



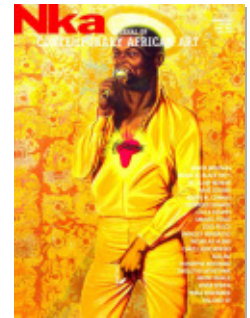
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AIMÉ CÉSAIRE

THE POET'S PASSION

Édouard Glissant

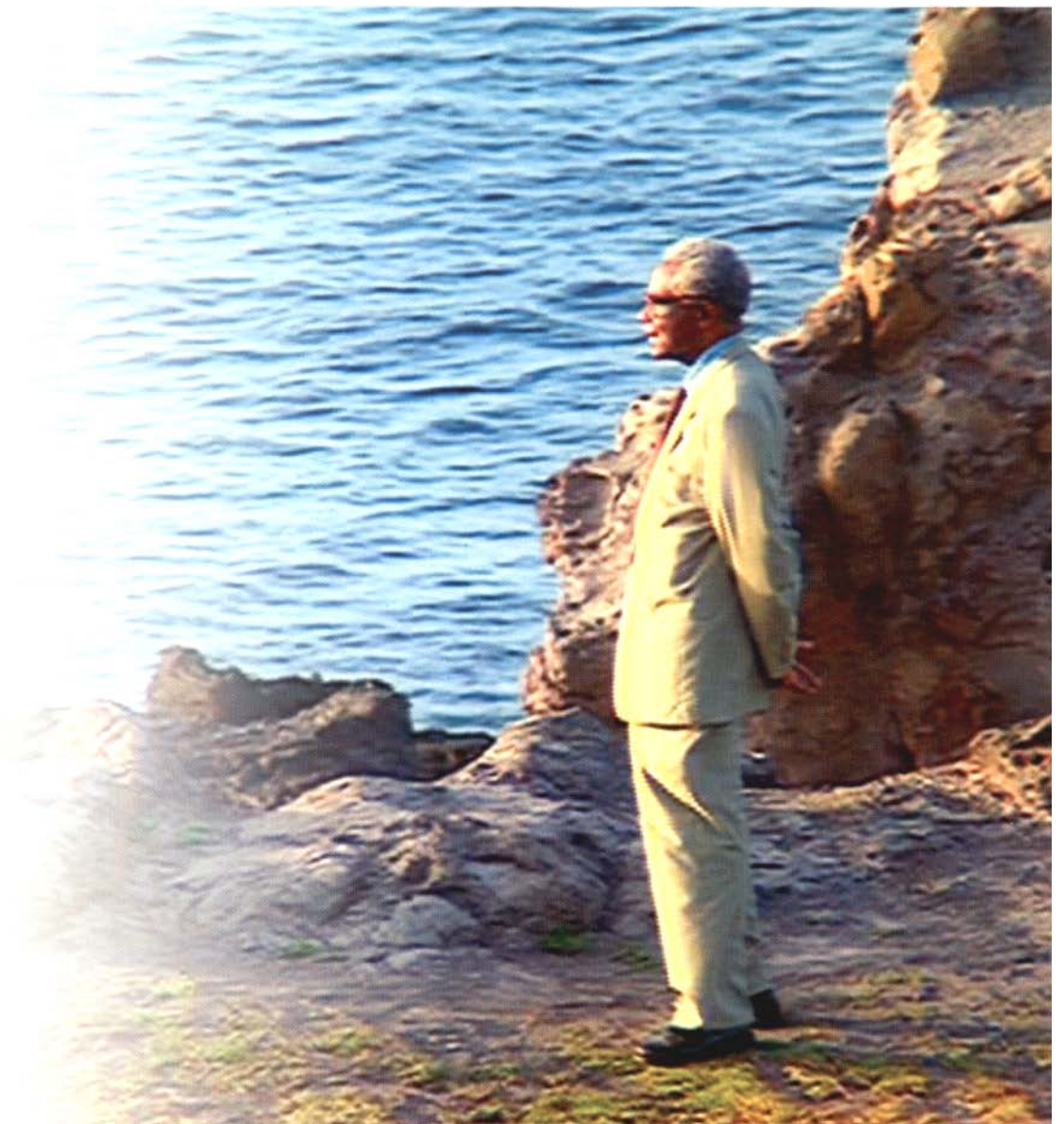
translation by Christopher Winks

The Balata road ascends through Martinique's primal forest until Morne-Rouge and beyond, toward the plateaus of Ajoupa-Bouillon, Lorrain, and Basse-Pointe, where the poet was born, and where you discover and experience "the hysterical grandsuck of the sea."¹ Nobody knows or can say precisely when, on this route, you leave the south of the country, its dry brightness, its tamed beaches, its anxious insouciance, and enter the domain of this north of heavy rains and occasional mists, whose fruits—chestnuts, apricots, and terebinth mangoes—are rich and present, and where in the distance the drummers and storytellers may be heard. There, everyone roots themselves motionlessly in their childhood, as if standing in the red mud that lies in wait to attack the Pérou and Reculée mornes.

But the poet's youth was also marked by peaceful errandries. In the years immediately preceding World War II, he was a student in Paris, having left these mornes in Martinique's north and the Lycée Schoelcher in Fort-de-France. He discovered the so-called Old Continent, but above all he encountered Africa, "gigantically caterpillaring up to the Hispanic foot of Europe, its nakedness where death scythes wildly." Not the explorer's discovery, but that essential part of the son who had returned to the source of his passions and concerns. Among them were Africans, Antilleans, Guyanese, Madagascans, and Reunionese, who at that time made up the colonial intellectual emigrant communities in Paris, itself at the margins of another emigration from the same places, factory workers and sub-proletarians as they were called at the time, and which would subsequently be officially and systematically organized around postwar reconstruction (some will remember the famous

"Bureau of Migration of the Overseas Departments," known by its French acronym as the highly efficient Bumidom, which operated until the end of the 1960s). Aimé Césaire was already a political militant who moved in the circles of the editors of the journals *L'Étudiant noir* and *Légitime Défense*, and who may have attended the meetings at the home of Madame Paulette Nardal, a committed defender of the Antillean and Black personality. He met the Senegalese Léopold Sédar Senghor and the Guyanese Léon-Gontran Damas, forming the inseparable trio of Négritude, but above all—in 1939, in what could be called solitude but in any case through a powerful effort that went unnoticed at the time, published as it was in a provincial journal called *Volontés* that entered into history as a result, he caused to spring forth, as if by dint of a powerful stamping of the foot on the still distant land, the *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*), a work we would immediately place on the level of its precursor of 1917, Saint-John Perse's *Éloges*, and its successor of 1943, René Char's *Feuillets d'Hypnos* (*Leaves of Hypnos*), composed during the French Resistance and among the greatest poems of our age, one which for me carries a deeper meaning well beyond its reputation as a work of political militancy.

Thus, his errantry, in no way erratic, and his discovery of the world were radicalized through a deliberate act: a plunge into the Martiniquan native land, with the following particularities. The *Notebook* is not a realistic, descriptive text, but there is nothing closer to the rhythms, the suffocations, and the pulse of that real; it is not a text of triumphalist exaltation, and yet it was to become a source of inspiration for the African diaspora. It



Film still from *Aimé Césaire: A Voice for the 21st Century*, 2006. Courtesy California Newsreel.

weaves a tragic and in no way complacent poetics of the geography and history of this country that was still unknown to itself, and for the first time in our literature, it marked a communication, a relation, of this same country, with the civilizations of Africa, the histories, at long last known, of Haiti and the Blacks of the United States, the peoples of the Andes and South America, with the sufferings of the world, its passions and its tremors. From this beginning, then, the relationship to Africa would not be sung as something immediately political; it would not proceed from Frantz Fanon's approach, which it would encounter later, nor would it consist, as it did with Marcus Garvey and the Blacks of the United States, in an exchange of populations, another *return* that could have resembled an occupation (of Liberia or Sierra Leone, for example): it would, rather, be a profound poetics of the historical sufferings of the Africas and of the shared knowledge of the world.

These characteristics would appear even more remarkable in that the *Notebook* found a second life, from 1940 to 1943 and 1944, in a Martinique that was cut off from the world, occupied by the sailors of Admiral Robert, the delegate of the Vichy regime, and surrounded by the U.S. fleet of the Caribbean and Atlantic. The poem was enriched by the resistance texts published at that moment by Aimé Césaire and his friends (including his wife Suzanne Césaire and René Ménil) in the journal *Tropiques*, among them a manifesto that even today has been insufficiently considered, "Poetry and Knowledge." In 1941, the journal, along with Césaire's work, was revealed, thanks to a casual glance in a bookstore display window, to André Breton while the French poet was en route to the Americas with a group of artists and intellectuals in flight from the Nazi occupation. During this period, Aimé Césaire wrote some of his most beautiful poems ("High Noon," "Batouque") collected in *Les armes miraculeuses* (*Miraculous Weapons*), a book of telluric power. He joined the French Communist Party, from which he would resign in 1956 (see his "Letter to Maurice Thorez"), and in 1945 was elected Deputy of Martinique for the Party, and later Mayor of Fort-de-France, posts he would occupy for more than fifty years, in the name of the *Parti*

progressiste martiniquais, which he founded after his break with the French Communist Party. Nobody can say whether his political battles were waged to the detriment of his poetic production or not. The simplest opinion would be to say that each supported the other.

His relations with the Surrealists on one hand, particularly his friendships with André Breton and Paul Éluard, and his intimate relations with Léopold Sédar Senghor and the Cuban painter Wifredo Lam on the other, help us understand that what is involved here is a complicity between modern Western poetics, all involving the questioning and the revolution of language, and Black poetics, whose inspirations (the power of rhythm, the marvelous, the lack of restraint, humor, the original fusion and cosmic foundation of the word, along with the procedures of accumulation, assonance, vertigo, etc.) encounter each other without blending into each other. Césaire is only a surrealist because he has founded it in his Négritude, and not the other way around. This Négritude is at the same time an awakening of memory and a premonitory call for a renaissance; to a certain extent, it *precedes* the flowering of the modern Négritudes of the African diaspora, and in this sense it differs from Senghor's, which proceeds from a millenarian community, whose wisdom it encapsulates. Aimé Césaire's poetics is one of volcanoes and eruptions; it is torn from the tangles of consciousness, sailing the waves coursing out of Black suffering, with at moments a surprising tenderness of spring water and a clamor of joy and jubilation.

At times the French reader might reproach him for a lack of moderation, although his is a poetry of true measure, but a measure measuring something unmeasured: the world. The poet is one who brings the beauties of his heritage into accord with the beauties of his becoming in the world. But he has forgotten neither the Plantation (he was born there) nor the slave ship. We can establish a difference from Léopold Sédar Senghor's elegies, bestowed as from a boat slowly moving down the great river of the African land, as well as Léon-Gontran Damas's sharp, grating song, its tortured rhythms welling up from the stench of a stumbling morning on the quays of rusted ports. A sur-

prising dis-symphony of these three Words celebrating source and diaspora, and through which one understands that these poetics have explored the diversities of the world together.

However, the poet's maturity was marked by fertile creations. The books of poetry, *Soleil coupé* (*Solar Throat Slashed*), *Ferrements*, *Cadastrés*, histories and geographies, now and forever sealed within the tragic shudder of the world, up until the final one, *Moi, laminaire* (*I, laminaria*), both laminaria and laminated, which from the depths of so many activities and responsibilities erects the shadowy statue of an essential and irreplaceable solitude. The essays and studies, in particular *Toussaint Louverture*, and the most important of which remains the *Discourse on Colonialism*, where the poet brings to bear his erudition as a graduate of the École Normale Supérieure to dredge up numerous racist statements hidden in the compost of Western elite culture. The deadly accuracy of his phrases. His eloquence as well, which opens forth into anger. Great poets are the greatest pamphleteers.

Aimé Césaire created a body of dramatic work shaped as a whole by tragedy, and which can be approached through *A Tempest*, where, for our benefit, he makes use of Caliban, the (cannibal?) monster of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, as none other than an inhabitant of a Caribbean island conquered by the legitimate Duke of Milan, the repository of all the sciences and of magical and logical knowledge alike. This refutation by Césaire of all legitimization of the principles of colonialism, and of any apologetics for its deeds, serves as a good introduction to his other plays: *The Tragedy of King Christophe* and *A Season in the Congo*, which examine the implacable distortions that often follow struggles for decolonization and sometimes result from such struggles. It has been said that as a completion of this cycle, the poet had intended to write a tragedy about the situation of Blacks in the United States, another aspect of colonization, about its enormous diversity and its incalculable consequences. If tragedy is the resolution of a dissolution, it is fair to consider tragedies by anticolonialist poets—or, stated simply, by poets from the countries of the South—as attempts to resolve this inconceivable dissolution

represented by the act of colonizing and its consequences. The tragic word accompanies this other action, which in turn opposes the colonizer's deed. Suddenly, the monster Caliban is a consciousness. But it also happens that the resolution of the dissolution miscarries, in the architecture of tragedy as in the reality of countries' suffering, and recent history furnishes numerous examples: the formerly colonized adopts the manners, strategies, and injustices of the former colonizer; the passion for power suffocates him and turns him against his people, in Haiti as in the Congo: tragedy is aware of that.

And so the poet stands upright on the terrain of his struggle. Aimé Césaire's presence and interventions at the two International Congresses of Black Writers and Artists, at the Sorbonne in 1956 and in Rome in 1959, remain in memory. Those were the times of arduous liberation struggles in Africa, and what was needed above all was to help these emancipations, but also and already to preserve as much as could be preserved of the African opening, the poetic word, the passion for exchange, the enjoyment of being together in the world, which *Présence Africaine* and its director Alioune Diop had undertaken to defend, and with which Aimé Césaire joined forces with all his strength.

Surrounding the death of poets is an air that more crushing or terrifying misfortunes do not have. This is because we know that a great poet, here among us, has already entered a solitude we cannot defeat. And at the very moment of his departure, we know that even if we were to follow him immediately into the infinite shadows, we would never again be able to see him, or to touch him.

Édouard Glissant is Distinguished Professor of French at The Graduate Center, City University of New York. Born in Martinique and educated in Paris, Glissant's expansive theories of creolization have much to say about an evolving global culture, as well as his native Caribbean.

Note

¹ All translations of quotations from Aimé Césaire's poetry are by Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith.