

The Imagery of Writing in the Early Works of Paul Auster

The Imagery of Writing in the Early Works of Paul Auster:

From Stones to Books

By

Clara Sarmento

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



The Imagery of Writing in the Early Works of Paul Auster:
From Stones to Books

By Clara Sarmiento

This book first published 2017

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2017 by Clara Sarmiento

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-9981-X

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-9981-9

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	vii
Chapter One.....	1
Stones, Walls and the Music of Words	
<i>Ground Work: Selected Poems and Essays</i>	4
<i>The Art of Hunger</i>	17
<i>The Music of Chance</i>	23
Chapter Two	35
The Room that is the Book	
<i>White Spaces</i>	39
<i>The Invention of Solitude</i>	47
<i>The New York Trilogy</i> (I)	54
<i>Leviathan</i>	69
<i>In The Country of Last Things</i>	73
Chapter Three	79
Inside the Space of Chaos	
<i>The New York Trilogy</i> (II).....	81
<i>Moon Palace</i>	98
Chapter Four	109
Auster, DeLillo and the Post-human Landscape	
Conclusion.....	121
Bibliography	125
Index	137

INTRODUCTION

The Imagery of Writing in the Early Works of Paul Auster: From Stones to Books is an intertextual reading of the author's literary production and poetic imagery in the late 20th century¹. This period of Paul Auster's work is characterized by a long reflection about the process of literary creation, through an actual and metaphorical exploration of the scene of writing and the symbolism of space.

Paul Auster was born in 1947, in Newark, New Jersey, studied at Columbia University, and, after working for some time in an oil tanker, lived in France for four years before returning to New York in 1974. The aesthetic and fictional world of Paul Auster is austere², composed of reconfigured intrigues and complex motifs drawn from the history of American literature and from his own past. Analyzing the many intertextual plots that characterize Auster's literary journey is the complex task this book undertakes. But instead of following a rigid chronological order, *The Imagery of Writing in the Early Works of Paul Auster* opts for a critical

¹ Abbreviations for some of the works by Paul Auster in this book (works not listed here are included in the final bibliography):

AH – *The Art of Hunger: Essays, Prefaces, Interviews*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1992.

CLT – *In the Country of Last Things*. London: Faber and Faber, 1989 [1987].

GW – *Ground Work: Selected Poems and Essays 1970 - 1979*. London: Faber and Faber, 1991 [1990].

IS – *The Invention of Solitude*. London: Penguin, 1988 [1982].

L – *Leviathan*. London: Faber and Faber, 1993 [1992].

MC – *The Music of Chance*. London: Penguin, 1991 [1990].

MP – *Moon Palace*. London: Penguin, 1989.

MV – *Mr. Vertigo*. London: Penguin, 1994.

NYT – *The New York Trilogy*. London: Faber and Faber, 1992 [1987].

RN – *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*. London: Faber and Faber, 1995 [1993].

S – *Smoke and Blue in the Face*. London: Faber and Faber, 1995.

² See, for instance: Robert Creeley, "Austerities" in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 14:1 (Spring 1994), 35-9; Brian Case, "Austere Auster" in *Time Out* 902 (December 2, 1987), 42; Cheri Fein, "Austerity" in *Details* (April 1989), 127-128; Joan Frank, "The Art of Austerity" in *San Francisco Review of Books* 17:3 (Winter 1992), 20-2.

reading of the most representative images Auster employs in order to illustrate the process of literary creation. Auster started his career writing poems and essays for *The New York Review* and for *Harper's Saturday Review*. In 1987, he obtained critical acclaim for the collection of narratives *The New York Trilogy* (*City of Glass*, *Ghosts* and *The Locked Room*), having then opted for fiction. *The New York Trilogy* is a deconstruction of fictional genres, particularly the mystery novel, forming a sequence of simultaneous explorations of multiple questions, from the plot, located in an oppressive urban context, to the nature of language and the intertwined roles of writer, character, and reader. The *New York Trilogy* displays considerable dramatic suspense, but breaks the rules of traditional structure to transform fiction into a research field of contemporary urban reality, language, writing and literary history. *City of Glass*, for instance, uses the detective story in order to explore themes of identity and the relationship between words and meaning. Instead of being solved, the mysteries investigated eventually become even more complex. Each story in the trilogy adds a new thread to what has already been written and reveals the growing diversification and epistemological confidence of a writer that investigates, among other things, his own identity, and at the same time describes the quest for the origins of the literary genre he is using. Auster's stories always have hidden literary roots, in which the writer seems to display a canonical desire for building an explicatory tradition. In *The New York Trilogy*, the fictional ghosts include names like Melville, Thoreau, Poe, Whitman and Hawthorne.

Auster's books are postmodern in that they are fictions clearly and reflexively about fiction. However, to read Paul Auster's fiction as a mere illustration of a certain definition of postmodernism would be severely reductionist. Postmodernism is a movement visible in almost every cultural manifestation in the last decades of the 20th century, from Quentin Tarantino's movies to architecture, from the writings of William Burroughs and John Fowles to painting, from philosophy to television. In literature, postmodernism has its roots in the rejection of traditional mimetic fiction and the values of institutionalized modernism. On the contrary, it favors a sense of artifice, suspicion towards absolute truth, and highlights the fictionality of fiction. The self-ironic attitude of postmodernism appears to be a return to traditional values, but it is in fact a conscious questioning of ancient styles of writing. Postmodernism's deceptive lightness contributes to its (apparently) easy assimilation by mainstream and pop cultures, which possibly explains Paul Auster's success and the adaptation of his fiction to cinema. The artificial acceptance of contemporary alienation and the idolization of the art-object

have already led to accusations of political irresponsibility. French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard³ sees the boom of information technologies and the global access to a proliferation of materials of anonymous origin as part of postmodern culture and as a contribution to the dissolution of personal identity and responsibility. However, Lyotard considers the multiplicity of styles of postmodernism as part of a massive rejection of the representational conception of art and language. A comparative reading of the paradigmatic *New York Trilogy* with certain features of postmodernism, namely those enumerated by Ihab Hassan⁴, Douwe Fokkema⁵, Brian McHale⁶, an Jean-François Lyotard, suggests the presence of a narrative archetypal of this movement, but Auster's work in general is not restricted to that category. Though Auster's writing is clearly epistemological, it also investigates a very large spectrum of ontological and intertextual topics:

Modernism and postmodernism are not separated by an Iron Curtain or Chinese Wall; for history is a palimpsest, and culture is permeable to time past, time present, and time future. [...] an author may, in his or her own life time, easily write both a modernist and postmodernist work. (Contrast Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* with his *Finnegans Wake*.) [...] This means that a "period", as I have already intimated, must be perceived in terms *both* of continuity *and* discontinuity, the two perspectives being complementary and partial. [...] any definition of postmodernism calls upon a fourfold vision of complementarities, embracing continuity and discontinuity, diachrony and synchrony.⁷

Auster, a former teacher of creative writing, poet, critic, and translator, has always written near his personal experiences. Hence the presence of so many autobiographical elements in his work, which justifies the indiscriminate use of the expression 'writer-character' (or 'character-writer') in this book.

³ Jean-François Lyotard, *A Condição Pós-Moderna* [The Postmodern Condition], translation by José A. Bragança de Miranda (Lisbon: Gradiva, 1989).

⁴ Such as, for instance, the concepts of *scriptible* (writerly), performance (happening), silence, exhaustion, process, participation and absence, described by Ihab Hassan in "Postface 1982: Towards a Concept of Postmodernism" in *Critical Essays on American Postmodernism*, edited by Stanley Trachtenberg (New York: G.K.Hall and Co., 1995) pp. 81-92.

⁵ Douwe W. Fokkema, *História Literária: Modernismo e Pós-Modernismo* [Literary History: Modernism and Postmodernism], translation by Abel Barros Baptista (Lisbon: Vega, n.d.).

⁶ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994). To McHale, the epistemological dominant is characteristic of modernism, changing to the ontological dominant in postmodernism.

⁷ Hassan, "Postface 1982", pp. 84-5.

In *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), a meditation about death built around memories of his father and of the author's relationship with his own son, Auster also reflects on the relationship between language and the individual, and on the simultaneous inescapability and solipsism of naming objects. The book is an attempt to proclaim the power of memory in a world perpetually beyond our comprehension, exploring contemporary and historical philosophical questions about language and the way the writer rebuilds it as an instrument of autobiographical and phenomenological expression. Auster's fictional works present a stunning degree of variety, always encompassing vast contexts, ideologies and aesthetics. Set in a decaying urban scenery, *In the Country of Last Things* (1987) is an apocalyptic novel with historical resonances. *Moon Palace* (1989) is a fascinating work of complex fantasy, a fusion of experimentalism with the American myth. *The Music of Chance* (1990; filmed in 1993 by director Philip Haas) leaves the urban scenery to wander through an endless space of uncertainty, an *on the road* circumscribed by the stones of a wall with multiple connotations. *Leviathan* (1992), another experimental work about the simultaneity of life and writing, was followed by *Mr. Vertigo* (1994), a history of America symbolized in the journey of a young man who learns to fly. *Smoke* and *Blue in the Face* (1995) originated the homonymous motion pictures directed by Wayne Wang. In his fiction, Paul Auster combines magical realism with the contemporary world, never allowing the reader to forget that his main subject is the process of writing itself. Among his works there are also translations from French and several volumes of poetry, besides *Ground Work: Selected Poems and Essays 1970-1979* (1990) and *The Art of Hunger: Essays, Prefaces, Interviews* (1992), compilations that deal with many of the subjects covered in Auster's fiction. Paul Auster deciphers the world as a confusing textual labyrinth, fully aware that to rebuild memories, defeat solitude, establish logical sequences, and discover the living image of objects, that is, to discern the order of the universe amidst chaos is the ultimate mission of the writer.

While reading Paul Auster's work, two motifs stand out: existential loss and drift, along with the isolation of the character devoted to the task of writing, as if he were confined to the book that controls his whole existence. When Auster's work is taken as a whole, this second motif prevails. The character's drift occurs within the space of his own solitude, as if the wandering could also take place inside the four walls of a room, in the same way it is narrated inside the space of the page and the book. In this gallery of solitary characters devoted to the task of writing and meditating, some stand out as capable of ordering, through that work, an

apparently incoherent existential trajectory. Among these, the narrator of *White Spaces*, A., and Samuel Farr-Anna Blume are worthy of special attention. Characters like Quinn, Blue, Fanshawe, Ben Sachs, or Paul Benjamin seem to hesitate between the construction of a universe and self-destruction, as though incapable of fully realizing the infinitely creative power of writing. And what to say of Jim Nashe, a non-writing but constructive entity, who claims, however, to be capable of reading the meaning of his nomadic existence in the stones of a wall, as if these were the words of a text he himself had written? Despite being one of the few protagonists in Auster's fiction who is not directly involved in writing as a profession (and mission), Jim Nashe seems to be the one closest to the poetic persona of *Ground Work* and of the essays of *The Art of Hunger*. Indeed, in both his poems and essays, Auster seems to look at writing as a concrete physical endeavor of actual building, as if the words to be aligned in the text-poem were stones to be laid in order to build a wall or some other stone structure.

With this in mind, *The Imagery of Writing in the Early Works of Paul Auster* examines symbolic meanings in the work of Paul Auster, where stones-words are the genetic substance of a world (re)built through writing, inside the walls of a room. Words build the book in the same way stones build a wall, and that wall defines a closed space-time which nonetheless allows for unlimited mental expansion, like a book or the room of writing. Paul Auster's work is revealed as an aesthetical-literary meta-reflection about writing: the writer exists solely as an entity that produces writing; writing (and its product, the book) occurs entirely within the room; the room is the exclusive space of the writer, in a circular succession of endless identities. How Paul Auster sees himself as a writer, how he looks at the writing he produces, and how he transposes that attitude into literary discourse is what we will try to explore.

In the first chapter ("Stones, Walls and the Music of Words") we look at the above mentioned image of writing as work of construction, starting from words as raw materials and from the unequivocal correspondence between the written-aligned object and the external referent, concentrating particularly on *Ground Work: Selected Poems and Essays 1970-1979*, *The Art of Hunger: Essays, Prefaces, Interviews, Laurel and Hardy go to Heaven*, and *The Music of Chance*. The search for truth may be the search for a visual presence, and the infinite task of the supreme artist would be to designate every object in the universe, rebuilding it through those reinvented words, like Peter Stillman, an insane and ironic *alter-ego* of the author, who seeks the creation not only of a new world but also of a whole new language to translate it.

Inside the closed space of the scene of writing – though generically called “room”, it may also take the shape of a house, a studio, an apartment, or a jail cell – freedom prevails, as there, characters are able to enjoy an entire universe built by themselves. Since rooms are spaces that can be filled (like *White Spaces*), they are havens of infinite possibilities; in there, a protective alternative universe is created, where everything is ordered by imagination. The pages that the character-writer builds become the walls of the room that seclude him, so that the written genesis can mature and freely expand. The room is like a womb that conceives and gives birth to the written work after a long gestation in solitary confinement. This imagery is explored in the chapter “The Room that is the Book”, which analysis the settings of writing in *The Red Notebook: True Stories, Prefaces and Interviews, Smoke, Mr. Vertigo, White Spaces, The Invention of Solitude, Ghosts, Black-Outs, The Locked Room, Leviathan*, and *In the Country of Last Things*, evoking, whenever pertinent, fictional ghosts from American literary tradition. Anna Blume’s room in *In the Country of Last Things* is undoubtedly that which best demonstrates the semantic game of “Room and tomb, tomb and womb, womb and room” expressed in *The Invention of Solitude* (IS 159-160)⁸. However, the room is also a potential tomb or a deadly womb that may generate chaos instead of a written cosmos.

In Auster’s work, the craft of writing can be seen in two ways, depending on its outcome. The writer can be the author of a cosmogony, through the original power that reveals itself in the solitude of the room. Yet, the writer can become, in another context, the creator of a lethal vacuum, describing a chaogony, disordering the universe he himself has conceived, conjuring a wall of death around himself and his characters. The text should be built through the harmonious alignment of words, not through a formless gathering of random fragments, unable to generate a symmetrical and expandable space. In the chapter “Inside the Space of Chaos”, we will try to penetrate the dysphoric “black spaces” of *City of Glass, Ghosts, The Locked Room*, and *Moon Palace*, with intertextual references to Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne. The writer-character in permanent self-reflection is like an inexperienced God, whose hands can originate cosmos or chaos, life or death. Hence Auster’s recurrent meditation on the work and power of writing, which is simultaneously self-biographical and self-critical.

⁸ In *In the Country of Last Things* we read: “Blume. As in doom and gloom, I take it.” “That’s right. Blume as in womb and tomb...” (CLT 101).

The formula “The Building (I) of Cosmos (II) and Chaos (III)” in Paul Auster’s scenes of writing summarizes the content and sequence of these three sections. But who better than Paul Auster himself to answer the question “What is the meaning of the imagery of stones, walls and rooms that appear all over your work?”. The author’s answer certainly becomes the best introduction to these pages:

Difficult to answer your question. Everything and nothing. The irreducible. That which resists. It’s hard to say. Oddly enough, I grew up just down the road from a quarry. Perhaps that has something to do with it.... I’m talking about stones, of course. As for walls and rooms... it is enough, I believe, to start thinking about them to come up with several answers.⁹

The last chapter, “Auster, DeLillo and the Post-human Landscape” briefly recovers the theme of isolation and urban alienation in *In the Country of Last Things*, under a comparative approach. In order to explore the urban landscape dehumanized by post-modernism, the chapter brings together Auster’s work and Don DeLillo’s short-story *The Angel Esmeralda* (1994), with references to DeLillo’s major novel *Underworld* (1997), which contains the entire text of *The Angel Esmeralda*, divided between chapter eight and the epilogue, with slight differences. In the landscape of a not-that-fictional urban scene, an individual as well as collective memory arises from violence, war and despair. Auster and DeLillo scatter unexpected images and revelations around each corner of their geography of horror. DeLillo’s underworld in New York or Auster’s imaginary country are peopled by characters and groups who practise their own art (Ismael Muñoz’s graffiti), who speak or write in their own language (Samuel Farr’s never-ending book), who worship their own miracles (the angel Esmeralda itself), building a secret legacy to the world. Isolated inside these “underworlds”, people create rituals, beliefs, works of art and myths, i.e., a whole alternative narrative, as part of the post-human – often inhuman – urban landscape.

Paul Auster creates new paths for the practice of literary discourse, appropriates them, recreates them in variations and intertextual extensions, sends us from text to text, pushes the reader into a maze of everyday coincidences, both exceptional and structuring. Auster is part of a literary tradition that evokes, respects and transforms classic authors such as Hawthorne, Thoreau, Melville, Poe or Emily Dickinson, sceptical writers who kept questioning the world and language, while intersecting with other paradigms that include French poetry, Cervantes, Kafka, Borges and

⁹ Paul Auster, personal correspondence, 28 June 1996.

Beckett. And also, Emerson and Whitman, Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Nathanael West and, in the contemporary scene, Don DeLillo, with whom Auster shares so many affinities in what concerns the craft of shaping stones into books.

The fact that Paul Auster is a contemporary author, open to dialogue and to sharing ideas, with a literary production still in full expansion and not yet exhausted by critical analysis, is a tempting challenge. Auster has not yet given rise to those universal truths, crystallized in endless bibliographies, which transform any supposedly original approach into a discouraging reformulation of previous perspectives. The scarcity of specific bibliography about the subject of *The Imagery of Writing in the Early Works of Paul Auster: From Stones to Books* is outweighed by the adventure of reading and interpreting the pages by Auster-himself, who is the best mirror of his own literary imagery. We are thus invited to enter the fictional universe of Paul Auster, progressively linking thematic, intertextual and intratextual threads, in order to make sense of the stories that stones and books tell. Auster's work opens up before the reader like a territory ahead, an endless road that Jim Nashe invites us to explore, a drift through space and time towards the wilderness of the West, as in the final journey of *Moon Palace*.

The Imagery of Writing in the Early Works of Paul Auster: From Stones to Books was translated into English by Hermano Henrique Marques Esteves de Moura, as part of his dissertation of the Master Degree in Specialized Translation and Interpreting, of the School of Accounting and Business of the Polytechnic Institute of Porto (ISCAP-IPP).

The editorial work was the responsibility of Gisela Hasparyk Miranda, holder of a degree in Communication and Translation from ISCAP-IPP and currently a student at the Master Program in Intercultural Studies for Business of ISCAP-IPP.

Both Hermano Henrique Marques Esteves de Moura and Gisela Hasparyk Miranda developed their outstanding work at the Centre for Intercultural Studies of ISCAP-IPP (www.iscap.ipp.pt/cei), as junior researchers, under the supervision of the author, with the support of a scholarship sponsored by the Polytechnic Institute of Porto and Santander Totta.

The research that grounds this book was developed during the author's stay as a visiting scholar at the Department of English of Brown University, USA, sponsored by the American Club of Lisbon Award for Academic Merit, to whom the author is deeply indebted.

CHAPTER ONE

STONES, WALLS AND THE MUSIC OF WORDS

(...) and the word that would build a wall
from the innermost stone of life.
(GW 67)

The work of Paul Auster, from his first poems and essays to his most recent fiction, is dominated by the metalinguistic and metafictional reflection on writing, through the obsessive exploration of the scene of literary creation, centered on its protagonist, the writer-character. This designation comes from the typically Austerian habit of following the writer in his vicissitudes and movements, within a space exposed to the eyes of the reader. Since the work of writing is the central topic of Auster's reflections in prose, poetry and essay, the person who produces that writing is also the main character of Auster's work. The writer-character plays the leading role in his fiction, is the subject of his essays, and expresses himself in his poetry, all of them vehicles for the experiences of Auster-writer himself, who very often employs autobiographical annotations and onomastic games. But how does Paul Auster see this writer-character, his double, and what verbal images does he use in order to transpose the genesis of the written work into that same written work?

In his comparative schematization of the characteristics of modernism and postmodernism, Ihab Hassan juxtaposes the postmodern process ("performance/happening") to the artistic object as "finished work" of modernism¹. Auster, a writer of the postmodern period, focuses, meta-fictionally and meta-linguistically on the problem of writing as action, allowing the reader to follow that process of construction. The dynamics of the construction of a poem are the dominant principle that decides its form, defining the poetic structure in kinetic terms, a theoretical premise that Auster shares with the advocates of the so-called "open field composition" or "projective verse"². Since the process is a generative continuity, in which one perception leads directly into another, the

¹ Hassan, "Postface 1982", p. 87.

² As described in Charles Olson's essay "Projective Verse" (in *Poetry New York*, 1950) on the poetry of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams.

composition constitutes an open field capable of incorporating elements learned during the act of writing, without rigid presuppositions concerning its technique or subject: “The poem, then, is not a transcription of an already known world, but a process of discovery” (AH 87). In consequence, the reader enjoys the postmodern concept of participation, in contrast with the modernist distance, since Auster dissects the process of writing, offering free access to the mind of the writer-character. The narrative and the language become intellectualized, self-conscious. While modernism is *lisible* (“readerly”), postmodernism is *scriptible* (“writerly”), actively focused on writing³.

For Auster, the room, archetype of the space surrounded by walls, is the space of artistic creation *par excellence*, to which all literary instances converge. In the sublime confinement of the room, a written universe is created, where latent chaos is ordered through imagination, generating an expanding cosmos, successively framed by the mind of the writer – where that infinitely dense matter is concentrated, because “Le monde est dans ma tête”⁴ –, by the room of writing, and by the pages of the book. This framing presupposes the delimitation of a potentially infinite and chaotic space through some kind of barrier against disintegration and the subsequent loss of identity through cosmic assimilation. This framing is thus related to symmetrical ordering, to the harmonious building of a work that would otherwise be a shapeless heap of sterile raw material.

In the literary work, the raw materials are words that represent concepts, experiences, and plots that exist in the mind of the writer. The result, intended to be harmonious, is the written page, or, in a broader perspective, the book itself. In Paul Auster’s creative universe, the work of writing resembles, to an unparalleled degree, the actual building of a physical structure, as if we were talking about a stone wall or a fence. This image is corroborated by the conspicuous recurrence of the wall motif throughout Auster’s work. Taking the product of that construction a bit further, we realize that a certain configuration of walls produces a room, comprising an inhabitable space and defining a boundary between the inside and the outside worlds. The room is another recurring theme in

³ “Foucault instructs us, for example, to ‘develop action, thought, and desires by proliferation, juxtaposition, and disjunction,’ and ‘to prefer what is positive and multiple, difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems. Believe that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic’”. Quoted by David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford, UK, and Cambridge, USA: Basil Blackwell, 1990) p. 44.

⁴ See: Gérard de Cortanze, “Le monde est dans ma tête, mon corps est dans le monde”, *Magazine Littéraire* 338 (Décembre 1995), 18-25.

Auster's work of literary construction, which is actually done through his writing. His walls are made of words resembling methodically ordered stones, so that the whole does not crumble and reaches the aesthetics appropriate for a literary work. In turn, these walls of words build "the room that is the book" (NYT 170), like written pages put together. Word by word, the writer-character builds the space of the literary work, since it is word by word that he builds the book. The wall is made up of stones, just as the text is made up of words that create or recreate the universe⁵. In this way, it becomes possible to draw an equivalence between stones and words, just as between wall and text, both the result of a building work.

These words-stones are the genetic material of the world (re)built through the work of writing, inside the walls of the room. The product of that work is the archetypal space of literary creation, constantly revisited by Auster, built exclusively out of words and enclosing the character-author within its pages/walls. Or, in Auster's own words, the room that is the book is born of the work of writing. That room is the sublime point of convergence of all literary instances, where the writer achieves his cosmogony.

Throughout Paul Auster's work, the need for a symmetrical configuration of words is most noticeable in the construction of poetry. Indeed, his poetry has a strong melodic component, firmly rooted in the music of words, or, to be in consonance with the imagery here explored, in the harmony of stones. However, recurring reflections by the author regarding that same work of literary construction show that he is aware of the difficulties of his trajectory when it comes to poetry. The expansion of the poetic cosmos generated in Auster's mind was not linear, as it found several walls in its way. Walls which, instead of working as structures for the poetic construction, were monolithic barriers that jeopardized his

⁵ The logical-psychical parallelism between world and language is the core of Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of language. In *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, published in 1953, Wittgenstein compares language to an old town: "a labyrinth of paths and small plazas, of new and old houses, of houses expanded in former times, and this surrounded by a quantity of new suburbs, with rectilinear streets bordered by uniform buildings", to then pose the question: "How many houses or streets does it take for a city to become a city?" (translated from the French version: *Investigations Philosophiques*, trans. Klossowski (Paris: Gallimard, 1961) pp. 18-19). How many stones form the wall? How many words form language and the written work? Likewise, Auster relates the building of material works, under several forms (houses, castles, streets, towers, buildings... walls and rooms) and made of several materials (such as stone), to the building of linguistic works, made of words. Curiously, Wittgenstein's *The Blue and the Brown Books* (published in 1958) call to mind Auster's *The Red Notebook*.

literary career. In a long interview of 1989-90 to Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, published in *The Art of Hunger*, Paul Auster critically mentions that, at first, his poems resembled clenched fists: “they were short and dense and obscure, as compact and hermetic as Delphic oracles” (AH 285). An asymmetrical or excessively nebulous construction generates a structure that is not only sterile in terms of expression but also fatal to the transmission of literary meaning, a true wall of death for writing. The cosmogonic power of the writer must be self-aware of its simultaneously constructive and destructive potential, and Paul Auster is an excellent example of that, as Adam Begley transcribes:

He wrote prose, not verse – he says he hasn’t written a poem in 13 years. His poetry, he explains, “was always a very compact, univocal expression of feelings. Prose is vast...” He pauses, searching for the right words. “It allows me to speak out of both sides of the mouth at once.” His themes were primed for elaboration.⁶

The switch from poetic construction to fictional imagination is, therefore, understandable, as Paul Auster describes in his interview to Joseph Mallia: “I don’t think of myself as having made a break from poetry. All my work is of a piece, and the move into prose was the last step in a slow and natural evolution” (AH 257). Auster’s poetry juxtaposes fragmentary evocations of an imaginary landscape, barren and dry, with verses of tortured self-analysis: “in the impossibility of words / in the unspoken word / that asphyxiates, / I find myself” (*Interior*, GW 31). His poetry is at its most expressive when it brings to mind the hypnotic, though restrained, rhythm of his prose, but, generally speaking, it suffers from the very austerity and dryness it tries to convey.

Ground Work: Selected Poems and Essays

In *Ground Work: Selected Poems and Essays 1970-1979*, published for the first time in 1990, Auster collected some of that seminal poetry, which already contained several of the main themes of the works in prose to follow. We should not forget that groundwork is the work which forms the foundations for some kind of study or skill, including the written work. Auster breaks apart the word to better look at its segments: this is his *Ground Work*, or work on the ground, on the dirt where he will erect his creation, building it like a skillful stonemason. This is also the first work

⁶ Adam Begley, “The Case of the Brooklyn Symbolist” in *The New York Times Magazine* (August 30, 1992), 41, 52-4.

(first poems and essays) that foreshadows his future works and respective themes, like the words and the mystery of language, the city, shadows, solitude, death, emptiness, and chance. Prominent influences in his work, like Kafka and Beckett, are unsurprisingly present. Sir Walter Raleigh, to whom Auster frequently refers, makes his debut in a powerful meditation about death (*The Death of Sir Walter Raleigh*, GW 164-9). All through this poetic groundwork, we can also find the omnipresent stones, walls, and the rooms which will, in later works, enclose the writer-character.

The stones and the walls of *Selected Poems and Essays 1970-1979* share a multiple, polysemous language, just like words, the raw material of Auster's craft⁷. And there are many verbal images which transpose, in a more or less obvious way, the concept of building the written work into Auster's poetry, associating words and stones, walls and pages. In order to interpret and examine those images, we will refer to some of his most expressive poems.

In *Unearth*, originally published in the homonymous *Unearth* (Living Hand, 1974), which covers the poetic production from 1970 to 1972, the poem interweaves the wall and the stones with a whole semantic field related to writing and language:

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 count the
stones
of unseen earth, and smooth your
place

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)

⁷ "I'm learning to listen to stones", said Marguerite Yourcenar in the last years of her life. Yourcenar knew the mystery of the voices of objects and the fascination of the world's forgotten and neglected alphabets. The metaphor is not new, since in *Tellus Stabillita*, from *Memoirs of Hadrian*, Yourcenar had written about reconstruction as the result of a collaboration "with time gone by, penetrating or modifying its spirit, and carrying it toward a longer future. Thus beneath the stones we find the secret of the springs". *Memoirs of Hadrian*, trans. Grace Flick and Marguerite Yourcenar (New York: Farrar, Straus & Young, 1955) pp. 128-9.

among the wolves. Each syllable
is the work of sabotage.

Unearth I (GW 7)

When we read “Your ink has learned the violence of the wall”, we understand that wall has a destructive power that projects itself into writing. *Song of Degrees*, from *Wall Writing*⁸, reveals part of its meaning:

[...]
Minima. Memory
and mirage. In each place
you stop for air,
we will build a city
around you. Through the star –
mortared wall
that rises in our night, your soul
will not pass
again.

(GW 51)

Described as an insurmountable barrier, the ultimate obstacle at the end of the poem, the wall foreshadows the annihilation of writing, a violent restraint to the flow of the ink from the writer’s pen. The constructive power of writing (“we will build a city”) may be used in a negative way when, instead of generating a well-ordered universe, it generates chaos. If the room that is the book does not structure the expansion of the author’s imaginary universe in a harmonious way, it crumbles inevitably, burying him inside. The death of writing means the death of the writer-character, of the entity that is the creator and, at the same time, the inhabitant of the cosmogonic space of the room that is the book, thus transformed into a terminal cell. When the night comes and the soul crosses to the other side of the wall, returning becomes impossible. And the words that could decipher this wall have not been discovered yet, for death is the most inscrutable of all mysteries⁹. “It is a wall. And the wall is death./ Illegible...”

⁸ *Wall Writing* (Berkeley: The Figures Books, 1976). Edition of four hundred and seventy four copies, compiling works from 1971 to 1975.

⁹ See *Le Mur*, by Jean-Paul Sartre (1939), a collection of five novels written in the period between *La Nausée* and *L’Age de Raison*. The first novel is set in the Spanish civil war, where a republican combatant, imprisoned by the francoists, waits his execution. He imagines himself next to the wall, the weapons pointed at him. But that is all, his imagination cannot go any further, he cannot visualize the

(GW 62) – illegible because it is indecipherable, because it is related to the collapse of the written work, to the irreversible fragmentation of the writer.

The metaphor of the wall of death is a product of the work of writing, since the rhetorical device exists only in the text, as language, without a concrete referent in reality. Through words, the writer simultaneously constructs the metaphor (beauty) and exorcizes its referent (truth)¹⁰, as he will later do in *The Invention of Solitude*, a long written catharsis of death. But the beauty of the metaphor is just a fraction of the sublime infinity of literary cosmogenesis. While beauty is focused on a limited object, the sublime is projected into infinitude. Here, the spirit rises above itself, senses its own limits, and experiences something transcendent. The sublime, according to Kant, is that which, by the mere fact of being conceived, points to a faculty of the soul surpassing all physical senses. While the aesthetics of beauty is defined as a theory of the object as finished configuration, the aesthetics of the sublime brings forth the idea of a transcendent and infinite object. Kant relates the sublime to the supersensory, which is exclusively present in the human spirit.

The inventiveness of writing confers a plurality of meanings to stones and walls, which, in the present perspective, are the elements and the final product of writing, respectively. While the wall is observed as a detached object in *Song of Degrees*, it is reunified with writing in poems such as *Wall Writing* – the writing on the wall and the writing of the wall; the substance and the subject of writing –, *Covenant* and *Hieroglyph*:

[...]	[...]	The language of walls.
Or a word.	All night	Or one last word –
	I read the braille wounds	cut
Come from nowhere	on the inner wall	from the visible. [...]
in the night	of your cry [...]	
of the one who does	Covenant (GW 44)	Hieroglyph (GW 46)

world without his presence. The title of this first novel reappears throughout the collection, to which confers unity: no matter how close we get to the wall, the wall is impenetrable; we always remain on the same side of the wall, without being able to jump over it, run away, or ignore it.

The wall of death has, ultimately, a lot in common with the White Whale, Moby Dick, an immense and inscrutable mystery: “All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks... If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me”, says Ahab to Starbuck. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (London: Penguin Classics, 1986), p. 262.

¹⁰ “Beauty and truth. It is the old question, come back to haunt us” in *Truth, Beauty, Silence* (AH 62-74).

not come.

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

Wall Writing
(GW 43)

The first poem seems to describe the process of writing, with the anguish of the blank page and the triumph of the first word that blooms on it. But what matters is not just to write about the walls, but also to make a wall out of writing, an aesthetic, stable, durable construction. In *Covenant* and *Hieroglyph*, we can read “braille wounds” or listen to “the language of walls” and of words “cut” (extracted) from the visible world. Stones belong to the realm of the natural, they exist isolated, until they are laid down by the builder-writer’s hand to give shape to a wall, describing a trajectory similar to that of words, between the abstraction of a dictionary and the finished poem. Doing that requires a *Stone Work*, the title of a poem which appears in the original edition of *Wall Writing*, though not in *Ground Work*. *Stone Work* refers to the work with stones and words, to the art of the poet-craftsman:

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, names, gives life to stones through the power of poetry and the manipulation of words:

From one stone touched	All summer long, by the gradient rasp-	[...] such yield
---------------------------	---	---------------------

to the next stone named [...]	light of our dark, dune- begetting	as only light will bring, and the very stones undead
Unearth XI (GW 17)	hands: your stones, crumbling back to life around you. [...]	in the image of themselves. Bedrock (GW 98) ¹¹
	Meridian (GW 35)	

Stones are inanimate beings that writing brings to life, transporting them from imagination to reality, offering their presence to a world that patiently waits for the light of the word: “the most quiet / wait before the word” (*Stone Work*); “the whiteness of a word, / scratched / into the wall” (*Wall Writing*). Or they exist dimly in everyday life, and the work of writing gives them a new glow, a new life, as it happens with New York, its places and characters, transported into so many of Paul Auster’s works¹². In *The Poetry of Exile*, an essay on the poetry of Paul Celan¹³ that also alludes to Van Gogh’s painting, Auster recovers the focus on the vital and transfiguring power of writing:

Neither Van Gogh’s stroke nor Celan’s syntax is strictly representational, for in the eyes of each the “objective” world is interlocked with his perception of it. There is no reality that can be posited without the

¹¹ Bedrock is the main stretch of solid rock in the ground supporting all the soil above, as well as the facts on which a belief or argument rests. It is significant that a poem entitled *Bedrock* is included in a *Ground Work / groundwork*.

¹² On objects of everyday life used in writing, see the essay “The Decisive Moment”, in *The Art of Hunger*, about the work of Charles Reznikoff (1894-1976), an American poet of Jewish origins, born in Brooklyn, whose work may be included in the movement of open poetry or objectivism: “Each moment, each thing, must be earned, wrested away from the confusion of inert matter by a steadiness of gaze, a purity of perception so intense that the effort, in itself, takes on the value of a religious act. The slate has been wiped clean. It is up to the poet to write his own book” (AH 36). Reznikoff reflects on every encounter between the poetic persona and the world, devoting himself to seek the linguistic strategies necessary to transform those reflections into verse. To Reznikoff, the poem is a witness of the individual perceptions of the world.

¹³ For Paul Celan (1920-1970), born into a Jewish family, the experience of the genocide, at the same time historical and personal, marked his entire poetic work, along with the reflection on the possibilities of poetic language. Celan’s last works pay more attention to everyday reality and experience more radical doubts regarding the efficiency of the poetic word.

simultaneous effort to penetrate it, and the work of art as an ongoing process bears witness to this desire. Just as van Gogh's painted objects acquire a concreteness "as real as reality", Celan handles words as if they had the density of objects, and he endows them with a substantiality that enables them to become a part of the world, his world – and not simply its mirror. (AH 88-9)

Auster is searching for a discourse that may convey a subjective state or experience, in a direct encounter with the cosmos, as if it were 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.

Transfusion¹⁴ (GW 77)

In *Fragments from Cold* we can also find *Disappearances*, and many are the characters that disappear in Auster's fiction. In this key-poem, we find the several images we have already analyzed interweaved, in a work of profound poetic elaboration:

1.
Out of solitude, he begins again –
[...]

He is alive, and therefore he is nothing
but what drowns in the fathomless hole
of his eye,

and what he sees
is all that he is not: a city

of the undeciphered,
event,

and therefore a language of stones,
since he knows that for the whole of life

¹⁴ Originally published in *Fragments from Cold* (Parenthèse, 1977), covering the period from 1976 to 1977.

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 work of writing is born of solitude, as in *The Invention of Solitude*, a long and heartfelt attempt to overcome the eternal loneliness of life and death, or, in *The Music of Chance*, with the construction of the wall that provides a goal to Jim Nashe's solitary wandering, stone after stone, forming the "monstrous sum of particulars". From a global perspective, we see here the eternal cycle of life and death, the inexorable succession of human beings over space and time. From a singular, though not reductive, perspective, we see here the building of the text, the product of the writer's work:

3.
To hear the silence
that follows the word of
oneself. Murmur

of the least stone

shaped in the image
of earth, and those who would
speak
to be nothing
but the voice that speaks them
to the air.

And he will tell
of each thing he sees in this
space,
and he will tell it to the very
wall
that grows before him:
[...]

(GW 63)

4.
[...]
For the wall is a word. And there is no word
he does not count
as a stone in the wall.

Therefore, he begins again,
[...]

What he breathes, therefore,
is time, and he knows now
that if he lives

it is only in what lives

and will continue to live
without him.

(GW 64)

Enumerating everything, translating everything, counting every word and every stone in the wall is a herculean task, a “monstrous sum of particulars”:

- | | |
|---|--|
| 6. | 7. |
| And of each thing he has seen
he will speak – | [...] and the word that would build a wall
from the innermost stone
of life. |
| the blinding
enumeration of stones,
even to the moment of death
–
[...] | [...] Therefore, there are the many,
and all these many lives
shaped into the stones
of a wall, |
| (GW 66) | and he who would begin to breathe
will learn there is nowhere to go
but here. |
| | Therefore, he begins again, |
| | as if it were the last time
he would breathe. [...] |
| | (GW 67-8) |

The writer creates a parallel between stones and words, between wall and text, in an endless task, with unlimited referential horizons, that will only be completed upon the worker’s death, as in the spiral of models of the *City of the World* or in the wall of *The Music of Chance*. An insane task that Auster revisits in prose in the onomastic reformulation that Peter Stillman imposes on 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.’” NYT 78). This is an attempt to catalogue the universe, to make an inventory of its basic elements, and, on the other hand, to define the fundamental and exclusive relationship between symbol and object. By prolonging the extension of his work until his own death, the builder (of writing) knows that he is erecting a wall of death for himself, forever secluded inside the infinite task¹⁵. But only he has the

¹⁵ Such is the case of the protagonist of Franz Kafka’s *A Hunger Artist*, a perfectionist of his art of hunger. Besides being an enthusiastic reader of Kafka (see “Pages for Kafka” and “Kafka’s Letters” in *The Art of Hunger*), Paul Auster is frequently compared to a postmodern Kafka. See Valentine Cunningham, “Kafka rides the subway” in *The Observer* 10,357 (April 15, 1990), 60, and Adam Begley,

power of reordering and reformulating the universe, and he does not hesitate to sacrifice his life for it.

In the presence of this wall one can sense the presence of every wall of death, which, one day, will cut short every human existence¹⁶. The wall, like every semiotic system, is at the same time closed in on itself and susceptible to entering a combinatorial game. It is at the same time wall and stone, totality and part. The wall can rise around the writer-character, surrounding and isolating him from humankind, until self-annihilation, until death. This is more or less the fate of the characters of *The New York Trilogy*, *The Music of Chance*, *In the Country of Last Things*, *Moon Palace*, *Smoke*, *Leviathan* and *Laurel and Hardy go to Heaven*. This unpublished play of 1976, only privately performed, narrates the story of two men who spend their entire time on stage building a wall that ends up separating them from the audience. The wall conveys disappearance and death in the eyes of others. Their voices do nothing but add new stones to the wall, since words are a wall built between them and the world. The wall – a prison where graffiti-writing proves one still exists – encloses the Austerian hero and is where he eventually self-annihilates.

Aubade introduces for the first time the theme of exile inside the walls of a room, which will be extensively developed in Auster's fiction:

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

“Kafka goes gumshoe (profile)” in *The Guardian Weekend* (October 17, 1992), 18-21.

¹⁶ As in *Bartleby the Scrivener*, a narrative by Herman Melville much admired and paraphrased by Paul Auster, if not even plagiarized. See: Maria Irene Ramalho de Sousa Santos, “Plagiarism in Praise: Paul Auster and Melville” in *Colóquio Herman Melville*, coordinated by Teresa Ferreira de Almeida Alves and Teresa Cid (Lisbon: Edições Colibri, 1994) pp. 111-22. Bartleby came closer than any other man to the wall of death, to the eternal question of mankind. His universe is Wall Street, his landscape is a wall of dead bricks. Bartleby sees the wall as eternal, as part of the structure of things, comparable to the incapacity of crossing the limits of human perception, or to death itself. His vision of reality is disenchanted, in a “dead-wall revery”. He is obsessed with the wall, and, when that wall materializes in his path under the form of death, it is next to a wall, in The Tombs prison (the tombs, the ultimate walled space), that he is found dead, with his eyes wide open. Wall Street simply accepts the walls for what they are: structures made by man to compartmentalize. To Bartleby, however, they are abstract symbols of every obstacle to the fulfillment of a man's place in the universe.

and its stammering, storm
 in the plural – this other name
 you give your world: exile
 in the rooms of home. [...]

(GW 75)

The wall appears as a structure that both isolates and protects from the chaos of the world outside, and sets the basis for the walls of the safe-room. The wall creates a barricade against reality, demarcating a secret space that is also a sacred space of literary genesis, from where death and emptiness have been banned. Because, within the space of the book, the power of the writer is sacred, as it is inside the room where he writes. But, once the work is finished, the driving force that keeps the builder alive also ceases to exist. He lives exclusively within the book and the scene of writing, as his identity derives solely from the building work. Does death determine the end of words or is it the end of words that determines the moment of death? In *City of Glass*, does Quinn stop writing in his red notebook because he dies or does he die because he stops writing in it: “What will happen when there are no more pages in the red notebook?” (NYT 131)? In the end, when there are no more lines to write in the red notebook, when there is no space left to write a single word and say “I”, identity disappears, dematerializes, as the character exists only while he writes: “And when nothing was left, there could be no more words” (AH 94). When writing stops, Quinn’s identity vanishes, assimilated by the fiction, as nothing tangible remains of him. The notebook was his language, and, as with Stillman, Quinn cannot exist without it. From this perspective, writing and life are inextricably intertwined. Auster’s poetry does not neglect the importance of linking words, walls, and stones with the omnipresent mystery of life and death:

[...]
 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

You will not blame the stones,
 or look to yourself
 beyond the stones, and say
 you did not long for them
 before your face
 had turned to stone.
 [...]

Viaticum¹⁷

¹⁷ In *Wall Writing*, 1976.

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)

Building a “stone wall” might mean making a long speech or question so as to slow down the business of a meeting or parliament, for instance. In the present context, it also means extending life (and work) and postponing death and oblivion, through skillfully employed and musically conjugated words, that is, through the work of writing. Words are flung against time, against the memory that evaporates, against the loss of identity.

At the moment of death, the heart turns into stone, fuses with the wall (“Stone wall. Stone heart”). Inside Quinn’s room, after his disappearance (“Wherever he may have disappeared to...” NYT 132), only the red notebook remains, the ultimate purpose of his life and writing. What survives of Quinn is what he wrote in its pages. What survives of the artist is his work: “What he breathes, therefore, / is time, and he knows now / that if he lives / it is only in what lives / and will continue to live / without him” (GW 64).

The Death of Sir Walter Raleigh (1975), one of the thirteen essays included in *Ground Work*, though not in *The Art of Hunger*, forms a continuum with Auster’s poetry by again using the image of the wall as a metaphor for death and for the space where the character builds his perennial work, while waiting for death:

The Tower is stone and the solitude of stone. It is the skull of a man around the body of a man – and its quick is thought. But no thought will ever reach the other side of the wall. And the wall will not crumble, even against the hammer of a man’s eye. For the eyes are blind, and if they see, it is only because they have learned to see where no light is. 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)

Solitude is invented in stone; man, himself, is also a stone, carved as a chess piece. In the stone prison, there is only place for thought and for the certainty of death. Walls close in, suffocating and omnipresent: “For death is a very wall, and beyond this wall no one can pass” (GW 165). However, even this limbo of total isolation can generate a work of art:

One thing is sure: this man will die. The Tower is impervious, and the depth of stone has no limit. But thought nevertheless determines its own boundaries, and the man who thinks can now and then surpass himself, even when there is nowhere to go. He can reduce himself to a stone, or he can write the history of the world. Where no possibility exists, everything becomes possible again. (GW 164)

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.¹⁸ (GW 166)

Building the written work appears as an alternative to annihilation, filling the last days of the subject’s life with a task that not only grants a new meaning to his whole existence, but also gives him the power of reordering the history of the world. It is the “history of the world”, as it is the “City of the World”, not any other minor history, because the power of writing possesses a universal scope: “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 Raleigh*, we learn about the possibility of a dignified preparation for death, through a journey of spiritual enhancement. How can the “stone that breathes” become “able to die”, “face the wall”, “go through life with his eyes open”? The answer is: through the power of writing and solitary meditation which grants the writer – a Narcissus of his own intellect – his megalomaniac power. This is a superhuman power born of the sublime exile amongst walls, presupposing the gift of immortality that the written work confers, like a work in stone that defies time¹⁹. In the magical space of the room or of the

¹⁸ As did, in fact, Sir Walter Raleigh (1552?-1618) who, incarcerated for many years in the Tower of London, wrote, among other works, *The History of the World* (1614), which saw eleven editions in less than a century. It is characterized by a sober and eloquent style and by the famous apostrophe to death, with which it ends, a magnificent example of Elizabethan prose.

¹⁹ See Augusto Roa Bastos, *I the Supreme*, trans. Helen Lane (New York: Aventura, 1986): “Forms disappear, words remain, to signify the impossible” (p. 11); “I must dictate/write; note it down somewhere. That is the only way I have of