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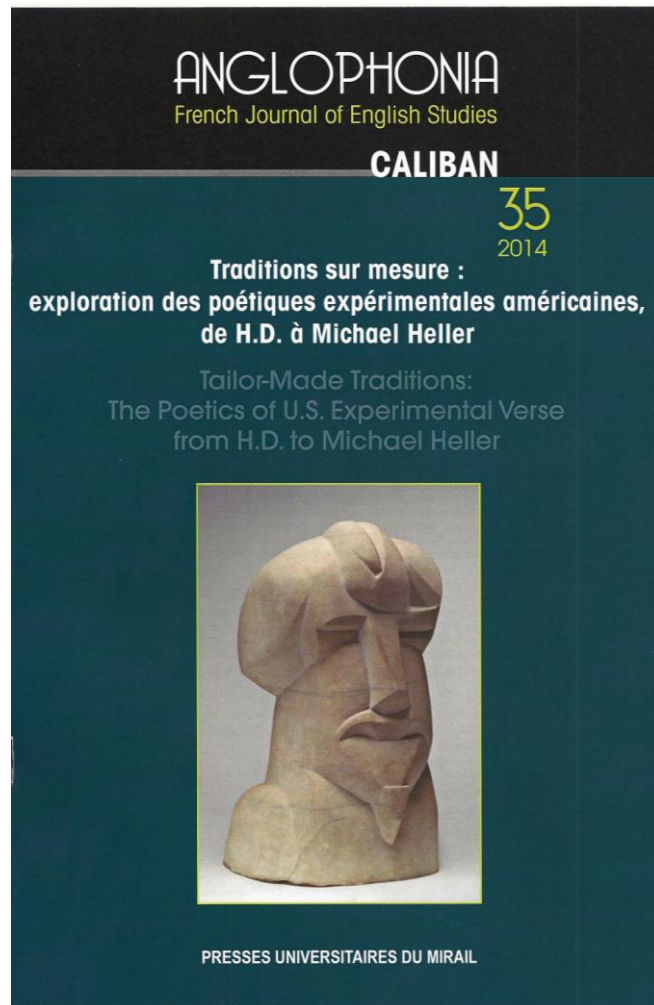
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“Reznikoff is also discussed in François Hugonnier’s study of ‘mystical aspiration and negativity’ in Paul Auster’s poetic texts. In keeping with his acute awareness of using language after Babel, Auster’s concern for nothingness, blank pages and silence produces what Hugonnier depicts as a poetics of ‘unsaying’ foregrounding the inherent paradox in language: its power to create and its profound inadequacy, an essential duality summed up in ‘death’ and ‘breath’. Auster’s drive to ‘speak the unspeakable’ intersects ‘Edmond Jabès and Paul Celan’s struggle with language’.”

(Clément OUDART, “Introduction”)

Unsayings: Mystical Aspiration and Negativity in Paul Auster's Poetry

François HUGONNIER *

ABSTRACT

La seconde chute de l'homme, celle engendrée par l'expérience de la babélisation, est une préoccupation centrale de Paul Auster, qui exprime une position ambiguë sur le pouvoir des mots. Dans ses poèmes, le langage est systématiquement présenté comme un instrument inadéquat. Cependant, ses écrits, dans leur itération même, tendent paradoxalement à révéler la force créatrice de la poésis. Ceci nous amène à nous interroger sur le dépassement des limites du langage opéré par Paul Auster. Afin de mesurer le rôle de la négativité dans son œuvre poétique et d'évaluer ses élans mystiques, il convient d'étudier son recours à l'absence d'image, à la représentation du silence et à l'expression de l'inexprimable. Esclave de la temporalité et d'un vocable étouffant, le poète s'exile dans le langage et se heurte aux murs de l'indicible. La figuration contradictoire d'une subjectivité fuyante et d'une mimesis défailante conduit Auster à déterrer les pierres d'une "nonterre" promise (Unearth). Dans cet univers poétique sans image, l'ombre du verbe plane sur la page blanche pour ne laisser apparaître, en négatif, qu'une re-présentation imparfaite. Il s'agira de déchiffrer ces traces artificielles rédigées dans une langue obscure, où les mots s'avèrent les "cendres" d'un discours poétique informulable et informulé, s'inscrivant comme reste.

KEYWORDS: negativity; silence; image; representation; exile.

Silence and the impossibility of writing haunt Paul Auster's poems. Concise, "dense and cryptic" (Auster 2003, 388), his poetic work is addressed to nothingness. An overwhelming negativity

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saturates the blank pages, blocking images that cannot get across to the Other in the confusion of tongues, while now and then an invisible divinity, whose unpronounceable tetragrammaton generates a multitude of names and interpretations, is disclosed *in absentia*.

Paul Auster constantly revisits the myths of Creation and Genesis, and notably the Word of God, the construction of the tower of Babel and the linguistic fall of man. Contrary to Kabbalists, who are “at one in regarding language as something more precious than an inadequate instrument for contact between human beings” (Scholem 17), Paul Auster expresses an ambiguous—and often ironical—view on the power of words. In his work, which depicts a linguistic failure, language is repeatedly presented as an “inadequate instrument”. However, the act of writing, in its very iteration, tends to reveal the creative drive of poetic language.

Involving a lack as well as an excess of meaning, human language compels the poet to re-present his perception of the world, so that he finds himself enslaved by a stifling, time-ridden word. Auster’s relationship to language echoes Jacques Derrida’s definition of the “*pharmakon* ... which acts as both remedy and poison” (70). According to Auster, language is an ambivalent material merging opposites, thus equally synonymous with *death* and *breath*. After a decade of poetic experimentations leading to a dead end, prose writing gave him a new lease of life. Analyzing Paul Auster’s early poetry is necessary not only to understand the linguistic and philosophical stakes of his protean work, but also to reassess his place in the American canon.

This article enquires into Paul Auster’s handling of the limitations of language by addressing the function of negativity in his poetry so as to discuss his mystical aspirations. I shall therefore turn, first and foremost, to his use of the linguistic paradoxes of imagelessness, of the representation of silence, and other means of expressing the inexpressible.

The imageless world

Then images would be, to speech, what imagelessness is to silence.
—Edmond Jabès (11, my translation)

Paul Auster's first literary texts, written under the decisive influence of Edmond Jabès, systematically tackle the "silence"/"speech" and "image"/"imagelessness" polarities. These reflections inform his poetic re-readings and re-writings of biblical texts. In his early poems and critical essays, Paul Auster defines the poetic act as a refashioning of perception and language. In "The Decisive Moment", he harks back to the creation of the world in religious terms and imagery: "The poet, who is the first man to be born, is also the last. He is Adam, but he is also the end of all generations: the mute heir of the builders of Babel. For it is he who must learn to speak from his eye—and cure himself of seeing with his mouth" (Auster 1984, 151). Like any poet, the Objectivist Charles Reznikoff must recover from linguistic poisoning and repent of his semiotic sins. As early as 1967, Auster wrote that "the fall of man ... is a question of language conquering experience: the fall of the world into the word, experience descending from the eye to the mouth" (Auster 2007, 204).

Stemming from experimentations at the threshold of unsaying, aphasia is the inevitable upshot of Auster's poetic demands. In several poems, silence and imagelessness are symbolized by whiteness. This paradoxical non-color appears in *Effigies* for instance: "Northernmost word, scattered/in the white//hours of the imageless world" (Auster 2007, 120). The mimetic operation, which parallels the Greek *pharmakon* in Derrida's definition, is undermined by fragmentation ("scattered"), temporality ("white//hours") and imagelessness ("imageless world"). Nonetheless, the silent whiteness *is* represented thanks to the adjective "white" and the preceding space, unveiling the white page behind the words.

In *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Scholem asserts that "the religious world of the mystic can be expressed in terms applicable to rational knowledge only with the help of paradox" (4-5). The "invisible God of the Hebrews", which is mentioned in Auster's long prose poem *White Spaces*, embodies, *par excellence*, this phenomenon:

It is sometimes necessary not to name the thing we are speaking about. The invisible God of the Hebrews, for example, had an unpronounceable name, and each of the ninety-nine names tradition ascribes to this God was in fact nothing more than a way of acknowledging that-which-cannot-be-spoken, that-which-cannot-be-seen, and that-which-cannot-be-understood (Auster 2007, 157).

In Auster's poems, which were all written before this hybrid piece, Yhwh's presence is translated through its absence, as in "Covenant", taken from *Wall Writing*:

Throng of eyes,
Myriad, at sunken retina depth: the image
of the great, imageless one,
moored within.

...

A name,
followed through the dust
of all that veering, did not ever
divulge its sound. (Auster 2007, 83)

"Covenant" is an obvious biblical rewriting interwoven with literary references. In the first stanza, the "[t]hrong of eyes" recalls Charles Olson's "polis/is eyes" (30). This kaleidoscopic dissemination of "eyes" and I's is followed by "the image/of the great, imageless one/moored within" (Auster 2007, 83). The remote "image" of the "imageless" is an indirect representation of God, whose name is unpronounceable: "A name ... did not ever/divulge its sound" (83).

When Paul Auster tries to speak the unspeakable, he approaches the impenetrable place of inspiration, the realm of the unconscious. As inaccessible as the nameless divinity, stealthy visions and melodies withstand re-presentation. In his essay entitled "The Silence of Mallarmé", Maurice Blanchot describes this creative process and concludes that the poet "revealed only the absence" of "the great secret work" (106). Nevertheless, Mallarmé and Auster are irresistibly drawn inward, towards a blind and silent core. From the collocation

“imageless/one” (Auster 2007, 83, emphasis mine) the *swan*—a Mallarmean emblem representing the hidden poet himself—is conjured up phonemically.

The adjective “imageless” (83, 120), which is composed of the noun “image” and the suffix “less”, illustrates the economy of Paul Auster’s poetic language. No sooner is the image pronounced than it literally disappears—as if erased in the same breath. From a wider perspective, this paradox is inherent to metaphors, which Auster rarely uses, except when it comes to putting into words the untranslatability of his perceptions. As Marc Chénétier explained during a speech on Auster’s poetry delivered at NYU in 2001, images are mostly absent from his work. Indeed, he carefully avoids them:

If Paul Auster ‘tried very consciously not to use images in poetry’ and uses very few in his prose, it is of course not because he dismisses the obvious metaphorical dimension of poetic imaginative frames or of novelistic narratives. But precisely because ‘the pure approach to things’ he wishes to be his precludes the erection of a wall of images that would double the wall of words themselves, further to obscure his apprehension of the real.¹

Paul Auster eschews images in his poems in order to get a more direct grip on the real and a “pure approach to things”.² This strategy is inherited from the Objectivist poets Charles Reznikoff and George Oppen, who are inseparable from Auster’s debut as a writer.³ The only

¹ Marc Chénétier, “On Silence, Space, Stones and Speed: the Poetics of Paul Auster” (typescript), a “French Accents” event with Paul Auster, co-sponsored with the Department of English, NYU, 12 April 2001, 15. I thank Marc Chénétier for allowing me to use this unpublished material.

² Paul Auster told Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory that “the aim [of his poems] was always to achieve a purity and consistency of language” (Auster 1995, 133).

³ Auster’s essay on Reznikoff’s poetry, entitled “The Decisive Moment” (Auster 1984), is an important landmark in Auster’s *œuvre* and a touchstone of Objectivist criticism. In his essay on George Oppen’s poetry, Auster also analyses silence and linguistic nakedness (Auster 1981, 49-52). Besides, in the very first essay he published, Auster makes a similar comment on Jacques Dupin’s work: “The poetic

metaphor used is the tower of Babel, for it translates the impossibility of words themselves. Though barely formulated, other images, like the scarab imprisoned in its own feces (67), picture Auster's contentious relationship with the *pharmakon* language. They contribute to a relentless circulation between the poles of the oppositions (interior/exterior, life/death, world/word). Walt Whitman's line "Fog in the air, beetles rolling balls of dung" ("Song of Myself", 110) is internalized by Auster in "Interior" ("A scarab, devoured *in the sphere/of its own dung*" [67, emphasis mine]). In *White Spaces*, the human body is described in the exact same terms: "the body's need to be taken beyond itself, even as it dwells *in the sphere of its own motion*" (156, emphasis mine). The "sphere" and the interior/exterior duality are repeated in the final parable of the adventurer Peter Freuchen (160-1). This lonely figure—surrounded by starving wolves and threatened by his own breath freezing on the inner walls of his igloo (a *hemispheric* shelter built in the North Pole)—embodies Auster's struggle with language; from death to breath, from silence to silence, in the whiteness of a wild act of survival.

Be they made of stone or snow, the brick walls, whose construction is associated with the poetic act, materialize the impenetrable boundary between world and word, or between interiority and exteriority. As for the quarry, it points at Auster's "exile in the word"⁴ through some indecipherable subterranean escape route: "Picks jot the quarry—eroded marks/That could not cipher the message" ("Spokes", 25); "For the crumbling of the earth/underfoot//is a music in itself" ("Quarry", 138). An unstable structure threatens to collapse, line by line, as each syntactical break deconstructs the stones of language. Paul Auster tentatively digs into the "non-place"⁵ of literature, grinding the pebbles that roll under his feet like indomitable syllables.

word is ... burdened by the weight of habit and layers of dead skin that must be stripped away before it can regain its true function" (Auster 1973, 78).

⁴ The phrase "Exiled in the word", which was coined by Edmond Jabès, was later used by Jerome Rothenberg as the title of one his poetry anthologies. See Rothenberg 1989.

⁵ The expression "non-place" was used by Marc Chénétier in his speech on Auster's poetry (10), and by Josh Cohen in his article on "Paul Auster, Edmond Jabès and the

Unearthing language stones

Like Reznikoff, Jabès and Celan, Paul Auster looks for the adequate words in the rubble of the tower of Babel, which he “hew[s]” (Auster 2007, 39, 91) with microscopic accuracy through his Spinozist lenses.⁶ Auster collects the smallest particles of the world in his sand and dust-covered pages. His breath turns them into hourglasses, stopping time⁷ and reuniting the atomic fragments of an elusory totality:

My breath
shatters into you. I am
particle
in what heaps you whole,
ash—hovering (“Horizon”, Auster 2007, 88)

Stones and words are cold concretions. Silent, lifeless and faceless, they cannot project an image, nor mimic an organic movement. After Celan, Auster writes “As one speaks to stones ... /from the abyss”.⁸ Inspired by Ralph Waldo Emerson (“The poet finds himself not near enough to his object” [Emerson 208]) and Charles Reznikoff (“a process by which one places oneself between things and the name of things” [Auster 1984, 151]), Auster places himself in the rift between world and words, deciphering the “illegible” (108) writings on the walls as he walks across an “unland” (126) strewn with arbitrary signs.

“White”, a poem written in memory of Paul Celan, deals with their exile into the “unland” of poetry. This complex tribute is a

Writing of Auschwitz” (102). Mark Brown also dedicated a whole chapter to Auster’s “no places” (129-159).

⁶ The poem “Looking Glass” (Auster 2007, 136), which will be studied later on in this paper, alludes not only to man and God’s images, but also to the fact that Spinoza made particularly accurate lenses for a living.

⁷ See especially the poem “Gnomon” (Auster 2007, 128), which deals with the representation of time and the imperfection of such semiotic systems as human language.

⁸ Paul Celan, “Radix, Matrix” (Celan 1995, 191).

midrash; an “elegiac”⁹ exegesis of the Flood and the exit from the Ark (Gen 8: 6-12) requiring a detailed analysis:

For one who drowned:
 this page, as if
 thrown out to sea
 in a bottle.

So that
 even as the sky embarks
 into the seeing of earth, an echo
 of the earth
 might sail toward him,
 filled with a memory of rain,
 and the sound of the rain
 falling on the water.

So that
 he will have learned,
 in spite of the wave
 now sinking from the crest
 of mountains, that forty days
 and forty nights
 have brought no dove
 back to us. (Auster 2007, 87)

The first line “For one who drowned” (87) alludes to Celan’s suicide: he jumped into the Seine from the Mirabeau bridge in April 1970. Written a few years after his death, this short poem merges some of the main themes of Celan’s works of prose and poetry. The first stanza paraphrases Celan’s Bremen address (“this page, as if/thrown out to

⁹ The adjective “elegiac” is used by Norman Finkelstein in his brief study of the poem “White”: “the poet gives himself over completely to his elegiac task” (Finkelstein 48).

sea/in a bottle”).¹⁰ In the poem “White”, this reference is enigmatic, but Auster makes it more explicit in his essay “The Poetry of Exile”:

“In this language,” Celan said—and by this he meant German, the language of the Nazis and the language of his poems—“I have tried to write poetry, in order to acquire a perspective of reality for myself.” He then compared the poem to a message in a bottle—thrown out to sea in the hope that it will one day wash up to land, “perhaps on the shore of the heart.” “Poems,” he continued, “even in this sense are under way: they are heading toward something. Toward what? Toward some open place that can be inhabited, toward a thou which can be addressed, perhaps toward a reality which can be addressed.”

The poem, then, is not a transcription of an already known world, but a process of discovery, and the act of writing for Celan is one that demands personal risks. ... These poems are more than literary artifacts. They are a means of staying alive (Auster 1993, 95-6).

Celan’s use of the personal pronoun “thou” prompted Auster’s “one”, “he” and “us” in the first and final stanzas of “White”. Auster puts Celan’s investigative poetry to the test by rewriting the words “toward a thou”, thus sending a message back to him: “toward him” (87). According to Auster, Celan was not interested in formal speculation or referential illusion (“more than literary artifacts” [Auster 1993, 96]), but in the search for truth and reality through poetic practice. As in most essays by Paul Auster, poetry is then described as *a mode of survival*: “a means of staying alive” (Auster 1993, 96).¹¹

¹⁰ Paul Celan, “Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen” (Celan 1986, 33-5).

¹¹ Paul Auster repeats this conception of the act of writing in his essays on Jabès (“a mode of survival” [Auster 2003, 368]), Louis Wolfson (“an act of survival” [Auster 2003, 326]) and André du Bouchet (“an act of survival” [Auster 1993, 183]). From a strictly autobiographical perspective, Auster even told Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory that “writing is no longer an act of free will for [him], it’s a matter of survival” (Auster 1995, 123).

“White” progresses towards the Other, towards a linguistic refuge—towards a homeland. The poetic act is an endless movement, a continuous flux like water and memory, and Auster adds up to it by presenting himself as the Other; a fellow (Jewish) poet. The communication between these exiled poets is established through the poem, even though the timeless reality they share is uncertain, as the modal “might” suggests (Auster 2007, 87). The “echo/of the earth ... /filled with a memory of rain” sustains this weak connection beyond spatiotemporal boundaries. The personal pronoun “us” celebrates the performative role of the poem and the unification of the poets, even if the last lines (“have brought no dove/back to us”) ultimately translate a communication failure.

In the last two stanzas, biblical elements need to be deciphered. At first sight, the “mountains” evoke Mount Sinai and Celan’s prose text “Conversation in the Mountains” (Celan 1986). In the last stanza, the “forty days/and forty nights”, “the water”, the “mountains”, “the sky” and the “dove” clearly refer to the Flood (Gen 7: 19).¹² The white “dove”, which recalls Celan’s poem “The Whitest Dove of All”, embodies migration, sacrifice (Gen 15: 9) and mourning (Isaiah 38: 14). In Genesis, the dove plays a crucial part in the exit from the ark (Gen 8: 6-12), when the waters recede and the top of the mountains comes into view (Gen 8: 5). Forty days after the Flood, Noah sends a dove to scout out the terrain. Auster intertwines these elements in the second stanza: “even as the sky embarks/into the seeing of earth” (Auster 2007, 87). Unable to find earth to land on, the dove flies back to Noah (Gen 8: 12), who repeats the procedure twice more. But the third time the bird does not return; hence the poem concludes: “forty days/and forty nights/have brought no dove/back to us” (87).

Auster implies here that the dove has not found hospitable land, but that it has perhaps escaped at great cost to some unknown place, a mental haven where language has meaning, far from the land of men. And the page, rocked by time and tides like a message in a bottle, testifies to the poem’s aim, to its being “under way”, sent “toward”

¹² The Flood lasted forty days and forty nights (Gen 7: 12), echoing other key biblical ordeals, like the forty days (Mark 1: 13) and forty years (Numb 14: 33-4, Deut 2: 7; 29: 4) spent in the desert. Moses’ sojourns on Mount Sinai both lasted forty days and forty nights (Ex 24: 18; 34: 28).

(Auster 1993, 95) the Other—towards one's self—towards death as the ultimate and unknowable state of being. The silent whiteness represents both the persistent hope for poetic rebirth, and an ongoing alienation whispering new forms, beyond the boundaries of language.

According to Auster, Celan was the archetypal outsider poet: "Paul Celan was a poet of exile, an outsider even to the language of his own poems" (Auster 1993, 90). In "Shibboleth for Paul Celan" (1994), Derrida makes the same reading of Celan's poetry, which Marjorie Perloff sums up and nuances as follows: "The alienation of the poet from his own language, [...] the 'mouthfuls of silence' the poet proffers the reader—these analyses of Celan's poetic are based, we should note, on a very particular set of assumptions about the way Celan's poetry—or, for that matter, any poetry—works" (Perloff 291). However, this "set of assumptions" about the workings of poetry is quite revealing of the common features of Celan and Auster's aesthetics. These "assumptions" are actually shared by many poets and scholars, including Gilles Deleuze, who defines literary "style" as "managing to stammer in one's own language ... [B]eing a stammerer of language itself. Being like a foreigner in one's own language" (Deleuze 4). Despite the complexity and impenetrability of his work, Celan himself insists on the utmost necessity of using the poetic form merely as a means of communication.¹³

After experiencing exile as an American poet in Paris, Paul Auster took up Edmond Jabès and Paul Celan's struggle with language. If he did not suffer comparable losses and political threats, he was inspired by their search for oblique ways to speak the unspeakable. The magazine *Living Hand*, edited by Paul Auster and Mitchell Siskind in 1973, is a response to linguistic alienation. It constitutes a homeland for Jabès, Celan and Auster's poems. *Living Hand #1* contains some fragments from Auster's *Unearth*, published for the first time. The title *Unearth* refers to the poet's activity: Auster unearths the ruins of the tower of Babel, digging out the buried roots

¹³ See Celan's Bremen speech (1986, 33-5) analyzed by Auster in "The Poetry of Exile" (1993, 95-6).

of language. The endless repetition of “stones” pounds the earth and paves the way for the stammering voices of the future novelist.¹⁴

In *Living Hand #1*, after a few stanzas dedicated to wandering in the “desert” (“Nomad—/till nowhere” [Auster 1973, 53]), the poet of stones Paul Auster makes room for the poet of “sand” (53), Edmond Jabès. Starting with the first poems of *Unearth*, which were published as a whole collection in the third issue of the magazine, the City’s din contrasts with the empty spaces. Later on, in *Disappearances*, the megalopolis is entirely peopled with language stones. In a growing confusion of bodies and buildings, the poet advances stone by stone, undergoing a threatening process of desubjectification:

And of each thing he has seen
he will speak—

the blinding
enumeration of stones,
even to the moment of death—

as if for no other reason
than that he speaks. (“Disappearances”, Auster 2007, 112)

Auster’s semiotic world is made of stones. The more the poet sees, the blinder he becomes. Deciphering (or engraving) messages is no remedy. In the Jewish mystical tradition, the world was created with language, which would conversely allow a reading of God’s attributes. “Spokes”, Auster’s first poem published in *Poetry* (1972), bears a resemblance to the Kabbalistic wheel, which built the world and its thriving houses by propelling stones and letters. These thirteen

¹⁴ This metaphorical representation of poetry was later used by Paul Auster himself at the enigmatic end of his novel *Invisible*: “A barren field stretched out before me, a barren, dusty field cluttered with gray stones of various shapes and sizes, and scattered among the stones in that field were fifty or sixty men and women, each holding a hammer in one hand and a chisel in the other, pounding on the stones until they broke in two, then pounding on the smaller stones until they broke in two, and then pounding on the smallest stones until they were reduced to gravel.” (Auster 2009, 307)

fragments also evoke the Buddhist wheel of fortune. Contrary to the latter, Paul Auster's wheel is not made of twelve, but thirteen "spokes". Language and creation are bound to an odd-numbered, deceitful wheel: "The wheel/Was deception. It cannot turn" ("Spokes [12]", 32). The wind ("gales") is associated with the poet's "breath" and the arbitrary inscriptions of the wheel of creation:

But gales nourish
Chance: breath, blooming, while the wheel scores
Its writing into earth. ("Spokes [9]", Auster 2007, 29).

This stanza mirrors the story of Creation, which begins with performative breath and language. The poet cannot control the act of writing's outward and impersonal motion ("the wheel scores/Its writing into earth"). "Spokes" is the first piece originating from Auster's fascination with irretrievable perfect languages such as the Word of God, which would later trigger the plots of *City of Glass* (1985) and *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005). Auster's poems are made out of a flawed language that translates the guilt of its own creation. As a result, each stony poem cements the boundaries between word, image and object:

The language of walls.
Or one last word—
cut
from the visible. ("Hieroglyph", 70)

The stone wall materializes a limit to the idealized creative act. Darkening the object of representation more than it enlightens it, this oracular linguistic construction paradoxically gives away the poet's powerlessness. Paul Auster cannot communicate in a language that takes him further away from the world and the Other who might—or might not—read him. After Paul Celan in *The Noman's Rose*, Paul Auster rewrites these frustrated expectations in *Wall Writing*.¹⁵ Both

¹⁵ The poems "Hieroglyph" (70) and "Wall Writing" (81) refer to the biblical episode of the Fall of Babylon, when the fingers of a human hand appeared and drew a message on a wall of the royal palace. Terrified, king Belshazzar summoned

poets try to fertilize stones, seeds and eggs that will neither bloom nor hatch:

We stand by the window embracing, and people
 look up from the street:
 it is time they knew!
 It is time the stone made an effort to flower (“Corona”, Celan
 1995, 61)

It is spring,
 and below his window,
 he hears a hundred white stones
 turn into raging phlox (“Scribe”, Auster 2007, 69)

The “roots” (Auster 2007, 21, 27), which grow out of the “seeds” (21, 26, 31) and into the “stones”, generate a poetic language that Marc Chénétier named “saxifrage” in reference to Michel Deguy (Chénétier 2). “Saxifrage” is an appropriate adjective to describe Auster’s poetics, all the more so as it had previously been used by William Carlos Williams. The link between “A Sort of Song” and Auster’s poems, which describe the writhing of the roots, the splitting of stones and the blossoming of nameless flowers, is evident:

Let the snake wait under
 his weed
 and the writing
 be of words, slow and quick, sharp
 to strike, quiet to wait,
 sleepless.
 —through metaphor to reconcile
 the people and the stones.
 Compose. (No ideas
 but in things) Invent!

Daniel, who was the only one capable of translating this secret message (Daniel 5). According to the Jewish rabbinic interpretation of this chapter from the Book of Daniel, the eligible message was probably written in a coded language. Some Kabbalists have claimed that it was gematria.

saxifrage is my flower that splits
the rocks. (“A Sort of Song”, Williams 55)

Like Williams’s, Auster’s “saxifrage” word tries to crack apart the walls of language, truth and subjectivity. Auster calls into question the power of “metaphor” and imagination (“Compose”, “Invent!”) celebrated by Williams. From the very first stanzas of “Spokes”, Auster distrusts the validity of poetic language and endeavors to free himself from solitary confinement in the stifling stones:

The flower is red, is perched
Where roots split, in the gnarl
Of a tower, sucking in its meager fast,
And retracting the spell
That welds step to word
And ties the tongue to its faults.
The flower will be red
When the first word tears the page (Auster 2007, 27)

In this fragment, “[t]he flower” rhymes with the “tower” of Babel; with its linguistic ramifications and poetic “gnarl”. The poem might become a flower of ruin. But metaphors are impossible. The “word tears the page”, in other words its creation entices its own destruction. The “reconcil[iation]” of the poet with the stone words precipitates the subject’s disappearance. In the aftermath of the fall of the tower of Babel and the *confusio linguarum*, naming is synonymous with wandering and error. Speech is once again referred to as the original sin: “the spell/That welds step to word/And ties the tongue to its faults” (27). The repetition and variation of the lines “The flower is red” and “the flower will be red”, contains a homophonic pun (red/read) that pictures reading and understanding a message as the final faulty steps in the doomed process of communication.

The fragmentation and rocky architecture of the poem are also derived from George Oppen (“There can be a brick/In a brick wall” [Oppen 175]) and of course, from Jacques Dupin, whom Paul Auster considers as a “brother” (2012b). Auster walls himself up by digging

out language stones, engraving and deciphering braille messages in the shadow of the word:

All night
I read the braille wounds
on the inner wall
of your cry (“Covenant”, 83)

In the impossibility¹⁶ of words,
in the unspoken word that asphyxiates,
I find myself (“Interior”, 67)

“Interior” is a meditation on subjectivity and the act of writing. The poet, who works inside himself, is exiled in a threatening language. Like Peter Freuchen who somehow manages to escape from his tomb-like igloo in *White Spaces*, Auster goes past this “asphyxia” thanks to his life-saving, or at least career-saving, prose: “needless to say, he did escape” (161).

Auster’s poems are the outcome of experimentations with the unspeakable, the “unspoken” (67), and various forms of *unsaying*. Starting with exile and the internalization of breath, these expressions of negativity participate in “a *phenomenology of breathing*” (Auster 2012a, 1), which calls for further reading of Auster’s poetic output.

Unsayings: mystical aspiration and negativity

According to Jerome Rothenberg, Paul Celan and Charles Olson are the forerunners of post-1945 poetry: “[I]t was the writers of the postwar as such—Celan & Olson the first presented here—who offered a resistance through language & through a poetry driven back into the body (...), to issue therefrom in a poetics of the breath (‘projective verse’—Olson) or of a ‘breathturn’ (Celan)” (Rothenberg 406). Celan and Olson searched for an internalized response, a

¹⁶ The noun “impossibility” and the adjective “impossible” describe Paul Auster’s linguistic confinement in the poems “Interior” (67), “Effigies” (118), and finally in “Facing the Music” (151), formulating what Norman Finkelstein refers to as “a valediction to poetry rarely found in modern letters” (Auster 2007, 14).

political and esthetic resistance that led them to denounce the obsolescence of metaphor in the era of disaster.

Correlative to “breath”-related issues, the question of the subject’s linguistic internalization is central to Auster’s poetics. In his essay “On Language as Such and the Language of Man”, Walter Benjamin asserts that “all language communicates itself. Or, more precisely, that all language communicates itself *in* itself” (64). Benjamin’s theory echoes Auster’s linguistic confinement and his lamentations over the divorce between world and words. Emphasizing the impossibility of any verbalization of the world, Benjamin adds that “language is in every case not only communication of the communicable but also, at the same time, a symbol of the noncommunicable” (74).

In his poem “Narrative”, Auster puts forward an analogous vision: “if we speak/of the world/it is only to leave the world/unsaid” (Auster 2007, 143). The world is out of the reaches of human language, which communicates *inside* human language. The attempted journey from interior to exterior requires multiple translations that impoverish and displace meaning. If Celan claims that “No one/bears witness for the/witness”,¹⁷ Paul Auster can only speak of speech: “I speak to you of speech” (“Lapsarian” [Auster 2007, 97]). In search of a representation of the interior-exterior duality, halfway between Benjamin’s theories and Celan’s poetry, Auster demonstrates that the only word possible is the “unspoken word” inside which the asphyxiated poet “finds himself” (Auster 2007, 67).

In the darkness of the “imageless world” (120) and the gradual disappearance of the poetic subject, a crowd of *un-words* sketches out a negative ontology. Abounding as much as the stones, these *un-words* are a means of textual deconstruction. The parallel concepts of “nothingness” and “nowhere”, which are developed at length in Auster’s novels, were initiated in his poetry. Auster invokes this negativity by turning the light of Creation (Gen 1: 3) into the “shadow” of “nothing[ness]”: “And if nothing/then let nothing be/the shadow” (Auster 2007, 128). Most poems are saturated with *un-words*: “unpronounceable” (56), “unsigned” (66), “unspoken” (67),

¹⁷ Paul Celan, “Ashglory” (Celan 2005, 104-5).

“unapproachable” (73), “unknowable” (89, 157), “undeciphered” (107), “untellable” (135), “unblessed” (147), “unborn” (57, 148), “undead” (149). These adjectives—the list is not exhaustive—qualify perception and speech, neither of which can quite come to life but which both paradoxically refuse to die. Auster doubts the capacity of language to represent anything but itself, so much so that he systematically *unsays*. The prefix “un” reinforces the paradoxical *unity* of his aesthetics of *nothingness*, marked by a noteworthy mastery of French language.¹⁸ In his essay “Book of the Dead”, Paul Auster quotes Edmond Jabès’s chiasmic pun “nul/l’un”: “In the very center of *El*, ... there is a chart with ‘nul’ [nothing] on the top and ‘l’un’ [one] on the bottom. The whole work, in effect, takes place in this ‘one’ and is finally cancelled out to become ‘nothing’” (Auster 1990, 208). This erasure of language—and ultimately, of Auster’s whole poetic work—is put to the test in his poems, gradually leading him to a silent void filled with nothingness.

Elsewhere, quoting from his translation of *A tomb for Anatole*, Auster reflects on this negativity, which he also inherited from Mallarmé. In the second half of his memoir *The Invention of Solitude*, a third-person narrative, he claims that his translations resemble secular “prayers” addressed to “*the modern nothingness*”: “Translating those forty or so fragments by Mallarmé ... had become the equivalent of offering a prayer of thanks for the life of his son. A prayer to what? To nothing perhaps. To his sense of life. To *the modern nothingness*” (Auster 1988, 111). As they reveal a great deal of his “sense of life” Auster’s own poems can be considered as nihilistic “prayers” too.

Running through his entire poetic work, Auster’s multi-faceted *un-words* are made of negative prefixes and suffixes, or mere negations: “never”, “nowhere”, “no one”, “no more”, “no home”, “no meaning” and “nothingness” are repeated endlessly. The word “nothing” occurs no less than thirty-five times. In “Fore-Shadows”, the shadow of the Holocaust hovers over this saturated absence. Like Celan, Auster hardly ever mentions Auschwitz explicitly. Yet, his

¹⁸ In the early 1970s, Auster spent almost four years in France, where he met Jacques Dupin and Edmond Jabès.

poetic language is often evocative of its traumatic aftermath: silence, fragmentation, stone words and muffled references are buried under the literal surface of the poems, while deeper meaning now and then shows through uncertain signs. According to Norman Finkelstein, “the Celan-like ‘Fore-Shadows’ ... [is] addressed to victims of the Holocaust generally, but perhaps to lost Jewish writers in particular” (Finkelstein 49). In this poem, Auster shows the highest necessity of his poetic venture:

I breathe you.
I becalm you out of me.
I numb you in the reach
of brethren light.
I suckle you
to the dregs of disaster.

The sky pins a vagrant star
on my chest. I see the wind
as witness, the towering night
that lapsed
in a maze of oaks,
the distance.

I haunt you
to the brink of sorrow.
I milk you of strength.
I defy you,
I deify you
to nothing and
to no one,

I become
your necessary and most violent
heir. (“Fore-Shadows”, Auster 2007, 78)

Some of these words function as traumatic recollections: “disaster”, “vagrant star/on my chest”, “witness”, “haunt”. Auster’s “he[ritage]”

is disclosed through a “violent”¹⁹ act of language, even if most of it is unspoken. Auster’s “necessary ... heir”—in which one might hear yet another allusion to breath (*air*)—is not Wallace Stevens’s “necessary angel” (Stevens 1954). If Auster investigates Stevens’s theories of inspiration, reality and the imagination, here in “Fore-Shadows” the poet introduces himself as the heir of post-1945 poetry, in the American context of the Vietnam War.²⁰ Like Auster’s translations of Mallarmé, this poem of the “breathturn” (“I breathe you”) is a “prayer” (“defy”, “deify”) addressed “to nothing and/to no one” (78).

Besides these literary and historical references, Auster’s negativity is prior to linguistic formulation. In a flawed semiotic system, words seldom match the poet’s fleeting perceptions: “the furtive/Equinox of names” (29). Before attempting verbalization and representation, perception itself is impossible. The poet’s senses seem defective and powerless: “unseen” (35, 147, 159), “illegible” (108), “inaudible” (66), “invisible” (everywhere). Auster’s negativity is also expressed through lexical, grammatical and syntactical dislocation; enjambments and gimpy metric redistribution:

Along with your ashes, the barely
written ones, obliterating
the ode, the incited roots, the alien
eye—with imbecilic hands ... (“Unearth”, 37)

The poet is estranged from himself in the line break “the alien/eye”. He progresses in a language incompatible with the immediacy of perception. The dash both draws and severs a link, all the more so as it is followed by the distant preposition “with”. These lines show that hands and eyes cannot articulate proper messages. They also

¹⁹ Paul Auster told Victor Martinez that “intimate, compact and ferocious poets interest [him]” (Auster 2012b, 18, my translation). He also recalled the “hidden violence” of Jacques Dupin’s poetry: “when I was very young, the hidden violence of his poems appealed to me. I found it vivifying, like ... a declaration of war against the conventions of poetry, thought, philosophy and politics” (13, my translation).

²⁰ “For Jacques [Dupin], it was the Second World War, for us, it was the Vietnam War” (Auster 2012b, 19, my translation).

underscore the poet's inability to find his own voice, unless he breaks free from poetic conventions ("obliterating/the ode"). The personal pronoun "I" intermeddles ("the alien/[I]"), like the evanescent remnant of an exercise in desubjectification inspired from Rimbaud's "I is another" (84, my translation).

In "Wall Writing", double negations push these experimentations to the limit: "Nothing less than nothing/In the night that does not come/from nothing,/for no one in the night/that does not come" (81). Auster's poems map out the non-place of writing, either by redefining its boundaries or by crossing them. In his interview with Edmond Jabès, Auster thus spoke of "a word on the other side of speech, a kind of limit, something almost impossible to express" (Auster 1990, 202), "thereby exposing a large segment of his very own progra[m] and quandary", as Marc Chénétier observed (20). These considerations on the unspeakable and the limitations of language give an ambiguous insight into Paul Auster's quasi mystical aspirations, and more precisely, into the mechanisms of his negative ontology. His poems suggest a paradoxical equilibrium as they translate silence and nothingness into minimalist lines. Despite this verbal concision, Auster could only end up silent, for the inner ecstatic experience is untranslatable.

It would be simplistic to qualify Auster merely as a mystic, but his paradoxical handling of poetry can partly be explained in that respect. Moreover, paradoxes, oppositions and negativity are still quintessential aspects of his novels. The underlying spiritual and metaphysical questions keep surfacing in the characters' dialogues and introspections. During our interview conducted a few weeks before the release of *The Brooklyn Follies*, Auster used the term "salut" ("salvation"), which led me to question him on the place of religion and spirituality in his work. Suddenly dropping the fictional mask, he explained that one might talk of these matters as

spiritual rather than *religious* ones. Not *religious* because I am not a believer. But there is always this idea that we haven't invented the world. We haven't created it. There are transcendental aspirations in each soul for something bigger than us. ... I see myself as belonging to the world. Most of the

time people are cut off from the world, isolated, but sometimes we feel connected.²¹

Auster's "transcendental aspirations" and his "belonging to the world" are led by an inner call reaching out to "something bigger than us". Auster is "not a believer", but his spirituality blends American Transcendentalism and the Spinozist conception of God—or Nature—as an infinite substance connecting all fragments, all animate and inanimate things. During a conversation with Gérard De Cortanze, Auster retrospectively acknowledged the foundation of his philosophy in the chiasmic proposition he wrote as a nineteen-year-old student: "The world is my head. My body is in the world."²² This expression sums up his early readings of Spinoza, and perhaps most notably, of Merleau-Ponty's negative ontology. In 2011, Auster claimed that Merleau-Ponty was "the most important [French] philosopher, the one that profoundly changed [his] life" when he was "nineteen-twenty years old" (Auster 2012b, 20, my translation). Auster's early philosophical statements are reminiscent of *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968), in which Merleau-Ponty reflects on the relationship between "body" and "world" through various chiasmic formulations.

In the poem "Looking Glass", Auster pays homage to "Spinoza's" unnamable "god", exiled into a speechless world after having blinded the unfaithful poet:

Spinoza's god
 cast from the borders of speech, geometric,
 journeying through the curve
 of exile,
 hazards another world (Auster 2007, 136).

²¹ This interview with Paul Auster was conducted in French during the Étonnants Voyageurs Festival in Saint Malo, France, in May 2005 (Hugonnier 524-5, my translation).

²² Paul Auster, "Notes from a Composition Book (1967)" (Auster 2007, 203). Paul Auster retrospectively told Gérard De Cortanze that the formula "The world is my head. My body is in the world" could well "sum up [his] philosophy." Auster even added that "[his] books are nothing else than the development of this observation" (Auster 1997, 21, my translation).

As the title “Looking Glass” suggests, Auster is alluding to the representation of man made in the image of “god” (136). Contrary to its creator Spinoza, the absence of capital letters reinforces the representation of this nameless god seen through a peculiar human “lens”, or focal point. The subject’s “connect[ion]” with the endless and selfless world—a world that is both semiotic and “unspoken” (67)—is represented thanks to chiasmic reversal, alchemistic dichotomies and boundary crossing. The world’s connectedness and fragmentation entail loneliness and “exile” (136). Consequently, if human beings communicate with (and within) language, they paradoxically tend to suffer from “isolat[ion]”. In Auster’s poetics, language plays an ambivalent role, both connecting and separating interiority and exteriority, subjectivity and otherness. For it is man who “invent[ed]” his own “solitude” by reflecting upon himself and translating his experience of the world into words.

When Paul Auster re-presents the internal glimmer of inspiration with human language, he breaks the ecstatic experience and acts as a forger, rather than a creator. He expresses this view in *White Spaces*, after mentioning the “invisible God of the Hebrews”: “words falsify the things they attempt to say” (Auster 2007, 157-8). In the illusory intoxication of “the fall ... from the eye to the mouth” (204), the poet only translates this experience into a series of imperfect signs: artificial traces composed in an opaque language. Following the death of speech, “ashes” are left exposed on the page, beyond metaphor. Only a few “imageless” signs remain. In line with Wittgenstein’s mysticism²³ and Blanchot’s literary essays, Auster’s poems obscure their elusive object of representation, and let it shine through its absence. Paul Auster celebrates “nothingness” and “unearth[s]” a secret word better to *unsay*. He protects the unspeakable from the inadequacy of language by returning it—obliquely—to its silent core.

²³ In *The Brooklyn Follies*, Nathan Glass sums up his reading of a Wittgenstein biography (Auster 2005, 60). Auster ironically abides by Wittgenstein’s famous injunction by not mentioning it: “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence” (Wittgenstein 89).

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