

## The Incarnation of the Existential Self within the Realm of Language in Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things*.

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### Abstract:

This paper aims at studying Paul Auster's appropriation of the Heideggerian existential discourse in *In the Country of Last Things*. It endeavors to prove the influence that Heidegger's perception of the essence of human existence exerts on Auster's vision of the concept. The study elucidates the way Auster exposes man's quest for survival as a way to fulfill the possibilities of his existence. It is an attempt to prove that Auster relies on the Heideggerian discourse to incarnate the existential self within the realm of language. For the purpose at hand, more emphasis will be laid on the examination of the Austerian adaption of the concept of language to reveal the presence of the protagonist-Anna- between the words of her letter.

**Keywords:** Heideggerian discourse; possibilities of existence; incarnate; existential self; language.

### INTRODUCTION

Being or nonbeing is the main philosophical problem that dominates Auster's oeuvres. His concern with the essence of human existence leads critics to associate his literary production with the existential discourse. Auster's protagonists are a mere reflection of his worldview. Accordingly, Anna Blume, the central character of *In the Country of Last Things*, epitomizes his existential outlook. Moreover, the dystopian apocalyptic setting of the novel imposes issues such as the absurdity of life and man's position in the world to be central

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themes in the work. In this regard, survival becomes the victory of the fittest in a wasteland where everything evaporates in a blink of an eye even language. Therefore, words lose their signifiers in the decaying world of Anna, then the signified vanishes through time from the inhabitants' minds. Subsequently, the question of survival concerns not only man, but also his language since it constitutes his Being.

The conceptual bounds between the Heideggerian discourse and Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* have been targeted by a few critics who attempt to trace mainly the affinities that exist between Heidegger's existential-ontology and Auster's vision of the world in his 1987 novel. Likewise, Noorbakhsh Hooti, Nasser Maleki, and Mohammad-Javad Haj'jari innovatively analyze Heidegger's notion of "Dasein" in their *Dasein's "Potentiality-For-Being" in a Wasteland: The Case of Auster's In the Country of Last Things*. They offer a Heideggerian reading of the Austrian novel by highlighting the similarities between the notion of Dasein and the speculative world of Auster. Similarly, Maya Merlob's *Textuality, Self, and Words: The Postmodern Narrative in Paul Auster's In the Country of Last Things* analyzes Auster's narrative strategies that are used to picture man's inability to decipher the chaos of the postmodern era. Merlob's study and even Daniele Fargione's *Words and/as Waste in Paul Auster's In the Country of Last Things* declare that, through his work, Auster tests the adequacy of language in coping with the postmodern reality. Hence, all the attempts realized in the field of Auster's language in *In the Country of Last Things* are handled from the postmodern perspective. Though Hooti, Maleki, and Haj'jari attempt to read the novel through the lens of Heidegger's discourse, language is never considered as one of the possibilities of Dasein's being. In other words, they emphasize the notion of Dasein while neglecting the concept of language which Martin Heidegger, especially in his later works, considers as inseparable from the main issue of Being. So, the present article targets the issue of language in *In the Country of Last Things* from the Heideggerian perspective in order to demonstrate the incarnation of the existential self within the realm of language.

Since the backbone of the current paper is Martin Heidegger's existential ontology and due to Auster's keen interest in human existence; analyzing the author's attempt to incarnate the existential

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self within the words of his character in *In the Country of Last Things* implies a careful examination of the link between man's fulfillment of the possibilities of Being and language. Dasein, or what it is used to mean "man's existence", is related to man's realization of the possibilities of being that he can fulfill in his life while maintaining the facticity of death. This means that Dasein can realize itself in terms of the possibilities he chooses and it is related to the whole process of a constant orientation toward a mode of being. However, the later works of Martin Heidegger reveal more interest in approaching Being through language or what he refers to as "discourse" (Iwuagwu, 2017, p. 26). He stands on the opposing stream of the traditional Aristotelian conception of language offering "an existential-ontological perspective" (Gupta, 2017, p. 66). Accordingly, he rejects the mediatory function of language equating it to Being. Hence, his main concern is not language as a sign system and a linguistic unit, but the way man's use of language constitutes his existence (Gupta, 2017, p. 65). Man feels his existence through language; it provides him with the space where to manifest his existence. It is simply "the house of being"; the room where man dwells.

Hence, the purpose of this article is not only to trace the conceptual bounds between Heidegger's discourse and Auster's novel, but it also attempts to prove that he relies on the Heideggerian conception of human existence in the incarnation of the existential self of his main character- Anna Blume- within the words of her letter. For the purpose at hand, more emphasis will be laid on demonstrating Anna's struggle for survival as a form of fulfillment of the possibilities of her existence including the linguistic sphere.

### **1. Chasing the Possibilities of Being in Auster's Apocalyptic Land**

Auster's examination of the concept of thrownness is evident through his selection of the dystopian apocalyptic mode that serves the themes of survival and struggle against the external environment to identify one's place in the world. Auster's post-modern man is burdened by existential crises that have left little space for hope for the future. The residents of this country are dying if not by hunger,

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their true human self-fades among the vanishing components of their world. The protagonist- Anna- is flung into existence; is cast to be a part of a society where death is the faithful comrade to its days and nights. Therefore, she is trapped into existence and “is veiled in its whence and whither, yet disclosed in itself all the more unveiledly; we call it the ‘thrownness’ of this entity into its ‘there’; indeed, it is thrown in such a way that, as being in the world, it is ‘there.’ The expression ‘thrownness’ is meant to suggest the facticity of its being delivered over” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 174). Hence, Anna is thrown into a wasteland to test her coping strategies with the new environment she dwells.

Anna Blume finds herself drowning in the mud of despair among the inauthentic beings while searching for her brother. Her desire for survival is empowered after all by the human instinct to live. Hence, we see that the character adapts herself to the reality she is part of by first, realizing the dynamics of the world around her. Later, she learns to read the signs as the first step toward survival in a society where things evaporate in a blink of an eye. She discovers the way to communicate with the universe which responds in cipher “you must learn how to read the signs [...] The signs are unmistakable, even the forewarning hints” (Auster , 1988, pp. 12-15). Her life in “the land of sadness” makes her watchful for any slight changes that occur around her and require her eyes to “be constantly open, looking up, looking down, looking ahead, looking behind [...] on your guard against the unforeseeable” (Auster, 1988, p. 11). This readiness for any possibility constitutes the essence of her coping strategies in the wasteland. It, therefore, teaches her to expect everything and live her life in its minimal form. Similarly, Anna says:

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. It turns your thoughts inside out. It makes you want to live, and at the same time, it tries to take your life away from you. There is no escape from this. Either you do or you don't. And if you do, you can't be sure of doing it the next time. And if you don't, you never will again. (Auster, 1988, p. 10)

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This poetic description of the minimalist form of life equates it to a victory where man's existence is always at stake; a victory to be won or lost. Moreover, one's survival primarily depends on his coping strategies. In this wasteland, Anna endures all sorts of pain even hunger, then creates her own philosophy in life; to be a minimalist in a world that offers none. Hence, she understands that a man's satisfaction with the sum he gains determines his survival in such an environment. Therefore, Anna's minimalist attitudes flawlessly picture Paul Auster's adaption of Heidegger's notion of "givens" which refrains man from achieving his authentic existence. Thus, she succeeds to overcome her hunger -as one of the givens- in pursuit of authenticity. In this regard, she stands on the opposing stream of the city dwellers who are trapped in an inauthentic existence as the following excerpt indicates:

The ones who fight their hunger [...] These are the ones who are obsessed, who refuse to give in to the facts. [...] They eat without ever filling themselves, tearing into their food with animal haste, [...] and what they manage to swallow, they usually throw up again in a few minutes. It is a slow death; as if food were a fire, a madness, burning them up from within. They think they are eating to stay alive, but in the end, they are the ones who are eaten. (Auster , 1988, p. 10)

Auster reveals the other side of reality where the unauthentic beings fail to overcome their givens and are not even conscious of the unauthenticity of their existence since they "think they are eating to stay alive, but in the end, they are the ones who are eaten". Anna Blume opposes this inauthenticity by choosing a different path. Auster goes to the extreme with his protagonist in the exploration of the living possibilities the character is required to fulfill. Her passion for life makes her ready to give up on the most precious things to remain alive. Similarly, Anna decides to disguise herself as a man and sacrifice her hair for the sake of survival as she writes "The first thing to go was my hair—and that was an awful business. It was all I could do not to burst into tears, and with Isabel snipping away at me, telling me to be brave," (Auster , 1988, p. 44). She, thus, realizes that life is brutal in such a country and that the human soul is man's treasure even if it costs her the loss of her old self. In other words, Anna's

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fulfillment of the possibilities of being leads her to the abandonment of the character traits she used to possess then moves to a new adventure. She turns her back to “the givens” of her existence – sex, identity, and biological needs- in a quest for an authentic existence.

Survival in the apocalyptic city of Anna requires certain strategies to cope with the specificities of life there. Likewise, scavenging is one of the possibilities Anna goes for to fulfill her needs:

The essential thing is to survive. If you mean to last here, you must have a way of earning money, and yet there are few jobs left in the old sense of the word. [...] Scavenging is the most common solution. This is the job for people with no job, [...] I did it myself for a while, and the facts are very simple: once you begin, it is nearly impossible to stop. (Auster , 1988, p. 27)

The game of survival requires a skilled fighter who knows how to select the winning card in order to tip the scales in his favor. So, earning money through scavenging is one way to fight the apocalypse and assure her existence.

Dasein is defined by Heidegger as a passage to death through which man is required to manifest his Being from birth to death. The latter is the only possibility that cannot be overcome by Dasein. However, this never means that man surrenders to inauthenticity by committing suicide for instance. Since death is a key concept in the Heideggerian discourse, Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* perfectly exemplifies this notion. Auster exposes different kinds of death that roam the city streets. Initially, “the death race” is the choice of the runners who train themselves to run until they breathlessly die. Additionally, “solitary deaths” which become a public ritual, are done in groups. These people decide “to climb to the highest places for no other reason than to jump. The Last Leap, it is called” (Auster , 1988, p. 16). However, the other category of death is ironically described as “happy death”, and is left for the starving people who undergo death talks to metaphysically satisfy their hunger. Whereas, the “paid deaths” are meant for those who can pay the “Euthanasia Clinics” to kill them. These types of death are the inauthentic people coping strategies. Still, this inauthenticity of the *others* throws the seeds of doubt in Anna's self which were later eradicated by the hope

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enlightened after her companionship with Isabel. Anna rejuvenates the desire to struggle against all the outer forces to test her survival possibilities when she comments on her living reality “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 , 1988, p. 25). Afterward, she criticizes the people’s openness to death as the only feasible possibility to face the meaninglessness of their lives comparing them to herself when she says “But finally, I cannot let myself go. I will not allow it. I am going to hold on for as long as I can” (Auster , 1988, p. 15). Hence, this juxtaposition that Auster establishes between Anna’s rejection of death and the nihilism of the city dwellers reveals her suffering of being surrounded by the inauthentic *shadows* while seeking authenticity.

The flame of hope in Anna’s heart enlightens her path as long as the possibility of a better future is still haunting her thinking. The novel is considered by Auster the most optimistic work he has ever written (Hooti Noorbakhsh, Kaleki Nasser and Haj’jari Mohammad-Javad, 2018, p. 175). Anna’s embryo is the first sign of hope in her life. Accordingly, a woman’s pregnancy has always been a symbol of change not only at the level of her inner self but the direction of her life will be altered as well. This is, literally, the case with Anna Blume who declares:

And little by little he soothed my doubts, got me to look at the pregnancy as a good omen. The child meant that we had been spared, he said. We had overturned the odds, and from now on everything would be different. By creating a child together, we had made it possible for a new world to begin. (Auster , 1988, p. 82)

So, the unborn baby is Anna’s good omen. Though the couple’s loss of the fetus results in Anna’s mental turmoil, her recovery keeps that flame of hope always on. She is unique in her fulfillment of the possibilities of her existence while she confesses that death is the culmination of all these possibilities. She fights until the last breath as she each time identifies a new path to take whenever the end waves

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“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 , 1988, p. 9). Eventually, Auster explores another form of existence in an attempt to confirm the incarnation of Anna’s self within her words: language.

### **2. The Incarnation of Anna’s Self within her Words**

The examination of Auster’s language leads us to think about a dual function he attributes to it. On the one hand, it is used to narrate the actual or more precisely the physical experience that Anna Blume undergoes in the city of the last things ( Merlob, 2007, p. 39). On the other, Anna as a reporter of her story about life in that city; puts into language her own experience with language itself. In other words, Anna stands for the poet, or the artist in more general terms, whom Heidegger considers as the one who has the ability to put into language the experience he undergoes with language” When the poet incarnates Being within the word, Being therein appears in its fresh and vital creation” (Heidegger, as cited in Sefler, , 1974, pp. 152-153)

Paul Auster relies on the Heideggerian conception of language in an attempt to formulate a consistent process of self-incarnation of his novel’s main character in an apocalyptic absurd world. Likewise, Anna, who went to a decaying city for the sake of finding her brother William, is urged by an ardent desire to write her experience to an anonymous addressee frequently referred to as” you”. Anna says “I am writing to you because you know nothing. Because you are far away from me and know nothing.” (Auster , 1988, p. 10). Thus, the letter she writes to her addressee is not only a report of life in the fantastic city she dwells in; but also a way to manifest her existence which is lost and will never be identified in the material world. This interpretation is proved through Isabel’s advice to Anna:

That was a danger Isabel warned me against many times. Never think about anything, she said. Just melt into the street and pretend your body doesn’t exist. No musings; no sadness or happiness; no anything but the street, all empty inside, concentrating only on the next step you are about to take. Of all the advice she gave me, it was the one thing I ever understood. (Auster , 1988, p. 43)



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In other words, human existence will vanish like all the other world's components which are disappearing day by day. So, writing is one possibility for Anna, a space where her Being is epitomized between the lines of her letter. In other words, language provides her with the shelter where her Being is revealed. It is, literally, what Heidegger describes as "the house of Being". Hence, Anna in her quest for an authentic existence and struggle for survival turns her intention to language as a new possibility of Being since language constitutes our existence.

Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* proves his influence by the existential-ontological perspective of language. His use of language detaches him from the unitary mediatory function of language. Besides, Auster equips Anna with the power of words in order to give her a chance to manifest her self in a new dwelling. In this regard, Maya Merlob in her post-modern reading of Auster's textuality suggests that Anna's language becomes self-referential. This means that it "refuses to point toward its externality" (Merlob, 2007, p. 40). Language is, however, liberated from the signified-signifier relationship which has dominated the world perception for decades. So, Auster in his novel decides to free language from that enclosed space where it used to dwell. Furthermore, he established a unique relationship between his characters and words as the following quotation indicates "Words be what tells me how to know" (Auster, 1988, p. 92). These words echo Heidegger's slogan "language speaks". Heidegger believes that language speaks and man's utterances are merely a response to the language he receives. For him Being-existence- is language, and listening to language is listening to the voice of Being. Accordingly, Being is revealed to man through language (Gupta, 2017, p. 66). This is, in fact, the case with the quote stated above. Thus, Auster agrees with what Heidegger theorizes. His characters respond to "the voice of being" in words (Heidegger M. T., 1971, p. 7)

Anna Blume's desire to write her experience in the wasteland is out of her realization that writing or language is the most authentic form of existence that deserves to be pursued. After she spends some time in the city, she masters the dynamics of the environment around her. Thus, she becomes able to judge which space to trust the most.

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Hence, Auster goes through a whole process that was already mapped by Heidegger in order to test the best way to approach human existence to, eventually, declare the incarnation of the existential self within language. Therefore, Anna Blume decides to undergo an experience with language and to inhabit that neighborhood through writing. Anna is represented as the servant of the words which they come effortlessly; she simply listens to the voice of Being which is language as Heidegger says. To further illustrate this perception, we state the following words of Anna:

Bear with me. I know that I sometimes stray from the point, but unless I write down things as they occur to me, I feel I will lose them for good. [...] and to follow even the simplest thought very far exhausts me. This is how it begins, then, in spite of my efforts. The words come only when I think I won't be able to find them anymore, at the moment I despair of ever bringing them out again. Each day brings the same struggle, the same blankness, the same desire to forget and then not to forget. When it begins, it is never anywhere but here, never anywhere but at this limit that the pencil begins to write. The story starts and stops, goes forward, and then loses itself, and between each word. (Auster , 1988, p. 31)

Anna's language is private and devoid of its mediatory function ( Merlob, 2007, p. 41). Her intention is directed toward the preservation of the experience she undergoes with language rather than being understood by her addressee ( Merlob, 2007, p. 41). Her writing is a response to the voice of Being which is in control of her thought. In the last two sentences "When it begins, it is never anywhere but here, never anywhere but at this limit that the pencil begins to write. The story starts and stops, goes forward and then loses itself, and between each word" echo Heidegger's slogan "language speaks" not man. Anna's inner struggle with words stands for the existential dilemma that man suffers from birth to death. It is, however, described by Martin Heidegger as the "everydayness" that man faces in his existential journey. Her language is a manifestation of her self which is deprived of its right to exist in the apocalyptic absurd world.

Paul Auster presents a juxtaposition of Anna's antithesis; Samuel Farr, and his book. Firstly, Sam's primary mission in the decaying city

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is to write a coherent report about the catastrophe in that country. So, Sam's writing is like a documentary about life in that strange land that has to be understood by people in the other world. Moreover, the objectivity of the language of his work leads to the withdrawal of the self in writing ( **Merlob, 2007, p. 41**). In other words, his reproduction of other people's experiences in an objective language refrains him from putting into a language his own experience with language itself. Besides, Sam's language reveals the disintegration of the self and its inability to offer a new space for him since it "prompts the death of the subject [...] without the ability to resurrect it or change it" ( **Merlob, 2007, p. 41**). Auster criticizes the traditional conception of language through Sam and his failure to accomplish his mission or to create from his writing the space to inhabit. In a similar vein, the scene which demonstrates the burning of Sam's book and the library that contains it, best illustrates this interpretation ( **Merlob, 2007, p. 41**). Hence, the damage of Sam's book symbolizes the inadequacy of the old view of language to cope with man's existential dilemma in the postmodern era.

In opposition to Sam's book, the analysis of Anna Blume's writing reveals several affinities between Auster's perception of language and Heidegger's vision of the concept. Besides, Anna's writing stands for a new type of language that manifests her existence within her words. In order to prove this viewpoint, we need to consider the view that man -Dasein- is the only entity that has the ability to understand the complex relationship that results from using other beings to manifest his own existence and help these entities to come into existence (**Hooti et al, 2018, p. 160**). This means that Dasein discovers the "serviceability" of the *others* who are present with him in the world in his quest for authenticity. So, Anna discovers the serviceability of writing to co-exist as long as language survives. Writing becomes a new possibility for existence. Since her city is characterized by the disappearance of all the components of its reality and life signs even the signifiers of words in the material world follow the norms of the city as the following excerpt indicates:

How can you talk to someone about airplanes, for example, if that person doesn't know what an airplane is? [...] Words tend to last a bit longer than things, but eventually, they fade too, along with

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the pictures they once evoked. Entire categories of objects disappear [...] and for a time you will be able to recognize those words, even if you cannot recall what they mean. [...] In effect, each person is speaking his own private language, and as the instances of shared understanding diminish, it becomes increasingly difficult to, communicate with anyone. (Auster , 1988, pp. 62-63)

With Anna the case is different; her ability to comprehend the situation around her leads her to writing; the new dwelling where her Being is incarnated within her words. In her private universe, Anna's existence reveals itself in her private language which survives regardless of all the changes around her. This survival is proved through the promise to write again which appears at the end of her letter "This is Anna Blume, your old friend from another world. Once we get to where we are going, I will try to write to you again, I promise" (Auster , 1988, p. 125). This openness for the future suggests the survival of her language; a vision which Auster himself supports. He declares that "Anna Blume survives, at least to the extent that her words survive. [...] I think Anna Blume as true heroine" (Auster as cited in Hooti, Noorbakhsh, Kaleki, Nasser and Haj'jari, Mohammad-Javad, 2018). Even Auster's words suggest that the survival of the language is linked to the physical survival of the character herself. Thus, the survival of Anna's private language divulges the survival of her self that continues to exist as long as it inhabits that new sphere of existence.

### CONCLUSION

The present work offers a Heideggerian reading of Auster's apocalyptic work *In the Country of Last Things*. It is an attempt to demonstrate the conceptual bounds that exist between Martin Heidegger's discourse and Paul Auster's novel. The close reading reveals several affinities that exist between Heidegger's notion of language and Auster's appropriation of these philosophical ideas in his novel. Anna's existence reveals itself in the private language of her letter which survives regardless of all the changes that take place in the city of last things. Thus, this enigmatic survival of Anna's words leads us to suggest that her language proves that the world which can never be made right again, can only be occupied linguistically. Hence,

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Auster's protagonist succeeds to approach an authentic existence through her words and creates a new dwelling for herself.

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