

CRITICISM

VOLUME

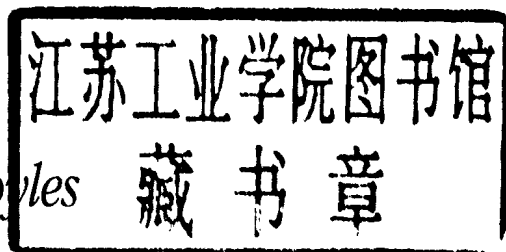
25

Poetry Criticism

*Criticism of the Works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

VOLUME 25

Laura A. Wisner-Broyles
Editor



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Preface

A Comprehensive Information Source on World Poetry

P*oetry Criticism (PC)* provides substantial critical excerpts and biographical information on poets throughout the world who are most frequently studied in high school and undergraduate college courses. Each **PC** entry is supplemented by biographical and bibliographical material to help guide the user to a fuller understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism Series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, **PC** offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by **PC** supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

Coverage

In order to reflect the influence of tradition as well as innovation, poets of various nationalities, eras, and movements are represented in every volume of **PC**. Each author entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that author's work; the length of an entry reflects the amount of critical attention that the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Since many poets have inspired a prodigious amount of critical explication, **PC** is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most significant published criticism to aid readers and students in their research. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors will sometimes reprint essays that have appeared in previous volumes of Gale's Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds fifteen percent of a **PC** volume.

Organization

Each **PC** author entry consists of the following components:

- **Author Heading:** the name under which the author wrote appears at the beginning of the entry, followed by birth and death dates. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and his or her legal name given in parentheses in the lines immediately preceding the Introduction. Uncertainty as to birth or death dates is indicated by question marks.
- **Introduction:** a biographical and critical essay introduces readers to the author and the critical discussions surrounding his or her work.
- **Author Portrait:** a photograph or illustration of the author is included when available.
- **Principal Works:** the author's most important works are identified in a list ordered chronologically by first publication dates. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, original foreign-language publication information is provided, as well as the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.

- **Criticism:** critical excerpts chronologically arranged in each author entry provide perspective on changes in critical evaluation over the years. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type to enable a reader to ascertain without difficulty the works under discussion. For purposes of easy identification, the critic's name and the publication date of the essay are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the journal in which it originally appeared. Publication information (such as publisher names and book prices) and parenthetical numerical references (such as footnotes or page and line references to specific editions of a work) have been deleted at the editor's discretion to enable smoother reading of the text.
- **Explanatory Notes:** introductory comments preface each critical excerpt, providing several types of useful information, including: the reputation of a critic, the importance of a work of criticism, and the specific type of criticism (biographical, psychoanalytic, historical, etc.).
- **Author Commentary:** insightful comments from the authors themselves and excerpts from author interviews are included when available.
- **Bibliographical Citations:** information preceding each piece of criticism guides the interested reader to the original essay or book.
- **Further Reading:** bibliographic references accompanied by descriptive notes at the end of each entry suggest additional materials for study of the author. Boxed material following the Further Reading provides references to other biographical and critical series published by Gale.

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¹David Daiches, "W. H. Auden: The Search for a Public," *Poetry* LIV (June 1939), 148-56; excerpted and reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*, Vol. 1, ed. Robyn V. Young (Detroit: Gale Research, 1990), pp. 7-9.

²Pamela J. Annas, *A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (Greenwood Press, 1988); excerpted and reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*, Vol. 1, ed. Robyn V. Young (Detroit: Gale Research, 1990), pp. 410-14.

Comments Are Welcome

Readers who wish to suggest authors to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editors.

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Aimé Césaire

1913-

(Full name Aimé Fernand Césaire) West Indian poet, dramatist, and essayist.

INTRODUCTION

Césaire is recognized as a major Caribbean poet and dramatist. Best known for his surrealist poem *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, he is also acknowledged as "The Father of Negritude." Defining negritude as "the affirmation that one is black and proud of it," Césaire urged blacks to reject assimilation into white culture and honor instead their racial heritage, a belief that permeates his poetry and essays.

Biographical Information

Césaire was born in 1913 to a poor family on the island of Martinique in the French West Indies. Under the tutelage of his grandmother, he learned to read and write by age four. When he was eleven, he enrolled at Lycée Schoelcher, a leading school in Martinique's capital, Fort-de-France. Upon graduating in 1931, Césaire received a scholarship to study in Paris. While enrolled at the École Normale Supérieure, he, along with Léopold Sedar Senghor and Léon-Goutran Damas, founded *L'étudiant noir*, a student magazine dedicated to uniting blacks and promoting pride in black culture. Although they produced only five or six issues, his involvement with the magazine was vital to the development of negritude. After the publication of *Return to My Native Land* in 1939, he returned to Martinique and immersed himself in politics, serving as mayor of Fort-de-France and as a member of the French National Assembly. Césaire has continued to compose poetry as well as drama and essays, but has written less frequently in recent years due to an increasingly busy political career.

Major Works

Although each of his works has received favorable reviews, none has matched the success of Césaire's first poem, *Return to My Native Land*. Consisting of three movements and covering sixty-six pages, the poem is considered the original statement on negritude, moreover, it evinces the basic tenets of the acceptance of one's blackness and the rejection of white assimilation. The first movement surveys the demoralizing effects of colonialism on Martinique, the second chronicles Césaire's struggle to



free himself from white culture, and the third celebrates negritude.

Critical Reception

As observed by commentators, Césaire's poetic language strongly shows the influence of French surrealists of the 1930s. Like the surrealists, he endeavored to free his writing from the conventions of French literature. Unlike them, however, he infused his poetry with angry images and bitter invectives against Western culture. Some critics see his poetic language as a form of literary violence marked by jarring images and forceful rhythms that assault the reader. Some commentators, in addition to admiring its literary finesse, also praise *Return to My Native Land* for its universal appeal. The poem speaks to people of all color and nationality, they contend, because Césaire's struggle for self-acceptance is a struggle shared by all people. Today, his concept of negritude forms the foundation for black movements across the world. Whether consciously or unconsciously, many black leaders have adopted Césaire's negritude as their rallying cry.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

Les armes miraculeuses 1946
Cahier d'un retour au pays natal [Return to My Native Land] 1947
Soleil cou coupé 1948
Corps perdu 1949
Ferrements 1960
Cadastre 1961
State of the Union 1966
Noria 1976
moi, laminaire . . . 1982
The Collected Poetry 1983
Non-Vicious Circle 1985
La poésie [Poems] 1994

Other Major Works

Discours sur le colonialisme [Discourse on Colonialism] (essay) 1950
Et les chiens se taisaient (drama) 1956
Lettre à Maurice Thorez [Letter to Maurice Thorez] (letter) 1956
La Tragédie du roi Christophe [The Tragedy of King Christophe] (drama) 1963
Une saison au Congo [A Season in the Congo] (drama) 1966
Une tempête: d'après "La tempête" de Shakespeare, Adaptation pour un théâtre nègre [A Tempest: After "The Tempest" by Shakespeare, Adaptation for the Negro Theatre] (adaptation) 1969

CRITICISM

Edward A. Jones (essay date 1970)

SOURCE: "Aimé Césaire," in *Voices of Négritude: The Expression of Black Experience in the Poetry of Senghor, Césaire & Damas*, Judson Press, 1970, pp. 53-62.

[In the following essay, Jones discusses the defining characteristics of Césaire's work.]

In her excellent book on Aimé Césaire and his works, in the *Poètes d'Aujourd'hui* series, Lilyan Kesteloot appraises the extraordinary talent of this Afro-French, West Indian poet as follows:

Je ne vois pas dans l'histoire de la littérature française une personnalité qui ait à ce point intégré des éléments aussi divers que la conscience raciale, la création artistique et l'action politique. Je ne vois pas de

personnalité aussi puissamment unifiée et à la fois aussi complexe que celle de Césaire. Et c'est là, sans doute, que réside le secret de l'exceptionnelle densité d'une poésie qui s'est, à un degré extrême, chargée de toute la cohérence d'une vie d'homme.¹

I do not see in the history of French literature a personality who has so highly integrated such diverse elements as racial consciousness, artistic creation, and political action. I do not see any personality so powerfully unified and at the same time so complex as that of Césaire. And, without doubt, therein resides the secret of the exceptional density of a poetry which has, to an extreme degree, taken on itself all the coherence of a man's life.

Paying eloquent tribute to Césaire's rare poetic gifts in his Préface to Césaire's first major collection, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, the "high priest" of French surrealist poetry, André Breton, who discovered Césaire during a visit to Martinique, has this to say in that Preface, titled "Un grand poète noir" [To a Great Black Poet]:

Et c'est un noir qui manie la langue française comme il n'est pas aujourd'hui un blanc pour la manier. Et c'est un noir celui qui nous guide aujourd'hui dans l'inexploré, établissant au fur et à mesure, comme en se jouant, les contacts qui nous font avancer sur des étincelles. Et c'est un noir qui est non seulement un noir mais tout l'homme, qui en exprime toutes les interrogations, toutes les angoisses, tous les espoirs et toutes les extases et qui s'imposera de plus en plus à moi comme le prototype de la dignité.

A black man it is who masters the French language as no white man can today. A black man it is who guides us today through unexplored lands building as he goes the contacts that will make us progress on sparks. A black man it is who embodies not simply the black race but all mankind, its queries and anxieties, its hopes and ecstasies and who will remain for me the symbol of dignity.²

Just who is this black poet who has elicited such flattering appraisals from persons best equipped to appreciate his genius? To understand Césaire's complexities and the magnitude of his anger, we are reminded by his biographer that one must understand the island which gave birth to him: Martinique, in the French West Indies, where dazzling luxury and wealth on the part of the few (whites) are in sharp contrast with the abject poverty of the masses (blacks)—where hunger, disease, and ignorance stalk the land—where former slavery and present-day exploitation have combined to crush the black masses of the population. This is especially true of Martinique, where Aimé Césaire was born in 1913, ". . . a miniature house which lodges in its guts of rotten wood dozens of rats, as well as the turbulence of my six brothers and sisters, a tiny cruel house whose intransigence infuriates the last days of the month . . ." ". . . une maison minuscule qui abrite en ses entrailles de bois pourri des dizaines de rats et la turbulence de mes six frères et soeurs, une petite maison cruelle dont l'intransigeance affole nos fins de mois . . .").³ His

family was, however, in the "middle" (*moyen*) on the scale of local wretchedness, his father being, for a time at least, an "employee of the lower-echelon government" (*petit fonctionnaire*) in the town of Basse-Pointe.

Even worse than the material poverty afflicting the island was the spiritual and moral bankruptcy resulting from years of domination and exploitation: the complete resignation, loss of the will to resist, and the despair and constant fear of hunger, unemployment, and the like. Moreover, a color elite had developed among non-whites, which further aggravated the real blacks.

Thanks to native intelligence, industry, and promise, Césaire was to be sent to France to pursue his secondary and higher education. The former was acquired at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, in Paris, where he met and began his lifelong friendship with Léopold Senghor. He then attended the Sorbonne and the École normale supérieure, the teacher-training school where to be admitted is an enviable distinction. Like Senghor, he graduated from both and was *agrégé* in literature. It was while Césaire was at the École normale supérieure, in 1935-1936, that this writer met him and introduced him to Sterling Brown via his poetic collection, *Southern Road*. Some years later, Césaire was to become mayor of Fort-de-France, capital of Martinique. After entering politics, he was elected delegate (*délégué*) to the Assemblée nationale in Paris; and in 1946, like Senghor, he was a member of the Assemblée constituante which framed the Constitution for the Fourth Republic in France (1946-1958).

Césaire's bitterness attracted him to the Communist party, a recognized political party in France's multi-party set-up, which he later abandoned. Ultimately, his ardent Communist activities made him somewhat unpopular among literary circles in France, where he still lives with his wife and daughter and continues to write.

A co-founder of *L'Étudiant Noir* in Paris, Césaire was also one of a group of Communist and surrealist West Indian students who founded in 1932 a magazine known as *Légitime Défense*.

Thus this black poet who, in the eyes of another great poet, possesses qualities of soul and genius which brought the two men together in a deep and abiding friendship also possesses a universality of interest and appeal which makes him the voice not only of his native Martinique but of all mankind. Indeed, Césaire's song is a social lament which elicits a ready response from all those who suffer from social, economic, and political injustices.

First of all, Césaire is a poet: he is essentially a singer of songs. His native sense of rhythm and his power to transfigure into poetry the commonest and even the ugliest aspects of life make of him a truly great poet. To quote André Breton again:

... la poésie de Césaire, comme toute grande poésie et tout grand art, vaut au plus haut point par le pouvoir de transmutation, qu'elle met en oeuvre et qui consiste,

à partir des matériaux les plus déconsidérés, parmi lesquels il faut compter les laideurs et les servitudes mêmes, à produire on sait assez que ce n'est plus l'or la pierre philosophale mais bien la liberté.

Césaire's poetry, like any great poetry or art, draws its supreme value from its power of transmutation which consists in taking the most discredited materials, among which daily squalor and constraints, and ultimately producing neither gold nor the philosopher's stone any longer but freedom itself.⁴

Césaire's poetry, whose rhythm is suggestive of the weird and mysterious beat of the tom-tom, is replete with the exotic and luxuriant beauty inspired by the flora and fauna of the tropics. It excels in colorful and vivid imagery.

Behind the exquisite beauty of Césaire's verse there is a profound and prophetic meditation on the social injustices of which his people, especially in Martinique, are victims. The bard of Martinique sings of the wretchedness of colonial peoples and bemoans their exploitation by a handful of European parasites, who, frequently in defiance of the law, set themselves up as cruel, inhuman masters of an unhappy people forced to resign themselves to a status of virtual slavery. He sings of the evils of this system of colonization as they manifest themselves in the daily life and activities of his native island—in poverty, miserable housing, poor health, ignorance, superstition, and prejudice. He sings of "... the hungry West Indies, pitted with smallpox, dynamited with alcohol, stranded in the mud of this bay, in the dirt of this city sinisterly stranded" ("*... les Antilles qui ont faim, les Antilles grêlées de petite vérole, les Antilles dynamitées d'alcool, échouées dans la boue de cette baie, dans la poussière de cette ville sinistrement échouées*").⁵

Césaire's major work, for our purposes, at least, is his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, written in Paris in 1939 on the eve of the poet's return to his native Martinique after completing his work at the École normale supérieure. This work was published in the review *Volonté* in 1939, but it did not attract attention until it was republished by Bordas in 1947. As the young poet makes ready to return to his native soil after a highly successful academic sojourn in Paris, he is haunted by the real and tragic vision of the West Indies afflicted with hunger, disease, alcoholism, and moral turpitude—fruits of a despicable, though doomed, system of economic exploitation and social abuse. He thinks particularly of his native city:

Au bout du petit matin, cette ville inerte et ses au-delà de lèpres, de consommation, de famines, de peurs tapies dans les ravins, de peurs juchées dans les arbres, de peurs creusées dans le sol, de peurs en dérive dans le ciel, de peurs amoncelées et ses fumerolles d'angoisse.

At the end of the dawn, this inert city, with its lepers, consumption, famines, fears hidden in ravines, fears perched in trees, fears sunk in the soil, fears drifting in the sky accumulations of fears with their fumeroles of anguish.⁶

These conditions with which the poet's hometown is afflicted invariably breed social vices and warp human personality and destroy human souls. The poet reflects:

Au bout du petit matin, l'échouage hétéroclite, les puauteurs exacerbées de la corruption, les sodomies monstrueuses de l'hostie et du victime, les coltis infranchissables du préjugé et de la sottise, les prostitutions, les hypocrisies, les lubricités, les trahisons, les mensonges, les faux, les concussions—l'essoufflement des lâchetés insuffisantes, l'enthousiasme sans ahan aux poussis surnuméraires, les avidités, les hystéries, les perversions, les arlequinades de la misère, les estropiements, les prurits, les urticaires, les hamacs tièdes de la dégénérescence. Ici la parade des risibles et scrofuloux bubons, les poutures de microbes très étranges, les poisons sans alexitère connu, les sanies de plaies bien antiques, les fermentations imprévisibles d'espèces putrescibles.⁷

At the end of the dawn, the odd stranding, the exacerbated stench of corruption, the monstrous sodomies of the offering and the sacrificer, the dauntless prowess of prejudice and stupidity, the prostitutions, the hypocrisies, the lubricities, the treasons, the lies, the frauds—the concussions, the breathlessness of half-hearted cowards, the smooth enthusiasms of budding bureaucrats, the avidities, hysterias, perversions, the harlequinades of misery, the injuries, itchings, urticarias, the dreary hammocks of degeneracy. Here the parade of contemptible and scrofulous bubos, the gluttony of very strange microbes, the poisons for which there are no known alexins, the pus of very ancient wounds, the unforeseeable fermentations of species destined to decay.⁸

Further in his dream of his return home, M. Césaire depicts the advent of Christmas in his native city. His reminiscences on this most beautiful of all Christian celebrations are all the more vivid because of the contrasts which they evoke between the economic extremes of the city. He announces the approach of Christmas in high poetic images:

Et le temps passait vite, très vite.

Passés août où les manguiers pavoisent de toutes leurs lunules, septembre l'accoucheur de cyclones, octobre le flambeur de cannes, novembre qui ronronne aux distilleries, c'était Noël qui commençait.

And quickly, time went by.

From August, when the mango-trees were decked with lunulas, to September, midwife of hurricanes, to October, incendiary of sugar canes, then November, purring in the distilleries, and suddenly Christmas was there.⁹

Then he depicts the joy that reigns habitually in the city at Christmas time:

... et le bourg n'est plus qu'un bouquet de chants, et l'on est bien à l'intérieur, et l'on en mange du bon, et l'on en boit du réjouissant et il y a du boudin, celui étroit de deux doigts qui s'enroule en volubile, celui

large et trapu, le bénin à goût de serpolet, le violent à incandescence pimentée, et du café brûlant et de l'anis sucré et du punch au lait, et le soleil liquide des rhums, et toutes sortes de bonnes choses qui vous imposent autoritairement les muqueuses ou vous les distillent en ravissements, ou vous les tissent de fragrances, et l'on rit, et l'on chante. . . .

... the little town is now only a bouquet of songs: you are well inside, you have good things to eat, wine to drink, and there are sausages, one kind is thin as two fingers tightly wound, the other big and dumpy, the soft kind tastes of thyme, the strong of red-hot spice, there is burning coffee and sugary anise, punch with milk, and the liquid sun of rum, and all sorts of good things which despotically work on your mucous membrane, distilling delights or weaving fragrances, and you laugh and sing. . . .¹⁰

But all these good things associated with the celebration of Christmas were reserved for the fortunate few in Basse-Pointe, the poet's native city. The observance of Christmas in the poet's own family contrasted sharply with the affluence and abundance of good things (*bonnes choses*) described above. He remembers his family abode, rat-infested and dilapidated in an ill-smelling, unsanitary street, as the scene of a laborious mother tirelessly pedaling a Singer sewing machine in order to feed her numerous brood, while his indolent, irascible, and sickly father sat idly by. To such people, Christmas was hardly any different from any other day. The poet remembers this scene in these words:

Au bout du petit matin, une autre petite maison qui sent très mauvais dans une rue très étroite, une maison minuscule qui abrite en ses entrailles de bois pourri des dizaines de rats et la turbulence de mes six frères et soeurs, une petite maison cruelle dont l'intransigeance affole nos fins de mois et mon père fantasque grignoté d'une seule misère, je n'ai jamais su laquelle, qu'une imprévisible sorcellerie assoupit en mélancolique tendresse ou exalte en hautes flammes de colère; et ma mère dont les jambes pour notre faim inlassable pédalent, pédalent de jour, de nuit, je suis même réveillé la nuit par ces jambes inlassables qui pédalent la nuit et la morsure âpre dans la chair molle de la nuit d'une Singer que ma mère pédale, pédale pour notre faim et de jour et de nuit.¹¹

At the end of the dawn, there is another tiny house stinking in the narrow street, a miniature house which lodges in its guts of rotten wood dozens of rats, as well as the turbulence of my six brothers and sisters, a tiny cruel house whose intransigence infuriates the last days of the month and my fantastic father chewed by a certain ailment, I never discovered what, my father whom an unanticipated sorcery makes drowsy with melancholy sweetness or exalts to the high flames of anger; and my mother, whose limbs, in the service of our tireless hunger, pedal, pedal, day and night, I am even awakened at night by those tireless limbs which pedal the night, by the bitter punctures in the soft flesh of the night made by the Singer machine my mother pedals, pedals for our hunger day and night.¹²

As the time for the poet's return approaches, he takes inventory of the rupture, which has developed during his stay in France, between him and his people, not only the relatives in the smelly little house but also all men of color similarly situated, and he seeks to repair that rupture. The first step in the process of repair is to destroy his refound cowardice (*lâcheté retrouvée*) which revealed itself to the poet one day when, on a Paris tramway, he had renounced his racial allegiance and solidarity with "a comical and ugly Negro" (*un nègre comique et laid*) whose presence was a source of embarrassment to the poet in the occidental setting so unsympathetic with this comical Negro (an incident described earlier). This impetuous and thoughtless decision was foolish, the poet concludes, and he must accept all that is characteristic of even the most backward of his people, all that has been imposed upon them by years of disease, poverty, and ignorance. All this he must accept as his heritage, and he must identify himself fervently with the cause and fate of Negroes. This he does:

"J'accepte, j'accepte tout cela . . . [toute cette Négritude]. . ."¹³ He accepts the bad along with the good, but he does it in the conviction that the future holds a promise of liberation, of complete and real freedom for his people and for all peoples. He believes that the conquest of liberty has only begun: ". . . but the work of man has only begun . . . and there is room for all at the rendez-vous of conquest" ("*. . . l'oeuvre de l'homme vient seulement de commencer . . . et il est place pour tous au rendez-vous de la conquête*").¹⁴

The Negro, Césaire believes, is destined to have a part in mankind's liberation from "this serfdom of our time," a liberation of mind and body. As a poet, M. Césaire is resolved to fight for the former, and as a politician he is in the thick of the struggle for social and economic liberation. In his poem "A l'Afrique" he looks into his poetic crystal ball and foresees a pestilence that will depopulate the West, and he exhorts the peasants, with a philosophy suggestive of Voltaire's "cultivate your garden" (*cultivez votre jardin*), to continue to strike the earth, identifying himself with the toilers of the land, the tillers of the soil.

The caustic candor and cutting irony of the selection that follows point up the characteristic rage of Césaire when he is forced to defend blacks against the whites who have victimized them, reduced them to a status of social and economic inferiority, and then castigated them for being "inferior," for not having excelled as inventors, discoverers, explorers, philosophers, scholars, and so forth.

Ceux qui n'ont inventé ni la poudre ni la boussole
ceux qui n'ont jamais su dompter la vapeur ni
l'électricité
ceux qui n'ont exploré ni les mers ni le ciel
mais ils savent en ses moindres recoins le pays de
souffrance
ceux qui n'ont connu de voyages que de
déracinelements
ceux qui se sont assoupis aux agenouillements
ceux qu'on domestiqua et christianisa
ceux qu'on inocula d'abâtardissement

tam-tams de mains vides
tam-tams inanes de plaies sonores
tam-tams burlesques de trahison tabide¹⁵

Those who invented neither powder nor compass
those who never tamed steam or electricity
those who did not explore sea or sky
but they know in their innermost depths
the country of suffering
those who knew of voyages only when uprooted
those who are made supple by kneelings
those domesticated and Christianized
those inoculated with degeneracy
tom-toms of empty hands
tom-toms of sounding wounds
burlesque tom-toms of treason.¹⁶

The *Cahier d'un retour* is above all a song, a lament, perhaps the greatest lyrical creation of our time. No lesser than M. André Breton has characterized it as "the greatest lyrical monument of our times" ("*le plus grand monument lyrique de ce temps*").¹⁷

Truly, M. Césaire, equipped with all that he could learn from the white man and his civilization, belongs, at least as far as his literary genius is concerned, body and soul to the vast collectivity of the proletariat, to the millions of laborers whose voice he becomes as he sings their joys and sorrows, their tribulations and aspirations. And Césaire's voice is in truth, as M. Breton has described it, "beautiful as nascent oxygen" ("*belle comme l'oxygène naissant*").¹⁸

As Lilyan Kesteloot puts it, *Le Cahier* is a decisive date in the birth of black consciousness, and it has for twenty years served as a standard for the revolutionary youth of colonized countries,¹⁹ whether in Africa or the West Indies or elsewhere. It may well be studied by black youth today in their efforts to set the current struggle in historical perspective. Alioune Diop characterizes this work as "the sum-total of Negro revolt against European history" ("*la somme de la révolte nègre contre l'histoire européenne*").²⁰

At once an epic and a lyrical poem, it defies classification as a poetic creation. Like the medieval literary form (*chante-fable*), there is an alternation of verse with prose passages. It is unique, resembling only itself. Its surrealism is often hard to penetrate and to interpret. But where its social commentary is clear—which often it is not, thanks to surrealistic verbiage—it is a scathing denunciation of European colonialism and an eloquent apology for the dignity of man and his equality with all his fellowmen.

Notes

¹ Lilyan Kesteloot, *Aimé Césaire* (Paris: Editions Pierre Seghers, 1962), p. 9.

² André Breton, "Preface: Un grand poète noir," in A. Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* [Return to my native land], tr. Emile Snyder (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1956), pp. 14-15.

³ Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* [Return to my native land], tr. Emile Snyder (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1956), pp. 50-53.

⁴ André Breton, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19.

⁵ Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, pp. 30-31.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 39, 41.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 38, 40.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 53.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 50, 52.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 138-141.

¹⁵ Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, p. 111.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

¹⁷ André Breton, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

¹⁹ Translated from Kesteloot, *Aimé Césaire*, p. 25.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

that the reader emerges from Césaire's poetry with the distinct impression of having "felt" and "sensed" rather than "understood" what was intended to communicate.

It appears to me that this rather knotty poetic démarche is not the vainglorious exercise of a young man whose learning has gone into his head but rather reveals the psychological trauma which the poet had to scale in order to verbalize his vision and thought. I am strongly persuaded that Césaire's poetic idiosyncracies, especially his search for and use of uncommon vocabulary, are symptomatic of his own mental agony in the search for an exact definition of himself and, by extension, of his people and their common situation and destiny. The torments and agonies of this quest are reflected not only in the tortuous and intractable syntax of his poetry but also in the rarity of the vocabulary that attempts to capture and objectify that definition. Similarly, every image and symbol, no matter how far-fetched or seemingly unrelated, but that contributes even ephemerally towards this definition by its suggestiveness and or association of ideas, is exploited to the utmost.

This quality of Césaire's imagery and symbols has led students of his poetry to draw a parallel between his poetry and those of his French Surrealist forerunners. And André Breton's salute to Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* as "nothing but the greatest lyrical monument of our times"¹ has only gone to bolster the belief that to understand the character of Césaire's imageries and symbols one must drink deep from the fountain of *The Manifesto of Surrealism*.

Césaire, for his part, of course, does not deny his admiration for and the possible influence on him of the surrealists and the symbolists before them. But it appears unsatisfactory to me to explain the entire character of Césaire's imageries and symbols as the result of the influence of these European predecessors. To get to the root of the character of Césaire's symbols and images we must attempt to penetrate that sacred domain of the mind and psyche in which every image and symbol is born. In a word, we must attempt to fathom the various layers of what Léopold Sédar Senghor calls the poet's subjectivity.²

What then does Aimé Césaire's subjectivity reveal? From reading his poetry and contemplating his personal use of imageries and symbols one arrives at the conclusion that Aimé Césaire, among the best of our poets of French-expression, has, if I may paraphrase Senghor, assimilated but has not been assimilated. In other words, it is clear from his use of symbols and imagery, that despite years of alienation and acculturation he has continued to live in the concrete reality of his Negro-subjectivity. The late Janheinz Jahn, alluded to this phenomenon when in an article, "Rythmes et styles dans la poésie africaine," presented before the 1963 Dakar conference on African literature, he asserted that the main difference between African poets and their European contemporaries is the "... non-European stylistic processes that arise from African traditional poetry ..."³ Although Jahn limited himself to discerning the influence of traditional African rhythmic pat-

Hilary Okram (essay date 1976)

SOURCE: "Aspects of Imagery and Symbolism in the Poetry of Aimé Césaire," in *Yale French Studies*, No. 53, 1976, pp. 175-96.

[In the following essay, Okram examines the relationship between Césaire's imagery and his West Indian heritage.]

If Aimé Césaire's poetry is difficult to understand, as every student of his works is well aware, it appears to me that the difficulty comes principally from three basic factors. Briefly, these are Césaire's use of highly sophisticated vocabulary that bears witness to his solid literary education, his fixation for tortuous parataxic sentence structure and, what on the surface would appear to be, his cavalier penchant for discordant and disparate images and symbols as vehicles for poetic enunciation. The combination of these characteristics gives rise to poetry that is exceedingly personal in form and overtones despite the poet's avowed posture as the voice of the collective conscience of his people. Another consequence of this poetic aesthetics is

terns on the works of our contemporary poets in the absolute neglect of the influence of that same poetic tradition on the character and quality of the images they employ, he did at least make the all important point, namely: that our writers of today, no matter in what European language they write, cannot be divorced from their African roots.

Our poets, therefore, are hybrids who live in two worlds: the world of their Judeo-Christian education and environment; and the world of their African traditions and values. Years of slavery, colonialism, assimilation and acculturation have attempted to re-enforce the former but have scarcely weakened the latter. As Aimé Césaire so succinctly put it in *Et Les Chiens se taisaient*. "In vain have they whitewashed the foot / of the tree, / the sap underneath cries out . . ." It is within this context therefore that we have to view Césaire's poetry in general and his use of symbols and imagery in particular.

And if it is true, as Césaire asserts, that the wonder of poetry comes from the "marvelous contact of internal and external totality seen imaginatively," then it is safe to conclude that his poetic démarche includes a plunge into his black subjectivity to objectify certain qualities which in conjunction with the external world serve as the vehicle for expressing what Jean-Paul Sartre aptly describes in "Orphée Noir" as the realities of "the being in the black world."⁶ And Negro subjectivity, Léopold Sédar Senghor tells us, reveals, among other qualities, a synthetic reasoning process which attempts to unify every phenomenon, being and object by discovering the links that bind them to one another and to man. By contrast Greco-Roman subjectivity perceives the external world through analytical reasoning which separates man from nature in order to control and dominate it. Césaire seems to endorse this view of black subjectivity when in *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* he says this of the black race:

truly the elder sons of the world
porous to all the breath of the world
fraternal space of all the breath of the world
bed without drain of all the waters of the world
spark of the sacred fire of the world
flesh of the flesh of the world
panting with the very movement of the world
tepid dawn of ancestral virtues.

And in *Et Les Chiens se taisaient*, using the symbol of the Architect and the Rebel to represent the white man and the black revolutionary leader respectively, Césaire puts these words in the mouth of the Rebel to describe white subjectivity and what happens when that subjectivity brings its full weight to bear on the external world:

Architect deaf to things, clear like the tree
but closed like an armor every step of yours
is a conquest and a spoliation and a
misinterpretation
and an outrage. . . .
Architect, Orcus without a gate and without a star
without a source and without a budding

Architect of the tail of the peacock, of the step of
cancer, of the blue speech of mushroom and steel
Beware of yourself

It is my view that the unique qualities and seemingly disparate character of Césaire's imagery and symbols come from the role played in his poetry by his Negro subjectivity. And if his poetry attains the height of "memorable speech" the reason is to be found in the imaginative relationships he establishes between that subjectivity, defined as thought-reality, and objective reality defined as the observable and tangible phenomena of his world. Since our examination of Césaire's use of symbols and imagery is based on this premise, a word or two on what constitutes Césaire's subjectivity and the external evidence of his universe will not be out of place.

Césaire has always referred to himself metaphorically as a bastard whose mother is Africa and whose run-away father is France and who has, in consequence, clung stubbornly to the mother that suckled and nourished the infant. He therefore sees himself as an African, a black African, who has never tired of deepening his lien with his black mother. As he says through the Rebel:

I ask for no forgiveness.
With my heart I have raised the ancient gem
the old tinder deposited by Africa in the
very depth of me.

Césaire's subjectivity therefore is first and foremost black African subjectivity for as he tells us "my country is the 'night lance' of my Bambara ancestors," whose affective participation in and synthesis with the "very movement of the world" constitutes their cardinal philosophical essence.

As for the external realities of his universe, Césaire bears the following witness:

My memory is encircled with blood.
My memory is girdled with corpses . . .

[*Cahier*]

And they sold us like beasts, and
they counted our teeth . . . and they
felt our pouches and they examined
the gloss or wrinkle of our skin
and they felt our pulse and they
weighed us and underweighed us
and they slipped around our neck
of tamed beast the necklace of
servitude and sobriquet.

[*Et les Chiens*]

The above is Césaire's representation of the slavery, servitude and dehumanization of his ancestors that preceded the era of current French colonization of his native Martinique. This is the background that explains the present plight of Césaire's island-home which he describes as "flat, tripped by its common sense, inert, out of breath under the geometric weight of its eternally renewed cross, at odds with its fate, mute, baffled, unable to grow in the manner