The imagery of writing in the early works of Paul Auster: from stones to books

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BOOK REVIEW

The imagery of writing in the early works of Paul Auster: from stones to books, by Clara Sarmento, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017, 155 pp., £45.99 (pbk), ISBN 978-1-4438-9981-9

In a well-known 1897 watercolour painting, artist Robert William Buss depicts Charles Dickens seated in the middle of his writing-room, while thoughtfully immersed in the creative process, surrounded by the images of various characters and scenes taken from his books and stories. This painting (*Dickens' Dream*) has become a sort of classical representation of all writers' *reverie*, and it might be considered as an allegory of literary creation itself and of the evocative power of the imagination. The portrayed room is also a veritable *scriptorium*, a separate and almost sacred space entirely devoted to the art of writing and set apart specifically for that purpose. Although this picture is never mentioned in Clara Sarmento's *The Imagery of Writing in the Early Works of Paul Auster*, it could easily have been used as the book's front cover. Such a representation of the writer as surrounded – and somehow haunted – by their own fictional creatures is crucial to the reasoning behind the readings presented in this book and pervades many of the texts and spaces there analysed. Indeed, what Sarmento proposes is most of all an inquiry into the many spaces that Paul Auster has 'inhabited' and 'built' in his early literary production, especially in the role of what she designates as 'writer-character' in many occasions. According to the feeble distinction between reality and fiction suggested by that double nature – which is quintessentially postmodern – a clear difference between physical spaces and mental spaces matters very little. What might be called the 'space of writing', which is also necessarily material, is a place where a dreamy dimension and a concrete act of writing fuse together and influence each other. So, as the title of the book clearly states, Sarmento's work is an essay on the 'imagery of writing', which also means that it deals with images of writing and of writers. In this sense, if one thinks of imagery as composed of images and dealing with different figures, representations and motifs, the imagery of writing is exactly where images blossom and proliferate. Indeed, *The Imagery of Writing in the Early Works of Paul Auster* examines some of the most powerful tropes Auster employs in order to metaphorise the very act of writing; and the subtitle 'From Stones to Books' makes it even clearer that the reader should take these images both literally and metaphorically.

It is also important to underline that this book focuses on the early works of the American writer – from the very first poems and essays to novels like *The Invention of Solitude*, *The New York Trilogy*, *The Music of Chance*, *In the Country of Last Things*, *Moon Palace*, *Mr. Vertigo* and *Leviathan* – which remain Auster's most famous and best-known books. Although other novels such as *Oracle Night* (2004), *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006) or *Man in the Dark* (2008) would fit perfectly into the theoretical framework of this study,

the actual selection makes a consistent and exemplary group that reaffirms that Auster's literary production in the late twentieth century is mainly metafictional and self-centred on the craft of writing. The conclusion is that in those works we can already find the essential features of the entire Austerian poetics and imagery. This is nothing new, for at least since the nineties, critics agree in considering Auster's books as dealing in particular with the very act of writing and the almost magical power of literature: intertextuality, metatextuality, writing experience, self-reflection, etc. are by now watchwords of the critique of Auster and even of his self-critique.[1] However, instead of presenting a chronological list of cases where the theme of writing and its metaphors occur, Sarmento's inquiry into the aesthetical dimension of writing focuses on the poetics behind it. In so doing, she highlights the ambivalence and ambiguity of the activity of writing in Auster's works and proposes to read this act as a concrete physical endeavour of actual building, where the writer is conceived of as a craftsman. Such creative activity engenders a process of liberation and self-concealment at the same time, as the writer-character constantly creates new words and spaces while, at the same time, being entirely absorbed in that task, to the point of being imprisoned and even dying. Sarmento perfectly shows how such a double-edged imagery is expressed in Auster, and she outlines a gradual path that moves from 'stones to books'.

Among the first images Sarmento analyses, we find the powerful idea of words as stones, a fundamental image that recurs especially throughout Auster's poems and essays (*Ground Works, Disappearances, The Art of Hunger*). Yet stones are used to assemble bigger structures such as walls or rooms, just as words are gathered to create sentences and books. The first chapter is indeed devoted to Austerian tropes like stones and walls, representing the basic tools of writing as an activity of construction. But, while 'words-stones are the genetic material of the world (re)built through the work of writing, inside the walls of the room' (p. 3), since in the first works walls are already connoted by an ambivalent nature, they 'rise around the writer-character, surrounding and isolating him from the humankind, until self-annihilation, until death' (p. 13). Through an intelligent patchwork of quotations from Auster's texts and her own reading and analyses, Sarmento argues that Auster's writing is an attempt to resist the chaos of isolated words so as to give an order to the world by making words-stones into walls and rooms. Such equations (stones = words, walls = poems; rooms = books, etc.) are the real infrastructure of Sarmento's book and prove essential to understand the complexity of Auster's imagery of writing and its ambiguities. While the words-stones of the poems might be read as a symptom of chaotic creation, the episode of wall building in *The Music of Chance* perfectly shows that 'the builder-character becomes denotatively a writer-character, by establishing a connection between the work of writing and the work of building in stone' (p. 29). Nevertheless, such building becomes a space of isolation where the writer–builder–character locks himself in a fictionalised, ordered universe as opposed to the chaos of reality.

Self-confined in such an isolated space of writing, which is also a place where they build themselves, writer-characters can experience an absolute freedom. The

second chapter deepens this idea of solitude and isolation by focusing on the image of the room: the very sanctuary of all Austerian writer-characters. Here, by means of references to some famous writing rooms – from Pascal to Baudelaire, Hawthorne, Proust and Kafka – Sarmento introduces another important equation suggested by Auster himself: the room as a womb. The writing room is indeed a generative space, a place where the writer-character is free to create and originate his own universe according to infinite possibilities. So, the act of writing is no longer just an act of self-construction and self-constriction but becomes a veritable act of cosmogony with a precise ontology and a specific order. Sarmento concentrates on works like *White Spaces, The Invention of Solitude, The New York Trilogy, Leviathan* and *In the Country of Last Things* in order to highlight those parts where the act of writing in the room is a liberating and generative activity for the writer. In this regard, Auster himself states the equivalence between the room, the mind of the writer who is in the room and the book written in that mind-room. Sarmento seems to suggest that while the poetic experience, with the image of stones-words, ends up in the 'wall of death', novels dealing with writing (in) the room are salvific and lead to a cosmic new birth which is also the creation of the book as a sort of metaphysical yet concrete and infinite entity (Mallarmé and Jabès). Once again the point is that writing a book and creating a parallel universe within the mind and the space of the room, allows the writer to save, to revitalise and to evoke what seemed to be lost forever. To this extent, the 'white space' of the room, which is of course the blank page, is the origin of infinite stories, as well as a safe recovery from the outer world of devastation and chaos. As Sarmento puts it:

> in the solitude of the room, the writer-character inhabits an alternative space and time, while dreaming the universe. The cosmogenesis is the dynamic result of the dream of the protagonist … under the form of a written work that contains an entire poetic and fictional universe. (p. 78)

But, as usual in Auster's poetics, there is always another side of the coin: the one where the *womb* turns into a *tomb* and where 'blank spaces' become 'black spaces'. The third chapter deals with this reversal and focuses on a space of chaos and destruction, where the activity of writing no longer creates an ordered universe but an all-consuming negative and chaotic movement. Here the room of the writer is a place of complete isolation and concealment where language degenerates and becomes inexpressive. What was a cosmogonic activity turns into 'chaogony' (p. 81) and instead of moving and freeing themselves in fictional spaces, writer-characters are locked up in their rooms and disappear. Sarmento sees these works as representing a defeat of the generative power of writing, but a defeat created nevertheless by the same power of writing. So, once again, we are presented with the constitutive ambivalence of Auster's imagery of writing, which is both made of cosmos and chaos, for 'it is necessary to admit the existence of chaos, to extract from it what may survive, and, ultimately use the imagination to build a new cosmogony' (p. 107).

Following this line of enquiry, the last chapter focuses on the issue of how the imagery of writing can come to terms with a sort of post-human condition.

Sarmento traces here a parallel between the Austerian description of a world in decay, as depicted in the pages of *In the Country of Last Things*, and *The Angel Esmeralda, Underworld* and other apocalyptic visions created by Don DeLillo. In both cases, it emerges that the only way to come to terms with such a landscape of destruction and devastation is to create a possible and better world thanks to the power of imagination and writing. So, in order to oppose chaos, it is always necessary to build and to imagine another space, another universe and another possible reality. Such imaginary alterity is not meant to be a simple replacement of or an escape from the real world, but rather it functions as a guiding light through the darkest places and moments. According to Auster and DeLillo, language, however limited or imperfect it might be, offers the possibility to redeem reality by representing even the most mysterious, negative and impervious paths, because 'literature is always performing a double mission: to tell stories about freedom and to make us free' (p. 120).

In the end, Sarmento argues that reading Auster's works could teach us to be more human, because they show us the importance of being receptive to the chaotic yet beautiful possibilities of life, as only great literature can do. And it is exactly thanks to literature and to the complex imagery of writing that Auster can explore the (post-)human condition by unveiling the secret pattern of hidden connections and relationships that makes the world go round. In fact, the self-reflection prompted by writing in Auster's works is a way out from a common and sterile understanding of the world, as well as from any stale system of representation. Instead, for him, as for his writer-characters, writing is always a deep exploration of hidden possibilities, including the more chaotic and difficult ones. *The Imagery of Writing in the Early Works of Paul Auster* reaffirms the central place that writing occupies in Auster's aesthetics, and in so doing, it stresses the importance of literature and creativity as a privileged way to access the world inside and outside of us. After all, as Auster himself puts it, quoting Beckett, to write is 'to find a form that accommodates the mess'.

Note

1. Just to mention a few books in which the theme of writing is tackled with reference to Auster's narrative and poetics, see Evija Trofimova, Paul Auster's Writing Machine (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014); Brendan Martin, Paul Auster's Postmodernity (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008); James Peacock, Understanding Paul Auster (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2010); and Stefania Ciocia and Jesus A. Gonzalez, The Invention of Illusions (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011).

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