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DASEIN'S "POTENTIALITY-FOR-BEING" IN A WASTELAND: THE CASE OF AUSTER'S *IN THE COUNTRY OF LAST THINGS*

Abstract

This paper proposes a reading of Paul Auster's novel *In the Country of Last Things* (1987) through the conceptual lens of Heidegger's theory of Dasein. It focuses on Heidegger's definition of human nature as Dasein by discussing the range of existential possibilities that the German philosopher outlined for human beings in order to make authentic sense of their being and life before death. The progression from birth to death constitutes Dasein's state of being or its existence. However, not many individuals are conscious of this process, being lost in the limiting situation of their everydayness. Accordingly, inauthentic lives without understanding one's

true possibilities take place. A fictional visualization of Dasein's attempts at an authentic existence within its limiting situation or, we could say, within its typical society, can concretize Heidegger's points in a better way. Concerning Paul Auster's existential outlook on life, *In the Country of Last Things* is a portrayal of such a struggle for an authentic existence in a dystopian predicament where humankind is thrown into the lowest possible situation. Allegorically, the novel is a laboratory for experimenting with human potentiality for being in the face of severely lacking conditions for the fulfilment of biological needs, with death always in the background. In such a thrown state of life, the protagonist, Anna Blume, is called to authenticity against others' inauthenticity and life-threatening situations, highlighting the possibility of living in a dystopia through authentic selfhood. The paper thus argues that Auster's existentialism in this novel is not alien to Heidegger's worldview on human existence.

Keywords: Auster, authenticity, Dasein, Heidegger, *In the Country of Last Things*, "potentiality-for-Being"

Introduction: Dasein's "Potentiality-for-Being"

In Heideggerian existentialism, Dasein is the very existence of human beings in the world regarding the way they cope with the world. However, human existence is not limited to the biological needs, that is, it is the sum of all the coping strategies which an individual authentically and consciously applies to the very course of life from birth to death, having recognized the fact that death is always in ambush to unveil itself at any moment. For Heidegger, human existence is paradoxically a movement towards death, a process within which one can fulfill as many possibilities of living as possible. Thus, Heidegger puts utmost emphasis on what he calls Dasein's "potentiality-for-Being," a concept that is related to "understanding" one's position in the world (183).

"Higher than actuality stands *possibility*," Heidegger tells us (63). According to Inwood, this is to say that "the range of possibilities" with which Dasein may test itself "is not fixed." Inwood further explains that if Dasein ignores its "*own* possibilities" and accepts what "the they" chooses for it, it can merely focus on "the present and immediate future" with no mindsets fixed on future possibilities (172). In Heidegger's words, Dasein's "potentiality-for-Being" depends on the phenomenon of "understanding,"

that is, Dasein is not something “present-at-hand” like a hammer lying somewhere to be or not to be used. Rather, Dasein is “Being-possible,” which means that it is a “can-be” or “possibility” in relation to itself, the others, and the world (183). Existence is “the gift of the having to be, of Dasein as a can-be,” and it is through “understanding” that Dasein’s potential is revealed to it (Schalow and Denker 228). Dasein can understand the range of its capabilities, and part of such understanding is that Dasein can find itself in its possibilities: “As long as it is, Dasein always has understood itself and always will understand itself in terms of possibilities” (Heidegger 185). It follows that as “Being-possible,” Dasein is “*not yet*”; it is “what it becomes (or alternatively, does not become),” culminating in the sentence “Become what you are” (Heidegger 186). However, becoming “what you are” is not some pre-established sense of being; it is rather becoming conscious over our possibilities to be what we are not yet.

Dasein’s “existence” is, therefore, its “possibility of itself: to be itself or not itself” (Heidegger 33). According to Heidegger, although Dasein has either consciously selected these possibilities or “grown up in them already,” it is only “the particular Dasein” that “decides its existence” through “existing itself” via its possibilities (33). As such, Heidegger adds, Dasein has “Being-in-the-world” as one of its basic features in its routine “*dealings*” in the world with “entities within-the-world” (95). These dealings make Dasein “involved” in the “serviceability” and the “usability” of other entities. For instance, Dasein is involved in a hammer, to note Heidegger’s example, to make something useful with it. Moreover, Dasein is the only entity that understands the intricate relationships that follow from using other entities not only to help its own existence in the world but also to let other entities happen or come into existence (117).

Dasein’s understanding happens through “*angst*” or “anxiety” (Dahlstrom 172). Dasein is already “thrown” in the world and with “the they” – a situation which is called Dasein’s “thrownness” or “lostness” in the “everydayness” of the world (Heidegger 225). Because of this situation, Heidegger believes that Dasein is mostly “inauthentic”; Dasein is mostly the “they-self” within a “fallen” state of being, which is to say that, Dasein’s “they-self” or “inauthentic” self is its “*average everydayness*” in the world with others (225). This state of being stands for Dasein’s inauthentic escape

from itself. Yet, it is better for Dasein to choose authenticity and fulfill its possibilities, since "the they" has always refrained Dasein from facing its possibilities. "Anxiety," in Heidegger's worldview, calls Dasein to such authentic selfhood; it "individualizes" Dasein in facing its possibilities and "discloses" Dasein as "*Being-possible*." In other words, it is through "anxiety" that Dasein can become free to choose and take hold of itself (Heidegger 232).

Heidegger calls Dasein's "potentiality-for-Being" its "*Being-ahead-of-itself*" (236). As such, Dasein's Being, which is "already-in-the-world" with other entities, is "ahead-of-itself" in thinking about its future dealings with all the things and the people it encounters in the world (237). Dasein for Heidegger thus understands that it is always "one possibility or another," that it is constantly "*not* other possibilities" and is "essentially *null*" or open for other possibilities (331).

Moreover, Dasein's authenticity is "anticipation," that is, Dasein is "truly existent and individualized" when it is consistently "anticipating" the ultimate possibility of its death. In anticipating its death, Dasein understands its "most unique and uttermost potentiality-for-being." As the "authentic" understanding of "the future," "anticipation" thus saves Dasein from the "inauthentic" future of "falling" in the realm of others (Schalow and Denker 52).

In general, "Every 'possible' possibility offers itself, and this means that the impossible ones do so too" (Heidegger 392). In other words, possibilities are "contingent," as Käufer interprets Heidegger (357). In fact, Käufer adds,

Dasein exists as born; and, as born, it is already dying, in the sense of Being-towards-death. As long as Dasein factually exists, both the "ends" and their "between" *are*, and they *are* in the only way which is possible on the basis of Dasein's Being as *care*. . . . As care, Dasein *is* the "between." (426–27)

"Care," in Heidegger's words, is "the whole of Dasein" (235), which is manifested through Dasein in three phenomena until its death: Dasein as "ahead-of-itself," Dasein as "Being-already-in" the world, and Dasein as "Being-alongside" the others (237). Heidegger then holds that as "the

possibility of the *im*-possibility of existence,” death terminates Dasein (354), which means that Dasein lives and fulfills some of the possibilities of its life until death. It is therefore important for Heidegger to acknowledge “the possibility of *authentic existence*” before death, since death shows Dasein that “its very Being is the issue” (307). In other words, death is Dasein’s “ultimate can-be” (Schalow and Denker 228).

Several questions then follow regarding a possible manifestation of Dasein as Heidegger sees it: Who can concretize Dasein’s “potentiality-for-Being” as clearly as possible? Who is the most authentic person to consciously consume his/her possibilities in life until death? Are we, as Daseins, into our full possibilities in the face of death? While many of us are already fallen in our everydayness and may not face authentic people in the Heideggerian sense, it is not impossible to find some literary manifestation of a Dasein-figure. Such is the case of Anna Blume in Paul Auster’s *In the Country of Last Things*. As far as Auster’s existential worldview is concerned, a Heideggerian analysis of this novel can be useful to fill the gap in Auster studies.

Anna Blume as Auster’s Dasein-Figure

Auster’s fiction can be interpreted philosophically regarding his existential concern with “human existence,” with a Heideggerian tint. Through his writings, it is revealed that he is familiar with Heidegger, referring in one of his articles to him (Auster, *Prose* 357), among other existentialists. In practice, for example, Auster’s *In the Country of Last Things* abounds in Heideggerian existential overtones. A reading of the novel in the light of Heidegger can thus manifest Auster’s own words that once a “work is finished . . . interpretations begin,” “philosophical” interpretations also included (*Prose* 124).

In the Country of Last Things presents us with a city, which may be part of a country in politico-economic turmoil, on the verge of non-existence wherein the settlers, thrown into their lowest situation in life, are struggling for survival through the lowest possible means.

This city has no name, or Auster gives us no name, a technique Auster has used to enrich the city with allegorical undertones of a wasteland which

may befall humankind at anytime throughout history. In this wasteland of a city, facilities are broken, buildings and streets are ruined, the weather is "in constant flux" (Auster, *Country 1*), and healthy food is rare. Transportation is also broken, and no safety is guaranteed. Stealing is common, and rubbing the dead of what is left for them is not shameful. "Newcomers" to the city, before learning "the ways of the city," are "easy victims" for the charlatans who dupe them "out of their money" (7). Overall, there is no education, no decent job, no humanitarian legal institution; there are no arts and letters, no entertainment or sports, no ceremonies, no hope for life in this city. As such, suicide is the highest wish for utmost freedom, and voluntary death is an established routine.

Auster's wasteland is a place where humankind can only live through the least means of survival. Even human feces and corpses are collected to be used and burned as fuel. "In a society depleted of almost everything," As Lerate says, people increase the value of decaying objects "in inverse ratio to their availability" (126). In fact, "By wanting less, you are content with less, and the less you need, the better off you are. That is what the city does to you," as the protagonist Anna Blume says when she enters the city and has to deal with its condition to find her missing brother, William (Auster, *Country 2*). Amidst the quick changes that are happening to the city day by day, one "is to be prepared for anything" (26).

Anna Blume finds herself in the most terrible situation that she could ever imagine throughout her life. She is the sole reporter of what is happening in the city. Observing the events firsthand upon arrival, Anna makes up her mind to find William by all means possible – William was sent to the city as a reporter, but he never returned nor did he send any reports. Anna's quest already needs consciousness over her will to survive. Thus, "to attach a discernible sense of meaning to her existence within the city," she experiences "an intense struggle for survival" (Martin 154). Anna's method of survival is to make ends meet in as far as there are possibilities of survival, even in the face of extreme hunger as she comments on the starving situation of the city: "It is also possible to become so good at not eating that eventually you can eat nothing at all" (Auster, *Country 3*). However, the stifling situation with which she has to deal in order to find her brother plays the background to her heroic attempts.

The citizens' existential crisis leaves no place for any hopes of survival – they are already dying either through hunger or voluntary death. This situation allegorizes our own lives at present, as Auster claims in an interview: “Anna Blume walks through the twentieth century” (qtd. in Hutchisson 36). On the other hand, life as we live it is running before our eyes, but we are not conscious over its flux and the way we are wrongly running it. In Heideggerian terms, this is a sort of “thrownness” into which humankind has fallen. However, it can be tested for its authenticity if one wants to take care of one's *self*. Auster's experiment here is to put humankind within a dystopia to test human “potentiality-for-Being,” to use Heidegger's term (183), through “a hand-to-mouth existence” (Auster, *Prose* 199). This shall highlight the human beings' attempts at willing their possibilities of living.

The possibility/necessity of disclosing this “limit-situation,” as Heidegger termed it, to ourselves and hoping for a better future by managing the present is not evident to all of us; however, it is not unattainable. Managing a “limit-situation” and fulfilling our possibilities requires “anticipation,” which reveals to humankind as Dasein that it is “thrown” into the uncertainties of its “limit-situation,” that Dasein has possibilities before death. By understanding life as a movement towards death, Dasein has in fact won its “authentic potentiality-for-Being-a-whole” through “anxiety” (356). Humankind thus becomes conscious of its existential crisis, which in Anna's case is the knowledge of how to survive in a rotten world.

The quest for survival for Anna simultaneously serves two purposes: to survive, as a human instinct, and to find William. Anna shall thus will her survival, a fact not possible within the realm of the miserable people of the city. Some citizens are seemingly hopeful for a better future, including “the Smilers,” “the Crawlers,” and “the Drummers,” especially regarding the weather and how it can help them have fertile lands. However, they are in fact escapists who are existentially inauthentic in making the utmost use of other possibilities to alleviate the catastrophe. Anna's response to such nonsense on the part of these sects is that the matter of the weather is based on “pure luck” (Auster, *Country* 27), not on “attitudes” or “beliefs” (28).

Anna gradually recognizes what is ahead of her in the city. Understanding her situation and what is necessary to survive, she initially develops some doubts about her purpose: "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" (Auster, *Country* 6). However, as Auster's prototype in manifesting the Heideggerian concept of humankind's "potentiality-for-being" (Heidegger 183), Anna has already made up her mind to confront anything in her quest. In Anna's view, in order to survive, "you must learn how to read the signs" (Auster, *Country* 6), so that when you walk through the city, "you must remember to take only one step at a time. Otherwise, falling is inevitable. Your eyes must be constantly open, looking up, looking down, looking ahead, looking behind . . . on your guard against the unforeseeable" (5). Anna's watchfulness metaphorically signifies Dasein's "care" or "anticipatory resoluteness," as Heidegger puts it, which means that one shall be authentically ready for any possibility (374). Anything ordinary or extraordinary may happen. "Even if it is for the hundredth time," Anna believes, "you must encounter each thing as if you have never known it before" (Auster, *Country* 7). And the city itself is ruled by such "extreme randomness" so that anything may just happen (Hyvärinen 1).

In the randomness of living in the city, "The essential thing is to survive," Anna says, "if you mean to last here, you must have a way of earning money" (Auster, *Country* 30). Consequently, Anna's first attempt is to become a "scavenger" to roam the streets and find anything valuable (33). She does not wish for good things to happen; she believes that "I wish" is the "language of ghosts," since what others "wish for" can include anything "as long as it is something that cannot happen" (10). Wishing is inauthentic for Anna. In other words, she must survive through the myriad possible forms to find her brother. As Auster explains in an article, "Where no possibility exists, everything becomes possible again" (*Prose* 305), or in other words, "at each moment there is the possibility of what is not" (306).

Death, as the most threatening phenomenon against life, is the most rampant thing in the city. While death is commonly ignored as something that just happens to all people, as Heidegger put it, it is the sole activity in Auster's wasteland which is done consciously. Due to the lack of biological

needs, different kinds of death rule the city, including “a happy death” for starving people, the death race for “the Runners” who run until they breathlessly die (Auster, *Country* 11), “solitary deaths” for people climbing to the highest places to jump their “Last Leap” (13), and paid deaths for people paying assassins or “Euthanasia Clinics” to kill them (14). All these types of death, liberating as they are for the suffering laity, do not include consciousness over life as “Being-towards-death,” in Heideggerian terms (Heidegger 374). Volunteers for death and death institutions have all ignored the possibilities of living for the sake of one ultimate possibility, that of death. Such an attitude ignores Dasein’s existence which principally incorporates the coping strategies undertaken by Dasein between birth and death. It is merely Anna who consciously refrains from such an inauthentic approach towards life and death: “it’s stupid to die when you don’t have to,” Anna holds (Auster, *Country* 105). Anna is leading a life that is based on one’s abilities during one’s life. In Anna’s view, which is paradoxical regarding her own survival instinct,

Still, there are those of us who manage to live. For death, too, has become a source of life. With so many people thinking of how to put an end to things, meditating on the various ways to leave this world, you can imagine the opportunities for turning a profit. A clever person can live quite well off the deaths of others. (14)

Anna believes that others’ deaths are materialistically beneficial for the assassins who are legally paid for the assassinations, so that not only the victims achieve peace in death but also the assassins live financially better. In such cases, as Anna holds, “life goes on as it always has. Death remains on the horizon, an absolute certainty, and yet inscrutable as to its specific form” (15). Here the victims are *awaiting* their deaths at every moment, while in normal conditions death is ignored so far as people are involved with “everydayness” (Heidegger 428). Through death-awareness, as Anna says,

Death is no longer an abstraction but a real possibility that haunts each moment of life. Rather than submit passively to the inevitable, those marked for assassination tend to become more alert, . . . more

filled with a sense of life – as though transformed by some new understanding of things. Many of them actually recant and opt for life again. (Auster, *Country* 15)

It is thus through consciousness over death that people become conscious over the gift of life; it is through understanding life as “being-towards-death,” in Heidegger’s words, that life becomes meaningful in making the utmost use of one’s possibilities (374). In Auster’s words, the one “who will throw himself into life, live[s] life to the fullest of life, and then come[s] to his end. For death is a very wall, and beyond this wall no one can pass. . . . The question is: at what moment does one begin to see the wall?” (*Prose* 306). The city has been surrounded by huge walls which have turned it into a big prison from which there is no escape under the present circumstances. That is why death is rampant and the citizens are already in their graves. These walls can symbolically stand for the threshold of life in the city, that is, the walls mean that there is no escape and death is the fate of all. As Auster maintains,

Each man approaches the wall. One man turns his back, and in the end he is struck from behind. Another goes blind at the very thought of it and spends his life groping ahead in fear. And another sees it from the very beginning, and though his fear is no less, he will teach himself to face it, and go through life with open eyes. Every act will count. . . . He will live because he is able to die. (*Prose* 309)

Those who face the wall but turn their backs are those who ignore death, and as such they are never ready for death. Those who lose their eyesight in the face of the wall stand for those who are always afraid of death and can never enjoy their lives. And those who face the wall and take it as the threshold of life enjoy the time they have and live their lives in the face of death. Death is there as the last possibility of one’s life. In Auster’s view, “Until there was death, there was always the possibility there would not be death” (*Prose* 86). Therefore, in order to exhaust all her possibilities, Anna continues her quest, while keeping an eye on her chances of survival. “If there is such a thing as an art of living,” Auster says, “then the man who lives life as an art will have a sense of his own beginning and his own end”

(*Prose* 308). Anna's belief, likewise, is that "death is the one thing we have any feeling for. It is our art form, the only way we can express ourselves" (Auster, *Country* 13).

The unpleasantness of the death of others is because of the way death reveals itself to them. In Heideggerian terms, death is life-giving when considered as a possibility which may happen at every moment in our lives. Through the knowledge of death as such, we may direct our lives in a way to make the utmost use of our possibilities. In other words, consciousness over death leads us towards having the fullest life before death. Saying "death happens to all" is the most inauthentic view about life, since death is an ultimately personal experience and each person experiences his/her own death (Heidegger 298–99). As Anna witnesses dead bodies deprived of their possessions by scavengers, she holds:

But what happens when you find yourself looking at a dead child . . . lying in the street without any clothes on . . . ? What do you say to yourself then? It is not a simple matter . . . to state flatly and without equivocation: "I am looking at a dead child." . . . the thing before your eyes is not something you can very easily separate from yourself. (Auster, *Country* 19)

For Anna corpses on the streets are objects of contemplation regarding the nature of life, and not as some means of survival for scavengers by rubbing them of their possessions. Corpses are not just dead bodies; Heidegger considered corpses as possible objects of contemplation for the students of "pathological anatomy" whose achievements are directed to "the idea of life" (282). Anna is the one who is making sense of life in the face of "the dilemma" she faces:

That is the dilemma. One the one hand, you want to survive, to adapt, to make the best of things as they are. But, on the other hand, to accomplish this seems to entail killing off all those things that once made you think of yourself as human. . . . In order to live, you must make yourself die. That is why so many people have given up. For no matter how hard they struggle, they know they are bound to

lose. And at that point it is surely a pointless thing to struggle at all.
(Auster, *Country* 20)

According to Marin, "as opposed to a resolute determination to challenge the workings of the system, the majority relinquish responsibility" and cannot resist "the sinister logic of the city," "blindly" accepting their powerlessness (157). Anna is just about to lose herself in the meaninglessness of others' lives when she runs into Isabel, an old scavenging woman, and saves her life just before Isabel is trampled upon by a group of death runners. Anna's hopes for survival are then rejuvenated by seeing Isabel trying to make her life as tolerable as possible. Living in the face of others' death and miseries, Anna declares:

Lives continue to be lived, and each one of us remains the witness of his own little drama. . . . 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. (Auster, *Country* 29)

From Anna's realistic viewpoint, "It takes years of living in the city to get to that point," and she confesses that she "was only a novice . . . who could barely find her way" from one part of the city to another. Yet, she had "a certain youthful enthusiasm" from the beginning to keep her going, "even when the prospects were less than encouraging" (35). Anna, step by step, comes to understand the potentialities she has for expressing her being (in the worst condition ever). "Everything falls apart," she tells us, "but not every part of everything, at least not at the same time" (36). The only thing that can deprive us of our being and possibilities of living is death. There are still pathways to hold on to, in any situation. Limitations do exist, but they are self-willed: "I might have done better, I think," Anna says, "but there were certain lines I drew within myself, limits I refused to step beyond. Touching the dead, for example" (36).

Life with Isabel refreshes Anna's hope of life. Anna's company is also helpful for Isabel, since everything was on Isabel's shoulders before Anna moved in. In turn, it is Isabel who teaches Anna how to survive best in the streets and where to look for the best objects as a scavenger. Moreover,

Anna has become “a drudge, the sole support of two people,” Isabel and Ferdinand who would not have survived without her support (Auster, *Country* 57). Anna’s survival quest to find her brother has therefore led, in its course, to the survival of others: “Without me,” Anna holds, “they would not have lasted ten days” (58). One is to live as authentically as possible, but this endeavor is best fulfilled if one helps others live their lives as fully as possible. However, Anna’s attempts end up in vain for the already lost soul of Ferdinand, a fact represented by his ships-in-bottles “as a sign of inner stress” (52) – while ships are made to sail in open waters, a bottle for a ship is a limiting situation. In fact, Ferdinand has chosen to live inauthentically.

“As a modern Columbus figure” reporting her experiences in a new world in her notebook (Lerate 124), Anna differs from Columbus in some ways. While Columbus found the beginning of America, Anna finds its end. However, Anna is “dreaming of a new beginning” at the end of the world just like Columbus dreamed of a new beginning for Europeans at the beginning of the Renaissance (Nyström 36).

In order to survive, Anna shall undergo some transformation by having her hair cut in order not to call much attention to her beauty while scavenging. Having been partly deprived of her former identity, Anna keeps herself conscious of the reason why she has lost it: “Horrible consciousness, horrible, horrible consciousness,” Anna repeatedly tells herself (Auster, *Country* 65). Put differently, Anna is living the untold life story which involves the “facts and figures” about the city that her brother was to send back home (28). She is thus reciting an untold manual that she has to put into practice in the most conscious manner; otherwise she is a loser: “A moment or two when your attention flags,” she tells us, “a single second when you forget to be vigilant, and then everything gets lost, all your work is suddenly wiped out” (82). Anna’s viewpoint is metaphorically directed to an existential point about how to live. Following the loss of her scavenging cart as a source of survival, she does not lose hope; she changes the misfortune into a possibility of more action – to stop scavenging altogether.

On Isabel’s roof, while throwing Ferdinand’s corpse down to the street, Anna says, “For the first time since my arrival, I had proof that the city was not everywhere, that something existed beyond it, that there were other

worlds besides this one. It was like a revelation” (Auster, *Country* 74). Anna sees here what lies beyond her limiting situation. Her bird’s-eye view, metaphorically as someone looking down at people’s everydayness, lets her criticize the inauthenticity of others’ ways of life. She is always conscious over what is still possible, over what has not happened yet. Others’ forgetfulness and ignorance is what stands before her as she criticizes the very ignorance of people about the loss of their memories. Once a guard at bay tells Anna that he does not know what an airplane is when she asks about it. In Anna’s opinion, “What still exists as a memory for one person can be irretrievably lost for another, and this creates difficulties, insuperable barriers against understanding” (88). A person who still knows something is an alien in the eyes of the increasing number of forgetting people. In other words, an authentic individual suffers among inauthentic people. “How can you talk to someone about airplanes, for example,” Anna explains, “if that person doesn’t know what an airplane is?” (88–9). According to Auster, “the country Anna goes to might not be immediately recognizable, but I feel that this is where we live. It could be that we’ve become so accustomed to it that we no longer see it” (qtd. in Hutchisson 12). So far as Anna comes from an intact world, one may say that she has still some memories of the old world which may finally disappear, as she is entangled in the country of last things. However, she has written down her memories in her notebook, all intact. As Parini holds, “Anna hits upon a notion that reverberates throughout Auster’s fiction: the interconnectedness of present reality and memory” (29). Auster’s own points expressed in one of his interviews are revealing here:

A crisis occurs when everything about ourselves is called into question . . . it’s at those moments when memory becomes a most powerful force in our lives. You begin to explore the past, and invariably you come up with a new reading of the past . . . and because of that you’re able to encounter the present in a new way. (qtd. in Hutchisson 42)

After Isabel’s death, Anna happens to find an alternative source of inspiration in Samuel, her brother’s friend, whom she finds unexpectedly in a library. Their relationship soon develops as a symbiotic cohabitation –

Anna has money and Samuel has shelter. Anna writes that through Samuel she “had been given the possibility of hope” (Auster, *Country* 107). Samuel also knows so much about the city, so that he is still hopeful of getting out of it. His unwritten book also inspires Anna: “as long as we kept working on it,” Anna says, “I realized, the notion of a possible future would continue to exist for us” (114). Sam’s book in fact serves the possibilities of living in the city. Anna also considers the possibility of bearing a child to concretize “a new world to begin” (117). Although continuously facing problems of survival, Anna is not refraining from reproducing herself in her child. As Auster points out, “each ejaculation contains several billion sperm cells . . . which means that, in himself, each man holds the potential of an entire world. And what would happen, could it happen, is the full range of possibilities” (*Prose* 95). Anna faces new difficulties time and again even after her acquaintance with Samuel. Her fall from the butchery window to escape her murder is the critical point in her survival quest. According to Auster, “In the most important scene of *In the Country of Last Things*, Anna Blume jumps through a window on the top floor of a building in order to save herself; she’s not killed, but it changes the course of her life” (qtd. in Hutchisson 95). Anna loses her unborn baby in the fall, an event which puts her in mental turmoil after she recovers her health in Woburn House.

Woburn House is “by any standard . . . a haven, an idyllic refuge from the misery and squalor around it” (Auster, *Country* 139). There Anna meets people trying to help the citizens survive by providing them with provisional food and shelter. It was initially founded by the late Dr. Woburn who believed that “noble actions were still possible” (131), and that “the little we can do we are doing” (132). The House is now run by his daughter, Victoria who acts just like her father. There are also other people who dutifully serve the residents under Victoria, including the old Otto Frick, his grandson, and Boris Stepanovich. Boris constantly reminds others that “A man must live from moment to moment, and who cares what you were last month if you know who you are today?” (146). His own coping strategies are in fact sources of inspiration and courage for others at Woburn House, as Anna tells us:

Stepanovich never really expected you to believe what he said, but at the same time he did not treat his inventions as lies. They were part of an almost conscious plan to concoct a more pleasant world for himself – a world that could shift according to his whims, that was not subject to the same laws and bleak necessities that dragged down all the rest of us. (147)

Boris has “managed to float above his circumstances;” he has “imagined every possibility in advance,” and thus he is “never surprised” by what happens (147). There is also Victoria who is “stubborn” and holds out “until the last” (154). In particular, Victoria is a great help with Anna’s mental peace, giving her “the courage to live in the present again” (157).

At Woburn House, Otto defines Anna’s name for her: “A-n-n-a. Back and forth the same, just like Otto myself. That’s why you got to be born again” (Auster, *Country* 133). Even before that, Auster has presented us with the importance of life for Anna, manifested in her struggles for survival through her full name. When she introduces herself as “Anna Blume” to Samuel, he replies: “Blume. As in doom and gloom.” And Anna replies: “That’s right. Blume as in womb and tomb” (101). Signifying the process of life between birth and death, Anna is reborn at Woburn House, instead of her unborn baby. She is reborn after each catastrophe, so long as death hides itself. Anna’s hardheadedness is always with her, even from the very beginning of the novel when she decides to hold unto herself away from the wanderings of others: “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 that happen to me; . . . I am going to hold on for as long as I can, even if it kills me” (11). As far as living in “the country of last things” continues, “everything happens too fast,” “shifts are too abrupt,” and “what is true one minute is no longer true the next” (25). Likewise, so long as Dasein is stretched between life and death, it *is* its “potentiality-for-being” (Heidegger 183). As such, everything is contingent and anything can happen. In Anna’s words, “facts fly in the face of probability” (Auster, *Country* 22), a view Auster emphasizes in more explicit terms in *Winter Journal*: “all life is contingent, except for the one necessary fact that sooner or later it will come to an end” (5). Moreover, since political issues do influence urban

conditions, Anna tells us, “Governments come and go quite rapidly here, and it is often difficult to keep up with the changes” (Auster, *Country* 86). Since changes are not necessarily positive, the best thing is to let ourselves change. In Heidegger’s words, “a change of the world presupposes a change of the conception of the world,” and that conception will be achieved by “a sufficient interpretation” (qtd. in Puspitosari 2015), as that of Anna. In Anna’s view, “Our lives are no more than the sum of manifold contingencies, and no matter how diverse they might be in their details, they all share an essential randomness in their design” (Auster, *Country* 143–44). In fact, humanity “must be prepared for every contingency” (186), since “anything is possible” (188). What remains is our death, the ultimate possibility of nullity.

Open-endedness is a postmodernist technique which can represent the Heideggerian concept of “potentiality-for-being”. When a story does not end, it has already echoed the ontological oscillation it incorporates regarding the destiny of its characters. “The sense of endings” in Auster fiction is, “at least in his early prose,” a “developmental stage, one yielding to new beginnings and a whole new realm of probability and possibility” (Neagu 2012). Moreover, Anna has “the voice of a Scheherazade” (Varvogli 74), or is “a Scheherazade-like, life affirming” person (Neagu 2012), someone whose quest is to survive and test the possibilities of living in the cruelest condition. However, it should be noted that Anna’s letter is not a tool for survival as some critics hold by comparing it to Scheherazade’s tales as means of survival. Anna is not another Scheherazade proper; she is merely like her in so far as she succumbs to the very act of story-telling when her life is in danger. The act of reporting on events by Anna needs her survival as its only prerequisite. In other words, the presence of the letter she has written highlights Anna’s success with coping strategies in the face of problems. According to Auster, “The little phrases that appear a few times at the beginning – ‘she wrote’ or ‘her letter continued’ – put the whole book in a third-person perspective. Someone has read Anna Blume’s notebook” (qtd. in Hutchisson 12). The plot development of the novel reveals that Anna’s letter has finally reached Anna’s lover, who turns out to be David Zimmer in Auster’s next novel *Moon Palace*. Zimmer is in love with a girl called “Anna Bloom or Blume” who “had suddenly taken off to join her

older brother, William, who worked as a journalist in some foreign country, and since then Zimmer had not received a word from her – not a letter, not a postcard, nothing” (Auster, *Moon* 86). Auster also emphasizes this issue in another interview, announcing Anna Blume as “the person Zimmer is desperately waiting to hear from” (Auster and Siegumfeldt 116).

Anna’s story is “a story of triumph” (Barone 8); however, her fate is not sealed yet, just like the end of her letter. When the novel ends, Anna is history, and we cannot say for sure whether Anna will live happily ever after. On the other hand, while Scheherazade tells stories to survive, and her life is finally bestowed on her, Anna’s story is an introduction to the process-orientedness of the duration of life in the face of death. Anna’s life is more practical than Scheherazade’s, and she is a great figure in so far as she does her best to survive in recording her attempts as a manifesto of survival. The end does not matter while the individual is involved in the process, in the possibility of survival. Death is the ultimate possibility, so why should one bother oneself with the end? As Heidegger holds, life is “being-towards-death” (374). In Anna’s words,

The end is only imaginary, a destination you invent to keep yourself going, but a point comes when you realize you will never get there. You might have to stop, but that is only because you have run out of time. You stop, but that does not mean you have come to the end. (Auster, *Country* 183)

Within a “multicursal” labyrinth, “the wanderer’s progress is contingent on the choices he makes at each forking path” (Shiloh 92), and no center is apprehended. The city of Auster’s novel is such a labyrinth. As Pascariu argues, knowing the city and “its labyrinthine structure” for Anna means getting to know its “paths and bifurcations” to reach its “centre or exit.” However, Pascariu continues, directions constantly shift, and Anna’s decisions and choices are entirely based on “intuition,” which is never basically logical, and mostly leads to “frustration and disorientation” (681). This city is already a Minotaur-haunted city, gradually killing all its captives. Such “decenterment” gives the postmodern labyrinth infinite possibilities of action, as Hoffman argues: “Decenterment adds to the labyrinth the

modality and creativeness of infinite possibilities” (416). There is no center to hold onto for Anna then. Anna is thus on her own to make sense of her *potentiality-for-being*, considering her life as “a process of constructing order out of chaos” (Woods 113). Anna believes that “[u]tter despair can exist side by side with the most dazzling invention; entropy and efflorescence merge. . . . It all has to do with a new way of thinking. Scarcity bends your mind toward novel solutions” (Auster, *Country* 29). *In the Country of Last Things* is thus, in Auster’s words, a manual explaining “how one lives in a kind of chaos” (qtd. in Hutchisson 166). As Boris tells the others on leaving Woburn House, “Unless we begin to look ahead, there won’t be much further for any one of us. . . . Make plans. Consider the possibilities. Act” (Auster, *Country* 155). These words are also reflected in Auster’s comments in an article: “When no possibility exists, everything becomes possible again” (*Prose* 305), or in other words, “at each moment there is the possibility of what is not.” Playing with the concept of contingency, Auster holds that “one can always choose one’s moment” (306). Anna thus begins her existential manifesto by saying, “At times my weakness is so great, I feel the next step will never come. But I manage. In spite of the lapses, I keep myself going” (Auster, *Country* 2). Anna’s sense of life and human existence as struggle do make her “a true heroine” in Auster’s oeuvre, as the author himself emphasized in one of his interviews:

I find it [*In the Country of Last Things*] the most hopeful book I’ve ever written. Anna Blume survives, at least to the extent that her words survive. Even in the midst of the most brutal realities, the most terrible social conditions, she struggles to remain a human being, to keep her humanity intact. . . . It’s a struggle that millions of people have had to face in our time, and not many of them have been as tenacious as she is. I think of Anna Blume as a true heroine. (qtd. in Hutchisson 36)

Conclusion

Anna has survived her quest to send her letter, so far as her letter has been delivered. In a naturalistic way, Auster has picked up a young girl from a well-established city and thrown her into the middle of a catastrophic

situation to test her survival will. Auster's choice of a dystopia rather than any well-established place serves the question of the meaningfulness of life and human existence, particularly in the worst situation. It might be surprising that until a catastrophe befalls humankind, no functionality of seemingly valueless stuff can be truly comprehended. This fact serves two issues: possible living through the lowest forms of life and attacking consumerism. What Heidegger terms as the "present-at-hand" and the "ready-to-hand" are therefore significantly relevant: the objects around us and those made by us to serve us are not necessarily functional in a dystopia. In other words, it is the condition that deems what is functional and what is useless for humans. Auster's novel shows a time when even human waste is of utmost importance for living, denouncing the functionality of consumerism at hard times.

In the Country of Last Things thus tells us to make much of our time and resources in life. And this requires, as Heidegger believes, a change in our understanding of the world, manifested in Anna's recognition of her situation in the world of the novel. Dasein, as a coping being, is thus tested here through the utmost coping capabilities of its being to survive. Death, wrongly understood by the citizens, has in fact become a way of managing life through suicide, while it is the last possibility after testing all the means of survival in the eyes of Anna and the members of Woburn House.

Allegorically, the novel depicts a laboratory to experiment with human potentiality for being in the face of the very lack of the essential means of survival. In such extreme Heideggerian "thrownness," in which most people are gradually dying with no sense of living, Anna is called to authenticity in the face of the inauthenticity of the mass of people and the limitations of the situation. Auster's city seems like a purgatory to test humankind's attempt at survival, so that life would be gained upon victory. What is mostly evident in the novel – which is also seen in Auster's other novels regarding his play with chance – is that whenever something good is going to happen, something evil interferes. It necessitates taking for granted all the possibilities of one's state of being in the world, as Heidegger holds, which in turn necessitates adapting oneself to the new conditions of living in a wasteland. Anna thus chooses, as a possibility of survival, to disguise herself,

tolerate famine and bad weather, cope with her situation, not care for her losses, and never commit suicide before the certainty of death.

Anna is not alone in her survival quest. Manifesting adaptability to any condition, the remaining Woburn House members have tried to survive through insufficient resources, and thus seem to have mastered their situation rather than having become its slaves. Part of this struggle is communal, as they cooperate to run the House and share what they have with each other. Communal survival manifests a unique order in that dystopia, an important factor that is promising to save not only the House administrators' lives but also the lives of the people outside, a fact that counters the impotency of the government to care for its citizens. Pursuing Dr. Woburn's beliefs, the members of Woburn House symbolize authenticity. In Anna's words, they all willed to survive, especially Anna herself through contemplating how to accept the given and deal with it.

One's weakness, if confessed, reveals one's state of inauthenticity. Understanding it is the first step to overcome it. And when you overcome it, you may acknowledge your "potentiality-for-being." Through what we can term as *Auster's existential manifesto of survival*, in the manner of what he wrote autobiographically in *Hand to Mouth, In the Country of Last Things* presents us with Heidegger's Dasein's will to make everything possible through life in the face of death. Thus, human existence in this novel incorporates as part of human "potentiality-for-being" such issues as the will to survive, understanding the "limit-situation" and adaptation to it, mutual cooperation with the "Dasein-with" of others for Dasein's own highest self-fulfillment, the importance of discourse in expressing one's existence to the world, the role of death in living one's life, the truth of hope hidden in one's future possibilities, and the contingency of the worldly affairs. These all constitute Dasein's coping strategies and its range of possibilities from birth to death, making Dasein the master of its situation.

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TUBITAK I „POTENCIJAL ZA BITAK“ U PUSTOJ ZEMLJI: AUSTEROVA *ZEMLJA POSLJEDNJIH STVARI*

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Rad predlaže čitanje romana Paula Austera *U zemlji posljednjih stvari* (1987) kroz konceptualnu perspektivu Heideggerove teorije tubitka. Naglasak se stavlja na Heideggerovu definiciju ljudske prirode kao tubitka i pritom se raspravlja o rasponu egzistencijalnih mogućnosti na koje njemački filozof upućuje ljudska bića kako bi prije smrti postigla autentičan osjećaj vlastitoga bića i života. Kretanje od rođenja prema smrti predstavlja tubitkovo stanje bitka, odnosno egzistenciju. Međutim, rijetki su svjesni toga procesa te su izgubljeni u ograničavajućoj situaciji svakodnevnog života. U skladu s time, neautentični su životi nesvjesni vlastitih mogućnosti. Fikcionalna vizualizacija tubitkovih pokušaja autentičnoga postojanja unutar svoje ograničavajuće situacije ili, mogli bismo reći, unutar svog

uobičajenoga društva, može na bolji način konkretizirati Heideggerove tvrdnje. Kada je u pitanju Austerov egzistencijalni pogled na život, *U zemlji posljednjih stvari* prikaz je jedne takve borbe za autentično postojanje u distopijskom svijetu u kojem je čovječanstvo svedeno na najnižu životnu situaciju. U alegorijskom smislu, roman predstavlja laboratorij za eksperimentiranje s ljudskim potencijalom bitka suočenog s izuzetno nepovoljnim uvjetima za ispunjenje bioloških potreba neprestano praćenima smrću koja vreba iz prikrajka. U takvom teškom životnom okruženju protagonistica Anna Blume osjeća poriv prema autentičnosti usprkos neautentičnosti drugih ljudi i sveprisutnoj smrtnoj opasnosti, pritom naglašavajući mogućnost života usred distopije na temelju autentične svijesti o sebi. U radu se stoga tvrdi da je egzistencijalizam u Austerovu romanu blizak Heideggerovu svjetonazoru o ljudskom postojanju.

Ključne riječi: Auster, autentičnost, tubitak, Heidegger, *U zemlji posljednjih stvari*, „potencijal bitka“