Disorientation and Detection: Paul Auster's *In The Country of Last Things*

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Abstract

Paul Auster, in his second novel, *In the Country of Last Things*, invites us into a dystopian vision of the future where Anna Blume, our protagonist, narrator and amateur sleuth, leaves her home to enter the country of last things to search for her missing brother. She searches this unfamiliar land for clues, but is met with uncertainty, confusion and failure. This paper will investigate Paul Auster's novel *In the Country of Last Things* as a work of metaphysical detective fiction. It will do this by examining how Auster undermines classical detective tropes by employing elements of the metaphysical genre and, in doing so, highlights the strained and complex relationship we have with knowledge and knowing. The purpose of this analysis is to highlight the connection between the metaphysical detective genre and its influence on Auster's novel. This study serves two purposes: (1) to explore the reasons why Auster has subverted some of the common detective genre tropes, (2) to investigate the effect of this subversion and how it influences how we read the narrative, and (3) to explore the implications of representing the world this way. The importance of this analysis is found in Auster's warning about trying to read the postmodern world and the complexity and confusion we find when we do so. Thus, this analysis highlights Auster's manipulation of detective fiction and points towards further research into the author's use of this device in his later fiction.

Keywords: Metaphysical detective, Paul Auster, Dystopia, Disorientation, Postmodernism

"I don't expect you to understand. You have seen none of this, and even if you tried, you could not imagine it. These are the last things" (Auster, 1987, p. 1).

Introduction

In the metaphysical detective story, the reader is always the detective. He is lost in the multiplicity of the postmodern world and is offered Deleuzean cartography rather than the traditional traces or clues that are found in classic detective fiction. Paul Auster, in his second novel, *In the Country of Last Things*, invites us into a dystopian vision of the future where Anna Blume, our protagonist, narrator and amateur sleuth, leaves her home to enter the country of last things to search for her missing brother. She searches this unfamiliar land for clues, but is met with uncertainty, confusion and failure.

Even before writing the novel under consideration, Auster had a fascination with detective fiction. In fact, his first novel, *Squeeze Play*, written under the nom de plume Paul Benjamin was a 'straight' hardboiled detective story. Moreover, the first novel that he published as Paul Auster, *City of Glass,* which was the first novel of *The New York Trilogy*, was also a detective story albeit more of the metaphysical variety. In fact, the *New York Trilogy* and *City of Glass* in particular, have been lauded as a model for the metaphysical detective genre as they adhere to the definition as discussed by Merivale and Sweeney (1999) in their book *Detecting Texts*: "subverts traditional detective-story conventions—such as narrative closure and the reader's role as surrogate reader—with the effect, or at least the intention, of asking questions about being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot" (p. 1).

Although there is a vast body of work that investigates *The New York Trilogy* as a work of metaphysical detective fiction (Merivale & Sweeney, 1999), Auster's second novel *In the Country of Last Things*

has not received the same treatment, though it also exhibits elements of the genre. A reason for the latter not receiving the same amount of attention may be the more subtle nature of the text. *The New York Trilogy* is an obvious parody of detective fiction and focuses on philosophical concerns rather than seeking to make an emotional connection with the reader. *In the Country of Last Things* is in the form of a long letter, it does not make explicit references to detective fiction, and it exists in a dystopian world. Moreover, *In the Country of Last Things* uses the tropes of metaphysical detective fiction to examine issues of loss and disorientation and the implications for the reader as they try to navigate the postmodern world. In fact, very few of Auster's later novels have been examined as examples of metaphysical detective fiction, though they contain elements of the genre.

This essay will investigate Paul Auster's novel *In the Country of Last Things* as a work of metaphysical detective fiction. It will do this by examining how Auster undermines classical detective tropes and, in doing so, highlights the strained and complex relationship we have with knowledge and knowing. The purpose of this analysis is to highlight the connection between the metaphysical detective genre and its influence on Auster's novel. This study serves three purposes: (1) to explore the reasons why Auster has subverted some of the common detective genre tropes, (2) to investigate the effect of this subversion and how it influences how we read the narrative, and (3) to explore the implications of representing the world this way.

The Metaphysical Response

Merivale and Sweeney (1999) posit that the reason we should engage with metaphysical detective stories is because "they directly speculate about the workings of language, the structure of narrative, the limitations of genre, the meanings of prior texts, and the nature of reading" (p. 7). These stories aim to examine the human condition and our relationship with the world rather than solve a crime. In his detailed and comprehensive study, *The Figure of the Detective: A*

Literary History and Analysis, Brownson (2014) looks to the future of the detective genre and asks: "What variations might we look for?" (p. 159). The author's hypothesis is that the Metaphysical Modern, as he calls this new genre:

> will arise from contemporary questions about truth and evidence. At issue are the reliability of the knowledge we have of the phenomenal world, memory and the dubious claims we make about ourselves and others, doubts about the foundations of psychology and personality, the spectacle of spirituality assailed by materialism, morality by cynicism, community by individualism. (Brownson, 2014, p. 159)

In short, Brownson (2014) envisions this new genre as embracing postmodern playfulness and subjectivity. The fear that will exist in these new stories will be a detective who faces "absolute relativism" (Brownson, 2014). Earlier theorists such as William Spanos, Michael Holquist and Stefano Tani foresaw the rise of this genre and its place in contemporary fiction. Spanos (1972) coined the term "anti-detective fiction" and defined the new genre as creating narratives that "evoke the impulse to detect...in order to violently frustrate it by refusing to solve the crime" (p. 154). Holquist (1971) also highlighted the resisted teleology and the shifted purpose "...the metaphysical detective story...is not concerned to have a neat ending in which all the questions are answered, and can [therefore] be forgotten" (p. 170). While Tani (1984) saw it as questioning the traditional genre and the consumerist nature of literature: "it frustrates the expectations of the reader, transforms a mass-media genre into a sophisticated expression of avant-garde sensibility," and replaces positivistic interpretation with an acknowledgment of mystery, it is "the ideal medium of postmodernism" (p. 40). Finally, Merivale and Sweeney (1999) have examined the complexity and importance of this new genre and define it in the following way:

> A metaphysical detective story is a text that parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions - such as narrative closure and the detective's role as a surrogate reader - with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot. (p. 2)

This new detective lives with uncertainty and faces ontological questions rather than the epistemological questions that traditional detective fiction is famed for. This new genre, moreover, contains a detective who understands that there is no certainty or reliable solutions or conclusions. These detectives work with the tropes of the original genre, but they seem uncomfortable with these tropes as they are undermined and highlighted as artificial in the new metaphysical modern genre. And, even the tropes that are expected and essential for the traditional detective genre to be identified as such are inverted or ignored. This is the case with the metaphysical mysteries of Paul Auster wherein the characters search for clues and some kind of answer only to be met with confusion and inevitable failure. The significance of clues, as a consequence, and the very act of collecting evidence and following a logical line of cause and effect are ignored or undermined. Discoveries and breakthroughs are accidental; the sheer volume of clues is overwhelming and the significance of the clues is called into question. These 'broken images' seem to have no causal relationship and the detective becomes hampered by his inability to decipher the clues or the world he finds himself in. As Brownson (2014) notes "The Metaphysical Modern detective detects nothing. Clues remain clues, not linkable to form a coherent causal sequence" (p. 160). Furthermore, Bernstein commenting on *The New York Trilogy* says that the author "attempts to sever [his] ties with all but the exoskeleton form of detective fiction. The closural epistemological certainty that long characterized the genre is just one code dispensed with" (1999, p. 134).

This new metaphysical iteration of the traditional detective story is heavily influenced by the rise in popularity and acceptance

of French semiotics. The influence that this had on fiction and genre fiction in particular is far-reaching: "In literature, history and other fields it was how to interpret texts, whether written or experienced, that seemed to have no fixed meaning, but only what was attributed to them or extracted from them by self-interested critics" (Brownson, 2014, p. 161). Traditionally, we knew what to expect when we opened a detective narrative. It may have been a Mannerist labyrinth, but it was a labyrinth that we were always released from. When meaning is called into question and we apply this uncertainty to a genre that prides itself on the certainty of genre conventions and tropes a great disorientation takes place.

This is highlighted in Auster's text when Anna finds that the city that she has entered is impossible to read. Not only does she struggle to survive, but she finds herself adrift in a sea of indecipherable signs. Meaning refuses to stay still and because Anna and the other inhabitants of the city find no meaning in their lives they care only about survival or how to end their suffering through elaborate suicide pacts.

Certainty collapses and gives rise to doubt and this new genre is used in many ways to highlight and explore this doubt. *In the Country of Last Things* is a text gripped with uncertainty, which is explored from many angles within the story. This is illustrated in the text by the lack of clear laws, the constantly changing government and the disappearance of language, people and borders. However, it could also be argued that these new manifestations of the detective are not detectives at all and are only masquerading as sleuths. This, in turn, gives rise to a variety of questions that will help us see the difficulties the metaphysical modern detective is facing: How can uncertainty be detected? What solution is available to us when every conclusion is suspect and open to negotiation? Anna's inability to detect anything is evident when she attempts to decipher her new environment.

Many writers are willing to take this new genre very seriously. For, although Brownson believes that the genre is in its infancy and

has had a handful of notable examples over the last 100 years or so, he also fails to mention some of the more prominent and established authors who have dabbled with the genre as well as the growing body of criticism that surrounds it. In his study, *The Figure of the Detective*, Brownson (2014) makes passing mention to Eco, Nabokov, Robbe-Grillet, Durrenmatt, Stein, Borges and Gadda; however, he fails to mention some of the more contemporary and acclaimed authors working within the genre: Amis, DeLillo, Pynchon, Barnes, Murakami, and the author under consideration in this essay, Paul Auster. One could argue that the genre is quite mature and has been employed consistently by many award-winning authors over the last 30 years. In fact, Auster has consistently returned to the genre for over 30 years from *City of Glass* (1985) to his latest novel *4321* (2017), though the scholarship surrounding his work seems to indicate that he turned his back on the genre after the *New York Trilogy*.

The genre has appeared and continues to gain popularity and audiences are more in tune with what it is trying to say and what it is reacting to. The postmodern condition as identified by Jameson creates a 'waning of affect' and a 'loss of historicity'. The telos that we once embraced as certainty has gone, and we are adrift in a sea of seemingly unrelated and unrelatable signs. The postmodern condition offers us no exit or clear and decisive resolutions. The new detective, then, is in a very precarious position. He can investigate. But will he ever discover anything that resolves the problem that he faces?

This, however, leads us to what the metaphysical detective story is able to achieve. The investigation in the hands of Paul Auster, as one example, becomes an analysis on the nature of memory, knowledge and identity. The stories still contain a detective, but it is not the detective you think you know. And, just as with the traditional detective, the reader is an involved participant. However, as has been discussed above, there are no clear solutions to the problems posed by the book. We as readers are along for the ride, but we suffer the same humiliations and defeats as the detective figure in the story. This situation, however, frees us from the constraints of

genre boundaries and allows us to explore the ideas on a personal level. What is our own relationship with the world? What can we ever really know? Who are we?

In *In the Country of Last Things* Anna Blume resembles the metaphysical detectives of *The New York Trilogy*, though she never identifies herself as either a detective or the author himself (as the protagonist in The New York Trilogy does). She is attempting to locate her brother in an unfamiliar and terrifying world. Anna has to identify the correct way to survive in the new city. However, the language of the city changes everyday, new boundaries appear as if out of thin air, and danger lurks everywhere. This city of unpredictable boundaries is "a space without history: her [Anna's] life is a spatial rather than temporal experience" (Lucy, 2009, p. 120).

These stories though frustrating also offer exhilaration. We seek our own solutions, our own interpretations. The narratives inevitably refuse to offer neat endings that close the narrative. They remain open and "unconsumed" as Tani (1984) has observed, deserving further reading and analysis to try to make some personal sense of these metaphysical tales. In these stories we are the detective, but it is more than just the plot we are trying to decipher.

Another benefit of this new genre is the possibilities that it opens up. It takes the form of a quest narrative, but the text is very free to be manipulated as it has escaped the confines of genre constrictions. The stories encourage familiarity by employing some of the tropes of traditional detective fiction only to frustrate the reader by inverting the very conventions they use to stabilize the text and guide the reader.

This new genre, then, can be considered as a real and meaningful extension of the traditional detective genre. It is a departure from its predecessors and has very different preoccupations; however, it retains enough of the original to be considered an extension or derivative. Just as the Hardboiled moved away from the classic and, in doing so, changed focus and various tropes, it is still considered a natural progression of the classic detective format. The hardboiled in fact is

a reaction to its time and to what was happening in the world. These writers had lost faith in the genre that had preceded them and wanted to create something new. In fact, Raymond Chandler, probably the most recognizable author of the hardboiled genre, was openly critical of the genre that had preceded him. Chandler's critique of the "classic" Golden Age detective story goes beyond a lack of realistic characters and plot; Chandler (2006) complains about contrivances and formulas and an inability to move beyond them. According to Chandler, the classic detective story "has learned nothing and forgotten nothing" (p. 3).

The metaphysical modern, though hardly a clear extension of the hardboiled, has become a plaything of the new metaphysical genre. Thus, it is fair to identify this new genre as a genuine extension of the detective tradition. As Chandler (2006) was critical of the country house mysteries that proceed him, so it seems are the writers of the metaphysical variety. However, Chandler's complaint about the lack of realism of his predecessors is not what the metaphysical detective writers are responding to. They are responding to the certainty depicted in hardboiled fiction and traditional detective stories. They are on the other hand speculating, as Merivale and Sweeney (1999) have stated "about the workings of language, the structure of narrative, the limitations of genre, the meanings of prior texts, and the nature of reading" (p. 7).

The genre is versatile and evolving and has finally been embraced by the mainstream. Just in the last 30 years we have had a proliferation of interest and examples as well as criticism. This new genre, moreover, is not limited to the printed page. The rise in popularity of TV series has spawned *True Detective*, *Mr Robot* and a reboot of the pioneering metaphysical detective story for the small screen, *Twin Peaks*. It seems that this genre has arrived. And this is in no small part to Paul Auster's contribution that began with the *New York Trilogy* and then continued into his subsequent novel *In the Country of Last Things*.

Thus, the metaphysical detective story is employing and then playing with the genre conventions of the established genre. Many

of the typical genre tropes are on display, but the treatment forces the reader/detective to examine these tropes in a new light. These preoccupations take on different forms in the metaphysical detective story and, through genre manipulation, become areas of analysis themselves. The quest plot leads to no solution and the detective learns nothing from his journey; knowledge in the form of clues are overwhelming or false; logical and intuitive thinking collide and converge; the boundaries of the genre dissolve and resist replacement; and the effect of the investigation itself on the reader as well as the protagonist. In many ways the metaphysical detective story has recovered the reader. We are not only active participants in the story, but encouraged to be the creators of the story. This means, then, that the reading of many of these stories is difficult, frustrating and, as Brownson (2014) has posited, possibly "unsatisfying" (p. 174).

One way into these texts is to develop an understanding of late twentieth century philosophical ideas and critical theories as these can assist the reading of these stories and help us to understand how to better access them. According to Hoffmann (1994) "The central metaphor of postmodern fiction, the crucial figuration for its content, design, narrative, strategies, the paradoxicality of its intention, is spatial: it is the labyrinth" (p. 414). We are lost in this postmodern labyrinth, but the aim is not to kill the minotaur and escape. It is to go deeper into the Deleuzian multiplicity and to recognize the 'absolute relativism' of modern life. The extended metaphor of these stories is that 'the search' or the detective work is never done: it is always infinite.

Another interesting and helpful observation made by Brownson (2014) is the one area that unites all detective stories:

> all detective stories have one necessary, essential, defining element: the getting and deployment of knowledge. The present view of what knowledge is, is that it is performative, unstable, local, inscrutable, or only partially verifiable, and polluted by agendas of ideology and power - that knowledge is not a thing, a piece of the phenomenal world that can be picked up and put down, owned, but is a volatile product of action in the world. (p. 176)

This point is helpful when considering the connection between the metaphysical detective genre and its predecessors. The knowledge, however, is rather different in form. As stated earlier, the traditional and hardboiled genres both rely on epistemological knowledge, which includes verifiable facts and intuitions that lead to definite solutions. The metaphysical genre, on the other hand, is more ontological in focus. This becomes evident in *In the Country of Last Things* where the text is more interested in questions such as 'What, if anything, can we know?' or 'What, if anything, is real?'

The popularity of the TV shows *True Detective*, *Mr Robot* and the reboot of *Twin Peaks* as well as the writers Jonathan Lethem, Michael Chabon, Martin Amis, Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon and Julian Barnes' many current novels as well as the criticism that surrounds them points to a shift in the acceptance of such stories. The concern from my point of view is not that they will not be read, it is that they are not identified as part of a wider tradition. Comments about the above mentioned texts and authors discuss their self-reflexivity, their self-consciousness and their many metanarrative devices. They do not, however, place them in the genre that we have been discussing here. They are more than likely dropped into the enormous postmodern bucket. By placing these stories in the wide and varied genre of metaphysical detective fiction, we are able to see the similarities of the texts and compare and contrast their preoccupations.

What, then, can better prepare us to read these stories? Is it an understanding of what to expect, such as the identified tropes of the new genre that are found in Merivale and Sweeney's (1999) book length study of metaphysical detection: *Detecting Texts*. Should these texts be categorized by the genre and labelled as such? The problem with this is that the metaphysical detective genre resists genre distinction and rejects labels and the limitations of rules. Furthermore, what happens when we move into the area of chance, nonlinear and apparently causeless occurrence?

A way into the text, then, may be to consider how the author plays with the genre conventions and what the effect of this play is on the reader and what Auster is telling us about our society and the human condition by employing this method of storytelling.

The Defeated Sleuth

The first trope that is evident in the text is the defeated sleuth, which is Anna Blume but also us as the readers. Anna has left the comfort of her home to search for her brother who has, as a journalist, gone to the Country of Last Things to find out what is happening there. Anna is not a professional sleuth, nor has she any background in detection. She is a 19-year-old girl whose brother has not been heard from for nine months.

The novel leads us to believe that it will follow this narrative trajectory through and that we will find out about William and his fate. However, as early as p. 39 of the 188-page novel we are informed:

> I never found William. 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 blessing. (Auster, 1987, p. 39)

This confession disorientates the reader and alerts us to the fact that the text is not "playing by the rules" of detective fiction. The quest is announced on the second page of the novel; however, it is accompanied with foreshadowing: "William has disappeared, you said. And no matter how hard I looked, I would never find him" (Auster, 1987, p. 2). The formal logic that we find in the classic detective tale does not exist in the Country of Last Things. Instead, we have a detective who cannot read the world that she finds herself in. After hardly any mention of William in the ensuing pages, Anna

returns to her quest at the end of the novel to say: "Anything is possible, and that is almost the same as being born into a world that has never existed before. Perhaps we will find William after we leave the city, but I try not to hope too much" (Auster, 1987, p. 188). The modern city has defeated Anna and, even though she hopes to find William, her story ends there and we can infer that she never finds him.

Employing the defeated sleuth helps Auster focus the audience on Anna's place in the world and, by extension, our own. The detective's failure highlights for us that the solution to the story is not the main focus and, as a result, we are encouraged to dive back into the text to find meaning. For Tani, as for Holquist and Spanos, the anti-detective (metaphysical) novel "frustrates the expectations of the reader…and substitutes for the detective as central and ordering character the decentering and chaotic admission of mystery, of non-solution" (Tani, 1984, p. 40). The implications of representing the world this way are significant for the audience. Auster is questioning the nature of truth and knowledge through Anna's defeat. By representing the world this way, these failures force us to confront the confusion and disorientation of modern life. Traditional detective stories depict the success of detection. In contrast, the defeat of detection enhances the connotation of metaphysics. The failure of the detection directly refers to the unsolved mystery and the incomplete text, creating an absence of closure. We are forced to read deeper, to imagine ways into the text, to assign our own meaning and interpretation. As Tani (1984) states in his analysis of the anti-detective in postmodern American and Italian fiction: "[the metaphysical] detective novel's open-ended non-solution, if well-worked out, leaves the reader with a proliferation of clues, allowing him to fabricate one or more possible denouements" (p. 40). The reader, then, is a far more active participant in the creation of the story. Tani continues his analysis of the significance of the non-solution, when he states that "This is a way to leave the novel 'alive' (non-consumed), an object of curiosity even after the end, since a plausible solution imposed by the reader implies a rereading or rethinking, in which the artistic qualities of

the novel finally stand out" (p. 85). It becomes clear that the defeat of the sleuth helps to cement the metaphysical detective story's message more convincingly in the thoughts of the reader than a traditional detective story would.

A Proliferation of Clues

A proliferation of clues is a common theme found in metaphysical detective fiction. The infinite and subjective nature of the clues highlights "the detective's inability to decipher the mystery [and] inevitably casts doubt on the reader's similar attempt to make sense of the text" (Merival & Sweeney, 1999, p. 2).

Auster (1987) uses this theme to highlight the difficulty of conducting an investigation and this is demonstrated by the multitude of possible clues Anna comes across after she has arrived in the city:

> In the city, the best approach is to believe only what your own eyes tell you. But not even that is infallible. For few things are ever what they seem to be, especially here, with so much to absorb at every step, with so many things that defy understanding. (p. 19)

Anna has considerable trouble navigating the new city and has no time or ability to decipher the infinite world of clues around her. And, as has been previously mentioned, she is attempting to describe her adventure in writing; a task she is finding almost impossible to do: "There is so much I want to tell you. Then I begin to say something, and I suddenly realize how little I understand" (Auster, 1987, p. 28). Of all the new roles available in the new city, Anna chooses Object Hunter for herself. However, as we have come to expect, Anna has little talent for it and does not understand the value or meaning of the things in the city: "In the beginning, it did not go well. The city was new for me back then, and I always seemed to be lost. I squandered time on forays that yielded nothing, bad hunches on barren streets, being in the wrong spot at the wrong time"

(Auster, 1987, pp. 34-35).

She goes on to say that things in the new city are not what they seem to be or have no connection with other things: "For nothing is really itself anymore. There are pieces of this and that, but none of it fits together. And yet, very strangely, at the limit of all this chaos, everything begins to fuse again" (Auster, 1987, p. 35).

As an Object Hunter, Anna is searching for useful things, for things that have some kind of purpose beyond their mere existence. Her search, however, is not for objects that will help her solve the mystery of her brother's disappearance. This scrounging that she does is just in order to survive. It adds little to her understanding of the city or her place in the city. It simply offers her a way of existing. And, even when she becomes better at finding these objects, they prove to be meaningless to her and simply a heap of broken images:

> Little by little, my hauls became almost adequate. Odds and ends, of course, but a few totally unexpected things as well: a collapsible telescope with one cracked lens; a rubber Frankenstein mask; a bicycle wheel; a Cyrillic typewriter missing only five keys and the spacebar; the passport of a man named Quinn. (Auster, 1987, p. 36)

For the reader we can find symbolic meaning in the objects, but Anna only sees them as things she can sell. However, although they may help us see Auster's playfulness (for example, Quinn is the protagonist in Auster's earlier novel the New York Trilogy) it does not help Anna. She is too busy trying to stay alive to be bothered with metafiction.

In *The Country of Last Things* "there is a proliferation of clues that also may be used to prove different solutions (or to confuse the reader totally)" (Tani, 1984, p. 86). Again, as Tani has pointed out, this non-solution helps the work remain 'unconsumed' and forces the reader to go back into the text in an effort to find some kind of meaning. By breaking the rules of genre distinction, the writer is challenging the global, cosmopolitan reader to become a

better reader and by extension to find a personal message in the text.

One of the themes in Auster's novel is the idea that real justice is illusory and unattainable. The traditional detective story's motivations are undermined and the journey becomes a far more personal experience for the reader:

> while in the conventional detective story 'justice' was implied in the solution and never stood out in the fiction, here the suspension of the solution leaves the lack of justice and the related mechanisms of power and corruption standing bare and unpunished in a 'decapitated structure', so that they become the real theme and purpose of the fiction. (Tani, 1984, p. 91)

The implications of representing the world this way is to point out to the audience that the world is becoming increasingly difficult to read. When we really try to decipher the world, we are met with confusion, contradiction and disorientation. Auster, however, seems to be urging us to find something that we can personally hold on to. For Anna, it is a quest to find out what happened to her brother. For us, it may be something else entirely.

Detecting Coincidence

A preoccupation that can be found in Auster's work is the role that coincidence and chance play in our lives. Anna's journey is also heavily influenced by the forces of chance: "If I happened to find something, it was always because I stumbled onto it by accident. Chance was my only approach, the purely gratuitous act of seeing a thing with my own two eyes and then bending down to pick it up" (Auster, 1987, p. 35).

Auster (1987) also highlights the disorientation of the protagonist and the fact that she has no particular skills to unravel the mystery that she faces:

> I had no method…no way of knowing in advance where to go, no sense of what would be where and when. It takes years of living in a city to get to that point, and I was only a novice, an ignorant newcomer who could barely find her way. (p. 35)

According to Lucy (2009), "Perhaps, then, we could read *In the Country of Last Things* as a sort of inventory of the postmodern condition, a way of relating to a world in which ideas of system, origin, continuity and telos are present only in their absence" (p. 25). Any discovery that Anna makes is by necessity by chance. She is facing a world that is refusing to be read. The only 'breakthrough' that Anna makes as a detective is to find Samuel Farr, a former colleague of her brother from the newspaper. This discovery, however, has nothing to do with deduction or ratiocination. It happened due to chance: "It was the work of pure chance, one of those bits of luck that fall down on you from the sky. And a long time passed before that happened – more time than I would like to remember" (Auster, 1987, p. 43).

The City as Labyrinth

Anna Blume feels estranged in a city, as the streets appear and disappear, and the rumors of other places existing outside of the city are considered as the products of imagination.

What also characterizes the journey of Anna Blume is endlessness, as the "city" is always experienced as an endlessly familiar, endlessly repetitive space, thus enhancing the motif of the labyrinth. She begins her letter with the description of this uncanny labyrinth: "these are the last things. A house is there one day, and the next day it is gone. A street you walked down yesterday, is no longer there today" (Auster, 1987, p. 1). "The city" thus becomes a living being and because it is all-pervasiveness, it dehumanizes all of its inhabitants, it "makes people too small to be human anymore" (Auster, 1987, p. 74). The devastated metropolis is experienced by Anna Blume as a lifeless, objectless, godless place, in which people are faced with isolation and anonymity in the midst of similarly nameless masses: "Slowly and steadily, the city seems to be consuming itself, even as it remains

(…) the streets are the worst, for there you are exposed to every hazard and inconvenience" (Auster, 1987, pp. 21-22).

The city, like the letter to her friend, is a text. But it is a text that refuses to be read. And, the investigation, if it can still be called that, falters and fails because the city refuses to allow itself to be read.

Anna Blume's desire to relocate herself in this frustrating urban space is an act that recalls Jameson's notion of "cognitive mapping." According to Jameson (1991) "disalienation in the traditional city involves the practical reconquest of a sense of place and the construction and reconstruction of an articulated ensemble which can be retained in memory and which the individual subject can map and remap along the moments of mobile, alternative trajectories" (p. 51). Thus, the act of traversing the city in search of clues becomes a linguistic expression of a succession of mental images. The city in Auster's novel functions as both a scene of textual events and a text for individual interpretation. Thus, the city emerges as a text in which Anna Blume is "looking for the signs" in order to (re)locate herself and to find meaning. The city, however, resists any such reading.

Anna's attempts at mapping the city and detecting any clues constantly fail, and her possibilities to act and move freely are also blocked by the city's continuous physical decomposition.

The narrator's problem, according to Lucy (2009), "…is that she can't find any guiding star – any heuristic signposts – to point her in the right direction and so she can't allow herself to fantasize, to project a future for herself" (p. 23). The problems that face her in the present, including the problem of the present, occupy all of her time and overwhelm her imagination. All she can do is live and write:

> Bit by bit the city robs you of certainty. There can never be any fixed path, and you can survive only if nothing is necessary to you. Without warning, you must be able to change, to drop what you are doing, to reverse. In the end, there is nothing that is not the case. As a consequence, you must learn how to read the signs. (Auster, 1987, p. 6)

Anna, however, can only read enough of the city to stay alive. She doesn't even get close to finding William or what happened to him.

Conclusion

In the Country of Last Things explores the impossibility of really knowing anything for certain. The novel explores this idea by using the ruse of a detective story only to undermine this structure by introducing the defeat of the detective figure early on in the novel, by making the clues meaningless or unreadable, and by casting Anna into a city that refuses to conform to her expectations and, as with the clues, refuses to be deciphered. The effect of this on the reader is one of disorientation and uncertainty. The novel, however, reflects the society that we live in. A society that changes so quickly that we can never feel at home there. In the end, Auster's novel is a warning about trying to read the postmodern world. We, he argues, will never truly understand it, but like Anna we can (and should) continue to search through the multiplicity of clues and interconnected streets on the off chance that we may discover something about this new space and, more importantly, something about ourselves.

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