

Acting, Thinking, and Telling: Anna Blume's Dilemma in Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things*

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The Problem of Action

Let us begin with some confusion. Anna Blume, the protagonist and primary narrator of Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* (1987) has travelled to a strange and insulated country to find her missing brother, yet his destiny remains a total mystery throughout the novel. The city where Anna has arrived is governed not only by contingency but an extreme randomness. Things, ways, houses, rules, even words disappear without warning. In this context, Anna says something rather odd and perplexing:

Faced with the most ordinary occurrence, you no longer know how to act, and because you cannot act, you find yourself unable to think. The brain is a muddle. All around you one change follows another, each day produces a new upheaval, the old assumptions are so much air and emptiness. (20)

In what follows, I shall situate Anna's dilemma in the context of political thought; then I shall discuss the genre of Anna's narrative and compare it to alternatives such as dystopia, journal, and testimony. As fictional testimony, the work has a number of connections with Primo Levi's factual account of Auschwitz. But rather than suggesting any single context for the novel, I ponder the possibility of reading it as a hybrid image of twentieth-century history.

I see a key to Anna Blume's dilemma in the intimate relationship between narrative, action, and thinking – in particular, the way Paul Ricoeur (1984) has discussed the theme under the title of “semantics of action” in his theory of triple layers of narrative mimesis. Following Ricoeur, I suggest that the capacity to act depends both on a cognitive capacity to analyse action and the world in terms of stories, and the

emotionally vital possibility of recounting traumatic experiences in narrative form. Not quite incidentally, the novel portrays the figures of a narrative social worker and a narrative doctor as the last possible helpers of the inhabitants of the doomed city.

Anna Blume's account of her dilemma blatantly contradicts the Platonic heritage of the order of things, according to which *thought* always precedes action, and the quality of thought affects the attributes of action. Plato's key actor was nothing less than a philosopher-ruler, a ruler who would be, above all, a philosopher (see Coleman 200: 81–114). But the privileging of thought over action belongs not only to the distant past. "No one could deny the international impact of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971), which almost single-handedly revived normative political philosophy and the contractualist tradition of political thought," writes Cécile Laborde (2002: 133). Rawls, indeed, has often been celebrated as the initiator of the new rise of political thought in the 1970s. Action does not profile in his theory. His version of political philosophy is all about the goals, the ideals that characterize a good policy.

In discussing the Stoics' influence on Western political thought, Frank Ankersmit accentuates the strong connectedness of action and thought in Stoicism: "the parallelism and sometimes identity of the order of thought and that of practical and ethical action. . . . The Stoa required of human beings a 'logical life'" (1996: 32). Since 1800, Ankersmit argues, the dethronement of monarchs and the period of revolutions multiplied the number of possible actors and ended the former unity of thought and action. A political party is one significant formation in this process, because it "at least to a certain extent still embodies the unity of thought and action" (36). But that is meagre solace. Max Weber points to a new divide between action and premeditation by maintaining that "the eventual outcome of political action frequently, indeed regularly, stands in a quite inadequate, even paradoxical relation to its original, intended meaning and purpose (Sinn)" (Weber 1994: 355). For Weber, there is and cannot be any unequivocal ethical ground for political action.

Action seems thus to gain more and more independence from and relevance for thought. This is obvious in Hannah Arendt's idea of action as taking the initiative and beginning something new. "In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities," she maintains (1958: 179). Yet she does

not specify whether thought or action comes first: "Although nobody knows whom he reveals when he discloses himself in deed or word, he must be willing to risk the disclosure" (180). No theorist – at least not to my knowledge – has presented the capacity to act as a precondition for thinking. Outside political thought, action is still often understood as orderly and planned, e.g.: "first, practice or action unfolds in a sequence shaped by beginning, middle, and end, suspension-resolution, means and end. Second, the reflective, narrating grasp of these elements, the story-telling aspect of actions, has the practical function of holding the action together, organizing its parts, and doing so, if need be, in the face of changed circumstances" (Carr 1986: 71). Action is thus presented as unfolding in instrumental and planned terms, like "labour" in Arendt's vocabulary – the maker of a table *first* has the idea of the table, as Plato teaches, and *then* produces it in a planned sequence (see Arendt 1958: 79–135). Auster's Anna Blume, instead, seems to be beyond the horizons of action *and* labour.

The Problem of Genre

It is time to have a closer look at Anna Blume's story. Alike Varvogli (2001), who has by and large been one of the best-informed interpreters of Paul Auster's work, characterizes the novel as a fictional "journal" (10) or "diary" (89). Yet the novel tells very explicitly that Anna's letter, covering a period of several years, is supposed to have been written within a mere few days from the end of the novel. As regards memory, accuracy, reliability, and the committed speech act, the difference is far-reaching. Anna articulates the problem clearly: "I sometimes wonder how much I have left out, how much has been lost to me and will never be found again, but those are questions that cannot be answered" (182). No illusion of accurate, daily notes is created in this novel.

The letter is address to "you," and we are informed of there being a reader, but not of his or her reactions. We do not even know whether the actual reader is the same "you" the letter addressed. Very early in the letter, Anna ponders her unclear motivation for writing in the first place. As she says, "To be honest, I have barely thought of you since I got here. 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. It doesn't

even matter if you read it.” Her final point on this issue is: “I am writing to you because you know nothing” (3).

For the study of narrative as a potential way of thinking, there are several points of interest here. From the beginning, Anna’s narrative is presented not as a “diary” or a message to an unknown audience; it is indeed a letter to an addressee who was forgotten for a long time but who has come back to Anna’s mind. Parallel to this forgotten and then remembered “you” is the rediscovered need, even an urge, to tell. *Why* and *how* does Anna Blume recover her need to tell? She reminds “you” of their childhood: “You could never get enough of my stories, of the worlds I used to make up for us to play inside of. The Castle of No Return, the Land of Sadness, the Forest of Forgotten Words” (10). The title of the novel thus has a double reference to childhood’s harmless storytelling and the motto adapted from Nathaniel Hawthorne.¹ Why then was “you” first forgotten and later again so important? The crucial point resides in the sentence “I am writing to you because you know nothing,” which frames the letter generically as testimony and thus suggests similarities with other important testimonies. In terms of Auster’s early work, the novel indeed seems to be exceptionally non-experimental. The genre of testimony may safely be characterized by the fact that the testifier herself, as actor, viewer, and reflector (Fludernik 1995) is not a would-be objective observer but a participant strongly restricted and affected by the circumstances attested.

In the early period of its reception, the novel was often characterized as a dystopia. Auster insistently resists this reading: “As far as I’m concerned, the book has nothing to do with science fiction. It’s quite fantastic 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 was the phrase I carried around in my head while I was working on the book” (1997: 320) But what exactly are the “historical realities” the novel is anchored in?

The siege of Leningrad, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the slums of metropolitan cities are elements mentioned by Auster. Yet there are still other aspects beyond these usually listed contexts. There are the *Euthanasia Clinics* of the city, to begin with. The city also receives most

¹ “Not a great while ago, passing through the gate of dreams, I visited that region of the earth in which lies the famous City of Destruction” (Hawthorne 1974: 186).

of its scarce energy by burning the valuable dead bodies: "All around the edges of the city are the crematoria – the so-called Transformation Centers – and day and night you can see the smoke rising up into the sky" (17). The allusion to crematoria, smoke continually rising, does not leave much space for guessing: the traces of the Holocaust/Shoah are distinctive in the novel.

And there is more to come. One day, again by chance and in despair, Anna Blume happens to escape into the closed National Library. There, in a room whose door she accidentally opens, she meets a group of Jewish men. Her astonishment suggests something she has not articulated earlier: "I thought all the Jews were dead" (95). This is a slightly perplexing comment. Although the novel repeats the reign of contingency and even mentions several changes of government, there must have been some organisation and continuity of persecution to warrant Anna's presumption. A sort of indirect totalitarianism rules in the city. Be that as it may, she blurts out to the Rabbi, and thus mentions for the first time in her letter that she herself is a Jew. The Rabbi becomes a friend and a confidant, but things do not last in the country. Not long after the first meeting Anna again returns to the room only to find an arrogant ethnographer busy studying a row of skulls on his desk. As he irritably notes, the Jews had just lost their permit to stay in the Library. His reply to Anna's question about the whereabouts of the Rabbi is curt and sardonic: "On his way to the promised land, no doubt" (113).

Hybrid City

The representation of the city, the setting of the novel, is rife with conflicting allusions. The form of letter allows for an aphoristic, even poetic style: "These are the last things. A house is there one day, and the next day it is gone. A street you walked down yesterday is no longer there today. Even the weather is in constant flux. . . . When you live in the city, you learn to take nothing for granted" (1–2). The city is extremely unproductive: burning human bodies and recycling past utility articles seem to be the only flourishing businesses. The endless recycling of remains is an inverted mirror-image of the huge and unending productivity of modern industrialism.

Anna's words "All around you one change follows another, each day produces a new upheaval" (20) ring an oddly familiar note. In

1982, five years before Auster's novel, Marshall Berman published an influential book, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*. The title and one of the key inspirations of the book come from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Berman repeats the famous words of the *Communist Manifesto*:

All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face . . . their relations with their fellow men. (Marx & Engels, in Berman 21)

“All that is solid melts into air” could well be the other motto of the novel. Auster, however, is totally devoid of Marx's optimism about the future of social relations. The pressing contingency, the burden of change, turns out to be the enemy of all lasting relationships. Relations require a living past and visions of the future, both of which are jeopardized by the pressing weight of immediacy in the city. The image of industrialist capitalism gives way to the more extreme experience of concentration camps.

In his *Survival in Auschwitz*, Primo Levi has an ominous sentence: “Death begins with the shoes” (1996: 34). Shoes are a crucial worry in Anna Blume's city as well. When Anna's precious shoes finally wear out, she lets herself to be coaxed into a human slaughterhouse, is almost killed, and loses her child. Levi's account of his Auschwitz experiences arrives at conclusions oddly similar to those of Anna Blume about the limits of thinking:

one loses the habit of hoping in the Lager, and even of believing in one's own reason. In the lager it is useless to think, because events happen for the most part in an unforeseeable manner; and it is harmful, because it keeps alive a sensitivity which is a source of pain, and which some providential natural law dulls when suffering passes a certain limit. (1996: 171)

In this passage, Levi is not concerned about the freedom of thought in the conventional meaning of the term – in the sense of freedom to express and share thoughts publicly. His concern goes deeper – to the cognitive and emotional preconditions of thought. Thinking in the camp may be hopeless, painful, and even harmful. In the Third Reich,

freedom of thought was severely curtailed, whereas in the camps, the very *capacity* to think was jeopardized.

The difficulty of thinking seems to beget similar and paradoxical criticism of wishful thinking in Levi and Anna Blume's letter. Anna's description of the language of the "Ghosts" could be compared with Levi's analysis of the naïve newcomers, or even the "*muselmen*" of the camp: "All this belongs to the language of ghosts. There are many other possible kinds of talks in this language. Most of them begin when one person says to another: I wish" (*Country* 10). Elsewhere, Anna expresses this attitude of thinking and not thinking succinctly: "Now I am common sense and hard calculation. I don't want to be like the others. I see what their imaginings do to them, and I will not let that happen to me" (11).

Thought is impeded by extreme hunger. For Levi, "the fight against hunger, cold and work leaves little margin for thought, even for this thought" (124–25). In similar terms, Anna Blume registers the lack of politics and resistance: "For there are no politics in the city as such. The people are too hungry, too distracted, too much at odds with each other for that" (17). Auster's emphasis is not on a direct suppression of oppositional action but on the pressing circumstances.

How do these austere conditions relate to narrative thinking? For a better understanding of Auster's thoughts about the necessity to act for the capacity to think, let us take a detour, starting with Mark Turner's version of cognitive narrative theory in *Literary Mind* (1996). Turner maintains that "most of our action consists of executing small spatial stories: getting a glass of juice from the refrigerator, dressing, bicycling to the market" (19). He adds that we are able to "recognize small spatial stories on the basis of partial information" (19). Through extended understanding of such spatial stories, he argues, "narrative imagining is our fundamental form of predicting" (20).

One problem in Turner's argument is that he does not theorize the difference between enacting spatial, behavioural stories and proper action. Yet, even this simple behavioural level of following acquired cultural scripts is by no means as trivial as Galen Strawson (2004: 439) has suggested. Strawson criticizes the idea that "human beings typically see or live or experience their lives as a narrative or story of some sort" (428), and maintains that this is untrue in any non-trivial sense. He continues: "if someone says, as some do, that making coffee is a narrative that involves Narrativity, because you have to think ahead,

do things in the right order, and so on, and that everyday life involves many such narratives, then I take it the claim is trivial” (439).

In learning narrativity and recounting one’s own experiences, such cultural scripts are a basic step. For example, when “young children recount *routine, scripted events*, their narratives tend to be more detailed than those depicting less common incidents” (Ochs and Capps 2001: 78). When children grow up, the focus moves towards unexpected and unusual aspects of experience. These first steps may look trivial but they are still integral parts of the “phenomenology of the capable human being,” as Paul Ricoeur (2005: 89–104) has it. There are two separate problems of (non)triviality. First, what happens when the right and capacity to make coffee is challenged? Second, where is the decisive borderline between trivial and non-trivial? The script of “going to restaurant” is a widely known and shared example. When situated in the context of racial segregation or actual risk of suicide bomber, the script is far from trivial, yet not without the elements of the more basic script (see Schank and Abelson 1977).

Under extreme conditions, the loss of basic scripts is tangible. As Anna Blume writes:

Bit by bit, the city robs you of certainty. There can never be any fixed path, and you can survive only if nothing is necessary to you. Without warning, you must be able to change, to drop what you are doing, to reverse. . . . But everything happens too fast here, the shifts are too abrupt, what is true one minute is no longer true the next. (6, 25)

Certainty seems here to be intimately linked to the capacity to execute routinely the kind of scripts Strawson called trivial. The extreme randomness of city life robs one of a great deal of the most elementary cognitive tools in orienting oneself in everyday life. Without the necessary backing of cultural scripts or the capacity to properly imagine more than the next step, potential thinking is “so much air and emptiness” (20) – brains simply are far too overburdened to work properly. At least a moderate reliance on these trivial-looking scripts and schemata seems to be a pre-condition for more severe thinking and planning in social contexts. David Herman’s (2002: 27–51) finer distinction between states, events, and actions in narratives helps to understand Anna’s dilemma. She is over and over again unable to maintain any state as she likes, and she is exposed to events rather

than able to be an agent herself. Her moves, accordingly, fit more often the basic category of "activities" than the more controlled notions of "accomplishment" or "achievement."

The Semantics of Action

Paul Ricoeur (1984) and Monika Fludernik (1996) take a more helpful step from the behavioural level towards action in the context of narrative understanding. In theorizing the relationship between experience, action, and narrative, Ricoeur enlists the Aristotelian idea of *mimesis* as an "imitation of *action*." Narrative, in this horizon, is about understanding, orienting, and accounting of human action. In order to create a basic phenomenological relationship between these operations of narrative, Ricoeur introduces the idea of the "semantics of action." This semantics is presented as a precondition for understanding one's own action, perceiving action in a meaningful way, and the capacity to narrate. Fludernik adapts the very same notion of *mimesis* as the first element of her own model of narrativity ("My *level I* . . . is therefore identical with Ricoeur's *Mimesis I'*"; 43, bold replaced by italics).

What is new in Fludernik's reception of Ricoeur is the reading of the semantics of action explicitly in terms of cognition and even including the aforementioned "scripts" in Ricoeur's thought. Fludernik takes more distance from Ricoeur's theory on the level of emplotting and configuration, by arguing that Ricoeur's emphasis on temporality leaves the "dynamic of narrative *experience*" oddly out of the picture (24). She quotes (Fludernik 1996: 23) the following passage from Ricoeur:

The intelligibility engendered by emplotment finds a first anchorage in our competence to utilize in a significant manner the conceptual network that structurally distinguishes the domain of action from that of physical movement. . . . *Actions* imply *goals*, the anticipation of which is not confused with some foreseen or predicted result, but which commit the one on whom the action depends. *Actions*, moreover, refer to *motives*, which explain why someone does or did something, in a way that we clearly distinguish from the way one physical event leads to another. *Actions* also have *agents*, who do and can do things which are taken as *their* work, or *their* deed. As a result, these agents can

be held responsible for certain consequences of their actions. In this network, the infinite regression opened by the question “Why?” is not incompatible with the finite regression opened by the question “Who?” To identify an agent and to recognize this agent’s motives are complementary operations. We also understand that these agents act and suffer in circumstances they did not make that nevertheless do belong to the practical field, precisely inasmuch as they circumscribe the intervention of historical agents in the course of physical events and offer favorable and unfavorable occasions for their action. (1984: 54–55; italics mine)

For Fludernik, this level is both “pre-textual” and “pre-narrative,” and provides the “cognitive basis for story comprehension at its most elemental level” (23). At the same time, I add, it provides the cognitive basis for comprehension and orientation of action. The proposed view of the role of human action at the core of narrative theory can be easily countered by noting the human ability to narrativize even such phenomena as the movements of geometric patterns (Battersby 2006: 38). The metaphorical power of narrative is truly remarkable. The cognitive point of the semantics of action, however, is that geometric patterns or theoretical abstractions do not understand or account for their movements in terms of this vocabulary. The mimetic circle concerns only the sphere of narrative and human action.

There are several points that I want to make by reading this passage. First, Ricoeur deliberately makes his distinction between his “semantics of action” and the sphere of mere physical, behavioural movements; narratives are thus about proper and complex action. Next, Ricoeur adopts concepts and perspectives from early narratology, starting from Vladimir Propp’s (1968 [1928]) work, but instead of delving into the deep structures or functional models, turns to the *semantic network* of action as such; the language acts of asking who? what? why? and attributing responsibility, honor, and guilt as relevant in terms of narrative and action alike. Finally, this semantics of action is supposed to work in a triple way: it orients the agents to *understand* their own actions; it orients the spectators to *perceive* other’s action in meaningful ways; and it offers a core vocabulary of *actual telling*, accounting for action.

My purpose is not to define or confine narrative in strict Aristotelian terms as the representation of action. Rather, I consider the option

that we should possibly take the practical and cognitive relevance of this semantics of action more seriously. Indeed, Ricoeur links the cognitive and pragmatic aspects intimately: "To master the conceptual network as a whole" he says, "and each term as one member of the set, is to have that competence we can call practical understanding" (55). Should we consider this particular field of acting, thinking, and telling as a particular form of life, or as its cognitive basis? At least, I suggest that this idea of the semantics of action as a practical field should make Auster's and Levi's ideas about the difficulty of thinking more understandable.

Thinking without Space

Semantics of actions is radically curtailed under the conditions of the Holocaust or in Anna Blume's city. As a matter of fact, Primo Levi rather explicitly recounts his *expulsion* from the field of action – through the episode just after his deportation to Auschwitz when he tried to use an icicle to alleviate his terrible thirst:

I opened the window and broke off the icicle but at once a large, heavy guard prowling outside brutally snatched it away from me. "Warum?" I asked him in my poor German. "Hier is kein warum" (there is no why here) he replied, pushing me inside with a shove. (1996: 29)

Open a window, stretch out a hand, take an icicle, and suck it. This is truly a trivial script, but a script whose interrupted execution has non-trivial consequences. The extent of the degradation represented here may be approached with the help of Turner and Ricoeur. Turner discusses what he calls "the source-action stories" that help us to understand more complex and abstract events: "Grasping a physical object so as to control it is a common bodily action performed by an actor. If we grasp a physical object we can do what we want with it. We can put it into our mouth, throw it, throw it away, give it away" and so on. (1996: 33). In other words, Levi is out of control of his most elementary bodily movements. He is reduced to the position of a helpless infant. But the statement about the absence of "warum" reflects the fact that he was also derailed out of the field and semantics of action. If there is no *why*, there is no responsible agent, thus no *who* either; there is no need for

reasons and motives of commands. In a prisoner's suit, and reduced to the tattooed number, he is, indeed, not meant to be a distinct *who*. Auster's Anna Blume experiences a similar reduction of identity and damage to appearance, because she is otherwise "too pretty for daily contact with the streets" (59).

There is no need to overdo this argument. Of course both prisoners, Primo Levi and Anna Blume, engage in hard thinking every moment they are able to do so. At issue is impaired and restricted thought. At first, Levi and his fellow Italians meet on Sundays, but they soon stop due to their diminishing number: "It was better not to think" (1996: 37). Only after a good day, and for a few hours, is it possible "to think of our mothers and wives, which usually does not happen" (76). Here the obstacle is emotional since the content of thinking is the past and the loved ones. No wonder then that Anna Blume has not thought "you" for years before her letter. Both Levi and Auster's narrator make a significant distinction between "emotional thinking" and "thinking as hard calculation." Anna's older friend, Isabel, gives her a hard lecture on the survival on the streets:

Never *think* about anything, she said. Just melt into the street and pretend your body doesn't exist. No *musings*; no *sadness* or *happiness*; no anything but the streets, all empty inside, *concentrating* only on the next step you are about to take. (57; italics mine)

Thinking about emotional topics and giving space to emotions is here a version of thinking that must be consciously confined in terms of time (to minimally short periods) and place (to exceptionally protected ones). Of course it is impossible to carry out this task without concentration or without the other kind of thinking – Anna's "hard calculation" (11).

But Anna Blume's original problem concerned thinking about the immediate future. The constriction of the space for this type of thinking was also noted by Levi: "Although we do not think for more than a few minutes a day, and then in a strangely detached and external manner, we well know that we will end in selections" (103). Even here, the emotions are dangerously close by; hence the need for "strangely detached" thought.

Anna Blume ponders such a "strangely detached and external manner" in slightly different words. In addition to all kinds of emotionally charged thinking, the *ethical* sensitivity of thinking is challenged:

That is the dilemma. On the one hand, you want to survive, to adapt, to make the best of things as they are. But, on the other hand, to accomplish this seems to entail killing off all those things that once made you think yourself as human. Do you see what I am trying to say? In order to live, you must make yourself die. (20)

In the chapter "The Drowned and the Saved" Levi writes: "Survival without renunciation of any part of one's own moral world . . . was conceded only to very few superior individuals, made of the stuff of martyrs and saints" (1996: 92). Levi does not claim to belong to those exceptional people; in this chapter he used the present tense to account for the generalized predicament of the captives. The "you" of the passage above is obviously, likewise, no longer is the specific addressee of Anna's letter. It vacillates between Anna herself and a generalized *you* facing a more general human dilemma. But if one looks at the passage more closely, one can realize the sudden absence of concrete reference to the specific city and specific situation. With this play of "double-deicted you" (Herman 2002: 338–45), the actual reader (at least this reader) is invited to contemplate his or her own survival and adaptation.

Narrative Recovery?

Just after her severe injury and miscarriage, Anna Blume is – by coincidence – found by the staff members of a hospital and charity institution called *Woburn House*. Entering the house means a dramatic change. Now she has protection and care, and is surrounded by people who have names, histories, and normal emotions. Boris Stepanovits, who works at the institution and is a playful caricature of post-modern personality, keeps telling her fictional and fantastic versions of his past, most of all to cheer her up. After her partial recovery, Anna starts working for the house. Normally, the house provided a shelter for a two-week period. Anna's job is to interview the potential patients. The interview

never took more than a couple of minutes, but it was the rare interview that stopped at that point. They all wanted to tell me their stories, and I had no choice but to listen. It was a different story every time, and yet each story was finally the same. . . . I heard hundreds of these stories, and there were times when I didn't think I could stand it anymore. I had to be sympathetic, to

nod in all the right places, but the placid, professional manner I tried to maintain was a poor defense against the things I heard. (143–44)

The mere transition from the chaos of the streets to the temporary shelter of Woburn House opens the gates of storytelling. As a traumatized person herself, Anna has real difficulties in enduring and being sympathetic at the same time. Some stories are too much for her, like those of girls who worked as prostitutes at the Euthanasia Clinics. But the main point is that after her hazardous years in the city, Anna is now partly protected and thickly surrounded by stories.

Anna's reflections on stories grow deeper when her lost partner, Sam Farr, also finds his way to the House. At that time, the House has neither a doctor nor drugs left. For this acute reason, Victoria Woburn, the owner and director of the house, has an idea of converting Sam into a fake doctor. He shall just have a white coat, placid manners, and then he will just listen patiently. For Anna, the plan is at first a riotous fraud and betrayal, yet it is instituted nonetheless. The outcome is Sam's turning into an impostor-cum-narrative doctor, who, to Anna's initial dismay, is a great success: "He had a way of listening to them that made them want to talk, and words came flooding from their mouths the moment he sat down to be with them" (167). By contrast to Anna, he has his training as a journalist and he has his white coat and the fake title as doctor to keep himself within the confines of a role. He is thus better equipped to protect himself against the overflowing, transference trauma. Sam's success has further consequences:

His pose as a doctor had suddenly given him access to the intimate thoughts of others, and these thoughts now became a part of who he was. His interior world grew larger, sturdier, more able to absorb the things that were put into it. (168)

Anna reckons that other people's narratives created more space in Sam's mind and changed the way's he was thinking. An indirect comment on the difference between Anna's and Sam's reactions to their storytellers might be found in Domick LaCapra's *History in Transit* (2004). Even a historian whose work comprises the experience of victims of trauma needs an emphatic and not just a professionally detached attitude; however, empathy risks sliding into a full identification, with all of its traumatizing consequences. LaCapra therefore suggests an intermediary

attitude of “emphatic unsettlement” (76–77, 81): the stories heard must not leave the listener untouched; they should indeed raise questions about his or her own identity; yet the receiver has to be able to return to him or herself, without fully identifying with the victim. With the help of his fake title, imposed identity, and white coat, Sam is able to receive the traumatizing stories without too deep identification or too detached coolness: he nevertheless is unsettled, which is why his “interior world” grows “larger.” This emphatic unsettlement, however, is precisely one of the attitudes both Levi in the camp and Anna in the streets want to avoid and control, since all kinds of unsettlements are simply life-threatening. Under the circumstances, it simply is the wrong kind of thinking. In Woburn House, Anna is therefore working through and unpacking her whole model of “common sense and hard calculation” (11).

Let me summarize the script. Anna is rescued from the streets; she gets care and food. She is cuddled up with the stories of the friendly person at the Woburn House. She is, in a manner of speaking, back within the field of semantics of action though not free from the atrocities of the country. She starts interviewing and listening to would-be-patients. She has difficulties in receiving the worst stories. Sam starts working as a narrative doctor. Anna sees that Sam's inner world is enlarged by listening to stories. Though early on in her letter she says, “I am all common sense and hard calculation,” at this point, having lived through the Woburn-House experience, she is already deeply altered. The whole sentence, articulated in the present tense, can be best understood as her returning to relive her past in the streets of the city and thus pertaining to the time prior to that of her narration. Retaining exclusively common sense and hard calculation would, first of all, rule out her project of writing the letter in the absence of any concrete reason or benefit at hand.

It is a few weeks after her realization of Sam's new role that Anna finally, and apparently by chance, finds an old and unused notebook. This is the time when the remaining members of the Woburn House staff have decided to try an escape from the country in their old car. Anna does not expect much. “Anything is possible, and that is almost the same as nothing, almost the same as being born into a world that has never existed” (188). Still the point is that the group of friends will take action. During this hectic preparation for escape, Anna is finally and fervently writing her letter. The whole narrative embeddedness, the low

likelihood of escaping, the realization of the relevance of stories – all of these invoke the memory of “you,” and the urge to write.

The Anna who arrived in the city and lived there for many hard years had no time or need to write. As she was outside the reign of the semantics of action, she did not even care. A diary would have been a part of her past bourgeois foolishness, incompatible with hard calculation. A diary would orient us to study the representation of the city; whereas testimony directs us to examine the performance of writing – and Anna’s slow growth to the narrative way of thinking and the narrative way of telling “you” about the city of last things. The idea of a “total representation” of the city, in the form of Sam’s huge manuscript, was burned to ashes years before. Anna is writing partly because the other people, “you” as well as the escaping team, have grown important as fellow humans.

Level of Thought

Both Primo Levi and Paul Auster study the limits and necessities of thought under extreme conditions. To perform this task, they resort to a thoroughly paradoxical language of thinking hard versus thinking at all. These paradoxes can be at least partly resolved in terms of different meanings of thought that the two authors use in the works discussed. Both indicate how thinking about the whole moral consequences of one’s deeds may be disastrous, yet also how the exclusion of ethically oriented thinking may entail “killing off all those things that once made you think yourself as human” (Auster 20). Emotionally charged thinking about one’s relationships, past events, and wishes for future may also be a life-threatening diversion. Indeed, Anna Blume let herself to be lured into a human slaughterhouse because she was “too lost in [her] own thoughts to be thinking about anything except how glad Sam would be when [she] returned” (124).

Yet, at the core of the dilemma is the risk of losing the capacity to think altogether: “Faced with the most ordinary occurrence, you no longer know how to act, and because you cannot act, you find yourself unable to think. The brain is a muddle” (20).

Action does not need to follow any prescribed policy or Platonic idea of its result. Yet knowing and action are *circularly* connected. Anna is concerned about “how” to act, not about not knowing an acceptable objective. This is the point when even the hard calculation has its risks. Thinking does not have any repose or any help from cultural

scripts. This is the point when one is furthest away from any narrative organization of a situation and from one's own future, when one is reduced to a panicky immediacy. In these extreme circumstances the person is excluded from the culturally significant field of the semantics of action and from basic cognitive scripts of spatial stories. The withdrawal from the field of action engenders restrictions of ethical reflection and personal, emotional commitment to being a character who considers responsibility, guilt, and worth.

But what happens to the inhabitants of the city after their return to the streets? As a matter of fact, Anna considers the whole temporary shelter and care as a cruel and inhuman game without a genuine chance to give people a new course of life, even a start of such. Many a resident commits suicide rather than return to the streets. Temporary care and a possibility to tell your story do not change the harsh conditions of the country. This not an easy self-help book on benign storytelling.

I read Auster's novel as being about the tight and difficult connection between action, thinking, and telling in the risky endeavour of being a human being. Primo Levi wrote at the historical time after the Nazi camps had been destroyed and, in that limited sense, belonged to the past. Auster's city denotes the whole twentieth century, as he sees it. The city is still there. Anna Blume does what is possible. She tries to escape and writes to testify, to document at least some traces of the doomed city. In the same sense, the author leaves us without any indication of the attitude of the reader of the letter, its addressee. Why does he or she not react to this letter? Why is he or she silent? This uneasiness encourages the actual reader to take the role of "you," taking a stance as regards the atrocities of twentieth century.

The very last words of the novel are remarkable: "Once we get to where we are going, I will try to write to you again, I promise" (188). In fully admitting the radical openness of her future, Anna nevertheless reasserts her commitment to being a responsible agent who has a future, who continues to be herself.² This, if anything, attests her return to the field of the semantics of action.

² "I shall entrust to promise making the burden of bearing the destiny of ipseity, in defiance of circumstances that threaten to ruin the identity of the same. The proud assertion 'I will do it' expresses in language the risky posture of ipseity, as self-contingency that goes beyond the safety of mere sameness" (Ricoeur 2005: 103). Promise-making is the key tool to control the unforeseeable consequences of human action in Hannah Arendt's theory of action (1958).

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