"FROM STONES TO WALLS":
PAUL AUSTER'S WRITTEN GROUNDWORK

During the early years of his career, Paul Auster was mainly reputed as a poet and translator of poetry, before making his definite (?) choice for fiction. In *Ground Work, Selected Poems and Essays 1970 - 1979*[1], published for the first time in 1990, Auster collects some of that seminal poetry, which already offers several guiding motives for the fiction in prose that would follow. We must bear in mind that, according to the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English,* "groundwork is the work which forms the base for some kind of study or skill". That is why, in *Ground Work*, we read about the mystery of language, the city as a labyrinth, the essential solitude or the rule of chance. But *Ground Work* is also a wide literary field for the metaphor of stones and walls as well as for the first appearance of the room, where the fictional but so autobiographically real character of the writer will enclose himself in later prose works.

The stones and walls of the *Selected Poems* possess a multiple, plural, open language, just like words themselves, the raw material of Paul Auster's art. Actually, in his writing, words and stones are often entwined, building the text-wall of the poem and the book.

In *Unearth*, first published in the homonymous *Unearth* (New York: Living Hand, 1974), covering the poetic production from 1970 to 1972, the poem connects the wall and the stones with a whole semantic field related with language and writing:

Along with your ashes, the barely
written ones, obliterating
the ode, the incited roots, the alien
eye - with imbecilic hands, they dragged you
into the city, bound you in
this knot of slang, and gave you
nothing. Your ink has learned
the violence of the wall. Banished,
but always to the heart
of brothering quiet, you cant the stones
of unseen earth, and smooth your place
among the wolves. Each syllable
is the work of sabotage.

Unearth I (GW 7)

From one stone touched
to the next stone
named: earth-hood: the inaccessible
ember. You
will sleep here, a voice
moored to stone, moving through
this empty house that listens
to the fire that destroyed it.
(...)

Unearth XI (GW 17)

"Your ink has learned the violence of the wall": the destructive strength of the stony structure projects itself in writing. *Song of Degrees*, from *Wall Writing*[2], seems to reveal the meaning of that wall:

(...)
Through the star -
mortared wall
that rises in our night, your soul
will not pass
again.
(GW 51)

The wall appears as an unsurmountable barrier, the ultimate dissociation, at the end of the poem. When the night comes and the soul passes to the other side of the wall, the return becomes impossible. And the words that will decipher this mystery have not been discovered yet. This obvious metaphor of death is also remarkable as it exists only through the words that build it, because figures of speech are part of a text's language, without an actual existence in the outside world. Through words, the writer both builds the metaphor and exorcises its referent, as he will do later in *The Invention of Solitude*, a long written catharsis of death. The building of the wall (central issue of *The Music of Chance*) is made with stones, just like the building of the text is made with fragments of life and with words which create or report them. Consequently, the following scheme becomes possible:

$$\text{WALL} \quad \Leftrightarrow \quad \text{STONES}$$
$$\Downarrow \qquad\qquad \Downarrow$$
$$\text{TEXT} \quad \Leftrightarrow \quad \text{WORDS}$$
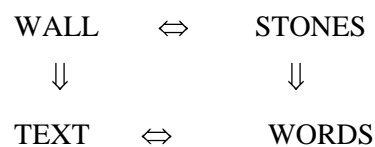
At the same time, the creative process of writing is also free to fulfil stones and walls with a myriad of meanings which, according to this perspective, will be both the text's parts and parcels and its final product. Sometimes the wall detaches itself from writing, which observes it in *Song of Degrees*, but comes across the writing process once again in poems such as *Wall Writing* (the writing <u>on</u> the wall or the writing <u>of</u> the wall), *Covenant* and *Hieroglyph*:

(...) Or a word.	(...)	The language of walls.
Come from nowhere	All night	Or one last word -
In the night	I read the braille wounds	cut
Of the one who does not	on the inner wall	from the visible.
come.	of your cry	(...)

Or the whiteness of a word,   (...)
Scratched into the wall.

      Wall Writing (GW 43)   Covenant (GW 44)   Hieroglyph (GW 46)

In the first, *Wall Writing*, the creative process seems to emerge, with the anguish in front of the blank page and the triumph of the first written word. In *Covenant* and *Hieroglyph*, one can read "braille wounds" and understand the "language of walls" and of words cut (taken) from the visible world.

Stones belong to the natural world, they live isolated, until the moment when, by the hand of the character-writer, they are harmoniously lined up, building the wall. In order to do so, it is necessary to go through a long *Stone Work*, title of the poem which appears in the original edition of *Wall Writing*, though absent from *Ground Work*, which recalls the carving of words and the verbal art of the poet-artisan[3]:

You took me
for a man who wanted to die.
Indifferent stone, defiant on the greenest anvil.
The earth was page, the most quiet
wait before the word, and it was you,
fault where the eye began
to see, it was you who were dying,
to keep me alive. Beyond the wall
you worked in stone,
and when the stones were small enough
to taunt the earth, you hid, voice in the run,
and shattered them, to make them
rally underfoot, as if they were
singing (...).

The poet touches and names the stones, bringing them back to life through poetry:

From one stone touched
To the next stone
Named
(...)

Unearth XI (GW 17)

All summer long,
by the gradient rasp-light
of our dark, dune-begetting
hands: your stones,
crumbling back to life
around you.
(...)

Meridian (GW 35)

(...) such yield

as only light will bring, and
the very stones
undead

in the image of themselves.

Bedrock (GW 98)

Stones are dead beings revived by writing, that leads them from imagination to reality, as an offer to the world. Those literary entities may already exist, erased by

common everyday routine, but they acquire through writing a new glare and a new life, like New York, its places and characters, when moved to Paul Auster's fiction. Writing accomplishes a transfusion of life:

(...) as if, in the distance between
sundown and sunrise,
a hand
had gathered up your soul
and worked it with the stones
into the leaven
of earth.

Transfusion[4] (GW 77)

Disappearances is also taken from *Fragments from Cold* (and there are so many characters who disappear in Auster's fiction). In this key-poem, we find all these symbols together, in a true work of poetic construction:

1. Out of solitude, he begins again - (...)
(...) and therefore a language of stones,
since he knows that for the whole of life
a stone
will give way to another stone

to make a wall

and that all these stones
will form the monstrous sum

of particulars.
(GW 61)

The written work is born of/in solitude, as in *The Invention of Solitude* and its attempt to overcome the everlasting isolation of life and death or, in *The Music of Chance*, with the construction of the wall that grants an aim to Jim Nashe's lonely wandering. A stone succeeds to another stone, building the wall, a "monstrous sum of particulars": in a global point of view, we can read here the chain of human existence with its relentless cycle of life and death; in a singular vision, this may be interpreted as the image of the building of the text, of the writer's destiny.

3. To hear the silence	4. (...)
that follows the word of oneself. Murmur	For the wall is a word. And there is no
	word
of the least stone (...)	he does not count
	as a stone in the wall.

And he will tell
Of each thing he sees in this space,   Therefore, he begins again,
And he will tell it to the very wall   (...)
That grows before him:
(...)
         Disappearances (GW 63)   Disappearances (GW 64)

To enumerate everything, to translate all existing items into words seems to be an inhuman task (a "monstrous sum"):

6. And of each thing he has seen   7.(...) and the word that would build a wall
he will speak -   from the innermost stone
                                          of life. (...)
the blinding
enumeration of stones,   Therefore, there are the many,
even to the moment of death -   and all these many lives
(...)   shaped into the stones
                                          of a wall, (...)

        Disappearances (GW 66)   Therefore, he begins again,

                                          as if it were the last time
                                          he would breathe.

            Disappearances (GW 67-68)

The poet has to accomplish the parallel between stones and words, between the wall and the text, during an endless task with unlimited horizons of meaning, like the insane mission that Peter Stillman imposes upon himself in *City of Glass*: "What do you do with these things ?'; 'I give them names' (...) 'I invent new words that will correspond to the things"[5]. That's why "It is a wall. And the wall is death. Illegible..." (Disappearances 2): the wall of death haunts the poem once again, not only because it is impossible to look at the other side of that wall and return, but also because it results from an infinite work, which can only end with the death of the craftsman, like the interminable models of the City of the World in *The Music of Chance*.

     Aubade introduces, for the first time, the theme of exile in the rooms of a house, inside its four walls, a literary context that the fiction of *Moon Palace*, *The Invention of Solitude* and *The New York Trilogy* will develop extensively:

I am your distress, the seam
in the wall
that opens to the wind

and its stammering, storm
in the plural - this other name
you give your world: exile
in the rooms of home. (...)
(GW 75)

Once isolated inside the room, it is easier for the character-writer to practice introspection and to reflect about the outside world, as he is protected in the inner space of his own imaginary world. This mental exercise is usually accompanied by a continuous exercise of writing and usually happens before some kind of spiritual revelation, some complete purifying of the self, ultimately reaching physical extinction, as in the open ends of *The New York Trilog*. *White Spaces*, a poem in prose taken from the homonym *White Spaces*[6] announces the power of that exile, experienced in the first person:

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. If the spirit moves me, I can stand in the center of the room. If the spirit moves me in another direction, I can stand in any one of the four corners. Sometimes I touch one of those 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. The light, streaming through the windows, never casts the same shadow twice, and at any given moment I feel myself on the brink of discovering some terrible, unimagined truth. These are moments of great happiness for me (GW 85).

A "white space" contains in itself everything that a text might mean: "Where no possibility exists, everything becomes possible again" (*The Death of Sir Walter Ralegh,* GW 164), not only because of the infinite potential of creative writing but also because of the uncountable meanings that readers are allowed to find in that same text.

But can we consider death as the end of words or is that same end of words the actual death? In *City of Glass*, Quinn stops writing in his red notebook because he dies or does he die because he has ceased writing ("What will happen when there are no more pages in the red notebook?" NYT 131)? Words and life are inseparable, that is why:

As if the first
word
comes only after the last, after a life

of waiting for the word

that was lost. To say no more
than the truth of it: men die, the world fails, the
words

have no meaning. And therefore to ask
only for words.

Stone wall. Stone heart. Flesh and blood.
As much as all this.
More.
                    S.A. 1911-1979 (GW 92)

According to this poem's imagery, the heart changes into stone, it vanishes into the wall (or beyond the wall) after uttering or writing the last word. Inside Quinn's room, after his disappearance ("Wherever he may have disappeared to..." NYT 132), only one object lies on the floor: the red notebook, the center of Quinn's last moments of life and writing. The sole remnants of Quinn are the words he has written on its pages.

We have chosen *The Death of Sir Walter Ralegh* (1975), one of *Ground Work*'s thirteen essays, because it forms a kind of *continuum* with Auster's poetry, recovering the concept of the wall as a metaphor for death, depicted as the boundary of the space where someone is waiting for death:

The Tower is stone and the solitude of stone. There is nothing here but thought, and there is nothing. The man is a stone that breathes, and he will die. The only thing that waits for him is death (GW 164).

In this poetic essay, solitude is invented in stone, the central character is but a stone in someone else's chess. In this prison, there's only space for thought and for the certainty of death. The overwhelming walls are as dangerously omnipresent as the untouchable wall of death, both unsurmountable: "For death is a very wall, and beyond this wall no one can pass" (GW 165). In this limb of total loneliness:

He can breathe, he can walk, he can speak, he can read, he can write, he can sleep. He can count the stones. He can be a stone that breathes, or he can write the history of the world (GW 166).

The space of solitude and emptiness can be the stage for self-anihilation or for the construction of the written work. The last remaining days may be (should be) devoted to the work that gives life a sense. Writing may grant an order to the world itself: Ralegh writes the "history of the world" (like the City of the World) and not some ordinary story:

If he has been able to live, he will be able to die. And when there is nothing left, he will know how to face the wall (GW 164).

In *The Death of Sir Walter Ralegh* there is a possibility of preparation for death, through a process of spiritual strengthening. But how can the living stone become capable of dying conscientiously, of touching the wall, passing through life and death with open eyes? This strength is achieved through the exercise of writing and lonely meditation, which offers the megalomaniac power to the writer, a narcisist of his own intellect. This superhuman profile is the outcome of the exile inside four walls, as in *White Spaces*, symbolizing the immortality that writing may offer, just like a work in stone that challenges time. Inside the magic space of the room or cell, any creation becomes possible, as if at the beginning of a new (literary) universe. There, as Auster describes in *City of Glass*, the paradoxically free character-writer "wrote about the stars, the earth, his hopes for mankind. He felt that his words had been severed from him, that now they were a part of the world at large, as real and specific as a stone, or a lake, or a flower" (NYT 130).

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[1] Paul Auster, *Ground Work: Selected Poems and Essays 1970-1979* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991). Further references will be followed in the text by the letters GW and respective pages.

[2] Paul Auster, *Wall Writing* (Berkeley: The Figures Book, 1976). Limited edition of five hundred copies, covering the years from 1971 to 1975.

[3] "Stone work: the parts of a building, especially those ornamented with special shapes, made of stone" (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*).

[4] Originally published in *Fragments from Cold* (Brewster, New York: Parenthèse, 1977), covering the period from 1975 to 1977.

[5] Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992) p. 78. Further references will be followed in the text by the letters NYT and respective pages.

[6] Barrytown, New York: Station Hill, 1980; literary production from 1978 to 1979.