FRANCESCA BISUTTI DE RIZ

"Walking Walls": Figures of the Limit, Figures of the Border

Have you not been as an inclosed garden to me,
and I a wall of fire round about you?
Thomas Shepard

On either hand thee, there are squadrons pitch'd,
To wall thee from the liberty of flight.
William Shakespeare

Per vedere le immagini riprodotte in questo saggio
si invitano i lettori a consultare il volume cartaceo.

Figure 1
Andy Goldsworthy. *A Wall Went for a Walk.* 1990. Grizedale forest sculpture. Cumbria.

A Land Art work by Andy Goldsworthy called *A Wall Went for a Walk* (figure 1) attracts our attention because of its paradoxical nature. The title, resonant in implications, light-heartedly and yet resolutely (with that fine past tense) tells us that one day a certain wall rebelled against its age-old role and freed itself from the strongest epistemological constraints. Now a *flâneur* in the wilderness, the strolling wall renounces its traditional office of closing in, of separating, and even discards its prime function of being there, fixed to one spot. It tends instead to become a thread that we can follow, a "promenade architecturale/naturelle," a path along which we are invited to wander.

A wall wandering in the forest: could this be a graphic representation of the American soul, nomadic and colonizing at the same time? The wall in the wood is both construction and path. More, it is a road in the wood, which occupies nature while adapting itself to nature and measuring itself against nature. In turn, the wood with the wall *inside* appears surprisingly original: not a sacred grove, nor a utilitarian wood; not the magic wood of elves and pixies, nor the forbidden garden of the Selfish Giant. Not even the disturbing metaphor of Shakespeare's moving forest can help describe it. If anything, this "hortus *in*conclusus" recalls the philosophic wood of Henry David Thoreau. We know that Andy Goldsworthy is not American[1], and yet there is so much of the author of *Walden* in the artist's digressive, sauntering and inconclusive wall: Thoreau, the Excursionist, would certainly have liked this *extravagant* wall and would have welcomed it into his landscape and perhaps described it as one "fit to entertain a travelling god, and where a goddess might trail her garments." *(Walden* 62) This cheekily oxymoronic wall, which negates the idea of wall, would have received a better treatment than that which Thoreau, as naturalist and rhetor, reserved, for example, for fences:

> I have frequently seen a poet withdraw, having enjoyed the most valuable part of a farm, while the crusty farmer supposed that he had got a few wild apples only. Why, the owner does not know it for many years when a poet has put his farm in rhyme, the most admirable kind of *invisible fence,* has fairly impounded it, milked it, skimmed it, and got all the cream, and left the farmer only the skimmed milk. *(Walden* 60, my emphasis)

> Not even a lark or an oriole, those mild plantation birds, ever visited my clearing. No cockerels to crow nor hens to cackle in the yard. No yard! But *unfenced* Nature reaching up to your very sills. […] Instead of a scuttle or a blind blown off in the gale, a pine tree snapped off or torn up by the roots behind your house for fuel. Instead of no path to the front-yard gate in the Great Snow — *no gate — no front-yard - and no path to the civilized world! (Walden* 93, my emphasis)

Figure 2
Thomas Jefferson. *Serpentine Wall.* Detail. University of Virginia.

Now, the question is whether the concept of the wall (and of closure in general) is really alien to American culture. Let's ask the stones themselves with the help of Frank Lloyd Wright, the architect:

> The cave dweller was the ancient conservative. But probably he was more brutal with his heavy club, if not more ferocious, than the wanderer with his spear.
> The cave dweller became the cliff dweller and began to build cities. Establishment was his. His God was a statue more terrible than himself, a murderer, and hidden in a cave. This statue he erected into a covenant.
> His swifter, more mobile brother devised a more adaptable and elusive dwelling place, the folding tent.
> From place to place over the earth following the law of change, natural law to him, he went in changing seasons.
> An adventurer.
> His god was a spirit, a wind devastating or beneficient as himself.
> […] But I imagine that the ideal of freedom that keeps breaking through our establishments setting their features aside or obliterating them is due in some degree to the original instinct of the adventurer. He who lived by his freedom and his prowess beneath the stars rather than he who lived by his obedience and labour in the shadow of the wall. (3, 71-72)

Wright's story of binary oppositions enacts the drama of conceptual contradictions in the new world. To stay in the shadow of the wall or to go out into the wind? Dwelling in the wind, to be sure, means "dwelling in possibility," as Emily Dickinson's line beautifully goes. That's the genuine American way, Wright suggests. The wind "that keeps breaking through our establishments" is the American Ariel who does not care for barriers and is intolerant of their shadows. Nonetheless, establishments are being built, from which the conservative inhabitant of the wall continues, with atavistic ferocity, to assert its centripetal (centralizing) force against the centrifugal (dispersive) force of the adventurer. Thus, as is implied in Wright's allegory of proto-social types, not only was it for obvious chronological reasons that the ancient archetype of the stone wall never took root in the American soil, where there was no historical time and no ideological room for Hadrian's Wall, for the Great Wall of China, for the Walls of Troy, or for the Berlin Wall.[2] The very idea of wall (symbol of limitation and separation, of interrupted communication, rivaling in all human contexts the purely functional symbol of defense and protection) couldn't possibly exist "in the American grain" owing to the powerful counterthrust that Wright tells us about in his capacity as anthropologist. As a mythographer, Thoreau had already told us that the history of America can only be told *on foot,* "walking out" of the title pages of historiography:

> I walk out into a Nature such as the old prophets and poets [...] walked in. You may name it America, but it is not America: neither Americus Vespucius, nor Columbus, nor the rest were the discoverers of it. There is a truer account of it in mythology than in any history of America, so called, that I have seen. (*Collected Essays* 231)

And indeed from early times the mythological method has shaped historiography. In his *Theopolis Americana,* Cotton Mather himself, the first urban planner of America, one might say, had powerfully indicated by way of biblical metaphors that walls were not needed. Roads and streets" were needed instead, it didn't matter whether they were imaginary or spiritual:

> PEOPLE OF GOD, May these be your Cares. Then there will be fulfilled unto us that Word, Isa. I: 26: *Thou shalt be called, The City of Righteousness, The*

> *Faithful City.* A CITY of such a GOLDEN STREET, will be a *Strong City;* God will *appoint Salvation for Walls and bulwarks* unto it; while none but a *Righteous Nation, which keeps the Truth,* inhabits it. [...] Our *Coast* will be under His Protection. There will none dare go up against the *Land of Unwalled Villages.* (Mather 278)

It may be that Mather took his inspiration, as well as from the Old Testament, from the legend of that other unwalled city, Sparta, which was invincible because it was protected by the breastplates of its warriors. The fact is, as cultural observers know very well, that Americans have always been engaged in and troubled by questions and controversies about limits (from fixing physical boundaries to regulating private property, from establishing Reservations for the Indians and the wildlife' to defining social appropriateness itself) Literature is full of stories about the exploration of limits, as we read in Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry* in which, for example, in a farcical legal act the sphere of competence and destination of two preachers is decided: the one who has the lawful qualifications and is versed in biblical philology will work in the town, the other who is a fraud but is energetic and persuasive will work in the territory! Less amusing and more patriotic are the anecdotes which have been handed down recounting episodes concerned with the theme of limits. In 1693, the people of Connecticut protested against the authority of the Crown by beating their drums. When they were ordered to stop, their elected executive is reported to have taken hold of the hilt of his sword and to have told the royal governor of New York, newly appointed by King William III, "If my drummers are again interrupted, I'll make sunlight shine through you. We deny and defy your authority." (qtd, in Kammen 31) Apart from the authenticity of the episode, in the gruesome threat to sweep aside an authority which is not recognized as legitimate (making sunlight shine through the body/barrier of the King's representative) one can clearly perceive the temptation to topple barriers, to sweep aside limits.

The "City on a Hill" has always been an "unwalled village." The memory of Cotton Mather's "unwalledness" has never faded and continually reappears, as does the Melvillian "landlessness," in all artistic contexts, from Ansel Adams' unframed landscapes, to Tennessee Williams' transparent screen walls, to

John Ford's long shots, to Robert Hahn's indictment of "stockades."[5] It most famously resurfaced in Thoreau's celebration of "unfencedness," almost two hundred years later and with similar messianic overtones:

> A people who would begin by burning the fences and let the forest stand! I saw the fences half consumed, their ends lost in the middle of the prairie, and some worldly miser with a surveyor looking after his bounds, while heaven had taken place around him, and he did not see the angels going to and fro, but was looking for an old post-hole in the midst of paradise. I looked again, and saw him standing in the middle of a boggy stygian fen, surrounded by devils, and he had found his bounds without a doubt, three little stones, where a stake had been driven, and looking nearer, I saw that the Prince of Darkness was his surveyor. *(Collected Essays* 230)

A powerful description of the fields of Paradise, which are open to harmonious movement, and of the pit of Hell, which is condemned to stillness and confinement. The visionary impact of "the shadow of the fence" is the same as that of "the shadow of the wall," although Thoreau's narrative is more Miltonian in tone and Wright's more ethnographic and scientific in character. Both authors, indeed, seem to echo Dante's infernal journey "tra '1 muro della terra e li martìri" ("between the wall of the earth and torments.") And it is interesting to note how Yi-Fu Tuan, one of the most influential contemporary human geographers, uses the same symbolic repertory and even the same scenario:

> We owe our sense of being not only to supportive forces but also to those that pose a threat. Being has a centre and an edge: supportive forces nurture the centre while threatening force strengthen the edge. In theological language, hell bristles with places that have sharply drawn — indeed fortified — boundaries but no center worthy of defence; heaven is full of glowing centres with the vaguest boundaries; earth is an uneasy compromise of the two realms. (243-44)

America can be seen precisely as this "uneasy compromise of the two realms" and its history can be epitomized in the story of its physical limits to the west, where the wall (the political *line* of confine) turned into the frontier (the mythical *zone* of surpassment), a magical and violent short-circuit between

the medieval, if not barbaric, invasion and the advance of progress, where the sense of what is "within" and what is "without" the boundary is continually superseded by the sense of what is "farther on." The perception of boundlessness transforms historical space into homogeneous space, similar to mythical or sacred space, characterized by the indistinctness of the temporal co-ordinates. It is no wonder that Kant and the Kantians, who devoted particular attention to themes connected with space, proved so successful in America, where the need to comprehend, contain and reduce itnmensity and the very incalculability of future time was so urgent.

> Deep loneliness is sublime, but in a way that stirs terror. Hence great far-reaching solitudes, like the colossal Komul Desert in Tartary, have always given us occasion for peopling them with fearful spirits [...] A long duration is sublime. If it is of the past, then it is noble. If it is projected into an incalculable future, then it has something of the fearsome in it. (Kant 48-50)

Barry Smith's recent stimulating discussion of borders as "bona fide" or genuine, and as "fiat" or the fruit of a deliberation (61-62), makes yet more problematic the already difficult phenomenon of the frontier, but does not help us to describe it: does a "mala fide" border exist? Just what sort of faith was it by which the genuine rim of the Pacific could be made to coincide with the willed (and imperialistic) "fiat"? We know that, in the first puritan frontier, Faith was enough: "Sola fides." Thus the "fiat" border was nothing more than the "genuine" consequence of a border perceived from the very beginning in good faith. When Smith suggests that even by merely turning our gaze towards the landscape we create a "fiat" border which coincides with the horizon (62), we think of the gaze of the pioneer, or of the cowboy, or of the cavalryman as of the gesture of a hand reaching out. The pioneers' extendible frontier[6] challenges the traditional typologies which describe the border as natural or diplomatic/military or yet again as "antecedent," or "subsequent" or "superimposed," according to whether "it had been established before, during or after the population had organized the main features of the humanized landscape." (Raffestin 420) The United States have been all three of these things, in the full span of their development, from "the turbulent Atlantic" to the "mighty

Pacific," to use the political language of mid-nineteenth-century propaganda: "Make way [...] for the young American Buffalo [...]. Well, he shall have the use of the two oceans" (qtd. in Flannery 287), exclaimed a Democratic delegate in 1844, undoubtedly taking his cue from Emerson's speech entitled "The Young American," and adding a touch that was intended to be picturesque but which strikes us as ominous for the inevitable association it evokes with extermination, and not only of animals....

Now, the house is one of the "main features of the humanized landscape" that is needed to stabilize the frontier, to make it a frontier of the "subsequent" type as quickly as possible. But what sort of house do we find in the frontier? A traditional house? Of course not. A "child of necessity," the "balloon-frame" house was widely used because of it was so easy to build, thanks to the use of a skeleton of standard thinly sawn planks and the abolition of slotted joints, substituted by machine-made nails. Initially mocked by master-carpenters for its crudeness and later called "balloon" both as a term of derision and also in reference to its lightness, this kind of portable house marked the triumph of industry over craftsmanship (Giedion 338-43). And since modernity and myth are not incompatible on the prairie, one can say that, together with the train, the "prefabricated" house took the pioneers out of time and into space. But it is a house destined to last only as long as required, not to survive its inhabitant, a house in light armor that by its very existence refutes the idea of the house as it has been cultivated over the centuries, and it is closer to the portable tent to which Wright refers. The home on the range is the child of movement, like its most meaningful accessory, the rocking chair that can never remain still.

In the ways I have sketched, the Americans tried to divest themselves of walls, which represent the architectural element that we most tend to associate with the concept of time and duration. Time, inhuman as it is, is neither under our control nor adjustable, nor can it be dictated to, whereas wide open spaces can be dominated, even if they are non-human in their vastness and enormity. To conquer the "irrimediabile tempus," that is, to fully and radically "make it new," as the first Puritan Commandment had it, one had to incorporate

movement in space, or rather, to "temporalize space,"[7] as Bruno Zevi puts it in another context: "Temporalizing means ceaselessly shifting one's point of view." (53) The most formidable architectural icon in this sense is Frank Lloyd's Wright's "Kaufmann House," the house *on* the waterfall and *of* the waterfall, as fluid and mobile as the water. The walls seem to have just set off on a journey, free explorers in all directions. The floors slide among themselves parallel to the ground and thus, wherever they go, they always remain connected to it. The vertical axis of the chimney/obelisk (authority principle)[8] counterbalances the adventurous horizontal development of the plan (pleasure principle.) Vincent Scully has very efficaciously written that "two deep-seated compulsions — both very apparent in America— one seeking rootedness and protection, the other demanding freedom and mobility, are here woven together in a calm and expansive unity." (121) In this dwelling-place there is a wholly human sacredness that Donal W. Hoppen has expressed with poetic intuition: "In a forest glen, a fire upon a rock." (99) Intimacy and meditation (a cinematographic memory of the camp?) can live alongside unconventionality and wild abandon (a memory of free horse-riding?) by virtue of Wright's radical undermining of the traditional wall: "My sense of the 'wall' was no longer the side of the box." Rather, it was "to bring the outside world into the house and let the inside of the house go outside." (Wright 2, 200) Most importantly, "[t]here was the sense of a vital, ever-changing order as elements and context shifted into new relationships." (qtd, in Secrest 424) These words take us back to Thoreau's works, regulated/deregulated by movement and modulated on the journey and on change; but they also take us forwards, to the experience of the Land Artists, who took these modes of perception to extremes, making transience and impermanence the essential qualities of their works.

It may be useful to recollect, from *Walden,* the scene where Thoreau, as a playful hygienist, invites his readers to participate in a ritual cleaning en-plein-air of all the household furnishings in the spirit of what we might now call a Land Art performance. This little exercise in *Verfremdung,* defamiliarization, this game of swapping the inside with the outside, the narrator says, "will not fail to show you a fresh prospect" (82):

> It was pleasant to see my whole household effects out on the grass, making a little pile like a gipsy's pack, and my three-legged table, from which I did not remove the books and pen and ink, standing amid the pines and the hickories. (82)

Thoreau decontextualizes his household objects, and "translates" them elsewhere:

> It was worth the while to see the sun shine on these things, and hear the free wind blow on them; so much more interesting most familiar objects look out of doors than in the house. (82)

This provides an apt definition of the artifice of defamiliarization that Thoreau exemplifies "extra moenia" instead of "intra moenia," much as Wright will do with his interior wall "septi," which extend out of the house, causing the interior to dwell happily in the exterior. It is always a pleasure to read Thoreau while thinking of Wright's houses:

> A bird sits on the next bough, life-everlasting grows under the table, and blackberry vines run round its legs; pine cones, chestnut burrs, and strawberry leaves are strewn about. It looked as if this was the way these forms came to be transferred to our furniture, to tables, chairs, and bedsteads, — because they once stood in their midst. (83)

Fascinating alchemy becomes possible when objects are released from the confinement of walls! What initially seemed a "displacement" procedure, one of putting things out of place, and thus separating forms from functions - the game of transgression and eccentricity, of leading beyond the limits and far from the center - appears now as an obligatory stage, that of necessary disorder. Disorder and confusion (thus combining elements and categories that are non-homogeneous and incongruous, like what is made and what is natural, closed and open, inside and outside) allow "displacement" to take on the character — at once bold and philosophical — of "replacement," a reconnecting of the object with its primary idea and primary life: Thoreau's objects "seemed glad to get out themselves, and as if unwilling to be brought in." (82) A bit like the beans that the author grew nonchalantly - as we might say - and which were "cheerfully returning to their wild and primitive state." (115)

Less cheerful and romantically transgressive than Thoreau, yet still in tune with him, is the postmodern architect John Hejduck, when he writes about his *Wall Houses* (figure 3):

> The wall is the most present condition possible. Life has to do with walls, in the sense that we are continuously going in and out, back and forth, and through them: a wall is 'the quickest' and 'the thinnest', *the thing we are always transgressing,* and that is why I see it as the present, the most surface condition. (Qtd. in Tafuri 19)

Figure 3
John Heiduck. *Bye House - WaLL House* 2. Drawing. 1973. Ridgefield, Connecticut.

And that indeed "life has to do with walls" is the lesson of Bartleby, the most human and the most metaphysical of characters, who is "always there" (26) and always beyond, allegorically inhabiting the modern frontier "tra '1 muro della terra e li martìri," even more alone than the unredeemable Gatsby, fatally isolated by invisible walls:

> We both looked down at the grass — there was a sharp line where my ragged lawn ended and the darker, well-kept expanse of his began. (Fitzgerald 89)

The aftertaste of the wall has thus never totally disappeared and the America that renounced walls, or liberated them, or weakened them, or even sent them for a walk, at a certain point needed one. 1982 saw the building of the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* in Washington, known and recognized as *The Wall* (figure 4.) Like a sort of nemesis it blocks energy and movement. The real closing of Turner's open frontier took place here, against this memorial-plaque in the form of a trench, which is a reminder and a restraint, a necessary

leash, a blind wall where the possibility of happiness is not inscribed but where names (many names) are given up to memory and to the pain of loss. It does not stand as a partition to keep an enemy out and to protect those within, as the *Paternal* "wall of fire" of puritan sermons defended the "inclosed garden"; it is not a shield against the outsider and in no way does it represent division or separation, difference or distance. Rather, *Vallum Maternale,* terrible and pitiful like the archetypical mother, a surface on which life and death touch and comfort one another, it is a genuine *mending* wall," mysteriously embodying proximity and the act of embracing.

Figure 4
Maya Lin. *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*. 1982. Washington.

NOTES

1. Born in Great Britain in 1956, Andy Goldsworthy creates his works outdoors and from natural materials. In 1997-98 he built a winding stone wall at Storm King Art Center, a sculpture park on the Hudson river in Mountainville, New York. Interestingly, the prototype of Goldsworthy's walls is to be found in America, in Jefferson's *Serpentine Wall* at the University of Virginia (figure 2.)

2. On the Berlin Wall and its American literary versions, see Roberto Cagliero's essay.

3. William Boelhower gives a stimulating analysis of the theme of the road in the second chapter of his *Through a Glass Darkly: Ethnic Semiosis in American Literature.*

4. On the conflict between "Land Ethic" and the "Abrahamic concept of land" see Rosella Mamoli Zorzi's essay highlighting Aldo Leopolds's and William Faulkner's vision of the wilderness.

5. "A stockade for Rebel prisoners, in the rolling hills / Of New York, had a staircase outside the wall/Ladies could climb, to see them, roasting or freezing, / And always starving, these elegant sons of the South / Whose ululations had terrified. / Frederick Olmsted / Labored in that decade, to show us open spaces / As art. […]" ("In the Open," *No Messages*, 121) For the Italian translation of Hahn's poem and for a comment on it as a contemporary *meditatio*, see Massimo Bacigalupo.

6. For a perspective on the American frontier "from the other side," from the point of view of the French, see Marie-Jeanne Rossignol.

7. On the relationship space/movement/time in the frontier, see my "Arcangeli a duello."

8. A passage from Melville's tale "I and My Chimney" strikes me as apt here; it serves as a curious ironic counterpoint to the strong and authoritative intentionality that has been attributed to Wright's chimney and it contains sharp vernacular observations on the sedentary spirit of the settlement and the nomadic spirit of the territory:

> "I and my chimney, two grey-headed old smokers, reside in the country. We are, I may say, old settlers here; particularly myoid chimney, which settles more and more every day […].
> My chimney is grand seignior here — the one great domineering object, not more of the landscape than of the house […].
> What care I, if, unaware that my chimney, as a free citizen of this free land, stands upon an independent basis of its own, people passing it, wonder how such a brick-kiln, as they call it, is supported upon mere joists and rafters? […].
> But stately as is the chimney — yea, grand high altar as it is, right worthy for the celebration of the mass before the Pope of Rome, and all his cardinals — yet what is there perfect in this world?" (352-359)

9. On Frost's poem see the analysis by Gregory Dowling in the fourth chapter of his *Someone's Road Home: Questions of Home and Exile in American Narrative Poetry.*

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