

*Emile Snyder*

## AIME CÉSAIRE : THE RECLAIMING OF THE LAND

Take a cruise to the French-speaking Caribbeans, a cruise skillfully organized by your local travel agency so that what you will see there will match the expectations of the travel folders. You will stay at a Hilton-type hotel and be entertained at night by local musicians; you will go on a guided tour in the interior and drive so fast that the memories you retain of the people will be images of colorful bandannas wrapped around the heads of women, shapes moving gracefully in the sunlight, a waving of hands and the smiles of children. And you will return home rhapsodizing to your friends about the paradise which is Martinique. Surely -- you will be inclined to say -- all this nonsense about colonialism and neocolonialism must be insidious propaganda propounded by misguided radicals. And not even once will you have guessed at the reality of life in Martinique: the physical and mental misery of the people, their sense of despair at an unchanging situation, their loss, over the years, of pride, of color, of self.

This bleaker image of Martinique -- the other side of the advertised coin -- faced Aimé Césaire from his birth, undermining his childhood, festering during his adolescence, and bursting open like a neglected sore just as he was about to depart from Martinique "with rapture". But in the most closeted chambers of his consciousness memories awaited, restless for the poems which would deliver them and exorcize them.

Beginning with *Return to my native land* (*Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, 1939), that long epic, dramatic and lyrical poem which André Breton called "nothing less than the greatest lyric monument of the epoch", the painful memories began to emerge. Césaire recalled his mother working late at night to improve the family earnings:

...I am even awakened at night by those tireless limbs which pedal the night, by the bitter puncture in the soft flesh of the night made by a Singer machine my mother pedals, pedals for our hunger.<sup>1</sup>

Césaire evoked his island:

At the end of the dawn, flowered with frail creeks, the hungry West Indies, pitted with smallpox, dynamited with alcohol, stranded in the mud of this bay, in the dirt of this city sinisterly stranded.

And the apparent passivity of his Martinique brothers:

In this inert city, this brawling crowd which so astonishingly by-passes its cry, its motion, its meaning, calm, passive to its true cry, the only cry you want to hear for it is all the city can say, because the sound inhabits some refuge of shadow and pride in this inert city, going by its cry of hunger, of grief, of revolt, of hate, this crowd so strangely blabbing and mute

And in prose Césaire ridiculed his secondary school friends, the sons of the mulatto bourgeoisie, aping the white world, and fuelled by what Franz Fanon called the drive for "lactification":

I was literally choking amid these Blacks who thought of themselves as white.

Already by 1939 Césaire was instinctively fusing with the history of the race the more immediate, existential conditions of his own life.

How do you accept, act upon, and transform such a past if not by speaking against it, if not by trying to raise "the good drunken cry of revolt"? How do you validate your existence, record for yourself and for your posterity a plot of land in the world register (cadastre), if not by trudging back along the ancestral path to return to the source -- Africa, the matrix, the point of embarkation for the Black diaspora and the irreversible moment of parturition. You must sail back to the "homeland", the family names, the genealogies which almost dissolved in the wake of the slavers' ships.

For Césaire the Orphic voyage was to pass through Paris. It was there, as a student at the Ecole Normale, that he met Leopold Sedar Senghor from Senegal (and later he was to say that the first time he met Senghor he began to think of himself as an African), that he befriended the poet Leon Damas from French Guiana, and that he merged with the African and Caribbean students attending the classrooms of the Sorbonne and sharing thoughts while sitting at the cafes on the Boulevard Saint Michel. An elite group? yes indeed, but what poet, what novelist, what intellectual has not willingly or unwillingly at some point been co-opted into the intelligentsia class, by reason of his education and the privilege of having to till the stacks of a library rather than the furrows of an impoverished land? An elite group, yes, but one intent upon denouncing the mystifications of the colonial reality (including the ambiguity of its own situation as an acculturated class), and asserting something of its own specificity as Black men among men.

The "Négritude" movement was launched, Césaire coining the word for the first time in *Return to my Native Land*, Senghor refining the theory, Alioune Diop providing with his review *Présence Africaine* (furthering the pioneering work of *Légitime Défense* and *L'étudiant Noir*) the voice or vehicle for keeping alive the palaver among Black men, for defining "the originality of African culture", for promoting "its insertion into the future concert of nations".

Césaire's contribution, over the years, took many forms. As a polemicist, in *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1950) he attacked the arrogant premises on which Western intellectuals asserted the so-called superiority of Western culture; as an historian, in *Toussaint Louverture* (1961), he rehabilitated the historical figure of the great Haitian patriot; as a playwright, he embarked upon a dramatic trilogy centered on Black heroes in the world because, as Césaire once said to Lylian Kesteloot "we need heroes of our own." His first real play, *La tragédie du roi Christophe* (1963), focused upon the forceful figure of the Haitian ruler, Henri Christophe. *Une saison au Congo* (1967) depicted the martyrdom of Patrice Lumumba and the rape of the Congo by foreign powers. To close the trilogy Césaire is said to be projecting a play on Malcolm X. In addition to his literary career, Césaire entered Martinique's politics, serving for years as mayor of Fort-de-France. He also joined the French Communist Party to which he adhered for over a

decade, resigning from it in 1956 and putting forth the reasons for his defection in a brilliant letter addressed to Maurice Thorez, the then titular head of the Party.<sup>2</sup>

But poetry has remained for Césaire the most cherished, the most exacting, and the most intimate way to conciliate his anger with his love, his despair with his dreams, his sense of his own Blackness with his yearning for an anonymous and universal presence in a future fraternal world. Poetry has always been for Césaire the "miraculous weapons", *les Armes miraculeuses*, as the title of his volume of 1964 announced.

Refusing the facile exoticism of the previous generation of Black poets writing in French (despite the fact that his vocabulary drives the reader to a variety of dictionaries), eschewing the simple statement (for Césaire once said that there was a world of difference between a political pamphlet and a poem), Césaire adopted the nightmarish visions of a Lautréamont or Rimbaud, the convoluted syntactical subtleties of a Mallarmé, and followed the hermetic plunges of the Surrealists into the reservoir of the unconscious.

But for him so much of Surrealism was only a matter of technique. For Césaire's visions coagulated into precise images of the indignities and tortures suffered under the colonial system, and into counter-images of anticipated liberation which would bring about the flowering of love and the reconciliation of man with the universe. Moreover, the syntactical meanders of Césaire's poems do not stem from a *précieux* mind. They reflect his intentions to record the torturous labor of memory grappling with lost landmarks. They, at the same time, underline the dialectic project which is political in nature and often stated at the onset by the very titles of the poems. Thus Césaire, although technically heir to the Surrealist tradition, stands ideologically poles apart from it. Nothing in his poetry is gratuitous. The imagination is not allowed to wander aimlessly for self-gratification. Each poem is in itself a project, a praxis -- in the Sartrian sense of the word -- carefully mapped out by a sense of urgency and of responsibility. The dialectic moves from the awareness of a tragic racial past to the lucid recognition of the present horror, compelling the poet forward to revolt in the name of a desired transcendence. The movement is from awareness to revolt and to love.

Let us trace this dialectic in "Raving Mad", one of the most poignant poems from his early volume, *Soleil Cou Coupé* (1948) salvaged in the recapitulative text of *Cadastre* (1961).<sup>3</sup>

Raving Mad

Greetings to you birds slicing through and scattering the circle of herons  
and the genuflexion of their resigned heads  
in a sheath of white down

Greetings to you birds who peck open the true belly of the swamp  
and the chieftain's chest of the setting sun

Greetings to you raucous cry  
resinous torch  
in which mingle the trails  
of rain ticks and white mice

Raving mad I greet you with my ravings whiter than death

Simple open sea  
I welcome my future hour  
when each word each gesture will liven  
your face like that of a blond goat  
foraging in the intoxicating vat of my hand

And then then  
my good leech  
then the beginning of time  
then the end of time  
and the erect majesty of the original eye

It is twilight. The poet imprisoned in his anger, contemplates a circle of herons. They stand there, outlined in the sunset, on one leg, the other leg doubled-back under the knee, and their heads lowered into their bodies. And the poet perceives in this attitude of the herons a symbol of the resignation of his Black brothers under colonial subjugation. This resignation is expressed ironically -- for Césaire's poetry is frankly anti-Christian -- through the image of penitents in genuflexion before the altar:

and the genuflexion of their resigned heads  
in a sheath of white down.

But all of a sudden a flock of small birds traverse the circle of herons and the herons, frightened, take flight. All the birds (small birds joined

by the herons) taking off towards sunset are for Césaire messengers of hope. In Césaire's bestiary almost all birds are symbols of liberation on the way.

The poet greets three times these harbingers of freedom, anticipating his own freedom. He follows the birds as far as his eyes can see. They lose themselves in the swamp. But, by poetic transposition, this swamp, this dusk, now become the mediation for a psychic plunge into the past, into Césaire's collective past which he relates to Africa by the war-like personification of nature: "and the chieftain's chest of the setting sun".

And it is no longer the "raucous cry" of the birds which the poet greets but his own recovered voice now asserting itself. For he is now going to be able to "raise with stiffness the great Black cry so that the foundations of the world will be shaken" ("d'une telle raideur le grand cri nègre que les assises du monde en seront ébranlées"), a project he had set for himself in his early dramatic monologue *Et les chiens se taisaient*. (1956). The imagination of the poet carries him into the most secret recesses of the bush (and of the past); it is there that life pulses with real intensity: "rain ticks and white mice".

Césaire begins to feel free at last from his psychic torture. Having recovered a sense of his roots he also recovers his personal and collective voice which he now uses to villify his oppressors: "Raving mad I greet you with my ravings whiter than death!" Note that for Césaire, as for Damas, the color white always has a negative connotation, being synonymous with physical death, spiritual atrophy, and cultural decadence: manichean principle in French Black poetry (not always adhered to by Senghor!) which tends to counter-balance the opposite manicheanism of Western poetry where the color white has been associated for centuries with notions of virginity, purity, spirituality and strength: "Raving mad I greet you with my ravings whiter than death."

Moment of supreme arrogance, of supreme liberation when the poet's all being coheres with his anger. Now Césaire can go beyond his anger, surpass it, and channel it towards a higher synthesis:

I welcome my future hour  
when each word each gesture will liven  
your face like that of a blond goat  
foraging in the intoxicating vat of my hand.

The last movement of the poem, an oceanic movement (for Césaire is an oceanic poet always conscious of the presence of the ocean lapping his small island: he once referred to Martinique as a “dandruff speck on the surface of the ocean”) prefigures universal fraternity. But this leap towards the “future hour” of freedom is also a return to a primal unity: return to simplicity (“simple open sea”), and to the harmony of man with the universe. Freedom will express itself through the now possible gestures of love between man and woman, the sensual communication:

when each word each gesture will liven  
your face like that of a blond goat  
foraging in the intoxicating vat of my hand.

Beautiful image, that of a woman whose angular face, bathed in the golden color of sunset, is being intimately, almost domestically caressed by the loving hand of the poet!

Without freedom there cannot be, for Césaire, any possibility of loving. But with the advent of freedom the cycle is completed, the “beginning of time” and “the end of time” fuse into a myth of fertility, the frankly phallic image of the triumphant sun, the old Egyptian symbol of power and fecundity: “the erect majesty of the original eye”.

Critics have often remarked upon the tone of violence in the poetry of Césaire. It should be seen, however, that violence for Césaire is only the second term of the dialectic, the moment of negativity in the Hegelian sense. True, by comparison with his manifested anger, Césaire’s final leap into love and tenderness is verbalized quietly -- a muted lyricism -- in the poems. Often a single verse reveals it, as if the poet overwhelmed by his newly discovered treasure finds himself too shy to share it with the rest of the world. In *Return to my Native Land* referring to his wife pregnant with child, and without naming her or his child precisely, he simply wrote

and you, O star, will draw lemuridae from  
your foundation with the unfathomable sperm  
of man  
*the not dared form* (my italics)

In Césaire’s poetry images of renascence through love counterbalance images of violence and destruction. Examples abound in the volume

*Cadastre*.<sup>3</sup> In "Millibars of the storm" he wrote;

Dream let's not yield  
among the hooves of frenzied horses  
a tearful noise groping towards the immense wing  
of your eyelid.

In "Chevelure" at the conclusion of the poem he invoked the loving woman:

and you  
abode of my insolence of my tombs of my whirlwinds  
mane bundle of lianas fervent hope of shipwrecks  
sleep softly on the meticulous trunk of my embrace my  
woman  
my fortress.

In "The Wheel" after having recalled ancestral miseries:

but you minutes will you not wind onto your spool of life  
the lapped up blood  
the art of suffering sharpened like tree stumps by  
the knives  
of winter,

he prophesized the rebirth of nature enhanced by the loving face of his woman:

the doe drunk with thirst  
bringing to my unexpected wellstones your  
face of an unmasted schooner  
your face  
like a village asleep in the depth of a lake  
and which is reborn to the realm of green and  
to the fruitful year.

A rebirth "to the realm of green and/ to the fruitful year", that is the key to Césaire's most private obsession. His anthropomorphization of nature which he carries to a near *frisson* of eroticism reflects his desire to reintegrate himself into the very minute manifestations of the vegetable, mineral, and animal world. There is, in his poetry, a rich catalogue -- indeed an encyclopedia -- of flora and fauna. A brief repertoire of his images should include plants, shrubs, flowers, such as a "silphium-lascinatium", cassia, monk's hood ("aconit napel"), solandra, albizzia, umbel and terrebelà -- to name only a few -- and trees such as a ceiba, kaelcedra, cassia, manchineel, baobab, and flamboyant. Cesaire



reflects the preoccupation of the botanist, bent as he is to avoid the "vulgar" terms in preference for the Latin names which embody the genus of the species. His bestiary is just as impressive. It includes not only known birds, fishes, insects such as a toucan, macaw, aras, gekko (lizard), scolopendra (centipede), remora (sucking fish), medusa-aurelia (jellyfish), shark, dolphin, but it also includes fossilated forms of life and mythical ones: the lailape, a gigantic fossil carnivorous dinosaur, the amphisbaena, a serpent in classical mythology, and the griffin, half-animal, half-human creature said to have kept watch over the tombs of the Egyptians. Finally the poems seem embedded into the earth, drawing their strength from the mineral eternity; numerous are the references to clay, laterite, dacite, chromium, mercury, and so on.

This constant obsession with the botanical, zoological, and geophysical world (overwhelming by far the human *personae* of his poems) might lead us to think that Césaire has spent his formative years with his head buried in specialized scientific dictionaries. The documentation alone is shattering. Are we dealing here with a poet conceitedly flashing his esoteric erudition? Jacqueline Sieger, in an interview with Césaire in *Afrique* (N. 5, October 1961), asked him about this seemingly *recherché* aspect of his poetry:

One feels that you are searching for the erudite word and soon this gives to your poetry an impression of esoterism;

to which Césaire answered:

It is true that the language of my poems is very precise; it is because I have wanted, above all, to *name* things. If I want to speak of a certain tree, I say a palm tree, of a certain flower, an hibiscus. And why not? The French poet, in his turn, does not speak of flowers but of the rose or of the violet. (my own translation)

Césaire's precise nomination of the natural world has a political implication - political because racism attempts to *disfranchise* a man from his geographical roots, indeed perhaps from the earth itself. In *Antisemite and the Jew* J. P. Sartre considering the situation of the Jew in France remarked that anti-semitism aimed at questioning the very legitimacy of the Jew's presence on French soil and within the context of French history. Are not his roots -- hence his biology, his culture and his allegiance -- in Odessa or in some other extra-territorial places,

would the racist say? Thus racism (all forms of racism) attempts to *deterritorialize* its victim who becomes reduced to beg acceptance as an alien or to seek to assimilate in the hope of disappearing from this monstrous illegitimacy fostered upon him.

Similarly Césaire, the son of uprooted African slaves, is first compelled to react against this curse. Naming the world in its totality is one way of claiming for himself an unchallenged plot (a *cadastre*) from which he cannot be disfranchised. Africa, the Africa which Césaire evokes at times in idealized terms (and which is not the Africa of Africans but the Africa of a Caribbean grandchild), is but a passage to a more lasting -- Moses-like -- homeland which is the universe itself! Naming the Nile, the Niger, the cities of Timbuctu or Uagadougou, is for Césaire like setting road signs along the homeward journey. But in the final analysis Africa is not enough for Césaire, for the centuries of colonialism have *disfranchised* him from that original homeland. In *Return to my Native Land* he wrote:

No, we have never been amazons of the king of Dahomey, not the princes of Ghana with eight hundred camels, nor wise men of Timbuctoo under Askia the Great; nor architects in Djene, nor *mahdis* nor warriors. Under our armpits, we do not feel the itch of those who bore the lance. And since I have sworn to hide nothing of our history (I who admire nothing so much as the lamb chewing his afternoon shadow), I want to declare that we were from the very first quite pitiful dishwashers, shoeshiners without scope and, at best, rather conscientious sorcerers whose only incontestable achievement has been the endurance record under the lash.

Hence nothing short of the whole undifferentiated earth can be his homeland; but Césaire feels that even that birthplace has been vitiated by racism, by human stupidity and hatred. It is therefore necessary to restructure poetically this ideal birthplace of man, beginning with an apocalyptic disaster (one of his poems is entitled "Tangible Disaster") and followed by a loving reconstruction. Césaire, a sort of self-appointed Noah figure, gathers lovingly all the beasts, birds, insects, saps, to shelter them from moral deluge. And then having done so Noah becomes Thor the god of thunder and lightning raining retribution upon the wicked. And the sky and the sun remain the only witness to this apocalypse which is a genesis in reverse. Césaire's poetry abounds with "convulsive sky", and "primal debris". Purification through fire from whence even extinct volcanoes find renewed strength. The poem "Crusades of Silence" ends with the terrifying vision of Chimborazo,

the volcanic mountain in the Andes, awakening once more to its original potential: "Chimborazo though extinct still devours the world."

In this poetic destruction of the universe there is a refusal to accept the world as handed down from an official version of Genesis because, to Césaire, those who may have written it as well as those who pretend to derive moral commandments from it, are immoral people. Genesis, and the natural reproductive cycle which Césaire loves so much, and to which he returns constantly through the images of water, ovaries, tadpoles, seeds in germination, *should* in his mind have led to the full blossoming of man in a fraternal world. However, already in the official Genesis Césaire finds himself and his Black brothers cast out. That is why he said with irony "Don't mind me, I am of before Adam" meaning not only that ideally he wishes to antedate a creation which has gone foul, but that in that Christian version of creation, starting with Adam, his own Black forefathers had already been damned.

Léon Damas, the French Guiana poet, has expressed a similar attitude in a bitter poem entitled "Against our love which asked for nothing more":<sup>4</sup>

Against our love  
 which dreamed of living in a free space  
 which dreamed of living its own life  
 of living a life  
 which would be  
 neither  
 shameful  
 nor leprous  
 nor faked  
 nor partitioned  
 nor haunted  
 they have invoked NOAH  
 and NOAH called upon SHEM  
 and SHEM called upon JAPHET  
 and JAPHET referred it to NOAH  
 and NOAH called upon METHUSELAH  
 and METHUSELAH once again took out of the arsenal  
 all the tinsel rags  
 all the taboos  
 all the warning lights of prohibitions

Beware  
 Now dangerous  
 Detour  
 Game-preserves  
 Private property  
 Guarded domain  
 No trespassing  
 Dogs and Niggers forbidden on the lawn  
 (my own translation).

Politics and metaphysics are inseparable for Cesaire. For the imbalance in human rapports (racism) has upset the innate balance of the universe. Nature henceforth reenacts, in the poet's mind, the drama of human beings enslaved through hatred and stupidity. In an early poem, "Les Pur-Sangs" from *Les Armes Miraculeuses* Cesaire paralleled man's enslavement with the deterioration of the harmonized forces of the universe:

the earth no longer makes love with the sun  
 the earth no longer rubs its cheek against the stars' clusters;

but as the poet finds a way to free himself from the yoke of servitude, as he begins to grow

... like a plant  
 without remorse and without stumbling  
 toward the loosened hours of the day,

the earth too begins to regain its original composure:

And the earth began to breathe beneath the gauze of mists  
 And the earth stretched. A loosening came  
 upon its knotted shoulders. In its veins  
 a crackling of fire.

Cosmic eroticism (and Sartre wrote in *Orphee Noire* that Cesaire "vegetalizes, animalizes sea and sky and stone") is his disguised love for the earth; it is at the same time the expression of his anguish at feeling *disfranchised* from it through centuries of racism. Treeforms, laterite-forms, fossilated and organic forms become the only tenable *cadastre* of a man whose very race had been uprooted. In the already mentioned interview with Jacqueline Sieger Cesaire clarified his position:

But I am an African poet! I feel very deeply the uprooting of my people. Critics have remarked upon the recurrence of certain themes in my works, in

particular plant symbols. I am in fact obsessed by vegetation, by the flower, by the root. There is nothing gratuitous in that, it is linked with my situation, that of a Black man exiled from his native soil. It is a psychological phenomenon from which I have never freed myself and which I feel to the point of nausea. It is as if I was hearing, in the most intimate part of my sensibility, the echoes of the lapping of the waves, the tossing which the slaves felt in the holes of the slave ships. The tree, profoundly rooted in the soil, is for me the symbol of man who is self-rooted, the nostalgia of a lost paradise. (my own translation)

Césaire's *cri du coeur* is first directed to his Black brothers, but it does not stop there. It extends itself to all men who, in some ways, have been humiliated, have suffered injustices, are seeking for redress and for peace. André Breton, perhaps the first to have understood the universal impact of Césaire's indignation, summarizes it in this manner:

What to my mind makes this indignation priceless, is that it transcends at every moment the anguish felt by a Negro because of the fate of Negroes in modern society and, indistinguishable from that felt by all poets, artists and true thinkers, while furnishing Césaire with a special fund of verbal genius, embraces the more generally determined condition of man today, in all its intolerable and also infinitely improvable aspects.

The dialectic of Césaire's poetry, in short, synthesizes the potentially *précieux* aesthetics of Surrealism with the political thrust of humanistic and existential ideology, the past and present with the future, and the experience of a unique individual with the universal condition of man.

1 The quotations from *Return to my Native Land* are from my own translations in the bilingual edition, *Return to my Native Land*, Présence Africaine, Paris, 1971.

2 *Lettre à Maurice Thorez*, Présence Africaine, 1956.

3 *Cadastre*, Edition du Seuil, 1961.

4 Léon Damas, *Névrologies*, Présence Africaine, 1965.

\*The translated verses from *Cadastre* are from the bilingual edition translated by Emile Snyder and Sandy Upson, to be published Winter 1973 by the Third Press, New York.