



**Universidad de Chile**

Facultad de Filosofía y Humanidades

Departamento de Literatura

**The absurd in “The country of last things”**

Informe de Seminario para optar al grado de Licenciada en Lengua y

Literatura Inglesas

Alumna:

Margarita Gómez

Profesor Guía:

Enrique Sandoval Gessler

**Santiago, 2005**

# Introduction

Paul Auster is considered a postmodernist writer. His novels can be categorized under different genres, as, for example, science fiction, picaresque or detective novels. His influences are very wide and come from different sources such as fairy tales, his own unconscious and from a variety of writers, i.e. Nathaniel Hawthorne, Charles Dickens, Franz Kafka or Samuel Becket.

This mixture gives him a particular style. However, this variety does not prevent him to revolve on the same topics. In fact, recurrence of topics can be found throughout his whole narrative.

Firstly, the majority of the characters of his novels live in New York, living totally alone due to their decision to cut off from society. This is an important characteristic in Auster's narrative. His characters decide to submerge into a "nothingness", isolating themselves in an absolute loneliness and living outside the system in a city which is compared to a labyrinth where his characters are trapped and lost.

Loss is what leads his characters to be thrown into "nothingness" and marginalization. This feeling is also a recurrent topic in Auster's narrative. His characters lose someone they love, either because of death or abandonment as well. This fact increases the sense of solitude, one of the favourite recurrent themes in Paul Auster. Senses of loss, abandonment, loneliness are characteristic of modern societies where individualism is an important feature. As it was said at the very beginning, Paul Auster is considered a postmodernist writer precisely because he describes postmodernist cities, in other words, his novels reflect our modern times in which we are living. And this is represented in his character's antisystemic attitude, whose nihilism seems to be a deep rejection against the capitalism.

This nihilist attitude is maybe what characterizes XX century. Old values and traditions have been broken and human beings have to face a world where nothing is certain. XX century is essentially change, which is reflected in every side of human life. As far as literature is concerned, vanguardist movements appeared that reflected precisely the

spirit of these times. One of them is the Theatre of the Absurd. As it was mentioned above, Samuel Becket is one of the authors that influences on Paul Auster's narrative. Given this fact and what is just mentioned above (regarding the spirit of XX century), it has to be a link between this literary movement and Auster's narrative. In this work, only a novel will be analysed and compared with the Theatre of the Absurd: *In the Country of Last Things*. The decision of the choice of this novel is the dramatic situation and its depressing atmosphere; it seems that is a prophecy or consequence of our modern times, in other words, is an extreme pessimist perspective of our society.

In order to establish the relationship between the Theatre of the Absurd and this novel, the concept "absurd" will be defined. Then, the sources, influences and important features of this kind of theatre will be exposed. And finally, they will be compared to the novel in order to find what they have in common and what, of course, in what sense they differ in order to establish the "absurdity" in this novel, which is at last the purpose of this work.

# The concept of the absurd

Before speaking about the absurd in the novel *In the Country of last Things*, we need to define it so as to see what it means what we call 'the absurd'.

According to Martin Esslin, absurd originally means "out of harmony" in a musical context. Hence its dictionary definition: "out of harmony with reason or property, incongruous, unreasonable, illogical." In common usage in the English-speaking world, "absurd" may simply mean "ridiculous"<sup>1</sup>

The definition of the absurd given above is the colloquial term used in everyday spoken English by any person, it does not matter if this person knows something about literature or if he is a philistine.

But an important point has come up: the appearance of the word 'literature'. It seems important to highlight the fact that the cultural background of a given person helps him to understand the notion of 'the absurd'. Therefore, the colloquial notion of 'the absurd' is not meaningful, or at least, not enough for a person who knows about literature, or rather, people who know how to handle the literary concept of 'the absurd'. Then, it can be concluded that there exists a literary conception about 'the absurd', which is not the same that people use in everyday language, and, of course, the definition given above is not enough and does not take account on the notion considered by the literary movement known as the Theatre of the Absurd.

Esslin, quoting Ionesco, gives his notion about what he considers 'the absurd':

"In an essay of Kafka, Ionesco defined his understanding of the term as follows: "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose...Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendent roots, man is lost, all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless"<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The Theatre of the Absurd, page XIX

<sup>2</sup> 2.- Ibid

This one is a better definition considered by the Theatre of the Absurd. In it are shown the most important aspects that characterize it, such as metaphysical anguish, lack of a life sense and absurdity of the human condition. That seems to be the essence of the Theatre of the Absurd. The most important playwrights of this particular theatre are, among others, Samuel Becket, Arthur Adamov, Eugène Ionesco, etc.

The word 'particular' is maybe what better describes the Theatre of the Absurd. If someone reads any of these plays, he probably would say that they are very strange, difficult to understand, special, or even, stupid or ridiculous because of this lack of sense and a certain craziness due to the absence of apparent logic. In other words, their "absurdity" gives them a particular style that differentiates them from other theatre, art or literary works which, in spite of the fact of referring to those existential topics that appear in the Theatre of the Absurd, do not show the irrational and illogic features that characterize this theatre.

This is an important point that is necessary to highlight since it gives another characteristic which is helpful to define the Theatre of the Absurd in a better way. Its not only the subject matter what defines it. There are other writers such as Sartre and Camus who are concerned with the same topics, but they present the absurdity of human condition in a logically constructed way, whereas the Theatre of the Absurd expresses the irrational and senseless of human condition without a rational device or rational thought. Then , the Theatre of the Absurd expresses the absurdity of human condition not only through the contents, but also through the forms, which creates a symbolic unity regarding the so-called "absurdity".

Therefore; the unity between form and content is what characterizes the Theatre of the Absurd, differentiating it from other artistic works and other kinds of theatre, such as the Existentialist theatre:

“While Sartre or Camus express the new content in the old convention, the Theatre of the Absurd goes a step further in trying to achieve a unity between its basic assumption and the form in which these are expressed. In some senses, the *theatre* of Sartre and Camus is less adequate as an expression of the *philosophy* of Sartre and Camus-in artistic, as distinct from philosophic, terms (sic)-than the Theatre of the Absurd”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, page XX

Here we see the notions of *theatre* and *philosophy*, which can be matched and related respectively to the '**raison d'être**' of the theatre itself, and the **topic** that certain plays talk about or refer to. Here we have the main difference between the Theatre of the Absurd and other artistic works concerned the absurd condition of human beings, as Esslin points out:

“The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing *about* the absurdity of the human condition, it merely *presents* it in being-that is, in terms of concrete stage images of the absurdity of existence”<sup>4</sup>

There is another trend in contemporary French theatre, which is also concerned about the absurdity of human condition. This is the “poetic avant garde” , whose main dramatists are Michel de Ghelderode, Jacques Audiberti, Georges Neveux, etc. It is important to differentiate it from the Theatre of the Absurd and not to mix up with it.

The “poetic avant garde”relies on fantasy and dream reality, which is a characteristic shared by the Theatre of the Absurd. But the “poetic avant garde” is more lyrical, and it does not present, or at least not in the same degree, the violence and grotesque features that appear in the Theatre of the Absurd. This “poetic avant garde” has: First, a lyrical speech, and secondly, a poetic speech. There is a big difference between the “poetic avant garde” and the Theatre of the Absurd, if we think of the latter’s attitude towards language for concrete images of the stage. They are so important that they can even contradict the language used. In other words, what happens in the play does not correspond to what the characters:

“The element of language still plays an important, yet subordinate, part in this conception, but what *happens* on the stage transcends, and often contradicts, the *words* spoken by the characters”<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, it can be concluded that the Theatre of the Absurd is part of the “anti-literary” movement, reflected in its rejection of the conventional use of language and other elements that conform traditional literature. Or, in other words, it is an example of the idea of “anti-conventionalism” as reflected through art, but, instead of other artistic works that criticize conventional attitudes and behaviour through words, the Theatre of

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, page XXI

the Absurd goes a step further in radicalize this anti- traditional perspective by rejecting literature itself, or the conventional and rational means used by other artistic works.

As it was said above, the Theatre of the Absurd is a vanguardist movement that attempts to break traditional art through its irrationality and devaluation of language. But, in spite of the fact of being an anti-traditional movement, its roots lie in old and even ancient traditions. At first sight, it seems a contradiction that such an iconoclastic movement had a traditional source, but the originality of the Theatre of the Absurd lies precisely in this contradiction. What is new is the presentation of those traditional elements re evaluated and presented in a different context, that is to say, the combination and presentation of traditional and familiar elements is what makes the Theatre of the Absurd an anti-conventional movement, since such elements are represented from a new perspective.

The traditions that are used in the Theatre of the Absurd can perhaps be classified under the next statements:

1. “Pure”theatre. What is “borrowed” from this theatre are the abstract scenic effects used in circus, work of jugglers, acrobats, bullfighters, and mimes
2. Clowning, fooling and mad-scenes
3. Verbal nonsense
4. The literature of dream and fantasy.

These features are often mixed up and overlap, offering to the spectator a particular mixture of “absurd baroque”. These elements, in spite of the fact of being traditional, carry a great deal of “absurdity” in itself. In fact, they have a strong symbolical and even metaphysical side that give them a deeper meaning that cannot be expressed only through language. What is more, the essence of theatre is the performance, and through it, theatre can be realized. This is a return to the ancient idea of “pure” theatre. In it language was not the most important means of expression. As Esslin says

“The element of “pure”, abstract theatre in the Theatre of the Absurd is an aspect of its anti-literary attitude, its turning away from language as an instrument, for the expression of the deepest levels of meaning”<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, page 230

Then, theatre is an art that has a rich symbolic imagery <sup>7</sup> and is expressed mainly through non-verbal means; therefore, reading a play is in a certain way a poor experience, or rather, it does not allow the reader to appreciate the whole expression that is just possible in the performance of it. In other words:

“The myth by no means finds its adequate objectification in the spoken word. The structure of the scenes and the visible imagery reveals a deeper wisdom than that which the poet himself is able to put into words and concepts”<sup>8</sup>

The Theatre of the Absurd has been influenced by ancient, old traditions, although it is not the only source that helped to create it. There are also new and modern influences which belong to the XX century. The silent-film comedy of Keystone Cops, Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, etc. is one of the most decisive influences on the Theatre of the Absurd. Its silent gags, grotesque comedy and its movement without words have its roots from the clowning and acrobatic dancing of music hall and vaudeville. What is important in this kind of cinema is the absence of language, and just movement and action is presented. The power of the corporal expression has a high importance since is the unique means of expression. Then, it is quite obvious that the Theatre of the Absurd has been strongly influenced by the silent-film comedy.

There are other literary sources that are also an influence on the Theatre of the Absurd, since they share some of its most important features. Some of them are:

a) The tradition of the *commedia dell'arte*, a genre which is characterized by spontaneous drama outside the realm of literature. This genre has survived in the form of other guises. It has survived in the puppet theatre and the Punch and Judy shows. In Central Europe, the tradition of the *commedia dell'arte* was merged with that of the clowns and ruffians of Elizabethan England and this dominated the folk theatre of the XVII and XVIII centuries. In the Austrian folk theatre, this tradition was joined with another one (the tradition of the baroque spectacle play and the allegorical drama of the Jesuits), to form a new genre which combined clowning with allegorical imagery. The

---

<sup>7</sup> It is important not to forget the traditional theatre

<sup>8</sup> The Theatre of the Absurd, page 231. This note is taken from Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*



greatest master in this genre is the actor-playwright Ferdinand Raimund (1790-1836). In his works, broad comedy is mixed up with naïve poetic allegory. Its play *Der Bauer als Millonär* (*The Peasant as Millionaire*) presents the human condition, “as a concrete poetic image that has become flesh on the stage and that is at the same time broadly comic and deeply tragic”<sup>9</sup> In this sense, it has a similar, if not identical, approach of the Theatre of the Absurd.

b) Another important dramatist that also has features of the Theatre of the Absurd is Georg Büchner(1813-1837), who also used the traditions of the *commedia dell`arte* and that of Shakespeare`s clowns. His comedy *Leonce und Lena* “deals with the futility of human existence that can be relieved only by love and the ability to see oneself as absurd”<sup>10</sup>

Büchner is also one of the pioneers of another kind of the Theatre of the Absurd, which is characterized by the violent, brutal drama of mental aberration and obsession, which is represented by its play *Woyzeck*. This play is the root of much of Brecht, German Expressionism, and of the dark strain of the Theatre of the Absurd (this last one as represented by Adamov`s early plays)

c) An important source that contributed to the Theatre of the Absurd is the literature of verbal nonsense, which is characterized by its breaking on the bounds of logic and language. Doing that “... it batters at the enclosing walls of human condition”<sup>11</sup>. It is possible to find nonsense poetry at the Middle Age, this is demonstrated in the book *Anthologie du Nonsense*, which is precisely about French scholastic nonsense poetry of the XIII century. Then, nonsense literature is not new, is part of the traditions of many countries, a good example of this are the nursery rhymes.

Verbal nonsense was signed as one of the important old tradition that is considered in the Theatre of the Absurd. The examples cited above are enough to probe this point. But in modern literature, it is possible to find nonsense literature. The masters of English

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. page 238

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. page 239

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. page 241

nonsense are Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. In the German-speaking world, Christian Morgenstern is one of the most important nonsense poets.

The nonsense universe of Edward Lear has features that are used in the Theatre of the Absurd, such as the world of human subconscious, poetry, cruelty, tenderness and destructiveness. Both writers, Lear and Carroll, share the characteristic of being inventors of creatures that do not exist in the real world, and these creatures receive their existence by their *names*. The metaphysical approach that attempts to transcend the limits of logic is clearly reflected in language, especially in Carroll's characters, such as Humpty Dumpty (*Alice in the Wonderland*), who breaks the conventional meaning of words, using them as he wishes, changing its meaning as a childish play.

Morgenstern is also characterized for being inventor of creatures, but in his works metaphysical is more visible and there is also a strong amount of *humour noir*<sup>12</sup>

d) The use of mythical, allegorical images and dreamlike modes of thought are present in the Theatre of the Absurd. This mixture between myth and dream has not been only present in ancient traditions, but in rational modern Western societies. They have been represented under different literary and artistic forms, since myths are inherent of human psychology, in fact, they are called the collective dream images of mankind. The literature of dreams has been always present, such as, for example, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, William Blake's prophetic visions, Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or Calderon's *La Vida Es Sueño*.

More modern and direct antecedents of the Theatre of the Absurd is the playwright August Strindberg, who was the first to put on the stage a dream world in the spirit of modern psychological thinking in his plays *To Damascus*, *A Dream Play* and *The Ghost Sonata*. One of the early examples of the Theatre of the Absurd is an episode of the novel *Ulysses*, in which, in spite of the fact of being a novel, it is presented as a dream play. Also James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* is an antecedent of the Literature of the Absurd, since it is also concerned about language and attempts to penetrate to a deeper level of the mind, closer to subconscious thought. Another important author that strongly influenced the Theatre of the Absurd is Franz Kafka, whose short stories that

---

<sup>12</sup> Morgenstein is more philosophical. He anticipated Heidegger's philosophy of being

are an example of nightmares and obsessions, feelings of anguish and guilt of human beings lost in a conventional world, are considered the best artistic works in charge to express the situation of modern man.

This has been a general approach to the Theatre of the Absurd, its main features, the notion of 'the absurd' and the main sources of this literary movement that help to understand and appreciate this movement.

Now, it is necessary to return to the initial point and try to establish "the absurd" in the novel *In the Country of Last Things*, one of the most dramatic novels written by Paul Auster, who presents a terrible world where "absurdity"<sup>13</sup> seems to dominate everything.

*In the Country of Last Things* begins presenting a decadent city which is on the verge of total collapse. This is a nameless city, giving a sense of universality to the situation, since gives the impression that this situation could occur in any part of the world<sup>14</sup>. The feeling of disaster perceived in the novel gives the impression that this is a post-apocalyptic world, which could be interpreted as the end of the civilization, since in this novel everything is disappearing and nothing new is created, in fact, no new baby is born anymore. This fact is alluded in the title of the novel, because it is the country of "the last things". Then, the inhabitants of this city are characterized by the loss of every aspect (cultural, emotional, material, etc.) that characterize us as human beings, producing a place where the majority of its inhabitants are alienated beings who live a purposeless life where the only important aspect of it is survival. Then, according to the definition of the absurd given by Ionesco and quoted above, in this city its inhabitants live an absurd life, that is to say, the absurd is present in every aspect of life, since they are cut off from all the aspects that conformed them as human beings in the past.

This world is presented to the reader through the words of the main character of this novel, Anna Blume, a young girl who arrived at this city looking for her brother, William. Taking the form of a letter addressed to someone whose name is never

---

<sup>13</sup> "Absurdity" must be understood in either the colloquial sense or that one considered in the Theatre of the Absurd

<sup>14</sup> However, this city could be considered a metaphor of New York

mentioned, Anna describes in a very detailed way how life is in the city and how she manages to survive in that chaotic world.

As it can be appreciated, the atmosphere of this novel is quite dark. A sense of alienation and cruelty is present throughout the whole story, as well as a lack of solidarity and loss of values in a city where the government is absolutely indifferent and does not care about people's lives. In general terms, the whole novel deals with this sense of loss, in the broadest sense of the word.

This is the general setting of this novel, a hopeless and absurd world where living has not sense. It has to be stressed that the words "absurd" and "nonsense" has been used. The world presented in this novel has the characteristics that are present in the Theatre of the Absurd, such as a purposeless life and the absurdity of human condition. However, it also has its differences that are important to mention, especially as far as literary style and genre are concerned.

It is fairly obvious that the situation of the city is "absurd", in the colloquial meaning of the word and in the definition quoted above just like the notion of "the absurd" shown in the plays written by Ionesco, Adamov or Becket, in which the main subjects stand for a lack of sense. The absurdity of the human condition and metaphysical anguish, situations strongly characterized by the inhabitants of the anonymous city of *In the Country of Last Things*. But this is not enough and it is quite vague, because it does not entirely handle the Absurd, or its real significance, its total meaning. What it has been pointed out are the main subjects that characterize the Theatre of the Absurd, its main features that particularize it to express "absurdity" and its influences. As it has been mentioned above, the Theatre of the Absurd does not argue about absurdity, it presents it in its essence, then, the Theatre of the Absurd is itself an absurdity. But where does this absurdity lie? In the mixture of traditional elements? In their devaluation of language? In its lack of logic and irrationality? It is important to remember that the colloquial meaning of the word has to do with the notion of "out of harmony", which is, at least at first sight, the main characteristic in this theatre.

Before trying to answer those questions, it is necessary to establish a comparison between the Theatre of the Absurd and the novel *In the Country of Last Things*. It is important not forget that *In the Country of Last Things* is a novel, but the comparison

will be based on the common features that both share and of course, on the differences that separate them, either from a stylistic point of view or from other technical or artistic aspects that do characterize them. If the absurd is supposed to form an important characteristic of this particular novel, it means that this is a concept that can appear in different literary works, no matter what trend such literary works belong to, and it is not only exclusive to literature, since nothing prevents it to appear in other different artistic fields. Every concept revealing an aspect of the human condition is worthy of being represented in any artistic work.

The main and most evident difference is that *In the Country of Last Things* is a novel but not a play. Novels are essentially created to be read, whereas theatre is to be performed. Physical movements, non-verbal expressions and body language are an important means of expression which accompany language and even finds a superior expression that make words seem useless. The unique means of expression of a novel are words; they serve to build a given world, either real or fantastic, with determined characters in a determined place and time. This does not mean that a novel does not have a powerful aesthetic completion in which human situations show the reader the different faces of human beings from different points of view. The effectiveness of the power of expression of words is clearly evident in Anna Blume's description of the terrible events that happen in the city. Her words reflect a frightening reality where a deep sense of cruelty, injustice and craziness is clearly perceived by the reader. Anna Blume's words have a strong power, her description is so precise that the reader cannot feel indifference towards the terrible situation she is going through.

It is not our concern to establish if the theatre is a better means of expression than the novel. But the Theatre of the Absurd, as well as the ancient traditions of "pure" theatre; has a deep symbolic and allegorical meaning expressed by the different and diverse non-verbal means explained above. Prose, on the other hand, uses the literal meaning as a form of expression. The allegorical non-verbal expressions have a deeper, even metaphysical meaning which is, of course, beyond language. In general, novels use words according to semantics, or, using a different meaning from that of its "dictionary definition". This goes as far as traditional novels is concerned, since there are experimental novels that do not follow this semantic pattern and break the rigid unit between signifier and signified, seeking deeper meanings that cannot be achieved by means of a conventional use of words.

It can be concluded that the difference between theatre and novel is determined by their different means of expression and different structure, but not as far as topic is concerned. Then, it seems that the generic difference between the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd and *In the Country of the Last Things* is irrelevant.

What makes the difference between the Theatre of the Absurd and this novel is the style in which they are written. Auster's prose is clear and concise, it is not difficult to understand it and produces a sense of pleasure in the reader. His novels have a rational structure that cross over the main plot with the different sub-plots that build the story. He uses the technique called "the Russian doll", where one little story is inside a bigger one. His works have been also compared to puzzles and labyrinths. There is an underlying logical structure under his stories that gives them practically a mathematical order, forming a geometrical harmony.

As it can be appreciated, this is an important contrast if we compare it with the irrationality and lack of logic of the Theatre of the Absurd, which correspond to its iconoclast proposition where content and form are one unit.

However, in spite of the fact that his novels are logically constructed, the topics which he is concerned with are not so rational and are related to the unknown, obsessions, nothingness, cruelty, loss, solitude and hunger. In other words, under the perfect building of rationality there is an underlying irrationality and metaphysical perspective of life. Then, there is not a correspondence between content and form, whereas it is present in the Theatre of the Absurd.

The novel *In the Country of Last Things* is precisely a good example of this situation. This novel is one of the most dramatic literary works created by Paul Auster. The elaborated structure of this novel has a high contrast between the content and a feeling of chaos and disaster are strongly emanated by this novel. Irrationality is the dominant force that is applied to every side of a life, where craziness is a common result.

However, the language used here, in spite of the fact of its clarity, has a certain amount of irrationality. The fluid words that Anna Blume uses; transmit a sense of desperation, because she writes her letter practically without pauses, giving a sense of confusion due to the excessive amount of data she has. So her report is not an organized exposition about life in the city; rather, she seems to express just what she is feeling at that very

moment. It seems that words just come out from her, as if she had the need to express them, as the only way to avoid going mad, or rather, as the only link with the external world, since words are the only thing that helps her not to become alienated; the only way to be spared in this city where everything is disappearing, where even language has devaluated itself, as it also happens with words:

“Words tend to last a bit longer than things, but eventually they fade too, along with the pictures they once evoked [...]... little by little, the words become only sounds, a random collection of glottals and fricatives, a storm of whirling phonemes, and finally the whole thing just collapses into gibberish [...] ... In effect, each person is speaking his own private language, and the instances of shared understanding diminish, it becomes increasingly difficult to communicate with anyone” (Anna Blume, from *In the Country of Last Things*, page 89)

Here we find an important point shared with the Theatre of the Absurd, which is the devaluation of language. In Paul Auster’s narrative there is no correspondence between form and content . The fluent speech made by Anna Blume, in spite of the fact of its relative irrationality, neither reaches the nonsensical levels used in the Theatre of the Absurd, nor it can be considered as surrealist writing or a form of stream of consciousness- they only share their topics,(the Theatre of the Absurd and *In the Country of Last Things*). The same subjects that were a constant in the plays belonging to the Theatre of the Absurd appear in Auster’s narrative, and it is more evident in this particular novel. However, whereas the irrational use of language in this type of expression is part of the theatre itself, in *In the Country of Last Things* it is one of the subjects, or rather, one of the strange aspects that characterizes the way of living of the inhabitants in that city. The language used by Anna, in spite of the fact of presenting the characteristics given above, is coherent; in fact, the novel would not exist if it were not for Anna’s words, and the reader could not know the situation of the city without Anna’s narration. The nervous tone that dominated the first pages of the novel gradually turns colder and calmer, as if she had given up the situation or as she had been used to life in the city. This gives the sense of psychological realism, the changing state of mind which is reflected through her letter as time goes on, but at any moment her language is incoherent, and words do not lose their meanings. What she is doing is telling what happens to other people, loss of language is not something that happens to her since in keeping writing she does not forget words. If she had lost language, this novel would have not been possible.

A strong connection between the Theatre of the Absurd and *In the Country of Last Things*; although an important feature in one type of art, whereas is presented in the novel as a concrete fact; in other words, the Theatre of the Absurd *is* devaluation of the language, whereas in the novel Anna simply talks about it, by referring to this strange phenomenon that is happening to the inhabitants of the city in her report.

Therefore, the link between *In the Country of Last Things* and the Theatre of the Absurd is thematic, since they share the same concerns regarding human condition, in the same way that the Theatre of the Absurd shares with other artistic expressions that influenced it and were cited above. The novel somehow is influenced by the Theatre of the Absurd. This proves that the same concerns have been a constant in mankind, what is indeed different is its aesthetic approach, nothing is really new, since concern about the human condition is not exclusive of the Theatre of the Absurd.

If *In the Country of Last Things* shares with the Theatre of the Absurd the same topics, this means it is also related and has similarities with the other artistic expressions and literary works. To what extent is this novel similar to these artistic works?

We can see in the novel elements that have a highly grotesque and macabre nature, such as those groups of people who join to form suicidal groups, characterized by the way in which they choose to die. This fact can be compared to mad scenes used in “pure” theatre. In fact, organizations such as the Runners and the Leapers offer a terrible spectacle, transforming even into a public show that is similar to theatrical characteristics, this last fact is applicable in an explicit way regarding to the Leapers:

“ There are the Runners, for example, a sect of people who run through the streets as fast as they can; flailing their arms wildly about them, punching the air, screaming at the top of their lungs. Most of the time they travel in groups: six, ten, even twenty of them charging down the street together, never stopping for anything in their path, running and running until they drop for exhaustion. The point is to die as quickly as possible, to drive yourself so hard that your heart cannot stand it[...]

...More common are the solitary deaths. But these, too, have been transformed into a kind of public ritual. People climb to the highest places for no other reason than to jump. The Last Leap, it is called, and I admit there is something stirring about watching one, something that seems to open a whole new world of freedom inside you: to see the body poised at the roof`s edge, and then, unexpectedly (for you can never be sure when it will happen), the body hurls itself through the air and comes



flying down to the street. You would be amazed at the enthusiasm of the crowds: to hear their frantic cheering, to see their excitement. It is as if the violence and beauty of the spectacle had wrenched them from themselves, had made them forget the paltriness of their own lives. The Last Leap is something everyone can understand, and it corresponds to everyone's inner longings: to die in a flash, to obliterate yourself in one brief and glorious moment. I sometimes think that death is the one thing we have any feeling for. It is our art form, the only way we can express ourselves" (Anna Blume from *In the Country of Last Things*, pages 11-13)

We can see that in this city a culture of death has been rooted. Death is considered an artistic occurrence, which at the same time has a macabre and comic side. Comedy lies on the irony that the only thing that joins people to do something is by eliminating themselves. The self-discipline that the Runners follow in order to be a good runner is practically a religion, and is a cruel paradox that that discipline had death as their aim. The cruel irony of this fact is a good sample of black humour, as if it were a cruel comedy exhibited in front of public. This is the only kind of humour that can be found in this novel, since humour and laugh are totally absent in this novel, where nothing good remains and the only sense that some people have found for their lives is death. We see here that elements of "pure" theatre appear, similar to the exhibition of the Runners and the Leapers, whose artistic death has a symbolic deep meaning that goes beyond words. The same element also appears in the Theatre of the Absurd, as it was explained above.

We have seen that language is disappearing in this city. There is also another linguistic phenomenon that reminds the literature of nonsense. People helps the empty spaces of they lives through words. They have so deprived of their bare necessities that they have decided to name them, since they do not have hope to obtain what they wish. It is an irrational play, and also an irrational behaviour, but in a certain way it is a kind of re-invention of those things that are disappearing and are becoming less familiar for people, a replacement of the actual reality in which they are living, and also a replacement of the satisfaction of their terrible desires (of food, especially), which are impossible to be fulfilled, as it will be demonstrated below. This process of re-invention is similar to that used by Carroll and Lear, who invented things that did not exist by naming them. In this novel, the process is different, in the sense that people re-invent things that are disappearing, that existed in the past and now they are absent. It is a well-known fact that a thing does not exist if it does not have a name, if something exists, it

has to have a name. Nominalization is the way that entities that do not exist in the real world are created and considered as something that really exists. Words are the means to create a different and alternative world where it is possible to create what we wish, and to eliminate what we hate, consequently stimulating dreams and myths.

What occurs in this novel is that people feel, maybe in an unconscious way, that naming things prevent them from disappearing, and this creates the illusion that they are real, and that they have not vanished and they still exist. They re-invent things since they were real in the old good days, before the city ended up in the chaotic state in which it is in the present, which is even worse than inventing things that never existed. People know what they have lost, and they also know of their existence as something real; those good things exist in the real world, and yet one can not buy them, which is even more tragic. This tragedy is what leads people to that nonsensical behaviour:

“...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. [...] Without fuss or prelude they break off from what they are doing, sit down and talk about the desires that have been welling up inside them. Food, of course, is one of the favorite subjects. Often you will overhear a group of people describing a meal in meticulous detail, beginning with the soups and appetizers and slowly working their way to dessert, dwelling on each savor and spice, on all the various aromas and flavours, concentrating now on the method of preparation, now on the effect of the food itself, from the first twinge of taste on the tongue to the gradually expanding sense of peace as the food travels down the throat and arrives in the belly [...] ...For best results, you must allow your mind to leap into the words coming from the mouth of the others. If the words can consume you, you will be able to forget your present hunger and enter what people call the “arena of the sustaining nimbus.” There are even those who say there is nutritional value in these foods talks-given the proper concentration and an equal desire to believe in the words among those taking part”( Anna Blume, from *In the Country of Last Things*, pages 9-10)

This is the way how people obliterate themselves and try to put up with life as better as they can. Anna is not immersed in “the language of ghosts”, but she understands it. She does not want to turn into a living ghost, so she keeps writing her letter, which is the novel

In spite of this fact, she has created alternative realities through words:

“...Yes, things have changed for me. You remember what a playful little girl I was. You could never get enough of my stories, of the worlds I used to make up for us to play inside of. The Castle of No Return, the Land of Sadness, the Forest of Forgotten Words” (Anna Blume, from *In the Country of Last Things*, page10)

Here it is possible to note that the fantastic worlds that Anna used to create when she was a little girl have an interesting similarity with the city she is living in. It can be observed that an amount of dream and a sense of evasion and fantasy are present through the invention of alternative realities, non-existing entities or, the re-invention of missing objects and concepts that existed previously. Thus, the invented worlds are an amazing representation of reality; a kind of prediction of the world in which she would eventually live. Linguistic nonsense is an important feature of the Theatre of the Absurd, in fact, it carries in itself a great deal of “absurdity”. Since devaluation of language is one of the most important features that characterize this kind of theatre, it is not strange that the literature of nonsense is a big influence on it. As it was demonstrated above, linguistic nonsense is not absent in this novel, giving also to it a great deal of “absurdity”.

It has been said that the Theatre of the Absurd uses elements of “pure” theatre given the allegorical meaning they have. Also, the literature of dreams and fantasy appear in this theatre. What is characteristic of the allegorical elements and dreams and fantasy is the power of representation of them and their symbolic meaning. They represent different aspects of reality and are a good means to enter into psychological realities and understand deeper psychological levels, such as the subconscious and even the unconscious. The importance of dreams and myths were considered scientifically by Karl Jung following the model of the psychoanalysis proposed by Sigmund Freud. Psychoanalysis was the movement that tried to describe the deeper processes of mind and had a big influence on art of the XIX century, as, for example, James Joyce’s novels such as *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*.

Then, the worlds that Anna invented in her childhood were a representation of a real world, that is to say, the nameless decadent city where she is living in the present. This means that they were not children games they are so fond of: invent fantastic worlds. It can be inferred that invention and creation are closely related to liar and falseness. Anything that is considered fantastic and not real does not correspond to the external

reality in which we are living; therefore, it does not correspond to truth and; of course, to the logic, that if something is not true is necessarily false.

What is real is true, and what is not real is false. This is a common agreement that lies on common sense and apparently, it does not need to be neither demonstrated nor discussed since everybody agrees with that obvious statement. Anna was not the exception; she perfectly knew that the worlds she spoke about were not true since were invented by her:

“...The Castle of No Return, the Land of Sadness, the Forest of Forgotten Words. Do you remember them? How I loved to tell you lies, to trick you into my stories, and to watch your face turn serious as I led you it was all made up, and you would start to cry...” (Anna Blume, from *In the Country of Last Things*, page 11)

However, those false worlds are now a frightening reality. It seems that is a contradiction to what was said just above, but if we think in the word “representation” it does have sense.

It is important to bear in mind the allegorical and symbolic characteristics of dreams and myths. They are not true in the sense of reality, however they represent reality in a deeper sense, they stand for a deeper level of meaning which makes them even more real than the external reality. Then, the Castle of No Return, the Land of Sadness and the Forest of Forgotten Words represent the city of this novel.

The city can be seen as a fantastic world whose representative value can be compared to another fantastic allegorical world found in literature, either ancient or contemporary.

And yet an important question comes up: if the city can be compared to a fantastic world, does that mean that the city is not real? Is the city a concrete reality?

The fantastic worlds created by Anna Blume are not real, since she admits it in the statement mentioned above. But they are similar to a real world, or rather, the fantastic worlds represent an external, objective reality which is being lived and described by Anna Blume. It can be said that the Castle of No Return, the Land of Sadness and the Forest of Forgotten Words *are* the city (in an allegorical sense), what means that myth and fantasy (the worlds invented by Anna) show an external, objective reality, that is the city of this novel: when we speak about reality, we speak about the external reality

of the novel, which is also a *fantastic* world since the most relevant thing that characterizes literature is that it is a fiction writing, whose purpose is also *representative*, it does not matter if the novel speaks about either a fantastic or real world, by the way. What is real, in literary terms, is what happens inside the novel. From this point of view, to establish if the city is real or fantastic, in other words, if this novel is a realistic one or if it can be categorized as fantastic literature<sup>15</sup> is irrelevant. However, allegorical and symbolic meaning in literature does not depend on the “reality” of the world represented. This fact is not only applied to poetry, but also to novels whose meanings are not literal and do have allegorical characteristics, as it happens with experimental modern novels.

Paul Auster considers himself a realistic writer. That means that his novels describe just real worlds that can be recognised by the reader. The consistence and clarity of his language seems to belong to the style used in traditional novels, where the meaning is determined just by the union between the signifier and the signified of words. However, the reality presented by Paul Auster has a certain particularity which can be considered as having a magical touch rather than a fantastic one at all. The particular organization and structure of his novels can be compared to experimental writing since the underlying harmony that forms the totality of the novel produces irrational feelings of obsession, loss and metaphysical anguish, taking the form of complex labyrinths whose exit cannot be achieved easily. Here it can be appreciated that Paul Auster’s works have a deeper complexity that contradicts the clarity of the words in which the novels are written. The labyrinth form that his novels have can be compared to a Kafka’s fiction, whose main purpose is to represent something beyond words.

As it can be appreciated, the underlying complexity of his novel seems to represent a hidden meaning that is not only represented by language. Then, Paul Auster’s narrative is not as simple as it seems at first sight, it has different levels of interpretation given its complex geometrical structure. The novel structure is similar to geometrical figures (parallels, circles, etc.) forming an underlying mathematical order whose meaning seems to have a symbolic value rather than a literal one, due to its particular complexity.

---

<sup>15</sup> *In the Country of Last Things* is considered a science fiction novel. Nevertheless, this does not help to establish the reality or fantasy of this novel

*In the Country of Last Things* is considered a fantastic novel, from the point of view of the unreal situation all of its characters are going through. It could be considered as an exaggeration, a description of a writer with a lot of imagination who decided to create a terrible world similar to a nightmare, a kind of surrealist work. Nevertheless, the different structural levels of this novel and its complexity, the repetition of certain words and topics, the fact that Anna spoke about invented worlds which are a representation of an external reality; means that this novel has a big symbolic value in which the castle of No Return, the Land of Sadness and the Forest of Forgotten Words are a metaphor of the city, and the *whole* novel as well.

*In the Country of Last Things* presents a world which is similar to any invented world that appears in the literature of dreams and fantasy. The Runners, the Leapers, the people who eat by imagining food; the city, even Anna Blume are similar to ancient myths or fairy tales whose symbolic meanings reveal recognizable aspects of our human condition. The novel can even be compared to them, proving that its meaning is allegoric. This allegoric element also appears in the Theatre of the Absurd, and being one of its important features, it may not be absent in the novel, as it will be seen below.

The horror that is perceived in the city has characteristics that resemble a horrible nightmare or hell. Anna could be compared to Dante going through the nine circles of the hell- which can be compared to the nine census zones of the city. The general horror lived by everybody in the city makes us see very few instances of paradise. For example, she is able to find love when she meets Sam, which is a relatively happy time in her life; another instance is Woburn House, a place in which Anna was accepted and was in charge of quantifying people to give them shelter, food and comfort. It is an instance that proves that solidarity has not disappeared in that world and that good things and generous values still remain. This place is managed by Victoria, whom Anna also found homosexual love and deep understanding with.

We can see that love still remains, even in the worst situations. It is a comfort and the only instance of redemption<sup>16</sup>. But in a certain way it is dangerous, since love is what motivated Anna to search her brother, an attitude that has clearly quixotic characteristics. She did not mind how dangerous her situation would be; she just went to

---

<sup>16</sup> This idea is also said by Marco Stanley Fogg in *Moon Palace*

the unknown city just to find William, and attitude at first sight could be considered as stupid or nonsensical, but which reveals that courage and internal power in Anna. Her fraternity is what sustains her and allows her to support the horrible situation in the city. She has an internal strength that helps her continue mindless of the corruption pervading the entire place. Her sense of solidarity shows a big contrast with the chaos that surrounds her. Anna represents what is good and maintains what is disappearing in the city, that is to say, the human aspects and good values such as generosity, fraternity and love. She beams out a sense of hope, since she keeps the strength that prevents her to fall. “I refuse to speak the language of ghosts” says Anna, and this expresses that she does not want to be like the rest of people in the city, she refuses to fall in helpless alienation and total collapse. In fact, Anna’s surname, Blume, reminds the word “bloom”<sup>17</sup>. She carries the meaning of birth and rebirth, represented in her pregnancy, ending with the chain of death and destruction, creating and producing a new life.

However, those instances of paradise and hope also disappear as everything in the city. She loses Sam, and also her unborn baby; Woburn House, the island of hope in the city, also collapses. Besides she fails to find her brother William. Paradise could not be found and the only feeling that remains is one of loss and despair. There is not paradise in hell; it is beyond the city, somewhere else’s. The certainty that another world exists somewhere else is the only hope that still remains, but it also vanishes with the construction of the tall Sea Wall Project that will surround the city like a prison!. There is no possibility to escape from it. The only hope is that her letter gets its destination. This does not seem very realistic. She even gives up on this idea and little by little, her strength is beginning to wane:

“I never found William, she continued. Perhaps that goes without saying. I never found him, and I never met anyone who could tell me where he was. Reason tells me he is dead, but I can’t be certain of it. There is no evidence to support even the wildest guess, and until I have some proof, I prefer to keep an open mind. Without knowledge, one can neither hope nor despair. The best one can do is doubt, and under the circumstances doubt is a great blessing” (Anna Blume, from *In the Country of Last Things* page 39)

---

<sup>17</sup> This fact also appears in *Moon Palace*, when Marco tells that Zimmer is in love with a girl called Anna **Bloom** or Blume who went abroad looking for her brother

“I spent several weeks trying to escape. At first, there seemed to be any number of possibilities, a whole range of methods for getting myself back home, and given the fact that I had some money to work with; I did not think it would be very hard. That was wrong, of course, but I was willing to admit it. I had arrived in a foreign charity ship, and it seemed logical to assume that I could return in one[...]...No ships were in sight, however, and even the little fishing boats I had seen there a month before were gone. Instead, the whole waterfront was thronged with workers-hundreds and hundreds of them, it seemed to me, more men that I was able to count. Some were unloading rubble from trucks, others were carrying bricks and stones to the edge of the water, still others were lying the foundations for what looked like an immense sea wall or fortification.[...]...It turned out that this was the Sea Wall Project, a public works enterprise that had recently started by the new government.[...]...This was the first I had heard of the current takeover, and when I asked someone the purpose of the sea wall, he told me it was to guard against the possibility of war. The threat of foreign invasion was mounting, he said, and it was our duty as citizens to protect our homeland [...]...The government was estimating that it would take at least fifty years to finish the wall. Good for them, I said, but in the meantime how does one get out of here? Oh no, he said, shaking his head, that’s impossible. Ships aren’t allowed to come in anymore-and if nothing comes in, nothing can go out...” (Anna Blume, from *In the Country of Last Things*, pages 85- 86)

“I had to give up the idea of going home. Of all the things that had happened to me so far, I believe that was the most difficult to take. Until then, I had deluded myself into thinking I could return whenever I wanted to. But with the sea wall now going up, with so many people mobilized to prevent departure, this comforting notion was dashed to bits. First Isabel had died, and then I had lost the apartment. My only consolation had been the thought of home, and now that suddenly had been taken from me as well. For the first time since coming to the city, I was engulfed by pessimism (Anna Blume, from *In the Country of Last Things* page 89)

As it can be appreciated, Anna is beginning to feel disappointed and desperate, she cannot change anything in the city and she no longer can stand the situation. She cannot find William; she cannot escape. Even her own mind is beginning to stumble down. Hell has taken over. There is no paradise.

This novel can also be compared to another fantastic world that appears in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Anna is a sort of Alice, who, like Anna, goes to a strange world where nothing is logic and where everybody seems to be crazy. Anna and Alice are the only beings who keep a reasonable logical mind, which is a big contrast between them and the inhabitants of this kind of world. They do not fit in that world and they



cannot afford to behave in the way the rest of the people do, since they reject its acceptance:

“All this belongs to the language of ghosts. There are many other possible kinds of talks in this language. Most of them begin when one person says to another: I wish. What they wish for might be anything at all, as long as it is something that cannot happen. I wish the sun would never set. I wish money would grow in my pockets. I wish the city would be like it was in the old days. You get the idea. Absurd and infantile things, with no meaning and no reality. In general, people hold to the belief that however bad things were yesterday, they were better than things are today. What they were like two days ago was even better than yesterday. The farther you go back, the more beautiful and desirable the world becomes [...]

[...]...I understand why people play this game, but I myself have no taste for it. I refuse to speak the language of ghosts, and whenever I hear others speaking it, I walk away or put my hands over my ears...

[...]...Now I am all common sense and hard calculation. I don't want to be like the others. I see what their imaginings do to them, and I will not let happen to me..." (Anna Blume, from *In the Country of Last Things* pages 10-11)

"...Alice felt that this could not be denied, so she tried another question. "What sort of people live about here?"

"In *that* direction," the Cat said, waving its right paw round, "lives a Hatter: and in *that* direction," waving the other paw, "lives a March Hare. Visit either you like: they're both mad."

"But I don't want to go among mad people," Alice remarked.

"Oh, you can't help that," said the Cat: "we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad."

"How do you know I'm mad?" said Alice.

"You must be," said the Cat, "or you wouldn't have come here."... (From *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* page 90)

It is thus suggested that it is crazy the fact of going to that world with no logical reason for Anna or Alice, only curiosity or the need to find her brother (Anna's) to go there. They are different, that is for sure, from the other inhabitants of that world and they are aware of it. However, this clear mind is little by little beginning to disappear, and they become "contaminated" with the surrounding craziness, as we will see below. In those

worlds nothing is certain, and anything can happen. Instability and change are the dominant forces there and nothing keeps for a long time. For that reason, even the thoughts and stability of the mind begins to hesitate:

“These are the last things. A house is there one day, and the next day it is gone. A street you walked down yesterday is no longer there today. Even the weather is in constant flux. A day of sun followed by a day of rain, a day of snow followed by a day of fog, warm then cold, wind then stillness, a stretch of bitter cold, and then today, in the middle of winter, an afternoon of fragrant light, warm to the point of merely sweaters. When you live in the city, you learn to take nothing for granted. Close your eyes for a moment, turn around to look at something else, and the thing that was before you is suddenly gone. Nothing lasts, you see, not even the thoughts inside you. And you mustn’t waste your time looking for them. Once a thing is gone, that is the end of it...” (Anna Blume, from *In the Country of Last Things*, pages 1-2)

“There seemed to be no use in waiting by the little door, so she went back to the table, half hoping she might find another key on it, or at any rate a book of rules for shutting people up like telescopes: this time she found a little bottle on it, (“which certainly was not here before,” said Alice,) and tied round the neck of the bottle was a paper label, with the words “DRINK ME”, beautifully printed on it in large letters.

It was all very well to say “Drink me,” but the wise little Alice was not going to do *that* in a hurry. “No, I’ll look first,” she said, “and see whether it’s marked ‘poison’ or not [...] However, this bottle was *not* marked “poison”, so Alice ventured to taste it, and finding it very nice, (it had, in fact, a sort of mixed flavour of cherry-tart, custard, pine-apple, roast turkey, toffy, and hot buttered toast,) she very soon finished it off [...]“What a curious feeling!” said Alice, “I must be shutting up a telescope.”

And so it was indeed: she was now only ten inches high, and her face brightened up at the thought that she was now the right size for going through the little door into that lovely garden...”( From *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* , pages 9-11)

“...Soon her eye fell on a little glass box that was lying under the table: she opened it, and found in it a very small cake, on which the words “EAT ME” were beautifully marked in currants. “Well, I’ll eat it”, said Alice, “and if it makes me grow larger, I can reach the key, and if it makes me grow smaller, I can creep under the door, so either way I’ll get into the garden, and I don’t care which happens!”

She ate a little bit, and said anxiously to herself, “Which way? Which way?” holding her hand on the top of her head to feel which way it was growing, [...] So she set to work, and very soon finished off the cake

[...] Curiouser and curiouser!” cried Alice (she was so much surprised, that for the moment she quite forgot how to speak good English), “now I’m opening out like the largest telescope that ever was! Good-bye, feet!” (for when she looked down at her feet, they seemed to be almost out of sight, they were getting so far off)...”( From *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, pages 13-15)

It can be seen that nothing *is* in those worlds, everything is in constant flux. The different changes of size of Alice and the instability of the city produce a sense of disaster that penetrates in Alice and Anna’s minds. In those places, clarity of thought cannot be kept for a very long time, and the dominant sense of disorder influences on the organized structure inside their brains. Then, they lose what they had for true and now the uncertainty dominates all over. In those places falling into imminent disaster it is practically impossible to find some kind of certainty. In the Country of Last Things people are deprived of everything affirmative, they are losing their sense of reality, of what makes it indispensable as language, for example, this is an environment in which people have to fill the emptiness with inventions such as the language of ghosts and other plays that have been mentioned above. All this chaotic mixture produces in Anna confusion in so much so that she is not longer sure of her own identity. A likely situation occurs in Alice’s mind. As we can see, another “absurd” situation is presented here:

“...After that, things get a little confused for me. I was exhausted, you understand, and I had that blurring in the brain that makes you think you are no longer yourself, when you begin to drift in and out of consciousness, even though you are awake...”(Anna Blume, from *In the Country of Last Things*, page 81)

[...] “Who are *you*?” said the Caterpillar.

This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, “I-I hardly know, sir, just at present-at least I know who I *was* when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.”

“What do you mean by that?” said the Caterpillar sternly. “Explain yourself!”

“I can’t explain *myself*, I’m afraid, sir,” said Alice, “because I’m not myself, you see.”

“I don’t see,” said the Caterpillar.

“I’m afraid I can’t put it more clearly,” Alice replied very politely, “for I can’t understand it myself to begin with, and being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing.” (From *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, page 60)

Loss of identity is something that occurs in modern cities and is one of the most important problems of modern men. Capitalist societies are based on the production and consumption of material goods. Consequently, human beings are not the centre of it but mainly economy, therefore human life is exclusively considered under technocratic criteria. Economical prosperity is the most important aspect, producing a big accumulation of wealth, but, on the other hand, it brings dehumanisation: we are deprived of everything that characterizes us as humans, turning us into production machines. This process of dehumanization produces isolation between individuals and loss of communication between us, we cannot forget that. Capitalism is distinguished by it, everybody is just concerned about their own welfare. Since individualism is the general rule, people are left unattended, alone. So people lose their identity, for they follow what is established, thus becoming particles of the large “urban tribes” whose members are identified by the same thought or life style, mere prototypes with no particularities of their own, conformists who have also lost their ability to handle the language of communication.

This is what happens in *In the Country of Last Things*. It seems that the city is a mirror of our capitalist society, or at least, what it will like sooner than later. Loss of language and communication is an important fact that appears in the novel and can also be compared to the Tower of Babel<sup>18</sup> in which loss of communication determined the Tower was never completed. The Tower represents prosperity, and the fact that people began to speak different languages symbolises the isolation produced by societies characterized by material success. In fact, vices and sins are the basis of these kinds of societies, they are what determines the construction of a tower, in this case, in order to demonstrate the power that possesses. Vanity is not the only and most evident sin. Every sin and vice, every selfish attitude is what sustains those societies, in other words, the worst aspect of human beings is what feeds them and allows them to exist. (It is

---

<sup>18</sup> The Tower of Babel is mentioned in *The New York Trilogy*, specifically in *City of Glass*

important to mention that the word “sin” does not refer to its religious or moralistic sense) This situation is not absent in *In the Country of Last Things*, where even doom and death are profitable business, such as the Euthanasia Clinics, the Assassination Clubs and human slaughter-houses. Maybe in a symbolic way, corpses, garbage and human waste are an important business since they are crucial resources that produce energy and are processed in the Transformation Centers of the city. In a metaphorical sense, our sins and vices, which can also be considered as human waste, is what also sustains civilization, as it was pointed out above. Everything is centred on that, such as the jobs that exist in the city, which are related to the collection of garbage and waste, as, for example, the Fecalists and the scavengers. As it can be appreciated, the collection of human waste- either in literal or metaphorical sense – is institutionalised in those societies, conforming their most important aspects since they are in charge to support them. Therefore, the existence of these kinds of societies are responsibility of everybody.

The city of this novel has been compared to other mythical fantastic worlds. As it was suggested above, their symbolic meaning has to do with representation. Going back to that point, it was also pointed out that the city and the whole novel, is a representation or a metaphor. Now, it is important to raise the question: what does the city represent? What is the metaphor of the novel?

The answer of this question can be inferred by what has been already mentioned above regarding the characteristics of the city. It is a metaphor for lack of solidarity, for political negligence, for the loss of values, dehumanisation and alienation of all of us.

It is possible to affirm that the city is a frightening reality which can occur in any place at any time. It is happening now, at this moment, in our modern capitalist societies.<sup>19</sup> It will happen eventually, it is a kind of prediction for the collapse of civilization as a consequence of capitalism. And it has happened before, for example, in II World War with the Nazi persecution against Jews. This last event is a possible interpretation, since a group of Jews appear in the novel. “I thought all the Jews were dead”, said Anna when she met a group of Jews for the first time at the National Library. The statement uttered

---

<sup>19</sup> Contemporary events that reminds *In the Country of Last Things* are the tsunami in New Orleans or the attack against Twin Towers

by Anna and the general horror experimented in the city reminds us of the horror lived in that war<sup>20</sup>.

“...Inside, five or six men were sitting around a wooden table, talking about something in urgent, animated voices. [...] All of the men were bearded, were dressed in black clothes, and wore hats on their heads. I was so startled to discover them there that I let out a little gasp and began to shut the door. But the oldest man at the table turned and gave me a wonderful smile, a smile so filled with warmth and kindness that I hesitated.

“Is there anything we can do for you?”

[...] “I thought all the Jews were dead”, I whispered.

“There are few of us left,” he said, smiling at me again. “It’s not so easy to get rid of us, you know”

“I’m Jewish, too,” I blurted out. “My name is Anna Blume, and I came here from far away. I’ve been in the city for over a year now, looking for my brother. I don’t suppose you know him. His name is William. William Blume.”

“No, my dear,” he said, shaking his head, “I’ve never met your brother.”

[...] “It’s been a long time,” I said. “Unless he managed to escape somehow, I’m sure he is dead.”

“It’s very possible,” the Rabbi said gently, “So many have died, you know. It’s best not to expect miracles.”

“I don’t believe in God anymore, if that’s what you mean,” I said. “I gave all that up when I was a little girl.”

“It’s difficult not to,” the Rabbi said. “When you consider the evidence, there’s a good reason why so many think as you do.”

“You are not going to tell me that *you* believe in God,” I said.

“We talk to him. But whether or not he hears us is another matter” (Anna Blume, from *In the Country of Last Things*, pages 95-96)

---

<sup>20</sup> In, fact, the name of the main character, Anna, reminds “Anne” from *The Diary of Anne Frank*

“Can it be possible! This old saint in the forest has not yet heard that God is dead!”<sup>21</sup>  
This statement and the sense that God is dead, also demonstrated in Anna’s words, is a notion that developed after two world wars, where millions were deprived of what has been considered their essence as human beings in a purposeless and absurd world.

The world lost its meaning, and now what was established cannot be accepted as valid, and the purpose of man in the universe, which with the existence of God had an explanation, now it seems to have no sense at all.

The horror lived at those times revealed the tragic loss of certainties of human beings, the loss of a world that would not exist anymore. The disappearance of God, and also, of religious sense, brought along the result that individuals are alone since they do not feel identified with the sense of community that religion produces. Their existence has become mechanical, alienated and deprived of dignity.

This kind of existence is lived in *In the Country of Last Things*, a metaphor of a society where human beings are deprived of their dignity and just live worried about their survival in an alienated society. The city is a world without God, where everything is disappearing, where the world will not be as it used to be in the good old days.

In all those aspects is finally where the absurd lies, which is at last, the only aspect that still remains.

---

<sup>21</sup> The Theatre of the Absurd, page 290. This note is taken from Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*

# CONCLUSION

Paul Auster is a complex writer. It is important to bear in mind the different levels in his novel before doing any literary analysis.

As far as the “absurd” is concerned, we see that such complexity in this novel has a symbolic characteristic, which is also an important feature in the Theatre of the Absurd. Both have the same purpose: to represent the absurdity of human condition.

The words “absurd”, “absurdity” and Theatre of the Absurd appear recurrently in this work. The Theatre of the Absurd is just a literary movement that is concerned about “absurd” and “absurdity”. It has determined characteristics that define it. But if the topic is what defines it, the novel *In the Country of Last Things* would also belong to the Theatre of the Absurd.

These aspects were discussed in the work. If the Theatre of the Absurd is mentioned in this work, is because this literary movement tries to approach in an extreme way to this concept, which is at last the key concept and our main concern.

*In the Country of Last Things* has features that belong to the Theatre of the Absurd, and to the Literature of the Absurd as well. But due to the complexity of this novel, the features that characterize this kind of theatre appear as themes or topics in it, but it is important not to forget the complexity of this novel and its different levels of interpretation which makes it similar to other experimental novels.

Therefore, as it was discussed in the work, the technical aspects and aesthetic approaches that differentiate them are irrelevant. What is important is the concept “absurd” and where it lies.

*In the Country of Last Things* is an extreme and frightening representation of the absurdity of human condition. All what makes our lives are purposeless and absurd is concentrated in the city of this novel. It seems that Paul Auster makes us to be aware of the reality in which we are living, or maybe, it is a prediction of our lives in the future. Anyway, if the absurd is what determines us as human beings, if it is an essential



characteristic that define us, if the construction of modern societies is based on our own absurdity, it means that there is not hope for mankind. Societies are not the cause of our absurdity, this lies inside us and as a last consequence we become alienated and dehumanized paradoxically because of what makes us humans.

This is at last represented in this novel. The complexity and underlying order in it (and also in the rest of Paul Auster's narrative) does not have any purpose and do not help his characters to find an exist in its labrynthical structure. And this is more evident in *In the Country of Last Things*, where the useless harmony of the universe, either in the structure of the novel or the social establishment ( inside the novel) just leads to chaos and the end of the world as it used to be.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Glaze, Alejandra. Auster's austerity (internet reference from seminar class)  
aglaze@interlink.com.ar

Sánchez Rizdi Andrea. 'El País de las Ultimas Cosas: La Temible Ciudad de Paul Auster' [www.periodismo.uchile.cl](http://www.periodismo.uchile.cl)

Cruel Universe [www.spikemagazine.com](http://www.spikemagazine.com)

Discussing Books: Paul Auster, In the Country of Last Things

"An Interview with Paul Auster" danepstein@hotmail.com

Paul Auster y su novela "En el País de las Ultimas Cosas" Programa "Puntos Suspensivos" Radio Universidad de Chile 102.5 F.M. Creado y producido por Enrique Sandoval Gessler. (Grabado el jueves 21 de Julio del 2005)

## Books

Barceló Pedro (traducción y prólogo) Teatro francés de vanguardia: Georges Schehade: Historia de Vasco, Arthur Adamov: Paolo Paoli, Samuel Becket: Esperando a Godot, Eugene Ionesco: Las Sillas. Madrid: Aguilar Ediciones S.A 1960

Becket, Samuel. Waiting for Godot New York: Grove Press 1954

Carroll, Lewis. Alice's Adventures in Wonderland New York: Book League of America, 1941

Esslin, Martin. The Theatre of the Absurd New York: Anchor Books edition, 1961

Glukman Martin. Eugene Ionesco y su Teatro Santiago de Chile: Editorial Universitaria S.A, 1970

Kofler Leo. Arte abstracto y literatura del absurdo Barcelona: Barral Editores S.A, 1970

Walter Joseph. Modern fiction studies “Criminality and (self) discipline: the case of Paul Auster” Summer 2002

## Novels of the author

Auster Paul. In the Country of Last Things New York: Penguin Books, 1987