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# The Physicality of Writing in Paul Auster's *White Spaces* and *Winter Journal*

François Hugonnier

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“If it really has to be said, it will create its own form.”

Paul Auster (1995: 104)

- <sup>1</sup> *White Spaces* is a short matrix text written by the poet, novelist and film-maker Paul Auster in the winter of 1978-1979. This meditation on the body, on silence, language and narration is Auster's immediate reaction to his “*epiphanic moment of clarity*” (2012: 220, original emphasis) which happened during a dance rehearsal in New York. Initially entitled “Happiness, or a Journey through Space” and “A Dance for Reading Aloud”,<sup>1</sup> this hybrid piece of poetic prose was retrospectively considered as “the bridge between writing poetry and writing prose” (1995: 132), and “the bridge to everything you have written in the years since then” (2012: 224). Consequently it features not only some of the main themes of Auster's poetry and future fiction, but also early experimentations with the verbal and non-verbal mechanisms of story-telling, as well as with the physicality of writing.
- <sup>2</sup> In *Winter Journal*, Auster retrospectively contextualizes this “epiphanic moment”, stating that “Writing begins in the body, it is the music of the body” (2012: 224). Indeed, as early as 1967, he had claimed that “The world is in my head. My body is in the world” (2007: 203), already drafting the outline of a philosophy of language hinging on the interconnection between the body and the world. According to Auster, writing is a silent physical activity propelled by the rhythm of breath, step and heart-beat — a linguistic and spatial motion articulated by the body. Story-telling is channeled through this moving, feeling and communicating apparatus capturing joy, despair and suffering, and ultimately putting them into words like a “faceless scribe” (2003: 378). Emphasizing the inner/outer motion of language itself, *White Spaces* and *Winter Journal* underline the fact that in spite of their core *silences*, stories are meant to be *voiced*.

- 3 In order to tackle the paradoxical journey of Auster's creative impulse, we will trace his early attempts with the physicality of writing in *White Spaces*, drawing from the original text, alternative drafts and later insights in *Winter Journal*. The groundbreaking development of *unwords*, sentences and paragraphs on the page — in other terms the sudden syntagmatic and lexical mutations inspired by moving bodies — bear witness to the birth of a writer's organic prose. After analyzing Auster's binary process from breath, heart-beat and "step to words", we will highlight his investigation of sensory abilities and limitations through his translations of sound and silence, visible and invisible, contact and loneliness, space and void, breath and death. As Auster's semiotic dance of the senses makes room for trauma writing and cyclical failure, we will finally address the physical and narrative implications of feeling, falling and failing.

## 1. From "step to words": the written body and the body writing

- 4 Facing the choreographer's inability to put into words the December 1978 dance rehearsal, Paul Auster, who had "not written a poem in more than a year" (2012: 221), suddenly overcame the inadequacy of language, which had been the vehicle for both his creativity and imprisonment: "the spell / That welds step to words / And ties the tongue to its faults" ("Spokes", Auster 2007: 27). The next day, he set out to experiment with poetic prose, following the music of silence that led him to embrace — step by step, word by word — linguistic randomness and spatial wandering:

Something happens, and from the moment it begins to happen, nothing can ever be the same again.

Something happens. Or else, something does not happen. A body moves. Or else, it does not move. And if it moves, something begins to happen. And even if it does not move, something begins to happen.

It comes from my voice. But that does not mean these words will ever be what happens. It comes and goes. If I happen to be speaking at this moment, it is only because I hope to find a way of going along, of running parallel to everything else that is going along, and so begin to find a way of filling the silence without breaking it. ([1980], 2007: 155)

- 5 *White Spaces* is composed of several paragraphs, preceded by white spaces, whose length increasingly expands, thereby marking visually the birth of Auster's cross-genre narrative prose. The writing speaks of its own beginning. Each paragraph starts without indentation. This poetic alignment is used again more than thirty years later in Auster's hybrid memoir *Winter Journal*. The first eight paragraphs of *White Spaces* (three of which are quoted above) grow from two to sixteen lines. The "silent" / "voice" and "something" / "nothing" dichotomies, which saturate Auster's prose from the onset, herald fundamental aspects of his aesthetics. In the first sentence, the commas delineate a central proposition. It is balanced by opposites ("Something" / "nothing") and figures the author "coming back to life" (2012: 224) through a motion in time and space. This motion surfaces with the unpredictability and desubjectification of an external force ("it begins"). The friction of opposites ("happens" / "does not happen"; "moves" / "does not move") gives shape and rhythm to the text and imitates the interaction of bodies moving in space. Contrary to the choreographer, Paul Auster does not want to ruin this subtle equilibrium with awkward words ("filling the silence

without breaking it"). A word-for-word explanation forces meaning into the audience, who should instead infer significance and grace from silence's non-verbal commands.

- 6 By claiming that it is "running parallel to everything else", the narrative voice<sup>2</sup> uses the lexical connotations of a flux. A stream of language, comparable to running water or hurrying feet, is produced and commented upon in order to describe, if not the thing seen, at least the way language, as an inadequate tool, might accompany the ungraspable motion of bodies in space. As has often been noted in Auster's work, writing involves composing with the irreducible difference between sign and object. It is about finding the right direction in repetition: one foot forward, and then the other. It is about listening to the words' own pace as they stir the writer's "living hand" (2012: 165).<sup>3</sup> This introductory excerpt also implies the need for both writer and reader (or listener) to listen for the undercurrents of speech and, as epitomized in his later novels filled with embedded stories, of story-telling.
- 7 Just as in a dance performance, the writer needs to use the step as a primary unit. Auster alludes to it more clearly a few pages later in *White Spaces*, and comes back to it in *Winter Journal*. Both extracts are quoted below:

I remain in the room in which I am writing this. I put one foot in front of the other. I put one word in front of the other; and for each step I take I add another word, as if for each word to be spoken there were another space to be crossed, a distance to be filled by my body as it moves through this space. ([1980], 2007, 158, emphases added)

In order to do what you do, you need to walk. Walking is what brings the words to you, what allows you to hear the rhythms of the words as you write them in your head. One foot forward, and then the other foot forward, the double drumbeat of your heart. Two eyes, two ears, two arms, two legs, two feet. That, and then this. Writing begins in the body, it is the music of the body, and even if the words have meaning, can sometimes have meaning, the music of the words is where the meanings begin. You sit at your desk in order to write down the words, but in your head you are still walking, always walking, and what you hear is the rhythm of your heart, the beating of your heart. [...] Writing as a lesser form of dance. (2012: 224-25, emphases added)

- 8 Writing is an outgrowth of physical symmetry and binarity, as discussed and practiced in these passages ("One foot" / "the other", "One word" / "another" [2007]; "One" / "the other", "Two eyes, two ears, two arms" [2012]). The form and meaning of the telling are orchestrated by the moving body. A key illustration of this pattern is the "double drumbeat" of the writer's heart, as the words simultaneously provide rhythmic and lexical mimicking thanks to a double alliteration in /d/ and /b/. In Auster's "landscape of random impulse", such rare moments of linguistic suitability are celebrated.
- 9 After *White Spaces*, *Winter Journal* offers a different narrative entryway into his "second incarnation as a writer" (2012: 224, emphasis added). The act of re-telling Auster's re-birth further mirrors the multi-faceted doublings. First, we should make out two narrative voices responding to each other ("I" in *White Spaces* / "you" in *Winter Journal*), and underline the systematic doublings of the pronouns within given sentences and paragraphs. Second, we need to focus on the flow of writing, which is animated by the sheer force of repetition and variation: a noun, nuanced by an adjective, a comma, the repetition of the same substantive preceded by another adjective. Auster gets to the heart of things by "hew[ing]" language (2007: 39, 91), by picking awkward signs out of the rubble of the post-Babelian era. The binary rhythm and structure ("This" / "that"),

the doublings (“each” / “each”, “space” / “space”) and the variations also occur at grammatical and syntactical levels (“**to be crossed**” / “**to be filled**”, “**have meaning**” / “**have meaning**”). A similar morpho-syntactic shift occurs at word-level thanks to alliteration (“**remain**” / “**room**” / “**writing**” [2007]; “**what**” / “**walking**” / “**words**” / “**write**” [2012]). Repetition and variation allow Auster to test both the appropriateness of each notion and the musical quality of each linguistic sign, step by step, heartbeat after heartbeat (“*still walking* / *always walking*”; “*the rhythm of your heart*” / “*the beating of your heart*”).

- 10 The act of writing requires losing oneself in an organic music, as if the words were alive, freely animated and dictated to the writer: “In other words, it says itself, and our mouths are merely the instruments of the saying of it” (Auster 2007: 158). This impersonal view of writing and speaking goes hand in hand with Auster’s belief not in inspiration so much as in “the unconscious” (Busnel). He remains faithful to a natural and physical phenomenon which should not be overloaded, restricted or misled by the intellect, as he told François Busnel upon publication of *Winter Journal*. Accordingly, the “voice” is a “function” and a “motion” of the body, as well as an “extension of the mind” that reaches out to the other. Its impulse is governed by randomness and the craving for interconnectedness with the world:

To think of motion not merely as a function of the body but as an extension of the mind. In the same way, to think of speech not as an extension of the mind but as a function of the body. Sounds emerge from the voice to enter the air and surround and bounce off and enter the body that occupies that air, and though they cannot be seen, these sounds are no less a gesture than a hand is when outstretched in the air towards another hand, and in this gesture can be read the entire alphabet of desire. (Auster 2007: 156)

- 11 With a chiasmus — yet another trope emphasizing the mirroring processes at work in the act of writing — Paul Auster reproduces the interactive motion of the (inner and outer) self and the (outer and inner) world. Language is presented as an inadequate but substantial means of interaction between human beings, as it travels freely through the air. The loneliness of Auster’s characters, writing in locked rooms (in *The New York Trilogy*, *In the Country of Last Things*, etc.), is but the extension of their inner struggle with language (say, Mr Blank in *Travels in the Scriptorium*). The writer is trapped in his own head with invisible, opaque words, and his walking body is enclosed in a space delimited by four walls. Consequently, the motion of bodies and words might pave the way out of solitary confinement.
- 12 During the dance rehearsal, Paul Auster was “saved” and “brought back to life” (2012: 220) by the silent motion of bodies and the articulation of their gracious non-verbal sentences in an “alphabet of desire” (2007: 156). The dancers’ bodies traveled through the air in total silence, like words on the page, surrounded by soundless white spaces: “Bodies in motion, bodies in space, bodies leaping and twisting through empty, unimpeded air” (2012: 220). From that moment on, the physical motion of body language enabled Auster to obey his own body’s commands, all the while keeping in mind that his “body is in the world”, and that “the world”, like words and images springing from the unconscious, “is [itself] in [his] head”. Naturally, the silence/speech and inner/outer dichotomies are tackled through the translation of the untranslatable. Within the same eight-page piece, Auster addresses the paradoxes of language by questioning logocentrism and scrutinizing his sensory abilities.

## 2. Probing sensory abilities and limitations (from a semiotic dance of the senses to a synesthesia of emptiness)

- 13 Paul Auster reminds us that the world cannot be put into words because of two factors: “the inadequacy of words” (2007: 161) and the limitation of senses.<sup>4</sup> In order to grasp the full extent of the physicality of writing in *White Spaces* and *Winter Journal*, we must go back to pre-lapsarian impulses, to the writing body’s process of perception, which precedes (and hopefully parallels) its means of expression. Being “present in the space of this moment” (2007: 156) is *White Spaces*’ impossible goal, knowing that perception and instant linguistic expression cannot match, as “the words would always lag behind what was happening” (156). This poetic quandary, which is central to both of these pieces of prose, calls for further assessment of the writing body’s sensory abilities and inabilities.
- 14 *White Spaces* could arguably be qualified as a poetic and philosophical essay, and it might be insightful to put it to the test of Ezra Pound’s definition of poetry “according to three essential elements: phanopoeia, melopoeia, and logopoeia — the play of image, music, and meaning”.<sup>5</sup> *White Spaces* is concerned with the interplay and representation of these themes and tools, and more precisely with the ways in which they contribute to the creative act of writing. However, in *White Spaces*, Auster seems to deviate from Pound’s “dance of the intellect among words” (i.e. *logopoeia*, Pound 25) by creating a semiotic dance of the *senses*, not of the intellect.
- 15 In addition to the drive of memory (re-membering is itself considered as a repetitive function of the body and the mind [Busnel]), the organic writing-flow of *White Spaces* and *Winter Journal* is stirred by the immediate translation of the body’s perception, or lack of it. Auster’s career as a poet has taught him how to perceive the world through his limited senses before employing his mouth as an “instrumen[t] of the saying of it” (2007, 158). As a result, *White Spaces* is deep down an attempt at perusing the body’s “naked eye” (157, 161, 162) and its ability to “touch” (159), “feel” (159), “list[en]” (155) and “breath[e]” (160). The object of translation is referred to as a “landscape” of “random impulse”, “space” and “sound” (156). Tentatively, the self-reflexive narrative voice rises at the distance of subjectivity and verbalization (both of which cast a dance of their own in the representation process). With *White Spaces* as a preliminary inquest, Auster seeks to define the body’s sensory interconnectedness with the world:
- I walk within these four walls, and for as long as I am here I can go anywhere I like. I can go from **one** end of the room to **the other** and *touch* any of the four walls, or even all the walls, **one** after **the other**, exactly as I like. [...] Sometimes I *touch one* of the four corners and in this way *bring myself into contact* with **two** walls at the same time. Now and then I let *my eyes* roam up to the ceiling, and when I am particularly exhausted by my efforts there is always *the floor to welcome my body*. (Auster 2007: 159)
- 16 The act of touching the walls repeats the binary process of the writer’s body walking, breathing and pumping blood (“one end” / “the other”, “one after the other”, “I touch *one* of the four corners” / “bring myself in contact with *two* walls”). In this extract, Auster probes the spatial limits of the room that surrounds him. The room repeats his corporal enclosure, while walking in the room echoes the cerebral process of linguistic symmetry. Outward limitations are part of the measurement of his subjectivity and

interconnection with the world through his senses (“touch”, “bring myself into contact”, “I let my eyes roam up to the ceiling”, “the floor to welcome my body”). The walls stand for the entrapment of consciousness within the body, and for the narrative voice’s desire to reach out to the unknown world. In the lines immediately following this fragment, Auster speaks of his being ecstatic (“great happiness”) during this metaphysical experiment as he “feel[s him]self on the brink of discovering some terrible, unimagined truth” (159). The lexical connotation of the verb *feel* (not *find*) in “I *feel* myself”, reinforces the sensory exploration at work – *feeling* oneself and the world is what it takes to *understand* the human condition.

- 17 Paul Auster’s sensory journey “in the realm of the naked eye” (157, 161, 162) starts with a purification of the senses derived from his readings of Objectivist poets George Oppen and Charles Reznikoff. Auster’s “naked eye” is an eye freed from the weight of representation and verbalization, a lens through which the world enters the writer’s body without interference from the intellect. Auster’s interest for the Objectivists shows through the following excerpt, where the object of representation (and representation itself as an object), are portrayed with as much objectivity as possible:

To say the simplest thing possible. To go no farther than whatever it is I happen to find before me. To begin with this landscape, for example. Or even to note the things that are most near, as if in the tiny world before my eyes I might find an image of the life that exists beyond me, as if in a way I do not fully understand each thing in life were connected to everything, which in turn connected me to the world at large, the endless world that looms up in the mind, as lethal and unknowable as desire itself. (Auster 2007: 157)

- 18 Inner visions are made of images from the world as well as images from the unconscious and the imagination, allowing Auster to embark on a journey out of the locked room, towards the unknown. The infinitives set off a series of scientific propositions in shorthand, as if getting rid of the syntactical burden of articulated speech: “To say”, “To go”, “To begin”. The sentences are put together by the collision of the outside world with the writer’s semiotic dance. In his Spinozist view of the world, Auster tends to consider that each particle (or in William Blake and Edmond Jabès’s words, each “grain of sand”)<sup>6</sup> could potentially hold the world at large. The phrase “*Everywhere*, as if each place *were here*” (2007: 162), whose near chiasmus/anagram visually and orally mirrors the world’s interconnectedness and the body’s urge for symmetry, is but an instance of this linguistic process.
- 19 Yet, as it gradually surfaces in the examples chosen above, Auster’s translation of the outside world through a pure sensory journey soon takes into account his paradoxical perception of “emptiness” and “silence”, of the “unseen” and nothingness. Auster’s experimentations with prose writing include translating the object seen, felt or heard. They include following the “relentless waves of the real” (159), be they waves of objectlessness and negativity. Simply put, what about the unseen and the unheard? Paying attention to formlessness is a paradoxical venture beyond sensory limitations. Auster testifies to his untranslatable perception of a “silence”, elsewhere linked to whiteness and emptiness, in the following address: “I dedicate these words to the things in life I do not understand, to each thing passing away before my eyes. I dedicate these words to the impossibility of finding a word equal to the silence inside me” (2007: 160).<sup>7</sup> The disincarnated object and agent of representation tend to fill in for the paradoxically scarce descriptions of the bodies:

In the beginning, I wanted to speak of arms and legs, of jumping up and down, of bodies tumbling and spinning, of enormous journeys through space, of cities, of deserts, of mountain ranges stretching farther than the eye can see. Little by little, however, as these words began to impose themselves on me, the things I wanted to do seemed finally to be of *no importance*. [...] Now *emptiness* is all that remains: a space, *no matter* how small, in which whatever is happening can be allowed to happen. (Auster 2007: 160)

- 20 The passivity of writing is here avowed (“the words [...] impose themselves on me”). Auster is deprived of will, as if proven wrong by his own writing (“the things I wanted to do seemed finally of no importance”). He is the hands and mouth of a highly sensitive writing machine translating a semiotic dance of its own. Moving away from the illusory “power of words to say what they mean to say” (2007: 158), Auster’s impersonal writing matches the conceptual motion of bodies “dancing to silence” (2012: 222).<sup>8</sup> Auster’s initial attempt at speaking of the body has created a music of “emptiness” and interior silence. Before being written down and externalized, the silent music of words is to be found in the body. In the aftermath of the dance rehearsal, Auster did not attempt a linguistic depiction of the bodies’ outer physicality. Instead, he wrote to his inner silence, just as the dancers had danced to their own inner silence.
- 21 Moreover, “no importance”, “emptiness” and “no matter” contribute lexically to the building of Auster’s aesthetics of impersonality and negativity. Indeed, his *unwords* fill the page with unprecedented density. Right from the aforementioned first sentence, “it begins” makes speech vacillate from presence (“something”) to absence (“nothing”). “[N]othing can ever be the same again” (2007: 155) alludes to the act of writing getting started, “propelling” an endless stream of negative words: “silent, silence, no longer, no memory, no less, not impossible, no one, never, no farther, unknowable, invisible, unpronounceable, nothing more, nothing less, no name, nowhere, unimagined, unseen, invisibility, nothing else, impossibility, no importance, emptiness, absence, no matter, no room, not nothing, inadequacy, Never” (155-162). These *unwords* (not to mention additional nouns made out of privative suffixes) translate the limitations of perception, understanding and speech, while they paradoxically thrive in the course of their own making and unmaking.
- 22 The method of Auster’s metaphysical exploration of the senses leads to a synesthesia of emptiness, as it testifies to contact and loneliness, sound and silence, visible and invisible, space and void, breath and death (the latter dichotomy being formulated through the final allegory of the arctic adventurer Freuchen, trapped in his tomblike igloo with his own freezing breath [160-61]). Auster’s experimentations with silence and speech underline the failure of language, which is repeatedly associated with confinement and physical fall in his whole body of work. In the final analysis, language registers negativity as indirectly as the body integrates trauma. Triggered in *White Spaces*, this concept proliferates in his later works of fiction and non-fiction. Taking up his investigations in prose where he had left them in *White Spaces* and *The Invention of Solitude*, Paul Auster begins his memoir *Winter Journal* by conducting a similar sensory research. The return to these questions, enhanced by a complementary approach to body writing, enables him to go further with the body translating and exhibiting the wounds of the past, in other words repeatedly feeling, falling and failing.



### 3. Feeling, falling, failing

- 23 At the end of *White Spaces*, the few pages collected by the writer in becoming, who feels a sudden appetite for destruction (“The desire, for example, to destroy everything I have written so far” [2007: 161]), are referred to as a composition among others, prone to the rules of contingency and arbitrary making: “there is always another way, neither better nor worse, in which things might take shape” (161). Besides, linguistic creation is reminiscent of the original fall of man: “I find these words *falling* from my mouth and vanishing into the silence they came from” (158, emphasis added). Falling and failing are natural motions, and cyclical destruction is also at the heart of the creative process. According to Auster, the writer must not attempt to control, censor or guide the narrative voice’s impulse. He must listen to it. He must accept the limitations of language and the arbitrary directions of writing, which are dictated by a larger motion, a motion encompassing the body in space. Falling bodies are subject to the law of gravity. Like falling and failing bodies, writing and speaking are both interconnected and limited, and they register pain and fault in their accidental trajectories through time and space.
- 24 Thus, *White Spaces* ends with “A few scraps of paper”, whose fragmented, binary black and white output — literally dark marks on white paper — is mirrored once more by the two-sidedness of the white snow and the “darkness” of the “winter night” (2007: 162). Fascinated by Beckett’s view of artistic creation as the repetition of failure (“Try again. Fail again. Fail better” [Beckett 8]), Auster constantly comes back to these questions, with each new approach a new failure.
- 25 A few decades down the road of accomplished failure, Auster’s introductory remarks in *Winter Journal* spark off the recurrence of his feeling-and-breathing creative pattern: “A catalogue of sensory data. What one might call a *phenomenology of breathing*” (2012: 1). Repeating the hybrid themes and forms of *White Spaces*, these statements immediately give way to a close examination of the body as a feeling, falling and failing device. Throughout *Winter Journal*, time itself is a companion object of representation. Interestingly enough, time is apprehended through synesthetic memory. Here, sensory and physical memory is Auster’s point of departure, as past events are carved into his flesh. Soon, “pleasure” gives way to crushing pain, which is arguably the central theme of this interior monologue. Even if the added distance of irony and mythification ostensibly takes into account his reading audience, *Winter Journal* is Auster’s conversation with himself. A conversation with the myriad of selves that are here one instant, gone the next. Auster is indeed speaking to himself in the second person, knowing that “I” is but the inadequate “dust / of a former self” [“Interior”, Auster 2007: 67]). Auster tells himself about his life through the perspective of past wounds that physically define who he is. Looking at his reflection in the mirror, he sees himself as if from the exterior, as if he were deciphering parchment:

The inventory of your scars, in particular the ones on your face, which are visible to you each morning when you look into the bathroom mirror to shave or comb your hair. You seldom think about them, but whenever you do, you understand that they are marks of life, that the assorted jagged lines etched into the skin of your face are letters from the secret alphabet that tells the story of who you are, for each scar is the trace of a healed wound, and each wound was caused by an unexpected collision with the world — that is to say, an accident, or something that need not have

happened, since by definition an accident is something that need not happen.  
(Auster 2012: 5)

- 26 The interaction with the world often takes the shape of a “collision”: writing itself is a series of accidents, as Auster shows in his fiction inspired from reality’s strangest and scariest contingences (Auster 1995: 115). The body bears “trace[s]” and “marks”, as if they were the remaining signs of past events. Scars and words have the same sort of elliptic, superficial quality. The skin can be read, it tells the outward story of who we are. But the inner meaning, the core truth is inaccessible. Like scars, linguistic signs are irrevocably detached from their object of representation. Rather than mere parchment (which used to be made out of goat skin), Auster’s skin evokes an eligible time-layered palimpsest. The carving of these “letters from a secret alphabet” soon binds together writing and bleeding. Paul Auster speaks of writing as scarring, as providing a token for the acknowledgement and remembrance of pain:

No doubt you are a flawed and wounded person, a man who has carried a wound in him from the very beginning (why else would you have spent the whole of your adult life bleeding words onto a page?), and the benefits you derive from alcohol and tobacco serve as crutches to keep your crippled self upright and moving through the world. (Auster 2012: 15)

- 27 But of course, the “wound” is never “healed”, and spreads out through the inadequacy of language, which is itself a prop and a *pharmakon*, a treacherous medicine. As the young Auster had written, “The fall of man is not a question of sin, transgression, or moral turpitude. It is a question of language conquering experience: the fall of the world into the word, experience descending from the eye to the mouth” (2007: 204). When, as an older man, he remembers his “epiphanic moment of clarity”, Auster repeatedly speaks of a “fall” that is still laden with biblical undertones:

[A]t a certain point something began to open up inside you, you found yourself *falling* through the rift between world and word, the chasm that divides human life from our capacity to understand or express the truth of human life, and for reasons that still confound you, this sudden *fall* through the empty, unbounded air filled you with a sensation of freedom and happiness [...]. (Auster 2012: 223, emphasis added)

- 28 In *Winter Journal*, Auster depicts one of the physical and linguistic falls that launched the overwhelming themes of falling and failing found in each and every of his novels.<sup>9</sup> The writer needs to accept the fall, to take a plunge into the unknown and compose with the inadequacy of words. Even on the smooth surface of the page, the clear-cut separation “between word and world” is lodged within the words themselves. The “rift” estranging the words *word* and *world* is materialized graphically. Itself a scar from the “secret alphabet”, the long letter “l” cuts these otherwise symmetric words like a gash. Or else, the letter “l”, being removed from the word *world*, symbolizes morphologically the painful loss of representation.
- 29 After describing the motion of bodies in space in *White Spaces*, then countless fallen characters, Auster puts himself to the test in *Winter Journal*. Physical and linguistic falls repeat the biblical fall of Adam and Eve and the collapse of the Tower of Babel. Finally, Auster discloses two major aspects of the physicality of writing at the end of *Winter Journal*. Writing is a physical activity guided by senses, breath, heart-beat, step and wounds which enables him to testify to his physical experience of the world. But Paul Auster also chronicles the wounds of others, real or fictitious.

- 30 Consequently, ever since 9/11, his latest pieces focus on the inscription, or data-storage of trauma caused by personal and collective loss, and especially war-related psychic dysfunction and physical mutilation. Likewise, in *Winter Journal*, the long passage on his epiphanic moment is actually followed by two others with which it forms a concluding trilogy of personal and collective testimony. The second one is a description of the “Towers [...] pulsating in memory” like phantom limbs, revealing the persistence of the 9/11 trauma when crossing the Brooklyn Bridge (225-26). The third one is the haunting memory of an “auditory hallucination” when visiting Bergen-Belsen (226-29).<sup>10</sup> All of them are put into words by referring to physical perception and representation, and abyssal falls. Auster’s elliptic prose reflects the enshrined wounds that now and then surface, in seemingly disordered ways, at the level of words themselves. Trauma entails a disorientation of time, memory and narrative, as well as psychic and physical dysfunction such as seemingly extra-sensorial perception, metalepsis, aphasia or impairment, all of which are to be found beyond the deceptive simplicity of Auster’s prose, acquired failure after failure, misstep after misstep.
- 31 In order to understand the range of Auster’s aesthetics, and his own thematic concomitances, we need to consider falling as a manifold motion from a linguistic, physical, clinical, spiritual, philosophical and artistic perspective. For instance, in the original draft of *White Spaces*, Auster wrote the following lines, hinting side by side at the fall in Genesis and nursery rhymes, as if discovering the secret universality of falling: “Question: Adam and Eve, the Tower of Babel; Humpty Dumpty; London Bridge. Answer: all fall down. Question: ashes, ashes. Answer: ashes, ashes” (Auster 1979: 35). Admittedly, Auster keeps storing occurrences of falls that might seem unrelated at first sight. But as far as literary creation is concerned, is that not how thematic obsession gradually turns into aesthetics?

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- 32 More than thematic obsessions, falling and failing are physical and linguistic motions impelling creation and death. The corpus assessed in this paper, which spans more than three decades of Auster’s literary endeavor, repeatedly puts the body’s functions and failures at the crux of the writing process. From the very beginning, when he was but 19 years old, Auster has stated his belief that “To feel estranged from language is to lose your own *body*. When *words* fail you, you dissolve into an image of nothingness. You disappear” (2007: 205). Hence, in 1967, forty-four years prior to the writing of *Winter Journal*, linguistic failure was already assimilated to a physical fall. This failure has since been repeated through various fictitious avatars and narrative voices. Consistently, Auster concludes his early interview with Jabès by quoting Beckett: “To be an artist is to fail, as no other dares fail” (Auster 1990: 210). “Or else”, in Auster’s own words taken from *White Spaces*, “to go on. Or else, to begin again. Or else, to go on, as if each moment were the beginning, as if each word were the beginning of another silence, another word more silent than the last” (2007: 161). Ultimately going back to the blank page to embrace silence illustrates Auster’s will to accept non-verbal meditation and linguistic failure. Auster’s art of failure is propelled by an intensely repetitive physical pattern that creates a music of its own. The writer must take a plunge into “the other side of speech” (1990: 202) in order to “discove[r]” whatever “unimagined truth” (2007: 159) the act of writing might translate. In that regard, *White Spaces* and *Winter Journal* are

nothing less than literary and scientific ventures aiming at channeling the unfathomable forces that drive us — physically — into the semiotic dance of speech.

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## NOTES

1. Paul Auster, *Facing the Music (Poems, Prose & A Dance for Reading Aloud)*, typed draft with title page and contents ("Nine poems", "Pages for Kafka", "The Death of Sir Walter Raleigh", "Northern Lights", "Happiness, or a Journey through Space"), enclosed with a letter to *William Bronk*. *William Bronk Papers*, New York: Columbia University (Butler Library, Rare Book and Manuscript Section), October 3, 1979. For a 2011 public reading of (and insightful discussion on) *White Spaces*, see Inge-Birgitte Siegmundfeldt and Paul Auster, "Paul Auster appointed honorary alumnus", 13 May 2011, <http://hum.ku.dk/auster/> (accessed Dec. 2015).

2. The narrative voice is ambiguous as *White Spaces* is a narrative and autobiographical "bridge" in Auster's career. Paul Auster is the author of this piece of non-fiction, and to some extent he might also be thought of as the narrator. Nonetheless, Auster explores an impersonal voice, hence the use of the phrase "the narrative voice" in this paper (as if the voice were his and not his, or else as if Auster were speaking at a distance from himself).

3. In *Winter Journal*, Auster alludes to Keats's "living hand": "Looking at your right hand as it grips the black fountain pen you are using to write this journal, you think of Keats looking at his own right hand under similar circumstances, in the act of writing one of his last poems and suddenly breaking off to scribble eight lines in the margin of the manuscript [...]. *This living hand, now warm and capable*" (Auster 2012: 164-65). Auster had originally used the expression "living hand" as the title for the journal he edited with Mitchell Sisskind in 1973 (see Auster 1973).

4. In his 1967 *Notes from a Composition Book*, Auster had written the following maxim: "But not only are our perceptions limited, language (our means of expressing those perceptions) is also limited" (Auster 2007: 204).

5. Charles Bernstein, "Introduction to Ezra Pound", from *Poetry Speaks*, ed. Elise Paschen, Rebekah Presson Mosby (<http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/bernstein/essays/pound.html>) (Sourcebooks, 2001), Buffalo: *Electronic Poetry Center* (June 2014).

6. "To see a World in a Grain of Sand" (William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence", *The Pickering Manuscript*, Kessinger Publishing, 2004, 15). See also Edmond Jabès, *Le Seuil, Le Sable*, Paris: Gallimard, 1990.

7. In his introduction to Paul Auster's *Collected Poems*, Norman Finkelstein underlines the trauma-related issues at stake when Auster "speak[s] to the silence": "Thinking now about Auster's poetry in the light of his essays in *The Art of Hunger*, and in the light of this poetry's own unique history, I understand that it is constituted of a solitary voice speaking to the silence. It is a silence that itself has a complex history, often connected to some of the most terrible episodes in modern times. In the end, it takes up residence within the poet and demands to be acknowledged" (Auster 2007: 16-17).

8. *Winter Journal* provides a detailed explanation of the “silence” to which the dancers rehearsed in the Manhattan High School gym: “The first thing that struck you was that there was no musical accompaniment. The possibility had never occurred to you — dancing to silence rather than to music — for music had always seemed essential to dance, inseparable from dance, not only because it sets the rhythm and speed of the performance but because it establishes and emotional tone for the spectator, giving a narrative coherence to what could otherwise be entirely abstract, but in this case the dancers’ bodies were responsible for establishing the rhythm and tone of the piece, and once you began to settle into it, you found the absence of music wholly invigorating, since the dancers were hearing the music in their heads, hearing what could not be heard...” (Auster 2012: 222).

9. Characters experiencing noteworthy physical falls include Peter Stillman in *City of Glass*, Benjamin Sachs in *Leviathan*, Sidney Orr in *Oracle Night* and the Zimmers in *The Book of Illusions*. Other types of falls include physical impairment (August Brill in *Man in the Dark*), loss of siblings, endangered state of health, monetary deprivation, homelessness (Fogg in *Moon Palace*, Anna Blume in *In the Country of Last Things*, etc.) and sin (the incestuous relationship between Gwyn and her brother Adam Walker, whose name obliquely evokes the original sinner/writer thematic of Auster’s first steps as a poet in *Invisible*). Walt’s levitation in *Mr Vertigo* is worth noting here, while several instances of falls or vertigo are also found in Auster’s books of prose. What is more, the fall of the Tower of Babel saturates Auster’s poems, and it is also evoked in several of his novels (see especially *City of Glass*).

10. These trauma-related excerpts are analyzed in detail in my chapter on “Auster’s Narratives of Traumatic Temporality”, in *Time, Narrative and Imagination: essays on Paul Auster*, Arkadiusz Misztal ed., “Between.pomiędzy” series, Gdańsk, Gdańsk University Press, 2015.

## ABSTRACTS

*White Spaces* is a hybrid piece of poetic prose marking Paul Auster’s literary rebirth. This matrix text, which served as an immediate response to Auster’s “epiphanic moment of clarity” during a dance rehearsal in New York, is an early experimentation with the physicality of writing. Words are steps. Verbs are motions. Facing the choreographer’s incapacity to put into words the December 1978 dance rehearsal, he began — step by step, word by word — to give in to silence, linguistic randomness and wandering. Auster suddenly realized that literary creation springs from physical commands rather than intellectual ones. Thirty years later, in *Winter Journal*, Paul Auster took up his exploration of the impersonal and tested the second-person narrative voice of his aging self. In both *White Spaces* and *Winter Journal*, the repetition of the binary rhythm of steps, breath, heartbeat, and the emphasis on doublings and symmetry widen the scope of Auster’s organic use of language. Speaking and writing require losing oneself to an interior music, as if the words were alive, freely animated and dictated to the writer by his own body. Speech, which parallels the world seen, is propelled by its own flow. Sensory limitations and the inadequacy of language, which had led Auster to a poetic dead-end, are in turn deplored and celebrated. As suggested in *Winter Journal*, language registers negativity as indirectly as the body integrates trauma. Shifting from pleasure to pain, the body exhibits the wounds of the past. Repeatedly, these cyclical works focus on feeling, falling and failing. Hence the aim of this paper is to highlight Auster’s metaphysical quest and aesthetic obsessions, which put the body’s functions and failures at the core of the writing process.

*White Spaces* est une œuvre hybride de prose poétique annonçant la renaissance littéraire de Paul Auster. Ce texte matrice, expérimentation liminaire sur le caractère physique de l'écriture, est une réponse immédiate à un « moment d'illumination épiphanique » qui frappa Auster lors d'une répétition de danse à New York. Les mots sont pas. Les verbes mouvements. Face à l'incapacité du chorégraphe de décrire la répétition de danse de décembre 1978, il décida de s'en remettre — pas à pas, mot à mot — au silence, à l'erreur et l'errance linguistiques. Paul Auster comprit soudain que la création littéraire surgit de directives physiques plutôt qu'intellectuelles. Trente ans plus tard, dans *Winter Journal*, Auster reprend ses explorations de l'impersonnel et teste une voix narrative à la deuxième personne, qui est véhiculée par son corps vieillissant. Dans *White Spaces* et *Winter Journal*, la répétition du rythme binaire des pas, de la respiration, des battements de cœur, et l'accent mis sur les doubles et la symétrie accroissent l'étendue de son utilisation organique du langage. Parler et écrire nécessitent de s'abandonner à une musique intérieure, comme si les mots étaient vivants, animés librement et dictés à l'écrivain par son propre corps. La parole, qui côtoie le monde observé, est propulsée par son propre flot. Les limites sensorielles et l'inadéquation du langage, qui avaient mené Paul Auster à l'impasse poétique, sont tour à tour déplorées et célébrées. Comme *Winter Journal* le suggère, le langage inscrit la négativité tout aussi indirectement que le corps intègre le trauma. Du plaisir à la douleur, le corps exhibe les blessures du passé. Ces œuvres cycliques répètent la perception, la chute et l'échec. Il s'agira en conséquence d'élucider ici la quête métaphysique et les obsessions esthétiques de Paul Auster. Se révéleront, au sein du processus d'écriture, les fonctions et les failles du corps.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Auster Paul, *White Spaces*, body, dance, prose, poetry, motion, senses, falling, failing

**Mots-clés:** Auster Paul, *White Spaces*, corps, danse, prose, poésie, mouvement, sens, chute, échec

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