removed the starry sky from the ambience of the big city more reliably than this was done by its tall buildings (Benjamin 50).”

No longer is there a necessity of mentioning what we could call, the “truly” outdoors. The metropolis moves separately from the rest of the country. It has a uniqueness of ever being awake. It is therefore possible to exist in it at all hours. And it is possible to observe the crowds at all hours. “The moon and the stars are no longer worth mentioning (50),” when it is possible to find all sorts of flora and fauna in the city.

The creation of public transportation confronted citizens with each other, the fact of having to be together in a enclosed space for over five minutes forced people to observe each other; the flâneur decides to observe others but in such a way that he goes unnoticed. The idea is for him to see but not be seen.

Physiologies allowed for the appearance of a literature devoted to life in the city, a special part is devoted to the investigation of crowds, of the masses in the city, where anyone or anything could get lost into. We are seeing the origin of the detective story, which can be closely related to the flâneur:

“Strolling gives him the best prospects of doing so [playing detective]. Baudelaire wrote: ‘An observer is a *prince* who is everywhere in possession of his incognito.’ If the flâneur is thus turned into an unwilling detective, it does him a lot of good socially, for it accredits his

idleness. He only seems to be indolent, for behind this indolence there is the watchfulness of an observer who does not take his eyes off a miscreant (40-41).”

Poe was inspired by the character of the flâneur, and decided to create a narrative around this topic, which is a result of the consolidation of the city, a genre that allowed him to look deeper into men’s consciousness, and motives. Baudelaire, with his poems, aided Poe’s creation. Benjamin offers his interpretation on the short story, “The Man of the crowd” by Poe, in his chapter “The Flâneur” in ‘Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism’. In it we can see the relationship both him and Baudelaire make between the figure of the detective and the flâneur, this subject will be dealt upon more thoroughly later on.

It might be interesting to know that Baudelaire himself wanted to embody the character of the flâneur, “Baudelaire loved solitude, but he wanted it in a crowd (Benjamin 50).” This permits an understanding of his creation of such a character as the flâneur.

This jump from the flâneur to another character that roams the city was bound to happen, but Baudelaire had not envisioned it in his Paris yet. However, it does occur, and the flâneur figure is slowly engulfed by the city, as the city grows it becomes more impersonal. It needs to account for the fact that “the disappearance of people in the masses of the big cities leaves no traces (47).” This is a city post-flâneur existence. As late as 1864, people still tried to be noticed above the mere objects they possessed but to no avail. The big city eliminates the existence of individual beings and rather groups them all into categories. It becomes a regulation to fit into the mold that has been imposed. Individuality slowly disappears.

All of these features characterize what can be understood by flâneur. When we offer a comparison to Anna’s state in “In the country of last things”, we see a clear contrast. Obviously this city is post-flâneur existence; there is not a way around it. The gaslights that helped create Baudelaire’s character as a roamer by night have disappeared and the setting, the city has been left to its own devices, and so have the people that have come to inhabit it. Buildings fall apart, public places have become rubble.

“The rubble is a special problem. You must learn how to manage the unseen furrows, the sudden clusters of rocks, the shallow ruts, so that you do not stumble or hurt yourself. And then there are the tolls, these worst of all, and you must use cunning to avoid them. Wherever buildings have fallen or garbage has gathered, large mounds stand in the middle of the street, blocking all passage. Men build these barricades whenever the materials are at hand, and then they mount them, with clubs, or rifles, or bricks, and wait on their perches for people to pass by. They are in control of the street (Auster 5 – 6).”

The street (as a public element) does not belong to the people who live in the city anymore; it has been taken away from them and has acquired a life of its own. Whoever is strongest, can survive. Even certain crimes (such as stealing¹⁰) have become common place, and are no longer considered relevant as a crime. This would undoubtedly help us explain why Anna is not a flâneur, since Tribunella also goes on explaining: “The figure of the urban stroller is defined in part by his freedom to move about the city (68).” Anna is clearly free to roam around the city; however freedom here is trumped by the survival instinct. She knows that no matter how independent she may be, or whatever ability she may have, she is not strong enough (mainly due to the lack of food) to defend herself against men with weapons. A battle is going on between the citizens and the city. One which is not relatable to the way the flâneur is faced with the city. The flâneur, in a way, is a care-free person. He is allowed to roam the streets because nobody notices him, since the idea behind the flâneur is that he becomes invisible in the metropolis that the city has become. A city so worried to be efficient and to create efficient life, that it no longer worries those who have no input in the creation of this sort of life.

In this reality, Anna’s reality, there is only the Municipal market, the only place Anna mentions where big crowds of people will gather to buy food. But even there interaction is scarce. Individuality is the only thing that is left, it is what will set you apart and make you realize that it is the only way of survival.

Anna survives on her own for the better first part of the book; her observations have allowed us an insight to the city. Nevertheless she encounters Isabel, an old lady, whom she

¹⁰ “Food theft is so common in the streets that it is not even considered a crime anymore (Auster 4).”

saves from being trampled by Runners, who takes her under her wing and teaches her what cannot be learned but from experience.

“We didn’t do much talking in the streets, however. That was a danger Isabel warned me against many times. Never think about anything, she said. Just melt into the street and pretend 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. Of all the advice she gave, it was the one thing I ever understood (Auster 57).”

It is a different way of acting on the street, nobody wants to be recognized on the street, identified, since crowds are scarce, it is necessary to merely become part of the scenery. While the flâneur relishes in the idea of being able to empathize with the objects around him, and takes comfort in knowing his roaming is all that he needs, Anna is constantly alert to what is happening, she cannot permit herself to get sucked into the city. And contrary to the limited vision, we have already mentioned, the flâneur seems to possess, Anna at one point realizes that the city is not everything. That something exists beyond it:

“For the first time since my arrival, I had proof that the city was not everywhere, that something existed beyond it, that there were other worlds besides this one. It was like a revelation, like a rush of oxygen into my lungs, and it almost made me dizzy to think about it. I saw one rooftop after another. I saw the smoke rising from the crematoria and the power plants. I heard an explosion from a nearby street. I saw people walking below, too small to be human anymore. I felt the wind on my face and smelled the stench in the air. Everything seemed alien to me, and as I stood there on the roof next to Isabel, still too exhausted to say anything, I suddenly felt that I was dead, as dead as Ferdinand in his blue suit, as dead as the people who were burning into smoke at the edges of the city (74).”

This realization that she is dead can be associated to the fact that everything is disappearing in this city, nothing is at it seems to be. The concept Anna has of city, has changed, and so has she through the experience of living somewhere where objects and people slowly vanish. The scene occurs after Ferdinand’s death when, instead of taking him to the crematoria outside of the city as they should do, Isabel and Anna decide to throw him off the building and into the street. Isabel believes this will make him seem brave, for only

Jumpers (people who commit suicide by jumping of buildings) have enough courage to end their lives this way. It is also the moment where Anna realizes that life or death do not mean much in this all-consuming decaying place. That, even though, she happily realizes that the city is not everywhere, is not an all-engulfing entity, despair grips her as she knows there is no escape. A flâneur feels at ease in the city, feels part of it and can relate to it, all of these feeling are not seen in Anna and cannot be found throughout the novel. She is afraid of everything the city incarnates. But in this scene Isabel is still alive, aside from all the anguish her realization carries, there is still an amount of comfort from knowing that there is still a place for her in the city. She explains that the next few months she spends as if dead, but there was still someone to support her, a person she could rely on. However, when Isabel dies, Anna is left with nothing: “I had been in the city for more than a year now, and nothing had happened. There was some money in my pocket, but I had no job, no place to live. After all the ups and downs, I was right back where I had started (85).” It all comes to a crashing end, and an even more daunting understanding that the city is unpredictable and an overall dangerous place. She begins to finally realize that normal standards will not apply: “That is how it works in the city. Every time you think you know the answer to a question, you discover that the question makes no sense (85).” Parameters for understanding this society and city are not the same as the ones she used to know, it has taken her over a year to realize this, and it is all the more interesting to see when we see the construction of the idea. No matter how many questions you ask, they will always be wrong and therefore unable to provide an answer, this is the moment where she needs to either learn to reformulate her questions or simply accept her existence in this city as it is. Contrary to Winston, who still sees hope in the proles, in 1984; Anna realizes that in this city despair has taken over. There is nothing left, either to do or to fight for. However both characters still manage to imagine a better world, it may be seen as a child-like fantasy.

Eric L. Tribunella provides us with a description of the child flâneur, and though it may not be entirely adequate in these times to relate children to women, I will allow myself to cite a few of his examples. Mainly because it is Anna herself who reminds us that in the state of abandonment people in the city are in:

“So many of us have become like children again. It’s not that we make an effort, you understand, or that anyone is really conscious of it. But when hope disappears, when you find that you have given up hoping even for the possibility of hope, you tend to fill the empty spaces with dreams, little childlike thoughts and stories to keep yourself going (9).”

Tribunella writes that the child, as much as the flâneur, is able to look at a dirty and overcrowded modern city, and still find beauty in its midst. “(...) the flâneur is one who is carefully attentive to the world around him as he walks, a critical observer of the city and its people, and one who learns from them (64).” Relating Anna to Tribunella’s description she does not fill this mold; she tries to avoid the city, more specifically the streets. She tells us when the novel begins about all the dangers encountered if you roam the city: “There are people so thin, she wrote, they are sometimes blown away. The winds in the city are ferocious, always gusting off the river and singing in your ears, always buffeting you back and forth, always swirling papers and garbage in your path (3).” Even such common climatic elements as wind can become an enemy.

At one point Anna decides to find a way out, any way out. However this city is not one to release people easily. While trying to find a way back ‘home’, she makes her way to the docks to find out about ships and when encountering a worker who has been hired to build a wall to the sea, and him explaining that she will not find ship leaving, she tries to ask if he knows of any airplanes and ends up realizing that he does not remember the word ‘airplane’. Things vanish and so do elements in people’s memories.

“You see what you are up against here. It’s not just that things vanish – but once they vanish, the memory of them vanishes as well. Dark areas form in the brain, and unless you make a constant effort to summon up the things that are gone, they will quickly be lost to you forever. I am no more immune to this disease than anyone else, and no doubt there are many such blanks inside me. A thing vanishes, and if you wait too long before thinking about it, no amount of struggle can ever wrench it back. Memory is not an act of will, after all. It is something that happens in time, the brain is bound to falter, things are bound to slip through it (87).”

She is determined to write down her story and convey the existence in the city as accurately as possible, which explains why the beginning of the story is an introduction to life in the city, a thorough explanation of how most things work, and how people function inside the city.

It would seem important to emphasize this idea, the fact that Anna's writing is cathartic for her, she is letting everything out. She is somehow picking up the work she lost with Sam (whose book burned together with the library) and recording what she has been through since her arrival. It will also help her remember, since this city takes people over in ways they cannot begin to imagine, they will inevitably forget things, start living as if they are only put on earth to survive. In Hyvärinen's work "Acting, Thinking, and Telling: Anna Blume's Dilemma in Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things*" he compares Primo Levi's recounts of his days spent in Auschwitz with Anna's survival in the city. In this extremely interesting article he explores the similarities, such as the necessity of good shoes, the crematoria, and most of all her encounters with the Jews, and the fact that she has waited this long to reveal to the reader that she is Jewish. Also that she wants the person whom she is writing to, to understand the horror she has been through, conveying it all through writing.

Horror is something many people can relate to, and some of the elements Hyvärinen mentions in his article, such as the existence of ghettos, which Sarmiento (2006) also shows Paul Auster himself has presented as factual inspiration for this novel, are all things people in the past century have had to live through. However it is the combination of all these facts, the idea that they are all happening in one place what makes this novel fictional, in some way. This is why Anna needs to explain what is happening all over the city, why we need her to contextualize the situation, to be able to empathize with her in her struggle against an unknown city that seems to be constantly changing. And even though she tries to explain, many things remain lost to the reader. This characteristic of hers might be related to the flâneur, she wants to portray the city just as it has been presented to her. However this small event in Anna's life, as we will learn later on, does not happen in the midst of her observations, as a flâneur would make it seem, it happens when she is safe in the comfort of a private space.

Anna describes that in the country of Last Things objects vanish they do not die, they do not disappear, since this would involve a certain remembrance on the part of people, vanishing seems to imply the ephemeral existence of all objects - and people¹¹ –. Nothing is constant, consistent or embedded into the earth or the country; the elements simply release their grip on reality and cease to be in a very transient manner. At first the loss of the element will leave a void that will later be covered with other memories, not to be remembered again. To relate this to our analysis of the flâneur we can see that Anna is a mere character trying to oppose becoming part of the commonality, she tries to avoid forgetting, forces herself to remember, but she knows she will fall prey to the disease eventually. A flâneur is someone, as we saw by the development of this character in physiologies, who remembers the people he encounters, who takes such care in describing his precise subjects that he will not forget. She does not remember everything, maybe she never will get those memories back, that is just the way the city works.

Crowds in Poe and Auster

Another important feature of the flâneur is his ability to know what goes on between the boundaries he so often wanders through. This clearly is not Anna's case.

According to Tribunella “Baudelaire describes the flâneur as one who observes and yet is unobserved (...) The true flâneur attempts to understand the crowd (77 - 79).” Anna does manage at a certain point to understand the daily standards she has to live by if she wishes to survive, she understands the crowd somehow. Her descriptions of the ‘city life’, allow us to further look into this decimated city. We read about suicide clubs, euthanasia clinics, about the language of ghosts, the governmental organization –the disposal of bodies and of excrement-, the different religions, the assassination clubs and the existing jobs. This would make us think that Anna knows the city, that she may be a flâneur. However any degree of flânerie Anna would have amount to have is lost the moment she jumps out of the window

¹¹ So far the focus has been on the fact that objects are slowly vanish; Anna, however, also mentions the fact that people will vanish too if close attention is not paid. Specifically, when living in the library Anna gains a friend in a Rabbi, after a few months he disappears: “You see what things are like in this country. Everything disappears, people as surely as objects, the living along with the dead. I mourned the loss of my friend, felt pulverized by the sheer weight of it. There was not even the certainty of death to console me – nothing more than a kind of blank, a ravaging null (113-114).”

at the human slaughter house. She is taken to Woburn House, where she stays until the end of her narration.

Woburn house offers a sort of community, a sentiment of belonging that the rest of the city does not, but it does not offer an opportunity to be a flâneur. It has enclosed spaces and “a small private park (130),” that allow it to separate from the street and the rest of city life. There are no crowds, or public spaces to walk through and to observe others without them noticing (Tribunella 77). Noticeably the crowd, public places, and habits of people in the city have, obviously, different purposes and different ways of organizing as we would commonly see in a modern city. Especially since, in this case, the crowd is not a physical entity, but the mass of people roaming the city, the signifier has in a way changed its signified. Is that possible when it comes to cities and the citizens? In this case, it should be. We should be able to adapt what we consider a modern city crowd, one place full of people at the same time (a square, a street), to one that is able to grasp the new sentiment in this lost city. The mass of people exist, maybe even in the same building, we do not know how many, but that is not relevant since we cannot put a precise number on a crowd. However I would like to point out that the necessity to redefine the concept of ‘crowd’ as well as that of city, or citizen, is not merely a whim on my part. Rather an understanding that inevitably, as society and literary theory advances there are concepts that will have to be redefined. It is a way of “filling in the gaps” a story may leave us, we do not understand how a signifier we have related to a signified has suddenly changed, however the narrator may allow us to understand through his description of the world around him, and this is what happens in Anna’s case.

In a certain way, stories related to people who roam cities are filled with unanswered questions, elements are lost in explanations. The narrator’s we encounter are always in an observational position and influence our reading by their relating of the circumstances. Their ideologies influence our perception. In Edgar Allan Poe’s story, ‘The Man of the crowd’, there seem to be questions unanswered, yet not in the same way Anna’s final words leave us perplexed at the sudden interruption of her tale. It is clear that this man cannot be while alone:

“By and by, he passed into a cross street, which, although densely filled with people, was not quite so much thronged as the main one he had quitted. Here a change in his demeanour became evident. He walked more slowly and with less object than before – more hesitatingly. He crossed and re-crossed the way repeatedly without apparent aim; [...] The street was a narrow and long one, and his course lay within it for nearly an hour, during which the passengers had gradually diminished to about that number which is originally seen at noon in Broadway near the Park [...] A second turn brought us into a square, brilliantly lighted, and, overflowing with life. The old manner of the stranger reappeared. His chin fell upon his breast, while his eyes rolled wildly from under his knit brows, in every direction, upon those who hemmed him in. He urged his way steadily and perseveringly. I was surprised, however to find, upon his having made the circuit of the square, that he turned and retraced his steps. Still more was I astonished to see him repeat the same walk several times (6 – 7).”

He is, when he is in the crowd, even more evident is the fact that he does not want to be anywhere else but in the crowd. He decides to retrace his steps every time the city tries to make him loose the crowd. He will walk in circles if necessary, this is the first observation the narrator makes of the strange behavior of this man, but by reading further we realize this seems to be his *modus operandi*, he will cross the entire city to end up in a mass of people, even if they are drunkards. Apparently he does not sleep either, since this short story unfolds from one evening to the next. This is why in the end the narrator gives up on trying to follow him, or discover his reasons behind his constant searching of the crowd.

“I grew wearied unto death, and, stopping fully in front of the wanderer, gazed at him steadfastly in the face. He noticed me not, but resumed his solemn walk, while I, ceasing to follow, remained absorbed in contemplation. ‘This old man,’ I said at length, ‘is the type and the genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. *He is the man of the crowd.* It will be in vain to follow; for I shall learn no more of him, nor of his deeds (10 italics in the original).”

The narrator decides to simply conceptualize this man as ‘of the crowd’, and no longer follows him. Since he knows that, even though he might ask him, the man would not see

him (as he tries at one point to do), for he wishes to remain invisible, unseen to those in the crowd. Maybe it is possible to say that he rejoices the idea of the vitality the crowd allows him to have, the liberty of being in a mass of people without really being seen.

The quote at the beginning of this story is ambiguous. “Ce grand malheur, de ne pouvoir être seul – La Bruyère (1).” Understanding the reality of the modern city, due to its constant vigil, it might be taken as an oppressive fact, in such cities one is never alone, no matter how much one might desire to be. On the other hand it can be argued that it is a fact that belongs to this specific man, he cannot, will not and does not want to be by himself. In this case the quote is interpreted as a worry emerging in the character. He is worried of being by himself. This ambiguity is important as it introduces the confusion the narrator - and the reader along with him - feel throughout the story. We can see that this man seems at ease when not alone, but from where this unease originates we do not know.

Benjamin helpfully provides us with an interpretation for this way of portraying the story: “His [Poe’s] masterly stroke in this description is that he does not show the hopeless isolation of men in their private interests through the variety of their behavior [...] but expresses this isolation in absurd uniformities of dress or conduct (53).” All the people described in his story, even before introducing the main character, have been categorized, are organized into groups which they belong to. Our observer makes a note of this; he can identify them as they walk past his window. They are no longer individuals but belong to a society that does not care for a true understanding of individuality.

The main difference between Baudelaire’s poetry and Poe’s short story is that in the latter people act as if by a ‘reflex action’, as Benjamin explains, Poe focuses mainly on the people in the story rather than the entire setting these people have been put in. “If the crowd is jammed up, it is not because it is being impeded by vehicular traffic – there is no mention of it anywhere – but because it is being blocked by other crowds. In a mass of this nature the art of strolling could not flourish (53).” They block each other; the city is “crowded” in the complete sense of the word. Society blocks individuality.

Control through vocabulary: Redefining concepts

Returning to the analysis on the importance of signifiers and signifieds, we can see their importance when it comes to the control over population. The existence, or non-existence, of a certain understanding between members of the same society, who would tend to establish the same relationships, is not present when it comes to Orwell's 1984. In this novel the totalitarian government has created a new language. The basic idea behind 'Newspeak', which is the name they have given it, is to reduce the possibilities of opposing the regime by restricting what can be said, that is by reducing its vocabulary. "Its vocabulary was so constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a Party member could properly wish to express, while excluding all other meanings and also the possibility of arriving at them by indirectly methods (241)."

Signifiers and signifieds have been reduced to one. Which means there is an equal relationship, if a phrase is uttered there is only one way of interpreting it. This, as Orwell well explains at the end of his novel, is used for the sole purpose of limiting the human action by limiting speech. "Newspeak was designed not to extend but to *diminish* the range of thought, and this purpose was indirectly assisted by cutting the choice of words down to a minimum (242)." Foucault also analyzes discourse, to him "discourse is always inseparable from power, because discourse is the governing and ordering medium of every institution. Discourse determines what is possible to say, what are the criteria of 'truth', who is allowed to speak with authority, and where such speech can be spoken (Selden, Widdowson, Brooker: 147)." If the government is able to control discourse it will create a disciplined man, in his chapter on Discipline in "Surveiller et Punir" Foucault exemplifies the characteristics of a docile body, a disciplined body "Un corps discipliné est le soutien d'un geste efficace (179)."

In short, and to not digress from the main idea, it is another way to control the population, control the masses, and control the proles. Not only is this possible by reducing its range of freedom, i.e. telling them where they are allowed to go, when, with whom they are allowed to socialize, it is, somehow, easier to control them by simplifying the world around them.

Selden explains that this can be seen in the Bakhtin School, probably the first to contest the idea Saussure had brought in of natural bonds between signifiers and signifieds. The fact that most words are used in dialogues allows the people interacting to create different interpretations, both the person speaking and the person listening can understand words differently. Human language is, simply called, always open for misinterpretation. Since it is not possible –even if many have tried to make it seem otherwise- in social environments to avoid ‘interference and conflict’, all words have “layers of semantic deposits resulting from the endless processes of human struggle and interaction” (Selden, Widdowson, Brooker: 146). The reduction between signifier and signified, as presented in Orwell’s novel, is another example of the complete instability between significances, or meaning that can be assigned to words, to the relation between signifier and signified. By redefining concepts in the light of Postmodernism, such as flâneur, crowd, citizen, it is not possible for me to stick what they are commonly associated to. Rather there is a need to reinterpret them in a new light. In this case I will defend this choice by abusing Eagleton, when he states, “significances vary throughout history, whereas meanings remain constant; authors put in meanings, whereas readers assign significances (58).” ‘In the Country of Last Things’ is an opportunity to explore a different city than what we are accustomed to, one where all of our ideas relating to city, and the concepts that stem from it need to be revised and redefined in the light of an apocalyptic world.

Selden helps understand this by stating that Lacan’s Freudianism makes modern criticism unreliable when it comes to the ‘meaning’ of words. The ideas presented in a novel are based on uncertainty, relationships between signifiers and signifieds have changed, since they present ideas which we can generally not relate to anything we know. He explains that modernist literature plays on its release from meaning by using sceneries relatable to dream-like-states (Selden, Widdowson, Brooker 159). Eagleton’s quote is helpful to this interpretation because it encompasses the fact that although the studios (academics) may assign a "significance" to a certain literary text this can never be viewed as the ultimate meaning, which is a subject already seen in Fish, “when one interpretation wins out over another, it is not because the first has been shown to be in accordance with the facts but because it is from the perspective of its assumptions that the facts are now being specified.

It is these assumptions, and not the facts they make possible, that are at stake in any critical dispute (340).” Therefore it is not my intention, nor my claim, to assign the exact reinterpretation of these concepts in postmodern light. And it might be farfetched to interpret a concept assigned to an 19th century man who roams around his new, modern city, to a 20-year-old girl who has lost herself in an apocalyptic world but I will lean on the fact that since literary theory opened up to postmodernism, what can, and what cannot be done with literature has widened immensely.

“while there are always mechanisms for ruling out readings, their source is not the text but the presently recognized interpretive strategies for producing the text. It follows, then, that no reading, however outlandish it might appear, is inherently and impossible one (Fish 347).”

Therefore all criticism is possible. Especially when it comes to a text as Auster’s, who displays an immense capacity to overthrow everything that is common in our world. I have already mentioned Anna’s problem when encountering a dock-worker who does not seem to understand the words she uses. In her roaming of this city, however, this is not the only time she encounters this problem. When she arrives at Woburn House she realizes Otto, the driver, has a different way of talking, he mentions that it is not necessary for him to speak correctly since people will understand him nonetheless. Anna has related Otto’s explanation before to the constantly vanishing of things throughout the city.

“Words tend to last a bit longer than things, but eventually they fade too, along with the pictures they once evoked. Entire categories of objects disappear –flowerpots, for example, or cigarette filters, or rubber bands – and for a time you will be able to recognize those words, even if you cannot recall what they mean. But then, little by little, the words become only sounds, a random collection of glottal and fricatives, a storm of whirling phonemes, and finally the whole thing just collapses into gibberish. The word “flowerpot” will make no more sense to you than the word “splandigo.” Your mind will hear it, but it will register as something incomprehensible, a word from a language you cannot speak. As more and more of these foreign-sounding words crop up around you, conversations become rather strenuous. 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 (Auster 89).”

The idea of community in the encounters of the city is lost, when the linguistic similarities are lost so is the memory of them. People, in short, cannot relate to each other anymore since they do not have a common ground, linguistically speaking, to stand on, as if the entire city is only made up out of foreigners, invading a place for the need of shelter and nothing else. Auster creates this crisis in order to further explain the fatality of the situation, as language is no longer applicable as a common factor to these citizens, what else can they look for as a denominator? It is my belief that this observation Anna makes epitomizes what is happening, she feels helpless in a country where there are even such last things as language. Many authors of fiction create a crisis within the world they have created to then go on and either, fix it, or use it to explain their characters’ situation. It is the latter which applies to Anna, she is there to relate the horror of the city, there is no way of fixing it, it seems to be a dead end.

Discipline in the city

One of the keywords to be analyzed is the word *citizen*. The word city (Klein 1: 293) comes from the Latin word, *cīvītātem* which is the action of *cīvītās*: ‘citizens of a community, citizenship.’ The suffix ‘-an’ (1: 67), added to ‘city’, means ‘pertaining to’; therefore a citizen would be a person ‘pertaining to’ a ‘community’. Klein also suggests comparing to the word urban: “adj. pertaining to a city, cultivated, refined, elegant. ‘Urb’ probably comes from ‘urbs’ (fr), meaning ‘a city’, of unknown origin (2: 1681).” And ‘urbane’: “noun, city life; refinement or elegance in speech (2: 1681).” Therefore all words related to city life come from the civility demonstrated in urban areas.

In our seminar we have brought up the issue of "urban subject", a type of citizen who is restricted by the city; the city’s borders are also the borders of human behavior, i.e. the limits the city has imposed upon itself are also the limits that restrict its citizen’s actions. This person has never before known another reality but that of living in a place where where he/she walks has been limited. It is an invisible power that binds us to what

we deem to be right, there is a control over the physical body of citizens¹². We are not allowed to ‘roam’ the streets, in a literal sense. Where we buy, what we eat has been determined by the environment that has been created around us. And not only has it not been influenced by the subject, us subjects, but we have absolutely no control about what happens when those “in charge” stop taking care of it.

When the city around us slowly begins to crumble, what is left of us? Are we still allowed to call ourselves citizens? And does this mean that the ‘contract’ we agreed upon when giving, what we might call, our absolute freedom, has been broken and we are therefore free to do whatever we want, no restrictions? Or has the surveillance of so many years, the many ways of imbuing discipline into citizens, and the various punishments associated with breaking discipline, altering the order, stuck with people so much that we would still repress ourselves in some way?

If we say that a city is created by contract and agreement in which the “citizen” agrees to respect certain aspects of the norms created by the city, we would find ourselves in what Foucault accurately calls a disciplinary state. By agreeing to the limits imposed by the city lines, sidewalks, streets and all other perimeters imposed we are inside a normative society. Everything around us has been created to give us an illusion of normalcy, of having chosen this way of life. When in reality it has been imposed on us by the ideological society we live in. And what happens when all of that is taken away from us. Everything you know to be normal and familiar goes and is replaced by a limitless, law-free environment.

The idea that an environment as such could exist exposes us once more to assume the perspective of a society we are not familiar with. Foucault explains that all states are disciplinary, because “les procédés disciplinaires font apparaître un temps linéaire dont les moments s’intègrent les uns aux autres, et qui s’oriente vers un point terminal et stable. En somme, un temps « évolutif » (188).” This state is not present in Auster’s novel, where he throws Anna into a type of environment where “normal” rules do not apply, there is not an evolutionary point, or time to go to. From a modern perspective we could say chaos is the

¹² Foucault explains: “Grâce aux techniques de surveillance, la « physique » du pouvoir, la prise sur le corps s’effectuent selon les lois de l’optique et de la mécanique, selon tout un jeu d’espaces, de lignes, d’écrans, de faisceaux, de degrés, et sans recours, en principe au moins, à l’excès, à la force, à la violence. Pouvoir qui est en apparence d’autant moins « corporel » qu’il est plus savamment « physique » (208).”

order she finds at first. At first, I say, because after she has spent a while in this new country she is able to rationalize some of the events that take place around her. Discipline has disappeared; no longer does society revolve around making efficient individuals that will help create an evolving, efficient society. This time the individual, better said, each person - for let us not make collective what is inherently not - they will gather in groups for certain moments, or for certain opportunities but in direct oppositeness of a contractual society it is each man for himself.

Discipline seems to be non-existent.

Maybe this comes from the fact that this society lives on an everyday basis, life day by day instead of seeking fulfillment in objects, as a modern person would, seems chaotic. "To a certain extent, the everyday has this resistant quality simply because its very presence is not always registered by the panoptic gaze of bureaucratic power; it remains an inchoate and heterodox mix of fluid, multiple and symbolically dense practices and thoughts, a 'black rock that resists assimilation' (Certeau 1984: 69). (Gardiner 16)" No longer is the relationship with the world an economical one, in this case the world (the environment) wins. It is an oppressing force, the hope lies within resisting and surviving every day. The governments are not watching the people in the city, the only laws that are carefully reinforced are those related to the Crematoria, and the disposal of human waste. And Anna carefully spends time explaining both of these operations; how every morning trucks go through the city to collect corpses which are taken to Transformation Centers (the crematoria), this job is difficult since these trucks cannot go through some of the broken down streets. But this is not an easy job: "Throwing stones at death-truck workers is a common occupation among the homeless [...] There is no coherent motive behind these attacks. They stem from anger, resentment, and boredom, and because the collection workers are the only city officials who ever make an appearance in the neighborhood, they are convenient targets (17)." As Anna explains, they are the visible faces of government. Truly, politics and the entire political system have stopped being a presence in the city. Political allegiance cannot be relevant among people who feel abandoned by their government. The attacks these workers suffer is another demonstration of what could be

considered 'lack of discipline'. Discipline is not reinforced, when it comes to relationships amongst humans.

As to the disposal of human waste this is more related to the lengths people are willing to go to in the face of adversity. 'Fecalists' are the people who collect the human waste in their neighborhood, and are given special housing because of their service. This is done to avoid chaos and disease, which would ensue were people left to throwing their feces on the street, and Anna also explains this helps create the methane gas necessary to keep up with the city's power supply, she even emphasizes this point: "Shit is a serious business, and anyone caught dumping it in the streets is arrested (30)." Discipline, as we can see in this case, is reinforced, because you are not only arrested: "With your second offense, you are automatically given the death penalty. **A system like that tends to dampen your playfulness. You go along with what is demanded of you, and pretty soon you don't even think about it anymore (30 emphasis mine).**" This is what Foucault calls "la « peine » de l'idée de la « peine » (112)." In his chapter on Punishment, he explains the creation of the idea of pain, a penalty which is paid, a sentence that is carried out without it necessarily being carried out. In his explanation on the five or six rules of punishment he writes that it is necessary for the 'subjects' to be aware of the gravity of any infraction without having to be sentenced for it. If anyone breaks the law, a punishment is carried out publicly so other subjects will be discouraged from doing it again (112 – 113).

My personal analysis on both of these episodes Anna narrates is closely related to the opinion she has. "It only goes to show how effective the government can be under certain circumstances. Dead bodies and shit – when it comes to removing health hazards, our administrators are positively Roman in their organization, a model of clear thinking and efficiency (30)." The priorities of the government have changed, discipline is carried out differently, it focuses on maintaining the status quo (the crumbling city) from falling into complete chaos by letting it become covered in dead bodies, or attacked by disease. There is still a certain amount of care, but this government has to focus on keeping the unlivable conditions as survivable as possible. The citizens are still angry about the abandonment, which is demonstrated in the attacks on city workers, however they still accept what little discipline is imposed on them. They will not dump their feces on the street because they

can still die because of this, something they all are trying to avoid somehow, even in a city like this, as abandoned as it is the survival instinct does not disappear.

Foucault explains the importance of discipline when it comes to politics, discipline as a manner of control a government has over its subjects. He mentions the necessity of establishing an all-seeing-eye figuratively speaking; people should feel observed at all times. This clearly does not occur in “The Country of Last Things”, the organization of space that Foucault says discipline offers¹³, is lost. He maintains that discipline should begin at a minimum level, which we could relate to the city’s activities of recollecting dead bodies and feces, and that it then is incorporated in routine activities citizens will carry out, i.e. citizens will absorb the idea of discipline, and routines, without noticing it, making control easier.

In relation to the idea of adventure, which comes from Simmel, through Foucault we are allowed to see how an adventure, as a deviation from what we call normality, can be cause of constant search for a character, or maybe constant avoiding, or even if the circumstances allow it, how it becomes an aspect annulled by its constant occurrence. And how we, ourselves, try to suppress any sense of impropriety in what we are doing. Foucault explains very accurately of how modern day society has forged itself a character which is not to be construed as natural, fair or just. Adventure is constantly present in our everyday life, it represents what can be identifies as ‘transgressive moments’:

“Whereas dominant ideologies define and sanction certain patterns of life as ‘natural’ or ‘inevitable’ –which helps to give everyday the unreflexive and taken- for granted quality that such phenomenologists as Berger and Luckmann or Schütz allude to – such transgressive moments problematize, ‘make strange’, and thereby subvert the ideological and bureaucratic structuring of everyday life (Gardiner 19 – 20).”

These little glimpses, which were already mentioned at the beginning of this work, are what allow us to see the way the relationship of ‘pouvoir/savoir’, as Foucault called them, are constructed. Adventure, in this case, means an escape from the constrictions; whereas

¹³ See Foucault 1975, part III p. 168.

leisure time was given to us, adventure is something that will happen without being programmed or planned.

“In modern society, leisure is regimented and commodified, and therefore represents a passive and manipulated way of relating to the world. ‘So we work to earn our leisure, and leisure only has one meaning: to get away from work. A vicious circle’, asserts Lefebvre (1991a: 40). (Gardiner 84).”

This is why the modern man strives for adventure, adventure represents a complete interruption of his everyday life, it is a distraction, but it also something that revitalizes a subject which is commonly a cog in a machine. Anna cannot escape the world she has landed in. Literally landed, she came by boat and cannot get out. By the end we are not even sure if she does get out. It might be a “common-place” to say she is imprisoned there, but that does not make it untrue. Nor less valid. Anna goes on an adventure, driven by her naïveté however when she reaches the dead end she realizes that there is no way back. The rules of the game have changed, she no longer has power over herself, or her body. The city does. This oppressing post-modern, apocalyptic (for this is an alternate reality that is presented to us in Auster’s novel, understanding apocalyptic as the portrayal of “widespread devastation or ultimate doom.”¹⁴) city has taken something which was only hers to give away, her body. However, and following Foucault’s analysis on the imprisonment of bodies, it would be fair to ask if she had power over her body in the first place. When one has repressed all “natural” instincts (sexual instincts mainly), is the body really free?

“I won’t deny how lonely I felt in my corner. Things like that can drive you crazy sometimes. There is an ache inside you, a horrendous, clamoring ache, and unless you do something about it, there will never be an end to it. God knows I tried to control myself, but there were times when I couldn’t stand it anymore, times when I thought my heart would explode (62).”

¹⁴ Definition of ‘apocalyptic’ taken from The American Heritage Dictionary.

In the end she masturbates, in her corner and she explains how she tries to keep quiet, but she does this in a hostile environment, she even points out tries to do it without Ferdinand or Isabel noticing. Everything about this situation is repressing her natural instincts, and this is related to the close quarters Foucault analyzes in "Surveiller et Punir". The main difference between his description and Anna's situation is that the first has been created by man to repress his fellow citizens, whereas the latter is a narrative of a city that has reached breaking point, it has lost all elements that constitute a proper society and has come to a moment where most of the law-enforced restraints have ruptured, but others will nevertheless appear.

This small mention of Anna's masturbation is also related to her lesbian relationship with Victoria at the Woburn House. Anna explains that they "became a refuge for the other, the place where each of us could go to find comfort in her solitude (156)." She finds Victoria, or Victoria finds her, when they are both in need of comfort. They are in need of the idea of love and the idea of companionship. It is not a real relationship, as she says, since Anna is perfectly aware that she is in love with Sam but, at this point, has already accepted his loss, or rather she uses her relationship with Victoria as a way of breaking through the pain of her loss. The Woburn House once more represents a place that functions outside of the reality of the city, and although it is a safe place as opposed to the hostile world in the city, it is not an alternate reality and there is a point where both will mix. Which explain why they maintain their affair until Sam reappears at the Woburn House, and Anna makes mention that she never sees any jealousy or reproach on Victoria's part for leaving her that easily. In a way their romance was a coming together of solitary figures, who became friends and satisfies each other's needs, but nothing more.

Anna tells the reader of her letter: "There are many things in my life that I regret, but this is not one of them (157)." She knows that, in the country where she comes from, her romance with Victoria would be frowned upon, and her need to explicate the event allows us to understand that even where a law-less world seemed to have appeared, it is humans themselves that restrain each other, by simple gestures and comments, or in Anna's case by her cultural background. "Humanity does not gradually progress from combat to combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity, where the rule of law finally replaces warfare;

humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination (Foucault 1977: 151).” Maybe, as Foucault cheerfully explains, there is no hope except escaping, for humans are bound to try and restrict each other’s, and their own actions somehow.

Conclusions

It has been my intention to portray the city created in Auster’s “In the Country of Last Things” as a forsaken world, a world that he may have originally related to a future prospect of the world.

This book was published in the 1980’s, all existing economic models were coming to an end, people rebelled against what they saw was happening with the world. This novel has elements of disaster, despair and hopelessness, all of which are inevitably related to a rising feeling in a decaying world. Most of Paul Auster’s work is embedded with the finding of identity, the connection of a world to words and the fact that the real world allows us much more room to create fictional events than people might think. The works of Poe and Orwell have been used to exemplify that the notions present in this novel are present in stories and novels which reach further back than post-modernism; this literary theory is not limited to post 68 literature. The ideas exist in society; the individual as a solitary figure in an increasingly populated area (or world) as seen in Poe, or the idea that everything a citizen does in a city is somehow controlled, and being watched over in 1984, and the opposing idea we encounter with Anna, of what might happen when we are not. These constituted part of what is already displayed in literature, a categorized society where only certain types of people are accepted and included. Auster shows us that this view is slowly dying, yet still when it comes to freedom in actions, categorization is still high in power. We are limited to what we are allowed to do; what is not allowed is penalized (Foucault 1975). In other words, we still seem to categorize our society, and limit ourselves by these classifications.

Somewhere along the way the aim of this work became to be able to convey how society can be toppled upside down in a matter of years. We are constantly reminded that this city Anna lives in is actually part of our real world. When talking with Victoria, at the

Woburn House, she discovers that she had two children who she sent to her in-laws, “to live in England (136).” This world is in fact the real world, this city we see depicted is a city that exists in our world, or at least that is what Auster tries to transmit. This is, in effect, one of the most interesting topics presented; the world that Anna knew had to be an ephemeral memory for her to be able to adapt. In the rapidly changing global society we live in, somehow Auster seemed to be able to grasp, even as early as the 1980’s, that we need to be constantly adapting in order to make it in a world that seems to be increasingly more alien to human relationships and nature. I would recommend using Auster’s work to begin a study of postmodern literature from this decade onward. How literature has been able to spread since the creation of the world-wide-web, and global communications. It has created a necessity for literature that crosses all genres and includes all world-visions. Post modernity was the literary focus this work took on. It helped me understand the power-related webs that crossed the novel, and why it was a relatable story, not only on a human level, but to its entire setting. Why is it so easy for a reader to understand and empathize with Anna? Because in a way we seem to understand her apocalyptic habitat, as it appears to be a near possibility for our own future.

Postmodern theory not only focuses on literature, but also on a realization of man’s role in society. This explains how the power, which can be commonly related to government and big economical entities, has been given in Auster’s novel to the people, and it has created chaos – a lesson perhaps for those who imagine an anarchic societal organization. In this highly individualized society of “Last things” it is every man, or woman, to himself. Somehow people are seeking control over something they do not know how to control, the elements of power and knowledge, which Foucault has placed in the hands of institutions and government, have been there - at least in his study - since the seventeenth century. The creation of social sciences that allowed studying human behavior permitted the layout of certain characteristics. Social scientists constructed the European cities we know, from the end of the 18th century, until the present. Urban planning, law enforcement have all come from these studies. Studies highly criticized by most of the quoted authors but even more so by Gardiner and Foucault.

All the authors that have been included in this work have in some way seen how all the elements in our known world are interrelated, to create a sense of normalcy, to create a sense of belonging. Auster has disrupted these beliefs in less than 200 pages. Wars, poverty and hunger are problems that attack our 21st century, and they attack Anna as well. As I mentioned in the beginning, imagining a city without urban subjects, or an urban subject without a city is not possible. They are connected and the one cannot exist without the other. But if the city seeks to stand alone, people will come to hate and not care for it, as in Auster where the city is abandoned to its own mercy; the city will become a centre for despair and hopelessness. Furthermore, as we read Auster's novel we understand Anna's search for a brother she has lost in a world she does not understand, we try to comprehend that world with her, how it is constructed and the way it works. However, this is not the only knowledge we acquire, we also aim to see a city that has been left to itself. A city that no longer has all those power-grids riding through it, blocking people from doing what they want, which would explain why we are pushed into despair with Anna. Things are lost, people never return, and extreme measures are taken to try and keep control over what inevitably can be labeled as a ticking time bomb.

There are many elements to be analyzed in this book, and this work has merely scanned the surface of them. The existence of masks in public life are present in the character of Boris Stepanovich who, every time he goes out selling something to a Resurrection Agent, comes up with a new story; also in the character of Samuel Farr who by the end pretends to be a doctor to instill some hope into the people who arrive at Woburn House, and even Anna herself admits at certain points that she has to pretend not to care as to not be affected by the gloom of her situation. Last but not least, when reading we know that there is a "better world" out of the city but, for some reason, nobody bothers to escape to it.

The city is the place where this novel takes place, but it is important to remember that the human element is relevant. Social sciences, in pretending to lay out norms and regulations, have forgotten the human element of surprise, or adventure as Simmel has seen it. Auster allows us to explore a world where everything is possible, where, as I have mentioned, uncertainty is part of life and adventure has long since lost its meaning, even though Anna herself uses it a certain point. It is an uncertain world, one where urban planners have lost

the battle and where government has lost its grip. Streets are no more what they used to be, and buildings have become mere refuges against all the climatic elements waiting outside, one of the reasons why Ferdinand chose not to go out anymore as he at one point explains to Anna.

This is the story of the struggle of a young girl trying to survive, and even though we do not know what happens to her after her final words, we know that somehow she has made it this far, against all odds. This city has been left to its own devices, and has so taken on a life of its own accord, it does not need any other power to threaten its citizens, it has only need of itself. Studying this idea will allow us to see a different aspect of the city, and cast it not simply as another byproduct of human creation, but as an element that can deeply affect its inhabitants, the citizens.

Anna's world is not a world where I would like to live in, but it is a world everything will come to if we do not let people take what is theirs. Eagleton mentioned the necessity to grant people books, any books, to allow them to become cultured, Lefebvre through Gardiner mentions the necessity of people realizing the city is theirs for the taking. Foucault suggests a deeper look into how the world functions and how we should see the power-webs that control it.

Auster shows us what happens when we are left alone. In this case, and in Anna's words: "Perhaps that is the most interesting question of all: to see what happens when there is nothing, and whether or not we will survive that too (29)."

The question still remains, would we survive?

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