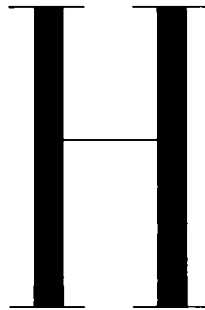


INTRODUCTION

I



Here is a riddle about contemporary French literature: which maverick of French academe proudly refers to his cannibalistic ancestors? Which major surrealist poet has held a deputy's seat in the French Assembly for thirty-seven years? Which teacher of dead classical languages ended up creating a new one? What member of the world intelligentsia makes himself totally and directly accessible to a constituency of underprivileged blacks? Which major postwar poet is also a major playwright? Which French mayor and member of the parliament commutes to his municipality over the Atlantic? What well-known statesman periodically voices his skepticism about power? What apostle of decolonization once sought the status of a French department for his country? Although each of these questions might have more than one answer, together they could only receive one: Aimé Césaire. Over several decades, Césaire has worn many hats and has been many different things to many people. No wonder, then, that as late as 1965, Michel Leiris found it normal to open an essay on the Martinican writer with the question, "Who is Aimé Césaire?"¹ We shall attempt to answer this question in the present introduction.

Aimé Césaire was born in 1913 in Basse-Pointe, a small town on the northeast coast of Martinique which lies in the shadow of the volcano Mont Pelée. He was the second of six children. Aimé's mother was a dressmaker and his father a local tax inspector. Under the tutelage of his grandmother, Eugénie, Aimé learned to read and write French by the age of four. While the Césaire family did not belong to the class of illiterate agricultural laborers that made up the vast majority of black Martinicans, they were poor. Unlike most Martinicans, however, the family made an ongoing effort to inculcate French cultural norms. By the time Aimé was eleven, the Césaires had moved to Fort-de-France, the capital of Martinique, where Aimé was able to attend the Lycée Schoelcher, the only secondary school for all of Guadeloupe, French Guiana, and Martinique, until after the Second World War.

Creole is the first language of all black Martinicans but to be exclusively a Creole speaker shows an inferior social position. It is indicative of the Césaires' middle-class aspirations that Aimé's father read the children the French prose classics and the poetry of Victor Hugo instead of telling them stories in Creole. Césaire, as a matter of fact, has never to this day envisioned Creole as a vehicle for Martinican cultural expression.

The abundance of Martinican fauna and flora in his poetry probably has as its first cause the influence of a teacher he studied with at the Lycée Schoelcher. Eugène Revert taught geography and attempted to interest his students in the peculiar geographical characteristics of Martinique at a time when standard examination questions were based on mainland French history and geography. It was also Revert who identified Césaire as a candidate for France's highest liberal arts institution, the Ecole

Normale Supérieure in Paris, and recommended him as well for the Parisian Lycée Louis-le-Grand, at which, in September, 1931, he began to prepare for entrance to “Normale.”

While at the Lycée Schoelcher in Fort-de-France, Césaire had met Léon-Gontran Damas from French Guiana, who would later join him in formulating the notion of *negritude*. At the Lycée Louis-le-Grand in Paris, he was befriended by Léopold Senghor from Sénégal. In 1934 Damas and Senghor started a newspaper, *L'Étudiant noir*, which intended to bring together students from Africa and those from the West Indies and was to be a matrix for the concept of *negritude*. The West Indians Léonard Sainville and Aristide Maugée and the Senegalese Birago Diop and Ousmane Socé also belonged to this *cénacle*. In the circle of *L'Étudiant noir*, Césaire met a young Martinican woman, Suzanne Roussy, whom he married in 1937 and who would later participate as a full partner in the magazine *Tropiques*. It is also during this period that Césaire took classes from Professor Le Senne at Ecole Normale. Le Senne's works on human and racial typology probably contributed to orienting Césaire and his friends toward the concept of a black cultural archetype which transcended geographical boundaries.

Whereas a concise appreciation of American black poetry was not to appear until the July 1941 issue of *Tropiques*, two years after the Césaires' return to Martinique, the Harlem Renaissance was well known to black students in Paris during the early thirties. Speaking of this period, Senghor, who went on to become a poet and the President of Sénégal, has written: “We were in contact with these black Americans [Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, and Countee Cullen] during the years 1929–1934, through Mademoiselle Paulette Nardal, who, with Dr. Sajous, a Haitian, had founded the *Revue du Monde Noir*. Mademoiselle Nardal kept a literary salon, where African Negroes, West Indians, and American Negroes used to get together.”² While the black writers of the United States made a profound impression on Césaire, Senghor's statement should be qualified: Césaire himself had little contact with these salons “for reasons that are indicative of his own social origins and his future evolution. He considered them too bourgeois, too *mulatto*—a term that described quite perfectly the Martinican middle class at the time—and too Catholic.”³

The Jamaican-born Claude McKay appears to be the Harlem Renaissance writer who gave Césaire the most to think about. McKay's novel *Banjo*, published in French in 1928, offered an explanation for the alienation of black intellectuals everywhere. McKay saw it in the loss of a folk tradition, with its concomitant folk wisdom, as well as in the deep inferiority complex of blacks, brought about by the need to imitate the “civilized” white, and to stifle in themselves anything that might appear strange and unique. For McKay, such negativity had a positive aspect: the very backwardness and unadaptability of the black race might be seen as preserving a vital resource, a close biological kinship to the primitive earth. Although Césaire's actual contacts with the black American writers belong mostly to this early period, their timing was important as the Americans' “primitivism” gave a contemporary focus to ideas he was getting through Frobenius in an even more massive dose.

In *Tropiques 2* (July 1941) Césaire wrote an introduction to a translated selection of poems by James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, and Claude McKay, but his own poetry does not draw on their forms of expression. As a writer who had repressed his own Creole background and was at this time being influenced stylistically by the imaginative synthesis promised by French surrealism, he responded to the Harlem Renaissance writers mainly as a new collective black voice. They provided him with a gate through which he could glimpse a sense of interiority and wholeness. He summed up his feelings about the black Americans in the following way:⁴ “From this poetry, which might seem like the sort Valéry called ‘loose,’ ‘defenseless,’ written only to the rhythm of a juvenile spontaneity, at the exact point of intersection between the ego and the world, a drop of blood oozes. A drop. But it is blood. . . . There is its value: to be open to man in his wholeness.” And Césaire praised the new generation of black writers in these words: “the ordinary Negro, the everyday Negro, whose grotesque

or exotic aspect an entire literature is bent upon finding, the black poet makes him a hero; he describes him seriously, with passion and the limited power of his art—by a miracle of love—succeeds, where more considerable means fail, in suggesting even those inner forces which command destiny.” “The spectacle of crude puppets,” Césaire concluded, “has been replaced by that of a new way of suffering, dying, enduring, in a word, of carrying the sure weight of human existence.”

Césaire’s remaining years as a student can be briefly summarized: in the summer of 1935 he visited the Adriatic coast of Yugoslavia with a friend, and while there, perhaps moved by the name of one of the islands—Martinska—began his celebrated *Notebook*. He actually did return to Martinique the following summer, but went back to Paris that fall, where he continued to work on the *Notebook* while completing a Diplôme d’Etudes Supérieures on the theme of the South in black American literature. By 1939, when he returned to Martinique for good, he had stopped short of becoming an *agrégé*, but he had published the first version of the *Notebook* in the Parisian review *Volontés*, and had assembled most of the ideological materials which would begin to be transformed in the poetry and essays he published in *Tropiques*.

Thought of as a Martinican cultural review and printed in editions of five hundred copies, *Tropiques* mixed European modernism with a Martinican form of negritude. Within months of the Césaires’ return, the French possessions in the West Indies felt the impact of the European war. Until 1943 Martinique was governed from Vichy, and Fort-de-France swarmed with thousands of French sailors contained there by the United States Navy. It has been suggested that one of the explanations for the surreal language in *Tropiques* is that only by such means could Césaire and his group express themselves creatively *and* attack the Vichy regime, which controlled the island. The racism of the sailors undoubtedly contributed to radicalizing Césaire and preparing him for a political commitment to fight colonialism after the war, but it should be pointed out that his adherence to surrealism had taken place before he left France.

The early issues of *Tropiques* reflect the interest Césaire and his collaborators had in Nietzsche. Nietzsche’s theory of the will, as well as his ideas on the cycle of culture, were particularly attractive to Césaire, as they reinforced surrealist attacks on the constraints of reason and affirmed the possibility of a heroic rebirth of negritude. At this time, Césaire, writing in the fall 1943 issue of *Tropiques* (p. 8), also admired the Nietzschean qualities in Paul Claudel: “Claudel, never so fulgurating as when he ceases to be Catholic to become earth, planet, matter, sound, and fury, super ego, superman, whether he exalts the will to power or opens the homicidal floodgates of a humor à la Jarry.”⁵ Such excitements echo the often demiurgic tone of Césaire’s *Notebook*, for instance the strophe beginning with “I would rediscover the secret of great communications and great combustions. I would say storm. I would say river. I would say tornado.”

During that period, Césaire meditated particularly on Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* and on its central concept of the voluntary sacrifice of the Hero so that the collectivity may live. It is an interesting coincidence—if it is one at all—that he was himself shortly to give priority to politics over poetics. It is perhaps in this light that one should see his sudden election in 1945 as the mayor of Fort-de-France and his subsequent involvement, as a surrealist poet committed to black particularism, with a colonial branch of European communism.

Césaire’s involvement in politics developed out of a seven-month visit to Haiti in 1944. Through the key figures of Toussaint L’Ouverture and Henri Christophe, and in spite of their tragic fates, Haiti symbolized for Césaire the possibility of a Caribbean political independence and cultural autonomy. While there, he lectured on Mallarmé and Rimbaud, and absorbed what would eventually result in two works dealing with Haiti’s history: the book-length essay *Toussaint Louverture: la révolution française et le problème colonial*, and his play *La Tragédie du roi Christophe*. According to Hale, “Upon his return to Martinique at the end of 1944, friends active in the local section of the French

Communist party asked him to give a series of lectures on Haiti. . . . Soon after, Césaire was invited to run on the party ticket in the municipal elections. Although he shared Marxist principles with his friends, Césaire had not given serious thought to full-time political activity. Before the war, the Martinican Communists had been able to garner only a few hundred votes in municipal elections, and thus it was more as a service to his friends than as a serious commitment to politics that Césaire offered his candidacy for a seat on the municipal council (and by the party's placement of his name at the top of the list, for the position of mayor). But in an astonishing upset, the Césaire list won a majority of seats in the May 27, 1945, election, and the next day the poet was formally elected mayor by his fellow councilors. After election as a cantonal *conseiller général* (October 7, 1945) and as one of Martinique's *députés* to the Première Assemblée Nationale Constituante (October 21, 1945), Césaire was sent to Paris to participate in the formation of a new constitution of the Fourth Republic."⁶

A word on Césaire's relationship with Marxism is in order here. His joining the French Communist party during the war was primarily an act of patriotism, and in part a reaction against the racist nature of the Vichy government's administration of Martinique. There is no evidence of Marxist influence in Césaire's writing before he was elected to the French legislature. His second book, *Les armes miraculeuses* (*The Miraculous Weapons*), published in 1946, is primarily concerned, theoretically speaking, with resolving an African world view with surrealism. In the same year he prepared the following statement for a party brochure: "I joined the Communist party because, in a world not yet cured of racism, where the fierce exploitation of colonial populations still persists, the Communist party embodies the will to work effectively for the coming of the only social and political order we can accept—because it will be founded on the right of all men to dignity without regard to origin, religion, or color."⁷ In other words, his position was not far distant from that of other French intellectuals of the postwar period who allied themselves with the Communists because, as Sartre said, having the same enemies was more important than having the same friends.

Throughout the decade from 1946 to 1956, Césaire wrote most of the poetry to appear in his next three collections, which to varying degrees accommodate the real world of contemporary history and politics. Although at points the internal dialectic, synthesized from ethnography, surrealism, and negritude, is influenced by dialectical materialism, it never indicates a total commitment to Marxism.

While the poet-mayor was able to improve the quality of life among his black constituents during this decade, his successful struggle to change the political status of Martinique from a colony to a department backfired. Civil servants imported from France replaced local people in administrative positions, and black Martinicans realized again and again that they were still second-class French citizens. Increasingly Césaire realized that the orthodox Marxist analysis of a capitalist economy did not apply to Martinican conditions and, with Maoist China as a model, he argued for the creation of an African brand of socialism. At the same time, he was involved with the most hidebound Stalinist party in Western Europe. As Césaire came to see it, on a political level the Marxist dialectic was being used to subordinate Martinican culture to the dominant culture shared not only by the former colonizers but also by the French Marxists. Literarily speaking, he realized that his poetry was essentially surrealist in nature and that he could not conform to the party line on social realism.

Césaire's official break with the party (signaled by his *Letter to Maurice Thorez*) came in 1956 and coincided with the invasion of Hungary by the Soviet troops. It is difficult, however, to assign a specific date for his change of heart. All one can say is that some time between his *Commemoration of the Centennial of the Abolition of Slavery* (1948) and the notorious *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950) Césaire must have begun to experience second thoughts about Marxism. Some sections of the *Discourse* pay their dues to Marxist orthodoxy. Yet others suggest a tension between the requirements of politics and those of poetics, judging by the fact that the Marxist argument in them seems little more than the argument in "Poetry and Knowledge"⁸ under a faint disguise.

In spite of criticism by Martinican Communists, Césaire was able to carry the majority of his supporters with him in the elections that followed, and in 1958 he became the leader of the independent socialist Martinican Progressive party (PPM), whose emblem is the balisier so ubiquitous in Césaire's poetry. In April of that year, the PPM started its own newspaper, *Le Progressiste*, which has become the main source of information on Césaire's activities to this day. Since 1958, Césaire, favoring a qualified autonomy for Martinique, has kept the PPM intact and has been returned to the French legislature in every subsequent election.

Césaire's literary output in the sixties was mainly confined to the stage. With *La Tragédie du roi Christophe* (1963), *Une Saison au Congo* (1966), and *Une Tempête* (1969), he became the leading black dramatist in the French language. All his plays deal with colonialism, liberation, and the problems of political power.

In politics, he and his followers continue to press for greater autonomy for Martinique. An ally of François Mitterrand, Césaire had new cause for optimism after the Socialist landslide in 1981. Now for the first time since 1947, he finds himself in the majority. But he refuses to press for independence in the short run. He has repeatedly asserted in interviews that there must be a transitional period of self-rule during which fundamental economic, social, and psychological changes take place in Martinique.

Césaire sees culture as playing a key role in these changes. In the early 1970s, he launched the Service Municipal d'Action Culturelle in Fort-de-France. The SERMAC holds an annual cultural festival in the city, sponsors local theater groups and filmmakers, and invites companies from Africa and Afro-America to participate. The SERMAC represents, in a sense, a contemporary approach to a problem which Césaire first attacked with his early poetry in *Tropiques* during the 1940s.

II

Although Césaire was by no means the sole exponent of negritude, the word is now inseparable from his name, and largely responsible for his prominent position in the Third World. This neologism, made up (perhaps on the model of the South American *negrismo*) by latinizing the derogatory word for black (*nègre*) with an augmentative suffix, appeared in print, probably for the first time, in the *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*:⁹ "My negritude is not a stone, its deafness hurled against the clamour of the day / my negritude is not a leukoma of dead liquid over the earth's dead eye / my negritude is neither tower nor cathedral." What was negritude then? A subsequent passage of the *Notebook* answered the question: negritude "takes root in the ardent flesh of the soil / it breaks through the opaque prostration with its upright patience." In more prosaic terms, it signified a response to the century-old problem of the alienated position of the blacks in history. Once upon a time, the blacks inhabited their homeland: a whole continent. And then, there was the diaspora which all over the world left the blacks enslaved or colonized, with neither a present nor a future nor even a language of their own.

The case of the Antilleans was particularly complex since they had been colonized for three centuries and since—Creole being mostly an oral vernacular—they had no other way to express themselves in print than in French. This frustrating situation was perceived by some as making them the "bastards" of the father figure of Metropolitan France, which had a culture but no love, and of the mother figure of their native land, which had love but no culture. In 1931 the Haitian poet Léon Laleau had also described this predicament movingly, though in conventional verse, as "this despair without parallel to tame with words received from France / This heart received from Sénégal."¹⁰ A relative cultural revival followed the 1915 American occupation of Haiti and gave birth to an efflorescence of local publications such as the works of Jean Price-Mars and the *Revue des Griots*. Yet,

up to the Second World War, most of the black intellectual world was still espousing (at least in their writings) the cultural values and literary forms of the white world. Such exceptions as the *prises de conscience* represented by the Haitian magazine *Lucioles* around 1927 and by the radical Paris-based journal *Légitime Défense* around 1932 hardly altered the situation. What Damas was later to call “tracing paper” poetry was the rule.¹¹

The negritude movement, therefore, set as its initial goal a renewed awareness of being black, the acceptance of one’s destiny, history, and culture, as well as a sense of responsibility toward the past. In a later interview (1959) Senghor viewed it as the upholding of “the cultural patrimony, the values and, above all, the spirit of the Negro African civilization.”¹² While the public statement of these goals was a novelty, however, the underlying concepts were not. As in other domains, Rimbaud had played a prophetic role in choosing Africa as his ultimate destination as early as 1880. Even though former slaves were still living in the shadow of their masters in twentieth-century Africa and the Caribbean, in Europe times were propitious for a rediscovery and rehabilitation of the African heritage.

In France in the 1920s a number of unconnected but seminal works showed this trend. René Maran published an almost scandalously realistic colonial novel, *Batouala* (Goncourt Prize in 1921), and Blaise Cendrars a collection of African legends (1921). Maurice Delafosse’s volumes on the African blacks (1922–1927) praised their ability to administer themselves, which they had demonstrated in the past. The geographer G. Hardy’s *Negro Art* (1927) continued the revival of interest in African art already present in Cubist painting. But the most important study for Césaire was undoubtedly anthropologist Leo Frobenius’ *Histoire de la civilisation africaine*, translated from the German in 1936. Subsequently, anthropologists were to be suspicious of Frobenius’ facts; but no one can deny the importance nor the magnitude of his vision. He conceived of an African essence—or soul—permeating all aspects of black culture and responsible for its striking aesthetic dimension. That culture he considered as the cradle of and a model for all others.

Such were but a few of the milestones along the road leading to the increasing decentralization of Western culture. We tend to think of this movement as characteristic of our era. It is nonetheless clear that the twentieth century’s eagerness to accept other cultures and to judge them by their own (and non-Western) standards, goes back to the nineteenth-century travelers—anthropologists such as Alexander von Humboldt—and even as far back as Rousseau’s *Second Discourse on the Inequality of Mankind*. One should therefore not be entirely surprised to see Césaire give Spengler and a legendary champion of white superiority like Gobineau their due.¹³ The leaders of the negritude movement read Gobineau apparently more attentively than the public at large. It did not escape them that this infamous “Aryanizer” extolled the profound quasi-biological fusion of the black race with nature—a fusion which (in Gobineau’s opinion) accounted for an artistic sense more spontaneous and more acute than that of the white race.

In the fifties negritude was to become as much of an arena as *engagement* had been in the 1940s. In retrospect, there were deep differences in the way various people conceived it—too many to do more here than just allude to some of the positions. Senghor was understood—perhaps wrongly—to consider black culture as the product of a black *nature*. If as a result of some covenant with nature, black Africans were a chosen race, they were bound to be both more secure about their roots and less alienated than deported blacks. Senghor’s poetry and many contemporary African novels tend to prove this point. Césaire seems to have shared Senghor’s view in the early part of his career—and he was later to be criticized for it by a younger generation of black intellectuals. In an interview with Jacqueline Leiner in 1978, however, he maintained that for him black culture had never had anything to do with biology and everything to do with a combination of geography and history: identity in suffering, not in genetic material, determined the bond among black people of different origins. If history had made victors of the blacks, there would not be what he called elsewhere “a greater solidarity among black people.”¹⁴

But whether innate or acquired, the characteristics of black culture on which all interpreters of negritude agreed were antipodal to the Western values of rationalism, technology, Christianity, and individualism. They spelled not the control of nature by reason and science but a joyful participation in it; not its control by technology but a coexistence with other forms of life; not the Christianity of the missions but the celebration of very ancient pagan rites; not the praise of individual achievement but the fraternity and communal soul of the clan, the tribe, as well as the love of ancestors. "A culture is born not when Man grasps the world, but when he is grasped . . . by it."¹⁵ Let us insert here that for Césaire (as for many other non-African blacks) the African heritage had been acquired through books and espoused spiritually—which made it perhaps an even more aggressive ideal.

The rallying motto of negritude had been conceived in the fervor of youthful militancy just before the Second World War. It was further promoted during the war and the occupation of France when Césaire and his entourage elaborated on these principles in the Martinique-based *Tropiques*. After the war, their success resulted in the foundation—by Alioune Diop and other well-known intellectuals—of a Parisian periodical and of a publishing house under the common name of *Présence Africaine*. The idea was also to find a theoretician in the High Priest of postwar French letters, Jean-Paul Sartre. His essay, "Orphée Noir" ("Black Orpheus"), which served as an introduction to Senghor's *Anthology of the New Black and Malagasy Poetry* (1948), gave negritude an existential and Hegelian imprimatur in a period when every aspect of intellectual life had to be viewed in those terms.

In the framework of Hegel's dialectics, Sartre saw the negritude movement as the moment of separation, of negativity, that is like the "antithesis" following the "thesis" of the colonial situation and preceding the "synthesis" in which not only blacks but all oppressed people would unite and triumph over their oppressors. As ultimately "the song of everyone of us and for everyone of us," negritude per se was therefore to be transcended at some point in the future when the "recognition of all by all" is achieved. Blacks would eventually have to put their blackness aside in favor of more universal ideals. "Born from evil," "pregnant with a future good," and entertaining the thought of its own mortality, the negritude ideal was itself a quasi-Dionysian passion in which dance and death were intimately mingled in the best Nietzschean fashion. It amounted to a sacrificial ritual by which the blacks took upon themselves the suffering of mankind as well as the sins of the white race. Since, unlike the white proletariat, blacks were not fully integrated into the materialistic, objective Western world, the expression of negritude should blend objective elements (the traditions of the black race) with subjective ones (the essence of the black soul). In summoning this return of the blacks to their original beings, their attempt to, at last, coincide with themselves, Sartre was describing the process of *naturation* which Césaire had equated with poetry in his previous "Poetry and Knowledge." Consequently, the black writer was confronted with the necessity to de-alienate the means of expression, that is, to systematically alter, even destroy, the language of the master race.

Sartre's definition of negritude was not the last one. It was, in fact, to become the touchstone of most subsequent definitions. Later exponents of the concept found Sartre too race conscious and not sufficiently class conscious. What they wanted was a classless society in which all races would be equal, and not a raceless society. Some (like Césaire himself more recently) felt that the concept of a black essence reeked either of determinism or of mysticism and that negritude would cease to exist in a world with more equitable economic conditions. The Marxists in particular (such as Adotevi) refused to distinguish colonialistic from capitalistic exploitation. Others thought the negative aspect of negritude encouraged the status quo: the validation of race, a useful notion at first, might become an artificial and restrictive framework in the future. Still others said that the very distinction between "black" and "white," between prelogical and logical mentality betrayed an Occidental point of view: a black should not have to wonder how to be black, just as in Wole Soyinka's famous quip, the tiger does not have to proclaim its tigritude. Others contended that negritude was but a slogan masking the reality of profound and in fact desirable differences among the black groups. At issue in this debate (a more

complex one than we can possibly demonstrate here) were some fundamental questions. Should negritude be “serene” à la Senghor, or “agitated” à la Césaire? Was it a reality or a myth, a policy or a passion, past or future, black or multicolor, that is for all oppressed people?

From our perspective, there is no easy answer: negritude is a dynamic concept. How relevant it was and will remain in the future depends on the situation and history of each particular colonized group. Politically speaking, as a number of African nations acquired their autonomy in the fifties and sixties, negritude lost some of its spark. Culturally speaking the future is open. Possibly some black literature will be written in native vernaculars; or, on the contrary, it is conceivable that young nations might lose their inferiority complex to the point where using the literary tools of their former masters will no longer be an issue. It is true that negritude was at its most potent in countries colonized by the French, that is, in which there existed a rigorously structured and policed official language. Former colonies in which the official language is English seem less sensitive to the problem. Some countries, such as Cuba, have chosen to emphasize the hybrid aspect of the culture and to promote a *mestiza* literature. Finally, black literature might be lured by its own success into joining the mainstream of Western literature.

III

One may infer from recent statements¹⁶ that, although by 1979 Césaire had given up the word “negritude” as an electrifying motto, his politics, the way he conceived the future of Martinique, were still imbued with its main principles. But even if negritude has lost its practical *raison d’être*, it has changed the contemporary world in the same way as psychoanalysis, cubism, surrealism, structuralism or, for that matter, the counterculture of the sixties and the American “Black Consciousness.” Moreover, as a powerful agent of literary renewal, it will continue to affect our sensitivities long after its historical moment has passed.

Naturally, the negritude poets do not come out of one single mold. While Senghor’s harmoniously flowing style and ceremonious nocturnal lyricism might remind one of Vigny, Claudel, or Saint-John Perse, Damas is concise, syncopated, ironical, and probably the most jazz-inspired of the major black poets. To the extent that he is the least European, he is sometimes considered as the “purest” in their ranks. In fact, some critics (Tougas and Jahn, for instance) deny that Césaire really breaks away from the French tradition since he remains conceptual, that is, Western. Yet it is in his poetry that the components of negritude found their most complex formal equivalents. For Césaire’s avowed goal is to “marronner,” that is, to run away from accepted French poetry, as the maroons ran away from their masters.¹⁷ Thus the question of the puzzling coexistence in Césaire of a militant emancipator of his race and a thorny, erudite, often obscure poet becomes a moot point. The renewal of poetic techniques that result in his esoteric style are an integral part of the negritude strategy. Moreover, since both negritude and modernism share some of the same concerns, it is no surprise that Césaire ends with what seems a revised (“cannibalized,” as Arnold says) version of modernism. The reader of modern poetry who might perceive the forthcoming remarks on Césaire’s poetics as *déjà vu* should keep in mind that even when his goals coincided with those of his European antecedents, his *motivations* were different.

He voiced his own *art poétique* in “To Uphold Poetry” (“Maintenir la poésie”), in various other *Tropiques* pieces on poets (Lautréamont, Mallarmé, Valéry), and especially in “Poetry and Knowledge.”¹⁸ While scientific knowledge “numbers, measures, classifies, and kills,” poetry provides the way to a “replenishing knowledge,” Césaire wrote. In the same way Descartes used algebra to make the physical structure of the universe intelligible, the poet will use the word to summon up “everything that

ever was, that is ever possible . . . all pasts, all futures in all fluxes, all radiations," in brief, "the cosmic totality" (p. 162). Such an all-encompassing concept of poetry was not new, but negritude gave it a new look: in the hands of black poets, antirationalism became a political value. Césaire meditates at length on this sentence in Breton's manifesto: "No fear of madness will ever force us to put at half-mast the flag of imagination." Moreover, for the "Wretched of the Earth" (to use Fanon's phrase) whom the modern world had bypassed, the image could be a "miraculous weapon." Through it, the world could be returned to its original simplicity and unity for the image had the power to resolve contradictions.

The image exposes the conflicts, obsessions, phobias, fixations of the self—and then goes farther. It descends in time: "I whistle yes I whistle very ancient things / as serpents do as do cavernous things" ("Lost Body"). It taps not only the ancestral vein but a universal one in which African, Greek, and Asian myths have their common source: "As for me I have nothing to fear I am from before Adam I do not come under the same lion / nor under the same tree I am from a different hot and a different cold" ("Visitation"). In the end it bypasses the "secondary scattering of life" to reach "the gnarled primitive unity of the world" where the antinomy between man and nature no longer exists. The absence of Christianity in this perspective is conspicuous. Whenever Césaire alludes to Christian myths, he handles them ironically, as, for instance, in "The Virgin Forest," or substitutes a pagan content for the Christian one as in "Visitation." Evidently, in Césaire's eyes, Christian myths were not as old, not as universal as others and, moreover, inseparable from the culture of the Western colonial powers. In retrospect, one can say (as Arnold does) that this was a mythic view of the past and that the collective soul of the black race, even more so of mankind, has a questionable psychological reality. Nevertheless, the fact that Césaire's works belong to the era of Jung and Freud as well as of modern cultural anthropology helps place this eccentric poet in the mainstream of modernism.

For him, poetry was nothing less than "insurrectional": "The truth is," he wrote, "that, for almost a century, poetry has been hell-bound . . . that our heritage is one of fevers, of seisms, and that poetry . . . must never cease to lay claim to it: with its raven-like voice, its voice of Cassandra, of Orpheus, of violent death."¹⁹ It was urgent to return the world to its primordial chaos and order to disorder so that a truer, more just order might be born. In this respect Césaire was indeed a disciple of Sade and Laclous, the contemporary of Bataille, and of the same spiritual family as those writers whom Malraux, giving a different meaning to the color, gathered under the banner of "the black triangle."

Césaire praised Lautréamont as the inventor of a modern mythology. He himself had been much influenced by Greek tragedy as the most basic embodiment of the tragic principle, as well as by Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*. His first African drama, *And the Dogs Were Silent*, took its form from Sophocles and Aeschylus. He meant his poetry to be a mythopoeia. Myth was to serve as "a dynamic plan, a catalyst for the aspiration of a people, and a prefiguration of the future, precisely because it is capable of mobilizing the emotional energy of the collectivity."²⁰ And his own poetry came to be the locus of many myths. The Earth-Mother is venerated in the form of Omphalus, the earth's navel ("Lost Body"), and as providing the phallus with an access to cosmic unity. The sun's horses stampede in the opening lines of "The Thoroughbreds." The phoenix appears often enough as a symbol of the rebirth of the Self and of the black race for critics (Kesteloot, Songolo) to refer to Césaire's "phoenicism." The poet labors as Hercules in "Lost Body," challenges the eagle devouring his liver like Prometheus ("Ferment"), sustains the Gorgon's assault in "Perseus Centuplicating Myself." But, as in the case of Christian myths, Césaire adapts the classical ones to the context of black history and culture. His Prometheus and his Perseus dwell less on their triumphs or their inventions than on their agony—perhaps even with the shrewdness of the weak, aware of the extent to which the torturers depend on their victims for their own ontological fulfillment.

Most myths imply transformation, especially the cosmogonic ones. Césaire's poetry conveys not only the substance of this cosmogony but its dynamics. For the images often ignite one another, set off

a chain reaction, and climax in moments of total incandescence, silence or void especially in *The Miraculous Weapons* and *Solar Throat Slashed*: “Behold— / nameless wanderings / the suns the rains the galaxies, / fused in fraternal magma / pass by toward the safe necropolises of the sunset / and the earth . . . blew out / . . . the earth makes a bulge of silence for the sea / in the silence / behold the earth alone . . . / empty” (“The Thoroughbreds”). The latter poem is a particularly rich example of Césaire’s personal mythology. A cosmic death and rebirth parallels that of the hero-narrator who accepts the dissolution of his self to be reborn as a plant-man totally connected with the cosmos. “The Thoroughbreds” offers a, so to speak, “passive” version of the hero’s quest and sacrifice, an Orphic version since the poem ends with a recreation of the world by the word (“And I speak and my word is earth / and I speak / and / Joy / bursts in the new sun”). Critics have indeed pointed out several Christlike figures in Césaire’s works, such as Toussaint Louverture awaiting a white death amidst the snows of the Jura Mountains (*Notebook*), the Rebel in *And the Dogs Were Silent*, or Patrice Lumumba in *A Season in the Congo*. But to find models for this structure he did not have to depend on either Greek or Judeo-Christian mythology. The mysteries of Ogun of the Yoruba culture or the dead-alive Zombi of Haitian voodoo stood for similar concepts. Likewise the Africans had their own version of Orpheus or of the biblical Word in the form of the *Nommo*, the magician’s word empowered to create.

Passivity and resignation are not the only aspect of the hero. Many pieces demonstrate a truly Dionysian violence. The Bacchantes are at work in Césaire’s poetry, making it a perpetual scene of dismemberment and mutilation: “Everything that was ever torn / has been torn in me / everything that was ever mutilated / has been mutilated in me” (“Lay of Errantry”). There are no fewer than nineteen poems in this volume of which the first line or the title conveys a violent and bloody assault. There is some disagreement in the critical response to these structures. For instance, while Kesteloot and Kotchy felt urged to make a graphic representation of the development of the poems showing that they oscillate between depression and elation, always ending on the upbeat, Arnold emphasizes the tragic consummation of the hero in a true Nietzschean tradition. He prefers to think of the rebirth as spiritual, the self having renounced itself and therefore any temporal presence in order to play the game of the cosmos. This latter reading is, no doubt, more to the taste of a period obsessed with entropy. It is also confirmed by Césaire’s recent interview (*Le Monde*, December 6, 1981), in which he states that the will to power has never been a motivation for him.²¹ Nevertheless, the poems frequently end on an opening—if not on a lifting, such as: “My ear against the ground, I heard Tomorrow / pass” (“The Thoroughbreds”), or “a melody nevertheless to be saved from Disaster” (“To Know Ourselves”), or “a child will half-open the door” (“In Truth”). A child of course, but also a child only; for it seems that following the violent convulsions of *Miraculous Weapons*, and intermingled with the exultant African celebrations in *Ferraments*, *Lost Body*, and *Solar Throat Slashed*, an elegiac voice makes itself heard, reflecting perhaps the gap between idealistic hopes and political realities and, like Orpheus, resigned to triumph by the word, not by the sword.

It must be pointed out here that Césaire’s revolutionary position remains rhetorical. It is never clear, in fact, in his poetry at least, whether he expects the neocolonial situation of Martinique to change. As Arnold remarks, “the violence that frequently precedes the renewal of the self should not be confused with a socially revolutionary activity. It is the violence of repressive desublimation, to use Marcuse’s felicitous term. The goal of this project is not social in the usual sense; it is meant to sustain the wounded self, which an unjust oppressive, social and racial system has alienated from itself.”²² The validity of a common African ethos rested on oppression. Césaire’s Prometheus had to remain bound and be daily devoured as well as to wrest his survival by his wits. It is not therefore surprising that, other than for a handful of topical pieces, Césaire’s poetic production decreased at the end of the fifties when numerous African states became independent new republics, and that he turned to a different media, the theater, through which the dialectics of emergent power and its consequences could better be explored.

Mythology also entails metamorphosis. Césaire's poetry exemplifies and expands Rimbaud's famous pronouncement in the *Lettre du voyant*: "I is someone else." Here again, Césaire had behind him an African folklore and culture that gave to this abstract philosophical Western concept a curiously vivid concreteness. For examples of metamorphoses, he could draw from a rich tradition of African and Caribbean folktales such as those collected by Lafcadio Hearn (to which he gives credit in a poem in *Ferraments*), or those one finds nowadays in the works of Birago Diop and Bernard Dadié. Moreover, the structure itself of some African languages encouraged him in this direction. His friend Senghor had pointed out that in some of these, comparisons could be made without using a comparative device; that words could change grammatical categories and were, in a way, relieved from any rigid function. For instance, in Wolof, there is no basic difference between a verb and a noun. "Thus," B. Cailler points out, "the deletion of the verb . . . goes truly in the direction of a return to an original unity,"²³ since the chasm between action and acting subject, that is between the I and the world, is bridged. Césaire conveys a state of complete participation in nature with startling lines such as these in "Lost Body": "I who Krakatoa / . . . who Zambezi or frantic or rhombos or cannibal . . ."

The type of metamorphosis most frequently suggested by Césaire's poetry is that of human into vegetal objects. It is once more in Frobenius that Césaire found—or at least understood—that the vital force of the black races (what Frobenius called *paideuma*) was biologically founded on a polarized perception of nature: Hamitic culture identified itself with animal symbolism, Ethiopian with vegetal forms of life. The special place Ethiopia will continue to occupy in the personal mythology of negritude writers is clear enough from poems like "Ethiopia" in *Noria* and from the title of Senghor's collection, *Ethiopiennes* (1956). As an ancient kingdom, Ethiopia embodied the dignity lost to other African people. But, more important, the founders of negritude had recognized themselves in Frobenius' plant man. In *Tropiques* (no. 5, April 1942), Suzanne Césaire described the Martinican as without any desire of harnessing nature, lazy, docile, but also "trampled alive, dead, but growing back," and "free, silent and proud" like a plant.

A mere leafing through Césaire's poems shows the pervasiveness of plant imagery: "I grow like a plant / remorseless and unwarped . . . / pure and confident as a plant" ("The Thoroughbreds"). In "I Perseus," the metaphor is continuous and provides the backbone of the poem: in spite of the attacks of the beak on the bark, and of the slow destruction of termites, the poet finds nourishment and growth in the invulnerable sap. To a dispersed race the tree offered the advantage of being rooted in telluric solidity and security while reaching for the sky. It had both the openness to the cosmos that constituted the special gift of the blacks and the strength necessary for survival and regeneration. It partook of the Orphic quest and of the Apollonian triumph, or death and joyful life. Finally, in its horizontal dimension, the tree could also allude to the fraternity of the black world, of mankind for that matter. Perhaps its fusion of opposite but complementary principles solved man's existential dilemma. Césaire had written once (in "Poetry and Knowledge") that the weakness of many men was that they did not know how to become a tree, how to say "yes" like a tree. And that is why man did not flower. One can see that in contrast with the Western need of control and assertion (think of the pitiful role played by the vegetal objects in Sartre's imagery), Césaire's position was tinted with African wisdom; and the passive principle was as much a part of his ideal as the active one.

However, the leader in him continued undoubtedly to be spurred by the necessity for action. Such a tension may explain the recurrence of oxymoronic images which Sartre (in "Black Orpheus") traces back to André Breton's "exploding-fixed" metaphor. Breton saw in it the fusion of contradictory principles, a type of transcendence only poetry could offer. In Césaire they are often conspicuously placed at the close of stanzas or poems, as, for instance, the "firm conflagration" and the "immobile veerition" (see below pp. 77 and 85) of the *Notebook*, or the "bloody eagle disentangled jolt of dawn" of "Ferment." They also create in the reader a state of indecision and suspense symbolic of the period of transition in which black history finds itself.

The identification with plants is the most important but not the only metamorphic process. Animal dynamism (as in Lautréamont) counterbalances vegetal life. To give just one example, a poem like “The Thoroughbreds” runs the complete gamut of animal orders. On his way to the cosmic fusion and obliteration of the ego achieved in becoming a plant, the hero-narrator descends the echelons of animal species (from ancestral primates, to fish, to primitive sea creatures) in the same way Roquentin, the narrator of Sartre’s *Nausea*, descends into the hell of pure existence, but without Roquentin’s Western resistance to the relinquishing of his individuality. All in all, what we have here is a sort of generalized metamorphosis of universal scope. Rocks can turn into plants, then into flesh: “And roots of the mountain / raising the royal descent of the almond trees of hope / will blossom through the paths of flesh” (“Survival”), or coal mines revert to forests in lines from “New Year” (eliminated by Césaire from the version printed here). At the end of the quest, the poet leads us to “the sacred / whirling primordial streaming / at the second beginning of everything” (“The Thoroughbreds”). At his side, we watch “the shivering spawn of forms liberating themselves from facile bondages / and escaping from too premature combinings” (“Wifredo Lam”).

As often with Césaire, what might have remained intellectual games for other writers rests on a concrete background. Next to “Remarks on Lautréamont” in *Tropiques* (no. 6–7) we find an article on mimesis, that is, the biological ability of some organisms—many of which were common in the Caribbean—to take the appearance of other animal or vegetal forms. In another domain, obvious rapprochements are to be made with totemism, of which Frobenius again had given an anthropological view, and with a number of religious rituals: the Eshu and Legba cults in Haitian voodoo and the African Yoruba beliefs which Wole Soyinka’s *Myth and Literature and the African World* later made known in the Western world. But equally true, the motive of metamorphosis can be put in the more general framework of the quest for an identity or the desire to dissolve an unwanted one. Césaire shares this motive with contemporary writers other than ethnic ones. Did not Artaud leave us the famous “Here Lies”: “I, Antonin Artaud, am my son, my father, my mother and myself.”?²⁴ Does not Genet’s insistence on his characters (in *The Blacks*) wearing masks and buskins and exaggerating their gestures partake of the same desire?

Pushed to its extreme, metamorphosis could take the form of cannibalism. In response to the facile exoticism of previous Caribbean poets, Suzanne Césaire’s splendid manifesto in *Tropiques* 4, January 1942, had ended with the lapidary sentence, “Martinican poetry shall be cannibalistic or shall not be.” When a recent critic (Arnold) shows Césaire as “cannibalizing” Western myths—that is giving them a countercultural twist—should we read this as a pun? Perhaps so, since Césaire himself claimed cannibalism as part of his de facto African heritage (“We claim kinship / with dementia praecox with the flaming madness / of persistent cannibalism,” he wrote in the *Notebook*). It was a matter of pride instilled with the ontological necessity to assert oneself. Genet describes the same motivation in *The Blacks*: “Let Negroes negrify themselves. Let them persist to the point of madness in what they’re condemned to be, in their ebony, in their odor . . . in their cannibal tastes.”²⁵ Césaire is prompt to point out that the white man can be just as cannibalistic and with much worse reasons. The narrator of the *Notebook* fantasizes that an English lady is being served a Hottentot skull in a soup tureen. In the midst of bloody political repression in Madagascar, the Ivory Coast, Indochina, and the French West Indies, Césaire castigated in *Discourse on Colonialism* (1967) “the scenes of anthropophagic hysteria” he had witnessed in the French Assembly, concluding with this apostrophe: “Shucks, my dear colleagues, I take my hat off to you (my cannibal’s hat, it goes without saying).”²⁶

It would be of course grotesque to say that in Césaire’s mind the word is used concretely; but to relegate it to a mere rhetorical use also falls short of the truth. It may be the most comprehensive label for the obsession of this otherwise most dignified poet with the inside of the body, with devouring, swallowing, licking, spitting, viscera, and (occasionally) excrement. See, for instance, “The Virgin

Forest,” or the opening of “Magic,” of “Debris,” the title “Viscera of the Poem,” the last few lines of “The Tornado.” It is certainly part of the mythology of blood, of fertility, menses, painful birth, violent death, and sacrifice. In this regard, it may be that, as in the case of Rabelais, the genital belly associated with cosmogonic myths is not always easy to distinguish from the digestive one. Going one step farther, cannibalism carries to its fullest degree the idea of participation; it symbolically eradicates the distinction between the I and the Other, between human and nonhuman, between what is (anthropologically) edible and what is not and, finally, between the subject and the object. It goes insolently against the grain of Western insistence on discrete entities and categories. An economic interpretation has even been suggested, at least for similar patterns in Haitian poetry, that in underdeveloped countries everything is validated by becoming food. Ultimately, in a political frame of reference, cannibalism may summarize the devouring of the colonized country by the colonizing power—or, vice versa, the latent desire of the oppressed to do away with the oppressor, the wishful dreaming of the weak (the scolopendras of “The Miraculous Weapons”) projecting themselves as warriors and predators.

All this does not make for an easy poetry. Negritude writers are aware of their dilemma: as spokesmen and educators of their people and committed to bettering their lot, should they not be intelligible to everyone? Some think so. Others consider that finding their inspiration in the people and being called to express their destiny are not synonymous with lowering their aesthetic standards. Their duty as black intellectuals is to reach the outside world by the most effective means. Césaire is among those. Moreover, he claims (in the Leiner interview) that simple people understand his poetry as well or better than intellectuals. By this he means that there is another way to perceive it than conceptually, such as through its rhythm. So here again, the commitment to the black world results in formal characteristics.

One of Césaire’s seven *Propositions poétiques* (in “Poetry and Knowledge”) states that “the music of poetry . . . comes from a greater distance than sound. To seek to musicalize poetry is the crime against poetic music, which can only be the striking of the mental wave against the rock of the world” (p. 170). Indeed, to the fluidity of traditional poetry Césaire opposes the exotic rhythms of African tom-toms, a word he uses in the title of three poems. His percussive effects are definitely influenced by African dances and voodoo rituals. But they also affect us somewhat like a *mantra* technique designed to weaken the resistance of the intellect. The accelerated repetition of some words or phrases often permit an entry into the poem other than the rational one.

Yet, although most of his critics touch on the subject, they tend to become evasive when enjoined to analyze the rhythm. Even Arnold’s excellent phonemic analysis of “Lost Body” in terms of immediate physical effects of this poem is less successful when it comes up to rhythm per se.²⁷ The fact is that, no matter how much Césaire meant to rape the French language, it was not in his power to give it a tonic stress or vowel lengths that would accurately imitate a tom-tom. If the much glossed over seven lines of “Lost Body” give a simulacrum of explosive and barbaric violence, it is not so much by their rhythm itself as by a succession of syntactic ruptures and incongruities. But it would be equally wrong not to recognize the impact of this poem and of many others as immediate and physical. Césaire’s skill in manipulating the physical elements of language results in what Arnold calls “a hybrid prosody,” that is, one stretching the limits traditionally considered as those of French prosody. This is what Césaire meant by his early promise of creating a “rupestral design in the stuff of sounds.” Thus the language that has become his trademark displays the same recombination of elements characteristic of his cosmic vision.

For instance, in “Batouque,” the repetition of the title word reproduces the brief punctuation of hands clapping and draws attention to the next musical phrase or dance figure. The acceleration of the repetition parallels that of the dance. Elsewhere, the repetitive structure of short lines as “standing in

the rigging / standing at the tiller," building up to "standing / and / free," or the "Dove / rise / rise / rise /" (*Notebook*) creates climactic effects. In "Miraculous Weapons" the recurrent three syllables of "scolopendre" with its initial consonantal stress seem to crush the black race flat against the ground, deriding it for its lack of dignity. The thrice-repeated "we will strike" at the opening of "Perdition" sounds like the stamping in a warriors' dance. The alternating of hard and soft explosive consonants in the French of "Tom-tom II" ("à petits pas de . . .") conveys cautious progress; the accumulation of sibilants in the opening lines of "The Thoroughbreds" evokes a pressure system about to explode. Often, Césaire establishes a strong beat with the mere repetition of a single word ("Kolikombo" in "High Noon"), or with onomatopoeia ("voum rooh oh!" in the *Notebook*, "bombaïa" in "The Verb 'Marronner'"). Nevertheless, some of his most powerful effects are also the most subtle and depend on syntax rather than sounds. What he does amounts to returning the syntax to what should be its privileged function, that of espousing human breathing and, in the long run, human feelings. The strategic disposition of "nous savoir" ("To know ourselves") creates an introspective mood as well as suspense on the threshold of some astonished reckoning; that of "who then" ("Who then") gives urgency to the question. To turn a complicated and heavily latinized French syntax into the vehicle of powerful emotions, that is true hybridization, that is true *savoir faire!*

IV

No wonder, then, that some scholars (Tougas, for one) deny Césaire's Africanism and insist he is not different in his inventiveness from other poets of the French tradition. Certainly, negritude does not tell the whole story. Who would contend that this alumnus of the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure, whose father read Hugo aloud in the evenings, had not totally assimilated this tradition? In the Leiner interview, Césaire recognized that he had the same ancestors as the surrealists: Rimbaud and Mallarmé, the Symbolists, Claudel and Lautréamont. Elsewhere he claimed Leconte de Lisle and Verhaeren as predecessors. For that matter, he is also indebted (as we have suggested above) to some of the components of the great intellectual vortex one calls modernism, such as Marxism, psychoanalysis, and existentialism. Consequently, for a complete study of Césaire's sources, we have to refer the reader to the comprehensive works acknowledged at the beginning of this essay. All we hope to do here is suggest with a few examples how Césaire connects with the mainstream of French poetry.

To all of it, starting with no less than Hugo, Césaire owes his concept of the poet as Seer and Spokesman. With many of the masters of modernism, he has transcended a painful personal situation through the dignity of the written word. And the commitment against logic also goes back a long way. The praise of folly is an ancient theme that has coexisted with rationalism during the centuries of Western humanism, from Horace to Erasmus, Rabelais to Romanticism, and from Shakespeare to M. Foucault. All the same, in "Poetry and Knowledge" (p. 159), Césaire takes the year 1850 as the cornerstone of modernism: "France was dying of prose" when all of a sudden, "with all weapons and equipment [it] went over to the enemy" (that is, the forces of a beneficial madness). Which ones of these "miraculous weapons" and what articles of the baggage found their way into Césaire's poetry?

Any answer to the question should start with the founding father of modern poetry, Baudelaire. Césaire shares with him a vision of the universe as a network of interlocking signs, except that (as Arnold points out), Césaire's *correspondances* do not allude to some vertical Platonistic hierarchy. On the contrary, their profusion implies an anarchistic equivalent in which black countervalues keep in check the traditional Western ones. Both Césaire and Baudelaire are concerned with social and economic outcasts (Césaire quoted Baudelaire's "The Ragmen's Wine" in his *Discourse on Colonialism*). And both have a special talent: that of extracting from the most ordinary language its maximum

poetic charge by creating around the words a zone of silence in which they seem to take on a renewed and startling value. The first stanza of “The Griffin” unfolds with the same ceremonial simplicity as some of Baudelaire’s famous sonnets, for instance “Spleen” (“J’ai plus de souvenirs que si j’avais mille ans . . .”): “Je suis un souvenir qui n’atteint pas le seuil / et erre dans les limbes où le reflet d’absinthe / quand le coeur de la nuit souffle par ses événements / bouge l’étoile tombée où nous nous contemplons” (“I am a memory that does not reach the threshold / and wanders in the limbo where the glint of absinthe / when the heart of night breathes through its blowholes / moves the fallen star in which we contemplate ourselves”). If this stanza is also reminiscent of Nerval (the first line of “El Desdichado”), the last line of the first stanza of “Redemption” which echoes (parodies, perhaps) the famous last line of “Harmonie du Soir” could (*mutatis mutandis*) pass as Baudelaire’s: “Le bruit fort gravité pourri d’une cargaison / désastre véreux et clair de soldanelle / le bruit fort gravité méninge de diamants / ton visage glisse nu en ma fureur laiteuse” (“The loud noise gravitates rotten with cargo / worny and bright wreckage of a soldanel / the loud noise gravitates a meninx of diamonds / your face glides naked into my milky frenzy”). Since Césaire’s “Baudelairianism” seems to occur when he uses Alexandrine (or other regular) meters, it is of course difficult to preserve its flavor in translation.

The influence of Lautréamont is more obvious and more prevalent. In *Tropiques* (no. 6–7, February 1943, pp. 10–15), Césaire, punning perhaps, referred to Lautréamont as the “fulgurating Prince of Caesarian sections” and celebrated him as the first to have understood that poetry begins with excess, with a lack of measure, “with forbidden quests, amidst the great blind tom-tom, in the unbreathable absolute void, [and goes] as far as the incomprehensible rain of stars.” Later, in the *Discourse on colonialism*, Césaire will praise Lautréamont’s boldness in denouncing capitalism, this “anthropophagic brain-snatching ‘creator’ . . . perched on a throne made of human excrement and gold!” It is, indeed, in the text of Isidore Ducasse that he found his first model of an organic and cosmic violence, of vehemently repetitive structures (“Vieil Océan” in the first Canto of *Maldoror*). But Lautréamont’s marine imagery finds a more realistic arena in Césaire’s Caribbean landscape. The motive of the whirlwind which is symbolically descriptive in Lautréamont corresponds to Césaire’s real Caribbean “strom.” The explosive force in *Miraculous Weapons* is that of volcanos—not merely of adolescent rebellion.

More important, it is to Lautréamont (as well as to the surrealists and, according to Arnold, Freud) that Césaire owes his concept of “humour noir,” or black humor. Humor could be a strategy denying, on one hand, the unacceptable reality that was the lot of the blacks, and on the other hand, the patriarchal values of seriousness, purpose, and reverence. “He was the first,” Césaire wrote of Isidore Ducasse, “to have understood the shattering demiurgic value of humor” (*Tropiques* no. 6–7, p. 15). And elsewhere, “It is humor, first and foremost, that assures Lautréamont—in opposition to Pascal, La Rochefoucauld, and so many other moralists—that had Cleopatra’s nose been shorter the face of the world would not have been changed” (“Poetry and Knowledge,” p. 165). Humor made it possible to say that “2 and 2 are 5” (*Notebook*) right under the doctors’ noses and without penalty—but then, one had paid the penalty for centuries! A reading that does not take this dimension in account would betray Césaire’s intentions.

His irony lashes everyone: the colonizers for their pompous monument to Joséphine de Beauharnais (*Notebook*); the blacks for their servility (“pay no attention to my black skin: the sun did it,” again in the *Notebook*); himself in “NonVicious Circle” and in “Trite.” Sometimes, his irreverence amounts to a thumb-to-the-nose gesture: in an anticlimactic moment of “Batouque,” a ship lets fly “a volley of mice / of telegrams of cowries of hours,” while a Wolof dances on points at the top of his mast. Quite often the translator encounters devilish and usually untranslatable puns: “tirer à blanc” (in “Noon Knives”) puns on blank (bullets) and white (people); “soleil, aux gorges” (in “Batouque”) enjoins the sun to go for the jugular . . . or into the canyons; “nos gueules claquantes” (in “The

Scapegoat”) combines “têtes à claques” (slappable, that is exasperating, mugs), croaking mugs (the French “claquer” being slang for “to die”), and probably chattering teeth (because the French “il claque des dents” means “his teeth are chattering”). But most of the time, humor is simply part of a deliberate exaggeration and of an unrestrained imagination. The poem “Demons” describes minutely some infernal, absurd, and purposeless machine-monster. Not only does it resemble Lautréamont’s monsters but its gigantic laughter, meant to frighten the children as well as the bourgeois, is right out of Rabelais.

When Césaire was asked to name his most important initiator, he settled on Rimbaud, whom he read during his youth in Fort-de-France. Both poets follow a spiritual path that includes a descent into hell, an epiphany, and a journey to Africa. Only here, as in the case of Lautréamont, everything that was symbolic for the European poet becomes concrete in Césaire’s world. Thus in *A Season in Hell*, Rimbaud views himself as an outcast (“I am a beast, a nigger”).²⁸ No wonder Césaire identified particularly with the Prodigy and Prodigal Son of nineteenth-century French letters. While the word “nigger” had a different meaning for each of them, it connoted for both a rejection of self-satisfied Western culture, particularly in its Christian aspects. Both entitled a poem “Barbare.” Both undertook a quest, Césaire’s season in hell teeming with tropical and nautical metaphors reminiscent of “Le Bateau ivre”: “Je bourlingue” (a Rimbaldian verb if there ever was one) “gorge tendue à travers les mystérieux rouissements les atolls enroulés” (“I toss about / throat stretched amidst the mysterious rettings the coiled atolls”) in “High Noon”; or “Mais déjà la veille s’impatiait vers l’astre et la poterne et nous fuyions / sur une mer cambree incroyablement plantée de poupes de naufrages” (“but already the vigil was straining toward the star and the postern and we were racing / across an arched sea incredibly planted with shipwrecked sterns”) in “Visitation.” For Césaire, Rimbaud was a test and an example of the total commitment to the “calculated disordering of all senses” and to the anarchy of the form that, for instance, the French Marxists (and Depestre in their wake) were unwilling to make. Rimbaud’s *Illuminations* and Césaire’s *Miraculous Weapons* convey violence by the same mixture of interjections and parataxis. In both we find the same ongoing cosmogony, and ongoing alchemy, not only of the word but of all elements, both poets having accepted their total consummation to be, like the phoenix, reborn from their ashes.

Strangely enough, Césaire also acknowledges a debt to a poet seemingly antipodal to Lautréamont and Rimbaud: Mallarmé. In *Tropiques* (no. 5), he senses the author of *Hérodiade* as a fellow traveler in a “gigantic intellectual adventure” that led away from the conventional forms of poetry. For Mallarmé, they would have implied a reality which the poet perceived as unworthy of his art. For Césaire, the problem was to escape the pallid conventionality of previous black poetry, on which Suzanne Césaire bravely declared war in a 1942 issue of *Tropiques* (no. 4): “Bamboo, we decree the death of *froufrou* literature. And to hell with hibiscus, the frangipane, and bougainvillea” (p. 50). Not only is it a fact that Césaire cultivates the *mot rare* no less than Mallarmé but a number of his stylistic devices that at first reading might be traced back to a surrealistic obscurity turn out under scrutiny to be the same learned hypallages and tight syntax characteristic of Mallarmé’s sonnets. Arnold remarks that Césaire is especially Mallarmean in poems with Creole topics, as if only an extreme sophistication of form could validate the particularly native content—a somewhat paradoxical mechanism which the negritude world would hardly endorse as its own.

These are mere glimpses; there is no room here to do justice to all French poets who may have contributed to the genesis of Césaire’s poetry. Without even mentioning possible and probable links with major foreign poets such as Rilke, Garcia Lorca, Neruda, and Vallejo, in France alone one would have to go back to Apollinaire (from whom Césaire borrowed some typographical experiments as well as the title of *Soleil cou coupé*), to Claudel, to St. John Perse (who inspired him with one of his most beautiful *tombeaux*). And one would have to scan the entire body of French poetry as well. Who knows

if Hugo's "A Villequiers" is not in transparency behind "Crusades of Silence"? Villon's ballades faintly echo in the title and many lines of "Lay of Errantry," of which the litany-like tone is somewhat lost in translation: "Corps féminin île retournée / corps féminin bien nolisé / corps féminin écume-né / corps féminin île retrouvée" ("Woman's body island on its back / woman's body full freighted / woman's body foam-born / woman's body recovered island"). And what about these other lines that seem straight out of the inscription on the gate of Thélème: "Nous sommes âmes de bon parage / corps nocturnes vifs de lignage" ("we are souls of noble birth / nocturnal bodies lively with lineage")?

But a special place should be made for the connections of Césaire with surrealism, Breton, and Artaud.

Césaire's relationship to surrealism is complex. While the poet has identified himself as a surrealist but not as a French surrealist, his literary connection with the movement is certainly André Breton, whom Césaire first met in Fort-de-France, in 1941, during the Vichy government when Breton was in exile and on his way to America. Reflecting on the effect of this meeting, and how it related to *Tropiques*, Césaire said in 1978: "Breton brought us *boldness*; he helped us to take a straightforward position: he shortened our search and our hesitation. I became aware that most of the problems I was pondering had been resolved by Breton and surrealism. . . . I will say that the meeting with Breton confirmed the truth of what I had discovered on my own. That enabled us to make up time; to go much faster, much farther. . . . The meeting was *extraordinary*."²⁹

To understand Césaire's unique allegiances and differences with the French surrealists, it is important to realize that surrealism was not merely an isolated French literary movement of the mid to late twenties whose basic premises were confined to a return to childhood, idealization of madness, Freudian free associations, anticlericalism, eroticism, and the occult. As part of a reorganization of identity in the twentieth century, surrealism extended the perimeters of consciousness in a way that not only reaches back to Romantic and Symbolist sources but dissolves the boundaries of time altogether. Meditating on this desire for wholeness in being, the American contemporary poet Robert Duncan writes: "The intense yearning, the desire for something else . . . rises . . . in our identification with the universe. To compose such a symposium of the whole, such a totality, all the old excluded order must be included. The female, the proletariat, the foreign, the animal and vegetative, the unconscious and the unknown, the criminal and failure—all that has been outcast and vagabond must return to be admitted in the creation of what we consider we are."³⁰

One can see immediately from the preceding description how parallel the goals of negritude and those of surrealism were. Yet, this rapprochement needs to be qualified because the contexts to which European surrealists and Césaire were responding were very dissimilar. In the first instance, it consisted of a long entrenched bourgeoisie and a pervasive Catholicism. In that instance, culture, people, and land were part of the same entity. In Césaire's case, the culture and the religion he rejected had been imposed from the outside. Consequently, on the one hand, he never showed toward his countrymen and their land the deliberate antipatriotic desecration nor the cosmopolitanism that is the trademark of the French surrealists. Césaire, therefore, remained profoundly in love with the natural world and the simple people that surrounded him. On the other hand, as Leiris pointed out, it was easier for the Martinican to depart from what Mallarmé called "the words of the tribe," that is, ordinary language. Finally, his revolt against injustice and oppression was much more concrete and specific than that of the French surrealist group, composed mostly of bourgeois intellectuals whose causes were theoretical.

An exception has to be made for Artaud whose attempts to step outside of Western civilization are clear from his poetry and his correspondence, especially from 1945 to his death in 1948.³¹ Unlike Artaud, Césaire did not ride off on a burro to the land of the Tarahumara, in a state of laudanum withdrawal, to eat peyote with Northern Mexican Indians. And he never became mad. Nevertheless

both poets set themselves apart from other surrealists by the awesome wholeness of their respective experiences and by their common willingness to tamper with French syntax in a way that makes Breton and Eluard sound like Mme de La Fayette.

As to the specific surrealist technique of automatic writing, Césaire experimented with it, especially during the years when surrealism was the major influence on him (1940 to 1950). The eighth and ninth issues of *Tropiques* (1943) include two automatically written poems by Charles Duits and S. Jean-Alexis' "Notes on chance." But, on the whole, Césaire's poems remain too thematic to be labeled automatic: their associative metaphors (*métaphores filées*) usually connect with an intertext, thus corroborating M. Riffaterre's argument against the very existence of automatic writing. In revising the various editions of his works, Césaire either eliminated altogether his most "automatic" poems (such as "The Sun's Knife Stab in the Back of Surprised Cities" deleted from *Solar Throat Slashed*) or cut them into several separate poems (as in the case of "The Virgin Forest," "Another Season," and "Day And Night"), thus conferring on each one some inner consistency.³²

V

When all is said and done, an introduction should answer the question: why read Césaire? Why read poems that require long exegeses, which stern readers have in the past deemed, at best, a brilliant intellectual game, at worst, arrogantly obscure, and riddled with typographical, grammatical, or semiotic idiosyncracies? We would like to reply that these flaws are not, in the case of Césaire, artificial and derivative tricks but simply occasional alterations inherent in sustained profundity and abundance. In the long run, only being "inside" a poem can truly expound Césaire's poetry. It is impossible, of course, to reconstitute a paradigm of what can only be an individual and multiform experience. But, were we pressed to do it, we would say that the first element characteristic of Césaire's poetic voice is its solemnity. Consider, for instance, the last lines of "Bitter Season" ("Then wind bitter and sole judge of white days / . . . you shall weigh me guardian of the word nailed by the decree") or of "But There is This Hurt" ("About this blood of mine you will say / . . . that more just before God than their correct mouths / my lie / before his distraught face soared"). The prophetic voice here commands attention with an authority unmatched by any other living French poet.

A second characteristic might be an exquisitely subtle blend of ferocity and tenderness. It is plain that Césaire is a master at turning the screw: a poem like "Fangs" depicts suffering as "map of blood map of the blood / bled raw sweated raw skinned raw / . . . blood which rises in the tree of flesh / by catches by crimes / No remittance / —straight up along the stones / straight up along the bones—for / copper weight shackle weight heart weight / venoms caravaners of the bite / at the tepid edge of fangs." Each line probes the wound further, increases the pain in short ineluctable jerks articulated by parallel constructions. But Césaire is not always so single-minded. The last section of "Elegy" (which is also a description of suffering) seems to us more typical because of the complexity of the structure: "then it is no use for me to press my heart against yours / nor to lose myself in the foliage of your arms / the herd finds it / and very solemnly / in a manner always new / licks it / amorously / until the first blood savagely appears / on the abrupt open claws of / DISASTER." The first two lines with the alliterations of *f*, *l*, *m* (which happen to be the consonants of "female") evoke the comfort of a loving embrace. The next five lines, short and of more or less equal length, recall the structure of "Fangs": the herd of old pains (previously described as a foraging animal), reaches up to the narrator's heart. It licks it *amorously*, however, thus connecting pain with the love theme at the beginning of the stanza. In the next line, cruelty prevails again with the apparition of the blood, while the last two lines suggest a surrendering—whether to love or destruction is hard to tell. One finds a similar ambiguity in the final lines addressed

to "Your Hair": "mane bundle of lianas violent hope of the shipwrecked / sleep softly by the meticulous trunk of my embrace my / woman / my citadel." The effect here is that of a curiously springy texture created by the alternation of hard "male" consonants (bundle, hope, shipwreck, meticulous, trunk, citadel) and soft "female" ones (mane, lianas, sleep, softly, embrace, woman) the two consonantic chains simulating the actual braiding together of a soft and a hard body.

Finally, another characteristic is Césaire's ability to surprise. We are delighted by this "truly wild disappearance / tropical as an apparition of a nocturnal wolf at high noon" which abruptly succeeds the quasi-epic tone of "Visitation"; a "pretty nymph sheds her leaves amidst the manzanilla milk and the accolades of fraternal leeches" at the end of the otherwise grim "Day and Night"; or (in the middle of "Patience of Signs"), a worm "tolling its new flesh," beats almost proudly in the apocalyptic landscape of fire shards, bones, and dried-up fires. Césaire has the ultimate cleverness to appear surprised himself by his surprises, thus making them more credible. It is as if, in spite of him and almost behind his back, the world in its boundless luxuriance performed magical tricks for the common pleasure of writer and reader. Perhaps the poem "Son of Thunder" must be understood to mean just this: "she speaks to me a language so soft that at first I do not / understand but eventually I guess she is assuring me / that spring has come countercurrent / that all thirst is quenched that autumn is kindly disposed to us / that the stars in the street have blossomed at high noon and / dangle their fruit very low." Without this intertwining of pleasurable elements with the somber and violent themes, Césaire's poetry would perhaps in our era occupy a niche as distinguished but as eccentric as that occupied by D'Aubigné's *Les Tragiques* in the sixteenth century.

We have chosen these three characteristics because together they seem to speak to the contemporary psyche better than would a homogeneous voice: the prophetic to our need for certainty and authority; the mixture of cruelty and tenderness to our need of being alternatively object and subject; the surprise to the child in us. We prefer to think of ourselves as unresolved. We also prefer to think of ourselves as fabricators of meanings, and the "courage of the imagination"³³ Césaire requires of his readers amply fulfills the *bricoleurs* in them.

Those still unconvinced by the aesthetic case must not overlook the equally compelling historical and moral one. In the *Tragedy of King Christophe* Césaire has the main character say that one has to demand more from the blacks than from any other race: more work, more faith, more enthusiasm, more persistence. As one looks back over Césaire's amazing career, it appears that he has lived up to his hero's ideals and even added one to the list: vision. On the black child from the slums of Basse-Pointe an almost messianic role was bestowed. For he was to become a bridge between the twain that, in principle, should never meet, Europe and Africa. Thus he symbolizes and sums up what is probably the twentieth century's most important phenomenon: the powerful surge next to the old and the new world, of a third world both very new and very old. Rather than aiming at the lowest common denominator between the two cultures, Césaire sought to fulfill his Africanism with "the zeal of an apocalyptic wasp," and the adjective here conveys adequately the extreme quality of this choice. As he pointed out again in his recent interview (*Le Monde*, December, 1981), however, it was by borrowing European techniques that he succeeded in expressing his Africanism in its purest form.

Césaire seems to have been constantly driven by the vision that the end result of this Africanization would be an elemental man in whom all mankind would recognize itself. Thus he claimed to have demonstrated Hegel's idea that the universal is not the negation of the particular, that it is by going deeper into the particular that one reaches the universal. In making the universal man black (and vice versa) Césaire was paradoxically putting the finishing touch to an image of man toward which Europe itself had been groping in the wake of Rousseau, Diderot, and the Enlightenment and which continued to develop through nineteenth- and twentieth-century anthropology. In expanding Man's image, he gave the white world, which had educated him, a hundredfold more than what he had

received from it. And, as a bonus, he gave a more genuine meaning to the traditional claim of the French language to be a universal one.

The transcendence of reality through the poetic word has become a cliché of the critique on modernism. In the case of Césaire the validity of this idea tends to obliterate the less intellectual but not any less admirable truth that such a transcendence implied no small amount of forgiveness. That Césaire the African, the descendant of the Cannibals, could give the Christian world a solemn lesson in one of its major articles of ethics is witnessed by his poetry. The fist which, he states (in “Memorial to Louis Delgrès”), always obsessed him, the incendiary fist from which a whole forest burns angrily in “High Noon,” the poinsettia’s “young green hand stiffening out of its massacre gloves” (from “Trite”) surfaces in the “Salute to the Third World” as “a hand free of the cestus,” bruised, wounded, yes, but open, “extended to / all hands . . . / to all the wounded hands / in the world.” And the last poem of the *Complete Works* (“A Freedom in Passage”) leaves to the birds the task of pollinating the future and correcting “the Erynnies’ blunders and the inflexible wine of moray eels.” That wine, sacrificial wine if there ever was one, is, let us not forget, the blood of slaves who were thrown (or in despair threw themselves) overboard from the slave ships. Thus Césaire’s last word clearly intends to wash this blood in the ocean of fraternity.

Négritude may well be, as we suggested before, politically outdated. Césaire himself (in the haunting and hieratical “Lay of Errantry”) hints that Africa’s glory may be only an ancient tale in a now closed wizard’s book. But perhaps it is precisely there, in its visionary status, that lies the real beginning of negritude. For the Africa of oil wells, supertankers, commodity markets, gigantic dams, and labor problems may need its guiding light even more than it needs tractors, guns, and capital, if it is not to become just another alienated industrial world. Negritude has the potential to remain, according to Camus’ prophetic paradox, the end that, in turn, shall be justified only to the extent that the means are justifiable.

Césaire’s career as a political figure or as a poet is far from completed. He is still at the helm of his native island and in the interview in *Le Monde* mentioned above he announces the forthcoming publication of another collection of poems, “Moi, laminaire.” He might surprise us in both these domains. But we venture to say that in neither will it be by revolutionary stances. To him, revolution and violence were only a phase. The readjustment of his political goals so as to focus on the development of Martinique and on local issues and the increasingly elegiac tone of his poetry are symmetrically significant of his present position. He admits that politics are for him a necessary authentication of his ideas but that his true vocation is elsewhere than in material power. For he was all along, after a much less ephemeral kind of power, one whose weapons are miraculous. He described himself in an early intuition of his destiny: “the poet is that very ancient yet new being, at once very complex and very simple who at the limit of dream and reality, of day and night, between absence and presence, searches for and receives in the sudden triggering of inner cataclysms the password of connivance and power.”³⁴

VI / THE COLLECTIONS

The text on which these notes are based is Volume I of *Oeuvres Complètes* (OC, see the note to the Acknowledgments). In the case of several of the collections, Césaire made extensive revisions as new editions appeared (twenty-nine of the original seventy-two poems in *Soleil cou coupé* are omitted in the OC).

While referring the reader interested in more detail to Hale’s bibliography, *Les Ecrits d’Aimé Césaire* [see n. 1], we would like to give minimal bibliographical notes and to point out the main characteristics of each of the six collections that comprise this volume.

NOTEBOOK OF A RETURN TO THE NATIVE LAND (CAHIER D'UN RETOUR AU PAYS NATAL)

First version in the Paris periodical *Volontés*, number 20, August 1939.

First publication in book form (New York: Brentano's, 1947) under the title *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal: Memorandum on my Martinique*, prefaced by A. Breton, translated by L. Abel and Y. Goll, bilingual.

First French edition in book form (Paris: Bordas, 1947, prefaced by Breton).

"Edition définitive" (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1956, 1960, 1971, this last one a bilingual edition, translated by E. Snyder).

Outside of France and the U.S. there exist editions in Great Britain (Penguin Books), Germany, Italy, Mexico, and Cuba.

OC, 1976.

With its 1055 lines the *Notebook* is more of an extended lyric poem than an epic; it opens, after the initial burst (which contains virtually all Césaire's themes), with a brooding, static overview of the psychic and geographical topology of Martinique, generally in strophes that evoke Lautréamont's *Maldoror*. A second movement begins with the speakers' urge to go away; suddenly the supine present is sucked into a whirlpool of abuses and horrors suffered by blacks throughout their colonized and present history. The nonnarrative, exploding juxtapositions in this movement immediately reveal Césaire's interest in surrealism, though as Arnold points out, thematic development is always in sight. The second movement reaches its nadir in the passage where the speaker discovers himself mocking an utterly degraded black on a streetcar. The final, rushing third movement is ignited by the line: "But what strange pride suddenly illuminates me?" In a series of dialectical plays between the emergence of a future hero giving new life to the world and images from the slaves' "middle passage" of the past, the "sprawled flat" passivity of the first movement is transformed into a standing insurrection that finally wheels up into the stars. The incredible burden of the poem is that of a parthenogenesis in which Césaire must conceive and give birth to himself while exorcising his introjected and collective white image of the black.

THE MIRACULOUS WEAPONS (LES ARMES MIRACULEUSES)

Paris: Gallimard 1946, 1961 (without modifications), and 1970 (with numerous changes).

Translated editions in Italy (1962) and Germany (1968, incomplete). *And the Dogs Were Silent (Et les chiens se taisaient)*, a "lyrical oratorio" that constitutes the last section of *Armes*, was published separately in 1956 (Paris: Présence Africaine; Emsdetten: Germany). In the OC it is collected with his dramatic works. Therefore we do not include it in this volume.

OC, 1976.

Although the volume represents the climax of the surrealist influence on Césaire, one finds in it possible topical allusions to the oppression of the French territories under the German occupation. For instance, at the end of the title poem, we are told of a bewildered great king and of cities deprived of water and sleep. *The Miraculous Weapons* was received by the French public with various degrees of praise (André Breton) or reservation (the Communist critic Garaudy), depending on individual commitments to politics or avant-garde literature. In this volume of (now thirty-one) poems and prose poems, the historical armature of the *Notebook* is dissolved in a swamp teeming with mythological particles. The vision of a fatigued, raped earth alternates with that of surging, primal earth; negritude and surrealism become a poetic trampoline which resists penetration at the same time it affords an exhilarating "ride." At times the writing in *The Miraculous Weapons* appears to be automatic. Actually, while the poems often proceed associatively, the range of associative possibility is restricted to some thirty or forty key words often antiphonally used (for instance night, day, dawn, evening, sun, water, volcano, swamp, blood, revolt, plundering, death, madness, logics) which, like elements in a

molten substance, rise to the surface and descend. The progression of the poems adumbrates some heroic itinerary from the “gunnery warning” at the beginning to the symbolic death and renewal of “The Thoroughbreds,” on to perdition, survival, the beyond, conquest, epiphanies, and prophecies—all themes that are orchestrated in a dramatic format in the coda, *And the Dogs Were Silent*. The frequent occurrence of “exploding-fixed” metaphors à la Breton suggests a non-resolved tension caused perhaps, on the topical level, by the double oppression of colonialism and of the German occupation and, at the level of discourse, by the struggle between thematic and associative techniques of writing.

SOLAR THROAT SLASHED (SOLEIL COU COUPÉ)

First edition: K. éditeur, collection “Le quadrangle,” 1948. Reedited under the same title, along with *Corps perdu* as part of *Cadastre* (Paris: Seuil, 1961).

Reproduced (along with *Antilles à main armée* by Charles Calixte) by Kraus reprint (Liechtenstein, 1970).

OC 1976, where, along with *Corps perdu*, it appears after the later published *Ferrements*, according to the date of the Seuil edition. Our translation reestablishes the real chronology.

Once this collection was severely edited (with many remaining poems modified and shortened), it became clear that Césaire had lessened its surrealist impact and reoriented the poems toward a more direct ideological statement. *Solar Throat Slashed* is, however, as it stands, a very diverse volume. Some of the most impressive ideological pieces, such as “Mississippi,” “To Africa,” and “At the Locks of the Void,” combine mythological and historical materials without committing the poems to either genre. The title of the collection is taken from the last line of Apollinaire’s “Zone,” and, according to Gregson Davis, “when transposed from the Parisian dawn to a subtropical ambiance, functions both as sign in an intertextual code (to use Roland Barthes’ term), and as a vivid symbol for the assassination of a people.”³⁵

The collection is dominated by the solar theme in its physical as well as mythological and metaphorical implications. Some interpreters (Hale) emphasize the cautious optimism of the poems inspired by the situation of the blacks in the world. They would reflect the years (1945–1947) during which Césaire was at his most efficient and successful as a legislator in the French Assembly. Others (Arnold) maintain that the solar principle in these poems is far removed from a macho assertion and that the tragic sacrificial theme dominates the scene. American blacks make their first appearance in Césaire’s poetry here. The language is less roily than before, more contoured and staccato, and at times takes on an austerity that prefigures the elegiac tone which is occasionally found in *Lost Body* and which becomes predominant in *Ferrements*.

LOST BODY (CORPS PERDU)

First edition: Editions Fragrance, 1950 (illustrated with thirty-two engravings by Picasso).

Reedited (along with *Soleil cou coupé*) under the same title as part of *Cadastre* (Seuil, 1961). OC, 1976.

Lost Body is the least known and the least commented upon of Césaire’s major works. Yet the ten poems that constitute it seem to have been written as an ensemble and present more unity than other collections.

Critics agree that *Lost Body* reflects a transition in Césaire’s career. Hale reads it as a, so to speak, second return to the native land, the poet leaving behind a Europe which has rejected him and an Africa whose relevance is momentarily being questioned. According to Arnold, the collection shows us Césaire pulled apart by the opposite demands of modernism and of negritude, the one dictating an inner discourse, the other a public, open voice. The “Lay of Errantry” with its dismemberment theme especially reveals this conflict, Arnold suggests. Other poems in the collections document this interpretation. For instance, the opening piece, “Word,” contrasts the magical efficacy of the poetic

word with the recalcitrance of the historical substance of the word “nigger.” In the title poem, “Lost Body,” the reference to Hercules serving Omphale might signify a regression into the telluric female principle preceding the phallic rebirth of the final lines (“and with the arrogant jet of my wounded and solemn bole / I shall command the islands to be”), or it might also allude to the harnessing of the poetic voice in the service of Mother Africa. This movement is somewhat confirmed by the fact that in revising the text, Césaire emphasized the African elements at the expense of purely mythological ones.

All in all, the collection conveys a crisis that accounts for the nostalgic and plaintive stanzas of the “Lay of Errantry” at times strangely reminiscent of Villon and Du Bellay.

FERRAMENTS (FERREMENTS)

First edition: (Paris: Seuil, 1960. Eight poems previously published in *Présence Africaine* between 1955 and 1959).

Prix René Laporte in 1960.

OC, in 1976 (with minor changes).

Césaire’s rare and ingenious title for his last separately published collection of poems is defined in *Webster’s 1950 International Dictionary* as: “A piece of ironwork; pl. shackles, irons; irons tools, fittings etc. Obs.” By choosing this word, instead of the common word for shackles (“fers”), Césaire was able to build constructive connotations into the iron that in black experience has been predominantly associated with torture and bondage. Even the obsolescence of the word serves him because, while slave ships no longer exist, blacks are still “shackled” in many parts of the world. Finally, the word puns on the idea of a “ferment” brewing a hopeful future.

Arnold has identified three intermingled voices in *Ferraments*. One is inspired by various phases of the fight for black independence whether in Africa, the Caribbean, or the United States (“In memory of a Black Union Leader”). It sings, so to speak, of unshackling. The “African” poems, in particular, celebrate decolonization in a tone that carries praise almost into political speechmaking. Among them, “The Time of Freedom” was elicited by the tragic bloodshed of the Yamoussoukro and Dembroko revolts in Ivory Coast in February 1950 and coincide with Césaire’s unceasing anticolonialistic campaign in the French National Assembly. “Hail to Guinea” was conceived as an homage to the only French African country which, under the leadership of Sékou Touré, voted for total independence from France in the 1958 referendum. “A Salute to the Third World,” dedicated to Léopold Sedar Senghor, and “Africa” are in a similar spirit.

Another voice represented in at least thirty of the poems, one that relates to the first and justifies the title, consists of a fantastic evocation of black bondage throughout history. It is as if each line in these poems is the “Flying Dutchman” of a slave ship, each word the ghost of branded flesh. We are told a relentless tale of abducting, sacking, dumping, of vomiting broken teeth, of ants polishing skeletons, of chunks of raw flesh, of spitting in the face, of trophy heads, of crucifixion. The accumulation suggests in itself that the torture is almost as much self- as other-induced, as if, in a quasi-Manichaean way, Césaire was attempting to drain the world of black suffering through mere exhaustiveness. Needless to say, as moving as they are, these poems hardly sustain their author’s claim that their “hermetic aspect has been significantly diminished.”³⁶ They were not particularly relevant to the situation of the black world in 1960.

It is perhaps to Césaire’s intuition of this fact, as well as to the relative abortion of the Martinican liberation, that we owe the third voice of *Ferraments*, the elegiac one. It appears in “Statue of Lafcadio Hearn,” “The Tomb of Paul Eluard,” “Memorial for Louis Delgrès,” “In Memory of a Black Union Leader,” “On the State of the Union,” and “In Truth.” Four of these poems are, in the vein of the classical elegy, lamentations for a dead hero. “Out of Alien Days” is a melancholic interrogation of the future of the Martinican people—on their limitations perhaps. “Always speaking beautifully as we die,” Césaire reflects, not without irony, on himself and his countrymen (“On the Islands of All

Compass Points”). And even love becomes but a bittersweet mirror image of that other slavery (“Ferraments”). One can see by the preceding examples that the main element in this elegiac voice is the distance from the scene it evokes.

NORIA (NORIA)

First publication in *OC*, 1976.

Some of these seventeen poems were previously published. “Letter from Bahia-of-All-Souls” was included in W. Spies’s *Pour Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler* (Stuttgart, 1965), in L. Kesteloot and B. Kotchy’s *Aimé Césaire, l’homme et l’oeuvre* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1973), and in *A Tarde* (Salvador-Bahia, May 1, 1976), translated into Portuguese. “Ethiopia” appeared twice in *Présence Africaine*: in no. 47 (1963), and in a special issue (on the summit conference of independent African states which took place in Ethiopia), in 1964 under the title “Addis-Abeba 1963.” Moreover, “The Verb ‘Marronner’ ” was previously published in slightly different versions: as “Réponse à Depestre poète haïtien (Eléments d’un art poétique)” in *Présence Africaine*, no. 1–2 (1955), and as “Lettre brésilienne” in L. Kesteloot and B. Kotchy’s *Aimé Césaire* (pp. 109–111).

Noria is a heterogenous collection difficult to characterize as an ensemble. A few poems such as “Wifredo Lam,” “In Order to Speak,” “This Appeal Prohibited Blood,” “To be Deducted,” “Annonciades,” and “Zaffer Sun” belong, loosely speaking, to a surrealistic vein. “Annonciades” in particular is a fairly typical example of surrealistic humor.

Some other poems are occasional. The “Letter from Bahia” is a record of Césaire’s impressions of a voyage he made in Brazil in 1963 and celebrates exuberantly the fraternal Brazilian culture. “The Verb ‘Marronner’ ” reflects the polemics that took place between Césaire and the Haitian poet Depestre. Beyond Depestre, Césaire was aiming at Aragon, leader and spokesman of the orthodox communist writers in the mid-fifties. Against the Marxist *art poétique* which required clarity, nonindividualism, and ideology, Césaire held out for a personal and esoteric style. Depestre, a Haitian poet to whom the poem is addressed, was a friend; therefore the somewhat gentle—albeit ironical—tone of the scolding. Aragon’s name which appeared (in a derogatory context) in the previous version was deleted from the *OC*.

The “Voodoo Ceremonial for St.-John Perse” is rather ambiguous. Césaire seems to be irritated by Perse’s “otherness” (he calls him “the Stranger”) and preciosity, but to admire the lofty and profound quality of his poetry.

Finally some of the poems could be considered as lyrical and elegiac. For instance, in the poem “Ethiopia,” Césaire indulges in the evocation of Ethiopia’s ancient and mythical past as well as in a discreet self-apology (fourth and fifth stanzas). This suggests that he was still affected at that time by the awareness of an increasing chasm between his poetics and his ideals, and the goals and means of fast (and at times ruthlessly) growing young African states. Ethiopia appears to play the role of an anchor in the overwhelming storm of contemporary history. The note of self-apology continues to sound in “I Guided the Long Transhumance of the Herd,” “Lagoonal Calendar,” “Banal,” and “Ibis-Anubis.” The “I” in these poems no longer is a stylized one, part of the mythopoesis as in previous collections, but a more concrete, human, and real one, reflecting on a full and difficult career.

VII / TRANSLATORS’ NOTES

It is not our intention here to be theoretical. Anyone interested in the general linguistic implications of translating should refer to the many excellent books on the subject, such as W. Arrow-

smith and R. Shattuck, eds., *The Craft and Context of Translation* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1964) or W. Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968). But a few words are in order on the specific problems encountered in translating Césaire. Some are inherent to his syntax and word order; others to his vocabulary and images.

As we mentioned earlier, Césaire's syntax is disjointed partly in an erudite Mallarmean way, partly as the result of his often unbound lyricism. A typical stanza duplicates the structure of fireworks, each clause introducing a dependent clause, the sequence building up to the last clause which usually brings a climactic opening or an ironical juxtaposition. It is therefore extremely important not to be misled by the apparent digressions, to keep track of parallel subordinating or coordinating devices, and to make use of the very few cola provided by the author. Let us take the last ten lines of "The Wheel" as an example: "but you minutes won't you wind on your spindle for living / the lapped up blood / the art of suffering sharpened to tree stumps by the knives of winter / the doe drunk from not drinking / which on the unexpected well rim presents me with your / face of a dismasted schooner / your face / like a village asleep at the bottom of a lake / which is reborn to daylight from the grass and the year / germinates." In reading this passage, one must register several things to be wound on the spindle, of which the last one (the doe) presents the poet with his lover's face, which is compared with two things (the schooner and the village), the second of which is in turn depicted as first asleep, then awake; one must also not let the intervening clauses distract from connecting the subject "your face" to the verb "germinates." Another example of exasperating Césairean syntax is the final stanza of "My Profound Day's Clear Passage": "Surely there is me as a great serpent of the bogs which / the sun's trident aping itself nails and which nameless / frightened bifid at the very edge of a ruptured night crawls / fragilely avid avid for a tenuous milk." Leaving aside the oddity of this image, the startling fact here is the sequence formed by the main French verb "se singe" and its dependent infinitive "clouer," given that a reflexive verb does not take a direct object other than its reflexive pronoun. In the attempt to make sense out of the text, the translator is forced to stretch the normal syntax beyond any standard of acceptability. But he seems to have no choice in the matter. A close scrutiny of genders and numbers is usually profitable. For instance, in the last two lines of "Who Then, Who Then," the masculine gender of "attentif" (intent) is a clue to the identity of the subject in the preceding line ("qui") and bars the possibility of this subject being a relative pronoun representing the "full grown girl" ("grande fille"). Thus, one is led to read "qui" as an interrogative—but not without toil.

It is clear by the above examples that Césaire's syntax is often patterned after the Latin but without offering Latin's convenience of word endings. With their help the modern Theseus, which the translator becomes, would have less trouble finding his way out of such a syntactical labyrinth as, for instance, the opening lines of "Your Hair." In this poem, the mistress' hair is compared by means of the slightly archaic "dirait-on pas" ("wouldn't you have taken it for") to a beautiful tree, then to "the invincible and spacious cockcrowing," itself ready to depart for some witch's sabbath. The modifier of the tree ("Bombarded by lateritic blood") and that of the cockcrowing ("already in invincible departure") precede the things they respectively modify, each time suspending the meaning to the next line. Not only are the images strange enough in themselves (a mistress' hair *might* be comparable to a tree, but hardly to a bird's cry) but deciphering the French poem becomes a perilous obstacle course: the translator must simultaneously be aware of the inversions already mentioned, take the repetition of "invincible" as an invitation to link the third and fourth lines, make note of the strong verbal value of the noun "départ," and move the adverb "déjà" where it should be, that is before the preposition "en."

This example, by no means chosen among the most difficult, illustrates the schizophrenic exercise one goes through when translating Césaire. It requires a combination of yielding to the movement of the text and keeping a strict watch over its structure—a process approximating a *coitus interruptus*. Moreover, one is not always able to decide when the hyperbaton (reversal of normal word order) is meaningful and when it is not. When Césaire writes (in *Notebook*) that he summons "this

egotism beautiful and bold” (cet égoïsme beau et qui s’aventure”), the odd placing of “beau” and the fact it is balanced with a relative clause clearly signify special emphasis. In contrast, “constant a season” (in “Africa”) and “clarteux l’élan épineux des belladones” (in the French version of “Poem for the Dawn”) might boil down to a slightly precious or erudite grammatical tic on the part of a high school teacher so familiar with Latin that his Fort-de-France students used to pass the awesome *bachot* with flying colors. Only a delicate assessment can tell when these anomalies are worth keeping in English. Ignoring all of them might not impoverish the text as much as it might change its tone. The frequent occurrence of ablative absolutes patterned on the Latin is another of Césaire’s latinized traits. “Chair qui soi prise de soi-même vendange” (in “Présence”), or “oubliée la morgue des orages” (in “The Thoroughbreds”), or “nous contus” (in “Salut au Tiers Monde”) are samples of this structure.

The problems raised by the syntax, however, are far from equaling the lexicological ones. Let’s not even mention the frequent use of homophony and echo effects which one should view as an interesting challenge. Let us pass quickly over the very large number of rare and technical words (there exist quantitative and qualitative analyses of them), which keep the translator bent over various encyclopedias, dictionaries of several languages (including African and Creole), botanical indexes, atlases, and history texts. If he is fortunate enough to identify the object, then he has to decide to what extent the esoteric tone of the poetry should be respected in the English. Dispatching the reader to the reference shelf at every turn in order for him to find out that the object of his chase is nothing more than a morning glory (*convolvulus*) or a Paraguayan peccary (“patyura”) hardly encourages a sustained reading. Here, again, a delicate balance must be maintained between a rigorously puristic stand and a systematic vulgarization. The case of plant names is especially complex, as one must be wary to betray neither Césaire’s use of vegetable forms as a symbol of black culture nor his concrete interest in Caribbean flora demonstrated in *Tropiques*. We have refrained from footnoting the words that can be found in current international English dictionaries.

But dealing with such exotic or technical objects as the Khamsin, chalaza, paraschites, souklyans, the cyathus, of flegrian birds is not as baffling as dealing with what Césaire does to ordinary words. Looming constantly on the translator’s horizon are treacherous homonyms. Fortunately, there is enough scholarship on Césaire’s imagery by now to help choose between the two meanings of “anse” (handle and cove), of “fût” (barrel and bole), or “bouche” (noun or verb). Keeping in mind the overall symbolic structure helps reduce the polysemy. For instance, in view of Césaire’s obsession with the genital/fertility theme, we were bold enough to translate “les petites têtes du futur” etymologically as “the testicles of the future,” and “la bourse du volcan” as “the volcanic scrotum.” Some scholars will challenge these choices in the same way we have challenged those of previous translators.

Neologisms constitute another pitfall. Some are relatively easy to handle because their components are obvious. “Négritude,” “nigromance,” “strom,” “mokatine” are immediately clear by association with “infinitude,” “nécromancie,” “maelstrom,” and “nougâtine” (a rich French almond candy). But coining equivalents for “rhizulent,” “effarade,” and “désencastration” (which we translated respectively as “rhizulate,” “frightation,” and “disencasement,” in this last case giving up on the hint of castration), requires a solid sense of semantics. Still, only Césaire himself was in a position to reveal (in a private communication) that “verrition” which preceding translators and scholars had interpreted as “flick” and “swirl” had been coined on a Latin verb “verri,” meaning “to sweep,” “to scrape a surface,” and ultimately “to scan.” Our rendition (“veerition”) attempts to preserve the turning motion (set against its oxymoronic modifier) as well as the Latin sound of the original—thus restituting the long-lost meaning of an important passage (the last few lines of the *Notebook*).

From the point of view of the translator, Césaire is at his most devilish when he paraphrases and puns on idiomatic phrases with a fully surrealist irreverence toward linguistic orthodoxy. He had admired Breton for turning upside down the old saying that “the thief creates the opportunity,” since, even more frequently, Breton said, “the opportunity created the thief.” He himself liberally used such

twists, too liberally, some feel. For instance, in “To Africa,” he speaks about “orgues végétales où / le vent épineux jouait des flûtes et des odeurs tranchantes.” While the connection of the flutes with a pipe organ is obvious enough, the familiar meaning of “jouer des flûtes,” which is “to run, to show a clean pair of heels” keeps fleeting through the translator’s mind. Our translation (“vegetal organ pipes / in which the thorny wind took off amidst flutes and trenchant odors”) is an attempt, successful or not, to maintain the double connotation of sound and movement. Likewise in “Perdition,” translating the phrase “avalant la bride des tornades mûres” literally will not do justice to the French because it does not convey the not-so-faint echoing of “courir à bride avalée” (to run full tilt). Thus many a line in our English text might puzzle the reader whose French is sufficient to understand the most immediate meaning on the facing page but not the full substance of the sociolect. If this is preciosity in the eyes of some critics, it is not our doing, and those critics will be happier when we have altogether failed to approximate French puns. As for the translator, he often is a dead duck caught between saying less or saying as much which, mysteriously enough, tends to come out as too much. Traduttore traditore, yes. But by excess or by default? That is the question. Yet, we consider such lines as “take the wind out of the birds’ wings” (for “couper le sifflet aux oiseaux,” in “Millibars of the Storm”), “resheaths the dagger of your neverborn swagger” (for “rengaine ta dégainé jamais née” in “Tangible Disaster”), and many others as experimental. It would be timorous, however, not to try conveying the magnificent “il vit à pierre fendre” (“it is so alive the stones are freezing”) of “Another Season.”

Of course, beyond the inadequacy of the mediators, that of the language sometimes enters the picture. Unfortunately in Césaire’s case, this is true in regard to several words that are part of his regular imagery. A word with an immense sensual and intertextual presence like the French “chevelure” does not have an English equivalent. In the text we have translated it by the rather pedestrian “head of hair,” and, as a title, by “your hair,” which is suggested by the context. Equally frustrating is the frequently used “sexe.” The corresponding English word focusing on the masculine/feminine polarity is obviously unsatisfactory. “Phallus” and “vulva” are sometimes possible substitutes. Nevertheless, the English language does not offer any term as frank, yet as dignified as the French “sexe” to designate the female organ.

Finally, the problems involved in translating the word “nègre” form a whole chapter of scholarship, one Arnold entitles “the Dialectics of Blackness.” Reduced to its sketchiest form, the lexical background is as follows: before the Second World War the French had three words to designate individuals or things belonging to the black race. The most euphemistic was “Noir” (noun or adjective). The most derogatory was “négro.” In between, on a sort of neutral and objective ground, was the word “nègre,” used both as a noun or as an adjective (as in “l’art nègre”). Delafosse had been among the first to give a scientific dignity to this word through his book, *Les Nègres* (1927). For the general public, “noir” and “nègre” may well have been interchangeable, but the very civilized and very complexed Antilleans considered themselves as “Noirs,” the “nègres” being on that distant continent, Africa. And it is in this light that one must read Césaire’s use of the word “nègre” and its derivatives “négritude,” “négrillon” and “négraille”: he was making up a family of words based on what he considered as the most insulting way to refer to a black. The paradox, of course, was that this implicit reckoning with the blacks’ ignominy, this process of self-irony and self-denigration, was the necessary step on the path to a new self-image and spiritual rebirth. From the point of view of the translator, it is therefore important to translate “nègre” as “nigger” and its derivatives as derivatives or compounds of “nègre” and “nigger” (negritude, nigger scum, little nigger, etc.).

Regarding the punctuation, we have respected the remarkable absence of it as an important characteristic of Césaire’s style, inserting commas and dashes with extreme discretion and only in cases when, because of the English lack of inflections, the reader would have been at a complete loss to make sense without these crutches.

In an illuminating article on translating Césaire, Gregson Davis wrote that the ideal interpreter (or

translator) would be one with a profound knowledge of Caribbean history and culture, and of European literary history, ancient and modern. “Perhaps,” he concludes, “a new and more accurate translation is an idea whose time has come for Caribbean studies.”³⁷ Our work is a response to his challenge, not a promise to live up to his lofty ideal. We have no self-delusions of perfection. No one can be more aware of the limitations inherent in translation, of its Pyrrhic victories and of its many defeats as those who have lived in intimate contact with a text for almost six years. And, for that matter, would not perfection strike a slightly sad note in the case of a poet as complex as Césaire? Would it not mean that his poetry has ceased to generate meanings? The most we can claim is that we benefited from others’ mistakes; and we hope that future translators and interpreters will in turn learn from ours as well as from our successes.

A. S.

C. E.