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LITERATURE

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How Far From a 19th Century Flâneur? A Female Urban Walker in Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things*

Abstract. This research paper is going to revolve around Paul Auster's urban dystopia entitled *In the Country of Last Things*. Yet, my claim is that the novel may also be categorised as an American city novel in which a flâneuristic account plays a significant role. The focal point of the paper is going to be the comparison between the Austerian figure of the urban stroller with a traditional one as developed in the 19th century Paris. Since there have been numerous transformations and reformulations regarding literary representations of the city walker, I shall examine the protagonist Anna Blume in reference to features characteristic of a traditional, 19th century urban stroller. Some theorists claim that women cannot be regarded as city walkers; nevertheless, the aim of the research paper is to prove that Anna, although a female character, can be considered as a postmodern variation of the flâneur.

Auster's fictional world might be compared to Lewis Mumford's "theater of social action"[1] where the inhabitants' quotidian drama is staged. This urban theater functions A fertile ground for city walker's observations, investigations, as well as subsequent artistic productions. A traditional flâneur is characterised as an aimless stroller for whom the very act of the 'inspection' of the crowd is a source of leisure. However, his desire is not only to experience the surroundings, but also to observe the physical construction of the city as well as its social dimension – the people around. Taking into consideration the very specificity of the flâneuristic figure, Anna Blume, despite representing the female part of society, can be regarded as a postmodern urban stroller since her only means of discovering and 'learning' the space is by walking in the city. Hence, the character created by Auster both diverges from the conventional image of the city walker in terms of characteristic features and is consistent with it when the scope of the flâneur's activities is considered.

Keywords: Auster, flâneur, postmodernism, flâneuse, women, tradition, city walk

[1] Mumford, Lewis. "What Is a City?" In LeGates Richard and Frederic Stout, *The City Reader*. London: Routledge, 2011. 91–95.

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Introduction

"With the publication of his first novel *City of Glass*, Paul Auster was hailed as the latest in a series of American authors who could be labeled 'postmodernist'" (1), argues Martin Brendan (2007) in his seminal book on Auster's literary works. Indeed, his consecutive works of fiction share some fundamental features of literary postmodernism, such as complex temporal relations, a pervasive presence of pure chance that determines the action, the indeterminate relation between the author and the character, or the turn from epistemological to ontological problems, among others. Yet, Auster is also famous for his authorial dialogue with generic traditions since he plays with genres such as detective fiction, road narratives, or a city novel. The latter generic convention represented by *In the Country of Last Things* (1987) is the central focus of this research paper.

The most frequent spatio-temporal continuum that the author applies in his fiction seems to be a city which functions as the universe for the individuals who are "blinkered, and [their] indifference and corresponding apathy result in estranged isolation" (Brendan 2007, 27) from the surrounding world. Usually suffering from loneliness or lack of understanding from the closest relatives, and doubting whether any stable truth exists, these individuals resemble characters lost in the postmodern world of dislocation, intellectual doubts, and multiple truths. Although they still remain a part of the social crowd, his protagonists alienate themselves from society. Such alienation is usually experienced when a character is hit by a personal crisis or has a certain mission to complete while walking along the city streets, as is in the case with the protagonists of *The New York Trilogy* (1987) or *In the Country of Last Things* (1987). Therefore, it is a critical situation, not pure leisure, as in the case of a traditional stroller, that drives a character to investigate urban space. As I shall argue based on the figure of flâneurs from the 19th century, in their specificity, Austerian individuals resemble traditional city walkers since they both belong to the crowd and are separate from it as they panoptically observe society and the surroundings. Still, in comparison to these strollers, as the paper is going to prove, Auster's characters' walks are far from being recreative and pleasurable in their nature.

Contrary to the urban stroller from the 19th century Paris that was portrayed, for instance, by Charles Baudelaire, Austerian protagonists act not only as observers, but also have obligations to fulfil, and these aims are usually imposed by their personal impulses or motives. The goals, which in many cases result from totally random occurrences, force the protagonists to investigate the social dimension of the surroundings. In *The New York Trilogy*, the characters are focused on achieving particular aims which involve walking through the city and making observations. At the very beginning they seem to be only detective investigations, yet with time they transform into quests for identity. Hence, *The Trilogy* features a flâneur who recurs in Auster's other

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works, so distant from the traditional one. The novels no longer portray aimless and leisurely walks of urban strollers; rather, the very act of walking is strongly directed at urban investigations, seeking clues and accomplishing tasks. Although a city walker with an added mission is not Auster's invention, since it is a defining feature of the contemporary flâneur, the author seems exceptional in his emphasis on the issues of identity and urban dislocation raised in the context of a city stroll.

In the Country of Last Things also features an urban stroller who investigates urban space during her journey. Anna Blume, the protagonist, sets forth to a dystopian city of chaos and pervasive dilapidation to find her missing brother, William. During her journey through the surroundings, Blume is confronted with reality reaching far beyond her empirical experience. Yet, as time progresses, Anna 'learns' the city, its rules and laws; however, her path is not without obstacles. Written in a form of a letter to a childhood friend, her flâneuristic account of urban experiences reveals a vision of a repellent metropolis where inhuman and deplorable conditions are met on a daily basis. My claim is that even though the protagonist is a female character and her flânerie does not resemble the traditional one, Anna meets all the responsibilities that, according to Carlo Salzani, an urban stroller should undertake.

The origins of a flâneur

In "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863), Baudelaire describes the figure of an urban observer – a solitary stroller traversing city space who, at the same time, remains a part of the crowd:

> The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world—impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito (1964, 9).

An ideal flâneur's desire is to become united with the crowd, the element which gives meaning to his life; as such, he is a member of the multitude, feeling at home amongst others. At the same time, however, the stroller remains a separate individual who panoptically observes the passers-by like a camouflaged detective hidden behind the mask of an average representative of society. It is his inconspicuousness that enables him to do so and, at the same time, keep up the appearances of being an ordinary urbanite who fits into the crowd.

While examining the historical beginnings of the concept of the flâneur before the 19th century, one can find some early sparse references to the term in the works

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of, for instance, a French literary critic, Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, or a novelist Honoré de Balzac. Yet, the traditional figure of an urban observer as known nowadays originated in the work of Edgar Allan Poe entitled *The Man of the Crowd* (1840) and the works, especially poetry, of Charles Baudelaire. Poe's text was discussed at length in reference to flâneur in Baudelaire's "The Painter of Modern Life" as well as by Walter Benjamin (1940) in his "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", which substantially contributed to the theorisation of the concept. However, some academics claim that Baudelaire's and Benjamin's contributions are usually overestimated since the urban wanderer had appeared in literature long before his presumptive rise in popularity in the 1830s Paris. In *The Spectator and the City in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (1991), Dana Brand, referring to the very process of city strolling, maintains that:

> [b]y the early nineteenth century, this process was far more advanced, as well as far more geographically widespread than Benjamin represents. The manners and strategies Benjamin associates with the flâneur may be found throughout the literature of Europe long before the late 1830s. Despite the lack of a widely current English word for him, the flâneur is as English a phenomenon as he is a French one, and it was primarily from England that he was imported to America (13).

The flâneur as a phenomenon might have reached the peak of his popularity in 19th century Paris, as Benjamin argues, nonetheless, according to Brand, his reach was not limited to France at that time. Hence, Benjamin's findings cannot be cutting-edge since the urban stroller as a concept had existed in literature long before. Presumably, his very beginnings can be observed "in the culture of spectacle that developed in London during its first period of extraordinary growth, in the sixteenth century" (Brand 1991, 14). According to Brand, it was the lack of proper English nomenclature that resulted in crediting France with originating the figure of the city observer. In support of her claim, Brand enumerates various literary genres that relied on the chronotope of the city and attached great significance to the detailed and extensive representation of life in London, such as urban panoramas or coney-catching books. These generic conventions focused mainly on seeking the sense of the 'urban spectacle' by means of close observations of the space and its inhabitants.

In her seminal book entitled *The Flâneur* (2015), Keith Tester also raises the subject of the urban walker's origins, yet, she does not reject the French substantial contribution to the creation of the city stroller in maintaining that:

> [o]n the one hand, there seems to be little doubt that the flâneur is specific to a Parisian time and place. On the other hand, the flâneur is used as a figure to illuminate issues of city life irrespective of time and place (16).

It cannot be denied that the stroller's urban observations and investigations provide rich material regarding metropolitan life, so promising in literary analysis. It does not

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matter whether the semiotic space is a fictional representation of a real city or an imaginary realm, whether the temporal dimensions are limited to the 19th century Paris or whether the action is set in a contemporary or a future world. The flâneur's account always offers the reader a broad picture of the surroundings and individuals embedded in them, regardless of the spatio-temporal conditions present in the works. Even if the figure of the urban walker had been present in literary contexts before the 1830s, as Brand and Tester argue, and his origins stem from English genres whose focal point was the representation of urban space, the importance of Benjamin's contribution cannot be discarded. The city walker as both belonging to the 1830s Paris and, at the same time, as embodying a universal figure of an urban detective/investigator/observer is such a complex concept that it cannot be unequivocally traced through history and defined.

However thought-provoking and fruitful the discussion about the flâneur's roots may be, it does not constitute the core of this research paper. Hence, I shall now refer to the genre in which it plays a significant role, namely the American city novel, the generic category to which *In the Country of Last Things* may be ascribed. As Blanche Gelfant (1969) states, the intention of the genre is "to explore the city, to show what it is, what values it lives by, and what effect it has upon the individual's character and destiny" (8). The city as a physical space, its atmosphere, conditions, all the inhabitants as a crowd and each one separately, their lives and destinies – all these factors create a unique urban "theatre of social action." Therefore, the major concern of the city novel is to produce a literary representation of real or imaginary urban spaces by portraying significant aspects and constituents of the urban space.

Yet, the genre is not homogeneous, rather it functions as an umbrella term for three derivative subgenres – the 'synoptic study' which anthropomorphises the metropolis, the 'ecological' study which does not focus on the city in its totality, but only on its parts, and finally, the 'portrait study' in which the image of the city is revealed through a single protagonist's eyes. My claim is that the last form, while belonging "to the literary tradition of the novel of initiation" (1969, 11), as Gelfant argues, can also be associated with the figure of the flâneur due to the very specificity of the hero who experience**s** urban space.

However, it must be emphasised that in the case of the 'portrait study' mentioned by Gelfant, the narratives do not tend to introduce the wanderers who regard urban observations as a hobby and who stroll leisurely and aimlessly along the streets of the city. Traditional leisurely flâneurs are replaced with personas to some extent similar to the ones that are later used by Paul Auster. Protagonists tend to be rather young individuals who are usually newcomers to the city:

> [T]he novel is built upon a series of educating incidents in which the city impresses upon the hero its meanings, values, and manners. As the hero responds to the insistent pressures of city life, his character undergoes a change [...]. The change in character, as a younger person either suffers inner defeat, achieves material success, or arrives at social wisdom, reflects the personal impact of urbanism (Gelfant 1969, 11–12).

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Single events, usually of educational character, contribute to the character's perceptions and images of urban space. These occurrences assist a protagonist in recognizing the specificity of the city; however, the image is never complete or coherent. Space is often seen as incomprehensible and impossible to fully grasp and understand.

With time, changes occur in the character: personality and the psychological or ideological growth of a protagonist. This aspect of personal development is difficult to observe in the case of 1830s flâneurs. Additionally, French urban strollers are not likely to be newcomers whose urban experience is primarily directed at getting to know the space and learning from the surroundings, nor are they young people looking for stable coordinates in their lives. Nevertheless, traditional strollers do not undergo any dramatic metamorphoses since their only preoccupation is to investigate the crowd and the surroundings.

Then, taking into account the tenets of the discussed genre, *In the Country of Last Things* can be examined in terms of the 'portrait study' city novel category since the whole description of the physical space, the rules and relations, is provided solely by Anna Blume in her letter. With the construction of the protagonist in the 'portrait study' and its characteristic features, Anna meets all the terms of the typical heroine. She is a newcomer to an unnamed, dilapidated city and a rather naïve young woman who believes in her abilities. "I'm not a little girl" (Auster 1989, 49), asserts Anna when Bogat, the editor of her brother's newspaper wants to discourage her from the decision to set out on her journey. "I'm nineteen years old, and I can take care of myself better than you think" (Auster 1989, 49), she adds, unaware of the dangers that she will have to face soon. Yet, the situation that Blume encounters and all the "series of educating incidents" (Gelfant 1969, 11) result in the protagonist getting to know the rules governing the space and, in turn, contribute to her metamorphosis. There is no doubt that during her flâneuristic journey through the unfamiliar territory Anna experiences personal losses and her major goal, which is finding any traces of her missing brother, is not accomplished. However, she gains social and practical knowledge which is instrumental in keeping her alive in the oppressive world.

Anna Blume – still a flâneur?

Since the concept of the flâneur was extensively described by Walter Benjamin and then theorised, many critical works examining the figure in numerous contexts have been published. However, as I have pointed out before, in the analysis of Anna Blume as an urban stroller I will refer primarily to the traditional walker theorised in the 19th century. As Carlo Salzani (2009) states, the classical flâneur is "the solitary stroller, who aimlessly and leisurely wandered the city, making his occupation the observation of modern life" (41), and his flânerie constitutes "a kind of reading of the streets, in which human faces, shop fronts, shop windows, café terraces, street cars, automobiles and trees become a wealth of equally valid letters of the alphabet" (Hessel, qtd. in

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Salzani 2009, 40). Individuals who participate in the urban spectacle, architectural constituents, such as shops, vehicles, and buildings associated with leisure and functioning as the scenery, create a city narrative that is to be deciphered.

Hence, a flâneur appears not to be solely a recreational stroller deriving pleasure from observing the crowd. What constitutes the primary feature of the flâneur, as emphasized by Benjamin, Brand, Tester, or Salzani, is the purposelessness of their wanderings. At the same time, some contributors make a comparison between the urban wanderer and an artist who, by participation in the spectacle, construes a representation of modern life. David Frisby (2015) also inclines towards the interpretation of the flâneur as a kind of an artist – a producer of various texts, literary, illustrative (paintings), journalistic and so on (83). Still, others link a city walker to a detective. Rob Shields (2015) maintains that "the *flâneur* is like a detective seeking clues who reads people's characters not only from the physiognomy of their faces but via a social physiognomy of the streets" (63). Therefore, such claims create vagueness regarding the concept of the flaneur since the urban walker is assigned highly contrastive characteristics. He is a part of a society and someone well familiar with the crowd, and at the same time remains a dislocated stranger. It may seem that stroller's activities are of a contradictory nature – recreational and purposeless, yet, meaningful and functioning as a generative occupation of the producer/detective. David Frisby sheds some light on this paradox, arguing that in certain circumstances the stroller is involuntarily transformed into a detective; such situations are represented by various crises or moments of a government's oppression. These are the cases where the need for conspiracy or any hidden observations arises and, therefore, everyone is allowed to play the detective and "[t]his role is best achieved through strolling" (Frisby 2015, 91).

Although in Auster's novels diverse crises play a large part in turning the stroller into an urban private eye, they are not necessarily, as Frisby enumerates, of social and political character. In works in which the author makes great use of the concept of flâneur, such as *The New York Trilogy* or *In the Country of Last Things,* the protagonists – city walkers – are turned into detectives and commence investigations of the city due to their individual crises or experience of solitude or personal disintegration. Consequently, for Austerian characters, the flânerie is intrinsically combined with the acts of observation, detection and subsequent deduction. Additionally, the heroes are assigned tasks which make their wanderings purposeful activities devoid of recreational nature. Usually, these assignments are induced by contingent events. Daniel Quinn in *City of Glass* mourns the loss of his son and finds himself on the border of a personal crisis. An accidental call drives him to pretend to be a detective strolling along New York streets in order to protect his payer against his father. An unexpected message is also the reason why the unnamed narrator in *The Locked Room* sets out on a journey to unravel the mystery of his friend's disappearance. Again, due to his personal crisis as a writer, the protagonist "felt old, already used up. What [he] had done so far amounted to a mere fraction of nothing at all. It was so much dust, and the slightest wind would blow it away" (Auster 1988, 436), and that is why he commences his detective

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adventure with little hesitation. Anna Blume, on the other hand, makes the decision to engage in a detective endeavour on her own; in contrast to the previous novels, there is no contingent event that coerces her to do so. Still, it is dictated by her private crisis – the disappearance of her brother William.

Anna Blume's quest as a metropolitan flâneur – investigator, as I argued before, may be considered in terms of experiencing the city, as in conventional 'portrait study' American city novels. Like all the Austerian flâneurs-detectives, she deviates significantly from the traditional portrayal of the urban stroller since her depiction goes against almost every feature of 1830s Parisian figures. As a flâneur, Anna is a solitary traveller "abandoned in the crowd" (Benjamin 2006, 85), "a living guidebook" (Ferguson 2015, 31) whose account provides a concise introduction to the dystopian metropolis submerged in chaos. However, whereas for a traditional wanderer the crowd serves as the source of delight, Blume feels desperate, lost and dislocated in the multitude. The crowd, instead of providing her with pleasurable experiences, frightens her as it testifies to the decay of civilisation. Indeed, she is alone amongst the masses in an unfamiliar space and she does not feel comfortable in such a position. Her walks, similarly to the other Austerian protagonists,' are devoid of their leisurely and aimless character. The primary focus of Anna's journey is a semi-detective endeavour to find her lost brother. With time, it transforms into a struggle for survival in an unpredictable city and, therefore, the road through the urban space and the process of experiencing its territory cannot be regarded as a recreative activity.

In the case of *In the Country of Last Things* Auster decides to depart from the tradition by replacing the male figure with a female character. Taking into account the research into the concept of the flâneur and the act of flânerie in its traditional understanding, male urban strollers dominate. Salzani, for instance, openly opposes the existence of the female flâneur claiming that "women are left out of the picture and thus confined to invisibility" (38). He further explains that female protagonists are ruled out form the urban spectacle since "women are always only the object of the flâneur's gaze, they cannot join the observers, but are always the observed, an object of curiosity and admiration" (2009, 46). Such a state of affairs may arise from the traditional gender roles and the division of their culture-defined duties. Women were always attached to the domestic, private life and, as Salzani states, even objectified so as to serve as the ones to be looked at and cherished.

Tester points to another explanation why men are more often involved in flânerie than women. She argues that "[u]rban stories […] can be told only by those immune to the stress and the seductions of the city, who can turn those seductions to good account, that is, into a text" (2015, 28); as such she perceives sensibility as female ability that generally excludes her from flânerie. Females are regarded as more vulnerable to a possibly negative influence of the city, as well as dangers that can be encountered while indulging in city walks. Their susceptibility is regarded as a factor that may negatively affect the urban narrative. However, the female character created by Auster remains in strong opposition to that portrayal. Although at the very beginning of the

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story Anna is quite a naïve "playful little girl" (Auster 1989, 17), with time she transforms into what she calls "all common sense and hard-calculations" (Auster 1989, 18) since only these features are helpful in the city. Maintaining common sense helps her, to some extent, to distance herself from the city and, as a result, to produce her letter.

Nevertheless, even though men dominated public space of the city and were widely recognised as flâneurs, it would be incorrect to maintain that women were completely excluded from experiencing the metropolis on foot. In the face of social and cultural transformation occurring since modernism, some critical works on the female urban stroller, that give an insight into the development of the flâneuse, have also been published. Tester, for instance, provides an illustrative context in which it is feasible to talk about female flâneurs in reference to the traditional urban walker. As she explains, strolling along department stores since "shopping provided the possibility for women to wander the city alone" (2015, 124). As such, recreational walking along the streets in search of desired shops, or a hobbyist visiting of the stores, constituted a female, limited equivalent for a male flânerie in a much wider urban territory. However, Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (2015) disagrees that shopping could be regarded as a form of purposeless urban strolling since a woman "desires the objects spread before her and acts upon that desire. The flâneur, on the other hand, desires the city as a whole, not a particular part of it" (27). The very act of shopping, even if involving leisurely wanderings along the urban streets, is marked by a materialistic desire "which has nothing to do with the detached and aimless strolling of the flâneur" (Wolff 2015, 125).

As Elfriede Dreyer and Estelle McDowall (2012) point out, "even though flânerie is subject to certain universal experiences, the contemporary flâneur in the urban milieu is faced with additional and unique challenges and experiences, and has been reimagined in terms of its gender" (32). Feminism and postmodernism have blurred the distinction between traditional gender roles, which resulted in defining them anew. Instead of being only the object of male gaze to be observed and admired, women can actively engage in urban strolling, just as traditional 19th century male walkers did. Hence, a contemporary female urban stroller:

> voyages out, and goes where she's not supposed to; she forces us to confront the ways in which words like home and belonging are used against women. She is a determined, resourceful individual keenly attuned to the creative potential of the city, and the liberating possibilities of a good walk (Elkin 2016, 27–28).

As such, the woman detaches herself from domestic surroundings and her private life. She dares to explore not so respectable parts of the city, even though it would be regarded as improper by the male part of society. The stroll is what provides her pleasure, offers freedom, and enables her to construe an urban narrative based on her observations. Although in her walks there is nothing entertaining, Anna Blume conforms to the portrayal of the contemporary flâneuse in that she investigates the questionable

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aspects of the city. It is her determination and perseverance that make it possible to explore space and describe it in greater detail.

Even more light is shed on the concept of the flâneuse by Lauren Elkin (2016) in her recent book that intertwines her personal experiences as the city walker with discussions on women whose major concern was the city. *Flâneuse. Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London* proves that, although at the very beginning condemned to invisibility, women have always been not only a part of the urban spectacle, but also its active participants. Since the late nineteenth century, their role has been steadily increasing to the point where traditional gender roles have become blurred. Although some critics strongly oppose the existence of the flâneuse, Elkin enumerates diverse examples that undermine their claim. She mentions, for instance, "George Sand, who dressed like a boy to walk through the streets" (11), "Jean Rhys, whose female characters walk past café terraces and cringe as the clientele follow her with their eyes, knowing she's an outsider" (12), or Clarissa Dalloway, Virginia Woolf's protagonist, who is "perhaps the greatest flâneuse of twentieth-century literature" (73). For Woolf herself experiencing the city while walking served as the source of inspiration for her works since "[w]ondering about the people she saw pushed her forward in her literary project – how to represent 'life itself' on the page" (Elkin 2016, 74).

What all fictional and real figures mentioned by Elkin have in common is that they do not represent the act of shop walking regarded by Tester as the only situation possible for the existence of female urban strollers. Additionally, these women were not passive objects of male gaze, but active participants of the urban spectacle. Although with some difficulty, they still explored the cityscape in a way primarily reserved for male flâneurs, contrary to a commonly-hold belief that the practice was not appropriate. As such, even though not fully recognised at first, they function as protoplasts of the contemporary flâneur who does not discriminate against any gender. Recalling one of her walks along Paris streets, Elkin mentions: "[a]nything, any detail that suddenly loosened itself, would draw me towards it. Every turn I made was a reminder that the day was mine" (15). For a degenderized, postmodern urban stroller, in comparison to the traditional flâneur, the city still possesses a tempting power that overwhelms the individual and incites him/her to explore the cityscape further and deeper. It is also a locus of certain challenges mentioned by Dreyer and McDowall, which may range from usual liberation from quotidian constraints, exploring limits of one's creativity, to even a pursuit of particular quests.

Hence, Anna seems to both share some characteristics of the 1830s walkers and, to some extent, diverge from them towards the figure of the contemporary, postmodern flâneur. Indeed, she is not engaged in the act of purposeful and materialistic shopping which is based on the desire directed only at a certain part of the city. To be more precise, her walking is solely motivated by the need for comprehending the specificity of the area and survival in the unfavourable conditions, not by consumeristic motives. However, as I have emphasised before, although Anna's investigation embraces the whole space, her flânerie is marked by a very specific purpose and, therefore, devoid

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of its leisurely character. The city, where she is not supposed to be, becomes a site for her quest which, at the very beginning, is represented by a desire to find William and, then, to survive.

Therefore, I do not maintain that in order to be considered a flâneur a protagonist's portrayal has to be in agreement with all the defining features of the traditional urban stroller, that is: being a male, deriving pleasure from observing the crowd and pursuing aimless walks for entertainment, amongst others. Various transformations on cultural and social grounds call for further developments and revisions regarding both the concept of the urban stroller as well as the act of walking itself. 1830s Paris contributed to the creation of a recreational flâneur who would fit into the newly emerged bourgeois society of those times. Over one century later, a concept of the new stroller is needed so as to become a precise reflection of the contemporary human being seeking sense in the city space, not only the sense of the urban spectacle, but also the sense of their whole life. This concept would include the individual who roams the labyrinthine streets of the postmodern metropolis with more or less defined purposes, making the recreative aspect disappear the one who is literally lost in the crowd as if he were invisible while being surrounded by anonymous individuals, which contributes to his feeling of dislocation and disorientation. Finally, it would be the individual for whom the gender category is not an obstacle to participate in certain actions, for whom the previously solid and impassable border between gender-specific activities blurs. Hence, the characters construed by Auster, although in general inconsistent with the defining conventions of the nineteenth century flâneur, can be examined in terms of the author's dialogue with the tradition. His postmodern figures, thus, reflect the changing social and cultural conditions of the twenty-first century.

Certainly, Paul Auster has his hand in shaping the new flâneur in terms of the most representative and defining features; yet, the author does not completely revolutionize the ones portrayed, for example, in nineteenth-century works. The features defining a traditional cultural and literary motif of the urban stroller are altered so as to accommodate them in postmodern realities. Still, when it comes to the very functions of urban strollers, they seem not to diverge from the traditional ones. Writing about the scope of urban stroller's responsibilities, David Frisby maintains that:

> *flânerie* as activity must therefore explore the activities of observation (including listening), reading (of metropolitan life and of texts) and producing texts. *Flânerie*, in other words, can be associated with a form of *looking*, observing (of people, social types, social contexts and constellations), a form of *reading the city* and its population (its spatial images, its architecture, its human configurations), and a form of *reading written texts* (2015, 82).

The thorough scrutiny of the surroundings results in the accumulation of the rich material regarding the metropolis and its governing rules. Then, the need to comprehend it arises and the stroller is forced, like a scientist, to analyse the findings and form correct conclusions. Eventually, the time for an artistic production comes and the

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flâneur is supposed to transfer his observations into physical and tangible forms, such as a picture, journalistic coverage, or a narrative, amongst others.

In the Country of Last Things portrays a flâneur very distant from the 1830s predecessors when it comes to the defining features; still, Anna Blume's range of 'obligations' seems to be in accordance with the ones discussed by Frisby. From the very beginning of her complex journey through the inhospitable land, the conditions encourage a careful observation of not only the environment and its physical constructions, but also the inhabitants' inclinations and tendencies. The careful and thorough investigations compel Anna to form appropriate deductions enabling her to endure in the disorienting space. "You must learn how to read signs" (Auster 1989, 13), she states since it is not possible to survive in the city without proper reliance on the senses. A comparison may be formed between her immediate experiences and deciphering the urban narrative inscribed in the space – the spectacle to which every individual contributes their personal dramas. What awaits Anna's decoding is the current spatial, social, and political image of the unnamed country – the task that her lost brother failed. The last obligation that Salzani mentions is a widely understood production and in this case Anna's actions do not diverge from the tradition. The protagonist finally transfers her meticulous observations into words, into a detailed account of her experiences in the form of a letter to her friend, written with hindsight, though she remains uncertain about her own motivation: "I am not sure why I am writing to you now […]. But suddenly, after all this time, I feel there is something to say, and if I don't quickly write it down, my head will burst" (Auster 1989, 9). It appears that the excess of information collected overwhelms Anna and she feels an intense urge to share her findings with the friend, even though, as she writes: "I don't believe this letter can reach you. It's like calling out into the blankness" (Auster 1989, 200). Still, further in her letter, the protagonist defines her motives as she claims: "I am writing to you because you know nothing. Because you are far away from me and know nothing" (Auster 1989, 10). The long and detailed letter reveals a negative image of the urban space where decomposition and fragmentation exert a tremendous influence on citizens.

Conclusion

The origins of the traditional flâneur constitute a fertile ground for various academic explorations. Although the urban stroller's provenance and approximate dating of his emergence are contentious issues, an unquestionable evolution of the figure can be seen over centuries. At the very beginning, the city walker was perceived as an aimless stroller who enjoyed his flânerie. Yet, with time, the act of wandering along the streets started to be associated with certain responsibilities behind its solely entertaining character, which testifies to the changes in the application of the urban walker. The flâneur's goal is not only pure observation, but also production understood as a transfer of all the outcomes of the investigations into words. Therefore, in his panoptical observation

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of the city and its life, "he became a recording device of progressively more complex and wider fields of vision" (Nesci 2014, 72). Finally, the postmodern stroller may be defined as the one with a certain predetermined goal stemming, most frequently, from a personal crisis. Such an individual represents the conditions of postmodernity – the sense of being lost in a crowd, alienation, urban dislocation, and epistemological doubts, amongst others.

The postmodern character of Paul Auster's *oeuvre* is manifested in many ways – from employing the tenets of postmodernism in literature and idiosyncratic motives in his writings to manipulations with long-established genres and literary conventions. The flâneuristic account provided by the protagonist in *In the Country of Last Things* is one of the conventions that Auster plays with. The story features a postmodern variation of the flâneur, so different from their 19th century predecessors. Although the majority of his works favour male protagonists as the urban walkers, the discussed novel is an example of almost a complete break with the tradition due to its female protagonist, and a relative consistent with the contemporary stroller. Anna's wanderings have nothing in common with leisurely activities stemming from boredom and abundance of free time that were of utmost significance in the case of traditional strollers. Instead, her journey through the city is oriented towards a certain goal; yet, it adheres to the contractual obligations behind the very act of walking along the streets. The woman observes society inhabiting the dilapidated space, tries to understand the rules and laws established there and, finally, she produces a piece of work devoted to her investigation. As such, Anna's portrayal seems to conform to the postmodern flâneur who has the "right to disturb the peace, to observe (or not observe), to occupy (or not occupy) and to organise (or disorganise) space on [her] own terms" (Elkin 2016, 239).

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