

Howls in the Lands of Aborted Dreams: Aimé Césaire and Allen Ginsberg

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RESUMEN

Durante el siglo XX, podemos encontrar numerosos ejemplos de protestas desde el arte y del compromiso social, tales como el grupo del *Harlem Renaissance*, los modernistas como Yeats y Eliot, los *Angry Young Men*, la generación *Beat*, los poetas de *Black Mountain*, el movimiento de la negritud, los artistas de la contra-cultura, los escritores poscoloniales, entre otros. En este trabajo, me focalizaré en dos textos: *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (*Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, 1939) by Aimé Césaire and *Howl* (1956) de Allen Ginsberg. Estos son, en realidad, *counter-texts*; es decir, obras que funcionan como armas contra el imperialismo, la opresión, las categorías taxativas, y los paradigmas crítico-literarios convencionales e inmóviles. Mi argumento, entonces, es que, tanto el texto de Césaire como el de Ginsberg, representan violentos aullidos contra la imparable destrucción de la civilización.

ABSTRACT

In the twentieth century, one can find some of the most illuminating examples of artistic protest and social commitment such as the works by the English antiwar soldier-poets¹, the Harlem Renaissance group, modernists like Yeats and Eliot, the Angry Young Men, the Beats, the Black Mountain Poets, the *négritude* movement, counter-culture artists and, lately, postcolonial writers, among others. In this paper, I will focus on two works, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (*Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, 1939) by Aimé Césaire and *Howl* (1956) by Allen Ginsberg. As literary history has shown, there are certain works -or *counter-texts*- that not only reject the oppressive forces of cultural imperialism but also defy conventional literary analysis. Usually, these *counter-texts* disseminate overflowing connotations and images, undermine and destabilize fixed theoretical categories and resist interpretation based upon pre-determined critical paradigms. Taking this into account, my central contention is that both Césaire's *Notebook* and Ginsberg's *Howl*—in spite of belonging to different geographical, historical and aesthetic contexts—display formal, thematic and politically concordant features, which represent some of the most violent and painful howls at the ruins of civilization.

Literature and politics can establish solid and paradoxically creative/destructive symbiotic relationships. When the world is too hideous to contemplate, to respect or to honor, some generations of poets have vehemently and wildly voiced their disgust and conducted literary wars against the “wastes of (...) insane nationalisms”². In the twentieth century, one can find some of the most illuminating examples of artistic protest and social commitment such as the works by the English antiwar soldier-poets, the Harlem Renaissance group, modernists like Yeats and Eliot, the Angry Young Men, the Beats, the Black Mountain Poets, the *négritude* movement, counter-culture artists and, lately, postcolonial writers, among others. In this paper, I will focus on two works, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*

¹ In this case, I particularly refer to the works of WWI poets such as S. Sassoon and W. Owen.

² “Horn on *Howl*” by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, reprinted from *Evergreen Review*, Vol. 1, N°4, 145-158, in *A Casebook on the Beat Generation* edited by Thomas Parkinson, 1961, 125-135.

(*Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, 1939) by Aimé Césaire and *Howl* (1956) by Allen Ginsberg, which represent some of the most violent and painful howls at the ruins of civilization.

As literary history has shown, there are certain works—or *counter-texts*—that not only reject the oppressive forces of cultural imperialism but also defy conventional literary analysis. Usually, these *counter-texts* disseminate overflowing connotations and images, undermine and destabilize fixed theoretical categories and resist interpretation based upon pre-determined critical paradigms. Thus, any attempt to classify such texts into a given aesthetic movement can be difficult for the reader and unfair for the author and the work. Taking this into account, my central contention is that both Césaire's *Notebook* and Ginsberg's *Howl*—in spite of belonging to different geographical, historical and aesthetic contexts—display formal, thematic and politically concordant features. Such similarities, and the difficulties and constraints of considering these poems in the framework of any given model of analysis, call for a manifold system of interrelated and assorted theoretical concepts.

It must be acknowledged that both poems can be approached from current critical perspectives such as cultural criticism, postcolonial theory or postmodernism, among others. Although it is not my intention in this paper to discuss in detail the origins, assumptions, postulates, implications and purposes of each approach, I deem it necessary to emphasise, for the sake of clarity and to avoid oversimplification, the fact that these critical fields present a number of problems when trying to apply them to these specific texts. In the first place, postmodernism is a very vague label that comprises a diversity of trends, among which one can include postcolonialism and cultural criticism. Second, some of the claims and practices of postmodernism, postcolonialism and cultural criticism tend to overlap because they share much common theoretical ground, draw on the same concepts to examine society, and—to some extent—constitute a body of reflections upon similar ideological, sociological, political and cultural questions. Besides, the three perspectives, when considered in their broadest sense, share many assumptions even with other theories—such as historiographic metafiction, new historical criticism, Marxism, feminism, to mention only a few. Despite the intricacy that such overlapping can generate when approaching a text from one of these paradigms, it is also true that they all contribute to exploring issues such as the experience of under-represented or misrepresented groups of people, the cultural dimension of imperialism and colonialism, the ideological and discursive construction of the past, the struggles to resist any form of oppression, and the emergence of transgressive and oppositional voices. This implies that the poems under analysis could be studied using elements from any of these models, or even from the aesthetics of artistic and/or socio-political movements such as Surrealism, the Baroque, the *négritude*, or the Beat generation³. However, as the texts are particularly complex and semantically multi-layered, not one theory or poetics can account for the tensions, heterogeneous voices, internal patterning, and similarities between the two poems. The formal, thematic and contextual aspects of the texts exceed the theoretical postulates of any given critical perspective and their interpretation and comparative study are consequently limited by partial readings. Finally, the analysis of *counter-texts* can neither be performed exclusively within the frame of officially accepted theories -even if such theories claim to be as ideologically subversive as the texts themselves- nor from “inherited”—though adapted—

³ The Spanish Baroque literature -with its inclusiveness of the new, its proliferation of metaphors and images, its assumed marginality- inspired Latin American artists and contributed to asserting the *creole* sensibility and the aesthetics of the Caribbean literature (R. González Echevarría., 1993). The Surrealist Movement, mainly in the figure of André Breton and others who self-exiled to The Antilles in the 1940s, motivated the Caribbean artists' rediscovery of their own culture, rituals, and natural environment (G. Durozoi, trans. A. Anderson).

artistic movements⁴. Thus, I propose to move away from pre-established models or paradigms in order to create more dynamic and context-specific categories drawn from fields other than critical or literary theories.

Within the fertile climate of the poststructuralist critique of official culture, in which thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida have carried the task of thinking about western thought, systems and institutions to their present limits, the collaboration between an academic philosopher and an “anti”-psychiatrist has produced a ground-breaking book under the title of *A Thousand Plateaus*. The introductory chapter is entitled “Rhizome” and it is the first, and maybe primary, of their many “plateaus” which develop metaphors intended to instruct their readers in a kind of subversive thinking that has been foreign to the official western culture and that may be specially needed in epochs of political centralization and cultural imperialism and domination. As it is impossible, given the extension of this paper, to discuss other Deleuzian figures that are also highly appropriate to the texts under analysis and, as the metaphor of the rhizome is particularly relevant to represent forms of resistance to oppression⁵, I will focus on the rhizome which I consider especially related to the subject of this study: two dissident poets—Allen Ginsberg and Aimé Césaire—“howling” at “the flunkies of order and the cockchafers of hope”⁶.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari elaborate their theory of multiplicity and subversion based on the concept of the rhizome. They take this image from nature, where some plants, instead of having a centralised root, have stems that assume a variety of forms and functions. As the rhizome grows according to principles of variation, expansion and divergence, its structure is absolutely undetermined in advance. In nature, rhizomes display a number of characteristics that can be projected onto the structure and purpose of unconventional literature. As to its form, a rhizome spreads along the surface of the soil while producing shoots above and roots below, buds and nods at unpredictable points. As this type of root is characterized by its capacity for rupture and mutation, its filaments, or lines, grow in all directions, between and among other organisms, actively seeking new paths. Because of these features, rhizomes make an effort to move forward trying to open new opportunities for growth and development, even when trapped in the heart of a tree or the hollow of a root. A rhizome then is paradoxically a multiplicity of juxtaposed, simultaneously advancing and entangled fibers.

It is important to mention at this point that Deleuze and Guattari contrast this rhizomatic form of development to another more dominant kind of growth: the arborescent “Tree” -a hierarchical entity of dependent, invariable parts. In the Tree, parts are subordinated to a central trunk, working together to produce a unified organism. One of the most important aspects of the Deleuzian critique of modernity is built up around the concept of the Tree: Western culture, they argue, has been founded on such “arborescent” systems of thought. The organisation of power, for instance, is a network of subjected segments (microstructures)

⁴ As is the case of European Surrealism and the Baroque when applied to Caribbean literature, or French postmodernist strategies to the Beat Generation.

⁵ Other more comprehensive and detailed studies in which the image of the rhizome has been exploited to analyse forms of resistance in literary texts, particularly in Anglophone fiction, include the unpublished manuscript *The Comic War Machine*, by Patricia Tobin, 1991; *Thomas McGuane: Along the American Rhizome* by Alejandra Portela, 1993, and *An Introduction to Postmodernism*, Chapter: “Major Theories of the Postmodern”, by Marcela González and Alejandra Portela, 1996.

⁶ *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, 35, in Aimé Césaire, *The Collected Poetry*, translated, with an introduction and notes by Clayton Eshelman and Annette Smith, 1983.

dependent on a central apparatus (macrostructure). The State is the centre according to which all subsystems and operations are synchronised: social structures, educational and religious institutions, and all local organisations. Hence, *rhizomatics* is the war machine of nomadic thought as opposed to the state machines created to discipline and normalise the divergent and the unruly.

Literature, in general, constitutes one of the most powerful discursive sites in which political and social conflicts assume symbolic guise. Thus, poetry can turn into an actual and powerful cultural force to attack, or at least expose, the decay of civilization. The surrounding political and aesthetic conditions in which *Notebook* and *Howl* were produced certainly determined their shape and content. *Notebook* is geographically and aesthetically inserted in the Caribbean region, in the late 1930's and 1940's, and is consequently pregnant with the political and social concerns of the struggle against imperialistic oppression. It also displays most of the stylistic features that critics have considered as characteristic of Caribbean literature: an assemblage of surrealist, baroque and—later labeled—postcolonial devices. *Howl* was engendered and nurtured by the American 1950's that officially boasted about its atmosphere of normalcy, plenty, order and conformity. However, the Beat generation writers diagnosed the evils of society and unveiled the American stupefying milieu that was thick with corruption, hypocrisy, superficiality, fear of dissension and originality, and a “passionate addiction to the dollar bill” (Sisk 1959, 194)⁷. The formal and stylistic “essentials”⁸ of Beat poetry and prose were mainly established by the Beats themselves who created their own literary axioms: use of undisturbed and flowing language, no selectivity of expression but free deviation of mind, spontaneous musicality—as a “jazz musician drawing breath between outblown phrases”⁹—honest and confessional expression of ideas, unbridled outpouring of images, and exclusion of grammatical and literary inhibitions, among others.

In order to explore the similarities between the two poems, it is fundamental to notice that, paradoxically, there are two basal differences upon which affinities are built. First, while *Notebook* was inserted in an overt violent atmosphere, *Howl* was incubated in an apparently homogenized and prosperous society. Second, while *Notebook* is the result of a complex web of European and Caribbean aesthetic tendencies, *Howl* is one of the representative texts of a self-contained and short-lived aesthetic movement and subversive generation¹⁰. It is interesting, and even unexpected, then, to discover that in these dissimilar geographical,

⁷ In fact, John Sisk, in “Beatniks and Tradition”, is very critical of the Beat's tragic diagnosis of American society. However, he acknowledges the fact that by dramatising the evils of their time, they forced readers and critics to reexamine the American “dream of utopian freedom and innocence” (200). Ginsberg's *Howl* and Kerouac's *On the Road* are for Sisk “very American” texts in the sense that they provide us with a mirror of the shape and aims of American culture in the 1950's.

⁸ Jack Kerouac outlined most of these techniques in “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose” (1958) and “Belief and Technique for Modern Prose” (1959), reprinted from *Evergreen Review*, Vol. 2, N° 5 and Vol. 2, N° 8, in *A Casebook on the Beat Generation* edited by Thomas Parkinson, 1961: 65-68.

⁹ The quoted fragment belongs to a passage in which Kerouac describes the rhythm of prose (or “Method”) and—at times citing William Carlos Williams—expresses: “No periods separating sentence-structures already arbitrarily riddled by false colons and timid usually needless commas-but the vigorous dash separating rhetorical breathing (as jazz musician drawing breath between outblown phrases)-‘measured pauses which are the essentials of our speech’-‘divisions of the *sounds* we hear’-‘time and how to note it down’ ” (in “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose”, 1958: 65-66).

¹⁰ Thomas Parkinson, in the essay “Phenomenon or Generation”, refers to the Beats as “a spasm of revulsion”, in *A Casebook on the Beat Generation* edited by Thomas Parkinson, 1961: 276).

historical and cultural contexts, Césaire and Ginsberg created rhizomatic texts in which similar stylistic and thematic tunes combine to create a unanimous howl at the miseries of civilization.

The first prominent feature shared by both poems is the rhizomatic web of genres that accumulate to give form to the texts. *Notebook*, as the title indicates, appears to be simply an informal collection of thoughts and impressions; however, both *Notebook* and *Howl* are the aggregation of other forms: a prayer, a confession, a political statement, an autobiography and, of course, an outcry—or “howl”. Though Césaire’s poem begins in an outcry, a “volcanic explosion” of loathing, grief and anger against imperialism, it later turns into an invocation in which he asks not to be a man of hatred: “and here at the end of these wee hours in my virile prayer ... / ... [make me] ... the lover of this unique people ... / ... preserve me from all hatred / do not make me into a man of hatred for whom I feel only hatred”¹¹. From its beginning, the poem appears to be an autobiography in which a first person narrative voice relates his personal experiences in a return to his native land and at the same time confesses the most private feelings and thoughts that burden his soul: “You must know the extent of my cowardice. One evening on the streetcar facing me, a nigger.../ A comical and ugly nigger, with some women behind me sneering at him. / He was COMICAL AND UGLY, / COMICAL AND UGLY for sure. / I displaced a big complicitous smile...”. Undoubtedly, the text is also a strong political statement in which the poetic persona condemns the “famine...fears perched in the trees... / piles of fears and their fumaroles of anguish”, “the stench of corruption, / the monstrous sodomies.../... prejudice and stupidity, the prostitutions, the hypocrisies...”. Some critics even call the poem “The Epic of Negritude” (James Arnold) to indicate that epic characteristics are also present in the text: it is a long narrative of a man’s process of maturation, of his struggle against oppression, and of his heroic evolution from shame to pride.

Howl is also a text of fused forms, of filaments spreading from various genres. It is, like *Notebook*, a poetic expression of the depths of despair and anger, a prayer, a confession, a political statement and, certainly, an outcry. The text begins with the lyrical and anguished denunciation of the evils of his time: “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, / starving hysterical naked ...”¹². These two lines condense the intensity of anger and agony the poet felt, while making a fiery criticism of the socio-political atmosphere of the United States at the time and firmly stating his generation’s position against the effects of technology, capitalism, drugs and war. Moreover, Ginsberg and other writers of his generation openly confessed in their texts that all this corruption was not only in society but also within themselves. In Ginsberg’s own words (1959, 27-30), Part I constitutes a “lament”, dirge or elegy moaning the loss of a whole generation of young bright minds; Part II is a description of the “monster” that preys on these young and innocent people, and Part III is a “litany” or prayer that ends in an affirmative note: “O victory forget your underwear we’re free”. A final section, “Footnote to *Howl*”, was added later as “an extra variation of the form of Part II” (1959, 29), but it is also a prayer accepting the holiness of all things created, from the most sordid to the most sublime: “The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy! / ...holy the hideous human angels! / ...holy the railroad holy the locomotive...”. It is self-evident, from the title, that the poem constitutes a wailing outcry, or as Ginsberg calls it

¹¹ All quotes from *Notebook* have been taken from the translated version by Clayton Eshelman and Annette Smith in *Aimé Césaire, The Collected Poetry*. No line numbers are provided because they do not appear in the text.

¹² All quotes from *Howl* have been taken from the edition *A Casebook on the Beat*, by Thomas Parkinson.

(1959, 29), “an extreme rhapsodic wail”. Just as Ginsberg added a “footnote” to *Howl*, it should be mentioned that *Notebook* went through many revisions and constant refashioning since its first printed version in 1939. Finally, the titles of both poems announce that the reader should not expect formal or traditional genres: one is simply a “notebook”, assorted scribbles in a personal journal, the other is a “howl”, a loud sound of pain and anger more typical of animals than humans.

The multiplicity of generic forms that the texts evince is in close connection with the poetic personas that speak to the reader. The first-person singular is used in *Notebook* and in *Howl*, but while at times the persona may be expressing his individual and solitary sorrow, “I” equals “we”. Both poems can be seen as sequences of dramatic monologues but they mainly constitute the manifestation of collectivity: the poets represent humanity and voice all the tensions and pain of the human condition. Similarly, the “you” in *Notebook* is also a generalized or plural “you”, constituted by the readers who are also part of humanity. In *Howl*, the “you” is mainly used in Part III and though Ginsberg is addressing his friend Carl Solomon—to whom the poem is dedicated—the reader can feel that s/he has been included as an active and eloquent speaker of this lament. It is also important to mention that the grammatical subject, or possessive adjective (“my return”, “my howl”), is absent from the titles of both poems, which significantly indicates that the first-person singular is a generalized “I” that transcends the specific anguish of the oppressed people in the Caribbean in the 1930’s and 1940’s and the anger and disgust of a group of young American poets in the 1950’s. The metaphor of the rhizome, then, reproduces itself not only in the generic form of the poems but also in the interconnections created by the speakers and the recipients of the texts.

The major theme of *Notebook* and of *Howl* can be encapsulated in a few words: the poems represent an outcry of disgust at everything that degrades our human condition. In *Notebook*, Césaire enumerates the evils of his society: starvation, misery, cruelty, slavery, disease, death, greed, among others; in *Howl*, Ginsberg catalogues madness, poverty, censure, the effects of alcohol and drugs, Capitalism, industrialization, war, isolation and despair. The whole range of moral abuses, physical pain, and the lethal consequences of “progress” are introduced again and again in the poems, as a litany, as a confession, as a howl. The poems are contestatory not only in the indeterminacy of their genres and in the ideological challenges and assaults upon their historical contexts but also in the rejection of classical rhetorical conventions. *Notebook* advances in the development of its narrative and of its themes through variations marked by a refrain that performs the function of a transition: “At the end of the wee hours...”. This device together with the incremental repetition of key phrases—“this town”, “this inert town”, “this inert town and its beyond of lepers...”—contribute to creating the idea of accumulation of juxtaposed images that portray the feelings of the poet and the state of his world.

The recurrent use of the coordinating conjunction “and” at the beginning of lines in some sections, the parallelisms, anaphoras and repetitions also sustain the rhythm of an endless enumeration of evils. In *Howl*, for example, parallel structures and anaphoras rule the three parts of the poem: “who bared their brains to Heaven... / who passed through universities with radiant... / who were expelled from the academies...”; “Moloch whose mind... / Moloch whose eyes... / Moloch whose factories...”. This patterning creates the apparent though deceiving image of order and sequence; however, the poem is precisely the opposite: a chaotic enumeration of phrases that perplexes the reader. The sudden transitions of ideas, the disruption of syntax, the unconventional use of punctuation marks, and the combination of excessively long sentences with very short lines are intended to disconcert and shake the readers out of complacency and to reveal the multiplication of the poets’ feelings and thoughts. This cumulative, expansive and agitated design of the poems functions exactly

as a rhizome: it provides accesses into and exits out of culture, it establishes connections between the poetic self and the Other, and it cuts across rigid structures. Thus, the formal features of the texts illuminate the concerns of the writers and the rhythm of their language matches the rhythm of their thoughts and emotions. Rhizomatic thought and rhizomatic language—that is, rhizomatic poetry—move freely, seek out original connections, do away with conventional forms, and explode into lines of flight¹³ that can penetrate the interior organizations of the State. Along their rhizomatic poems, Césaire and Ginsberg drew the lines of “go across, get out and break through” possibilities of their art and thought.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari capture an image—the rhizome, the war machine, the nomad—, follow its line for a short time, discard it and capture another one. When all these images are yet constantly kept in play, the effect is that of a palimpsest of vibrating plateaus, rhizomatic outlines of the “unthought”,—as opposed to “Imperialistic or State thought”—which loosely diagram the heterogeneous and subversive thinking of culture’s dissidents. In the same way, Césaire and Ginsberg’s poems constitute expanding filaments of a rhizome that actively seek the exits from culture’s overcoding machine. Although these rhizomatic texts exhibit both the negative and the positive extremes of the feasible direction that the harsh criticism of civilization can turn to, their authors stand up for their caustic words. The poems possess the destructive potentiality for sketching diagrams whose lines could be blocked or obliterated by the imperialism of tyrannical thought as well as the intensity and force needed to translate disgust, anguish and hopelessness into a lyrical statement. In a despairing—though merciless—poem, “The Hollow Men”, T. S. Eliot, closes his poignant critique of civilization with agonizing lines: “This is the way the world ends / This is the way the world ends / This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but with a whimper”. A few decades later, when confronted with the decadence of their worlds, Césaire and Ginsberg had the courage and vehemence to raise their voices above the pathetic whimpers of surrender in order to howl at their aborted dreams of equality and freedom.

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¹³ A line of flight is another metaphor used by Deleuze and Guattari which stands for the movement, agility, spontaneity and quick thinking by which rhizomatic literature challenges the hegemony of official culture and thought and thus escapes the oppressions of a power-oriented world. However, as I have already argued, a line of flight can also turn into a line of abolition, a self-destructive or self-nullifying line.

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