

Outw[o]rds and Inw[o]rds—Mapping Individual Exiles in Almeida Garrett and David Wojnarowicz

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In the 1980s, David Wojnarowicz produced a series of art works in which he portrayed characters in an incessant search for identity. Using the images of maps in his paintings and collages, as well as the description of movement through the roads and cities of the United States in his fictional diaries, entitled *Memories That Smell like Gasoline* (1992), the artist was drawing and textualizing a quasi-geographical self-entity. Character, in David Wojnarowicz's art, is expressed as a place: people are not just parts of places; they configure space and are configured by it, by moving in it. Space outside and space inside the character are constituted as something indistinguishably inner and outer, physical as well as mental, visible as well as imagined.

In *Travels in My Homeland*, the narrative leads readers through a journey that sets out from the beginning to be one of disclosure, or confirmation of the idea that social space shapes man and his attitudes. Movement outside (as the narrator journeys from Lisbon to the valley of Santarém) can explain or help understand changes inside man. Thoughts are part of an inner life, as towns, rivers, and houses are its separate and outer section. Nevertheless, Garrett's work turns out to present as complex and indistinguishable an image of man as that which comes out of Wojnarowicz's. The narrative levels, and the shifts between them, end up blurring the dash that separates the concepts of in and out, geography and the writing of identity.

In this essay, I take the opportunity to consider *Travels in My Homeland* in a contemporary light. The objective is not so much to test the resistance of the work to time but rather to make myself aware of what instruments I could use in the present, which were not known to me when I first read and studied Garrett's masterpiece as a student. As I went along, I rejected most of the analytical methods and moves available for a traditional study in literature. I did not want to make a strict formalist description—nor was I seduced by a mere neo-New Critical approach; it was not in my mind to focus only on the social, historical, or cultural importance of the text, and likewise not my intent to “justify” the textual options in any way. Instead, the idea permanently and strongly on my mind (and since, at that time, I was dedicating some time to research on an American contemporary artist) was to test the possibility of drawing two very distinct literary characters (distinct in time as well as in place and literary tradition) closer together—the Almeida Garrett of *Travels in My Homeland* and the David Wojnarowicz of *Brush Fires in the Social Landscape* (published posthumously in 1994). Again, the purpose was not just to perform an exercise in “comparative literature” or “comparative arts,” simply because the artistic objects I wanted to bring together were, in most of their features and in principle, incommensurable and incomparable. Therefore, the exercise would rather be an attempt at some critical move *prior* to a comparison.

Almeida Garrett wrote *Travels in My Homeland* in and about Portugal, in the middle of the nineteenth century (it first appeared as a book in 1846). David Wojnarowicz lived in New York most of his life, and he died there in 1992, at the age of thirty-seven. *Brush Fires in the Social Landscape* was the title he gave to one of his many exhibitions of photography, painting, installations, and music. It was made into an album/catalogue shortly after his death—on the cover, a title for Wojnarowicz's self-portrait could be “Buried in My Own Land.”

Unlike Garrett, Wojnarowicz was not part of the political or social power, although he lived in the center of the art world in the late 70s and 80s, and despite the fact that he is considered “a political artist.”¹ Many scenes in Wojnarowicz's life, such as his hustling days as a youth in New York, or hallucinations caused by extreme hunger and drugs, would have been unimaginable for Garrett. The Portuguese artist was a successful politician and writer by the time *Travels in My Homeland* came out. Though he had been in exile before that, and had undergone financial difficulties, by 1836 Garrett was setting up the Teatro Nacional (National Theatre), which accounts for his

position within the establishment. And yet, different as their lives may have been, both artists reveal the same alienated spirit, the same will to go against the moral and the petrified norm.

In Wojnarowicz's case, the artist tried to balance his unwillingness to be part of the establishment by making himself the center of his art (in self-portraits, through explicit scenes of homosexual encounters, representing men as maps, or the body of the subject as the space in which he moves). In the case of Garrett, who was already at the nucleus of the social landscape (which is one of the reasons why the author in *Travels in My Homeland* sets out to Santarém), he had to forge a movement outwards. The artist had to make his art what he, or his world, were not—what he saw as the margins of his own society (the countryside, the romantic figure of Joaninha, the transgression of the clergyman). In *Travels in My Homeland* that worldmaking is undertaken through the breaking up of certain rules of the structure of the traditional travel book as a notebook or chronicle of impressions. Garrett had certainly read Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey*, a work that undoubtedly marked the way he approached the genre.

Though finding Garrett and Wojnarowicz so distant, I nevertheless kept wishing to bring them closer together. In order to do that, I tried expanding some ideas raised by Carlos Reis's article "As *Viagens* como hipertexto: hipóteses de trabalho." According to this critic, Garrett's text anticipates hypertextual reading "in the same way that the novel anticipates techniques of film representation" (123; translation mine). Carlos Reis goes on to enumerate six fundamentals of hypertextual possibilities of reading *Travels in My Homeland*, namely the principles of interactivity, openness, plurality, atomization, simultaneousness, and playfulness (123).

Although these principles add more legitimacy to the possibility of observing coincidences in the works of such diverse authors as the ones I am now considering, the last one, which Reis calls "ativação lúdica" and which I have translated, very simply, as "playfulness," interests me the most, for it is the one that allows me to follow the play of some sort of impertinent reading. Carlos Reis ends his article with the suggestion that *Travels in My Homeland* should be read in a balancing movement between "amusement and knowledge, risk and sureness, certainty and uncertainty, fiction and reality" (123).

In *Travels in My Homeland*, the author sets out for a short self-imposed exile away from Lisbon, into a world in which he wants too much to be representative of his country, but which has inescapably disappeared, and exists

only in his imagination. Whenever the author changes his speech from the chronicle of the journey to the narrative of the “maiden of the nightingales,” this story is superimposed over the author’s speech, introduced by references to a wandering of the mind, the narrator’s hesitations and doubts, and dislocations of his spirit. The most famous scene in which this is shown is triggered by the viewing of a window, the necessary symbol of a passage into a different space, as well as into another narrative level: “The window awoke my interest. Who might have the good taste and good fortune to live there?” (Garrett 65).

In one of Wojnarowicz’s photo-stories, a composition of photograph and text called *Inside this House* (1990), a miniature white cardboard house stands in the center of the picture, on dark grass. To the upper left end, in a caption, that same house (or one similar to it) is burning, flames coming out of its windows. In the bottom right-hand corner a text tells about the house and whoever lives there, and we might think we have found the answer to Garrett’s question: “There, inside this house, lives a little girl. This little girl has dreams that not everybody understands. And the dreams sometimes go far away. Far far away.” Returning to *Travels in My Homeland*, we know that the dreams the little girl had took her as far as her cousin’s death. The house on fire is, thus, a symbol of interior danger and of a homely unfamiliarity. In the photographic composition, the contrast is set between the image and the words: the story is told in the mode of a fairy tale, whereas the image is that of the ultimate home destruction. In Garrett’s book, the bucolic description of the window and the house contradicts the development of the main character inhabiting it, since the girl’s dreams are representative of an interior omen and menace.

David Wojnarowicz seems to have little doubt about his characters. His style, unlike Garrett’s, is affirmative, for it corresponds to his own vision of himself as a transparent author: “I feel like a window, maybe a broken window. I am a glass human” (*Brush Fires* 25). Through his imagination, or traveling through this transparency, the viewer can be led from the text to the unshattered house in the middle of the picture, to the house on fire, and back again. The only hesitation here seems commanded by the transversal line uniting the three elements—and the eye cannot choose upon which of them it should settle. Wojnarowicz’s presence, however, is strongly felt, through the disproportional scale he introduces (“I am a broken window” [25]) between house and grass, or vice versa. In this case, it is the author who marks the measure of the story, and any invitation to the free participation of the reader is purely rhetorical.

As for Garrett, the questions he asks announce an undecided mind, one that tries to talk its readers into helping it build the story: is it a woman at the window, or a poet? Are her eyes black, or are they green? Nevertheless, and just like Wojnarowicz, he is always in command, and the story of the “maiden of the nightingales” unfolds whether the reader wants it to or not. It would seem, though, that it does so in default of the author, not of the reader. But the text inscribes itself and denounces its origin, continually coming back to the author, even as he justifies an inner dialogue with the presence of a “traveling companion” (66). All efforts are made to hide the author from the valley of Santarém, but the text keeps marking him as the green and motionless land of that valley, where it all takes place (“We did indeed dismount. We sat down and this is the story” [66]).

The author is also the doubting mind behind Carlos's uneasiness. In Chapter XXI, after Carlos meets Joaninha in the valley, his thoughts are troubled, and he is unable to make even the most insignificant decision. Carlos follows his cousin “automatically, apparently without a will” (119), and both are vulnerable, as they step “out in that bare, open valley” (119)—not persons anymore, but “images of feelings, always exposed and sacrificed in the midst of the stupid, barbarous struggles and the conflict of false principles in which what men call *society* writhes unceasingly” (119–20). Wandering through the valley as two bodiless souls, they are walking over the body they miss, that of their creator, who thus suffers with the destiny of those two beings.

In many of Wojnarowicz's works, the author is also the land from whence all creatures spring; he sometimes represents himself as the trunk of a martyr, trespassed by arrows and literally rooted in the earth, or other times he is the nest sheltering people who shuffle their feet over the despair of abandoned construction sites. The author is formed as he forms the identity of the characters in his paintings, photographs, or texts. He is the grass under the house, he is earth himself—he is the element that introduces disproportion, the implosion causing the fire. To the same extent, the author in *Travels in My Homeland* spreads textual traps all over the narrative, thus affirming his undoubted mastery over story, characters, and speech. He is thereby strengthening an identity, a foundational ground of individual self-image, which is exposed in a never-ending game of hide-and-seek.

Note

- ¹ See Fran Lebowitz's interview with Melissa Harris in *Brush Fires in the Social Landscape* (79).

Works Cited

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