



## **PAUL AUSTER AND *THE MUSIC OF CHANCE*: BUILDING NEW STORIES**

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In the work of Paul Auster (Newark, 1947 - ), we find two main themes: the sense of loss and existential drift and the loneliness of the individual fully committed to the work of writing, as if he had been confined to the book that commands his life. However, this second theme is clearly the dominant one because the character's space of solitude may include its own wandering, because this wandering is also often performed inside the four walls of a room, just like it is narrated inside the space of the page and the book. Both in his poetry, essays and fiction, Auster seems to face the work of writing as an actual physical effort of effective construction, as if the words that are aligned in the poem-text were stones to place in a row when building a wall or some other structure in stone.

In Auster, we notice at once the recurrent presence of a metafictional and metalinguistic reflection about the art of writing, obsessively exploring the scene of the literary genesis, centered on its leading character, the writer. This writer is actually a literary character, whose dramas and movements Auster's writing follows and analyses, inside a space open to the reader's eyes. Thus, the character-writer is the protagonist of fiction, the subject of essay and expresses himself in poetry, conveying Auster's own feelings and thoughts. It is often difficult to avoid some autobiographic note or some significant onomastic word-game. But how does Paul Auster face that character-writer, his double, through which verbal images does he transfer the genesis of the written work to that very same work, that reaches our hands in the form of a book?

When comparing the characteristics of Modernism and Postmodernism, Ihab Hassan (HASSAN 1995: 87) opposes the postmodern process ("performance, happening") to the artistic object as "finished work" of Modernism. Indeed, Auster, as a postmodernist writer, describes in a metafictional and metalinguistic way the question of writing as an act, allowing the reader to follow that process of construction. As the process is a generative continuity, where an instant of perception leads immediately to another instant, the written page is an open field of elements perceived during the creative act, free from theoretical bias in terms of technique or subject. The reader is



thus able to enjoy the postmodernist concept of participation, opposed to modernist distance, as Auster openly exhibits the process of writing, of creating new worlds, offering free-access to the character-writer's mind. *The Music of Chance*, a 1990 novel, is not an exception to this rule.

During his long interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, published in *The Art of Hunger*, Paul Auster unveils the peculiar chance that marked the birth of *The Music of Chance*: "The very day I finished writing *The Music of Chance* - which is a book about walls and slavery and freedom - the Berlin Wall came down. There's no conclusion to be drawn from this, but every time I think of it, I start to shake" (AUSTER 1992: 276). Indeed, *The Music of Chance* connects the theme of slavery (as confinement and deprivation of movements) and freedom (liberation and movement) with his favourite image of the wall, a structure that defines and delimits a particular space of confinement or wandering. As protagonist of this deceptive *On the Road*, Jim Nashe is imprisoned inside the open space of the meadow, just in order to build the stone work. However, Jim Nashe manages to surpass this paradoxical confinement inside an open space and the apparent meaninglessness of the wall, when he charges both of them with a significance that guides his existential wanderings, during his growing work of construction, both concrete and metaphysical, as if Nashe was turning himself, step by step, into a character-writer, another craftsman of words and thoughts.

At first, when a symbolic wall appears in the middle of Jim Nashe's road of freedom, it represents the end of the erratic journey, a pragmatic barrier caused by the dissipation of the inherited fortune. Later, that wall becomes real in the shape of the imposed slave-work, another unsurmountable barrier. But Nashe will use that very same wall to settle his fragmentary existence, to willingly cease the chaotic expansion of a disordered individual. In those rows of stones in the meadow he finds truth, a music (an harmony, an ordered and well-balanced sequence) inside the chance of his wandering. When Jim passes to the other side of the wall, in the liberation day, when he leaves behind the structural lines of a life totally identified with the stone work, he is already inside the sphere of the illegible/unspeakable, on the other side of death.

The more than ten thousand stones of the Irish castle, the wall's raw-materials, have got an identity, as if they were living beings or as if they could bring with them to America, to this new world of such recent past, a bit of the History of the XV century Ireland. The wall may thus be faced as a postmodern entity because it is a pastiche of its own origins, a fetish of History. And, from the stones of that Irish castle, destroyed by



Oliver Cromwell, a mere wall will arise, to adorn the vanity and the meadow of Stone and Flower's property, those two instant millionaires of American lottery. Flower is the apparent leader of this enigmatic pair who simultaneously hosts and imprisons Nashe and Pozzi. But Stone happens to be much more sinister in the sadistic details of his megalomaniac City of the World, as if the harshness of a stone were also in his soul, which had conceived the plan of enslaving the two debtors. A symbolic-allegorical structure emerges between the City of the World and the building of the wall. Work becomes the exercise of a moral corrective power. Building the material wall rebuilds, in a certain way, the model of the *City*, where we can find wicked traits of humour as the prisoner about to be shot against a wall, a dark omen of the two protagonists' destiny.

Stone and Flower's wall is a monumental celebration of the eternal present and of good fortune offered by chance. A monument to inutility, the monolithic structure is intended to be a self-sufficient barrier against time, preventing the escape of luck and wealth or the approach of death and loss. Like the written wall A. erects against the gradual death of his father's memory in *The Invention of Solitude*, already announced in the poetic obituary of S.A. 1911-1979 in *Ground Work*. Writing is a way of fighting for life, with one's back to the wall of death, because the writer resurrects words that have been annihilated by everyday speech.

The wall's most evident double is the fence that surrounds the whole property of Flower and Stone, posing a disturbing question: "The barrier had been erected to keep things out, but now that it was there, what was to prevent it from keeping things in as well? All sorts of threatening possibilities were buried in that question" (AUSTER 1991: 126). When Nashe tries to run away, after Pozzi's beating and his own unfortunate fight with Murks and Floyd, that second wall (the fence) prevents Nashe's escape from its double, in a mysterious alliance of two apparently inanimate stone structures. Nashe's unconscious perception of this mystery and his deep feeling of loneliness and confinement call to his mind Couperin's piece *The Mysterious Barricades*: "As far as he was concerned, the barricades stood for the wall he was building in the meadow, but that was quite another thing from knowing what they meant" (181). It becomes impossible for Nashe to play this brief piece without thinking about the wall, whose building the music evokes through its own irregular progression, full of pauses and new beginnings, towards an end that never comes. Nashe's story, too, never reaches a real end, neither does the plot of *The Music of Chance* (just like *City of*

*Glass, Ghosts, The Locked Room, Moon Palace* or *In the Country of Last Things*), deprived of a concrete epilogue, which is clearly open and ambiguous instead. These strategies belong characteristically to the postmodern aesthetics of plural equivocal epilogues, whose epitome is John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969).

By manipulating the stones in order to build a wall, Nashe has to sacrifice their strange peculiarity to the demands of a structure, even if this structure appears to be purely abstract. When stones rebel and refuse to leave the ground, one has to fight against them, to lay them down, to accomplish a *groundwork* of preparation, before the definite building. Transposing this idea to Paul Auster's life and work, the anthology of *Ground Work* (1990) contains the poetical preparation for the prose work Auster is currently building.

According to Nashe, the wall is something of his own, something that will remain for the future because it was born of his work. After losing family and fortune, and after his mad aimless car drifting, Nashe finds a home in the meadow, a son in Pozzi and a work to which dedicate his life. That is the reason why the thousandth stone is so important. It wakes up in him the preconsciousness of being like an implicit author, the narrator of a peculiar story: "In spite of everything, Nashe could not help feeling a sense of accomplishment. They had made a mark somehow, they had done something that would remain after they were gone, and no matter where they happened to be, a part of this wall would always belong to them" (AUSTER 1991: 147). Just like Camus's Sisyphus, another dedicated stone mover and a symbol of humankind's absurd condition, Nashe comes closer to fulfilment when the odds are less in his favour. At first, it seemed that Flower and Stone wanted a structure that would function as a wailing wall for the two imprudent gamblers. But later, in Nashe's mind, it becomes simultaneously a wall of salvation and a mending wall, like in Robert Frost's poem *Mending Wall*: (...) "And on a day we meet to walk the line / And set the wall between us once again. / We keep the wall between us as we go." (...) "Before I built a wall I'd ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out, / And to whom I was like to give offence. / Something there is that doesn't love a wall, / That wants it down..." (FROST 1923: 65-67).

Nashe proved himself able to order the gigantic mass of stones and to construct the structure that also ordered his own existence. He is a prisoner of the wall but actually he was the one who built that same wall; the walls that delimit his space of punishment and confinement are of his own creation, in an exercise of strength and



defiance of Stone and Flower's imposed authority. As a fictional image of the writer, Nashe symbolizes, with his work, the building of "the room that is the book that will go on being written for as long as he stays in the room" (AUSTER 1992a: 169-170), as we can read in *Ghosts*, the second story of *The New York Trilogy*. The character-writer is confined to the space of the room and the book, both built by himself, but in there he frees his cosmogonic imagination. Nashe transformed the wall into his own universe, sharing the writer's experience. The wall is a sign of victory over the original chaos of stones, a metaphor for the chaos of thoughts and words in a pure state of dictionary that always precedes every written page. However, in an ironic reading, Nashe is also unintentionally building a wall of death that prevents his looking at the other side, giving a double meaning to the idea that "something important had begun to happen" (AUSTER 1991: 202). Once the work finishes, the existence of the worker ceases as well. Nashe's existence is no exception, as it is so closely tied to the building of the wall, the central event and condition for the development or conclusion of the book. And *The Music of Chance* never stops offering us the latest "News of the Building of the Wall", as dreamlike, allegorical and grotesque as Franz Kafka's story, "A Fragment" following "The Great Wall of China".

Nashe writes a detailed account of the wall's progress, as a journal, where he delightedly registers the number of stones added to the wall day by day, as if those stones represented his most intimate thoughts or as if they stood for the most relevant incidents of the journey, as it is usual in a diary. Thus, the character-builder becomes now an actual character-writer, by matching both the written and the building work. Nashe lines up words in the very same way that, during the day, he lines up stones in the wall, and those words speak about stones and walls. In the fictional poetics of *The Music of Chance*, Nashe is the image of that metafictional and metalinguistic concern that covers Paul Auster's work, another character-writer in constant self-observation. But Nashe takes his identification with the building work too far, eliminating the chance of surviving as a single character and not only as *homo-faber*. When Nashe finishes the wall, his diary has no more reason to exist, there aren't any more events to write down in his life, as if this life had to cease. These and other omens will come true in the suicidal crash of *The Music of Chance's* last moments.

While building his opus, Nashe is examining and questioning it at the same time, in a parallel process of construction and deconstruction, like a self-analysing narrative. Jim Nashe's saga simply fictionalizes the process of self-conscious writing, present



everywhere in Paul Auster's work, from *The Invention of Solitude* to *Leviathan*. External shape must be adequate for the ideological significance, the word's material presence has to build an harmonious, stable and lasting unit (as in architecture or music) with its inner meaning: this is the reason for literary construction. The result is a text with its particular rhetorical structure, a text that can be compared to any other text, of any other type. Like the "text" of a wall, written in stone, whose building we follow in *The Music of Chance*.

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