

Title	Walking through the wasteland : philosophy of things in Paul Auster's In the country of last things
Sub Title	荒れ地を歩く : ポール・ オースター 『最後の物たちの国で』 における物たちの哲学
Author	松村, 美里(Matsumura, Misato)
Publisher	慶應義塾大学藝文学会
Publication year	2025
Jtitle	藝文研究 (The geibun-kenkyu : journal of arts and letters). Vol.129, (2025. 12) ,p.127 (76)- 138 (65)
JaLC DOI	
Abstract	
Notes	
Genre	Journal Article
URL	https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=AN00072643-01290001-0127

慶應義塾大学学術情報リポジトリ(KOARA)に掲載されているコンテンツの著作権は、それぞれの著作者、学会または出版社/発行者に帰属し、その権利は著作権法によって保護されています。引用にあたっては、著作権法を遵守してご利用ください。

The copyrights of content available on the KeiO Associated Repository of Academic resources (KOARA) belong to the respective authors, academic societies, or publishers/issuers, and these rights are protected by the Japanese Copyright Act. When quoting the content, please follow the Japanese copyright act.

Walking Through the Wasteland: Philosophy of Things in Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things*

Misato MATSUMURA

Paul Auster's fourth full-length novel, *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), takes the form of a long letter from a female narrator, Anna Blume. This novel is set, as the title shows, in the Country of Last Things, a ruined world where things as well as their memories are disappearing from people's minds; many people are suffering from extreme hunger, thefts, murders, and cults, which are everywhere in the country. Anna Bloom goes to the country in search of her missing brother, and survives under extreme conditions.

This article examines the representation of things in this work to identify the sense of catastrophe and the Jewishness of Auster, born as a third-generation Polish Jew. Furthermore, this article argues that Auster's philosophy of things seeks to open his Jewishness to the universal through the vision of the wasteland.

1. A Country of Memory and Oblivion

The novel opens with a nightmarish vision of the Country of Last Things, described by Anna Blume, the narrator of this story. She describes the country's instability as follows:

These are last things, she wrote. One by one they disappear and never come back.
. . . These are the last things. A house is there one day, and next day it is gone. A street you walked down yesterday is no longer there today. . . . Nothing lasts, you see, not even the thoughts inside you. (1-2)

Much of the novel is devoted to depicting an unimaginable, ever-collapsing world that is never stable, not even for a moment. As mentioned above, the Country of Last Things is cut

off from any context; it is impossible to determine when and where the story is anchored. Things disappear one after another and are forgotten.

This situation reminds us of traumatic memories and self-protective reactions against trauma. To understand this dynamic more clearly, it is useful to clarify the meaning of the term “trauma” and its nature. The word “trauma” originally meant a severe wound on the body, and Sigmund Freud used it as a term in psychopathology to mean a wound to the mind. In her 1996 book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth defines trauma as a “missed experience,” which “is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to [the] consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (4).

In other words, the memory of trauma is the memory of our five senses, the raw realization of the shock to the mind that has been missed and has not yet been translated into words. The passage below is a scene that describes how this missed experience occurs in *In the Country of Last Things*. Anna Blume reflects on the time she was taken into a slaughterhouse where people were to be butchered as follows:

Afterward, when we got to where we were going, things happened too fast for me to remember them. If I see them now, it is only in short, random clusters, isolated images removed from any context, bursts of light and shadow. . . . It’s as if those things never happened, even though I know for a fact they did. (124)

Anna has failed to capture the experience, as she states that she only recalls the slaughterhouse as a fragmented scene detached from any context, as if it were not real.

Michiko Shimokobe discusses how memories of trauma are forgotten through the dual mechanisms of the individual, who “abandons the function of evoking a certain kind of memory,” and of society, which suppresses the experience as horrible and impossible things (10; my translation). Here, oblivion works as a defense mechanism to survive. However, it is a crucial precondition for the recovery of survivors to capture the experiences they have missed, translate them into coherent narratives and events, and share them with others.

These steps align with those of Anna as an object hunter. In the first half of the story, Anna and Isabel (an elderly woman who resides with Anna) are engaged in picking up valuable items from debris and selling them. In other words, they trade the items they scavenge at a value they share with others. Anna describes her job as follows: “As an object hunter, you

must rescue things before they reach this state of absolute decay” (36). This statement brings to mind the reality that the memory of trauma is forgotten by individuals and society, and it must be narrated before it is entirely forgotten. This is because in the *Country of Last Things*, the disappearance of an object signifies the erasure of the language and memory associated with it. For example, when asked if there are any airplanes, a resident of the *Country of Last Things* cannot recall what they are (87). From this, we can see that when things disappear, so do their memories.

Each thing in the story refers to a signifier that directs the signified—memories. If the signifier is lost, its content, the signified, will never be spoken of again and will be forgotten by society and individuals before it becomes a word. Through this story, Anna attempts to capture the memory of trauma and translate it into words by picking up deserted things.

2. The Collage of Traumatic Modernity

Having described the connection between *In the Country of Last Things* and the memory of trauma, we can turn to the question of what constitutes the trauma of the *Country of Last Things*. If we look carefully at the images in this novel, we come to a disastrous historical trauma. When queried by Larry McCaffery in an interview about where the realistic “urban nightmare scene” (*Art* 306) of the work came from, Auster replied as follows:

As far as I’m concerned, the book has nothing to do with science fiction. It’s quite fantastical at times, of course, but that doesn’t mean it’s not firmly anchored in historical realities. It’s a novel about the present and the immediate past, not about the future. “Anna Blume walks through the twentieth century.” That’s the phrase I carried around in my head while I was working on the book. (*Art* 306)

Through this statement, Auster conveys the central vision of the novel: “Anna Blume walks through the twentieth century.” The figure of a girl walking through a wasteland, which is nightmarish and characterized by overwhelming violence, reminds us of *The Diary of a Young Girl*¹ written by Anne Frank and of the literature and thoughts of other Jewish authors.

To understand the implications of the vision, it is necessary to examine the poem “An Anna Blume,” written in 1919 by Kurt Schwitters, a German poet of Dadaism and

Surrealism. Elizabeth Wesseling explains that “An Anna Blume” was composed using the experimental technique of collage and that Schwitters’ method of creating poems from newspaper and magazine clippings corresponds to Anna Blume’s role as a scavenger, picking up objects from the ruins of the Country of Last Things and selling them (496). The name Anna Blume is clearly an allusion to “An Anna Blume,” and looking at the poem reveals why Auster named his protagonist after it. Let us take a look at the following lines from “An Anna Blume”:

Oh Du, Geliebte meiner 27 Sinne, ich liebe Dir!
 Du, Deiner, Dich Dir, ich Dir, Du mir, ---- wir?
 . . . Das gehört beiläufig in die ---- Glutenkiste.
 Anna Blume, Anna, A----N----N----A! . . . (175)

“An Anna Blume,” quoted above, is generally considered a parody of a love poem with a woman named Anna Blume. Its chaotic, spliced narrative is said to reflect the chaotic atmosphere of Europe after World War I. This technique of collage is also related to the overall method of the novel. As Aliko Varvogli states, “What follows, however, is a depiction of a city that is as much a self-conscious collage of literary cities as it is disturbingly recognizable in historical terms” (73). Maya Merlob, who discusses the multilayered spatiality of the novel, characterized postmodernist storytelling by the lack of a sense of universality, homogeneity, and linear time that stems from a distrust of linear narratives with endings and beginnings—in other words, the dominant role of space over time. For example, in *In the Country of Last Things*, the progression of the story depends on place rather than time, from street to apartment to library to Woburn House. She also pointed out that the work is a collage of various historical spaces:

Blume’s narrative is embedded with historical figures and events, among them are Ferdinand and Isabel, the Spanish monarchs who had sent Christopher Columbus on his journey; Anna Blume and Otto Frick whose names are reminiscent of Anne Frank and her father, Otto; the expulsion of the Jews from the library—a reference to the Holocaust; and so on. Their meaning, however, lies not in themselves, . . . But this spatialization bears no consequential relation to history because the historical references are detached from their historicity. (36-37)

Merlob stated that each character corresponds to different historical events, such as the Ho-

locust, but that all characters are collaged together, separate from their historical contexts. As mentioned earlier, Auster emphasizes that the situation depicted in this work is not a figment of his own imagination but is based on the events that have happened or are ongoing somewhere in the twentieth century (*Art* 306). In other words, the unimaginable and ever-collapsing world of the Country of Last Things is a collage of various historical events. Here, we can again point out the correspondence between “An Anna Blume” and *In the Country of Last Things*.

Let us also look at another poem that comes to mind from this collage of history and images of warfare and walking through it: *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot. The poem, like “An Anna Blume,” illustrates the chaotic atmosphere of post-World War I Europe in an avant-garde style interspersed with quotations from classics. Below are the last four lines of the poem:

These fragments I have shored against my ruins
Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo’s mad againe.
Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.
Shantih shantih shantih (2022)

It is not necessary to assume that Eliot was in Auster’s mind while he was shaping Anna Blume’s voice, but the lines evoke the twentieth century as an image of a wasteland: “These fragments I have shored against my ruins” unwittingly embodies Anna’s figure: “Anna Blume walks through [the] twentieth century” (*Art* 306).

Auster, who compiled an anthology of French poetry of the twentieth century, explains Dadaism in relation to World War I in its preface:

The war was not simply a conflict between armies, but a profound crisis of values that transformed European consciousness, and the younger poets, while having absorbed the lessons of Apollinaire and his contemporaries, were compelled to respond to this crisis in ways that were without precedent. . . . The Dada movement, which began in Zurich in 1916, was the most radical response to this sense of spiritual collapse. (*Art* 207)

The use of collage in representing the traumatic memory of war can be explained by Surrealism’s close relationship, from its inception, with contemporary advancements in psychology and psychoanalysis from its inception. André Breton, author of the

theoretical manifesto of Surrealism, *Manifeste du surréalisme* in 1927, was originally a medical student who had served in a mental hospital in the midst of World War I and was familiar with Freud's psychoanalysis from its early age. He was also influenced by the psychologists Pierre Jeannet and Jean Charcot (Tsukahara 176-77). The Surrealists' initial understanding of human psychology was largely informed by the work of psychologists during wartime.²

It was in 1980 that posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was officially recognized by the American Psychiatric Association in the third edition of *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III). However, the similar symptoms were already observed in soldiers returning from World War I. Walter Benjamin also noted that "men returned from the battlefield completely mute" (48) and stated the following in his essay "The Story Teller":

It's as if a capacity we had considered inalienable, the most reliable of all our capacities, has been taken from us: the ability to share experiences. One reason for this state of affairs is obvious: experience's stock has fallen in value. (48)

Benjamin posits that the capability to articulate experiences was compromised by the unutterable modern experience of the World War. From this perspective, the disjointed narration of "An Anna Blume" can be perceived as an attempt to give voice to the traumatic memories of war. The wasteland that appears before us through Anna's eyes is also linked to the trauma of modernity.

One of Auster's essays, "the Poetry of Exile" (1975), addresses his thoughts on the unspeakable. In this essay on Paul Celan, a concentration camp survivor and poet, Auster writes about Celan's poem *Todesfugue* in relation to telling the unspeakable: "The unspeakable yields a poetry that continually threatens to overwhelm the limits of what can be spoken" (83). Auster believes that Celan's poetry is imbued with the memory of the Holocaust and that it is the opposite of Adorno's "fatuous remark" (84).

The essay also describes Celan's meeting in the 1960s with Heidegger, a German philosopher who has been accused of supporting the Nazis, and Auster points out a reference to Heidegger's choice of silence and abandonment of responsibility for the worst crime in human history in *Todesfugue* as follows: "In the first line, *heidegängerisch* is an inescapable allusion to Heidegger—whose thinking was in many ways close to murderers" (91; italics

original). The word *heidegängerisch*, which Auster sees as a reference to Heidegger, was coined from the German words “heide” (wasteland) and “gang” (walk), meaning “walking through the wasteland.” Here, too, we encounter the theme of speaking of the unspeakable, the image of the wasteland, and walking through it.

3. The Angel in the Wasteland

Finally, we consider the image of the wasteland, which has appeared repeatedly throughout this article. It emerges before Anna’s eyes as a nightmarish, ever-disintegrating ruin. Therefore, as “Anna Blume walks through [the] twentieth century,” we have seen the twentieth century as a wasteland in previous sections. Holocaust survivor Paul Celan coined the word *heidegängerisch* [walking through the wasteland] in *Todesfugue*. Anne Frank also saw this wasteland. She wrote in her diary on July 15, 1944, just before she was arrested, “I see the world being slowly transformed into a wilderness” (332). Avant-garde artists, such as Kurt Schwitters and T. S. Eliot, quoted and patchworked words to express the chaotic wasteland after World War I. What is more, as Auster emphasized that the novel is based on events that happened or were ongoing somewhere in the twentieth century (*Art* 306), and Merob pointed out that the novel consists of collages of various historical spaces (36-37), this method of collage creates the wasteland of the story.³

This collage of history and the way it is brought to the present in the story reminds us of Walter Benjamin’s historical materialism, which was proposed in “On the Concept of History,” a few months before his suicide. It is a historical method of recalling and reviving memories in the present rather than seeing them in a continuum of progress. This historical materialism or progress is effectively represented in thesis IX, which uses Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus* (1920) as the angel of history:

There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at

his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is this storm. (392)

The storm of progress refers to the view of history as progress, which believes that history has a beginning and an end and that it advances and develops as it proceeds. Nazi Germany believed in this view, propagating the narrative that the Aryan race was superior and that by exterminating the Jews, they could get rid of mongrelism and create a better nation, leading to war and slaughter. Benjamin resists the idea of fascism and asserts that the task of historical materialism ought to be, in the words of political scientist Ronald Beiner, “not to make the future, but to save the past” (423). Anna likewise states that she must “rescue things before they reach this state of absolute decay” (36), and we can recognize the prototype of the Country of Last Things in this landscape of wind-blown rubble before Benjamin’s eyes. Anna says that there is always an extremely strong wind that blows away the starving and skinny people in the Country of Last Things:

There are people so thin, she wrote, they are sometimes blown away. The winds in the city are ferocious, always gusting off the river and singing in your ears, always buffeting you back and forth, always swirling papers and garbage in your path. (3)

Furthermore, in his interpretation of Walter Benjamin’s critique, Nobuyuki Kakigi describes the approach of historical materialism as telling history:

Telling history by quotation means “reversing” the myth’s narratives and salvaging the memories of the victims of catastrophes, freeing them from the chains of causality narrated in historicism. Only then can we put into words what each of the dead experienced. To write history is . . . to testify to the memory of the dead. (204; my translation)

Kakigi insists that telling history by quotations reverses the myth—the history of oppressors. This discussion leads us to conclude that the collage and quotation of history that Auster applies to his work are ways of defying the meta-narrative of progressive history and testifying to the memory of the dead. Benjamin also mentions the oppressed: “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception

but the rule” (“On the Concept of History” 392). The traumatic world, of which many people became aware for the first time during wartime emergencies, has always been familiar to the oppressed or minorities. From here, we realize that the ever-collapsing wilderness, with its strong winds, is a traumatic world that lies before the eyes of minorities. The city unfolds vividly before the eyes of the oppressed. The person who sees the landscape can be right around the corner from us. The Country of Last Things always exists next to our world, quietly and overwhelmingly.

The perspectives of the oppressed and the philosophy of things that describe their stories were also depicted in Auster’s more recent work, *Sunset Park* (2010). The story is set in 2008, just after the Lehman Brothers collapse, in Florida, where numerous individuals faced eviction from their homes as a result of the subprime mortgage crisis. While Auster’s previous works were written about the past, *Sunset Park* tries to capture the “now” of uncertain and difficult times. Some may find the setting of *Sunset Park* to be a far cry from the abstract world of *In the Country of Last Things*. Miles Heller is in a job known as “trashing out,” entering countless abandoned houses, clearing repossessed properties of their ejected occupants’ abandoned things, and has been taking pictures of “the innumerable cast-off things left behind by the departed families” (3):

Then, always, there are the objects, the forgotten possessions, the abandoned things. By now, his photographs number in the thousands, and among his burgeoning archive can be found pictures of books, shoes, and oil paintings, pianos and toasters, dolls, tea sets, and dirty socks, televisions and board games, party dresses and tennis racquets, sofas, silk lingerie, caulking guns, thumbtacks, plastic action figures, tubes of lipstick, rifles, discolored mattresses, knives and forks, poker chips, a stamp collection, and a dead canary lying at the bottom of its cage. (5)

The list of things tells eloquently the anger and sorrow of the dispossessed. Miles listens to the things speaking to him of the stories of despairing people and their ruined lives in the age of the Great Depression (5). Facing the time and undertaking its reality involves taking on tangible objects in front of us. This is most clearly shown in the act of repairing an abandoned house and living there.

All the characters in this novel attempt to restore the tangible reality of “here

and now” in their own distinct ways. For instance, Bing repairs “objects from an era that has all but vanished from the face of the earth” (73) in the Hospital for Broken Things. This carries forward the actions of Anna, the object hunter in *In the Country of Last Things*, who gathers things from the rubble and gives them meaning, as well as the ethos of Woburn House, the hospital that takes on the abandoned people later in the story.⁴ For Auster after “sunset,” facing the urban ruins of the catastrophic times and accepting the harsh reality means dealing with the tangible things that are right in front of us.

Comment

- 1 The epistolary form of this novel and the name Anna remind us of one famous historical person: Anne Frank (Wesseling, 496; Matsumura 29-30). Anne Frank kept a diary in the form of letters to herself (her imaginary friend Kitty) from June 12, 1942 to August 1, 1944. In addition, it is evident that Auster was conscious of Anne Frank, as she repeatedly appears in Auster’s autobiographical novel *The Invention of Solitude* (1982). The phrase “she wrote,” which he used to quote Anne Frank’s diary (*Invention* 157), also appears in the beginning of *In the Country of Last Things*, which I quoted at the beginning of this article. Thus, we can conclude that *In the Country of Last Things* is connected to Anne Frank’s diary and the traumatic Jewish history of the Holocaust.
- 2 Particularly influential in the development of early Surrealist automatic techniques were their studies of hypnosis and what was called psychological automatism, referring to involuntary actions and processes not under the control of the conscious mind, such as dreaming.
- 3 This relationship between a sense of catastrophe and the art of collage can also be attributed to postmodern historiography. The image of history as objectively given and as a process of progress has been undermined by Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* and Jean-François Lyotard’s collapse of the “grand narrative” (Lyotard xxiv–xxv). In *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*, Bertrand Westphal argued that after World War II, the “river metaphor of time” (Westphal 1) was dismantled, and the primacy of temporality (history) over space was overthrown. This is because history has progressed linearly and purposefully, only to see the horrors of the Shoah and war in the end. As a result, history has become disconnected and spatially unfolded in a sedimented manner, Westphal stated, drawing on Walter Benjamin:

History continues its march, as with Walter Benjamin's *Angelus Novus*. The wind rushes under the wings of the angel of history and carries him onward, inevitably, despite the overwhelming sadness caused by the spectacle unfolding before his eyes Synchrony seems to take precedence over diachrony. Events are crammed into the present, a process that Hermann Lübbe has called "musealization," in which every temporal moment is frozen and preserved as if in a museum. (Westphal 14; *italics original*).

The moment when synchrony prevails over diachrony, when history spreads out in parallel in space, is the scene of the rubble where the angel gazes sadly. At the beginning of this postmodern era, history splits into histories, and when it becomes clear that what has been considered *objectively correct* until then is just a story or ideology, things are freed from their diachrony and juxtaposed in space. Westphal asserts, "Postmodernism emerges from the ruins of the twentieth century: the smoking remains left by conflicts (especially by the Second World War)" (Westphal 3).

- 4 In *Sunset Park*, a reference to Walter Benjamin's "men returned from the battlefield completely mute" ("Storyteller" 48) also appears (*Sunset* 104), linking the narrative to traumatic historical catastrophes.

Works Cited

-
- Adorno, Theodor. *Prisms*. Translated by Samuel and Shierry Weber, MIT Press, 1981.
- Auster, Paul. *The Art of Hunger: Essays, Prefaces, Interviews*. Sun & Moon, 1992.
- . *In the Country of Last Things*. 1987. Faber & Faber, 2005.
- . *The Invention of Solitude*. 1982. Faber & Faber, 2010.
- . *Sunset Park*, Faber & Faber, 2010.
- Benjamin, Walter. "On the Concept of History." *Selected Writings*. Edited by Michael W. Jennings et al., vol. 4, Belknap Press, 1996, pp. 389-400.
- . "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov." *The Storyteller Essays*, New York Review Books, 2019, pp. 48-74.
- Bertrand, Westphal. *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*. Translated by Robert T. Tally Jr., Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
- Eliot, T. S. "The Waste Land." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 8th ed., edited by Nina Baym, Norton, 2013, pp. 2009-2022.
- Frank, Anne. *The Diary of a Young Girl: The Definitive Edition*. Translated by Susan Massotty, Penguin Books, 2007.
- Kakigi Nobuyuki. *Walter Benjamin: Yami wo Aruku Hihiyou* [Walter Benjamin: the Theory That Walk

- Through Darkness]. Iwanami Shinsho, 2020.
- Kida Gen. *Heidegger no Shisou* [the Philosophy of Heidegger]. Iwanami Shoten, 1993.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi, U of Minnesota P, 1984.
- Matsumura Misato. “Kioku no Kuni Kara no Tegami: Paul Auster no In the Country of Last Things ni Okeru Trauma to Katari [].” *Colloquia*, vol. 42, 2022, pp. 25-37.
- Merlob, Maya. “Textuality, Self, and World: The Postmodern Narrative in Paul Auster’s *In the Country of Last Things*.” *Critique*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2007, pp. 25-45, 112. *ProQuest*, search-proquest-com.kras1.lib.keio.ac.jp/docview/212429684?accountid=11815.
- Schwitters, Kurt. “An Anna Blume.” *Dada: Eine literarische Dokumentation* [Dada: A Literary Documentary], edited by Richard Huelsenbeck, Reinbek, 1964, p. 175.
- Shimokobe Michiko. *Rekishi to Trauma: Kioku to Boukyaku no Mechanism* [History and Trauma: Mechanism of Memory and Oblivion]. Sakuhinsha, 2000.
- Tsukahara, Fumi. *20seikishisou wo Yomitoku: Ningen ha Naze Hiningen ni Narerunoka* [Reading 20th-Century Thought: Why Can Humans Become Inhuman?]. Chikuma Shobou. 2011.
- Varvogli, Aliki. *The World That Is the Book: Paul Auster’s Fiction*. Liverpool UP, 2001. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/keio/detail.action?docID=38 0759.
- Wesseling, Elisabeth. “The Country of Last Things: Paul Auster’s Parable of the Apocalypse.” *Neophilologus*, vol. 75, no. 4, 1991, pp. 496-504.