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RUBBISH CITY AND THE UTOPIA OF THE RESIDUAL: *IN THE COUNTRY OF LAST THINGS* BY PAUL AUSTER

Philosophy and literature – philosophy of literature? – a truly problematic couple of concepts and disciplines. What is the meaning of their encounter? I remember “Lightness,” the first of Italo Calvino’s *American Lessons, Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1988). The first memo for the next millennium, to be entrusted to writing, is the “subtraction of weight” (Calvino 1993, 3) from the real, so that lightness, speed, and agility of thought, the levity of the experience of narrated life, are born from an opaque, inert, and almost stone-like world, as our socio-historical reality is (crushed, as F. Jameson would say, by the rocklike burden of “multinational capitalism” and “media capitalism” (1992, XVIII). It is about eluding, through narration, the *nomos* of a world petrified by Medusa’s gaze, which transforms every living being into a rocklike statue of itself.

Here, Calvino draws on an ancient myth, unraveling it existentially and ontologically: the myth of Perseus, able to elude the inexorable gaze of Gorgon (symbol of an oppressive reality) by seeing her reflected image in the bronze mirror of his gleaming shield. Perseus guides his gaze “on that which can be revealed to him only through an indirect vision, in an image captured by a mirror” (Calvino 1993, 4) and thus survives a fatal reality, which would like to reduce his life to an enigmatic law of a destiny with no name and no face. The story narrated from the myth is unwound in the following stages of progressive lightening: from the blood of Medusa’s *caput mortuum* rises the winged horse Pegasus; Perseus, already equipped with winged footwear, in his turn, rides his winged steed, from a strike of its hoof on Mount Helicon springs the fountain from which the Muses, the inspirers of art and letters, drink.

Why go back to this elaboration of the myth? It may be that today philosophy, in order to think reality, has to reflect on the world as it is reflected in the mirror of literature. Hence, an allegory of the philosopher’s relationship with the world might be concealed in this myth. Pegasus’s ‘mirror of mirror’ philosophy is the form of reflection par excellence; its art is that of trailing reality in the game of images refracted in adjoining and successive (either literary or philosophical) elaborations, progressively refining itself to the point of obtaining an ontological distillation in which, at the end of this alchemic process, only the essential is collected. It is therefore in this game of cross-references between philosophy and literature that my interpretation of Paul Auster’s “novel-mirror” unfolds. The mirror of the world that literature offers to philosophy might give access to residual dimensions of meaning that evade every direct conceptual approach; thus, literature could rise to a “narrative schematics” that grants that (essentially mediated) the knowledge of the world toward which the philosopher, in an intimate vocation, is indeed inclined. Giambattista Vico, with the frontispiece situated as an introduction to *New Science. Principles of the New Science Concerning the Common Nature of Nations* (1744), seems to have captured this art of mediation; the winged lady of Philosophy receives in her heart (represented by a convex mirror) the ray of providence only inasmuch as this is, in its turn, reflected down at the feet of the statue of the “true Homer” (Vico 1993, 355), symbol – or “imaginative universal” (148) of the mythological narrations of pagan antiquity. In other words, metaphysics “studies” things “in idea” (130) by going through a longer path, that is, by contemplating not directly the physical world but rather “the civil truths” (91) (insofar as they are offered by those *Umwege* which are the “true stories” (364) told by literary myths. Hence, it could be claimed that philosophy is, in Vico, an art of digression, which distills from the heaviness of myth the idea of a redeeming project: that ideal-eternal story that can be drawn from the contemplation of the human destinies that are offered by the “great fragments of antiquity” (86).

But let us return to the heaviness vs. lightness opposition, and to the philosophical and narrative mirror as the gift of levity. Could it be a mere chance that Auster’s novel – at least so it seems to me – tells of the impossible

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possibility of fleeing from the mythical destiny of the city of Destruction? That is, from that “sense of fate” (Auster 1987, 110) that inexorably weighs upon its citizens, crushing every character with those inflexible “laws and bleak necessities that dragged down all the rest of us?” (147).

Boris Stepanovich, who uses language as a deft “instrument of locomotion,” “constantly on the move darting and feinting, circling, disappearing, suddenly appearing again in a different spot” (Auster 1997, 146) in a sort of expressive dance on tiptoes – is one of those possible solutions of lightening upon which I would like to meditate. His fanciful stories – oscillating between the story of Countess Oblomov’s teapot and that of the French court of the improbable Duke of Fantomas – create a world that “could shift according to his whims,” hence managing to “float above the circumstances. Starvation, murder, the worst forms of cruelty – he walked right by them, even through them, and yet always appeared unscathed” (147), succeeding, as it were, in exorcising Medusa’s gaze from the urban *nomos* of an infernal city ruled by dark and pre-historical forces. The same surreal and alienating effect is conferred upon the magic spectacle that Boris himself would like to organize in his Utopian flight, by car, with Anna Victoria and Sam, as far as the city borders: “It is pleasant to dream of these absurdities” (187) – they lighten the leaden weight of existence.

Another example: the *redidivus* Sam, who suddenly reappears at the Woburne’s. Although a journalist, he dons the mask of a doctor (Doctor Shamuel Farr, Quackingsham, Bunk, however he likes to be called), to the point of becoming one with that role. The irony of fate: “after a while he began to act like one, too” (167). There was no doubt “that he looked like a doctor” (167) but it is another story to believe in one’s mask as a new identity. In this “masquerade” a playful and illusory acting on the abyss of a catastrophe, he at last finds his “ghostly equilibrium” (169) eluding that “sense of fate” (110) that weighed them down. As Sam once says, “It’s better not having to be myself,” (168)

if I didn’t have that other person to hide behind — the one who wears the white coat and the sympathetic look on his face — I don’t think I could stand it. The stories would crush me. As it is, I have a way to listen to them now, to put them where they belong — next to my own story, next to the story of the self I no longer have to be as long as I am listening to them. (168-169)

I hope the philosophical interpretation of *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), which I propose here, is able to capitalize on this possible lesson of lightening, or in the language of philosophy, to catch sight of a redeeming solution (or even only a residue of Utopia, as every Utopia of “marginality” should be able to do) for the unredeemed world, made of cursed existences, described by Paul Auster, a solution dropped into the diegetic fabric of the novel.

Paul Auster’s *In the Country of Last Things* is a powerful and disquieting allegory of a world that is no longer there; and if it still exists, it possesses a merely fantastical reality, like “a huge, dissolving crystal” (90) through which filter the last nostalgic rays of what is no longer there, of what remains of the real. Objects are still for a moment but soon transform into mounds of rubbish: “Once a thing is gone, that is the end of it” (2). Human life too is already a walking ghost: one roams the city with a dreamy air, and hollow, bloodless eyes like those of ghosts, staggering, terrified of stumbling and falling on the ground – which would already be a premature submission to death.

Who could ever stand up again in a dissolving world, in which every human being has already been scanned in life, by the meticulous “Transformation centers” (17), for all that could be recycled: shoes, clothes, malodorous food, dentures, and even excrements? Where are the handholds onto which one could cling to lift oneself up in a reality whose objects, which a moment ago we could still see, are no longer there, and that already display characteristics of a premature transience and disfigured cracks due to a process of endogenous and irreversible destruction?

As Auster writes, “These are the last things. A house is there one day, and the next day it is gone. A street you walked down yesterday is no longer there today. Even the weather is in constant flux.” (1). “Everything happens too fast here” – continues Auster, “the shifts are too abrupt, what is true one minute is no longer true the next” (25). The city described by the author is situated on the margins of the world of production: it is an anti-functional residue and yet it is necessary – exactly in its constituent residuality – for the perpetuation of the world of *nomos*.



It is a society of outcasts in which all the unusable rejects of the hierarchically structured functional world converge; like a periphery of the center of organization and power in which the untamable (that is to say, not subsumable within a norm) residue of the order in force is gathered: namely, that which eludes a secular principle of organization that – in spite of its claim of universality – constantly produces unredeemed forms of marginality. Hence, for the citizens of this peripheral city, the experience of *nomos* (turned into mythical law) takes on essentially repulsive characteristics; such *nomos* is intelligible only in the form of *ananke*, of “pre-historical forces” due to which the police – guarantor of the order – has a policy to “hit first and ask questions later” (92). In other words, it takes the shape of a necessity or a fate in substance (as Hegel would say) capable of setting traps for and permeating every small aspect of human life with its threatening and pervasive semblance: “The sky is ruled by chance, by forces so complex and obscure that no one can fully explain it” (27-28); in the city, for instance, “There is a law of city life that says you must never knock on a door unless you know what is on the other side” (98-99), a prudential attitude echoing Kafka’s short-story “The Knock at the Manor Gate” (90): just beyond the threshold, there could always be a human slaughterhouse lying in ambush.

The *nomos* of the world is translated, in this waste-city, into nine “census zones” (12) into which the city is hierarchically subdivided; each of these districts is marked by an autonomous “Transformation center” (17) where “dead bodies and shit” (30) are recycled to produce energy, thus transforming death and defecation into life: new life that feeds, however, a kingdom of only the moribund. Here, the cycle of life evidently clings onto an economics of death: hence, the *nomos basileus* (“*nómos* or *pántōn basiléus*”), in this city, reveals its true deadly essence, as sheer destiny.

The norm is incarnated by the “the great So-and-So” (86) – no one knows what the real name of the leader is – an anonymous and mysterious character, since “governments come and go quite rapidly here, and it is often difficult to keep up with the change” (85). This hidden characteristic of the head of government, in the rubbish city, has its ramifications in an enigmatic and disquieting bureaucratic apparatus in which the alienating mechanism of the Kafkaesque judicial trial, particularly in the short-story “Before the Law,” resurfaces: “but after running back and forth between several government agencies, waiting in line day after day only to be told to take my request to yet another bureau” (89), affirms Anna Blume, “I had to give up the idea of going home” (89): when the Kafkaesque gate to the law is open, entry is forbidden by a gatekeeper; when the gate closes, the protagonist cannot but die in ignorance and lack of answers. All things considered, writes Auster,

In spite of what you would suppose, the facts are not reversible. Just because you are able to get in, that does not mean you will be able to get out. Entrances do not become exits, and there is nothing to guarantee that the door you walked through a moment ago will still be there when you turn around to look for it again. That is how it works in the city. Every time you think you know the answer to a question, you discover that the question makes no sense. (85)

This all-encompassing characteristic of the rubbish city, for which those who enter it lose all hopes of ever being able to leave it (the construction of the breakwater barrier observed by Anna is the symbol of this impossibility) discloses the exergue affixed on the novel. The reference is to *The Celestial Railroad* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, an author beloved and quoted profusely by Auster (he is the editor of diaries and Hawthorne’s epistolary exchange with Herman Melville).

Needless to say, in this meta-literary operation, Auster behaves like the Jews of the library, residue of Israel involved in rather esoteric studies: “hunting for parallels between current events and events in classical literature” (111), in order to see if the answers to the no-sense of the present could at least be found in the past, that is to say, in the recursion of life, hoping for everything to have already happened at least once. “Not a great while ago” – writes Hawthorne in this short-story – “passing through the gate of dreams, I visited that region of the earth in which lies the famous City of Destruction. It interested me much to learn that” – thus goes the sequel left out by Auster, which nevertheless renders the reference even more explicit and significant – “by the public spirit of some of the inhabitants a railroad has recently been established between this populous and flourishing town and the Celestial City” (Hawthorne 2000, 208).



In his masterly story, Hawthorne outlines a parody of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) (overtly quoted in the story): instead of the classic pilgrimage on foot toward Paradise, the City of Destruction has constructed a railway on which a comfortable train runs – the locomotive described by Hawthorne as a satanic cavern blowing fire and flames.

It is a sort of mechanical demon that would hurry us to the infernal regions, than a laudable contrivance for smoothing our way to the Celestial City. On its top sat a personage almost enveloped in smoke and flame, which [...] appeared to gush from his own mouth and stomach as well as from the engine's brazen abdomen. (212)

In reality, it is a mutilated path, which ends its route in the City of Vanity:

I do assure you, and beseech you to receive the truth of my words, that that whole enterprise is a bubble. You may travel on it all your lifetime, were you to live thousands of years, and yet never get beyond the limits of Vanity Fair! Yea, though you should deem yourself entering the gates of the Blessed City, it will be nothing but a miserable delusion. (224)

That is to say, the subsumption of the road to purification of Christian (the protagonist of Bunyan's novel) to a technological norm reduces the man to a gear functional to the infernal city. In order to be assimilated into the earthly hierarchy and technological *nomos*, the bare life of man eventually renounces every crumb of remaining *humanitas*, that ancestral past doomed to perish by the disintegration of the narrable experience – thus writes Italo Calvino (1993, 17), creating in a way a short-circuit between Benjamin's *The Narrator*, dedicated to N. Leskov, and Hawthorne's works). In order to have the railway cross the threatening Pantano Valley, indeed, adequate foundations have been laid by throwing in there

Some editions of books of morality, volumes of French philosophy and German rationalism, tracts, sermons, and essays of modern clergymen, extracts from Plato, Confucius, and various Hindoo sages, together with a few ingenious commentaries upon texts of Scripture; all of which, by some scientific process, have been converted into a mass like granite. The whole bog might be filled up with a similar matter. (Hawthorne 2000, 209)

At second glance, this episode of sacrifice of culture finds its equivalent, in our novel, in the cast-iron stove that is fed with the masterpieces treasured in the library; paradox of paradoxes: Sam and Anna live entirely devoted to the writing of a book but simultaneously burn books, the only way that they “kept warm during the winter. The world the books had belonged to was finished, and at least now they were being used to some purpose” (Auster 1997, 115-116). In the end, even the Utopia of Cyrano de Bergerac (who describes his imaginative journey to the Moon and the Sun) turned up in smoke. In such a mass of granite, symbol of a demonical progress subjected to scientific *nomos* (which would like to take the secular and mundane place of Providence), there are suppressed every desire and every utopian thrust that only could enable man to live in what is strictly human: a world free of *ananke*, still capable of showing itself in a world that is essentially different from ours (The Holy City).

The city of destruction thus becomes the other face of progress, of the organization of a society that has reabsorbed into itself – in the immanent ideal of “*magnifiche sorti e progressive*” (Leopardi 1913, 130) – the celestial kingdom. Hawthorne, who in the first forty years of the 19th century, those of the prodigious American scientific revolution, personally witnesses the desecration of nature, reveals the satanic side of this model of development. With a purely puritan spirit, he sees in the contamination of wild nature and in the secularization of providence (transformed into blasphemous technological progress) the historical result of an action essentially permeated by original sin: the other terrifying and threatening side of itself that *nomos* reveals to the citizens of the City of Destruction. As principle of death – as Thanatos, which represses “brave, idealistic sentiments” (Auster 1997, 117) – it sterilizes life in the city to the point that “babies refuse to be born” (7) hence thwarting even “the notion of a possible future” (114).



But let me return to Auster. This marginal city, made of discarded lives and broken and useless objects, is a hardly disguised hell: “the Castle of No Return, the Land of Sadness, the Forest of Forgotten Words” (10), “an invisible world, a place where only blind people lived” (18). Here, one can keep on living – like in a Lager – only by pretending, with inhumane cynicism, that life is still worth living, as recounted by Primo Levi with regards to the loading of metal bars in the labor camp of Buna-Monowitz; the only ‘ethical’ imperative in force: if you want to stay alive, it is better to choose a taller workmate, so that all the weight would fall on his shoulders! (Levi 1989, 66).

In other words, one can survive only by not giving in to any form of pity for those surrounding him, without compassion, spastically concentrated on oneself in an effort to remove the constant sensation of hunger and the scorching experience of the atrocious hardships to which life – afflicted by constitutive lack and progressive subtraction – is committed. “Those who remained could no longer afford to be generous” (131). It is a monastic life without God and without love for the neighbor, in which you must have “given up hoping even for the possibility of hope” (9), an interior conversion, where instead of the divine synteresis, there is only the desert of a humanity that has left nothing of itself but a volatile trace – a transient trace that, nevertheless, is better not to remember.

Memory, writes Auster, “is the great trap” (38); “those of us,” he continues, “who were brought up somewhere else, or who are old enough to remember a world different from this one, find it an enormous struggle just to keep up from one day to the next” (20). The soul, instead of being inebriated by God, thus finds itself alone in that dreadful soliloquy that marks the beginning of the novel, a prey to the memories studded on the walls of the self’s inner cave (Cagliero 1996, 134); you may or may not read my memories, this letter of mine – the soul concludes – but it is not important; in fact, it is better that I myself, the protagonist who tells you her incredible, nightmarish story, do not know what I am writing: “Then I begin to say something, and I suddenly realize how little I understand” (28).

“Nothing lasts, you see, not even the thoughts inside you. And you mustn’t waste your time looking for them. Once a thing is gone, that is the end of it” (2) and that’s it, it is useless to try to fasten it through writing. While I tell you the story, “the story starts and stops, goes forward and then loses itself, and between each word, what silences, what words escape and vanish, never to be seen again” (38). Among all this emptiness, in this cruel game of transience, Anna writes, “the rest of the city was growing smaller. We were being swallowed up, and not one of us knew how to prevent it” (171). Not only do things disappear but so does memory: “Dark areas form in the brain, and unless you make a constant effort to summon up the things that are gone, they will quickly be lost to you forever” (87).

When things disappear from the physical world, words that designate them are also subjected to a precocious process of removal; now “the problem is not so much that people forget, but that they do not always forget the same thing. What still exists as a memory for one person can be irretrievably lost for another, and this creates difficulties, insuperable barriers against understanding” (88). Now, if entire categories of objects disappear – but not all in the same way for everyone – language will turn into a multiplicity of private languages to which some representations of objects (and not others) are inaccessible: sooner or later, certain words such as the word airplane, “become only sounds, a random collection of glottals and fricatives, a storm of whirling phonemes, and finally the whole thing just collapses into gibberish” (89). At the end of this “is a slow but ineluctable process of erasure,” therefore, “each person is speaking his own private language, and as the instances of shared understanding diminish, it becomes increasingly difficult to communicate with anyone” (89).

In this satanic confession, in which the narrating protagonist reflects his own spiritual misery in the empty mirror of the soul remembering his equivalent to consuming the world, one’s own memory of the world, in a series of terrifying images chased – step by step as if by its own Luciferian shadow – by the immanence of death. *Vita et mors* are one the replica of the other, the essence of the other, like in a game of mirrors: “In order to live, you must make yourself die” (20) to wipe away in yourself every surviving idea of *humanitas* (20). Living in such conditions indeed means to die: to strengthen one’s body (like in the image of Marathoners who, by their own choice, run to death by subjecting themselves to an extenuating training), in fact, means to gain access to death, to anticipate one’s end: in an utterly paradoxical way, these new Christian martyrs without God, who run through the streets as fast as possible can, “flailing their arms wildly about them, punching the air,



screaming at the top of their lungs” (11), must have an enormous athletic preparation in order to be able to push their limits. One dies running only when one is almost capable of running indefinitely; one dies, that is, when “he has simultaneously reached a point of ultimate strength and ultimate weakness” (12) almost to the point of fleeing – galloping at a breakneck speed, like in Kafka’s story “The Wish to Be a Red Indian” (1912) – to the point of going out of your own body: “until one shed one’s spurs, for there needed no spurs, threw away the reins, for there needed no reins, [...] when horse’s neck and head would be already gone” (Kafka 1971, 421), thus leaving one’s own body behind!

In the same way, living intensely among luxury and immoderate passions in the “Euthanasia Clinics,” where one can choose between “Journey of Marvels” and “Pleasure cruise” (Auster 1997, 13-14), means conquering death once again, reaching a homeostatic state in which every human glimmer – that which remains of man – eventually dies out, numbly accompanied by sleeping pills and drugs. Here, ecstasy, as fulfillment of life, is the point of no return, for which man longs not in order to learn all reality in God (platonically, the omnitude of the existent in its own eternal archetype), but in order to completely forget everything, every remaining detail of historical life. “People climb to the highest places for no other reason than to jump” (12) abandoning oneself, like rubbish, to a decaying world.

More than death itself, in this rubbish city studded with atrocious hardships and suffering, human beings must dread their fear of death. This fear is still something too human, perhaps the last remnant of *humanitas*, which not only does not let us survive through the prevailing cynicism, but neither does it allow us the choice to die (by enrolling, for instance, in the “Assassination clubs” (14), where one pays to be eliminated by a stranger, not knowing either how or when).

One needs to be a Godless mystic to be able to live and die in such a way, without the least passion and perturbation. Here, a theological sense (almost an intuition) is indispensable: to learn to smell the air, to make out the imperceptible shadows at street corners, to see what is behind the thresholds, to notice the heaps of debris even before they are visible, to renounce food (because one lives better without food, but to the point of starving); all of this commits the citizens to the formulation of a real urban metaphysics of waiting – as if behind everything, there always lied in ambush a mortal danger, the only true certainty in such a world.

Every detail, in this entropic city, is an expression of “an absolute non-sense” that dictates its enigmatic conditions in a no man’s land: thus, waiting for one’s end, one becomes “more vigilant. Death is no longer an abstraction, but a real possibility that haunts each moment of life” (15). Living in a void of meaning, in a constant *memento mori* – everything, indeed, incessantly disintegrates, and in every part of the city one can hear the continuous flares due to the collapse of buildings – means to rapidly approach a blasphemous parody of the *Parousia*: however, only its negative counter melody remains (as Kafka would say), that is, the destruction of the century, constantly announced by the inexorable accumulation of abandoned debris and corpses: “a sense of fate dragging us along with it into unknown corners of oblivion” (Auster 1997, 110) where the creation of a new sky and a new earth is reduced, at the most, for the rubbish-man (that which remains of man) to an ephemeral conquest of a stale piece of chocolate cake. Yet, this does not fill one up but simply sickens that bottomless well – “a hole as big as the world” (5) – that man’s stomach has turned into, contorted by spasms for which no remedy is given, spasms and contractions that the devoured food does nothing but sharpen.

If no other choice is given, if from this city (as an inexorable “steel cage,” an image variously adopted by postmodernity in accordance with some Gnostic doctrines) one cannot flee, it is better to emphasize one’s asceticism – that interior void, in which one takes refuge like the last monks without truth – pushing it to the extreme. It is better, in other words, to anticipate death, to see the skeleton with the sickle peeping out from behind everything; in short, to give a hand to time – because, anyway, it is only a matter of time. If one cannot be satiated with life – because most things that are indispensable are missing –, then it is better to get tired of life before one’s time! “I sometimes think that death is the one thing we have any feeling for. It is our art form, the only way we can express ourselves” (13).

This urban apocatastasis stops, indeed, only at the penultimate things: it is a progressive process of subtraction (18) from reality that in the end produces, around the survivors, an absolute void, a void in which God seems to go into hiding, and nevertheless (exactly through His disruptive absence) stuns man with His mocking sneer: we speak to him, affirms the rabbi who lives in the remains of the National Library, but whether or not he hears us is another matter (96); “life as we know it has ended, and yet no one is able to grasp what



has taken its place” (20). This quite mystical approach – due to the waiting for the end – is therefore essentially maimed, blocked in and inexorably driven back to the here and now; and yet, if the here and now has been eroded at its foundations, then nothing remains but to ascetically hover in the void of that which is missing, in the sight of a world that is about to vanish: “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).

It may also be that “entropy” (*finis mundi*) and “efflorescence” (a new beginning?) are in the end founded, thus transforming mortality into “beautiful transience” (110). This magical conversion is, indeed, already working: “dead bodies and shit” (30) become new trade goods upon which – in the absence of carbon and petrol – an entire urban economy relies: “There are pieces of this and pieces of that, but none of it fits together. And yet, very strangely, at the limit of all this chaos, everything begins to fuse again” (35). Something always remains in the fragments of a world that is no longer there, a remnant of reality remains; “everything falls apart, but not every part of every thing, at least not at the same time” (36); hence, the work of the street sweeper-man (the last avatar of Benjamin’s collector) consists in saving these tiny intact islands of reality and uniting them with other similar ones: until by magic, “to create new archipelagoes of matter” (36) because

There is so little left, almost nothing gets thrown out anymore, and uses have been found for materials that were once scorned as rubbish. It all has to do with a new way of thinking. Scarcity bends your mind toward novel solutions, and you discover yourself willing to entertain ideas that never would have occurred to you before. (29)

These new thoughts constitute a new *ars combinatoria* of the residual: as the last salvation of things beyond their original function and utility, it secularizes the beatific vision of the districts – after the end of the world, in the mystical access to hereafter – through a spasmodic attention for a desecrated *Diesseitigkeit* that absorbs every residual form of ulteriority and transcendence: all things considered, this takes on, for the dwellers of Auster’s city of Destruction, the residual aspect “of a dreadful, posthumous sort of life” (137), like, as Anna says, “an eccentric little coda tacked on to a piece that was already played out. Everything was finished. It was just that I didn’t know it yet” (167).

The world, in order to last somewhat longer (in order for something to be saved), is thus forced to recycle itself, to constantly perpetuate by indefatigably redrawing on its own waste. The lack of reality is filled with “the remnant of that which was” in a constant strategy of delay that procrastinates indefinitely *the finis mundi*: “It takes a long time for a world to vanish, much longer than you would think” (28). The Jews of the National Library too have this clear perception: “Every Jew, he said, believes that he belongs to the last generation of Jews. We are always at the end, always standing on the brink of the last moment, and why should we expect things to be any different now?” (112).

The question therefore is not if the world will sooner or later end, but how much time it will take to vanish: how long until everything ends? One should not wonder about what will come after, but only about how long that which rests of the world will last: how long until there is nothing left of the last remnant of the world? Or rather, in Anna’s words, “How much time is ‘a little time’?” (154). The situation, Max Weber would say in *Science as Vocation* (1919), is similar to that which resonates in the song of the scout, in the period of exile, in the oracle of Isaiah: “Watchman, what of the night? The watchman said, The morning cometh, and also the night. If ye will enquire, enquire ye: return, come” (1946, 156). At second glance, the dwellers of the city described by Auster do nothing but return in order to ask the same fatal question over and over again; they remain, that is, nailed to the threshold of the end; this threshold is exactly that which remains of the end!

The world has perhaps already ended, but the problem is still its waste – that which remains of the world – the waste that keeps indefatigably cropping up by reconfiguring itself in the shadow of the world, forcing man to survive his own death. The last “veil of Maya,” the last phantasmagoria of the real, is a remnant of ontological consistence that blocks the nothingness of the world in a perennial erosive process of subtraction, averting – always for a bit longer – the cataract toward which reality is precipitating. But what does this remnant of world and of time mean? It is as if history would want to grant yet a bit more time (a remnant of time) to man so that he can at least learn how to die! In the meantime, it is better to equip oneself with a shopping cart in order to



collect rubbish, securing, as well as possible, something to live by: in any case, all things considered, “The harder you work, the weaker you become; the weaker you are, the more draining the work” (Auster 1997, 31): this is – Auster writes emblematically – a “deadly equation” (32), and it is only a question of time until the Luciferian astuteness of every conatus of existence reveals itself: sooner or later, whether we like it or not, each dwelling in the residual life will be translated into that which it truly is: an implacable race toward death! We have to bravely face “the fate of our time” without deluding ourselves, we could say with Weber’s words. The remnant, on the other hand, does not involve reflection either morally or theoretically; the fact that something still remains is neither good nor bad, it cannot be evaluated or judged by any extrinsic criteria: the remnant, as such, is, at second glance, that which actually remains in the end of every attempt of axiological evaluation and philosophical discussion – it is that which remains of every thought, abstraction, and faith. Perhaps, the remnant is not even real, it is only a hallucination of the old man who remembers someone who desperately tries to hold onto a semblance of world on the wrecks and rubbles of history. Hence, it is not the world that remains but only our wish for something to remain: to continue writing uselessly a history of the city of Destruction, made of reports and interviews (according to the delirious project of Samuel Farr), is a clear manifestation of this wish, even if it seems to make no sense (since the book is reduced, indeed, to a “a futile heap of papers trying to say things that could not be said” (109).

As Anna affirms, “As long as we kept working on it, I realized, the notion of a possible future would continue to exist for us” (113-114). This invincible wish to remain is the source of the last religiosity, the religion or Utopia of last things and “of the last man:” the wish for the ultimate things to always be penultimate, for something further to always remain, and so on and so forth to infinity – so that the question about the end can be re-proposed endlessly. This is the last theological enchantment: to halt the disintegration in the residual image of passing away, to immortalize the inert and irrevocable effectiveness of death in the agony of the process of death (mortal illness), the past of that which was (life that is no more) in the present hour of its dissolution – in short, to cling onto a never fully completed entropic process as the last remnant of salvation. It is as if to say: until I can see things die, death is, for me who remains, always something to come. I must participate in all possible funerals in order to learn to survive; I want to count every victim one by one – corpses, writes Auster, are in fact everywhere: “Dead bodies are therefore everywhere you turn – on the sidewalk, in doorways, in the street itself” (16) – to assure myself – a la Descartes – of my existence: if others die, ergo I exist, re-sist, or rather, I exist because I remain.

For as long as everything passes away and dies, I remain alive; I am that remnant of the world that still remains before ending. If, evangelically, the last ones will be the first ones, then the penultimate – in this residual world – are those men-angels (compassionate or cruel, we will never know!) who delay the advent of the end, like Karl Kraus with his sharp and residual writing as opposed to a certain linguistic wildfire. For as long as someone dies, it is because someone still remains to live. There is still something to be gained from someone else’s death: as long as this holds true, it is because someone, for better or worse, remains alive, like “a clump, a mote, a fragment of the world that has no place: a cipher of it-ness” (35) from which another world – beyond every remnant of hope – could always be reborn.

Against every incarnated *nomos*, secularized in a mundane hierarchy, man – one could claim – can access the future only by re-drawing on the spirit of Utopia; that remnant of Utopia which, as Benjamin writes to Scholem, is given only to those who despair: “Only for the sake of the hopeless ones have we been given hope” (1955, 140).

The fact that this remnant of hope rises from residues, from margins of the world subjected to a secularized (worldly) *nomos* is the suggestion I have wished to convey and elaborate on through Paul Auster’s pages: or rather, to collect “the smallest, most specific images in a kind of languorous incantation” (Auster 1997, 110). Hence, the ashes of Cyrano’s works could still give rise to that remnant of Utopia that salvation still lacks.

At times even names – that which remains of the lost identities of residual men in the desecrated city, who almost invited to attend their own funeral (93) – can unveil this transformation of death into new life, of the nullifying death into resurrection, of the ironclad necessity of *nomos basileus* into the spirit of Utopia.

The palindromes, seized by the dyslexic Otto Frick, prefigure this conversion that has something of miraculous in it: the estranged and alienated wits of the chauffeur of the Woburn House – organized in certain centers of assistance, which exactly due to their fleeting character avoid the urban *nomos*, thus offering help to the



outcasts – grasp a residual sense in the semantic jumps and in the gaps between words, a sense that unhinges the mythical structures of language and the prevailing logic. It is indeed the mad, who in no way thinks and acts in conformity with *nomos*, who is able to grasp “between each word” (38) and in the silences of logos, that marginal and subversive sense that risks to be lost. In Auster’s novel, a real imperative ethic is hidden in Otto Frik’s name; ought to freak, or rather: I ought to become alienated, reach madness to save myself, liberate myself from *nomos*, rid myself of every necessity.

My name is Otto. It go back and forth the same. It don’t end nowhere but begin again. I get to live twice that way, twice as long as no one else. You be named the same as me. A-n-n-a. Back and forth the same, just like Otto myself. [...] You was dead, and I seed you get born again with my own eyes. (120)

This could be defined, in an entirely Benjaminian sense, as “against the grain” reading of the hierarchical and oppressive urban fabric, starting from the rubbles of the existent, from the fragments of words, thus liberating hope from the steel cage of *ananke*. Such is, said in Calvino’s words (I’m referring now to “Multiplicity,” the last of the aforementioned *Six Memos*), the immense objective that literature – and why not, philosophy too – must set for itself: “The sudden nimble leap of the poet/philosopher who lifts himself against the weight of the world, proving that its heaviness contains the secret of lightness” (Calvino 1993,14).

This attention to the residual corresponds perhaps to that *philosophie portative* that – as recommended by Valéry in *Carnet XXIV*, 713 – has to be carried by man in his *démarche saccadée* among the wrecks of history and the ruins of our normative world: in favor of a “cumulative, modular, combinatorial structure” of thought from which bursts forth, as if by magic, a new typography of meaning – as though fragments and details of a new scene that surface from a rotting world; ruins, Vico would say, neat, composed, and located in their places, so that from them may rise a new illumination of meaning, capable of liberating philosophy for new and ambitious possibilities of thought.

That is, after all, not different from what Don DeLillo, before the “world of ash and near night” (35) brought about by the collapse of the Twin Towers, has called the ideal of “counternarratives:” its duty is to save the human beauty from “the crush of meshed steel” of the ruins of the skyscrapers – compared to “almost Roman, I-beams for stonework, but not nearly so salvageable” (37) hence giving meaning to that “emptiness that screams,” to that accumulation of piled rubbish on streets which is the remnant of Ground Zero: “There stands the smoky remnant of filigree [offered by the only surviving pylon] that marks the last tall thing, the last sign in the mire of wreckage that there were towers here that dominated the skyline for over a quarter of a century” (38); from this wreck, symbol of “history” that “is turned on end” (40) one has to outline the threads of a new narrative, supporting an art – thus writes Auster in the novel – of “conscientious mending,” (170) that would save the savable (152).

Said in the form of an exhortative motto: we need to allegorize the urban wastelands to reach the – always residual – beyond of that which remains of meaning, that which remains of salvation. The last road of the postmodern pilgrim passes exactly through the wreckage of our urban necropolises, oppressed by deposits of garbage like unsuspected and virtual repositories of the fragments of our collective desire: the Utopia of a happiness that has always been possible, and yet, constantly betrayed.

Garbage, considered as waste, is not predictable; it is the non-appropriable par excellence and, hence, cannot be eluded in its subversive importance; it breaks up the preconceived image of the given world by advancing a supply of lost meaning that has not had any space in the horizon of meaning instituted by *nomos*; in such a way, it is also the bearer of Utopia. The project of a happy – but constantly disregarded – life, which our society (sure of representing incarnation with no residues of meaning) has not been able to voice, crystallizes in residuality.

Just as all leftovers are the image of an abundant and not entirely consumed meal, the waste of an object of consumption (the merchandise) is the unveiling of a semi-appeased society that has never been able to enjoy its goods all the way through: almost an image of a world of dreams that reawakens only through its nightmares. The nightmare, that is, of having transformed paradise on earth – forever co-desired, evoked through the phantasmagorical production of goods – into the obscure steel cage of our society, to which the



waste-byproduct collected from urban landfills has always been a counterpart. From this evacuated and marginal world, by which (as DeLillo's *Underworld* points out) civilization is by now besieged, we need to start again in order to draw from the Utopian potential (the true image of a happy society) virtually included in and yet always betrayed by the objects of consumption and the blasphemous phantasmagoria of goods. In this world full of misery, as Aby Warburg loved to say, "the good Lord is in the details;" or as P.K. Dick also expressed it,

The true God mimics the universe, the very region he has invaded: he takes on the likeness of sticks and trees and beer cans in gutters – he presumes to be trash discarded, debris no longer noticed. Lurking, the true God literally ambushes reality and us as well. God [...] attacks and injures us in his role as antidote [...] like a seed, lies concealed within the irrational bulk. (2011, 74)

Once again garbage (the alienation of man, the excrement of the productive process, yet autonomous from every functional context) remains the last and residual theological reality to be thought in philosophy. By eluding every dialectic of recognition (self-certification, appropriation of the already known and its insertion into various mythical and hierarchical structures of meaning, which always aim at the repressive reconstitution of that totality that, subjected to *nomos*, is constitutive of the technocratic and "opulent society"), it becomes irrepressible image of the collective desire: desire for happiness, for a different world forever possible and yet constantly removed and betrayed.

The landfill, in accordance with *Intercenale IV 1* ("Somnium") by Leon Battista Alberti, is similar to that place where souls go in dreams (once again the moon), where "everyone is free to be delirious as he pleases" taking possession of his past in a new way: it is the valley where "lost things are kept," where all forgotten, obsolete, removed, and lost objects lie, from which once again radiates the promise of a happiness that was never given, and yet concerns us in its value (Alberti 1998, 77) as a remote Utopia (or a past future).

There, writes Alberti, "you find everything that has been abandoned: In the midst of those fields there lie the ancient states of those nations about which we read, as well as honors, benefices, loves, wealth, and similar things that, once lost, will never come back." (78) But not only: near the valley where all that has been neglected and waned is gathered, there is another mountain "inside which boil, in a cauldron, all things desired and hoped for; it is surrounded by the vows and the prayers offered by the men to the gods" to which a fountain "fed by the tears of the unhappy and the unlucky" (79) is a counterpart. Now, Lepido concludes retorting to Libripeta (the bibliophile, the learned), in this single journey among the waste and the ever-being of our past life, "I have learned more philosophy [...] that in all the years spent in your immense closed library" (80).

The National Library, in Auster's novel, goes up in smoke, and so does that of the Woburne house: in the nostalgic contemplation of its ashes, infinitesimal residue of knowledge (constitutive of the *humanitas* of man), one might still continue to hope in that "absolute rising up out of nothingness" (Auster 1997, 126) – from the almost-nothing of the remnant of reality – which is like the last word uttered by Anna Blume: similar to the clouds of smoke of the cigarettes smoked by Anna and Sam lying in bed at night, the last residues of humanistic culture and scientific knowledge, confined in burnt books, spreads in thin clouds that, in the end, hovering in the air, "drifting across the moon, the tiny stars" (109) waiting for a new day, or at least, "for the chance to live one more day. This is Anna Blume, your old friend from another world. – thus, the novel ends – "once we get to where we are going, I will try to write to you again, I promise" (188). This tenuous promise, like the thin and blue cigarette smoke that wafts in the air, belongs (like the hope entrusted to the illustrated Don Quixote together with the works of Schopenhauer, the last of Doctor Woburne's books to go up in smoke) to those phenomena of "beautiful transience" (110) that, piercing the sublunary sky ruled by the rocklike *ananke*, caresses, at last, the sky, the moon, and the stars.

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