

Demystifying the Sublime City in Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things*

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Abstract: The present study discusses the demystification of the urban sublime in Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things*. It sets the term in a US context and discusses its specificity through the examination of the relationship of the urban sublime with a pair of interrelated concepts: the technological sublime and the consumer's sublime. This theoretical preview verifies that the architectural and technological structure of the city has been subordinated to the logics of capitalist economy. The paper evaluates Auster's novel as a critique of the deferential elevation of the urban landscape through its reduction to the dystopian images of garbage and waste; through the reversal of the object of the sublime from the infinitely large to the infinitely small, from the urban to the natural; and through the subversion of the power dynamics attributed to the skyscraper, the central emblem of the urban sublime. It asserts that the foregrounding of the act of falling, set against the pronounced upward orientation of the urban landscape, defines the city as an inherently lethal area capable of arousing a single passion linked to the notion of the sublime—terror

Keywords: sublime, urban sublime, technological sublime, city novel, postmodernism

Introduction

The process of rapid industrialization and the steady shift from rural to urban society in the aftermath of the American Civil War resulted, undoubtedly, in the deification of the city as a potent marker of American progress. This gave birth to the American *city* novel which focused on urban centers such as Chicago and New York, the new emblems of the American Dream which attracted thousands of rural Americans with dazzling promises of

wealth and happiness. The city novel likewise specialized in reporting how urban life turned them into obedient ratchets in the machine of aggressive consumerism. Blanche Gelfant's seminal study in this field, *The American City Novel*, discusses the city as "a distinctive and peculiarly modern way of life that has shaped the American writer's vision and influenced the forms of his art" (vii). While the modern writer sees urban experience as an embodiment of the modernization process itself, the advent of postmodernism turns it into an unsteady, dispersed field of "anarchy and fragmentation" (Hassan, 40). This shift in urban sensibility and the modification in its aesthetic representation, triggered by "the increase of information technologies, a flood of images, and a proliferation of surfaces and simulacra" (Rosenthal, 1), can be detected in the works of divergent contemporary writers such as Paul Auster, Don DeLillo, Cormac McCarthy, Joan Didion, Siri Hustvedt, and Paule Marshall, who use the literary arsenal of the novel to question different facades of this multifarious experience.

In *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), Paul Auster, who discusses New York in many of his works as the quintessential contemporary American city, strips it of its propagated sublimity by turning the image of a post-apocalyptic city into an effective critique of contemporary urban reality. This article discusses Auster's attempt to demystify the notion of the *urban sublime* by unveiling the catastrophic nature of the city's promises of empowerment. The analysis of the novel is preceded by a review which sets the term in a US context and discusses its specificity through the examination of the relationship of the urban sublime with a pair of interrelated concepts: the *technological sublime* and the *consumer's sublime*. This theoretical introduction verifies that the architectural and technological structure of the city has been intrinsically related to the logics of capitalist economy. The paper discusses how Auster deflates the deferential elevation of the urban landscape by reducing it to the dystopian images of garbage and waste. Furthermore Auster reverses the object of the sublime from the infinitely large to the infinitely small, from the urban to the natural. He likewise subverts the power dynamics attributed to the skyscraper, the central emblem of the urban sublime. This paper asserts that the foregrounding of the act of falling/descent, set against the pronounced upward orientation of the urban landscape, defines the city as an inherently lethal area capable of arousing a single passion linked to the notion of the sublime—terror.

The Specificity of the American Notion of the Sublime

“The United States was born in the country and has moved to the city,” says Richard Hofstadter, referring to one of the central phenomena in the history of the country - the rapid urbanization during the years of the industrial expansion following the Civil War (23). The confrontation of the rural mind with the challenges of urban experience has led, undoubtedly, to a significant transformation of the aesthetics of the sublime as well. Thus the romantic spectacularization of natural sights such as Niagara Falls and the Grand Canyon has been gradually displaced by the admiration for monumental city landscapes. This rapid shift in the social scene has given birth to a new aesthetic and philosophical phenomenon, the *urban* sublime, which has found its way into the field of literary studies as well. Since scholars in this area draw their basic terminology from Edmund Burke’s foundational *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) and Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790), a brief summary of Burke’s and Kant’s notions of the sublime will be of use.

Burke defines the sublime as “an idea belonging to self-preservation” (160) and qualifies “astonishment/admiration, reverence, respect” and “terror” as its main ruling principles (96). His study provides also a detailed description of the causes of the sublime in Nature: “vastness/greatness of dimension” (128), “infinity” (129), “succession and uniformity” (132), and “magnificence” (140). His analysis includes categories such as “magnitude in building” (136), “light” (140), and “sound and loudness” (150) that permit the subsequent application of the concept to the study of urban settings too. Kant’s contribution to the debate is expressed mainly in the introduction of the question of representation. Stated in Fredric Jameson’s terms, for Kant, the object of the sublime is “not only a matter of sheer power and of the physical incommensurability of the human organism with Nature, but also of the limits of figuration and the incapacity of the human mind to give representation to such enormous forces” (34). Jameson himself is engaged in the investigation of the sublime in the atmosphere of late capitalism when the “radical eclipse of Nature” is chased by a brawny fetishism of commodities: “How urban squalor can be a delight to the eyes when expressed in commodification, and how an unparalleled quantum leap in the alienation of daily life in the city can now be experienced in the form of a strange new hallucinatory exhilaration - these are some of the questions that confront us in this moment of our inquiry” (33).

Christophe Den Tandt's *The Urban Sublime in American Literary Naturalism* (1998), the most comprehensive review of the representation of the sublime experience in the city, applies these questions to an earlier period and uses the term "urban sublime" to discuss a group of late nineteenth and early twentieth century US writers who tend to present cities as ambivalent "cites of terror and wonder" that inspire "fascination and fear" (x-xi). He notes the kinship of these sensations with the categories *astonishment*, *admiration*, *reverence*, *respect*, and *terror* that form the skeleton of Burke's *Inquiry*. Tracing the evolution of the term, he marks also that nowadays this perception has transformed into what Jameson names "the postmodern sublime" (x). Besides disclosing the constructed nature of sublimity, this statement identifies the cultural logic of capitalism as a major generating force of the urban sublime.

The most eloquent literary illustration of the birth of this category at the turn of the century is provided, undoubtedly, by Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), a novel which presents Chicago as "a giant magnet" that dazzles the heroine with its glamour (17). In addition to the effect of imposing architecture, *Sister Carrie*'s sublime experience is intensified through numberless other interactions offered by "diverse phenomena as the innovative art of window dressing... and the multiplication of new visual and spacial experiences" (Pattison, 1). All these novel aspects of city life can be discussed as manifestations of the other, equally flamboyant facade of urban reality, technological progress.

The peculiar interest of the US nation in technology is not a new whim. In the earliest noteworthy study of this relationship Leo Marx introduces the trope of the "machine in the garden" to indicate that the American cult of technology has been imbedded still in the nation's formative cult of the wilderness. The most recent study in the field, Darryl Slack and J. Macgregor Wise's *Culture and Technology: A Primer* (2015), expands Leo Marx's argument claiming that technology and progress have been "articles of near religious faith" in the US (14). The paradigm of Manifest Destiny has been closely allied to technology, and since the subjugation of the wilderness has been a marker of progress, each new step in the scale of progress has been equated to a new technology. Slack and Wise use the term *technological sublime* to reflect this pious reverence for the power of the machine.

Being rooted specifically in a US context, David E. Nye's classification of the sublime is worth attention too. In *American Technological Sublime* (1994), the critic argues that the US has been more closely allied to the

concept of the sublime than Europe because of the exclusive nature of the country's formation: "Lacking the usual rallying points (a royal family, a national church, a long history memorialized at the sites of important events), Americans turned to the landscape as the source of national character" (24). He introduces the term *geometrical sublime* and illustrates it with the most imposing structures of city landscape, skyscrapers ("the vertical city") and bridges. Besides the categories of the *electrical sublime*, *dynamic sublime* (the railroad, the atomic bomb and space technology), and *industrial sublime* (factories), Nye discusses certain individual events and projects (such as the 1939 New York World Fair, Apollo XI, the Statue of Liberty) as manifestations of the sublime. He introduces also the concept *consumer's sublime* clarifying its difference from the technological sublime. While the latter celebrates rationality, work and human achievements, the consumer's sublime privileges irrationality, chance, and discontinuity, placing the emphasis on fantasy. For Nye, Las Vegas, the representative of the quintessential postmodern urban landscape, is the perfect example of the consumer's sublime since having abandoned production, this city of joy exerts its energy merely on consumption. Nye argues that in places like Las Vegas and Disneyland, technology has the sole function of "enacting fantasies" as a result of being totally alienated from its original goal of enhancing the belief that people can control nature (295). Like Slack and Wise, he sees the history of the technological sublime as a process of constant movement "from nature to the machine, from substance to electric image" and remarks that its history "records a shift in emphasis from natural to artificial landscapes, a shift that simultaneously transformed the position of the subject in relation to the sublime object" (277).

Urban Reality in Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things*

The sublime object in many of Paul Auster's works is the city, or, to be more precise, New York. It represents "the epitome of the postmodern city," as Brendan Martin defines it quoting from Jean Baudrillard to set the *hip-erreal* as an intrinsic aspect of the metropolis: "Nothing could be more intense, electrifying, turbulent, and vital than the streets of New York... There are millions of people in the streets, wandering, carefree, violent, as if they had nothing better to do—and doubtless they have nothing else to do—than produce the permanent scenario of the city" (151). Set in an apocalyptic future, *In the Country of Last Things* envisions the ominous

aspects of this scenario by stripping the city of its glamour and reducing it to bare essentials. The novel reports the escapades of an Anna Blume in the chilly atmosphere of an anonymous, though distinctly American city. The economy of the country has collapsed completely and since nothing is manufactured anymore, the inhabitants of the city are destined to live solely on the remnants, the last things, of a once presumably affluent industry. Thus the novel can be read as critiquing the movement away from production-based economy to a self-destructive system of excessive consumption. In the urban capitalist space dominated by the monumentalized Commodity, the exchange value of goods has been gradually replaced by their display value to turn life into a sheer spectacle. Auster's novel depicts this atmosphere in the guise of a distressing scenario for the future. Meanwhile, he invites the reader to discern the apocalyptic signs in the present capitalist climate. Thus the work subverts the notion of the consumer's sublime by translating the wasteful abundance of goods that characterizes consumer society to an overwhelming image of abundant waste. Auster uses this technique to illustrate that consumption-based economy is nourished not by an obsession with the material product itself, but rather with its value as a signifier of economic and social relations. The novel decodes this gluttony for display into the image of the city as a wasteland, as a tomb for a community that confronts the threat of being buried under its own excess.

The novel's narrator is reticent about the reason for the downfall of the city. But the epigraph, the opening sentence of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Celestial Railroad," insinuates that it is linked to the typically American habit of glorifying technology: "Not a great while ago, passing through the gate of dreams, I visited that region of the earth in which lies the famous City of Destruction." Writing a parody of Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Hawthorne satirizes the prevailing deification of the train, the new symbol of technological and national progress, and "turns upon the idea of the new machine as a vehicle for an illusory voyage of salvation" (Marx, 27). Thus, entering Auster's novel through the gate of Hawthorne's epigraph, we find ourselves in the atmosphere of a City of Destruction. No longer capable to overwhelm with size or embellishment, this city of last things expresses its sublime power only in its ability to *literally* take one's breath. Unlike Bunyan's and Hawthorne's portentous narratives that are constructed as dreams, Anna Blume's apocalyptic experience is "real." Her narrative is structured as a diary-letter which traces her search for her missing brother who had come to the nightmarish city as a journalist. They

belong to “another place” (106) across the ocean, therefore her narrative is imbued with the presentiment of a return to the unnamed homeland once her mission is completed.

The prevailing image of disintegration and descent brings to mind *Leviathan* (1992). There Auster deals with the demystification of one of the main objects of the American urban sublime, the Statue of Liberty, through the image of a writer who decides to become a terrorist, to blow up replicas of the Statue of Liberty, and to scatter it along with all its transcendent ideals. While *Leviathan* deals with the annihilation of a symbol, in *In the Country of Last Things* Auster’s portentous imagination blows up a whole city. Despite the fact that the work is discussed mainly as a dystopia, it can be analyzed with equal success as a representation of contemporary American reality too. Tim Woods is only one of the critics who discerns in the novel “the typicality of New York city and also the indeterminacy of all contemporary urban constructions” despite the fact it seems to be set “in an indefinite future” and “in an indefinite space” (143). Catherine Washburn admits that “we are tempted to substitute the maps of first Europe, then America to chart Anna’s voyage” although the text makes no such proposal (165). A brief statement from her argument is due to disclose the parallelism she establishes between the images in the novel and their referents in contemporary life:

In the Country of Last Things is occupied not with a future dystopia but with a hellish present. Its citizens are no more inhabitants of the future than Swift’s Houyhnhnms are native to some unmapped mid-Atlantic island. They belong to the here and now, to its ethical, spiritual, and cultural chaos. The broken objects and decayed relics they dig up... are emblematic of a society which has not only ceased to invent and produce but which, for nearly two decades, has inflated the value of real property, objects of art, and fetishistic junk alike. (166-67)

This atmosphere of decay turns the citizens of the settlement into “active, space-producing *bricoleurs*” whose survival depends on their ability to detect broken objects in the heaps of junk and rearrange them in fresh combinations (Woods, 141). The streets of the city swarm with starving object hunters who strive to clutch things before their total collapse: “At a certain point, things disintegrate into muck, or dust, or scraps, and what you have is something new, some particle or agglomeration of matter that cannot be identified. It is a clump, a mote, a fragment of the world that has no place: a cipher of it-ness” (Auster, 35). Since life in the city is based totally on the

recycling of waste, the worthiest available job is that of the licensed scavenger. While many professions have vanished, scavenging has evolved into distinct professional areas: "An object hunter must go through the same registration procedures as a garbage collector and is subjected to the same random inspections, but his work is of a different kind. The garbage collector looks for waste; the object hunter looks for salvage" (33). In contrast to the mechanical act of garbage collecting, object hunting depends on the ability to establish new connections. It requires a more imaginative approach, a more resourceful or "metonymical thinking" as Tim Woods defines this new faculty, referring to Brian McHail's observation that postmodern fiction represents the city as a "metonymic site, a zone of spatial contiguity, interdependence, and circulation" (190). On the other hand, Auster's description of the process of hunting for objects "gives the word *collector* an almost sinister ring" (Washburn, 167), disclosing thus the acuteness of the state of commodity fetishism that has infected contemporary society.

Auster's sacrilegious attitude towards American reality becomes most obvious in his presentation of the city landscape as an inherently lethal area. The wasteland atmosphere of the city is extremely favorable for the proliferation of various communities that specialize exclusively in death. This ultimate goal is attained mainly in the act of falling/jumping from tall buildings. The group called the Leapers, for example, consists of people who commit suicide by jumping from skyscrapers. The Runners is "a sect of people who run through the streets as fast as they can...until they drop from exhaustion" (11). There are Euthanasia Clinics and an Assassination Club through which you can "buy your own death" (14). There are "religious" sects as well, whose compartmentalization depends on their attitude towards weather, a most vital aspect of life in the city. The sect of the Smilers believe that "bad weather comes from bad thoughts" (26). Other sects with a consistent weather theory are the Drummers, the End-of-the-worlders, the Free Associationists. The sects of the Crawlers, on the other hand, who believe people should crawl on the earth as a sign of repentance, has two principal factions: the Dogs and the Snakes.

Washburn suggests that Auster uses the image of the Leapers to show "the shaky financial structure of our own economy," while the one of the Tollists, the union of muggers that takes control of a street demanding a fee from every passerby, is introduced as a parody of the collapse of law (167). With the Smilers and Crawlers, the members of the fanatical organizations who believe they can control the weather with their feelings, Auster

“demonstrates how social conditions determine the superstructural beliefs in a society” (Woods, 157). As far as his howling Runners are concerned, Washburn proposes that they make us think about “an urban creature loping along, senses sealed through his electronic apparatus, eyes glazed and vision straining at a distant nullity, in quite the same way” (167). Jean Baudrillard’s parallelism between running and suicide is relevant for the elucidation of the image as well:

The marathon is a form of demonstrative suicide, suicide as advertising: it is running to show you are capable of getting every last drop of energy out of yourself, to prove it...to prove what? That you are capable of finishing... Nothing evokes the end of the world more than a man running straight ahead on a beach, swathed in the sounds of his Walkman... Primitives, when in despair, would commit suicide by swimming out to sea until they could swim no longer. The jogger commits suicide by running up and down the beach. (21)

One of the most striking images in the novel is that of hunger, and the constant shortage of provisions gives rise to a fixation on food. “The preferred instrument for transporting garbage is the shopping cart,” informs Anna, adding that it is “similar to the ones [they] had back home” (32). The shopping cart, the emblem of what Nye names as the consumer’s sublime, is so vital for the survival of the garbage collector that it has to be attached to the waist of its owner with a belt known as “umbilical cord.” Thus the establishment of an “organic” bond with the shopping cart functions as a compelling picture of the hysterical process of food collection in present day supermarkets. Washburn pays attention to another aspect of the contemporary consumer society which is evoked through the characters’ preoccupation with food:

The speakers in Anna Blume’s astonished narrative are, in fact, half-starved, but their preoccupation with food, like the onanistic rush of the Runners, mimics still another cultural vagary of the last decade: the urban sophisticate’s absorption in restaurants and cuisine. The parallels become uncanny. Where are we, if not in New York, near the end of the century, in an entrepreneurial capital where nothing indigenous is grown or generated? (167-68)

The state of unquenchable hunger can eventually be defined as a stringent metaphor for the consumer’s sublime. In the climate of excessive consumption, access to food merely escalates the feeling of hunger since the logic of consumption-based economy rests on the premise that the satisfaction given by a commodity should be reciprocal to the time needed for its con-

sumption. Distanced from its nutritional/use value, the monumentalized Commodity removes the weight from essence to façade, from content to quantity, from materiality to transcendence. Since consumer society compels the customer to view products as an extension of an advertisement, a specific manufacturer or a brand name, commodities establish a semiotic system that transcends their utilitarian value. Thus, Anna reaches the conclusion that the ability to survive in the hostile city depends first of all on one's skill "to read the signs" (6). And these are essentially the signs of a supermarket or a shopping mall, the most appropriate symbols of the consumer society, the boundaries of which have been expanded by Auster to view a whole city as an open space shopping mall. Being organized around consumption, the virtual nature of its existence is materialized in Auster's novel with the description of people who "pay for apartments that don't exist, others [who] are lured into giving commissions for jobs that never materialize, and still others [who] lay out their savings to buy food that turns out to be painted cardboard"(7). This turns the city into an abstract zone of signs where the citizens' own materiality is seriously threatened: "They think they are eating to stay alive, but in the end they are the ones who are eaten" (4).

Auster illustrates this in a gesture of swapping satire by subverting the beauty standards advocated by consumer society. In her study on the relationship between capitalist economy and eating disorders, Susan Bordo claims that culture is not "simply contributory but productive of eating disorders" (163). Thus she attacks contemporary American culture for demanding from people "to constantly monitor their bodies for signs of fat" and explains how this fear evolves into eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia (165). Obesity, on the other hand, is defined by her as a complete surrender to the call for consumption, it marks "an extreme capacity to capitulate to desire" (165).

Auster's novel satirizes the fear of fat advocated by contemporary American culture by bringing abstinence from food to its extreme: "[T]here are people so thin, [Anna] wrote, they are sometimes blown away... It is also possible to become so good at not eating that eventually you can eat nothing at all" (3). As victims of malnutrition these people may present a dismal scenario for a future apocalypse yet subsequent passages provide clues that turn them into parodies of contemporary beauty standards. These people "with caved-in stomachs and limbs like sticks, walk around trying to look as though they weigh two or three hundred pounds" (23) but their goal is

not to look fatter. “What they seem to be saying is that they know what has happened to them, and they are ashamed of it. More than anything else, their bulked-up bodies are a badge of consciousness, a sign of bitter self-awareness. They turn themselves into grotesque parodies of the prosperous and well-fed... they prove they are just the opposite of what they pretend to be—and that they know it” (24).

The novel as a whole functions as a grotesque parody of the main strongholds of the consumer ideology. By projecting contemporary urban reality into an exaggerated picture of a potential disaster, by literally realizing the shift from dependence on concrete goods to an addiction to ephemeral signs, Auster dethrones Commodity, the object of the consumer’s sublime, and promotes a more critical approach to its promises of affluence, luxury and well-being.

The Geometrical Sublime: the Voyeur vs. the Walker

In addition to the strategy of turning the contemporary city into a dystopian wasteland, Auster deflates it through the subversion of the power dynamics attributed to the image of the skyscraper as well. In his discussion of the geometrical sublime Nye remarks that the skyscraper, one of the most potent emblems of the modern city, reshapes urban space by opening field for the sublime experience of viewing the city from the top of the building, just in the way “the railroad was popular when considered from the passenger’s point of view” (100). The panoramic view from the top of the building creates “an Olympian sense of perspective that is immediately translated into a sense of power” (ibid., 100). Auster questions this notion of totalizing panoptic perspective by juxtaposing it with the fragmented perspective of the person who walks in the streets of the city. While the former is associated with death through the recurrent image of falling down from high buildings, the perspective of the walker is depicted as more active and more life sustaining because of being affiliated to the impulse to create.

“Walking in the City,” the most widely cited chapter of Michel de Certeau’s celebrated *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980), proposes that the act of walking in the streets of a city is a method for the realization of its semiotic potential just in the way language is realized in the act of speaking: Walkers “follow the thicks and thins of an ‘urban’ text they write without being able to read it...The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator” (93). To

highlight the dynamic nature of these self-willed urban texts, the scholar offers the act of observing New York from the summit of the World Trade Center as a counter example. The elevation turns the walker into a voyeur, “it puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was ‘possessed’ into a text that lies before one’s eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a Solar eye, looking down like a god” (92). The rhetorical questions provoked by the panoptic experience unveil its sublime nature: “To what erotics of knowledge does the ecstasy of reading such a cosmos belong? Having taken a voluptuous pleasure in it, I wonder what is the source of this pleasure of ‘seeing the whole,’ of looking down on, totalizing the most immoderate of human texts” (92).

According to Michel deCerteau’s taxonomy, Anna Blume, defined in the novel as “the ordinary practitioner of the city” who lives “down bellow” (92), is the quintessential walker. She is deprived of the Solar eye of the voyeur that offers a panoramic perspective, yet she has her own strategies of reading the city: “You must learn how to read the signs” (6), she states in the opening pages of her narrative. As her story progresses, she occasionally turns back to her methods of survival: “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” (18). One of Auster’s favorite devices of linking the process of walking to that thinking is used blatantly in this novel too. In the atmosphere of the city’s perpetual contingency, walking proves to be the only way to stay alive and preserve one’s humanity. Reminiscent of the ghost like residents of T. S. Eliot’s “Unreal City” where “each man fixed his eye before his feet” (65), the narrator of Auster’s *City of Last Things* is aware of the precariousness of losing one’s balance: “I put one foot in front of the other, and then the other foot in front of the first, and then hope I can do it again. No matter what anyone says, the only thing that counts is staying on your feet” (2). Thus the attempt to keep close to the ground, to keep one’s balance, turns into a major act of resistance to the general law of collapse that governs the city. Anna is so engaged in this act that the moment when she has the chance to view the city from the top a building is presented to be “the first time she had been so far off the ground since coming to the city” (74). This is a pivotal scene in which Auster discloses the pseudo-empowering quality of urban architecture and offers the vastness of the ocean as a redemptive return to the image of Nature as the source of the sublime.

“If the sublime experience were to be actual, you would be falling down a pit, vomiting from vertigo, and be *in* rather than *looking at* the sublime object,” states Anne Janovits. She reverberates Burke’s argument that “whatever acts in conformity with our will, can never be sublime” (250). Many of Auster’s characters are involved *in* such sublime experiences in which they are in the sublime object rather than its observers. In an interview with Ashton Applewhite, Auster admits that the generating force for many of his novels is “the idea of falling from high places” (95). *Leviathan* revolves around a man falling off a fire escape, one of the characters of *Moon Palace* falls down an open grave, and Anna from *In the Country of Last Things* jumps through a window on the top floor of a building (95). If we take into consideration the urban setting of Auster’s novels, his expression “falling from high places” can easily be specified as “falling from *high buildings*” since the architecture of the “vertical city” brings in specific urban space experiences as well.

In his discussion of the relationship between urbanity and sublimity, George Pattison refers to the works of the Danish critic Martin Zerlang, who draws attention to the birth of specifically urban diseases such as vertigo, agoraphobia, claustrophobia, neurasthenia. He interprets Zerlang’s definition of neurosthenia (“overstimulation of the senses and an underdeveloped capacity for motoric reaction, in other words a kind of blocked mental circulation”) as a representation of a chronic overexposure to sublime experiences, as a paralysis by the “sublime unmasterability of one’s environment” (2). Pattison links these conditions to the tendency of the new urban culture to present the fluidity of the diverse city reality as “the unity of a spectacle” which requires the suppression of elements which defy spectacularization (2).

Anna’s rooftop experience depicts, with a blatantly subversive twist, the specifically urban experiences of looking down and falling down from a tall building. She climbs to the top of a building together with Isabel to get rid of the body of Isabel’s husband Ferdinand whom they had killed after he had tried to rape Anna. However, what is accentuated in the narrative is not the ethical dimension of the event but the impact of the climb and the view from the roof of the building. When Anna finds herself at the top of the apartment, it is not the vastness of the cityscape that grasps her attention, she is stunned rather by its *finitude*: “when I finally got to my feet and looked down into the jumbled world below, I was startled to discover the ocean like that, and I can’t tell you the effect it had on me. For the first

time since my arrival, I had proof that the city was not everywhere, that something existed beyond it, that there were other worlds beside this one” (74). It is not the city, but the redemptive image of the ocean that creates a sublime effect (“It was like a revelation... it almost made me dizzy to think about it” (74)), or rather the mere thought about the possibility of the existence of other worlds. At this moment Anna does not see the ocean “in the old sense of the word” (74), and it is this new perspective which signals a return to the ancient view of the Ocean as the source for the sublime because of its ability to “fill the mind” (Burke, 41).

When Anna looks down, she sees “people walking below, too small to be human any more” (74). The expression “too small to be human any more” seems to mark a conventional celestial perspective, which diminishes the people down below to the size of insects. But the next sentence reveals that Anna does not feel any superiority to them: “I stood there on the roof next to Isabel...I suddenly felt I was dead, as dead as Ferdinand in his blue suit, as dead as the people who were burning into smoke at the edges of the city” (74). The relationship Anna establishes with the people below is one of affinity rather than dissociation. It is not the perspective which reduces the people’s size and deprives them of their humanity. Anna, the walker, is accustomed to their diminutive shape and the temporary position of a voyeur does not change her perspective. In other terms, she maintains the point of view of a walker even when she acquires the perspective of a Solar eye. Thus Auster strips the skyscraper, the emblem of the geometrical sublime, of its promise for empowerment through a panoramic, all consuming visual experience.

Collins claims that besides criticizing “the traditional power dynamics associated with skyscrapers” Auster inverts them further: “Anna is not empowered when she and Isabel make Ferdinand appear like a Leaper because this act redirects visual authority to people on the ground” (248). Upon the decision to throw Ferdinand’s dead body from the rooftop Anna contemplates: “The neighbors...would look up at him flying off the roof and say to themselves that this was a man who had the courage to take matters into his own hands” (72). Her speculations are not products of fantasy, she knows from experience that the so called Last Leap, the suicidal fall, has been transformed in the city into “a kind of public ritual,” into a kind of “art form” (13). Anna herself confesses the experience of watching a Last Leap fills her with sublime terror:

I admit there is something stirring about watching one, something that seems to open a whole new world of freedom inside you... 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 the beauty of the spectacle had wrenched them from themselves, had made them forget the paltriness of their own lives. (13)

To perform this spectacle, people have to climb “the highest places” (13) the architecture of the declining city provides. This links the potential of the geometrical sublime to the foundational principle of consumer society - the overwhelming impulse for commodification.

In the grim world of the city where death is no longer “an abstraction, but a real possibility that haunts each moment of life” (15), it acquires the shape of a profitable business that is advertised in terms that echo brash brand names: “Return Voyage,” “Journey of Marvels,” “Pleasure Trip.” Death can be ordered and purchased and like any other synthetically produced commodity it can be massively consumed as a spectacle. Disclosing the collapse of basic ethic values, this possibility to “live quite well off the deaths of others” (13) raises the alarming question about the city’s chances for salvation.

Though Collins argues that resistance is possible for Anna “only at the level of perception” (249), her response to the body of the dead Ferdinand can be read as a more active and morally engaged stance. Yes, she is involved in a practice that turns death into an aestheticized spectacle, but she cannot detach herself from the act and turn into a voyeur. To diminish the pain caused by her complicity in the horrendous event, Anna invents stories about Ferdinand’s death: “In our own minds, I said, we would pretend that we were throwing him overboard. That’s what happens when a sailor dies at sea” (72). Anna’s ability to translate the world into words is envisioned as a redeeming strategy within the overall plot of the novel too. Her ultimate goal of keeping the city alive by reshaping its litter into letters, by transforming dead objects to words materializes in her diary, her city of regained last things.

Ferdinand’s Miniature Ships and Anna’s Shrinking Manuscript

Ferdinand, the owner of a fleet of miniature ships, is another artist whose creative endeavors turn him into an image of dissent and hope. By engraving his miniature ships on the background of the collapsing city, Auster subverts the technological sublime associated with imposing size. In fact, the

novelist is preoccupied with the deeply *American* nature of this phenomenon since “certain historic and mythic contours are set up” with this character through the explicit allusion to the Spanish royal couple Isabella I and Ferdinand II who supported and financed Christopher Columbus’ voyage to the New World (Powell, 163). The similarity is enhanced by the very nature of Ferdinand’s obsession: he is the owner of a “Lilliputian fleet of sailing ships and schooners.” It seems to Anna that “his obsession with ships had led him to play the role of a man marooned on a desert island. Or else it was the opposite. Already stranded, perhaps he had begun building ships as a sign of inner distress – as a secret call for rescue” (52). The narrator is arrested most of all by the smallness of his works: “His ships were remarkable little pieces of engineering, stunningly crafted, ingeniously designed and put together” (52). Anna observes that within time his ships become “smaller and smaller” and his ultimate goal is to “make a ship so small that no one can see it” (55).

As a symbol of a culture that has established its discourse on technology and progress on the notion of ultimate growth, Ferdinand’s obsession with smallness can be interpreted as an invitation for the reassessment of the aesthetics of the sublime. Stephan Hancock points to two misconceptions concerning the sublime, the presumptions that the sublime is a masculine aesthetic that contrasts with the feminine beautiful and that the sublime is an aspect of the colossal, the oversized. Hancock focuses on a neglected aspect of Burke’s theory underlying that both greatness and smallness, in their extreme form, generate the sublime (114). A relevant quotation from “On Vastness” will be of use to present the overlooked point in his argument:

Greatness of dimension is a powerful cause of the sublime...However, it may not be amiss to add to these remarks upon magnitude, that, as the great extreme of dimension is sublime, so the last extreme of littleness is in some measure sublime likewise. In the contemplation of the excessively small we become amazed and confounded at the wonders of minuteness; nor can we distinguish in its effects this extreme of littleness from the vast itself. (127-28)

By reversing the object of the sublime from the infinitely large to the infinitely small, Ferdinand’s occupation turns into an evidence for a phenomenon named by James Collins as “a resistant recycling aesthetic” (210). Although the phrase is used by Collins in a study of Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*, it is applicable to Auster’s novel too because Ferdinand, like DeLillo’s characters who process waste, is engaged in an activity which disrupts

the logic of excessive consumerism. Quoting Evans, Collins focuses on the relationship between art and garbage: “What ties art and garbage is a common resistance to utility” (210). By making miniature ships out of garbage, Ferdinand, just like Delillo’s artists who work with waste, crafts articles that are “created by interrupting the cycle of consumption-reprocessing-and-reconsumption” (210). It is the uselessness of Ferdinand’s tiny, almost invisible ships, which differentiates him from the swarm of objects hunters who are engaged in a similar activity of recycling waste, yet with the motive of serviceability and marketability. This turns his pastime into a resistant art form that defies the capitalist impulse for commodification.

Anna Blume is the primary figure who resists against the city’s total collapse by reporting dutifully its slow disintegration by substituting words for disappearing things. Like in many of his other works, Auster is engrossed in the issue of language in this novel too. Throughout her narrative Anna underlies the materiality of language and its dependence on the tangible world. Looking for a method of escape from the city, she asks about the possibility to flee by airplane but she gets the puzzled response “What’s an airplane?” The disappearance of the word “airplane” makes her speculate on the relationship between words and things:

Words tend to last a bit longer than things, but eventually they fade too, along with the pictures they once evoked. Entire categories of objects disappear – flowerpots, for example...or rubber bands – and for a while you’ll be able to recognize those words, even if you cannot recall what they mean. But then, little by little, the words become only sounds... and finally the whole thing just collapses into gibberish. (89)

The parallelism between the collapse of the city and the decline of language is reminiscent of Wittgenstein’s much quoted definition of language as an “ancient city”: “a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from different periods” (quoted in Paursen, 75). Hence the obliteration of the urban map in the novel is linked to the deterioration of language. It is because of this intrinsic relationship between words and the world that absent objects can be replaced by the terms that represent them. Anna discloses the weight of words in her description of the lengthy conversations about food. In an atmosphere when survival is the only goal, talking about meals and eating becomes a life sustaining distraction: “Often you will overhear a group of people describing a meal in meticulous detail... There are even those who say there is nutritional value in these food talks (9-10). In the same way homeless people spend their last

money on virtual apartments and live on photographs taken still in the years before the city's collapse: "They go to rental agencies and patiently wait in line, sometimes for hours, just to be able to sit with an agent for ten minutes and look at photographs of buildings on three-lined streets, of comfortable rooms, of apartments furnished with carpets and soft leather chairs – peaceful scenes to evoke the smell of coffee wafting in from the kitchen, the steam of a hot bath, the bright colors of potted plants snug on the sill" (8-9).

While the city and language collapse each day, Anna's diary turns into the only force that struggles against total amnesia. Her attempt to generate more and more words turns her into a "new Columbus": "From nothing, something: she is the last manufacturer in the New World" (Powell, 163). Trying to fit everything into her only notebook, Anna reports how her words "get smaller and smaller, so small that perhaps they are not legible anymore" (183). Their overt resemblance to Ferdinand's Lilliputian ships stresses the affinity between the two characters' activities as well as their redemptive potential. Ferdinand's tiny ships are compared in the narrative to "smoke signals" (52). Similarly, Anna's act of keeping a diary is qualified as "calling out into the blankness," it is "like screaming into a vast and terrible vastness" (183).

The narrator's name points to the possibility of a way out of the apocalyptic atmosphere too. One of the characters, Otto, who is "sensitive to the internal properties of words" (133), notices a similarity in their names: when they are read backwards they do not change. Furthermore, Anna's surname, Blume, implies the possibility for blossoming. The suggestive nature of her surname is stressed in her conversation with Samuel Farr too. When he says it rhymes with "doom" and "gloom," Anna adds the words "tomb" and "womb" as well. Her own experience of miraculous recovery after jumping from the top floor of a building, the fact that she had "risen from the dead" (133), as Otto formulates, demonstrates that the end may generate a new beginning. What gives birth to Anna's diary, furthermore, is a state of ultimate loss: "If Isabel had not lost her voice, none of these words would exist" (79). In a similar way her manuscript marks the potential of the tomb-city to turn into a womb that will generate new forms of life.

The fact that both Anna's micrographic narrative and Ferdinand's miniature ships are manual products the composition/construction of which requires technical skills and craftsmanship prompts the reader to view them in their materiality. Distanced from the impulse for infinite multiplication imposed by commercial consumerism, they count merely as objects. This

quality of Anna's manuscript calls to mind Michel Butor's essay on the book as object where the critic discusses how the advent of print leads to the commodification of books:

When the book was a single copy, whose production required a considerable number of work hours, the book naturally seemed to be a "monument," something even more durable than a structure of bronze. What did it matter if a first reading was long and difficult; it was understood that one owned a book for life. But the moment that quantities of identical copies were put on the market, there was tendency to act as if reading a book "consumed" it, consequently obliging the purchaser to buy another for the next "meal" or spare moment, the next train ride. (in Stewart, 33)

As a report about the extinction of a world that is nourished by its own excess and a product of life-consuming efforts, Anna's manuscript becomes Auster's ultimate counter-monument to the culture of mass consumption. In contrast to the prestige coefficient of the sublime Commodity, her manuscript marks a return to a conception of language/object as use value. Stripped of the veneer of the consumer's sublime, his city transforms into a collection of things that germinate new wor(l)ds.

Conclusion

Our discussion of Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* has demonstrated that the urban sublime is an opaque category amalgamating various aspects of the technological sublime (such as the geometrical, electrical or industrial sublime) and that in the atmosphere of late capitalism it amounts to the category of the consumer's sublime. Imbedded in the American cult of technology, this last amendment of Burke's theory is based on the deification of Commodity as a source of power and transcendence. Distanced from their use value, consumer goods are transformed by this culture into floating signifiers that incite infinite desire. Auster critiques the contemporary notion of sublimity by projecting the existence of the consumption-based capitalist city into an image of a prognostic calamity. The novel dismantles consumerist excess by unveiling its pretense for opulence and well-being in distressing scenes of threat and scarcity. Thus the realm of abundance and luxury promised by excessive consumerism acquires the guise of a dystopian world that is rotting from within. The lethal nature of this city is enhanced with the pervasive image of death as commodity and spectacle. The novel deglamorizes the skyscraper, the setting of the urban spectacle, by juxtaposing the point of view of the voyeur and that of the

walker. The illusion of empowerment offered by the solar perspective is dismantled in the work by the weight of the fragmented yet self-sustaining practices of the walker.

Despite its dominant apocalyptic mood, the novel is imbued with the spirit of redemption and the belief in a fresh beginning. The sight of the vast ocean, the embodiment of the natural sublime, discerned by Anna from the rooftop, is presented as a dim yet brawny reminder of a better past and an impending source for a fresh beginning. The reversal of the scale of the sublime from the large to the miniature is Auster's ultimate response to the cult of the massive, the gigantic, and the copious, imbedded in the technological and consumer's sublime. Ferdinand's miniature ships and Anna's shrinking manuscript seem to answer the narrator's opening statement imbued with fear and desperation: "Let everything fall away, and then let's see what there is. Perhaps that is the most interesting question of all: to see what happens when there is nothing, and whether or not we will survive that too" (29). Thus, by presenting the excessive consumerism of contemporary American reality as a despondent postapocalyptic scene, by subverting the lenses of the sublime from the grand to the little, from the urban to the natural, Auster deglamorizes the social and cultural traditions that constitute the notion of the urban sublime and offers a resisting, and hopefully redeeming, method for the assessment of the contemporary urban world.

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