
Césaire—the Poet and the Politician

Lilyan Kesteloot

The poet and the politician have often been set against each other in the case of this extraordinary man who has profoundly marked two generations of African intellectuals and who continues to stir the students who study him in our schools and universities. In this year, his 80th, rather than adding my voice to the choruses of praise that are blanketing him almost everywhere, I have decided that it might be more useful to respond to the question asked so frequently: How has Césaire managed to be both the great Rebel of Negritude as well as a member of the French Parliament for 40 years?

Indeed, on the African side, all that is really known is the poet, the man who laid the foundations of Negritude, along with Senghor, Damas, Alioune Diop, and a few others. Negritude was not only a literary movement that brought together the Diaspora of Blacks from three continents through *Présence Africaine* and the *Société Africaine de Culture*; it was above all the expression of a black rebellion against the West and its stranglehold on the Third World; finally, it was the passionate demand for the freedom of the colonized lands, for the dignity of their people, and for recognition of the cultural values of their continent.

Thus, when Césaire wrote this strange prayer:

donnez-moi la foi sauvage du sorcier
donnez à mes mains puissance de modeler
donnez à mon âme la trempe de l'épée...

faites de moi l'amant de cet unique peuple
faites-moi commissaire de son sang
faites-moi dépositaire de son ressentiment (*Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*)

give me the savage faith of the sorcerer
give my hands power to mold
grant my soul the sword's temper...

make me the lover of this unique people
make me commissioner of its blood
make me the agent for its resentment (*Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*¹)

he took upon himself the task of being the authentic interpreter of the colonized Negro's deep sentiments. And so powerful was his word and so sincere his heart, that all recognized themselves in him. When Hamidou Dia speaks today of "Césaire of the fiery *Cahier* [Notebook]," he truly captures the burning sensation felt by

whoever picks up a copy or lends an ear to the complete *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*.

Thus it was an engaged poetry, and his bellicose project literally assaults the hearer, drives him out of his comfort and indifference, and does this regardless of cultural level. For the least that can be said of Césaire's poetry is that it was not at all popular poetry. Bristling with learned words, neologisms, and a hypercomplex syntax, it made a direct hit on the African continent as well as on the intellectuals in the Antilles, and even those of anglophone or lusophone Africa. Nor has this movement ceased to spread. When Elie Pennon gave voice to a Creole improvisation of the great poems of Césaire (June 1993), an entire theater filled with young Antilleans thrilled and applauded. When Doua Seck boomed the final speech of King Christophe—so difficult to articulate, so hard to understand—every Senegalese sitting before the television set wept. And not only because Doua was singing his swan song, but because he had become the character Christophe-Césaire, and because his stage death was also Africa's, as well as Haiti's.

The political and human message comes through wondrously despite the words that, although mask-like, are sharp as knives, and it is the message that the African audience perceives despite the terms that might escape them or the phrases that are troublesome. The audience grasps perfectly his polemic and his call to action.

Unlike the other continents, which appreciate Césaire for the density of his writing, his surrealism, and his ease in producing so many stupefying images (in the sense that Breton spoke of "stupéfiante image"), the African audience appropriated the Antillean poet because of the ideological content that traverses in chiaroscuro his language-puzzle, with a force connecting it to magical formulas like the "jat" of the Wolof or Fulani.

Incantation, curse, or exorcism!

But what exactly does Africa know about Césaire the politician? Only what too many short notes tell us: that he was first a teacher in a lycée in Fort-de-France and that he was then elected a Communist deputy in 1945. He voted for the departmentalization of Martinique in 1949, which sheltered the Antilleans in the joys...but also the disillusionments, then the sorrows of Independence. He became Mayor of Fort-de-France in 1945—and that was his preferred role: a true King Christophe living well in his little kingdom. He quit the Communist Party in 1957 more in disagreement with the French party and its policy in the Dom-Tom than because of the Soviets, as has been reported. A rereading of the "Letter to Maurice Thorez" is convincing evidence of that. He then founded the PPM and asked not for Independence but for self-rule for the Antilles.

In the 1960 referendum, De Gaulle and Malraux convinced him to vote "yes." This was scarcely noticed by the African nationalists (and only Guinea said "no"), but the entire Antillean Left held it against him, including Fanon, Boukman, and Confiant, who were fighting in Algeria at that time. Fanon eventually relented, however, whereas Boukman and Confiant joined the ranks of Césaire's opponents, at whose head was the writer Edouard Glissant.

Today Césaire's opponents make two cases against him.

First, the case against Negritude. It was nearly 20 years ago that Edouard Glissant proposed "Antillanité" as an alternative to Negritude. Concerning this shift, Professor Jean Bernabé and the novelists Raphaël Confiant and Georges Chamoiseau have written an epoch-marking essay, "In Praise of Creolity." Creolity

promotes the Antillean identity as opposed to Black Consciousness, which is judged too limiting and too Africa-oriented. Creolity, for example, recovers Indian origins. It is also dedicated to studying, writing, publishing, and teaching Creole as the medium of expression of the Antillean soul, as opposed to the exclusivity of French, which is spoken by adherents of Negritude.

This movement of Creolity brings together many young academics and writers, such as the three leaders named above, but also Raymond Relouzat, A. Anselin, Serge Patient, S. Dracius, C. Jorif, Serge Domi, Elie Stephenson, and Monchoachi. They manifest a sure dynamism that is visible in three bustling reviews: *Antilla*, *Karibel*, *Caribet*, and more recently, a fourth—*Tyamaba*, which by an unexpected detour discovered Egypt and its myths! (Perhaps Cheikh Anta Diop had a hand in it, through American universities....)

All this offers much of interest and is culturally productive. The only problem is that these writers attack Césaire so violently, and after having unwillingly recognized that “we are all children of Césaire,” they loudly affirm their intention to break away from this cumbersome father. It really exceeds the limits when Confiant indulges in a weekly insult in his journal, *Karibel*.

On the other hand, I have considered Confiant’s work (half personal tale, half pamphlet), entitled *Césaire, une traversée paradoxale du siècle*, to be a rather upsetting testimony. In it we discover a Confiant who, from the very first, is shaped, revealed to himself, by the “Cahier de feu,” just like our Senegalese. We see him translating into Creole this same surrealist poem—and that supposes quite an effort, as one can imagine! At that period, he did not reproach Césaire for being closer to Rimbaud than to the sugarcane cutter.

But as we move on through this astonishing book, we witness Confiant’s successive phases of disappointment in what he calls the deception of the leader Maximo, of the Authentic Black: the latter’s lack of understanding of the Creolist movement, the contradictions between the vigorous principles flaunted in his poetry and the compromises of an unthought-out policy: indecisive, not always enlightened or courageous. Confiant reveals, finally, the internal drama of the Antilles of the last 10 years, the poorly understood confrontations, the anonymous victims. Obviously, he gives his personal interpretation—and one that is not favorable to Césaire.

And he does that so well that this essay, which is meant to be an analysis, becomes an indictment, with Césaire tied to the pillory by an intellectual of evident sincerity, whose suffering is unquestioned and whose love, turned to hatred for his ex-idol, is still perceptible through the virulence of his criticisms, and even through the final appeal to Césaire—so unexpected—and the affectionate *tutoiement* used to urge him to guide his people once more along the true path, the right path (according to Confiant), the “politically correct” road of the “mangrove” and of Creolity, and not of the summit meetings and francophony.

One cannot help thinking—although he denies it—that this is a good example of Oedipal rebellion, with this injunction to the father that he be like the son, and that he fulfil the son wishes.... If there is a true heir to Césaire in the Antilles, it is Confiant! And he deserves this heritage through the sheer scale of his insurrection, the splendor of his polemic, the bite of his irony. Faithful to his role as *vilain chabin méchant*, as he defines it so well in his memoirs, *Au temps d'enfance*.

Alas! A very wounded Césaire understands nothing of this war, believes he is unjustly misunderstood, maligned, and persecuted. And he shuts himself away like

a snail in its shell. Over the matter, Chamoiseau has received the Prix Goncourt, and the Creolists are gaining ground in the former cultural bastions of pure francophones: Paris, Bordeaux, Montreal, Quebec, Baton Rouge.

Thus, in just a few years, positions have hardened, and the intellectual class is henceforth divided in two. Facing the clan of Creolity, the clan of Césairists includes Professor Roger Toumson and Simonne Henry-Valmore, the writers G. Desportes, M. Ponamah, H. Corbin, X. Orville, Daniel Maximin, and the newspaper *France Antilles*, the equivalent of *La Presse* in Montreal.

This first case is amplified by a second one brought against Césaire on his island. And that case is purely political. In fact, it is the case against the leaders of the PPM. Other parties, such as that of the deputy Marie-Jeanne, have gained in popularity, and in the last elections, the PPM lost its majority. The PPM is reproached for having become "bourgeois," for representing especially the minor officials, and then putting their demands on the back burner since 1980, when the Socialists came to power. What should be said? How can it be arbitrated? It is not for us to do so. All that we can do is put forth the banal contestation that what is happening is perhaps inevitable. How can one be a prophet in one's country for 40 years?

Even on the political and social plane, we must recognize that the country has been totally transformed: Fort-de-France is a magnificent city, Antilleans have French salaries, unemployment benefits, SMIC, family allowances, a French (or quasi-French) social security system. It is their deputy-mayor who cleaned up the city, created schools everywhere, as well as soup kitchens, welfare centers, and youth centers. This country is dripping with prosperity. But the people continue to complain. Just like the French.

Those of us coming from Africa think we're dreaming.... 100% of school fees paid for by the state, one car for every two Martinicans! Yes, there is a recession, there as everywhere. But Martinicans are supported by the Metropolis. Half of the Antilleans work in France. We can regret this fact. But we can also ask ourselves where they would go if they had to leave France. To blame Césaire for this is the same as blaming their island for being only 39 km wide!

Given these things, whither Independence? The only persons demanding it today constitute a small fringe that has never been able to impose its will on the country. Even if Césaire the Deputy dreamed of Independence in the years '56-'59 and later, he has not felt that he has the authority to "betray" his electorate. Having become French in '49, don't the Antilleans of Martinique want, even today, to remain so? Even if Confiant and his partisans demand another cultural policy. But that is not the way it is. And that is all that needs to be said. We must also admit that the evolution of Africa is scarcely encouraging.

What then must we conclude from all this? That the conflict of generations is a sad, but quite ordinary occurrence. We have lived through the same thing here in Senegal, with Senghor attacked in the same way. Certainly Senghor has an unequaled art in winning back his adversaries, while Césaire has no such skill. He suffers, sulks, reacts by silence and scorn. This does not encourage dialogue. For one cannot help wondering whether his sons have become peevish because they were poorly loved. And that, perhaps, if he had wanted to give them a bit of encouragement, Césaire could have disarmed them with little trouble.

In any event, viewed from Africa, and from Planet Earth, these antagonisms are but local problems and personal quarrels. They shall not weigh heavily in the international renown of the poet who has continued to increase in greatness over the last ten years. Theories pass; poetry remains, when it is royal.

For Africa, Césaire will remain the poet of *Les armes miraculeuses*, the man of “le Cahier de feu,” the one who “poussa le grand cri nègre si fort que les assises du monde en furent ébranlés” ‘uttered the great black cry so loudly that the foundations of the world were shaken by it.’

But he is also the one whose deeply profound poetry accompanies affliction and hurt:

car il y a ce mal
 ci-gît au comble de moi-même
 couché dans une grande mare la source sans ressac... (“...mais il y a ce mal”)
 for there is this hurt
 Here Lies at the height of myself
 spread out in a big pool the hidden one with no undertow
 (“...But There Is This Hurt”)

Défaite, Défaite, désert grand (“Grand Sang sans merci”)

Defeat, Defeat vast desert (“Merciless Great Blood”)

And it is again with Césaire that one learns patience or takes on hope again:

N’y eût-il dans le désert
 qu’une goutte d’eau qui rêve tout bas,
 dans le désert n’y eût-il
 qu’une graine volante qui rêve tout haut,
 c’est assez....
 désert désert, j’endure ton défi
 blanc à remplir sur la carte voyageuse du pollen (“Blanc à remplir sur la la carte voyageuse du pollen”)

Were there in the desert
 only one drop of water dreaming very quietly,
 in the desert were there
 only one flying seed dreaming very loudly,
 that is enough...
 desert, desert, I endure your challenge
 a blank to fill on the travel pass of the pollen. (“A Blank to Fill on the Travel Pass of the Pollen”)

It is up to each of us to translate these words into our own words or our common tongue: Wolof, Fulani, English, Chinese, Hindu, Creole.

Just as Raphaël did so well in his own time....

—trans. by Ruthmarie H. Mitsch

NOTE

1. Translations of Césaire’s poetry taken from Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith, eds., *Aimé Césaire: The Collected Poetry*, Berkeley: U of California P, 1983.

REVIEW ESSAYS

On Césaire

Gregson Davis

Aimé Césaire: le nègre inconsolé by Roger Toumson and Simonne Henry-Valmore (1993) is a collaborative biographical essay that is perfectly timed: its year of publication synchronizes with the momentous retirement of the veteran Martinican intellectual from the arena of politics where he had been a major player, without electoral setback, since the close of World War II. Césaire's announced reason for his decision, as cited by the authors in their final chapter (213-14), is couched in deceptively modest terms: "J'ai près de quatre-vingts ans; j'ai presque un demi-siècle de mandat parlementaire. Eh bien, j'ai toujours été opposé à toutes les aristocraties, je les ai toujours combattues. Et cela existe aussi, vous savez, l'aristocratie de l'âge: cela s'appelle la gérontocratie. Eh bien, je suis aussi contre la gérontocratie. Et je pense que le moment est venu de passer la main" 'I am close to fifty years old; I have exercised a parliamentary mandate for almost half a century. I have been opposed to all forms of aristocracy; I have always fought against them. Now, there also exists, you know, an aristocracy of age: it is called a gerontocracy. Well, I am also against gerontocracy; and I think the time has come to pass the baton.' The event constitutes a convenient parenthesis—a retrospective vantage-point from which to assess the remarkable career of a *rara avis* from the Caribbean who has striven throughout to conjugate poetry and politics.

The authors, evidently with an eye to ring-composition, begin their biographical narrative with a page entitled "Dernier relais" ("Last lap"), which also alludes metaphorically to the "historic event" of the retirement announcement, thereby anticipating the book's closure (with a slight discrepancy, incidentally, between the two verbatim quotations of the text of the announcement—cf. 11 and 213-14). They go on in the following section to define the aims of their narrative in terms that suggest its comprehensive, though not exhaustive, scope: "Le moment présent n'est pas propice aux synthèses totalisantes, aux inventaires exhaustifs, aux bilans définitifs [...] Mais une biographie humaine, intellectuelle, littéraire et politique tout à la fois est de saison" (15) 'The present moment is not propitious for totalizing syntheses, exhaustive inventories, definitive summations.... But a biography that is simultaneously personal, intellectual, literary and political is timely.'

Not all the parameters laid out in this ambitious-sounding fourfold prospectus receive equal emphasis, however; for the book's main focus, as it emerges, is on the political and the intellectual facets, with the personal and literary occupying the interstices. This disproportionate treatment is readily understandable, since, as the authors themselves point out, Césaire's well-known reticence concerning his private life precludes intimate revelations regarding the personal ("humaine") dimension ("...l'homme est pudique. Il est secret..." [21] 'the man is bashful. He is private...'). With regard to the interspersed discussion of the literary corpus, their