

**Lost, redefined, or preserved?
Expressions of solidarity in Paul Auster's
*In the Country of Last Things***

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Abstract

In his novel set entirely in a dystopian environment, *In the Country of Last Things*, Paul Auster portrays a disturbing vision of urban space where pervasive processes of disintegration and destabilisation profoundly determine the relations inside it. In this study the semiotic space of this unnamed city will be examined on the basis of the opposition between dominant dystopian space and impermanent sanctuaries located within the urban realm. The defining division of space has its reflection in the practical realisation of the concept of solidarity. The city is inhabited by society for whom moral codes and higher values can be considered relics of the past. Consequently, genuine solidarity has been replaced by what Sally Scholz calls 'parasitical solidarity'. Temporary refuges, on the other hand, serve as the last anchorages of humanity trying to resist detrimental impacts from outside and to preserve natural gestures of solidarity.

Keywords

Auster, dystopia, sanctuary, solidarity, urban space

**Utracona, przedefiniowana czy zachowana?
Manifestacje solidarności w *Kraju rzeczy ostatnich*
Paula Austera**

Abstrakt

W swojej powieści *W kraju rzeczy ostatnich*, której akcja całościowo rozgrywa się w dystopijnym otoczeniu, Paul Auster ukazuje niepokojącą wizję przestrzeni miejskiej, gdzie wszechobecne procesy dezintegracji i destabilizacji całkowicie warunkują relacje tam panujące. Przestrzeń semiotyczna tego bliżej nieokreślonego miasta będzie analizowana w oparciu o kontrast pomiędzy dominującym, dystopijnym otoczeniem i nietrwałymi miejscami o charakterze sanktuarium usytuowanymi wewnątrz miejskiego uniwersum. Definiujący podział przestrzeni ma swoje odzwierciedlenie w praktycznej realizacji konceptu solidarności. Miasto zamieszkiwane jest przez społeczeństwo, dla którego kodeksy moralne i wyższe wartości wydają się być relikwiami przeszłości. W skutek tego autentyczna solidarność została zastąpiona przez to, co Sally Scholz określa mianem „solidarności pasożytnej”. Tymczasowe azyle, natomiast, służą jako ostatnie ostoje cywilizacji, które za wszelką cenę starają się stawiać opór niekorzystnym wpływom zewnętrznym, oraz zachować naturalne oznaki solidarności.

Słowa kluczowe

Auster, dystopia, azyl, solidarność, przestrzeń miejska

“There is no stability without solidarity
and no solidarity without stability”.
(Jose Manuel Barroso)

1. Introduction

One of the most fundamental understandings of solidarity, provided by *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, emphasises its central idea of “support by one person or group of people

for another because they share feelings, opinions, aims, etc.” (Hornby 2010: 1468). As such, the given definition focuses on a practical realisation of the basic tenets of human nature – expressing empathy towards the other individual(s) by means of direct and mutual help or demonstrating unstinting support towards particular opinions or actions. Yet, the concept in its whole complexity that has been put into theory does not appear to be so straightforward since it might encompass diverse ideological dimensions.

In her book *Political Solidarity*, Sally J. Scholz (2008) explores various types as well as expressions of solidarity in different contexts – from social to political ones. Therefore, in her attempts to construe a comprehensive definition of the aforementioned conception, she maintains that the very notion “is used to describe a particular type of community and it is used to describe the bonds of any community. Solidarity is a feeling that moves people to action and it is an action that invokes strong feelings” (Scholz 2008: 17). In other words, in its basic understanding, the term refers not only to the social dimension encompassing relations between individuals that create a sense of unity, but, for instance, to emotional aspects. Amongst members of a particular group or a community, it evokes specified reactions that drive individuals towards a pre-established aim. Apart from the outstanding importance of the concept in building the history of primarily the Eastern European countries, the issue of solidarity constitutes a fertile ground for the examination of fictional worlds.

Scholz points out that solidarity cannot be regarded as a homogeneous conception referring solely to the practical realisation of convictions and ideological standpoints commonly held amongst members of particular groups. She discerns that “more often than not, the understanding of solidarity is blurred as scholars use it to discuss external identity, shared experience, shared consciousness, and political resistance separately and simultaneously” (Scholz 2008: 3). Hence, the phrase can be considered as a universal umbrella term for a wide range of other concepts overlapping with and, not rare-

ly, complementing one another. Solidarity may be understood as not only unity maintained in a particular community, which creates a sense of shared identity, but also as harmony, mutual support, and the pursuit of a common goal. In such forms, it is a fairly attractive concept to be explored in dystopian narratives where one out of protagonists' many challenges is the struggle for survival in unfavourable conditions. Therefore, there arises the question regarding the applicability of solidarity to spaces that are far from friendly for people immersed in them, such as the ones ravaged by cataclysms, wars; territories suffering from oppression or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, worlds under the absolute control of technology.

The novel under consideration is Paul Auster's dystopian *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), which portrays a dilapidated urban space governed by oppression and in which unfavourable and inhuman conditions are the defining components of the city. The protagonist, Anna Blume, commences her journey with the aim of finding her missing brother William, a journalist, who travelled to the place in which destruction and decay are present on a daily basis. The circumstances she has to deal with after arriving at the turbulent city are motivational for composing a letter addressed to her childhood friend. Her reported narration reveals deplorable conditions that shape the urban space and relations within it. The letter also testifies to how the dystopian centre exerts its influence upon the peripheral, impermanent sanctuaries located inside the space.

In the Country of Last Things is one of Auster's earliest novels and the specificity of the universe construed by the author has been a fertile ground for academic contributions. In *Paul Auster*, for instance, Mark Brown's focal point is Anna's experiences within "a dystopia of disturbing presents" (2007: 142), as he calls the city. He also addresses the notion of sanctuaries with great emphasis put on Woburn House. Tim Woods in "Looking for Signs in the Air": Urban Space and the Postmodern in *In the Country of Last Things*" (1995) analyses the uni-

verse of the novel primarily through the lens of postmodernism. Katharine Washburn's "A Book at the End of the World: Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things*" (2004) also revolves around the dystopian specificity of urban space, yet with a focus on its representing "a hellish present" (2004: 169). Bernd Herzogenrath in *An Art of Desire* (1999) offers two close readings of the novel – one regarding the conventions of science fiction and the second depicting the semiotic world as "entangled between absence and presence, between things irrevocably *lost* and things that seem to *last*" (1999: 95). Yet, none of the publications offers the analysis of Austerian universe in terms of possible expressions of solidarity amongst urbanites. Therefore, the principal aim of this article is to examine the spatial dimension of the novel with the main focus on the blurring opposition between the dystopian city and ephemeral refuges within it, in reference to the notion of solidarity.

2. Reflections on urban space

Thomas Halper and Douglas Muzzio's article "Hobbes in the City: Urban Dystopias in American Movies" (2007) proposes a coherent division of dystopian universes. As stated there, "urban dystopias fall into one of two opposing categories: the city as chaos or the city as under rigid, comprehensive control" (2007: 381). The former type portrays metropolises as in a state of disorder and turmoil, "where none is safe from the depredations of their fellows. The other depicts cities as Leviathan, imposing order and stability" (2007: 380). It may be assumed that the portrayal of the former – the turbulent and dysfunctional city – is closely related to spaces overwhelmed with oppression and disorganisation, where conventional relations are no longer acknowledged, whereas the latter category represents futuristic constructs dominated by the power of technology and scientific advances. Although in their findings Halper and Muzzio refer to urban dystopias in cinematic productions, these divisions may be as well employed to literary

representations in which the primary setting is the city, as in the case of *In the Country of Last Things*. The urban space in Auster's novel cannot be discussed in terms of futuristic dystopian spaces governed by technological advances that are prevalent in, for instance, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) or Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968). Rather, it can be classified as the one permeated with chaos and disarray, as, for instance, in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) or José Saramago's *Blindness* (1995).

To briefly characterise the city, its physical space is 'trapped' in inevitable and irreversible disintegration – the metropolis literally falls into pieces; what prevails is ruins, rubble, and overwhelming desolation that deprive individuals of any hope for a better future. As Anna states, "slowly and steadily, the city seems to be consuming itself, even as it remains [...]. Every day in the streets you hear explosions, as if somewhere far from you a building were falling down or the sidewalk caving in" (*In the Country of Last Things* 21-22). The city constructed by Auster is irreversibly damaged by unidentified blasts, which turns the whole space into a literal wasteland. Such a situation, as I have argued elsewhere, is reminiscent of the one present in the classic representative of dystopian fiction, namely in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Kula 2017: 383). Similarly to the Austerian universe, in Orwell's urban space – Airstrip One – "sometimes in the far distance there were enormous explosions which no one could explain" (Orwell 2016: 172). In both cases, what shapes the fictional worlds is various damaging processes of unidentified and unknown origins; the protagonists are somehow distanced from them and, as a result, unable to explain their nature. Unexpected and sudden explosions destroy the cityscapes and wipe out any traces of the buildings' existence; as Anna recounts, "[a] house is there one day, and the next day is gone. A street you walked down yesterday, is no longer there today" (*In the Country of Last Things* 1).

However, it must be emphasised that what Anna witnesses while getting acquainted with the unknown territory is not on-

ly the destruction of the landscape, but also evanescence of the daily necessities, such as ailment, attire, and even the memory of them. “Close your eyes for a moment, turn around to look at something else, and the thing that was before you is suddenly gone. Nothing lasts, you see, not even the thoughts inside you. [...]. Once a thing is gone, that is the end of it” (1), claims the protagonist, which emphatically concludes the situation present in the city. Being confronted not only with the destruction and disintegration of the urban space, but also with a subsequent unfavourable life situation, makes it evident that some crucial measures should be taken in order to persevere in the city; such memories ought to be primarily based on moral conduct, mutual support, and cooperation in public commitment to a shared objective. *In the Country of Last Things*, however, presents a social situation in which the genuine understanding of the concept of solidarity appears to be redefined so as to adapt it to the prevailing circumstances. What is demonstrated is comparable to what Scholz calls “parasitical solidarity” (2008: 46).

3. Dystopian space: solidarity lost or reversed?

In his book *Dystopia. A Natural History*, Gregory Claeys emphasises that “literary dystopias are understood as primarily concerned to portray societies where a substantial majority suffer slavery and/or oppression as a result of human action” (2017: 290). The terror may be inflicted by an unjust totalitarian or authoritarian government, which results in adverse living conditions or the surroundings perceived as dehumanised; powerlessness and suffering are what individuals experience on a daily basis. The devastation of the urban space present in the novel under consideration has its inevitable consequences in the social structure and its organisation. Harper and Muzzio briefly characterise dystopia as a place “of oppression and suffering” (2007: 281) and, indeed, what can be found within Austre’s city is pervasive poverty and practices perceived by the contemporary man as revolting, usually immoral and, hence,

testifying to the demise of the civilised man. Each day, the community described by Anna faces oppression enforced not only by the governments that “come and go quite rapidly here, and it is often difficult to keep up with the changes” (*In the Country of Last Things* 86), but also by the inhabitants themselves, who in order to survive, adhere to rules comparable to the ‘jungle law’. The city itself, where “[t]hings fall apart and vanish, and nothing new is made, [p]eople die, and babies refuse to be born” (7), resembles an urban jungle, in which only the strongest individuals, whose activities do not conform to morals and ethics of civilised beings, stand realistic chances of perseverance. Survival in space defined by burdensome conditions “seems to entail killing off all those things that once made you think of yourself as human [...]. In order to live, you must make yourself die” (20). Therefore, mutual support, civilised behaviour, sympathy, or even reliability have been, step by step, erased from the collective consciousness.

Further exploring the connotations attached to the concept of solidarity, Scholz also enumerates “the bond uniting individuals whatever their life circumstances may be” (2008: 2) and “expressions of sympathy, or struggles for liberation” (17). Neither the governmental actions nor the steps taken by inhabitants can be discussed in terms of compassion or common understanding, which leads to problems such as homelessness, grinding poverty and, as a result, unexpected deaths. In such deplorable conditions, the urbanites are forced to work out certain patterns of behaviour that would enable them to survive, no matter what the consequences could be. Although the city literally deprives the citizens of their human nature, in order to persevere some signs of solidarity between inhabitants can be identified, some of them being based on the concept of a group’s influence.

Michael Hechter in his book *Principles of Group Solidarity* (1988) focuses on communities and how their representatives may affect one another. He points out that

membership in some groups has a greater potential for influencing behavior than membership in others. Another way of putting this is that “groupness”—that is, the group’s capacity to affect the member’s behavior—is itself a variable. Following Emile Durkheim, the “groupness” of any group may be referred to as its solidarity. The more solidary a group, the greater the influence it casts upon its members. (Hechter 1988: 8)

In other words, belonging to particular groups established with a view to accomplishing specified aims or expressing shared ideologies, is always associated with the pressure exerted by the group collectively. In order to be regarded as fully-fledged participants, all the members develop a sense of collective identity and have to adhere to established rules and principal objectives. As such, the feeling of solidarity is demonstrated; yet, in the case of Auster’s dystopian universe, the realization of this notion “ignores or even contradicts the moral content of the concept” (Scholz 2008: 18). As Scholz explicates further,

there are solidarities that are not really solidarities at all: the pretenders or posers, the parasites. By “parasitical solidarity,” I mean that the term “solidarity” is used to connote a variety of feelings or relations that do not themselves count as full-fledged forms of solidarity because they often lack one or more of the key elements. (Scholz 2008: 46-47)

If moral reasons do not motivate a group’s or community’s actions, it is not possible to regard them as based on true solidarity. The gestures of solidarity amongst urbanites in the novel are not oriented towards positive aspects, such as emotional relations, genuine, unconditional support, or aid in need. Instead, they unite urbanites in their activities – deceiving other dwellers or establishing groups/sects dominated by specific, often distorted or twisted ways of thinking. At one point, Anna accounts instances of union between frauds:

I know a man who makes his living by standing in front of the old city hall and asking for money every time one of the newcomers

glances at the tower clock. If there is a dispute, his assistant, who poses as a greenhorn, pretends to go through the ritual of looking at the clock and paying him, so that the stranger will think this is the common practice. (*In the Country of Last Things* 7)

Thus, the only reason for cooperation is extorting money; in such a way the collaborating individuals share one common goal which, to some extent, may be translated into common experience. Scholz also points that solidarity “is a feeling that moves people to action” (2008: 17), and this claim has its reflection in partnerships established between scavengers – urbanites who look for pieces of junk that can be sold or objects that can be ‘reanimated’. When Anna’s letter accounts garbage collectors’ and object hunters’ work, she reports:

You need allies, however, especially to protect yourself against the Vultures—scavengers who make their living by stealing from other scavengers [...], the job is a free-for-all, with constant attacks and counterattacks [...]. With friends, I might have been able to avoid some of these raids. (*In the Country of Last Things* 37)

The feeling that group collaboration is more beneficial moves people to form some alliances to have stronger chances for much better findings or to ensure relative safety. Yet, as in the case of the frauds above, such bonds between individuals are not created out of moral motivations.

Another interesting example of “parasitical solidarity” regards the groups and sects that have come into existence in urban space. Examining group psychology in the context of dystopia, Gregory Claeys suggests that “[c]rowds were atavistic and primitive. Always ‘unconscious’, their power was always destructive. [...]. It exemplified a ‘collective mind’ where the ‘sentiments and ideas of all the persons in the gathering take one and the same direction” (2017: 20). Indeed, taking into consideration death groups, such as the Runners, what can be observed is that all the members share the same idea and the goal. The ‘association’ brings together individuals whose will to live is shattered by the conditions present in the city. Here,

solidarity is identified with “a form of unity [...]. Something [that] binds people together” (Scholz 2008: 19). In the case of the Runners, their uniting aim is death, yet, not sudden and on streets, but more spectacular, as if it were a kind of an artistic performance:

The point is to die as quickly as possible, to drive yourself so hard that your heart cannot stand it. The Runners say that no one would have the courage to do this on his own. By running together, each member of the group is swept along by the others, encouraged by the screams, whipped to a frenzy of self-punishing endurance. (*In the Country of Last Things* 12)

The functioning of weather sects – associated individuals who perceive weather changes as dependent on human behaviour – is based on a similar principle. What unites them in concerted actions – performing certain rituals, behaving in a particular way – is a common belief shared by all the representatives, usually stemming from mythical thinking. The group of the Smilers “believes that bad weather comes from bad thoughts” (26), whereas the Crawlers’ standpoint is “that conditions will go on worsening until we demonstrate—in an utterly persuasive manner—how ashamed we are of how we lived in the past” (27). Yet, no matter what the group’s interest is, it is always of a damaging nature – participation in suicidal associations ends in death, whereas weather sects look for mythical explanations having nothing in common with the surrounding reality.

4. Impermanent shelters: solidarity regained?

As mentioned above, not the whole urban space is submerged into processes of destabilisation and destruction that force people to seek various ways of dealing with the oppressive situation. Mark Brown argues that “Anna is able to find and occupy small, almost utopian spaces of stability which offer shelter, refuge and even renewal” (2007: 150); places that stand in

opposition to the dystopian universe. These sanctuaries provide the protagonist with a temporary escape from the outside suffering and oppression; nevertheless, they are not safe from surrounding chaos and decay.

As such, these impermanent refuges can be considered in terms of appropriated and reappropriated spaces contrasting with the dominant dystopian space. As Henri Lefebvre maintains, “[i]t may be said of a natural space modified in order to serve the needs and possibilities of a group that it has become appropriated by that group” (1991: 165). These are the venues that function as loci of some higher values and meanings attached by individuals residing or operating in them. During her road through the dystopian wasteland, Anna finds momentary respite in more civilised places, as opposed to hostile urban space, such as Isabel’s home, the National Library or, finally, Woburn House, where she is transported after an almost deadly accident. In all these locations, the protagonist is able to observe and subsequently experience some expressions of natural human tendencies – mutual help, support and cooperation – gestures that are lost in the culture shaped by the dystopian space. In contrast to the oppressive centre, they testify to expressions of solidarity in its genuine understanding.

From the very beginning, Isabel’s flat as well as Woburn House have been designated as places that are supposed to satisfy essential needs of their residents and to preserve some human instincts. In their standing in opposition to the dystopian environment, these buildings represent appropriated spaces. However, the National Library can be regarded rather as reappropriated space – the one whose function has been altered as compared to the traditional one. As Lefebvre puts it,

An existing space may outlive its original purpose and the *raison d’être* which determines its forms, functions, and structures; it may thus in a sense become vacant, and susceptible of being diverted, reappropriated and put to a use quite different from its initial one. (Lefebvre 1991: 167)

Libraries serve as loci of knowledge gathered through centuries and, therefore, may be considered as sacred places. Yet, in the case of the building in the novel, its traditional purpose has been reformulated. Although in the very beginning the library functions as the place for ideological discussions, its primary role is to provide shelter for religious groups and various associations.

Nevertheless, all the spaces to which Anna attaches some meaning are not safe from the damaging influence exerted by the dominant space. In her article “Spectres of Eutopia: (Re)appropriated Spaces in Filmic Dystopias”, Ludmiła Gruszevska-Blaim contends that “[a]cts of penetration and violence on the part of the dystopian State, which feels free to ignore all divides [...], destabilize both the physical and social structure of the theoretically appropriated space” (2012: 176). In the unnamed city, brutality and disorder find their way also to invade the reappropriated space of the National Library. As Anna’s letter proves, these impermanent refuges from “the misery and squalor” (*In the Country of Last Things* 139) are able to exist and adequately fulfil their intended functions as long as the border between the oppressive centre and the volatile sanctuaries is not violated by what is inextricably connected with the outside – violence or/and death.

“If we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause”, explains Yi-Fu Tuan (2001: 6). Places offer the sense of safety and protection against outside dangers; they also signify a momentary suspension in one’s journey, the one providing a few moments of repose. For Anna, they provide her with a break from the routine, which lets the woman stop her relentless quest for survival and feel relative safeness for a moment in appropriated and re-appropriated spaces. Isabel’s shelter becomes the first refuge for the protagonist after she has saved the elder woman from the band of the Runners. The moment she enters the private space, what can be observed is the metamorphosis that Anna has undergone since she arrived at the city:

The building that Isabel lived in was made of brick [...]. Ants and cockroaches moved about unmolested, and the whole place stank of turned food, unwashed clothes, and dust. But the building itself seemed reasonably solid, and I could only think of how lucky I was. Note how quickly things change for us. If someone had told me before I came here that this was where I would wind up living, I would not have believed it. But now I felt blessed, as though some great gift had been bestowed on me. (*In the Country of Last Things* 12)

In the devastated urban space, as Anna's reaction shows, even a small break from daily suffering is regarded as a precious gift. Although the shelter does not fulfil the pivotal function of home as a place "in which individuals come together in intimate relationships" (Madanipour 2003: 76), it provides the protagonist with a temporal feeling of moderate safety and stability. As Anna confesses, the days spent with Isabel, who invites the protagonist to her austere shelter and decides to take care of her after the rescue, "were the best days we had" (*In the Country of Last Things* 56). There, the protagonist has experienced practices lost in the city – mutual, sincere cooperation and support, and friendliness – which translates into the expressions of genuine solidarity that cannot be found in Auster's dystopian space.

As long as Isabel and her husband, Ferdinand, domicile the house, Anna can, at least to some extent, feel at home, even though the aspect of real intimacy is lost. The situation changes dramatically after Isabel's death since Anna, again, becomes marooned in the intimidating reality:

I was awakened by a loud pounding on the door [...]. The housebreakers forced the door open and then, crossed the threshold with the usual bludgeons and sticks in their hands. [...] Isabel had been dead for only two days, and already, the neighbors had pounced. (*In the Country of Last Things* 83-84)

The very process of the degradation of the sanctuary is triggered by the forces from the dystopian surroundings that have

been slowly sneaking into the place and was initiated by deaths, so rife in the city. The safe, private space of the house finally loses its status as soon as it is invaded by the house-breakers; consequently, Anna is precluded from it and has to seek asylum somewhere else.

Up to the moment of the degradation, Isabel's shelter stands for the anchorage where basic human tendencies, such as support, cooperation, and mutual care of each other are preserved, where real solidarity between the protagonist and the elderly woman is observable. Yet, it is the National Library, another coincidental stop during Anna's journey, that offers her hope and unforgettable experiences. Although, as in the case of the first refuge, "the best days were behind it" (94) since the influence exerted by the urban space is inescapable and irreversible, the library also offers Anna 'the relics' of the former life. Apart from the temporal stability, shelter, or friendship with the Rabbi, she is given an ersatz of normality that could not be found outside – genuine love.

"Those were the best days for me. Not just here, you understand, but anywhere – the best days of my life" (107), continues Anna in the letter. Her words may sound a bit weird taking into consideration the conditions present in the city; the situation has not changed since she entered the area of the library, nor have the daily struggles disappeared. Yet, it is here that the protagonist finds long-sought Samuel Farr, a journalist who has also been sent to the dystopian metropolis. As she states, "Sam made all the difference [...]. [N]ow I had been given the possibility of hope, and I began to believe that sooner or later our troubles were going to end" (107). Since then, the small room that Samuel has lived in becomes "the center of [her] world" (107); the initial flat-sharing turns into real intimacy between the bodies and allows Anna to believe that moments of happiness are possible in the city – after all she experiences what it means to be loved.

However, "the happiness and stability Anna finds with Sam prove to be ephemeral, as the horror of the city once again

undermines permanence and destroys certainty” (Brown 2007: 151), which leads to the collapse of the protagonist’s sanctuary established in the library. Its calm is ravaged by the dystopian conditions encroaching in the person of Dujardin, the ethnographer. His offer to sell the protagonist new shoes leads to Anna being taken to a human slaughterhouse and to her almost losing life while trying to escape. Whereas in the case of Isabel’s house what she is deprived of is shelter and the friendship with the woman, here it is the ersatz of genuine interpersonal relations and family.

Woburn House, where Anna finally finds herself in after the almost deadly accident, is another peripheral subspace in the urban territory that contrasts sharply with the dilapidation of the outside world; it is like a “heaven, an idyllic refuge from the misery and squalor around it” (*In the Country of Last Things* 139). As a place which serves as a philanthropic organisation, it ‘associates’ people with one common objective – providing help to people in need. Describing the idea of the sanctuary, Anna recollects:

[w]ith constant, back-breaking effort, they were able to house from eighteen to twenty-four people at any given time. Indigents were allowed to stay for ten days; the desperately ill could stay longer. Everyone was given a clean bed and two warm meals a day [...] people were given a respite from their troubles, a chance to gather strength before moving on. (*In the Country of Last Things* 132)

In comparison to the reality outside, in this sanctuary people have developed a certain sense of being united in a common goal – helping the residents to regain their lost stability, expressing sympathy for them, offering a friendly and supporting talk and, in general, taking care of the dwellers. Woburn House, therefore, “produces a very particular sense of place” since it “represents a stability that grounds and stabilises the permanent inhabitants” (Brown 2007: 152). Victoria and the rest of the staff feel obligated to continue what the doctor initiated – the endeavour to share their luxury even if it only re-

sults in a momentary respite. The appeal of Woburn House is so powerful that some of the urbanites start to perceive it as “an earthly paradise, the object of every possible longing they had ever felt. The idea of being allowed to live there had kept them going from one day to the next” (*In the Country of Last Things* 140).

Woburn House is a place where Anna is not only able to recover after the accident, but also to slowly rebuild the lost stability after her whole world has collapsed. In Victoria she finds the soul mate and the closest and most intimate confidante of secrets and thoughts; as the protagonist claims: “we each became a refuge for the other, the place where each of us could go to find comfort in her solitude” (156). Yet, even though the permanent residents of the mansion create a successfully working system based on cooperation, a system trying to push off the outside influence, the peace is only illusionary since the sanctuary is “built on a foundation of clouds” (154); it cannot escape the disruptive influence *ad infinitum*. Its temporal calm and peace are destroyed when the outside nightmare once more transgresses the peripheral borders. Mr Frick’s death is a flashpoint for the whole chain of succeeding events that lead to Woburn House also losing its status as the last anchorage for people seeking some hope. As Anna concludes, “[l]ittle by little, the distinction between Woburn House and the rest of the city was growing smaller. We were being swallowed up, and not one of us knew how to prevent it” (171).

5. Conclusion

Paul Auster’s *In the Country of Last Things* depicts the vision of the unnamed city in a state of decay. The landscape undergoes a gradual degradation and, together with it, all the constituents of urban space, such as society, economy, politics and interpersonal relations. Therefore, the inhabitants have had to develop certain patterns of behaviour enabling them to persevere in the oppressive space. Being united in frauds or various communities, such as suicidal or ideological groups, seems to

resemble the idea of solidarity in the name of which individuals share common beliefs or goals and, therefore, mutually support the common interest of the association. “Members of solidarity would thus be obliged to one another because of their membership in the community” (Scholz 2008: 10); the role of the group pressure cannot be discarded while examining expressions of solidarity in the dystopian city. Nonetheless, these gestures cannot be regarded as the genuine realisation of the concept since, as Scholz points out, it is individuals’ “opposition to injustice or oppression [that] unites the group” (2008: 10). In the case of *In the Country of Last Things*, no acts of resistance can be found; rather, these are immoral impulses and motives that unite urbanites. Therefore, gestures of genuine solidarity have been deflated in favour of what Scholz calls “parasitical solidarity”.

Even though the central dystopian space is submerged in total devastation, there exist some refuges standing in opposition to the surroundings – appropriated and reappropriated spaces. However, there arises a significant problem with places such as Isabel’s shelter or Woburn House: “when they are embedded in environments of antithetical or antagonistic processes, is that they will always be at risk of attack, erosion or degradation by the forces that surround them” (Brown 2007: 153). There is always a danger that the dominant forces generated in the more powerful, but chaotic, central part of the urban space would trespass the borders separating it from the more organised, yet weaker, appropriated and reappropriated spaces.

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