

# The Black Surrealists

# Francophone Cultures and Literatures

Michael G. Paulson & Tamara Alvarez-Detrell  
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Jean-Claude Michel

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In memory of

André Michel, Gisèle Michel-Peck, Aguy Michel,  
and Jacques Michel.

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## Foreword

Over the years, many colleagues, friends and students, not very well acquainted with French, have urged me to write an English version of my book, *Les Ecrivains Noirs et le Surrealism*.—Edition Naaman: Sherbrooke, Quebec Canada.—That was quite a challenge, when one realizes the arduous problems faced by translators of literary works, especially of poetry.

With this publication, those who have not had the pleasure to read the original texts of the great black French speaking poets and writers will have at least, the opportunity to read the English translation of their writings, and to enjoy the story of their marvelous surrealist adventure.

During this translation, a literal rendering of the texts in prose seemed advisable, and I did so, although this English version involves more than straight translation. Sometimes I have to eliminate a passage because the critic of the French prosody was not accurate in a literal English translation, and thus, new meaningful versions were added. In poetry, I rather attempted to recreate the mood of the French verses in English; nevertheless, some verses quoted in this essay were already translated in more complete and sophisticated Anthologies like the *Negritude poets*, by Ellen Conroy Kennedy. Also translated from French by Ellen Conroy Kennedy, a classic work in this field, is *Black Writers in French*, a literary history of negritude, by Lilyan Kesteloot. I refer with confidence my readers to those publications for further exploration of those writers' works.

I hereby gratefully acknowledge authors, translators, others interpreters, and anthologists of Black French Speaking writers without whom I would not be able to write *The Black Surrealists*.

To increase the usefulness of this essay, a Selected Bibliography has been added at the end. I hope it will provide a practical tool for those seeking access to this poetry in the original French editions translated in English.

J.C.M

Miami, Florida





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## Abstract

*Change life*, wrote Rimbaud, the genial 19-century adolescent poet. *Transform the world*, Karl Marx said. Those two passwords are for us one and the same, proclaimed the surrealist. In this steady persistence to bind poetic revolt and social revolution, man's aspiration to the *merveilleux* and man's legitimate desire to escape social determinism, one must seek the origin of surrealism's impossible quest for the absolute.

More than a poetic art, surrealism attempted rather to be a revolutionary way of life with objectives far surpassing any artistic or literary aspirations. . . .

But in their rebellion against Western civilization, the European surrealists were contesting their own society. That was otherwise serious for their Black counterparts who were subjected to severe restraints and harsh prejudices from this very society.

Above all, those black surrealists were all sharing the same racial memory of the slave ship. They would strive to completely eradicate this hostile society, but merely by means of art, of words, and of metaphors.

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## Introduction

With no intent to minimize the importance of black writers' common concerns it is obvious that the situation has deeply changed nowadays, regarding the era when this cluster of black French speaking poets—reunited by Leopold Sedar Senghor in his *Anthologie*<sup>1</sup>—were singing in unison their negritude and their revolt, along with a vast majority of black poets and writers scattered throughout the America's black diaspora.

The first Pan-African conference organized in London at the dawn of this century, has been a prelude to those hymns of protestation and of racial solidarity. W.E.B. Dubois, who provided the impetus for this Pan-African movement, stood incontestably at the origin of this social and literary African-American rebirth in the U.S.A., which would be magnified with the *Harlem-Renaissance* generation around the twenties. During that period, some leaders of this Negro-Renaissance from the United States, the West Indies and Black Africa used to gather in Paris. A bilingual publication, *La Revue du Monde Noir* (Black World Magazine), edited in the French capital at the time, was the fruit of their intellectual endeavors.

Among the protagonists of this publication, one could find Claude McKay—author of the novel *Banjo*, just out of Paris (1928),<sup>2</sup> Jean Price-Mars—who had just published in Haiti his fundamental work, *Ainsi Parla L'Oncle* (1929—*So Said the Uncle*—), and Felix Eboue—one of the first political leaders from Black Africa. There were also Etienne Lero and those young students from Martinique, who were later to published the review *Legitime Defense* (Paris 1932), only two months after the extinction of *Black World Magazine*. Some years later, the former collaborators of *Legitime Defense*, along with Aimé Césaire, Léopold Senghor, and Leon Damas, would be among the publishers of the magazine *L'Etudiant Noir* (Black Student).

Most of the promoters of those short-lived publications edited in Paris between 1929 and 1937, played a dominant role at the outset of the three cultural and literary movements which had a major influence in the black world: the Negro-Renaissance in the United States, the Indigenism in Haiti, and the Negritude movement. Concerning writers and poets who collaborated in those three movements, one can speak of Black African Literature, Negro-African Literature or other literary qualifications which emphasize on the artists' race but not on their native countries, their continents or their speaking languages. At the time, that was clearly the way this black intelligentsia understood it to be. This is why this particular term of *Negro-African* is used in this essay, although it does not exactly qualify the new reality of present time. This study is limited in time and spans, from the era of the magazine *Legitime Defense* in 1932, to that of the first publication of Senghor's *Anthologie* in 1948. The author will also analyze some recent works, but those writers would have already been known, and their works published within this limited time period. Reference to a later period would be for clarifying some influences, and underlining contradictions or conformities.

One must not be misled by the title and the goal of this present essay. It does not pretend to bind the authors within an artificial classification or to assimilate them with a distinct literature. A constant concern in this study is to make allowances for what does or does not pertain to the European or the French surrealist movement in Negro African literary or artistic works. The attempt is herein made by reviewing works and theories from the French surrealist writers who originated this movement, even though eventually, some of them disavowed their prior creed. Regarding Aragon and Paul Eluard for example, only the early surrealist works of these poets have been quoted.

This essay will mostly deal with poetry, taking into account the primordial value assigned to poetic language by the surrealists. For them, when poetry is freed from all literary restraints, all-logical and moral prejudices, it becomes eminently revolutionary. Such poetry could stimulate realistic dreams or incite to the vision of a New World order, which could induce the readers to get engaged in revolutionary acts of liberation. For the surrealists, the poet must be a leader, among those who have committed themselves in the struggle for a New World of justice and love. This concept of poetry as action, knowledge, and foresight was also the concept held by the majority of Negro-African poets. Proclaimed Senghor: "I had only to name things and elements of my childhood universe in order to predict the future world which would reborn from the ashes of the old

one, and that is the mission of the poet.”<sup>3</sup> About this potential compelling force inherent to poetry, Aimé Césaire told us: “In this poetic climate of fire and fury, money loses its worth, tribunals cease to judge, only the firing-squads still perform their duties: all conventions are voided, a storm of confusions.”<sup>4</sup>

It is essentially in the poetic genre that the negritude movement was revealed and became widely known to the public between the two world wars. This movement became inevitably involved with surrealism, which had already shown itself to be the defender of human rights, and held the belief that poetry was a kind of magical and primitive weapon capable of changing the world as well as mankind’s way of life.

If during this analysis the author has considered some themes in preference to others, that is because those selected themes appear to better express similarities and oppositions. Those choices, by no means, are under the pretext of exhausting such a topic. Moreover, surrealism is made up of a complex set of theories on art, on love, on humor function, on the *merveilleux surrealiste*, on the automatic writing and more. All those theories are difficult to define precisely, and are often derived from the preceding generation. The surrealist poetic images are also found in some works from authors who are clearly alien to the surrealist movement. Furthermore, several passages quoted in this essay, cannot be classified as surrealist, although their authors claimed to be this movement’s followers.

The problem of author’s selection may also appear to be arbitrary. The primary concern in this matter has been to select representative writers and artists most capable of illustrating the topic of this essay. A difficulty encountered was to classify as surrealist a work or an artist, without the author’s approval. In this essay, the first choice of authors as surrealist is of those who claimed to be surrealists at any given period, even if they have repudiated this movement later. The second choice includes authors who have been classified as surrealist by the critics without disapproval from the authors themselves. Therefore, placed in these two categories are the editors of the magazine *Legitime Defense*, Aimé Césaire, Magloire Saint-Aude, René Belance, Paul Laraque and Hamilton Garoute. Senghor’s statement on surrealism are mitigated, and even if this author occasionally adopts the surrealist style of writing he has not been really affected by the spirit of this movement. Leon Damas used to frequent the surrealist milieu in Paris, but he cannot be classified as one. Jacques Roumain, with his astounding surrealist poetic images, is an example of those poets, completely alien to surrealism. Réne Dépestre never claimed to be a

surrealist, but he affirmed himself sharing the same aesthetical views on poetry that the surrealist Aimé Césaire held. Beside, Dépestre's *Arc-en-Ciel pour un Occident Chretien* (A Rainbow for the Christian West), with its symbolic substract derived from voodoo mythology, is the best illustration of the *merveilleux* surrealist. The magazines *Legitime Defense* and *Tropiques* were two black publications, which pledged allegiance to the surrealist movement.

If this essay is mostly limited to the black Francophone poets, it is because surrealism was indeed, quite a Parisian movement, and had little influence on the black writers from the English, Spanish, or Portugese speaking countries. Surrealism spread quickly in Western Europe; however, London, Madrid, and Lisbon did not play the same intellectual catalytic role for their former colonies, as Paris did for the French colonies and other Francophone countries.

The Afro-Hispanic and the Afro-Brasilian authors find their source of inspiration mainly in their local folklore. These authors express themselves better in the genre of short stories or novels rather than poetry. Some verses of the *Black Portuguese Speaking Poets* presented by Mario de Andrad in his *Anthology*<sup>5</sup> possess surprising surrealist accents, but it would be fallacious to discern in those poets' works any surrealist influences. Besides, among the LatinoAmerican poets who have adopted surrealism, none have ever claimed any racial particularity.

As for the African-American poets, aspiring to develop a direct contact with their people, they generally prefer an easy reading style. This same style of writing is also evident in Nicolas Guillen's works that originated a renaissance of popular poetry in Cuba. Except for the black French-speaking writers, the Negro-African authors would not have resort to surrealism in their search for a peculiar writing style suitable to their own feeling and their dissension. The black Francophone authors most of them bilingual—manifest a kind of complexity with regard to French language, because of their resentment for having to use the medium of expression of their former colonizers rather than their native dialects. Molded in the French linguistic tradition of strict construction, the black Francophone writers have to find their own medium of appropriate diction through which they can image their peculiar universe, and still manage to speak persuasively to an hostile non-Negro audience, as the surrogates for their entire race.

In its attempt to combine all systems and disciplines within a single concept, surrealism encroached on some domains formally reserved to science, politic and philosophy, but not to the realm of literature. In this

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analysis of relationships between surrealism—with its excessive ambition—and the works of the black writers and artists, the author do not pretend at all to exhaust such a topic, and he apologizes therefore for omissions and disregards, particularly where science, politic and philosophy are concerned.

## Notes

1. Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Anthologie de la Nouvelle Poésie Nègre de Langue Française*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948).
2. Claude McKay, *Banjo* (Paris: Rieder, 1928).
3. L.S. Senghor, *Postface aux Etiopiques*, in *Les Etiopiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1956), p. III.
4. Aimé Césaire, *Poésie et Connaissance*, Excerpt from a lecture delivered in Haiti (1944), quoted in *Tropiques* no 12 (January 1945), Martiniques.
5. Mario de Andrade, *Poètes Noirs d'Expression Portugaise*: in review *Europe* (January 1961).



## Chapter 1

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# The Surrealism Spirit

It is rather restrictive to associate any racial classification—white or black surrealist—with a movement which was always aspiring to be international, without frontiers, and even more limitless in time and space.

The surrealist voice that shook Cumae, Dodona and Delphi is nothing more than the voice, which dictates my less irascible speeches to me [. . .] A good number of poets could pass for surrealists, beginning with Dante, and in his finer moment, Shakespeare[. . .].<sup>1</sup>

Thus, for André Breton, one of the promoters and the moving spirit of this movement, the surrealist's state of mind extends deeply into the spectrum of history. The peculiar manifestations of this earlier surrealism, although fortuitous, would express, nevertheless, those everlasting transcendental attitudes of human being: revolt against a worthless life, tireless quest for freedom and happiness, exaltation of desire and love. The surrealist's ambition would be to make permanent for mankind, those feeling which were confined and occasional in previous times. Beyond its literary aims, surrealism aspired to nothing less than to free the human race from all the restraints and *servitude* inflicted upon him by an utilitarian civilization; thereby, to restore mankind's *true condition*.

By denying resolutely reason, logic and intelligence, surrealism would attempt to recover those unexploited inner-richnesses, which were concealed in the very regions of surreality: human's depth of unconsciousness, his primitive instincts, and his dreams. From a philosophical standpoint, André Breton defined surrealism this way:

Surrealism rest on the belief in the highest reality of certain hitherto neglected forms of association; in the omnipotence of dreams; in the disinterested play of thought. It tends to destroy definitively other psychical mechanisms and to substitute itself for them in the solution of life's principal problem.<sup>2</sup>

Because art is the best way to express this *highest reality*, it was imperative that the artist completely submits himself to his unconsciousness and inward desire set free. The submission to *automatic writing* or *thought writing*, allowing writers and poets this tremendous quest within themselves. Thus, the work created would be more than a literary or aesthetic one, but rather an evocative insight of a deeper self: a re-creation. In order to reach this utter liberation of mind, it became necessary to get rid of all aesthetic limitations, all the ethic prejudices of a civilization, which in the name of Christian humanism permitted war and its atrocities, admitted colonialism and its consequences, and allowed the exploitation of the mass by a privileged class.

It would be the privilege of the Dada movement—which preceded and originated surrealism—to proclaim the end of this civilization in bankruptcy.

No more painters, no more writers. . . no more religion, politics, armies, policies  
 . . . no more nations, no more of these idiocies, no more anything, Nothing,  
 Nothing' [. . .]<sup>3</sup>

This *Nothing*, a thousand times repeated over and over in others Dada's manifestoes, was an accurate qualification for this meaningless word: *Dada*. The founder of this movement, Tristan Tzara, opening a dictionary at a random page, found the word *Dada*—Baby talk onomatopoeia—and thus, the name of this movement. In a total revolt, the *Dadaists* intended to bring to an end all previous cultures and traditions. To the assertion of a traditional social order, *Dada* would oppose the anarchic freedom of a spontaneous life after the universal destruction.

I destroy the drawers of the mind and those of social order: demoralize everywhere and throw down heaven's hands in the hells . . . Freedom Dada, Dada, scream of shooting pain, intermingling of opposites of all ludicrous antinomies and inconsistencies: Life.<sup>4</sup>

It was under such a patronage that surrealism affirmed its strength at the beginning, and that Tristan Tzara, André Breton, Aragon, Paul Eluard—just to cite some famous promoters of this movement—launched out provocations, and scandals, just for shocking the bourgeois establishment.

Indeed, that was an anarchic venture deeply tainted with nihilism, but it was merely a speculative enterprise, which never translated into action. The protagonist of *Dada* never went beyond provocations and rethoric. Nevertheless, one must not see in Dadaism, only a snobbism of intellectual's *petits-bougeois* or a means of expressing youthful revolt and rejection.

We must understand the compelling forces behind the motivation of those young intellectuals, when during their *Provocation Performances*, they wanted to depreciate art, literature, and to ridicule the establishment. By scorning society's values, those young idealist attempted to created a very opposite world than the decaying one of their forefathers who could justify a world-war, and its host of atrocities. A remarkable study, *Dada in Paris*,<sup>5</sup> makes a chronology of this movement which came into existence simultaneously in Switzerland and America, and from there, spread out to most of the European countries between 1915 and 1934. This movement, from the author's viewpoint was far from negative.

In spite of their firm determination to call everything in question, they bring us back from their voyage to the end of revolt, a discovery even unknown to their authors themselves: in matter of art and literature there is no integral nihilism. All negation is accompanied by a spontaneous affirmation, all destruction leads to a construction.<sup>6</sup>

Deliberately or not, the Dadaists did not intend to perpetuate any artistic or literary tradition. Moreover, in their insistence of radical destruction, they never anticipated to build a new world on the ruins of the outdated one. The surrealist ambition would be to hasten the advent of this new world order, and to shape up the new man suitable to such a society. With time, the surrealists would evolve, but at the beginning, they were merely those revolted idealists who were striving to destroy, thanks to the power of thought and words, all those restraints impeding human being's *spontaneous life*: religion, family, nation, logic, virtue and more. The entire submission to dream, and to *pure psychic automatism* allowing the exploration of those taboo regions of unconsciousness—beneath man's apparent consciousness—belonging to the *true-self*.

In fact, the surrealists were not the first to formulate this chimerical objective of recovering the original power of the mind by means of words. Neither were they the first to manifest this constant determination for mankind's spiritual emancipation, thanks to the omnipotence of language and thought. Novalis—a German Romantic writer—with his *Magical Idealism* concept aspired as well to reach this impossible blending of dream and life—He would commit suicide—. Gerad de Nerval also was yearning after this poetic illusion. Wrote André Breton in his first manifesto: "It appears, in fact, that Nerval possessed to a tee, this state of mind with which we claim a kinship."<sup>7</sup>

The surrealists were inspired as well by Baudelaire; the poet of *Correspondences* who believed that an *unspeakable reality* was concealed

behind this *forest of symbols* (words). Rimbaud, the poet of *illuminations*, one of the firsts to be engaged in the exploration and formulation of this infinite abyss of unconsciousness, directed the surrealists toward the road to the absolute. This *I* who for Rimbaud was someone else, would be for the surrealists that very power to which poets and artists might submit themselves entirely, in their effort to recover this ultimate reality. Following the seer of a *Saison en Enfer* (Season in Inferno),<sup>8</sup> the surrealists would also attempt to express the inexpressible, depicting hallucination through *alchemy of language* in order to reach this wonderland glimpsed by Rimbaud during his spiritual enlightenment. From this poet, they would learn also that when expressing a more dynamic reality, *poetry must lead somewhere*.<sup>9</sup>

All the surrealists glorified the work of Lautréamont, and this poet was celebrated as the *archangelic precursor*. The inspiration of the *Chants de Maldoror* stood for the surrealists as an obvious proof of automatic writing's efficacy. Lautréamont's delirious poetic works, exciting revolt against God, society and human condition, appeared to the surrealists as going far beyond the domain of words to become a lifetime experience. For Aimé Césaire, Lautréamont's poetic work was displaying the most lucid revolt: "The truth is Lautréamont had only to stare at the iron man molded by the capitalist system in order to apprehend its common heroic monster,"<sup>10</sup> asserted Césaire. "Lautréamont the first to understand that what leads to poetry is the road to excess, the breach of all limitations." Replied Breton. Lautréamont's sumptuous poetic metaphors might have fascinated those magicians of words for whom the very term of surrealist implied a certain quality of the literary images. Stated Aragon on this matter: "The vice called surrealism, is the immoderate and passionate use of outstanding literary images."<sup>12</sup>

The surrealist would learn from Alfred Jarry's irritating and macabre character of his play *Ubu*, that art's subversive function finds its highest form of expression in *black humor*. The word *surrealist* came from Apollinaire's burlesque play, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, which he described himself as a *surrealist drama*. In their tireless quest for the *ultimate life*, the surrealist would rely upon the psychoanalysis investigations of Sigmund Freud who made evident—in the early 19 century—the importance of unconsciousness, of sexuality, of desires, of dreams, and their influences on human behavior. In order to strengthen their creed, the surrealists would refer to several different concepts. They adopted Karl Marx's socio-economic theories as their own, and embraced Engel's notion of *objective chance* (Term used by Engel to describe the unpre-

dictable and seemingly illogical forces controlling a succession of events). One must understand that subjectivity, surrealism's essential value, could not be associated with Marxist objectivity. In fact, all those poets, scientists, and philosophers to whom surrealism claimed a kinship, had very little relationships among themselves. Nevertheless, aspiring to unify all the opposites, surrealism could pretend to combine all philosophies in a single formulation, which might apply to the whole human condition. For André Breton, the previously accepted contradiction between reality and dream, poetry and science was a false dichotomy. He would state in his second manifesto:

Everything suggests that there is a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, the height and the depth, cease to be perceived contradictory. Now, it is vain that one would seek other motivating forces for surrealist activity than the hope of finding and fixing this point.<sup>13</sup>

It became simultaneously possible by determining this ultimate point to eliminate all those contradictions restricting human activities, thereby, reinstating man's creative powers. In this denial of all limitations to man's living condition one can find surrealism's first motivation in its impossible quest of infinite expansion of reality. 'I avoid adapting my existence to the present worthless human condition, claimed Breton in *Confession Dédaigneuse*.<sup>14</sup> Build a word suitable to man's immeasurable size,<sup>15</sup> added Paul Eluard. However, if it was exalting to build this new world, the surrealists, nevertheless, were compelled to be heard only in their inner circle of privileged followers. Their opponents would rightly charged them of verbalism and of idealism. The strongest and best-formulated accusation came from a former surrealist, Pierre Naville, who specified on this matter:

[. . .] Moral scandals instigated by the surrealist did not necessarily imply a destruction of intellectual and social values: the establishment does not have any fear of them. The establishment easily absorbs them.<sup>16</sup>

Answering the question what can the surrealist do, Naville added that 'they can either persevere in a negative attitude of anarchic order, or resolutely take the revolutionary path, the Marxist one.' In fact, it was absurd to advocate *La révolution d'abord et Toujours*<sup>17</sup> (Revolution first and always) just with inflammatory words, but without any political action. Naville's alternative was clearly expressed, and by adopting his second solution, the surrealists all together joined in the French Communist Party. Even under such a commitment, and contrary to the marxist

orthodox view on that matter, Breton defining the poet's new role in this oncoming society could still allege: "The poet of the future will overcome the depressing idea of action contrary to dreams."<sup>18</sup>

As we see it, surrealism wanted not only to be a poetic art, but also a revolutionary philosophy of life. Having started from a rather mystical idealism of the omnipotence of spirit over matter, the surrealists arrived—at least in theory—at materialism in things themselves. They understood art as a building process, not as an individual statement of existence as it is, but as an addition to it. More than an art, surrealism strived to be—a way of life as Andre Breton specified it—with a triple objective far surpassing literary aspiration: to transform the world, to change life, and to re-make from scratch human understanding.

In this steady persistence of binding poetic revolt and social revolution, man's aspiration to the *merveilleux* and man's desire to escape social determinism, one must seek the origin of the insatiable and uncertain quest of the surrealist adventure. Adventure understood in its literal sense of hazardous, groping, but also exalting enterprise. *Transform the World*, said Marx *Change Life*, said Rimbaud. 'These two passwords are for us one and the same' <sup>19</sup> Breton proclaimed. But which one has precedence? The answer to this interrogation would originate within the surrealist movement, all those spectaculars breaking of bounds, those violent ex-communications from Breton and at the end the dissolution of the original surrealist group.

Unquestionably, the emotional factor inherent to surrealism doomed Breton's followers to disagreements and disunions. But in fact, those divergences were rather ideological than emotional. The problem above all, dwelt with the impossible conciliation of the Marxism's equalitarian concept, and the exalted individualism concept of surrealism, the impossible alliance of strictly political and social doctrine with a philosophy aspiring to embrace all concepts, but was unable to promote a single one. Undoubtedly, it was illusive to pretend binding up Marx and Rimbaud without yielding a priority to one of them. On that matter, Breton was unwilling to accept any concession when he wrote:

The inspiring life of the proletariat in its struggle, the stupefying and destructive life of the mind, a pray to its own beast: for our part, it will be worthless to side with only one of these two distant dramas. Let no one expect any concession from us in this domain.<sup>20</sup>

The breaking off between the surrealists and the communist party would be definitive in 1935, although some former surrealists—like Aragon and Eluard—preferred to side with communism. For Breton, the main

reason for this separation was that 'art could not accept without decadence, neither to obey an alien direction nor to receive with consent, the frame-work that people pretend to impose for pragmatic and short-sighted reasons.'<sup>21</sup>

However, despite Brenton's opposition to absolutism, he would always defend the causes of the left, and would be in the side of the victims of whatever causes. For him in fact, the divergences between surrealism and communism dwelt merely on ethical and esthetical problems. Later Aimé Césaire, one of the first Negro-African surrealist poet recognized as such by Breton himself, would quit the French Communist Party (FCP) for another reasons. Nevertheless, Aimé Césaire was not the first black Francophone writer pledging allegiance to marxist surrealism; some elders had already preceded him in that path. André Thiron related in his autobiographical book *Révolutionnaires sans Revolution* (Revolutionaries without Revolution):

During all of 1932, there was an affluence of new adherents coming from the West Indies; first Jules Monnerot and those recruited by him . . . Aragon defection did not have any negative effect.<sup>22</sup>

It was during the time of surrealism's activist period, also the time of Aragon's disavowal of this movement on behalf of the French communist Party. It seems that these new recruits coming from Martinique intended to stay outside of the internal dissension of their Parisian colleagues (The importance of this decision is emphasized in chapter II). The adhesion of these young blacks from this French colony (Now Martinique is a French Overseas Department) to the Parisian Surrealism cenacle would be a decisive factor in the history of Negro-African Francophone literature. Reckoning from this period, this literature will be quite different. At the time of this adhesion, most of the surrealist, inspite of their infighting and personal dissension, sincerely believed in the perfect accord of their movement with communism. *Change Life* by the irruption of irrationality and *merveilleux* in daily existence, and thereby inducing human being to unveil himself in his authenticity; *Transform the world* by a revolution which would destroy society's out-dated socio-economic structures, and lead to mankind's liberation from exploitation, poverty and racism. Beyond surrealism diversity of definitions and goals, it was particularly this message that reached those young bourgeois from Martinique who were students in Paris at that time.

Speaking of surrealism and its influences on these young blacks, Senghor wrote that this movement was 'all at once a school and a teacher, for them surrealism possessed and universal value of discovery.'<sup>23</sup> This

judgment has to be attenuated. Those young Martinicians had truly a great deal to obtain from surrealism. They had learned among other teaching from Breton, that 'a *man*'s existence must be understood the way he is willing to accept the unacceptable human condition.'<sup>24</sup> Black condition at this time was just tragic. In extreme case, even this very condition of being a human was denied to this race.

Nevertheless, in their denunciation of injustice and bigotry, their quest for a new identity and for authentic values, surrealism would not have been a mere solution to the problems faced by these young West Indians. Surrealism would have only crystallized those concepts previously formulated in the work of many Negro-African authors from the black diaspora of the Americas.



## Notes

1. André Breton, *Manifeste du Surrealism* Paris: Gallimard, 1977., p.38.
2. Ibid.
3. Tristan Tzara, *Sept Manifestes Dada* (Paris: J.J. Pauvert, 1963), p. 9.
4. Ibid.
5. Michel Senouillet, *Dada à Paris* (Paris: J.J. Pauvert, 1965).
6. Ibid., p. 429–430.
7. A. Breton, *Manifeste du Surréalism*, op. cit., p. 36.
8. Arthur Rimbaud, *Alchimie du Verde*, in *Saison en Enfer*.
9. A Breton, *Les Chants du Maldoror* In *les Pas Perdus* (Paris: Gallimard-Idee) p. 69.
10. Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le Colonialisme* (Paris: Pesence Africaine, 1950), p. 53.
11. André Breton, *Un Grand Poete Noir*, *Pérface of the Cahier d'un Retour D'Aimé Césaire* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1971), p. 27.
12. Aragon, *Le Paysan de Paris* (Paris: N.R.F., 1926).
13. A. Breton, *Second Manifeste du Surrealisme*, p. 76–77.
14. A Breton, *Confession Dedaigieuse* in *Les Pas Perdus* (Paris: Gallimar-Idee), p. 8.
15. Paul Eluard, *L'Evidence Poetique* (Paris: G.L.M., 1937).
16. Pierre Naville, *Que Peuvent Faire les Surrealistes*, quoted by Maurice Nadeau in *Histoire du Surrealisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1967, p. 33.
17. *La Révolution d'Abord et Toujours*, quoted in *Histoire du Surrealisme*, op. cit., p. 218.
18. A. Breton, *Les Vases Communicants* (Paris: Gallimare, 1955, p. 169.
19. A Breton, *Position Politique du Surrealisme* (Paris:).
20. A Breton, *Au Sujet de la Mort de Majakowsky*, in *Point du Jour* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970, p. 183).
21. A. Breton and D. Rivera, "Pour un Art Révolutionnaire".
22. André Thiron, *Révolutionnaires Sans Révolution* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1972), p. 353.

23. Lilyan Kesteloot, Letter from Senghor, quoted in *Les Ecrivains Noirs de Langues Francaise* (Belgique: Université Libre de Bruxelles. Doctoral thesis presented in (February 1961), p. 44.
24. A. Breton, *Clairement in les pas Perdus*, op. cit.

## Chapter 2

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# The Magazine *Légitime Défense*'s Allegiance to Surrealism

### A Criticism of the West

I say that the revolutionary flame burns where it delights in, and it is not up to a small band of men (French Communist Party), in this period of transition in which we are living through, to decree that this flame can burn only here or there.<sup>1</sup>

This clear rectification is an excerpt from an article entitled *Légitime Défense*, written by André Breton in 1926, to assert his position vis à vis the French Communist Party (FCP). In this article, Breton reiterated his adhesion to the principle of socialist ideology, while denying to the Communist Party the monopoly of revolution. In the name of surrealism, he even yielded to insulting language against the literary director of *L'Humanité*. (Official newspaper of the French Communist Party). Nevertheless, Breton all together with the surrealist leaders adhered *Au grand Jour*<sup>2</sup> (In Broad Light) to the FCP the following year. However, Breton would always uphold his initial position regarding the FCP; for him, just a positive surrealist state of mind—an absolute nonconformist attitude for which revolt is the only mean of regeneration—was sufficient to acquire this requisite *Etat de Grâce Revolutionnaire* (Revolutionary Blessing). Thereby, Breton could still maintain: “In the meantime—that the revolution succeed—it is no less necessary, as we see it, for the experiment of the inner life to continue without any external control, even a Marxist one.”<sup>3</sup>

Thus, when Breton made allegiance to orthodox communism, he never gave up his original ambition to conciliate both surrealism and communism activities. In theory, those new surrealist adherents from Martinique seemingly adopted the same position, and using the title of Breton's article, they published at joint expense a quarterly publication: *Légitime Défense*.<sup>4</sup>

'Should this little magazine—a temporary tool—fail, we would find other weapons', clearly anticipated the coeditors of this thin review of twenty-four pages. However, the subscription form printed in the last page France and Colonies, 15 *francs*; Foreign, 17 *francs*—proved in, the contrary, the initial ambition of the team to persevere in their joint venture. But the circumstances would otherwise decide: *Légitime Défense* would only have a single issue and this team would be disbanded.

In spite of its short-lived existence, the impact of this magazine's message upon a new generation, especially upon the African students just arriving in Paris at that time would surpass all expectations. Although the redactors of *Légitime Défense* did not leave any important literary works, it was up to them to inaugurate under this surrealist and communist patronage, a new way of thinking, which would deeply change the trend of black Francophone literature. The foreword at the first page of *Légitime Défense*, more than an introduction, was an impassioned oath of allegiance:

We raised up in this magazine, against all of those who are not suffocated by this capitalistic and bourgeois society . . . The communist party is leading everywhere in the world a decisive and vital struggle. A communist defeat—if against all probability we consider it—will be for us the final ' je n'en peux plus ' (I am knocked down). On tangible matter of figurative method for translating human expressions, we accept without reservation surrealism, to which—in 1932—we bind up our future [. . .]

This unconditional pledge of allegiance is however subject to some reservations, if one considers the indicative date (in 1932) deliberately included in the last sentence. In March 1932, the *Aragon Affaire* was over, and at this time, this writer had already repudiated surrealism on behalf of communism. Despite this fact, *Légitime Défense* that came out in June 1932, also praised in its editorial Aragon's teaching and his entire works:

[. . .] And we refer our readers to both the manifestoes of André Breton, to the entire works of Aragon, Breton. René Clevel, Salvador Dali, Benjamin Peret, Tristan Tzara, about whom we must say that it is a shame , they are not better known wherever French is spoken.<sup>6</sup>

It was obvious that those new followers intended to keep their autonomy from the Parisian surrealist's inner circle. While naming their magazine after Breton's article those young West Indians by no means chose a complete integration into the French surrealist movement. They

had too many distinct requests to advocate, and too many different rights to fight for. In addition to surrealism's literary purpose, those young blacks are above all attracted by the revolutionary aims of this movement, its determination to subvert completely Western civilization's values: the Dadaist legacy. There, surrealism had to encounter communism, likewise urging revolution and preaching the advent of a new society. It was Marxism indeed, which directed the protagonists of *Légitime Défense* to surrealism, under the leadership of Jules Monnerot, a sincere Marxist believer at this time. A historian of the surrealist adventure, André Thorn, gives an account of this fact: "[. . .] Both of those young men (Caillois and Monnerot) came to surrealism in the midst of an economic crisis, while every one believed that the moving spirit of this movement was above all communism."<sup>7</sup> It will be seen further that the Marxist contribution in the magazine *Légitime Défense* will be more conclusive than its surrealist inspiration. One can understand why the name of Artaud, Soupault and Desnos, who were against any political involvement of surrealism, did not appear among those proposed as role models by the redactors of this review.

The preface proclaiming *Légitime Défense's* manifesto was undersigned in alphabetical order by all the redactors: Etienne Lero, Thelus Lero, René Menil, Jules Monnerot, Michel Pilotin, Maurice Sabbat, Pierre Thésée, Pierre Yoyotte.<sup>8</sup> However, some facts subsequent to the publication of *Légitime Défense*, convince that the team leader was Monnerot. At that time, he was rather ideologically sided with Aragon's communist orthodoxy than with Breton's restrictive adhesion to the FCP. One could find Monnerot with Aragon and Tzara, managing the magazine *Inquisition* (1936)<sup>9</sup> voice of the *Front Populaire*, a socialist French coalition, obedient to the left. Furthermore, René Ménil would also corroborate Monnerot's leadership in the magazine *Tropiques*. In the sixth issue of this magazine, an article paradoxically entitled *In Memoriam*,<sup>10</sup> praised Monnerot in these terms:

Jules Monnerot was for the sole light begotten by our country. He compelled us to clearly see our condition, not be in despair for it, but instead to boldly hope anything from this very condition . . . In a more convenient time, we shall publish a substantial study, asserting accurately the considerable leading role performed by this bright lawyer . . . this historian of our colonial misery. He symbolizes the link between our generation and the one of our great ancestors . . .<sup>11</sup>

René Ménil, the author of this pretended funeral oration would explain some years later the reason behind this strange behaviour, as a way to

turn around the censorship of their review during the German occupation. Declared Menil: "Since marxism was outlaw, we wrote a funeral orate to do homage to Jules Monnerot, promoter of the Martinican communist party, The function of this message was to enunciate as well as to conceal our marxist belief."<sup>12</sup> There will be no substantial study neither in *Tropics* nor elsewhere about Monnerot, whom in the meantime had disavowed his Marxist and surrealist credo. One of his book, *Demarxiser l'Université*<sup>13</sup> (Keep Marxism off the French Universities), is a positive proof of his new ideological orientation.

By recalling those facts, I try to underline the major influence of Marxism on *Légitime Défense* movement. Nevertheless, the surrealist inspiration, although secondary, was not insignificant: quite to the contrary. For both Breton and the team of *Légitime Défense*, there were no contradictions between poetic revolt and social revolution. Those young Morticians also intended to change life thanks to the alchemy of language, the mystic of eroticism and the exploration of the psyche. They could proclaim with lyricism:

We intimate that everyone projects upon human psyche concretions, a light akin with the one magnificently enlightening Salvador Dali's convulsive figurative works, from which it seems sometime that some birds of love fly away of the rotten conventionalities.<sup>14</sup>

These Young blacks believed as well in the imminence of a social revolution. They could candidly proclaim that they believe without reservation in its triumph and would comply with the discipline such convictions require. However, if for the Parisian surrealists the *stupefying life of the mind* and the working people's life in its struggle were both a single drama, for the Martinicans there was a third more tragic one. They were black men in a society belonging to the white men; second class citizens of a republic presumably based on equal rights. Idealists from middle-class as well as their European colleagues, sharing the same culture, the same moral values and some common concerns, all those affinities clearly demonstrated that this assimilated society was theirs. But it was 1932, at the apogee of colonialism, and at this time, any indications announcing the approaching end of this unjust system. Furthermore, recalled Breton:

Going further back a few generations away, there is slavery, and the wound that encompasses the greatness of lost Africa, is ripped open again. It rekindles ancestral memories of the abominable treatment endured and the awareness of the monstrous and irreparable injustice inflicted upon an entire race.<sup>15</sup>

This African legacy was burdened with traumas. Undoubtedly, at this time many ethnologists and scholars had already rationally proved the equality of races.—Almost with the same arguments previously objected many decades ago by a Haitian scholar,<sup>16</sup> against the race supremacist theories of Renan and Gobinau—. <sup>17</sup> That were of little importance: racial prejudice as well as human emotions are often irrational. Even if France was the least racist minded country at this time—as one said—<sup>18</sup>, this degree in racism was not sufficiently effective, because France's latent racism and collective hysteria was also a legacy. 'The enduring myth of the bad Negro is part of the collectivity's consciousness'<sup>19</sup> wrote Franz Fanon a native of Martinique. Perhaps some intellects were able to free themselves from this unconscious attitude; but there were the others, the vast majority of those upset by the difference in the color of the skin and reacting unconsciously or not. That was for the Negro a living experience of his daily rejection by an entire alien community. Frantz Fanon had exactly illustrated previously what Leon Damas recalled, from the time he was student in Paris: *Nier un cauchemar quotidien* (Denying a permanent nightmare).<sup>20</sup>

Look a Negro, mama see the Negro . . . I am frightened . . . ! I am trying to laugh, but laughing had become impossible because I already knew that there were legends, stories, the History . . . I was responsible at the same time for my skin, for my race, for my ancestors. I Subject myself to an objective examination and discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics, and I was battered down by cannibalism, mentally retarded, fetishism, racial defect, and above all: Y a Bon Banania. (So Good eating Banania—French slang, spoken by an hilarious child-like Negro on a colorful poster advertising banana porridge—)<sup>21</sup>

In order to obliterate those injurious posters, it was imperative that the black man asserted first his integral citizenship right by accepting his Negro identity, therein assuming the consciousness of his negritude. The determining factor which conferred to the redactors of *Légitime Défense* all this prestige and credibility among the black students in Paris, lies undoubtedly in the rejection of the European borrowed personality and the self-recognition of their negritude. 'We refuse to be ashamed of what we feel', declare those young Martinicans who also belong to this West Indian bourgeoisie which they reject so vehemently and depicted so severely with the ferocity of adolescents rebelling against their conservative parents. Those young blacks realized that despite of their education, they were different from the Europeans with whom their forefathers so eagerly tried to be assimilated:

They want intensely to comply with a correct behavior of average Europeans . . . Their desire to go unnoticed and to be assimilated, confer a tragic aspect to their slightest attitude because they carry with them, wherever they go the incontestable characteristics of their race.<sup>22</sup>

Those young rebels perceived racial and cultural difference not as a handicap but rather as a fruitful promise. This reversal of values was proposed by young idealistic intellectuals who were themselves the product of this Martinican *bourgeoisie* they so bitterly critized. This West Indian *bourgeoisie*, merely because its education was the most assimilated category of the population. In addition, the willingness of this elite to speak only French, the official language, widened the gap with the mass speaking only *Creole*. Later, Frantz Fanon would investigate this matter with more sensitivities and an inexorable logic<sup>23</sup>. But at this time, this lucid social inquest from *Légitime Défense* was unprecedented in Martinique.

This racial problem in the West Indian communities became more complicated, because the notion of race and color discrimination were always intermingled with the concept of social class. A melting pot of nationalities, races, and languages, resulting from the colonial coercions and the trade of slave from Africa, originated this exceptional situation nearly everywhere in the Americas; with some differences because of different socioeconomic and linguistic structures. In some Hispano-American countries with a white majority, a mulatto—the hybrid progeny generated by this racial promiscuity—is automatically classified as a white man. In the contrary, in North America where white people are also in greater number, a Mulatto is still a Negro. But in the West Indies where Blacks are making up the majority, the Mulattos, who are historically the scions of the white colonizer, beseech this colonial heritage, and intend to form a privileged class. This colonialist legacy could have been restricted to the mere assumption of black against white, but with the Mulattos in addition; social and political problems got entangled. The Mulattos crave all at once for both the conservation and the abolition of the existing colonialist system. Conservation of a sociopolitical system guaranteeing them a least degrading conditions than that of the Blacks. Abolition of the same system for granting them some advantages which were detested the most because insufficient. A whole literature until nowadays, still cannot exhaust such a complex and explosive subject.

Surrealism by pretending to recover the original power of the mind thanks to psychoanalysis would give to the West Indian an ideal analytic instrument, in their quest for a lost identity. According to Freud's theo-



ries, the existence of an unconscious thought and will merely regulate human being's social behavior and selfconsciousness. Thereby, those theories rejected the traditional Western concept of *Homo Sapiens*: human being genetically endowed with reasoning and understanding faculties. One can understand what the surrealists might expect from psychoanalysis in their restless search for the infinite expansion of reality. For Breton and his surrealist followers, selfanalysis functioned as a *stepping-stone*; for the West Indians, self-analysis was an essential experience of *desalienation*. In their over-valuation of Freud's theories, those young blacks expected even more from introspection:

As for Freud, we are ready to drive his fantastic machine, makes up to run over the bourgeois family [. . .] We expect a great deal from introspective self-analysis and psychoanalysis confession which can reveal a lot providing that moral restraints and social conventionalities being set aside [. . .]<sup>24</sup>

This expectation was perhaps far away from Freud's assumptions, but the West Indians would have at least retained the basic teaching of the Viennese scientist: the therapeutic purposes of psychoanalysis. By introspective selfanalysis, they could find in the depth of their ego, the *Negro Fondamental* (Fundamental Negro)—as Césaire put it—the first step toward the recognition of their negritude. With introspection those young black could understand that their real problem dwelt with the disarray of a community without roots. People trying to hide behind a borrowing mask, living in an unreal universe ruled by the abstracts ideas and concepts of an alien collectivity. Could wonder Menil: "By which coincidence an African's descendant turn out to be a French man's grandson?"<sup>25</sup> Menil's self interrogation accurately expressed the whole anguish of Negro-African slaves' offsprings, unrooted, and stripped of their original characteristics by centuries of exile, physical suffering and moral traumas: an unprecedented situation in mankind history. Introspective self-analysis allowed Menil to comprehend that black West Indian's irrational behavior was rather unconsciously deceitful than consciously Machiavellian.

The colored West Indian gradually rejects his race his own body, he denies his fundamental ethnic passions, setting aside his specific way of reacting to life, to love and death [. . .]<sup>26</sup>

Thanks to psychoanalysis, a clearer insight into those taboo zones of unconsciousness, could unveil ancestral Africa and its values: a legacy inhibited by centuries of alienation for being barbarous, inferior and even

wretched. By assuming this legacy, those young blacks could assert their negritude and with humor's help, they could outride their distinctive condition by dominating it.

### **The Power of Humor**

In the introduction of his *Anthology of Black Humor*, Breton emphasizes the importance of humor as an ethic for human behavior, and as a means for selfimprovement. For Breton as well for Hegel and Freud, humor is above all a distinct behavior, a rational and bitter self-defense against society. This *objective humor*, as understood by the surrealists, would assist the West Indies in their attempt to free their community from alienation and prejudices. With a pitiless humor, Monnerot depicted the colored French middle class, 'one of the saddest thing in the world', as is:

If a documentary movie on the evolution of the colored French bourgeoisie were shown in a sufficiently fast speed, one could see the African slave's bent back, turning quickly into the bowing back of the sophisticated and obsequious colored bourgeois. In the quick intervals of a few images, a three pieces suit and a bowler hat would just have grown on him.<sup>27</sup>

The humor of this passage underlining the absurdity of a social behavior furthermore revealed the despair of a human being denying the real image that an alien education has taught him to despise and conceal. Thereby, through their humor, those young blacks could liberate themselves from a despicable and foreign condition. As C. Abastado states it: "Humor is being aloof, refusing to adjust to a given situation and enduring it. The mind by denying . . . whatsoever values to this situation, makes it worthless and futile."<sup>28</sup> By precisely assuming this state of mind which made him laugh at his own expense, the mulatto Lero could come to this conclusion:

As someone can see it, there are some humor in the case of the mulatto bourgeois ignoring his ludicrous attitude as well as the privileges he might claim for this mimicking role of monkey<sup>29</sup>

For Breton as well as for Freud, humor is primarily a peculiar behavior, a bitter and logical aggression against society. However, by scorning that way the social values formally approved by previous generations, and by laughing at the expense of a community strictly conservative in its behaviors, would inevitably lead to a revolt against this establishment. It is this revolt that explodes in each page of the magazine *Légitime Défense*,

and therefrom, those young West Indians have to encounter in their anger the Marxist ideology.

### ***Légitime Défense's* Political Testimony**

More than a magazine or a literary association, *Légitime Défense* was rather a cultural movement,<sup>30</sup> Senghor wrote. The endeavor of *Légitime Défense's* protagonists, although speculative and short-lived, seems rather politically oriented to the utmost. 'And insurrectional testimony in the highest degree'<sup>31</sup>, Leon Damas remarked, and most the vehement and scorching articles of this review, could stand as obvious evidence for this assertion. On pretence of literature, *Légitime Défense* in fact, obstinately set upon an unjust socio-economic situation, and—without mentioning the name—French's methods of exploitation. Text rather political is Lero's article about Martinique's social structures, which reveal that:

In this country, an hereditary white Plutocracy, which no revolution has never succeeded in ousting, owns four fifth of the land, taking advantage of the black proletariat as a valueless human material [ . . . ] The condition of the sugarcane cutter in 1932 is no better than what it was in 1832.<sup>32</sup>

Through the entire review Martinique's socioeconomic structures are steadily incriminated, and Maurice Sabbat's article hardly conceal a direct appeal to insurrection.

The field worker, this ugly piece of black clay with a breath of live is just able to eat with is meager earning. Three quarters of the Island belong to five or six families of manufacturers whose cupidity is quite the opposite of the workers' painful endurance. Nevertheless, one might not be too confident, people cannot be oppressed forever. The day will come where these workers will revolt.<sup>33</sup>

As for Lero, he clearly demonstrates that the West Indian's poetry exceptional character of mediocrity was the consequence of the actual social order. In his analysis of Martinique's social situation, Lero asserted further that those who pretended to be the only representative of the black oppressed proletariat of the island, had always been members of the mulatto class, *intellectually fed with white decadence*, and middle men of a French bourgeoisie exploiting them.<sup>34</sup> Lero concludes in this article that 'social revolution had to precede any cultural revolution' One can understand why it was rather natural for these young blacks to be so attracted by communism, which presented itself at that time, as an anti-racial and anti capitalist ideology. Those young Martinicans had learned

from Marxist analysis that there is no racism without economic motivation, and without determination to perpetuate social inequalities. There was no other choice for those young idealists but to believe *without reservation* in the triumph of an ideology preaching the near coming of a society without class and racism. Nevertheless, *Légitime Défense* political attempt was rather speculative and rhetorical. Those young Martinicans were merely intellectuals, and beside, the moment was far to be propitious for any revolutionary action. The international turmoil following the aftermath of the second world war was necessary to bring some improvements in the political statute of the colonies; even though, some colonies would have to pay the higher price for their independencies. If in Paris, the administration in power permitted the publication of revolutionary manifestoes, it was not the case in the colonies. In addition, at the time, neither the French government nor even the French public opinion would admit that a Negro might call in question the European supremacy and its privileges to colonize third world countries. René Maran's novel *Batouala*<sup>35</sup>, a book far from being subversive, was forbidden in the French colonies, even after receiving the 1921 *Goncourt Prize*—The most prestigious French literary award—for its human and literary values: the best possible guarantee.

Thus, when *Légitime Défense's* protagonists were praising international communism and were pretending being ready to act in compliance with their firm belief, this determination could not be materialized into political and tangible action. Devoid of political formation, far from being activists, those young Martinicans were not in Fort de France (Martinique capital) but in Paris, and even there, without any contact with this proletariat they were supposed to fight for. Isolated from their country and their people, they were also doubly isolated from surrealism and communism: both politically helpless for their concern. André Thiron, a former member and autobiographer of the surrealist adventure, traces in his book, *Revolutionnaires Sans Révolution*<sup>36</sup> (Revolutionaries without Revolution), the exciting life but politically fruitless struggle of the surrealist leaders, those rebels without causes, who were aspiring to change the world and our way of life. The fact of setting apart social revolution from individual rebellion, with emphasis upon the latter, denied all effectiveness to a problematic revolutionary collective action. Jean Paul Sartre states on this matter:

If Breton believes he is still able to go on with his inner experiments, aloof from or in a parallel way with the revolutionary action, he is beforehand doomed to

fail. That would be to say a liberation of the mind is possible for some people even in slavery, and consequently to make the Revolution unimportant.

Answering a question about the sincerity of the surrealists' revolutionary belief, Breton himself acknowledged later:

Even if we had decided to use all possible means on behalf of the Revolution, I think we would not be able to achieve this mission because sooner or later we would have returned to our surrealist solicitations.

Even if those young Martinicans have the temptation to undertake a revolutionary action in their country, they could neither rely upon the French Communist Party. The FCP, although sympathizing actively with the black man's cause, was before all preoccupied only in the social promotion of the French proletariat but cared very little about the colonial problems. Such an indifferent attitude of the Communist Party toward colonized countries would be bitterly criticized—in an interval of about 25 years—by two political leaders from the French colonies, active members of the FCP at the time: the Vietnamese Hồ-Chi Minh and the Martinican Aimé Césaire.

As for me, a member of the FCP, coming from a country colonized by France, unfortunately I have to say that our FCP have done very little for the colonies . . . Going further, I could undeniably establish some inconceivable facts which make me believe that our party systematically ignores everything concerning the French colonies [. . .]<sup>39</sup>

Hồ-Chi Minh was making this speech in Moscow in 1925. A few decades later, his revolution would succeed; however, Hồ-Chi Minh would apply communism in his own manner, according to the particular characteristics of his country. When he formally resigned from the FCP in 1957, Aimé Césaire could claim as well:

What I want, it is that communism and marxism being at the service of the Black man, but not the Black man serving the interest of marxism and communism. I want an ideology and a party framed for people and not the opposite. I want a doctrine made suitable for us and by us.<sup>40</sup>

For Césaire, as one can see it, the contention with the FCP was motivated rather by an ideological difference than by any problem of ethic or individual commitment, as understood by Breton. For *Légitime Défense's* protagonists in the contrary, the allegiance to marxism was unconditional, and those young black students could proclaim with all their juvenile, and

sincere enthusiasm that 'we believe unreservedly in its triumph because we are confident in Marxist ideology freed from all misleading interpretation and victoriously experienced by Lenin.'<sup>41</sup> The FCP was in no way interested in those noisy activists, pretending contrarily to the dialectic Marxist: "We want to lucidly understand our dreams and listen to its whispering. By helping us to apprehend clearly our problems, those dreams would allow us to alleviate the burden that this life is inflicting upon us."<sup>42</sup> In fact, this pledge of allegiance went unnoticed in the organs of the FCP which before all was expecting from its members, a strict discipline to the line drawn by the rulers of the Party. But if one knew about the aura of prestige surrounding at the time the international communism, and the triumphing Russian Revolution, one could understand the immense hope communism represented for those enduring this ruthless colonialist system.

When emphasizing the literary servility of West Indian literature *Légitime Défense* clearly understood that a true cultural liberation could take place only in the extent of a preceding political liberation. In that matter, Marxism would be an ideal instrument of analysis for those enthusiastic young Blacks, as Senghor discerned it clearly in Lero's article on the socio-economic situation of his country. Wrote Senghor: "From a Marxist analysis of Martinique's society, Lero could discover in native West Indians, the descendants of African slaves maintained for centuries in a proletarian abject condition."<sup>42</sup> Hence, *Légitime Défense's* articles on socio-economic problems would essentially underline the unjust wealth repartition, and the abusive monopoly of the lands by 'a few families of manufacturers possessing the three quarter of the island. This situation could be changed only by a radical revolution, and unable to realize it, those young idealists could only elated themselves with the words depicting this impossible occurrence. Hence, this impassioned and violent rhetoric qualified wrongly as *speech of students' polemics*,<sup>43</sup> but which was merely this *état de fureur surréaliste* (surrealist state of fury): a determination of utter revolt just for revolt's sake against all human limitations. Stated André Breton:

One can understand why surrealism was not afraid to make for itself a tenet from total revolt, complete insubordination, and sabotage by the rule, and why surrealism still expects nothing saved from violence.<sup>44</sup>

For surrealism, just an individual revolt, even devoid of revolutionary motivation, could possess this bursting load of anger, violence, and moral rigor against all injustice, oppression and baseness. An anger conveyed above all by words, this language dear to the surrealist when accusing,

denouncing, excommunicating, the very language of the redactors of *Légitime Défense* when they were proclaiming:

Among all of those abject bourgeois conventionalities, we particularly execrate humanitarian hypocrisy, this stinking emanation of Christian decay. We hate compassion. Sentimentalities means nothing to us . . . We have decided to betray this class and to go as far as possible along the path of this treason We spit on everything this class praises, on all its sources of subsistence and joy.<sup>45</sup>

There, those young West Indians were not deviating from Breton's dictate when he asserted in his second manifesto that everything had to be done, and every means should be convenient, in order to destroy the notion of family, of country and the mere idea of religion. This same vehement rhetoric, this very impetuous accent burst out in each phrase of *Légitime Défense's* manifesto. In his rebellion against the West, Breton was inciting those 'pure young people who refuse to knuckle down in schools, universities, and military barracks.'<sup>46</sup> *Légitime Défenses's* redactors as well urged the sons of the bourgeois to follow their footsteps, especially those who were not yet 'damned dead, successful, unscrupulous college graduated, decorated, rotten [. . .] Those who can hold on to life with some semblance of truth.'<sup>47</sup> But, however radical *Légitime Défense's* political views would have been, the notion of Martinique's autonomy—not to mention independence—would never be raised even once, in any article of this review. Nevertheless, we cannot pretend to be judge of those young Martinicans political integrity on the basis of this single issue. Beside, they had precisely anticipated such a critic in a memo at the bottom of the second page of their review, which stated:

If our critic in this review is merely negative, if against what we attempt strongly to condemn without appeal we do not present any positive indictment, we apologize on the urgent need to start this movement in the spur of the moment. Beginning in the next issue, we hope to explain our own ideology of the Revolution.<sup>48</sup>

There would be no next issue. *Légitime Défense* provoked a tremendous scandal in Martinique, outraging the establishment. The contributors to this review, who were holders of government scholarships, lost their means of support, and endured for months some bad time before having their scholarship reinstated. But despite its short lived existence, *Légitime Défense* would have nevertheless demonstrated the determination of a new generation for denouncing three centuries of socioeconomic failure in the West Indies, and above all, for having originated a literary renaissance. In this matter, this publication would not have voiced

in vain; its keen criticism of West Indian literary works would sketch for the years to come a whole theory for an authentic West Indian literature.

### ***Légitime Défense's Literary Revolution***

The sharpest and most accurate criticism of West Indian literature would come from Etienne Léro when he wrote:

The West Indian writer filled to the brim with white moral and culture, white education and prejudices displays in his literary works the inflated image of himself. Just to be a nice copycat of the pale face fulfills both his social and literary achievement [. . .]<sup>49</sup>

This servile imitation of French literature by the West Indian Francophone writers was a fact previously confirmed by many critics, but Léro was the first to so strongly underline that this literary servility was a direct result of colonialism subjugation, and closely bounded to the existing social order. Léro also spoke out against the inferiority complex of the West Indians striving to conceal their African origin behind a civilized *behavior*. This counterfeit attitude, remarked Léro, is obviously reflected in their poetical works.

In his own opinion, he cannot be too modest, too sedate. You behave like a Niger; they reprimand you if you dare to show a natural exuberance in their presence. So naturally, he does not want to behave like a Niger in his poetry.<sup>50</sup>

In this, pitiless article, Léro call to account most of the wellknown black Francophone writers of his generation and their dull exotic literature filled with Creole nonchalance, sweetness of living, idyllic evocation of their island, landscape painting and so one. In this keen criticism, Léro rebelled against the platitude of subject matters selected by those writers who refuse to accept their race and would do their best just to imitate archaic French literary school.

They are driven through beaten track by their prejudices . . . Just as they view in the same way France nowadays and the France of 1789, West Indians bourgeois refuse to adopt any poetic rule, unless it is approved by white experience of one hundred years standing.<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, Léro could rightly conclude that this obdurate imitative style was essentially the result of an alien education:

An indigestible mix of French esprit and classical studies originated those blabbers and the soothing syrup of their poetry, and just to mention a few of those



scribblers . . . Moravia in Haiti, Lara in Guadeloupe [. . .] Salvina and Gratian in Martinique who still enjoy this traditional genteel prosody and bricabrac of the last 100 years: the golden wings, the diaphanous things, the swannecked women the moonlights and other platitudes or clichés.<sup>52</sup>

Moreover, Ménil would enumerate those topics carefully avoided by those writers refusing to assume their ethnic pride: 'the feeling of the canne-cutter facing the relentless growth of the factory; the loneliness of the black man all over the world, his revolt against injustice in his own country, his love of love, his love of stupefying dreams and exalting dances, his love of life and joy; the denial of prestige and the acceptance of one self existence. Ménil would underline further that most of the West Indians writers were standing as far as possible of their true self in their endless pursuit of a Western mirage; consequently, they were only generating impersonal writings, tiresome and depressing poetry of scenery and trivial subjects. An artificial literature where 'one makes believe he feels emotions of others, where complex sentimental intrigues—after the manner of Paul Mauriac<sup>53</sup>—serve as a substitute for black man's pagan and wild love of life.'<sup>54</sup> In order to liberate the West Indian writers from this debasing condition, Ménil could propose some alternatives. At first, he urged those writers to free themselves from the Western civilization's values, and logic way of thinking, and then, by assuming their ethnic legacy, they would be able to deal with their own problems through a literature striving to modify life, and directed to those experiencing the same passions, and feeling the same emotions. By taking 'in the opposite direction of usefulness'<sup>55</sup> the road of dreams and poetry, and by introspective selfanalysis, West Indian poets could express 'those strange and distant thrills . . . those millenary revolts, those turbid and dynamic potentialities peculiar to black man's human uniqueness.'<sup>56</sup>

A surrealist inspiration was obviously displayed in Menil's poetic manifesto. In fact, the surrealist revolt laid above all in this persistent determination to subvert Western civilization's alienating values, and rational humanism. By trying to set up new relationships with the universe through artistic and literary creations, the surrealists were attempting to put an end to those strict limitations. Consequently, they denied the assumption of man molded by centuries of positivism, logic and reason, on behalf of the Freudian theory of man creature of desire, instinct and dreams. In the expectation of freeing West Indian poetry from social and cultural alienation, the surrealist teaching would be very helpful for the protagonist of *Légitime Défense*. By denouncing the absurdity of a civilization, and by rejecting its fundamental values, the surrealists were urging for a true Cultural Revolution. In literature, surrealism primarily intended to abolish

the idea of poetry just as an accomplishment or a traditional literary form to express the beautiful or the lyrical. For the surrealists, poetry and art are both privileged ways of access to knowledge, and exceptional means of action. As Breton puts it, 'Bind all together love, poetry and freedom. Make poetry an act not aiming to reflect events but to foretell, to instigate outcomes, and to create occurrences.'<sup>57</sup>

This theory on the power of language to reveal a future previously non-existent event could be dated far back in the history of literature. Rimbaud likewise might believe at a given moment, that words and rhymes could change reality. This concept of language, as a medium for discovering a higher form of reality lying beyond the confine of accepted world, is also a peculiar characteristic of the so-called primitive civilization. The belief in the symbolic efficiency of the *word-act* is one of the main features of African civilizations. Wrote Monnerot: 'Narrative act generates by itself magical efficiency. At the beginning of civilizations, poetry was likely to be link to action and dreams.'<sup>58</sup> This notion of language all at once knowledge and action would be essential in the poetical works of the ensuing generation of Negro-African poets influenced by surrealism.

The protagonists of *Légitime Défense* would have retained from literary surrealism, its spirit of free creation, and its rejection of the traditional aesthetic of Western civilization. They had learned above all from surrealism that art and literature are not only gratuitous activities of the mind, but actions instigating events, and allowing the recovery of a human authenticity. Thus, surrealism would be for those rebellious West Indian an excellent brake to cultural assimilation and would provide them a new weapon against the academic style of traditional West Indian Francophone literature.

For René Ménéil, the writers of the preceding generations were so mediocre, mainly because their works reflected above all the inspiration of their favorite models in French literature: *parnassians*, *decadents*, and other late French romantic authors. Specified Ménéil:

Strengthless literature, devoid of suggestive power, worthy writing only for those—as Hérédia, Samain, De Régnier [. . .] unable to endow life with fuller significance and dreams.<sup>59</sup>

Thereby, Ménéil condemned those writers sentimentalities in ornate literary French, their addiction to the past, and their tendency to exoticism which make believe that Martinique is a dream land, as understood in France. 'Abstract literature, objectively hypocritical, affecting no one, neither the white man nor the black man for their writing is nothing more than a mediocre imitation of early French literature.'<sup>60</sup>

By breaking away from a certain romantic verbosity, the concept of art for art's sake, the notion of Parnassian indifference and other symbolism vague desires, surrealism resolutely attested its determination to reach *true life*. Through literary and artistic acts, the surrealists expected to bring into reality new occurrences, and by deepening the knowledge of the Ego, to extending human beings' potential powers: those inherent characteristics which make each of us different from others. Stated Etienne Lero: "It is surrealism glory and strength for having entirely unveiled the function of poetry and integrated it more deeply in life"<sup>61</sup> That is for surrealists, the function of poetry is essentially subversive by itself, regardless of its very content. Those stupefying surrealists' poetic images and metaphors, by acting as a chock or an emotional commotion, ought to subvert the readers feeling and might incite them to consider differently life and things, urging them to react. Lero would not have forgotten this surrealist precept when analyzing Gratiant's poetical work:

This author says to us among other things, that a poem must be understood, tasted, felt. It is not true. A poem shakes off or does not shake off. A poem acts like a cord of dynamite, which will blow up sooner or later within the reader at any given moment. Mr. Gratian gives us the cord without the dynamite, that is not fair<sup>62</sup>.

Nevertheless, it was obvious that the theoretician of *Légitime Défense* was unable to live up to the exception of his own manifesto. The five poems published by Léro, in the magazine, was also given *on a cord without the dynamite*. One can not find in those poems, what Léro was rightly urging in his manifesto: "an original and deep feeling, a colorful black imagination, and the echo of hate and dreams of an oppressed people." Léro's poems in *Légitime Défense* were as unworthy as the ones of those elders he so ruthlessly denounced in the magazine. The content of his collection of poetry entitled *S.O.S.—request for help*—was far to illustrate the meaning of this subject; like in this poem for example:

Turning over and over  
I only cannot see  
Enough is neither blindness nor vision  
René is coming  
I am alone and you are nude.<sup>63</sup>

Weak and pale copy of a mediocre epigone imitating a master, far away from this flow of words of the surrealist's *automatic writing*. Perhaps poetry hastily written just to complete the last pages of the magazine, like this one for example:

On the meadow three trees and a teeparty  
 Your hidden hands  
 Let us play our usual game  
 Love boat at the curve of your arms. <sup>64</sup>

Jean-Paul Sartre, evaluating those poems in the preface of L. Senghor's Anthology, had only to quote textually Léro's critic on the plight of the West Indian literary tradition of imitative poetry: "Take away this Anthology, erase the author's name, and I challenge whatsoever black or white to attribute those poems to nobody but a European collaborator of *La Révolution Surrealiste* or *Minotaure* (Surrealist publications).<sup>65</sup> That was exactly the major point of Léro's criticism when alleging about the West Indian writers that is a point of honor for them when a white person could read their entire book without ever guessing the author's race. Most of the poems published in *Légitime Défense* were all the same: colorless imitation of Parisian surrealists by their Martinican followers. Those poems were in striking contrast with the virulent but accurate critics of their author when denouncing mannerism in the West Indian Francophone literature. Except for an obvious surrealist inspiration, Méné's verses could be an exact illustration of his article entitled 'Generalities on Black West Indian Writers'. Méné's poems in *Légitime Défense* were far to express what he previously requested from black poets: "those strange and distant thrills, those millenary revolts and essential needs". Sartre's criticism about Léro was likewise relevant to Monnerot's poetry in the magazine: providing one could substitute each other names:

Neither in this poem nor in any other one, Léro indeed urges for black liberation: at the most, he only claims for the liberation of formal imagination. In this very abstract play upon words, no association of ideas evokes even vaguely Africa.<sup>66</sup>

But on this matter, Sartre's criticism was questionable. Most of the poems published in *Légitime Défense* were not, in fact, neither urging for a black revolution nor evoking any ancestral Africa. The essential problem was not related in any way to the content of Léro's poems or to those thoughts clearly understood behind the screen of his surrealist writing: souvenirs fading away, nostalgia of a past summer on the meadow, and both poems mingled with sexual longing. Those topics were not reserved for a specific social class or a particular race. Black revolutionary poets, those young Martinicans could as well celebrate love or any peculiar emotions without endangering their cause. 'The love boat is run over by the course of life',<sup>68</sup> wrote Majakowsky, the ardent singer of the Rus-

sian revolution, a few days before committing suicide. This ambiguous line of the Russian poet was the title of an article wrote by Breton, on the subject of love and revolution. 'To love or not to love, that is the question',<sup>69</sup> he was proclaiming in a flashy prose, while concluding rightly that love anyhow could not morally minimize the scope of a social action. 'Majakowsky was unable to exclude love from life, neither can I: there are bosoms too gorgeous',<sup>70</sup> could say over again those young West Indians along with Breton, in order to oppose Sartre's criticism. Before all, how to separate love from life. Even politically committed, those young Martinicans had the right, as one of them wrote in their publication, 'to celebrate, to love, to frolic, and to play hopscotch.' The subject matters could not be solely incriminated for the mediocrity of the poems promoted by *Légitime Défense*. Besides, a prose poem from Monnerot came up with a very different topic:

When the time of ill hatred cry should stop shouting either black or white, when those making darkness should hang up together to the same hope, when they would let me forget that I am always dreaming other people dream [. . .] then all shelters should get softer, all the hatred and coarseness of the known world all disguises all mirrors should indulge at last the triumph of THE VERY EXPECTED.<sup>72</sup>

Despite a certain obscurity of the surrealist writing, one might understand the subject implicit in those free verses: hope of this VERY EXPECTED ideal socialist society, were blacks and whites victims of the same oppression could at least get along. However, inspite of this peculiar topic and distinctive state of mind so vehemently urged by the magazine, one can still notice a lack of originality in those wordy line of thought: impersonal language, writing of a skillful follower but still an imitation. The problem of those writers was laying essentially in the quest for this suitable language capable to express black man experiences and emotions. The promoters of *Légitime Défense* could accurately voice their revolt and their deepest aspiration in prose, but in poetry *ça ne passait pas* (That can't get through). That is poetry, especially surrealist poetry is allusion, evocation, and allegory. This specific language is made of metaphors, of image comparisons, and each word used recalls automatically a whole set of association of ideas. One knows that each language, each civilization have it own set of words for expressing even the same realities. Thus, a poet cannot only name things for this very word must suggest different realities. The poetic inadequacy of words for translating accurately a given mind, is a fact experienced by all poets. Words, syntax,

adapted rules, everything betray, distort what a poet want precisely to express. By just imitating the surrealist technique of writing, those young black writers were bound as their elders to be copycat poets. The issue above all, was to find an appropriated language capable to embody this peculiar duality: the African heritage assumed by a West Indian more or less assimilated to Western values and French culture. As the Haitian writer Leon Laleau poetically expressed this antagonism:

This anguish likes none other  
For taming with French words  
This heart that come to me  
From Africa.<sup>73</sup>

The ensuing generation of Negro-African Francophone writers would work out this problem by keeping some distance *vis à vis* the traditional mould of French language. Later, Aimé Césaire would avow:

Whatever I want it or not, I am a French speaking poet. It is obvious that I have been influenced by French literature. However, I have to insist on the fact that from those elements given to me by French literature, I sought to create a new language able to express the African heritage. Otherwise, I could say that French literature was for me like an instrument that I have to distort in order to translate my own, feeling. I wanted a West Indian French language marked by the Negro imprint.<sup>74</sup>

It will be seen further, how Césaire succeed in his literary venture. To adopt a language, to speak it, and to write it, means to accept at a certain degree the culture and civilization which originated this language; one knows the weighty value of French literary tradition. The protagonists of *Légitime Défense* could not completely get ride—as they urged their elders—of this ‘Indigestible mix of French esprit and classical studies.’ This poetical failure was not incumbent to surrealism but to those young Martinicans’ own determination to accept this Parisian movement *without reservation*, as they alleged it in their manifesto. That is for surrealism, the essential problem was that of language. In their revolt against literary conventionalities and out dated traditional writing, surrealism ambition was less to create a new art than to attempt of recovering language’s original innocence and creativity through the medium of words. The new generation of Negro African surrealist writers would deepen this message.

However, it would be unfair to pass final judgement on *Légitime Défense's* poetical work from this single issue. Besides, the ensuing generation would only retain the literary criticism and the political analysis of

this publication, not its collection of poems. It seems, in fact, that those poems have been their authors' first attempt. Later, Monnerot and Lero would be recognized as essayists or polemicists, and not as poets. We would find further Ménil with Aimé Césaire and, their surrealist magazine *Tropiques*, in Martinique.

As for Monnerot, the work, which made him noted in the Parisian surrealist milieu, was his essay on *La Poésie Moderne et le Sacré*.<sup>75</sup> (Modern Poetry and the Sacred) A Specialist of Surrealism literature, reviewing this books, would call Monnerot: "the sociologist of surrealism."<sup>76</sup> Monnerot's use of the English word *Set*, which describe precisely the group surrounding André Breton, would be adopted by the critics. Many studies on French surrealism would quote some of Monnerot's definition on this movement, but often in a context contrary to the author's views on that matter, as for Breton himself in this quotation:

Monnerot in Modern Poetry and the Sacred has skillfully demonstrated the affinity between surrealism and Indian poetry, which I affirm is still alive and as creative as ever.<sup>77</sup>

Monnerot—who in the meanwhile had disavowed surrealism—had in fact underlined such an affinity, but with the sole purpose to denounce the surrealist concept on language as a mean of discovery of a higher reality. In the chapter entitled *Magie sans Espoir* (Magic without Hope), Monnerot writes: "Poetry is just magic for magic's sake, magic without hope, and the poet is an hopeless magician, devoted to the ritual of magic merely for the sake of it."<sup>78</sup> A systematic endeavor of demystification, for in his essay, Monnerot denied the cogency of all surrealist theories, on dream, on automatic writing, on political commitment, on the function of poetry, and so one. Among other accounts, Monnerot maintained: "The literary use of psychoanalysis, the pseudo Marxism, the idiotic associations of images, the automatic writing [. . .] the ready-made thought, the creation of new clichés, so much symptoms of failure."<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, the former *Légitime Défense* leader could assert about the surrealists' political commitment:

Who made them judge in political matter? Who invested them of this right to insult and to despise? 'It is. Oracle what I say'. So said those men who were not even political activists. And surrealism, in the thirties, clashed with communism, like a license to act freely encountering a set of methods and rules.<sup>80</sup>

At the end of this severe indictment, the author scoffing at the illusion of the surrealist concept on poetry, added: "Those misfiring images—the



surrealist poetic images, always miss their objectives, and weakly burst out, within an indifferent sky.”<sup>81</sup> Later, JeanPaul Sartre would reach the same conclusion, while denouncing the illusive character of the surrealists’ violent rhetoric. He wrote: “This world perpetually annihilated, without one even destroying a grain of wheat, a granular of sand or a feather of bird, is quite simply put in parenthesis.”<sup>82</sup> In short, both critics specifically objected to surrealism, the fact of having overevaluated the power of language. In that matter, both were unjust, and especially Sartre, for his assertion appears to contradict a previous statement. In his essay *what is Literature*, Sartre was precisely describing the purpose of writing for committed writers, as a revealing action when he wrote:

If you name someone’s behavior, you reveal it to him [. . .] Thus, by speaking, I reveal the situation by my very intention of changing it; I reveal it to myself and to other in order to change it [. . .].<sup>83</sup>

At the time of nascent surrealism, Aragon made the same point more elegantly and with more succinctness while claiming: “Each image urges you at each time to revise the entire universe.”<sup>84</sup>

Except for René Mênil, the name of the others signers of *Légitime Défense’s* manifesto, would not be associated in the future with, any important surrealist publication. Etienne Léro was thirty years old when he died in Paris in 1938 while preparing a doctorate in philosophy. After *Légitime Défense*, he wrote some short novels and an essay about *The Bourgeois Family in the Work of Balzac*. The only one with a real talent for poetry, Sanghor would say about him and his poetical work in the magazine: “His poetry must be seen like a first attempt.” If Léro were still alive, he would have created poetry more original, at least much West Indian. For he had the gift of poetry, love and respect for his work, repulsion of the *déjà vu*, and a creative power to fable.<sup>85</sup>

René Mênil remained a sincere Marxist believer. As for Monnerot, his further literary works<sup>86</sup>—some heavy books on sociology and politic—would be a vehement testimony against Marxist ideology.

### ***Légitime Défense Precursor***

When they were clamoring in their revolt for the African heritage, those young West Indian from *Légitime Défense* could not pretend like André Breton did, concerning surrealism: “In matter of revolt, none of us should need ancestors.”<sup>87</sup> Well before *Légitime Défense*, within this vast Negro



Diaspora of the Americas, many authors while rejecting cultural assimilation, had already accepted this African legacy and its burden of traumas.

Getting down to our native root and building up from our own people is not savagery, it is culture.<sup>88</sup>

This formula, from the AfroAmerican Claude McKay, displayed in the front page of the magazine *Légitime Défense*, summed up in its very conciseness, all the future definition of the word *Négritude*. This excerpt from Claude McKay's novel, *Banjo*, was a recognition of the major influence of the AfroAmerican authors on the determination of *Légitime Défense's* editors. The AfroAmerican writers, especially those of the NegroRenaissance—or Harlem Renaissance—in the twenties, were the first to broach on the topics put forward by the young Martinicans in their publication.

The Negro-Renaissance in the United States was not a spontaneous phenomenon, but the fruit of an enduring gestation, during which the Negroes—in the aftermath of the Civil War and the Emancipation—began gradually to be aware of their despicable condition, thanks to their leaders' forceful standing. This new spirit was expressed by a more virile attitude opposed to all kind of injustices, by the revaluation of the African heritage, and therefore, by the assertion of a new Negro identity. Instead of the blues of sorrow and hope, this generation of writers and poets would voice loudly their aspiration and their revolt. This NegroRenaissance coincided with an era, which could stimulate such a defiant attitude. While those descendants of African slaves were feverishly searching a new identity, the Western nations were just began to discover the innumerable works of art of Africa, a continent for long considered as devoid of historic or artistic interests.

After the sack of the town of Benin in 1897, by the British imperialist army, the thousand of artistic masterpieces plundering from this country were at this time on display in the European museums. The historians of art at the outset of this century were naively mistaken when they classified those artistic works just as folkloristic curiosities or religious primitive artifacts. It is easy to understand the motive behind such a misunderstanding. Those European specialists were appraising African works of art according to the Western criteria of classical art, heiress of the GrecoLatin tradition and its aesthetic of symmetry and harmony. The cultural renewal in Europe, at the beginning of this century, which was also manifest in plastic arts, would have later permitted a different approach

of African art. Appolinaire in France, and the generation of the twenties in Europe, would be fascinated by the dynamism of those forms allowing a new vision of the universe. Many artistic schools, cubism and futurism among others, would revolutionize Western modern art by imitating the esthetical simplicity of African statuary, and its peculiar emphasis on geometrical line with little attempt at pictorial representation.

Jazz also, at this time, was beginning to gain a worldwide recognition as a modern American art form. This musical art form summed up a whole style of life for a new generation. The AfroAmericans would likewise use this medium as a testimony, in their rebellion against oppression and assimilation. Langston Huges, one of the protagonists of the NegroRenaissance, specified in his introduction to Jazz:

When the Africans first come to the New World more than 400 years ago, they brought these wonderful rhythms with them. One important thing that makes Jazz different from the music of other countries is that it is full of a variety of rhythms. In part, Jazz grew out of the beating of African drums.<sup>89</sup>

This recognition of African creativity manifested by itself a rehabilitation of the African heritage. W.E.B. Dubois was one of the firsts to translate this spirit in writing, and in social action. The N.A.A.C.P (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) that he founded, would be the first organism of this kind claiming for AfroAmericans the end of discrimination and basic equal rights. Dubois fundamental work, *The Soul of Black Folk* which denounced the scandalous condition imposed upon African American, would have a profound influence on the ensuing generation of black intellectuals all over the world.

In the extend where poetry is the best fitted medium capable to express deep emotions, the poets of the NegroRenaissance were undoubtedly the most noteworthy personalities of this movement. Among the poets of this revival who were rejecting the sentimental traditionalism in order to voice their own feeling, Claude McKay, Langston Huges, and Countee Cullen were incontestably those uttering with the most intense lyricism their despair, their suffering and their hatred.

There is a searing hate within my soul  
A hate that only kin can feel for kin  
A hate that makes me vigorous and whole . . .

*Claude Mc Kay, Mulatto*

Within all those souls, it is the same hate, which is brewing, which is burning, which is the dominant recurring theme in all those intense poeti-

cal voices of revolt and hope. The work of those authors images also vividly a common pilgrimage into the sources of ancestral Africa for a laudation of their race.

What is Africa to me  
Copper sun or scarlet sea  
Jungle star or jungle track  
Strong bronzed men or regal black  
Women from loins I sprang  
When the bird of Eden sang . . .  
Countee Cullen, *Heritage*

With the Depression of 1929, which worsen the economic condition of Afro-American, traditionally in the lowest socio-economic class, most of those writers had the tendency to view their people as the victims of both racial prejudices, and economic exploitation. Thereby, the notion of racial consciousness became mingled with the notion of social class. Guided by Marxist analysis, some of those Negro-Renaissance writers would thus appeal to proletarian solidarity, regardless to race.

Let Union be  
The force that break the timeclock  
Smashes misery  
Takes lands  
Takes factories  
Takes offices power  
Takes tools and banks and mines . . .  
Until the forces of the world are us  
White workers  
Here is my hands.  
Langston Huges, Open Letter to the South.

This feverish quest for a new identity ending in rebellion against the establishment—obvious fact with *Légitime Défense's* protagonists—was not only specific to the black intellectuals in United States. In all the black communities in the Americas, that was the same restless search and the same revolt. This *Negro Renaissance* was called *Cubanism* in Cuba with the generation of Nicolas Guillen, *Search of Identity* in Jamaica and the British Islands, Indigenism in Haiti with Jacques Roumain, Price Mars and others.

In the path of their revolt, the team of *Légitime Défense* could claim many other forerunners. Thus, when L. Kesteloot declares that 'our re-search—on Negro African literature—brings us to the conclusion that prior

to *Légitime Défense*, there was not any originality in West Indian literature", <sup>90</sup> this radical affirmation is very questionable. It was easy for the young iconoclasts from *Légitime Défense* to scoff at some mediocre verses from Gratiant, but they could also think over those lines from the same poet:

The primordial song of life  
 Interlaced by rhythms  
 The magician of lavish words  
 Insatiable consumer of love  
 Inhaler of dreams  
 The Negro  
 So great in entrusting  
 So generous in offering  
 G. Gratiant, *Poemes en Vers Faux*.

That was exactly what *Légitime Défense's* critics urged so vehemently; the surrealist inspiration was not indispensable to express black man's passions and soul. Furthermore, when those idealists were alleging: "If we had to seek for real poetry, we could find it only where they forced it to get refuge: in the Creole dialect which is not a writing language". They were right, but their criticism was not really founded on just grounds. August Viatte reports in his *Histoire Littéraire de l'Amerique Française*,<sup>91</sup> that in 1896 Marbot in Martinique parodied La Fontaine in creole . . . Baudot in Guadeloupe created all kind of poetry in dialect creole, even an opera entitled Fadoc and Therese, played in Basse-Terre. It was indeed the local folklore that these authors were already trying to express in their own dialect. One could name other black Francophone writers, uttering in an original manner their uniqueness, in the molds of the Parnassian or Romantic literary French schools. Some works of those authors could be worthy to compete with the ones of those minor poets or writers who, nevertheless, is ranked among the best in French Metropolitan literature. Another critic could moreover state "Negro African literature's origins could be dated back only from 1921, and this literature asserted itself in the years preceding the accession of the black African countries to independancies" in the fifties—. It is obvious that in order to be efficient, literature, as a social phenomenon, needs the back up of a sociopolitical power. That was not the case for the black communities in the Americas, and independent Haiti alone were far outweighed in this area. Nevertheless, confining Negro-African literature within such a short limit in time is an excessive exaggeration, whatsoever how Negro African literature is

understood. Thus, it is to say that the black writers in the twenties represented a spontaneous generation: absurd! Moreover, in what literature one could classify Jahiz who wrote in Arabic a book entitled *Fakhr as-Soudan al el Bidane* (Consciousness and Pride of Black Man), in A.D. 8 century. Without going back so far, one asks those critics if Emile Nau is or out their classification. Inquiring about the possibility of authentic Haitian literature, Emile Nau wrote in the newspaper *Le Republicain*: (PortauPrince Haiti, October 1, 1836)

In this blending of European, and African heritage which characterizes our community, there is something making our culture no longer French, as American culture being no longer British. French language in our writing and conversations look like a borrowing language, and that matter specially concerns those aspiring to write poetry. For them, it is no question to use a ready-made language, even from the best French model. They must accordingly modify this language to their own needs, adjust it to their own country [. . .]

It was such a message that the poets from *Légitime Défense* did not really understand when they intended to imitate just the writing technique of their fellow Parisian surrealists. While lessening the contribution of their West Indian elders, the determining influence of the African American writers was explicitly acknowledged by Lero when he disclosed in the magazine;

The wind rising from black America will soon sweep the West Indies clean, we hope, of all stunted fruits of its out dated culture. Lakgston Huge and Claude McKay, both revolutionary poets, bring to us soused in hot alcohol, the African joy for love, and the African dream of death. And yet, some young Haitians are giving to us some verses filled up with the dynamism of the future.<sup>92</sup>

Nearby of Martinique, and because of certain common similarities in their social and geo-political evolution, Haiti could also offer to the *Légitime Défense's* protagonists some examples to think over. At the time of its accession to independence in 1804, after a bloody slave rebellion, Haiti became the First Black Republic in the New World; besides, this new nation was forcefully welcoming this title with pride. Such a proud attitude indicated by no means an allegiance to the African heritage, but rather expressed a challenge, a fierce determination of freedom *vis a vis* the powerful nation supporter of slavery. At the end of their independence wars, when those bands of slaves freedom fighters, were ready to storm up the last French fortifications—*Crête à Pierrot*—they were charging the Napoleon's army last survivors while screaming under the deadly

fire: "*Nan pwen manmam nan pwen papa, sa ki mouri zafé an yo.*" (No one has neither father nor mother; the one who dies is one's business) This motto could be understood literally. In fact, a slave was not entitled to have his own family to live with, for parents and children could be sold separately. Thus, during those euphoric days following a well deserved independence, the native of St. Domingue—former name of Haiti—could not even claim a direct motherhood: not to mention ancestors, or the heritage of a civilization viewed at the time as inferior, and barbarous. After having succeed in their revolution, the Haitians might firstly protect their priceless freedom against a contemptuous, and hostile outside world. Devoid of the least resources and technology, without any support, even a moral one, from any other neighboring countries, those former uneducated slaves had to build up a nation on a land laid bare by a fierce war. Any nation in the world would have had such a tragic birth, and by adopting the Western civilization's values was the only way for Haiti to survive. Opting for this alternative was like being engaged in a vicious circle, and this original choice would deeply mark the social and political structures of this country and its very future as a nation.

In that manner, in spite of this independence, one could also observe in Haiti, with little differences, the same complex processes of assimilation which take place in Martinique. The same harsh and keen criticisms that the explosive little magazine directed toward the Martinican elite could likewise be relevant to this black independent country. But contrary to Martinique, the white population in Haiti, eliminated during the revolution, was not numerically significant, and did not represent a specific category in the social hierarchy. Thereby, this fact sharply accented the antagonism between black and mulatto; even both were referring to the same Western values. In this manner the assimilation was confined within those two social categories, and perpetuated from generation to generation.

After more than a century of independence, the colonist segregationist era was forgotten, and Haitians took for granted that they belonged, *de facto*, to this outside white world, for having adopted its values and its traditions. Moreover, being rightfully proud of its revolutionary past, the Haitians believed that this historical fact conceded upon them certain superiority upon blacks from other communities. A Haitian polemicist could write in 1884: "Haiti is the eldest son of the black race, he must be a model to imitate [. . .] He is an example, he must be the hope."<sup>93</sup> The invasion of Haiti by the United States in 1915, would destroy such illusions. In contact with the occupying forces of a nation which at that time institutionalized segregation in its laws, the Haitians could realized that

however their Western education and their glorious history, they were still remaining the descendants of African slaves. Remarks Ghislain Gouraige: "Their contact with the Americans made them understand with choke that racism is not logic and the color of the skin is the only determinant factor for discrimination."<sup>94</sup>

At the political level, the reaction against the American invasion was insignificant; some sporadic rebellions brutally crushed by the occupying forces. But the reaction to Yankee intransigence provoked a social and literary renewal. The European oriented elite, out of patriotism, became interested in the native tradition of the masses, who was supposed to be authentic, untouched by any alien influences. This new current of ideas was mainly expressed through the Indigenism movement under the leadership of Price Mars. His essential work *Ainsi Parla l'Oncle (So Said the Uncle)*, published in 1928, would have a determining influence on the ensuing generation of black Francophone writers. Later, Senghor could welcome Price Mars as *Le Père de la Négritude (Father of Negritude)*<sup>95</sup>

*So Said the Uncle*, published during the American occupation,<sup>96</sup> was epochmaking in black Francophone literature not only for Price Mars praising of Haiti native traditions, but specially for the grandiose manner he imaged Africa, from the rare historical given facts on this continent, available at that time. All those criticisms formulated by the *Légitime Défense's* editors were already recorded in *So Said the Uncle*: "The tragic paradox of social and cultural assimilation, the collective assimilation of fellow compatriots who could not think of themselves as Negroes, and so one. Specified Price Mars: "By joint of seeing ourselves as colored French, we had forgotten to be simply Haitians. Namely men born under specific historical conditions."<sup>97</sup> The author would express further the wish that the Haitian intelligentsia by freeing itself from all alien influences, might make use of their own national patrimony: "the voodoo religion, the Haitian folklore, the Creole dialect, and the native traditions which for eighteenth is a gift from Africa."<sup>98</sup> This absolute reversal of solidly established values proposed by Price Mars, would be hailed by his generation and would reverberated as well in his country's socio-political domain.

Undoubtedly, the young's Martinicans from *Légitime Défense* might have known the works of those authors who heard Price Mars' message and translated it rightly in their writing. Those 'young Haitians poets with their works filled up with the dynamism of the future', as Lero put it, were at the very origin of the Indigenism movement.—Name after their publication, *La Revue Indigène*—Among the protagonists of This movement, one could find: Thoby Marcelin, Antonio Vieux, Jacques Roumain and

specially Carl Brouard who seems to be the one expressing more passionately the spirit of this movement. This unconditional Indigenist could proclaim with lyricism and condescension:

Hardly, and proudly, perhaps childishly, we swore to make our country the Negro Miracle, as ancient Greece has been the White Miracle for the Western civilization.<sup>99</sup>

Brouard was also one of those who sincerely believe that the true values of his country could be found intact and alive in the traditions of the masses; from there to proletarian literature, there was only one step, easily strode.

You

All of you from the masses  
Stand up for the last sweep up  
You are the pillars of the edifice  
Pull off and everything crumbles down:  
Castle of sand.<sup>100</sup>

Carl Brouard, Vous: Haiti 1927

This social renewal through the traditions of the masses—alleged guardian of the African patrimony—becoming a political platform, would be later *Légitime Défense's* essential assumption. Nevertheless, even for having just promoted their elder's ideas, *Légitime Défense* would have paved the way for a cultural rebirth. This review symbolizes the genuine awareness of a generation, and represents for the black Francophone writers the point of departure of a new way of thinking, and a new manner of writing. Above all, *the surrealist furor* of those young Martinicans would have loudly echoed their elders' timid songs on negritude, on revolt, and on Africa lost and found again. Later, some other black poets, along with Aimé Césaire, would also believe that they had found in the surrealist inspiration, this miraculous weapon allowing them 'to shout out so loudly the intense Negro cry that the very base of the world should be shaken.'<sup>101</sup>



## Notes

1. André Breton, *Légitime Défense*, (Paris: Edition Surrealist, Sep. 1926.).
2. Title of the article in which the French surrealists made a formal allegiance to the FCP. In *Histoire du Surrealism*, op. cit., p. 261.
3. A. Breton, *Légitime Défense* op. Cit., p. 46.
4. *Légitime Défense*, p. 1 (From now on, all references to *Légitime Défense* concern only the West Indian magazine).
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Thiron, *Révolutionnaire Sans Révolution*, p. 354. *Légitime*.
8. *Légitime Défense*, p. 1.
9. René Lacoste, Tzara (Paris: Seghers, 1952), p. 53.
10. *Tropiques*, no 6 ( February 6, 1943).
11. Ibid., p. 9.
12. Ibid.
13. Jules Monnerot, *Démarxiser L'Université* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1970).
14. *Légitime Défense*, p. 1.
15. André Brenton, *Un grand poète noir*, Preface of *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal*, Aimé Césaire.
16. Louis Joseph Janvier, *De L'Egalité des Races Humaines* (Haiti, 1885).
17. Gobineau, *Essai sur L'Inégalité des Races Humaines* (Paris, 1885).
18. Georges Pompidou, Preface of *L.S. Senghor et la Naissance de*.
19. *L'Afrique*, Monique Sordet (Paris: Seuil, 1952), p. 50.
20. Frantz Fanon, *Peau Noir, Maques Blanc* (Paris: Seuil, 1952), p. 50.
21. *Rencontre avec Léon Damas* in *Nouvelle Poesie Africaine*, de Marc Rombaud (Paris: Saint-Germain des Prés) p. 50.
22. Frantz Fanon, op.cit., p. 110.
23. *Légitime Défense*, op. cit., p. 9.
24. Frantz Fanon, op. cit., p. 15.

25. *Légitime Défense*, op.cit., p. 15.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
29. Claude Abasto, *Le Surréalisme* (Paris: Hachette), p. 141.
30. *Légitime Défense*, p. 2.
31. L. Senghor, in *Anthologie de la Nouvelle Poésie Nègre*.
32. Léon Damas, *Rencontre* op. cit. p. 53.
33. *Légitime Défense*, p.3
34. *Ibid.*, p. 6
35. *Ibid.*, p. 10
36. L. Kesteloo, op cit., p. 20.
37. A. Thiron, op. cit.
38. Jean-Paul Sarte, *Qu'est que la littérature?* (Paris: Gallimar, 1948), p. 227.
39. A. Breton, *Entretien*. Op cit., p. 135.
40. Hö-Chi Minh, *Discours prononcé à Moscou* in *Nouvelle in Optique*, Vol. (Mai 1971, Montréal Canada).
41. Aimé Césaire, *Lettre à Maurice Thorez* (Paris: Présence Africaine), p. 12.
42. *Légitime Défense*, p. 1.
43. L. Senghor, *Anthologie*. op. cit., p. 49.
44. L. Kesteloot, *Ecrivain Noirs*. op. cit., p. 25.
45. A. Breton, *Manifeste du Surréalisme*, p. 82.
46. *Légitime Défense*, p. 12.
47. A. Breton, *Manifeste du Surréalisme*, p. 82.
48. *Légitime Défense*, p. 2.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
51. *Ibid.*, p.10.
52. *Ibid.*
53. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

54. French Conservative writer.
55. *Légitime Défense*, p. 11. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
56. *Ibid.*
57. A. Breton, *Manifeste du Surréalisme*.
58. Jules Monnerot, *La Poésie Moderne et le Sacré* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 16.
59. *Légitime Défense*, p. 8.
60. *Ibid.*
61. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
62. *Ibid.*
63. *Ibid.*, p. 16–17.
64. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
65. J.P. Sartre, *Orphées Noirs*, in Preface of.
66. Senghor's Anthology. op. cit.
67. *Légitime Défense*, p. 10.
68. A. Breton, quoted in *Point du Jour*, p. 71.
69. *Ibid. Ibid.*, p. 73.
70. *Légitime Défense*, p. 21.
71. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
72. Léon Laleau, *Trahison*, in *Musique Nègre Haiti*, 1921.
73. Aimé Césaire, in *Entretien avec René Dépestre*, p. 158.
74. J. Monnerot, *La Poésie Moderne et le Sacré*, op. cit.
75. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
76. Jean Duché André Breton nous parle in *Supplément Littéraire du Figaro* (5 Octobre 1946).
77. J. Monnerot, *La Poésie Moderne et le Sacré*, op. cit., p. 18.
78. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
79. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
80. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
81. J.P. Sarte, *Qu'estce que la littérature*. op. cit., p. 225.
82. *Ibid.* p. 29.

83. Aragon, *Le Paysan de Paris* (Paris: N.R.F., 1921).
84. Senghor, Anthology. op. cit., p. 49.
85. J. Monnerot, *Sociologie, Révolution, Mythologie du XXème Siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1963).
86. A. Brenton, *Manifeste du Surréalisme*.
87. Claude Mc Kay, *Banjo* (Paris: Rieder, 1928).
88. Langston Hughes, *Introduction to Jazz*
89. L. Kesteloot, op. cit. p. 35
90. Auguste Viatte, *Histoire littéraire de l'Amérique Française* (Paris: Presse Universitaire, 1954), p. 489.
91. *Légitime Défense*, p. 12.
92. Louis Joseph Janvier, *Les Affaires d' Haiti* (Haiti: 1867 new edition Panorama, 1976), p. 88.
93. Ghislain Couraige, *La Diaspora d'Haiti et l'Afrique* (Sherbrook, Naaman, 1974), p. 72.
94. L.Senghor, *II Congrès des Ecrivains Noir* (Rome, 1957).
95. The U.S.A. occupation of Haiti ended in 1930.
96. Jean PriceMars, *Ainsi Parla L'Oncle* (Haiti, 1928, new edition, Montreal: Léméac, 1973), p. 44.
97. Ibid.
98. Carl Brouard, in *La Revue Indigène* (Haiti: août, 1937).
99. Ibid.
100. Aimé Césaire, *Les Armes Miraculeuses* Paris: Gallimard, 1946).

## Chapter 3

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# The Magazine *L'Etudiant Noir* and Surrealism

Very little is known about the review *L'Etudiant Noir* except that it was published in Paris around 1939, by a team of five: Leon Damas from French Guiana, Aimé Césaire, Aristide Maugé from Martinique and the Senegalese Leopold Senghor, Birago Diop and Ousmane Socé. They were the first who began to illustrate and defend in their works the concept of Negritude. Some former *Légitime Défense* redactors were also members of that team. First concern of this group was to unite, through their culture and history, African and West Indian students supposed to be French by law and nationality, as Léon Damas reported it many years later:

*L'Etudiant Noir*, a corporate and combative newspaper, was aimed to put an end to the division of black students in Paris. One ceased to be a student from Martinique, Guadeloupe, Guiana, Africa, Madagascar, and becoming solely a black student. Life in isolation was over.<sup>1</sup>

A small and unpretentious review, *L'Etudiant Noir*, nevertheless represents an important step for Negro African literature, although not even a copy of this review has been preserved. Alleges Damas about this fact:

Critics speak a lot about *L'Etudiant Noir*, but any of those opining on this subject did not read this magazine even (L. Kesteloot) who wrote so knowingly of it. We were so unaware of such matter that we did not preserve our manuscripts at this time. It was just a generous game.<sup>2</sup>

The first gathering in Paris of West Indians and Africans from the French colonies could not have a clear political platform as the one displayed in *Légitime Défense*. From different backgrounds and different

countries, the members of this movement rather represented a forum of ideological tendencies, a focus of intellectual fermentation. Although those black students were suffering the same injustice, and were sharing the same hope, they had different concerns and political agendas, because of their distinct origins. The Africans could perpetuate in their countries their ancestral traditions still alive. They might as well maintain in their communities some traditional socioeconomic African structures, remained intact despite colonization. In the contrary, the uprooted West Indians, more assimilated to Western values, and more responsive to European revolutionary ideologies, could urge for more radical change. In the literature of black Africa, there were not such violent testimonies like those from the West Indian authors. Those rotten, starving and scared West Indies depicted by Césaire in his *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal* (Notebook of a Return to my Native Land), and this suffocating socioeconomic condition denounced by Damas in *Retour de Guyane* (Return from Guiana), did not have both their equivalent in African literature. In Karim Ousmane Soce's first novel published in Paris in 1935, one could find an indirect echo of the feverish atmosphere of those students' gathering and their main concern:

The polemic was running high . . . everyone ardently pleading his own cause. Thoroughly, everybody was hesitating to break away from African traditions for the benefit of European values. Their hearts were longing for ancestral Africa, and their interests were siding with Western practical modernism.<sup>3</sup>

This group took great interest in the study of African, civilization and culture, thus, the West Indians were introduced to this lost legacy they were looking for. Concerning surrealism and socialism, *L'Étudiant Noir* no longer accepted those movements' creeds *without reservation*, as *Légitime Défense* did. The group wanted to use Western ideologies with discernment, choosing from them only what could promote black peoples' interests. In that manner, most of the contributors to *L'Étudiant Noir* were considering socialism exclusively as an efficient instrument of research to analyze and to find out a solution to the socio-economic problems of black peoples, but without interference in any other domains. Claims Senghor: "To draw ones inspiration from socialism is not to adopt some sort of Marxist dogma or to borrow European ready made solution." As for surrealism, the protagonists of *L'Étudiant Noir* would be above all attracted by the revolutionary spirit of this movement, and by some distinctive traits surrealism happened to share with traditional Afri-

can art and literature: a common belief in the power of words, of objets, and of external occurrence. However, none of the redactors of *L'Étudiant Noir* would write an important essay in their publication. 'They preferred at that time the conservative publishing firms', reports a Zairese researcher who concludes: "May be it is the proof that this little review was not as significant one make us believe".<sup>4</sup>

Anyway, it is not necessary to drag on the recent declarations of the former protagonists of *L'Étudiant Noir* about their movement. Those recently interviewed were not the hard working and rebellious students of the thirties, but well-known conservative statement or successful writers. As Damas underlined, 'for Senghor (former president of Senegal) or everyone of us, the essential was to pass our exams [. . .] we had to succeed, it was a challenge.' Although many statements about *L'Étudiant Noir* are conflictual, Césaire and Senghor, at least their declarations on this matter are in accord on many points. Both writers considered the political and literary options of *Légitime Défense* too assimilated, and the redactors of this review too engaged in Western concerns. Said Césaire on this matter:

What I reproached them above all —may be under Senghor influences—was the fact that they were merely French surrealists. Nothing could discern them neither from French surrealists nor from French communism . . . It was still assimilation.<sup>6</sup>

As for Senghor, he was more radical in his declarations when he stated:

*Légitime Défense* rejected traditional Western values . . . Whereas our first move was to reject all Western value on behalf of ours [. . .] *L'Étudiant Noir* believe in the priority of African culture. For us, politic was but one aspect of culture [. . .]<sup>7</sup>

One must not accept literally those declarations. There was not any radical breaking between those two Parisian movements of black students, coming from the French colonies. Those passionate refusals opposed to Western values were originally, Western refusals, endowed later with specific African features. Césaire and Senghor reproach to the *Légitime Défense*'s redactors their assimilation to Western ideologies but not the fact of having adopted those ideologies. "Marx is right but we must complete Marxism"<sup>8</sup>, said Césaire. Moreover, those authors, as well as their elders directed their revolt primarily against racial prejudices. Therefore, it was a social revolt, and no one could object that the negritude was first a political movement before being cultural. Those clamors of

revolt from the Afro-American poets of the Negro Renaissance, the lucid inquest of René Maran, the bitterness of Césaire's Notebooks, all those Negro, voices in the Americas expressed above all the humiliation of an alienated community living in a shameful socioeconomic condition. The negritude was merely an awareness of this social injustice by the black Francophone intellectuals. Affirmed Césaire:

Our struggle was the struggle against alienation, it is how negritude was born . . . When we founded L'Étudiant Noir, in fact we want to name this magazine L'Étudiant Nègre (Negro Student), but there were some disapprovals among the West Indians, thus, I recommended Negritude. It was like a challenge, a violent acceptance of the word Nègre (Nigger), thereby the word Negritude.<sup>9</sup>

In order restore the oppressed race's dignity, Césaire, Senghor and their generation would emphasize firstly in this struggle, on the cultural aspect. Therefore, rejecting Western values, they would beseech a close identification with the cultural heritage of this civilization, which prospered in Africa long before colonization and the tragedy of slavery. Departing from this concept, the mission of the black intelligentsia would be to create a new image of the Negro and to prepare the ground for decolonization. As René Dépestre put it: "Decolonize the countries as well as the minds."<sup>10</sup> On the same matter, Césaire said about his political standing at the time: "We considered, Senghor and I, that the concept of emancipation sided us with the left, but we refused to see in the black problem only a social one."<sup>11</sup> Although Senghor agreed with this statement, one could discern behind a recent declaration of the *poet president* the reticence of the successful politician, no more responsive to revolutionary ideologies. He alleged on his side: "L'Étudiant Noir proclaimed the priority and the primacy of politic over culture: for us, politic was only one aspect of culture."<sup>12</sup> By asserting such a priority, they had to recall those ancestral cultural values which were gradually disappearing in the course of history and were never replaced in current time. Cultural revolution, indeed, since this concept presupposes a thorough change of those feeling and of those ideas conditioning black awareness of both his situation within mankind, and his actual condition within the community. Ethnology which was beginning to discover and to ascertain Africa's real past, would further impel those young black's tireless quest of identity. Their forefathers being victimized in a recent past, they are haunted by this historic iniquity. They would strive to go back in time, scratching out those infamous centuries, in order to bring to life this ancient and un-



spoiled Africa. In that manner, the poet could recollect with bitterness and pride:

No, we have never been amazons of the king of Dahomey, nor princes of Ghana with eight hundred camels, nor doctors in Timbuctoo under Askia The Great, nor architects in Djene, nor Mahdis, nor warriors. We do not feel the armpit itch of those who once upon a time carried lances [. . .]"<sup>13</sup>

In the works of all those poets would come to life an Africa of dream, of desire, of freedom: a mythical Africa, indeed, but here this myth would be source of creation, of knowledge and of revolt. By pretending that poetry was not just a literary category but a mean of action and discovery, surrealism represented an ideal medium of expression for the black poets. In Césaire's poetical works, surrealism would be made manifest as a constant attempt to recover in his deep ego a true identity. 'The descent into the abyss of myself was also a descent into Africa [. . .] An operation of desalination [. . .] I understood surrealism in that way,'<sup>14</sup> would claim the Martinican poet. In order to recover his true self freed of all alienation it is in that way that the poet could reach ancestral Africa, rescinding its immemorial sources, becoming impregnated with its history and metamorphosis:

I am from before Adam  
I did not come neither from the same lion  
Nor from the same tree  
I am from another warmth,  
From another coldness [. . .]"  
Césaire; Visitation, *Armes miraculeuses*.

By pridefully claiming the fact of possessing the specific of a different civilization, required as well the rejection of alien ideologies. Senghor could declare therefore: "We accept surrealism as a medium and not as an ending in itself, as an allied, but not as a master."<sup>15</sup> While saying *we*, Senghor was far to be a spokesperson for the redactors of *L'Etudiant Noir*. By writing only realistic novels, Ousmane Socé clearly displayed his indifference toward the surrealist spirit. The novel, as literary genre, is despised by surrealists for being only anecdotal, therefore, giving to the reader just a superficial vision of realities; merely the appearance of things, but not those thousand aspects of life as well as the emotion unveiled by authentic poetry. 'I decree that one must be silent when one is devoid of emotion',<sup>16</sup> proclaims Breton on this matter, in his arrogant usual speaking

style. That is for surrealist, the essential function of writing is to reveal and not to entertain or to tell a story.

Renouncing to surrealism, Birago Diop through his fairytaleslike and short stories,<sup>17</sup> would use the French, language only to perpetuate this enduring oral literary traditions of his native country. He alleges that he was more influenced by the *Griots*\* of his country than by any other literary movement. His master, as he says, *Amadou Koumba N'Gom, Master of the Logos*.<sup>18</sup> His poetical works seem to be the prolongation of an African tradition. With an excellent talent for criticism but devoid of poetical inspiration, Aristide Maugé would write some interesting essays. Except for Senghor and Césaire, the other contributors to *L'Etudiant Noir* did not leave any important literary works.

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\* The Griots in West Africa are both historians and public storytellers; they form an hereditary cast, transmitting verbally from generation to generation the mighty deeds of African heroes, and the native traditions.

## Notes

1. Léon Damas. Notre Génération in *Ecrivains Noirs*. op. cit., p. 91.
2. Léon Damas, *Rencontre avec Damas* op. cit, p. 14.
3. Ousmane Socé, Karim, roman sénégalais (Paris: Soriot, 1935).
4. Kimoni Iyay, *Destin de la littérature Négro-Africaine* (Canada, Sherbrooke: Naaman, 1975).
5. Léon Damas, *Rencontre avec Damas*, op. cit., p. 54.
6. Aimé Césaire, *Un Orphée des Caraïbes un Pour la Révolution pour la Poésie de René Dépestre* (Paris: Lèmeac, 1974).
7. L. Senghor, *Lettre à L. Kesteloot*, op. cit.
8. Césaire, *Un Orphée des Carïbe* op. cit, p. 161.
9. *Ibib.*, p. 165.
10. *Ibib.*, p. 171.
11. *Ibib.*, p. 170.
12. Senghor, *Lettre à L. Kesteloot*, op. cit.
13. Césaire, *Cahiers*, p. 97.
14. Césaire, *Un Orphée des Carïbes*, op. cit. p. 161.
15. Senghor, *Lettre a L.K.*, op. cit., p. 92.
16. André Breton, *Manifestes du Surréalisme*, p. 16.
17. Birago Diop, *Les Contes d'Amadou Koumba* (Paris: Fasquelle, 1947). *Leurres et Lueurs* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1960).
18. *Ibid.*

## Chapter 4

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# Aimé Césaire and Surrealism

### Césaire's Function of Poetry

Rejecting the realistic novel's clear and logic construction for a language more suitable to their feeling, it is essentially in poetry that the negritude movement was revealed and became widely known to the public in the forties, through the poetic works of Aimé Césaire, Leopold Cédar Senghor, and Léon Damas. Thereby, those Francophone poets were to become inevitably involved at that time with surrealism. Beside, most of the best French poets and writers of this generation is more or less marked by the spirit of this movement. Those black poets had quite a lot to obtain from such an alliance: the rejection of Western traditional values, the automatic writing concept, the revaluation of language, the laudation of humor, the celebration of love, and above all the faith in a radiant future thanks to Revolution. Nevertheless, it is only in the poetical works of Aimé Césaire that the surrealism spirit would be really manifest. This influence could be in part attributed to André Breton himself, as Césaire acknowledged it:

I have never forgotten my first meeting with André Breton in 1941. This encounter has been the one, which oriented my life in a decisive manner. Since then, there are some verses I cannot read. Some sceneries—including those of my native island—I cannot wonder at, without the assistance, that is to say, only through André Breton.<sup>1</sup>

It would pertain to Aimé Césaire to really set surrealism out *At the Service of Revolution*—Title of a surrealist review published in Paris in the thirties—and in that matter, he was not in agreement with Breton's specific reserves toward the political commitment of literature. The black writers would never have such scruples. Contrary to other literature, it is merely through *poesie engagée* (committed poetry) that the Negro-African poets could reach at authentic poetry. Explained Césaire in his introduction to AfroAmerican poetry:

Black poet's master feeling is of being uneasy, that is to say of being intolerant. Intolerant of every day reality for its sordidness; intolerant of the world for its mediocre confinement; intolerant of life, for being plundered of it on the highway to the Sun.<sup>2</sup>

Thereby, the West Indian poet was revealing all at once, the causes of his political engagement, the liberating function of his poetry and his total adherence to the Negro-African literary tradition of *poésie engagée*. As understood, the poetical activity becoming a real commitment for the one obsessed by a lost of identity, and a legitimate place in the community. That is for Césaire, poetry is much more than a composition designed to convey the perception of lyrical beauty or structural perfection characteristic of traditional poetry. Said the poet:

Poetry is a process—by mean of words, images, myths, love and humor—capable to direct me to the very heart of myself and to the core of the Universe.

Césaire; *First Proposition, Poetic Art*.<sup>3</sup>

It is no coincidence that this *Proposition* appears to be the first in Césaire's *Poetic Art*. In fact, this credo summarizes the essential of his poetical works: metaphors and emotions, mankind and race, time and space, and a specific attitude toward life. It is not difficult to recognize here all those antinomies, by no means contrary, which might allow the surrealists to decipher the dual fundamental enigmas of reality: the Ego, and the Universe. The Martinican poet cherishes as well as Breton this fool hope of finding out 'the point where life and death, the real and the unreal, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable cease to be contradictory perceived'.<sup>4</sup> Remarkd Césaire about this statement from Breton: "Never in the course of the centuries, such an ambition would have been expressed so quietly". Nevertheless, it was merely through verbal images and words, the essence of poetry, that the surrealists were projecting to achieve their excessive ambition; for, asserted Césaire:

"Surrounding the poem coming to life, all the women loved, all the desires longed for, all the dreams dreamed, all the images perceived or apprehended, the priceless vertigo: the ego, the others, the world. All the past and the future; I say everything . . . man is not only a creature, he is the Universe itself".<sup>5</sup>

It is obvious that this poetic credo was in complete agreement with other surrealist theories in this matter, which also claim that the essential function of poetry is to reconcile human being and the universe. The

whole poetical system of Césaire is related to this main concept. The poet's endeavor is to embrace as well as to recreate this universe just by his power to fable thanks to words, myths, humors, and love. It is once more the very surrealist ambition: the tremendous hope to recreate life with metaphors, those exalting myths allowing the poet to unveil the unknown, the subversive function of humor, love and its regenerative power. The connection between the poet's subjectivity and the outward reality is always manifest in his verses. That is for the surrealists, both the ego and the universe make up a single entity. Who am I? *Who was I many centuries ago?*<sup>6</sup>, are the obsessing questions of Nadja, the principal personage of Breton's surrealist novel? Those questions immediately call forth another interrogations concerning Nadja uniqueness in the world:

Who am I haunting? Beyond all kind of preferences I am apprehending, attractions I am undergoing, events occurring only to me, I strive to know why I am so different from the others".<sup>7</sup>

Thanks to surrealism, Césaire's descent in the deep of his inner self would help him find out the answer to those troubling questions eluded by Breton in his novel. Césaire maintains that surrealism has strongly contributed in his effort to recover the African heritage, and he affirms: "Deep inside the sociable being, I could find the true self freed from all alienation". And it is still the same Nadja's obsessing interrogation that is echoed in those verses: "Who and what are we? Wonderful question!"<sup>8</sup>. But the Martinican poet would elucidate this question also wonderful of conciseness:

From looking at trees I became a tree  
And my long feettrees have implanted into the ground  
Huge sacks of venom  
Towering cities of corpses  
From thinking to Congo  
I became a Congo roaring with forests and rivers  
Where the whips crack like prodigious flags [. . .]<sup>9</sup>

Thanks to the magic of words, the poet's cosmic vision encompasses in a glance time and space: the dreadful past, the present struggle, and the hopeful future. By identifying himself, in the poem in process, with objects and events of the distant past, the black poet can bring back to life a grandiose and virgin Africa, but also the painful remembrance of massacres, the *whips* of slavery cracking like prodigious flags which stand for the poet's commitment to a future Revolution. Those hallucinating visions

induce Césaire's critics to believe that Rimbaud and Lautreamont would have influenced the Martinican poet but not literary surrealism. While acknowledging this fact, Césaire nevertheless admits an affinity with surrealism, even before he met André Breton. Said Césaire: "I was ready to welcome surrealism because the same authors who inspired the surrealists have influenced me. We have had the same literary influences."<sup>10</sup> Césaire admitted furthermore Mallarmé's influence as well as Paul Claudel's. But he emphasized that both Rimbaud and Lautreamont represented for him *the great revelation*. Remembered René Dépeste: "I never heard before, anybody speaking of Rimbaud and Lautreamont's works as Césaire did, with such a communicative fervor, during a lecture in Haiti".<sup>11</sup> The Rebellious poets, the Seers, the Magicians of Words as the critics used to praised both Rimbaud and Lautreamont the legends, surrounding their life, and their unique writing style altogether fascinated this Doctor of Philology who was lecturing at this time like a poet:

The world stands at Rimbaud's eagerness. Black palls and fermata, lightning and thunder Lautreamont blasts the world for its emptiness Rimbaud and Lautreamont complemental.<sup>12</sup>

A perpetual struggle between the ego and the universe: it is how Césaire understands and explains the defiance of those poets toward the universe. Lautreamont's major work, *Chant de Maldoror*, which stand against God, human beings, and society—may be more than any other literary works—could only inspired the Martinican poet, spokesman of his race, calling into account History and Universe for a cruel denial of justice.

It is you dirty end of the world  
 Dirty end of the dawn.  
 It is you burden of insults  
 And one hundred years of whiplashing [. . .]

Undoubtedly, there are in some Césaire's verses some destructive aspect and this kind of ferocity that one could find in the work of Rimbaud or Lautreamont: but the resemblance ends there. Lautreamont's absolute and anarchist revolt against mankind and religion is far away from Césaire's rightful anger toward the Western civilization. As for Rimbaud, sometimes his literary work seems to be willfully incomprehensible; *J'en réservais la traduction* (I kept the interpretation for myself), he said about his own poetry. Despite an apparent obscurity of some verses, Césaire affirms that his poetry is far to be incomprehensible. Said Césaire: "*Mes poemes sont toujours accessibles á la sincérité des soifs longues.*" (My

poetry his always accessible for the one willing to quench one's thirst.)<sup>13</sup> Lilyan Casteloot, one of the best interpreter of Césaire's work, has singled out a whole set of symbol allowing an easy understanding of this poetry: nature, animals, objects, and their symbolic meaning<sup>14</sup>. Césaire admitted this symbolism when he stated explicitly that trees represent for him 'an exceptional harmony [. . .] the opposite of slavery, a sort of elder brother and the ardent symbol of the future.'<sup>15</sup> That do not mean Césaire's poetry have to be only apprehended through the correspondence of a symbolic language. Like any original poetry, its meaning is quite multiple and allows varied interpretations. In spite of their violent rejection of all literary traditions, the surrealists had to admit that their movement was in some manner a prolongation of symbolism. Although both movements proceed with different literary techniques, they have in common this hermetism making use of symbol to image an idea.

In a critical study of African literature, J. Jahn<sup>16</sup> tries to demonstrate this is an error to equate the African rooted poetry of Césaire and Senghor with surrealist poetry essentially European. He supports his theory by emphasizing on a vague concept about some common characteristics that he found between African philosophy of life, West Indian believes and Haitian Voodoo. Those similar characteristics—according to Jahn—are the main features of a traditional and unchanged oral literature inherited by Senghor and Césaire. Thereby, Jahn agreed in part with Senghor who discerns a clear difference between the Negro-African verses endowed with some mysticism, and the surrealist writing essentially a product of the intellect. It is easy to understand the ambiguity of such theories. It is quite clear that the problem does not lie in the fact that those authors belong to a specific literary tradition. Even though those writers are connected with an African cultural past—through the traditions of their native social milieu—they belong as well to the Western traditions for their assimilation of this culture, and their formal education. Senghor and Césaire's literary works, among others, are an obvious illustration of this *metisage culturelle* (cultural crossing) common to the Negro-African writers, specially those using an IndoEuropean languages: English, French, Spanish, Portuguese originated from a different historic evolution than the AfroArabic languages from Africa.

Writing in a language implies to accept its syntax as well as its literary traditions. The black Francophone writers' first concern would be to elude those linguistic imperatives, in order to find a new language capable to translate accurately their own feeling and their special vision of the universe. In comparison to French, English more flexible, Spanish more



accented, and both, those languages less regulated could allow more linguistic freedom for the writers using them. French language in the contrary permitted quite a few linguistic innovations for its weighty literary traditions, and especially for those numerous set of rules, of interdictions and exceptions which regulate its syntax since the end of the sixteenth-century. The word *négritude* would have been the only Negro-African neologism approved by the French Academy, as a new word worthy of acceptance in the official French dictionary. Wrote Jean-Paul Sartre: "The quite clumsy word of *négritude* is the only black contribution to French dictionary".<sup>17</sup> This laconic statement from an eminent writer like Sartre illustrates moreover French literary conservatism and the establishment's reticence to accept any modern linguistic creations. In fact, this neologism coined by Césaire refers to the old French origin of *négre* (Niger), and the suffix *itude* is standard in French linguistic. So, why this irrelevant qualification of *clumsy*, affirmed rightfully G. Tougas on this matter:

How to explain that a writer who conceives such a contempt for capitalism bourgeois, reacts over the word *negritude* like an affected swanky? It must be that a remote conservative reflex instinctively originated this reaction.<sup>18</sup>

The fact of language would be an essential problem for the black Frenchspeaking writers in their struggle against assimilation. In order to carry on their liberating mission, it was necessary to seek out for new accents and meaningful expressions. Quite analytical and restrictive, the French language—'This pale and cold skinny language' for Sarte, 'neutral language at the utmost, for Malarmé'<sup>19</sup>—was unfitted to image, among other things, those encroaching rhythms and tedious beats of African drums: the essence of black poetry, according to Senghor. This language was as well improper to embody this Negro-African concept of human being in perfect harmony with the universe. This poetry of knowledge and action innovated by surrealism, which tended, in fact, to be a poetic form of living rather than an aesthetic style, coincided with black aspirations. For the Frenchspeaking West-Indians, surrealist poetry would become the appropriate language for expressing their feeling and their revolt.

### Césaire's Surrealist Poetic Art

The marvelous encounter of the inner reality with the outward 'reality, imaginatively and conjointly perceived by the poet, can originate wonderful discoveries'.

A. Césaire, *Art Poétique*, 5e Proposition.

Césaire's fifth Poetic Art Proposition, concisely describes this surrealist concept of poetry as a mean of knowledge and action. As understood, the poetic act could no longer agree neither with the traditional aesthetics, nor with the orthodox linguistic rules. In such a case poetry becomes an antirational process aiming to willingly subvert the language as well as the logical way of thinking. Césaire himself asserts that surrealism helped him to find out what he was uncertainly in search for: a new language.

Surrealism gave me what I was confusedly looking for [. . .] Surrealism was an instrument, which dynamited the French language and blew up all conventions. That was very important, because the sluggish traditional form and ready-made French expressions were not suitable to me.<sup>20</sup>

Beyond surrealism influence, the West Indian poet was following the path dashed by many others frontrunners in the history of French poetry, and one can understand Césaire's excessive admiration for Rimbaud. All the critics concur on that matter: Rimbaud is the starting point of French modern poetry. Although he stands in history as the archetype of the rebel poet, the rimbaldian revolt was before all directed against traditional literature. *To find a new language* is a notation that comes up repeatedly in Rimbaud's *Letter of the Seer*<sup>21</sup>. Because for this adolescent poet, new literary forms were required to image this unknown he was ardently searching for.

It is quite difficult to entirely enumerate what French modern poetry owes to Rimbaud, and here also the critics are unanimous. Wrote Henry Peyre defining the dominant characters and lasting impacts of this poetry:

In barely one or two years, Rimbaud succeed in sweeping away all the tinsels of his predecessors' poetic diction's, and in passing beyond personal poetry whose era he declared hancerfoth to have passed away . . . He rejects all that contains and stagnates the torrent of sensations and images. All communications with the reader is broken off, or rather it will have to come about through an explosive shock.<sup>22</sup>

Césaire's critics generally characterize his poetry with about the same expressions that describe an outburst of sensations and metaphors capable to originate an efficient shock within the reader of his verses. That is because the black poet, who objects the establishment's essential values, likewise objects the language expressing those values. In order to endow his language with this Negro accent, and to destroy symbolically this hostile society, the poet must challenge as well this society's linguistic

traditions and the words of its vocabulary. 'The black herald would unfrenhchify those words, would crush them, would break their association off, and couple them by means of violence'<sup>23</sup>, said Sartre on Césaire's poetry. It is indeed this very unprecedented coupling of words and violence that one can find in Césaire's verses when the poet foretells future revolutions, deluges and cataclysm.

Starting up a fire of wimbles drilling  
And forcing the sky to scream at the stars  
A dance of assagais as one never seen before  
And ten thousand flags of victory  
Snatched from cetaceans.  
Césaire: Ferrement

Césaire poetry is studded with those exceptional surrealist images, which symbolize future purifying calamities. The words of those images seem to lose their usual meaning, acquiring a new signification capable to exactly express the poet's deep feeling and to image his specific universe.

Eruptive forces mark out your orbs  
Telepathic communications set forth  
Across the refractory matter [. . .]  
Césaire: Visitation, in *Les Armes Miraculeuses*, p. 32.'

And the lustful boat sails up unafraid  
Of the crumbling water  
And now rot out plops of ignominy [. . .]  
The stars in the bezel of their neverseen ring  
Shall cut the pipes of the organ glass  
Of the evening.  
Césaire: *Les Cahiers*, page 149

After all, the poet's domain is not only this tiny island; his empire is everywhere the Negro suffers 'death breathes madly in the ripe cane field of his arms'. And he can take upon himself to strike at the very heart of Western civilization, and its essential value, Logic, in the name of which Europe had justified the right to enslave people it called savage. Yes, Negroes are primitive for *whom two and two are five*, who identify themselves with nature and object and worship strange gods:

Because we hate you  
You and your reason  
We call upon ripen dementia Blazing insanity of stubborn cannibalism . . .  
Dances, idolatry, apostasy

I too kill God with my laziness  
 My words my deeds my obscene songs  
 I have worn parrot feathers  
 Musk cat skins  
 I have worshipped the Zambezi . . .  
 Here is the great defiance  
 And impulse of Satan  
 And the insolent nostalgic drift of red moons  
 Green fire and yellow fever.

Césaire: *Les Cahiers*, pages 474–854

And from verses to verses it is always the same accent of exacerbated anger, the similar bitter anathema voiced in an incessant and unrepensible burst of confusing images reaching the limits of metaphor. For a critic of Césaire's poetry, this persistent lyrical exuberance grows wearisome and dissonant for the reader of those verses: "Such a bursting, such an exaggeration and provocative excess grow tiresome from constant repetition." These incessant telescoping words astound the reader<sup>24</sup> wrote H. Heill about Césaire's exuberant metaphors. In fact, those flamboyant images, those broken sentences where the words seem to collide into each other, and all those excessive clamors which exasperate this critic, were the obvious proof that the Martinican poet had found out this specific language different from the European models, he was searching for.

### **The Automatic Writing and the Surrealist Metaphors— The Significance of Humor**

The truly genuine accents of universal poetry have always been new accents as Césaire's. The poet claims that he sought for those particular accents into the deep of himself, as he explained:

Within the subconscious which is closely related to genuine poetry. And because in any true poetry the poet play at the universe' game, genuine poet wish to let words associate themselves freely, for sure that is the only way to subject words to the universe's willingness.<sup>25</sup>

In such a matter, it is possible to speak of automatic writing about Césaire's poetry, and one knows the importance of this method in surrealist theories. For Breton, the automatic writing is nothing less but the primordial process of surrealist writing. Those word gushing spontaneously from the deep of the subconscious, without any external control, without any aesthetic or moral concern, represent for the surrealists the direct and undistorted expression of the self. Although all surrealists do

not practice this writing method, as exactly recommended by Breton, most of them allege that this inner voice has the power to enrich imagination, increase the poet's scope of knowledge, and by arousing his desires, impel him to change a mediocre existence. Affirmed Paul Eluard:

The automatic writing constantly open new doors over the subconscious and by gradually challenging the self and the universe, this method increase as well their potentialities.<sup>26</sup>

The automatic writing became for the surrealists a form of self-administered psychoanalysis. By placing themselves in a state of absolute attentiveness they tried to give free play to the inner power of words association and to the images which these suggested. This process represented a real psychotherapy for Césaire, and as he puts it, *a cure of desintoxication*. Thereby, the black poet could ride himself of his phantasms, his complexities, and his anger against the Western world.

For the Martinican poet, the *Automatic Writing* was not an experimental game, as it often was for the French surrealists. This process even was no longer this passive automatism recommended by Breton, and here, Sartre rightly discerns the fact: "Automatic writing *engagé* and even consciously directed, not for the obvious interference of Césaire's own thought in this process, but because the poet's words and images ceaselessly express the same torrid obsession."<sup>27</sup> That is for the West Indian poet it is impossible, as prescribe by Breton, to entirely hold apart the exterior world in order to gather those words coming directly from the subconscious. At any moment, the poet is not able to set aside of his thought, the *torrid obsession* of his race's distress and humiliation which leads to this poetic atmosphere of violence where all frenzies are permitted in a world torn by its own contradictions. For the poet, the outcome of this writing method is innumerable:

What is rising out, it is the individual substratum, the inward conflict, obsession, phobias and fixations. . . All the secret numbers of the intimate cryptogram . . . My past is there displaying and hiding its face alike . . . My future is there holding its hand out to me. Some rockets flare up; it is my childhood burning up, voicing and searching for me . . . What is bursting out, that is the ancestral past, the hereditary images, the millenary hidden notions and the legendary cities of knowledge.<sup>28</sup>

From there, the Martinican poet would come up with his entire literary works: "Les Cahiers d'un Retour au Pays Natal," epopee of his race and his autobiography, *Les Ferrements* (Iron Fitting) of bondage, *Les Armes*

*Miraculeuses* (*Miraculous Weapons*) of his struggles, and *Les Cents PurSang* (One Hundred Thoroughbreds) of his revolt, *Et Les Chiens se Taisent* (And the Dogs Grow Silent) of his compliance to the political reality of his native country, and *Le Cadastre* (Public Record) of the dis-abused poet mayor of Fort de France hobbled by deceits and frustrations.

Those evocative titles, for which the surrealists conceive a real passion, are very meaningful, and recapitulate as well the major stages of the poet's own life. The seemingly confusing verses in those poems are nothing else than the genuine expression of his desires and obsessions, the strict alliance of his words and emotions. When the poet give free rein to his thought, his verses take on the aspect of incantation. Words seem to lose their usual meaning to take a foretelling significance.

And I heard rising up  
 From the other side of the disaster  
 A stream of turtledoves  
 And of Savannah clovers  
 That I still carry deep inside me  
 At the inverse height of the twentieth floor  
 Of the most insolent building  
 As protection against the putrefying power  
 Of ambient twilight's  
 Survey day and night  
 By a damned poxy sun.

Césaire: *Les Cahiers*, p. 29

Only the automatic writing can contend for such a poetic language. However, behind the apparent confusing surrealist screen, everything is revealed in the moment, if the poet's symbolism can be understood: *The disaster* of slavery and colonialism, the purifying *river*, the *turtledoves* over the *clovers of the savanna*, clear symbol of freedom, the Western world *insolent* domination with its *building* and dominant technology, the *twilight* and *petrifying* atmosphere of submission and despair, and finally the *damned poxy sun*, apotheosis of future calamities and expectations. Those incoherent visions, spontaneously transcribed by the poet in a trancelike state, achieve to unveil in a privilege moment a whole reality of traumas, of desires, and of intentions concealed in the depth of the subconscious.

Breton equates to the subjection of drug hallucinations the poet's entire submission to the power of this uncontrolled flowing stream of words and the images, which these suggested. Proclaimed Breton in his manifesto:

The same goes for surrealist images as for opium generated images that a poet does not evoke them; rather, those images come spontaneously, despotically. He cannot chase them away because he has no longer the ability to control his mind.<sup>30</sup>

Breton added further that those self generated visions could create a certain state of needs capable to drive human being to frightful revolt. Those spontaneous images are of essential value in surrealist poetry and art, and the sole mode of expression fully satisfactory to the eyes and to the ears. It is not the clear meaning of those images, which is of the greatest importance, but their subversive action, the emotions and shock originated by their reading. That is for the surrealists, the traditional language can only describe a superficial appearance of things, while those automatic associations of words, subverting syntax, logic, and traditions, might suggest a new order of reality: a sureality coinciding with every day reality. Maintained Breton: "The mind soon becomes convinced of the supreme reality of those images, aware of the limitless expanses wherein its desires are made manifest."<sup>29</sup>

As the surrealists believe, those free combinations of words generating images are just the fact of a chance happening, *an objective chance* as Breton put it. He declared further in his manifesto: "It is as it where from the fortuitous juxtaposition of two words, that a particular light has sprung."<sup>30</sup> This specific function of the surrealist poetic images is precisely displayed in Césaire's poetical works. Those unusual images connecting two remote realities seem indeed to be the result of an objective coincidence. But in the black poet's verses, this surrealist objective chance is rather the fruit of a tremendous furor and intense hope blended in those bold metaphors depicting this alien world he is starving to obliterate.

We sing of poisonous flowers  
 Blooming in stormy field  
 Skies of love slashed by embolism  
 Epileptic sunrise, white fiery glow of abyssal sands  
 Jetsam of wreckage sinking into thundering night  
 Enflamed with wild scent [. . .]

Césaire: *Les Cahiers*, p. 53.

This gloomy picture of this world in a state of fusion images the West Indies despicable condition. To describe this world, the poet does not care to subvert established grammatical usage. He omits punctuation and verbs, displaces adjectives, and invents new association of words to make his verses more evocative. But when the black poet foretells the non-

existent world of his desire, those dreary visions are override by a free gushing forth of peaceful visions of happiness.

There are your eyes  
 Ladybirds quivering on the grey stone day  
 There is in the confusing glance  
 This swallow made of mint and gorse  
 Which melts always to be reborn  
 In the tidal wave of your light [. . .]

Césaire: *Cahiers*, p. 69

Those astounding surrealist images revealing such an unusual reality are numerous in Césaire's poetical works. However, when the poet seems to submit himself entirely to the subjection of the automatic writing technique, his verses lose this originality and evocative power inherent to genuine poetry. In this passage for example:

And you ghost rise blue chemistry  
 From a forest of haunted beasts, twisted machines  
 Jujube trees of rotted flesh baskets of oysters' eyes from a lace of straps  
 Cut in the beautiful sisal of human skin  
 I shall have words enough to contain you

Those heavy consonance and those anarchic images, although expressing a great deal of anger, nevertheless evoke only violence and confusion but not revolt. An uncontrolled and excessive automatism might possibly originated those verses from *Cadastre*:

Leaping waves of the unbounded ounce  
 At the zenith  
 Rarely slipped from your stud [. . .]

Césaire: *Interlude, Cadastre*

In those verses also, strained poetic images an excessive alliterations make those metaphors quite affected and completely hermetic. Fortunately, such passages occur rarely in the poet's work. Usually the text reveals a new reality where each word has a precise or symbolical meaning which embody the poet's emotion. In opposition, compare those later confusing images with those magnificent metaphors of the poet mastering his writing:

Freedom my only pirate  
 Rain of the New Year my only thirst



Love my only sampan  
 I shall drench with my flask  
 And my fingers full of happiness  
 The glazed lips of the Sleeping Beauty.

If the main purpose of the poetic images is to reveal the whole with the least possible words, this evocative passage, astonishing of preciseness and sumptuous expressive images, makes manifest the inventive poetical power of the Martinican bard. It is easy to understand that the word *pirate*, already suggesting the idea of someone free from any bondage, increases moreover the evocative poetic power of *freedom*, by adjoining to this word the concept of determination and audacity. The *Rain of the New Year* still symbolizes the poet's tenacious hope of this future world in harmony with human aspirations. All the exoticism inherent to the word *sampan* as well as its affective resonance and its meaning, symbolize the poet's highest idea of love: a fragile stiff capable to brave the most violent storm. It is not difficult to apprehend the deed of the poet longing to be *the lover of his unique race*, attempting to bring back his people to life, as the fairytale's legendary Charming Prince who revived the Sleeping Beauty from her centenary lethargy, thanks to the power of love.

The surrealist poets and those akin to the movement can merely be recognized by their use of those unconventional poetic pictures and metaphors. It is not that surrealists have invented metaphoric verses which is part of a poetical tradition; however, surrealists have more than a craze for unusual metaphors, and in that matter all of them agree. The surrealists affirm that poetic image's essential purpose is to reveal a fundamental truth, a different reality, and above all to unravel this enigma of the ego in his relationship with the universe. Most of the surrealists' statements support this view. 'Every images urge you at every time to revise the entire universe', asserted Aragon at the era of nascent surrealism. 'Images are alive, and everything can become images,'<sup>31</sup> added Eluard who equated this literary fact to reality; because, he affirmed further 'My images invent objects, creatures, events, and my sense are capable to apprehend all of them.'<sup>32</sup> Breton's last manifesto—published in 1957—is an eulogy of poetical metaphors, *living outcome* of the automatic writing. For Breton, this storm of images generated by the subconscious, those tremendous shower of stars, lead man to a better understanding of himself and of the world. Césaire's *Poetic Art* proceeds to a great extent from this concept of poetic metaphors as a means of knowledge, and all the poet's statements on this matter are in agreement with surrealist theories. Césaire likewise affirms that object and subject fused through the poetic images,

which reveal the hidden parts of a single face. By confronting and unveiling the connection between the ego and the universe, a metaphor no longer describe their appearances, but their potentialities. In a burst of lyricism, the usual surrealist style, Césaire proclaimed in *Poesie et Connaissance* (Poetry and Knowledge):

Thanks to images, the revolutionary images, the distant images, the images subverting all logic rules, human being may finally knock down obstacles [. . .] Because image unceasingly goes beyond the visible because the dialectic of image transcends antinomies: on the whole, modern science may merely be the ponderous verification of some fool images launched by a poet [. . .] While the sun of the image comes to a climax, everything become possible again.<sup>33</sup>

Beside this passionate cult of poetic images, surrealists share a common refusal of conventional grammatical rules. In surrealist poetry or prose, there is a lack of this logical sequence of ideas inherent to traditional writing. Most of the poems typically surrealist usually appear like a continuous series of clauses in juxtaposition generating images, but without any logical order; series of words or adjectives united by prepositions without clear syntactical structure and so on. This breaking off with literary tradition is moreover accentuated in poetry by a lack of rhymes, versification and even punctuation. The best definition of surrealist poetry was the one formulated by Monnerot who said: "Genuine surrealist poetry is shapeless as running water."<sup>34</sup> In their willingness of uniting poetry with every day life, the surrealists seemingly attempt to confer to their writing the unpredictable waving motion of human existence.

In conventional literary writing style, a poetic image generally refers to a symbolic representation of a specific thing or idea in the reader's mind; in this case, poetic image is synonym of metaphor, comparison. However, in the case where the poetic image is supposed to represent, by association of ideas, something different than the one describe, then, the notion of metaphor or comparison become ambiguous. By referring the reader to the mere phantasm of his imagination, the poet moreover appeals to a deeper domain of the self: the subconscious. One can understand why surrealists were so interested in Freud's psychoanalyst theories. The surrealist poetic images appeal thoroughly to both concepts: metaphor or comparison and unconscious imagination. In each case, the poet tries to project a specific vision or idea, thanks to his linguistic action upon words. From those new associations of words setting free in the Automatic Writing, surrealists earnestly expected to discover new concepts revealed untried formulas. *Alchemy of the Verb* means the power

of language to transform simple words in essential truth, as those legendary alchemists expecting to transmute simple lead into gold.

Many surrealists affirm their belief in a distinct truth hidden within words, beyond its very usual meaning. Like Rimbaud and many other predecessors, they strive to invent this new language where words would no longer be the logical auxiliary of the mind but an independent and dynamic creator. This word, outcome of the subconscious, would be able to suggest a new reality just by inflaming imagination, calling forth this mental process of evocation and analogy. 'What keep me from scrambling the usual order of words, thus challenging the completely seeming existence of things,'<sup>35</sup> Breton proclaimed. He added further in *Les Mots Sans Rides* (Words Without Wrinkles), that words become or is becoming again dynamically creative. He still maintained in his last manifesto that 'in order to restore language real power, it is necessary to leap back to the very beginning of its significance'. Most of the surrealists worship the same concept on word seemingly exorbitant creative power: Césaire much more.

And it is upon words—skin of the world, secret and innocent thin slice of the world—that poets speculate on our chances; the first chances and the last ones [. . .] It becomes more and more possible *that word might appear like an algebraic formula making the world comprehensible* [. . .]. *It may well be that an original manipulation of words instigates a new science* [. . .] Then, it would be an era where word comprehensiveness might make nature understandable again.<sup>36</sup>

This surrealist concept on the excessive ability of words is clearly in agreement with the primitive faith of universal religions, and the cabalistic systems of ancient philosophic doctrines. In the Western Genesis, the word of God gave rise to the universe. God commands to Adam just to name all creatures; thus he shall become their master. Césaire proclaims once more: 'Genuine poet wishes to abandon words to their free associations, sure that is the only way to subject them to the will of the universe'.

Words?  
Words indeed!  
When we handle quarter of the earth  
When we embrace delirious continents' [. . .]  
Césaire: Cahier, p. 87.

Thereby, words being no longer conventional linguistic symbols but components of the object itself, by using those words, the poet's speech

is supposed to affect the very elements of the universe as the Word of God did. It is this incantatory use of words that is displayed sometimes in the poetical work of the Martinican poet, infuriate demurrage seeking for the 'secret of striking communication and gigantic combustion.'

I should say storm. I should say river. Tornado I should say. I should say tree. I should be watered by all rains, dampened by all dews. I should rumble onward like frenetic blood [. . .] should command to these islands to come up again [. . .] Whoever could not comprehend me could neither comprehend the roaring of the tiger.

Cahier, page 59

The black poet is willing to accept the colonizer language as his own, providing that the words and traditions of this language could be endowed with new symbolism and different signification.

Reason, I crown you the wind of the night  
Voice of order, your name?  
It becomes the whip of the corolla  
Beauty I call you petition of the stone.  
Césaire: Cahier, p. 7

This conception of the poet as magician, capable to endow language with creative power is a constant fiction in Western literary tradition as well as in the oral tradition of the so-called primitive civilization. Marcel Griaule, in *Dieu d'eau* (God of Water),<sup>37</sup> underlined the close similarities between the cosmogony of the Western civilization and those of African traditions. In the Sudanese and Dogon mythology this author found also the creative Word of God at the origin of the universe. This metaphysical concept of the verb, essential in surrealist poetry, was not in fact a new concept in French literature. Baudelaire considered making poetry a *sorcellerie evocatoire* (incantatory bewitchment). Rimbaud told us of 'Verbal Alchemy and Mallarmé equated poetry to' 'Alchemists' Higher Work Resumption.' 'I say one must be a seer, make oneself a seer,' is Rimbaud's famous passage, which was printed on the cover of Césaire's review in Martinique: *Tropiques*. This quotation indicated above all the real spirit of this review in which René Ménil could predict the advent of a leader armed with poetic power [. . .] disrupting his country's political life with a single word.<sup>38</sup>

Surrealism with its extra literary ambition would have inherited those religious and occultist beliefs in the exceptional power of words. Even in his realistic and historic dramatic works, the surrealist Martinican poet

grants the power of utterance to his heroes. In order to assault colonialism oppression and to liberate Africa, Patrice Lumumba possesses only the *miraculous weapon* of words. Just before being overthrown, Lumumba replies to those exhorting him to fight back:

I have nothing for me but my words, I speak and I awake people. I am not a miraclemaker. I am an errant knight, I speak and Africa comes up again.<sup>39</sup>

For the poet, to speak means to unveil a new reality, to disclose a new order, and to apprehend the future just by the magic of words. The poetic language, which is able to manifest the subconscious more than any other language, might have this extensive power, proclaims Césaire in his fourth Poetical Proposition:

If affective energy can be endowed with casual power, as Freud prove it, one might believe that nothing could resist the extraordinary mobilization of energy and the incessant impulse of strength required by poetry.<sup>40</sup>

In Césaire's Poetic Art, this unusual power assigned to poetical language is the result of the poet's absolute liberation of imagination. By enlarging to the utmost the limit of reality, the poet's imagination increases his scope of understanding and his visionary power. Through words, the impossible is made possible, and reality can be endowed with new proportions. That is for a surrealist poet, the absolute and the infinite are dependent on his power over words, on his ability to associate them in order to reveal new visions of reality. But sometimes, assailed by those incredible and untranslatable visions, the Martinican poet unable to express in writing those startling chimeras and vertigos, occasionally admitted his powerlessness. 'There are a lot of unnamable things I would like to say' [. . .].<sup>41</sup> But only this *dementia imagination* can allow the poet to describe those nameless entities, to express the untranslatable, and then speak up for his public. Most of the surrealists share this concept and all of them magnify imagination. The introduction of Breton's first Manifesto is an excessive laudation of the *great wanderings of the human mind*, and its power to create realistic mental images.

Imagination alone offers to me some intimation of what can be, and it is enough to remove to some slight degree the terrible injunction; enough to subject myself to its power without any fear of delusion.<sup>42</sup>

That is for the surrealists, the multiplication of mental images instigates by imagination could expand the frontiers of logical reality, thereby, revealing the infinite possibilities within the scope of the concrete world.

Affirmes Aragon: "On imagination everything depend, everything come from imagination."<sup>43</sup> Replies Eluard: "Imagination does not have any instinct of imitation, it is the spins, the stream that no one can rowing up."<sup>44</sup> Three out of the seven Poetic Propositions of Césaire exalt the dynamism of this human faculty. The Martinican poet believes also that poetry is just 'a process of maturation instigated by the demential impulsion of imagination.'<sup>45</sup> It is, indeed, the poet's demential imagination, which raises up that frenzied universe where human being and objects, things and ideas are all together, carried away in a delirious vertigo.

Rains as no one ever seen such axis  
 St. Elmo's fire  
 Spangled suns, whispered night  
 Even some cathedrals  
 Skeletons of gigantic rotten horses  
 But that some people still worship [. . .]  
 Césaire: De Forlonge, Cadastre.

The whole of the poet's literary effort is to free himself from a sordid world in order to foretell and recreate this new desired reality just by the magic of words. The result of those associations of odd pictures remind a surrealist painting which suggest a different reality shaped by the artist's unrestrained imagination and innermost thoughts. That is for the surrealists, this outburst of imagery from the imagination is not only representation of a reality but an invention of the human mind directive of things to come. As Césaire put it in his Fifth Proposition:

The marvelous encounter of the inner reality and the outward reality, imaginatively and conjointly perceived by the poet, can generate wonderful discoveries.<sup>46</sup>

As one can see, Césaire makes no distinction between both concepts of imagination: the power of the mind's objective faculty to represent a given image and the entirely subjective concept of such power of the mind used creatively. Césaire's Poetic Art concurs more over with the surrealist theories in this ambiguity which comes from the surrealists' excessive ambitions to *conciliate the irreconcilable*. Likewise, Césaire expects to reach this impossible union, thanks to the magic of poetry. Wrote the black Surrealist poet:

Their now resolved, thanks to the poetic process, both of the most distressing antinomies: the antinomy between the ego and other beings, the antinomy between the self and the universe.<sup>47</sup>

The succession of the seven Propositions of Césaire's Poetic Art is essentially conflicting by referring simultaneously to objectivity and subjectivity, to reality and imaginary, to action and dream. Césaire's corollary statement of those Propositions outlines more over those opposite *magnetic fields* which were supposed to confer upon the poet the gift of foretelling and of knowledge.

The poet is just this very old very young and very complex creature standing at the living edge of dream and reality, of day and night, between presence and absence, looking for and receiving in the sudden outburst of an inner cataclysm, the password of foresight and power'.<sup>48</sup>

Césaire follows the surrealists in all their contradictions. Like some of them, he adhered with the same enthusiasm to communism and later repudiated this doctrine with the same eagerness. By having recourse to the automatic writing process—which considers the poet more like a recording device than an inspired creator—Césaire also depreciates the act of writing, and exaggerates at the same time the power of words. He exalts action as well as dream, and like Breton he tells us of premonitory visions and could proclaim with confidence:

It is not the fear of madness which will force me to fly at halfmast the flag of imagination [. . .] And the artist Chirico portrays by anticipation a future wound on Apollinaire's forehead. And André Breton the poet in 1924 about, peremptorily links the word War with the year 1939. And Rousseau the painter imagines tropical vegetation. And Rimbaud writes *Les Illuminations*.<sup>49</sup>

Later, the Martinican poet would be less imperative in his assertions. Prudently, he would reply to a critic on the subject of poetic creativity: "The only clear answer in such a domain is that everybody has to feel his one's way, and the creator doesn't not comprehend sometimes more than the reader". Nevertheless, Césaire would never disavow—like many other surrealists—his earlier literary works, although he has suppressed from a recent edition of poetry some selected surrealists verses.

Still in reference to Césaire's concept on humor, as formulated in *Poetry and Knowledge*, one can moreover bring the Martinican poet closer to surrealism. This strong interest manifested by Césaire for Lautreamont seems to be in relation with this author's understanding of a certain brand of humor. Wrote Césaire in overwhelming adoration for this poetic youth who died at the age of twentyfour:

Lautreamont was the first to integrate humor in poetry. The first to discover the functional role of humor. The first who made us feel that what love initiated, humor has the power to carry forward.<sup>51</sup>

This praise from Césaire could summarize as well the Surrealist concept on that matter: humor as a superior attitude of minds and a privileged mean of expression. The surrealists had learned from Freud that certain types of humor have a liberating effect and a sublimating power on the agent of that humor. Breton's *Anthology of Black Humor* illustrates this transcending faculty which keeps the creative artist from being overwhelmed by the suffering inflicted on him by the exterior world. For most of the surrealists, humor is an exceptional way for displaying insubordination to traditional values. As understood, humor is not just the ability to single out from reality what is absurd and ridiculous; moreover, humor is a formal objection to reality and a challenge to the very condition of human being's daily existence. For Césaire humor is an ultimate remedy, when his verbal violence and his curses are unable to convince and wake up his people getting used to resignation and mediocrity by centuries of submissiveness and assimilation.

For the West Indian poet, to remind black people of those roots they are trying to forget, would be all at once an act of pride and an ironical demystification of this subordinate condition imposed by the oppressor and accepted by the oppressed. Because, recognized Césaire:

Only humor can convince me that the most prodigious reversals are possible.  
Only humor makes me aware of the wrong side of things.<sup>52</sup>

It is specially in *Return of my Native Land* that one can find this essential aspect of Césaire's humor; for example, when he ironically amplifies a very painful recollection he wants his fellow Martinicans to remind about:

I want to declare that we were from the very first quite pitiful dishwashers, shoeshine boys with little scope and, at best, rather conscientious sorcerers, and our only incontestable achievement has been the endurance record under the lash.

Césaire: *Cahier*, p. 97

It is also a ridiculous attitude that the West Indian poet denounced when he made fun of those Negroes trying to conceal their own personalities in their naive attempt to imitate white people in order to be considered *civilized*.

Those who say to Europe: 'Look I can bow and scrap like you, like you I can pay compliment, in short I am not different from you; pay no attention to my black skin: the sun burned me'.

If humor can symbolically obliterate the consistency of reality, it can as well be a source of resentment and revolt. The poet understands this fact,



when in a sarcastic mood he recalls those atrocities inflicted upon his race for centuries. Being reminded of those accumulated humiliations, could lead to a brutal awakening of his people. Here, the humor is really dark and subversive, and the caustic tone hardly mask the poet's bitterness.

'And this country cried out for centuries that we were stupid beasts [. . .] And they branded us with red hot irons and we slept in our excrement and they sold us on the market for less than an ell of English cloth, and the salted meat from Ireland was cheaper than we, and this country was calm, tranquil, and was convinced that it acted in accordance with the will of the Lord'.

Césaire: *Cahiers*, pp. 97-98.

The phlegmatic irreverence of the final statement accentuated more-over the black humor of this recollection endowed with more convincing value than any fastidious argument on religion and slavery. Beside those specific humorous passages, Césaire made use of other traditional forms of humor. His most lyric accents are often interrupted by satirical strokes. For, he affirmed: "Only humor convinces me that it is perfectly right to say either the robber seizes the opportunity or the opportunity seizes the robber". Some of those poetic witty remarks, common in Césaire's work, are not always cheerful, but most of the time the striking effect of alliteration and association of opposite ideas confer a new dimension to his jests.

'And the bed of planks which brought forth my race, my entire race from the same bed with its kerosenecans feet, as if it had elephantiasis this bed, with its goatskin cover and dried bananas leaves, its rags with its nostalgia for a mattress and above this bed a pot full of fuel, an oil lamp whose flame dances like a big black beetle [. . .] and on the pot in golden letters THANKS'.

Césaire: *Cahier*, p. 53

A harsh and keen humor even marked the poet's denunciation of a sordid condition, which his people seem to accept with gratitude. Sometime the satirical stroke is rather ludicrous; for example, when the West Indian poet scoff at the senseless Remorse of some black people who still believe they are marked by the stigmas of their ancestor's enslavement, and by a biblical curse for a dubious original black sin.

But is Remorse to be slain? Beautiful as the stupefied face of an English lady at finding a Hottentot's skull in her souptureen.

*Cahier*, page 59

Furthermore, one can find in *Le Cahier* numerous aphorisms, laconic thoughts which function is to display at the very moment an absurd hu-

man condition. Sometimes, the words of those ironic expressions are linked by hyphens, which indicate that one must apprehend all of them as one word. 'The-negroes-are-all-the-same-I tell-you/ Vices-all-the-vices-I-tell-you/the-Negroes-smell the makes-the-sugar-grow. Remember-the-old-says: "wipp a-niger-you-feed-him'.' (Cahier, p. 59). In his poetry, Césaire uses some expressions to convey the opposite of their literal message, and takes also advantage of the humorous encounter of words pronounced alike but different in meaning.

For Césaire as well for the surrealists, humor is a defensive individual reaction face to the overwhelming power of a threatening collectivity. Humor reveals and contests a hostile reality and makes the readers aware pleasantly of an injustice or an irrational fact. However, sometime the poet's humor hardly conceals his resentment and sorrow: for example when describing this poor Negro, his alter ego, he meets in the subway;

A Negro as big as an ape [. . .] trying to dispose of his gigantic limbs and his boxer's hands on this greasy trolley seat. Everything about him was falling apart. His nose looked like a peninsula adrift [. . .] Poverty, laboring on some hideous scroll. The industrious, malevolent thumb, one could see, had shaped the forehead, with a lump, pierced the nose with parallel alarming tunnels, elongated the huge lips, and, in a master stroke of caricature, had polished and varnished the tiniest, cutest little hear in all creation' [. . .]

Césaire: Cahier, p. 65.

The liberating effect of this black humor would give the poet the strength to identify himself, and his entire race through this *comical and ugly* Negro marked by misfortune and poverty. Thus, he would no longer refuse this legacy:

I accept, I accept,  
The flogged Niger who cries "forgive me master"  
And the twenty-nine legal strokes of the whip  
And the spike iron collar [. . .]  
I accept [. . .] without reserve  
My race that no ablution of hyssop and lilies  
Can purify  
My race corroded with stain [. . .]

Césaire: Cahier, pp. 77–78.

The poet's total identification with his people produces a metamorphosis, and now as the *herald and cantor* of an entire race, he can *shout out loudly the wild Negro cry*:

And now suddenly strength and life charge through me [. . .]  
And we are standing now, my country and I

My hand little now in its enormous fist  
 And the strength is not in us  
 But above us, in a voice that pierces the night  
 Like the sting of an apocalyptic wasp" [. . .]  
 Césaire: Cahier, p. 82

### Césaire's Originality as a Black Surrealist

In spite of those clear surrealist characteristics in Césaire's poetic work, and even his formal statements on this matter, there is, nevertheless, a line of demarcation between the West Indian poet and his fellow European surrealists. The Automatic Writing, as formulated by Breton in his first manifesto was, before all, an intellectual experiment. For the European surrealists, the practice of this experiment was more important than a problematic result. Breton has always underlined the passivity of the writer listening to his subconscious, giving free play to the inner powers of words and the images, which these suggested. Although Césaire shares Breton's theories he is far to practice those surrealist methods in his works.

Césaire writing is clearly an elaborated one. *The magnificent master of his language* accurately wrote Senghor. Breton likewise agrees that the Martinican poet is the master of his writing. Besides, Césaire in his *Entretien* affirmed that a poet has to make his own language, and although one must rely on his inner-self, poetry is first originated in the individual's mind from a certain maturation of the intellect. Said Césaire: "In general, I mature things for quite a long time in my ego, and when those things arise, I utter them. At this very moment, it is poetry"<sup>53</sup> This statement contradicts Breton's theories on automatic writing passivity. Furthermore, the entertaining nature of those surrealist *jeux de mots* (play upon words) described with a great deal of detailed account in a surrealist review is evident.<sup>54</sup> Eluard recollected in *Donner à Voir* (Giving to See), those past literary party spent to *invent with love* the most eccentric verbal manifestations of a poetically conditioned mind. Concluded Eluard: "We were playing upon words, there were no loser."<sup>55</sup>

Eventually, the surrealists would evolve, and most of them would forget those early literary plays. As for Césaire, he never enjoyed those poetical diversions, and always proclaimed that poetry can not be just an amusement, a pastime, or even a respectful occupation. For him, literature can only be *engagé*, actively committed to a social or political cause. He further asserted: "A Martinican enjoying art for the sake of art! That means he never looked around him. There is a kind of intolerance of the whole situation: that get you involved"<sup>56</sup>

Those ethnic and politic factors that characterize Césaire's outright revolt against the establishment set him apart of the European Surrealists. The West Indian poet would always be a political activist. He would never practice, even in a speculative manner, those surrealists' investigations on psychic automatism or other mediumistic activities of nascent surrealism.

By referring, in their way, to Freud's psychoanalysis theories, the surrealists, would promote dream as a privileged form of knowledge with premonitory value. Despite Césaire's exuberant statement on this topic, one can not find in his work neither an account of dream nor this surrealist concept of dream overflowing real life, like the content of two vessels communicating from one to another. One can speak instead, about Césaire's dreamlike imagination. The poet's concept on *dementia imagination* seems to call forth an imagery of dream in his poetry. Some visions and hallucinations depicted in his poetical work remind us of the magical and enchanting atmosphere of dreams and fairy tales.

'And scattered in the bustle of collided lump of blood, I heard the last nonsense: "Sir, the sun is a naughty cake of mastic, which you can smash. Madam, your astral body wonder amidst flowers". Away dwarf's corpses! Away acromegalic giant! Away executive of the past!'<sup>57</sup>

It is, indeed, this fanciful atmosphere of *Alice in Wonderland*, and its upside down logic. The poet even remember the defiant heroine's famous "nonsense"; fantastic ambiance of a fairy-tale where elements and objects are deviated from their natural function or their habitual usage. Here also, the subjacent poetic language is still translating the angers and obsessions of the author *engagé*, and it is easy to understand with whom the bizarre creatures in this passage are associated. Such an allusive imagery is far away from the surrealist notion of *Vague de Rêve*<sup>58</sup> (Wave of Dream). Those relaxing dreams for Breton are supposed to open the gate of a wonderland where man, freed from all social restraints, would be able to satisfy his thirst for the absolute, and would be at last united with the universe.

If for the European surrealists, poetry is before all an act of reconciliation between the ego and the universe, in Césaire's work, this union is sometimes impossible to be realized. The black poet's poetic universe is always mingled with the West Indian islands, those '[. . .] hungry Antilles, those pockmarked Antilles dynamited by alcohol, shipwrecked in the mud of this bay, in the dust of this town dismally stranded.' (Cahier p.26) The Martinican poet seems to obstinately reject this inhuman perspective, although he strives to embrace it.

'Gradually as everything was dying away  
 I become wider and become wider  
 and my conscious wider than the ocean  
 I explode. I am the fire and the ocean  
 The world crumbles. I am still the world' [. . .]

Césaire: *Les Armes Miraculeuses*, p. 2

This delirious world, crumbling together with the poet's fate, seems to express the bitterness of the activist, conscious of the uncertainty of his political struggle. At the end of the poem, the vision of this world falling apart, and giving rise to a wonderful tropical dawn hardly conceal the poet's despair.

Rest, my cruelty, I said.  
 My hear against the ground  
 I heard the future fading away'.

Césaire: *Ibid.*

Césaire poetry is often clouded by this bitterness, and by a certain aversion for a world with which he is yearning to be in harmony; his own world, the West Indies.

Islands scars upon the waters  
 Islands evidence of wounds  
 Deformed Islands' [. . .]

Cahier, p. 90

In order to describe those lands of, hunger and oppression without hope, the poet disposes of a whole collection of powerful expressive words evoking loathing and disgust:

Here the parade of contemptible and scrofulous bubo's, the gluttony of very strange microbes, of poisons without known antidote, the pus of very ancient wounds, the unforeseeable fermentation of species destined to decay . . .

Césaire: *Cahier*, p. 41

That is because the black poet is writing first for his fellow Martinicans "this crowd so strangely mute [. . .] going by his cry of hunger, of grief, of revolt, of hate." The poet wishes to share with his countrymen this feeling of repulsion for their unnamable condition of life, and to arouse them from their lasting lethargy. Nevertheless, the poet still can identify with his people and his country:

And I should say to this land  
 whose mud is flesh of my flesh:

I wondered for a long time and I am returning  
 to the deserted foulness of your wounds".  
 I should come back to this land of mine and say to it:  
 I embrace me without fear.  
 Césaire: Cahier, p. 61

This return in the inferno of his native land merges with Césaire's traumatic itinerary in his inner self. In this matter, Sartre precisely understood the black poet's feeling when he wrote: "In the deep of the self, the white surrealists find relaxation; in the deep of the self, Césaire find the steady inflexibility of revolt and bitterness".<sup>59</sup> Revolt in dementia and blazing insanity; bitterness of the slave's progeny who still remembers the abominable treatments endured by his race in a quite recent historic past. The poet is always haunted by those ancestral memories and vehemently cries out his rancor:

In my memory, how many lagoons  
 They are not covered with water lilies  
 They are covered with death's heads and blood [. . .]  
 My memory is still roaring abduction [. . .] iron collar [. . .]  
 Slaveship [. . .] slave owner [. . .]

Césaire's poetic work is pervaded with those recurring and resentful recollections which confer a broader dimension to his revolt, and make him different from the European surrealists challenging their own civilization's set of values. The Martinican poet literally strives to eradicate this hostile civilization which allowed slavery, and justified the exploitation of his congeners in the name of convenient prejudices. 'I never gamble except at the great fear. Take me as I am, I shall not adjust myself to you,' (Cahier: p.87) is the poet's warning to the Western World. He clearly expresses his foremost wish: "The end of the world, of course! (Ibid)" The Martinican poet makes no difference between the Western civilization and its essential value, Logic, as he vehemently shouts out: "Because we hate you and your Reason, we call upon you the early dementia, the blazing madness of a persistent cannibalism." (Césaire: Cahier, p. 73)

When the poet's increasing anger reaches its climax, he gives free rein to his writing in endless dazzling images of melting universes; destruction's beyond measure, and expectation of future eldorado.

We sing of poisonous flowers flaring in raging  
 Of skies of love cut with thrombosis

Of epileptic morning and white combustion of abyssal sand of flotsam in the night struck with wild scent.

Very often, the poet's outcries and anathema's usually end on a bitter feeling of deception or a note of despair: "Then comes the unavoidable relapse," notes a Martinican critic of Césaire's poetry. That is because being politically engagé, the poet's literary work becomes closely related to his country socioeconomic problems. Deeply involved in politic, unable to modify the course of history and to change, as he wants it, his people's fate, the poet holds only to the limited power of his rhetoric to express anger, revolt and despair. Many discrepancies in Césaire's literary work, related to his political agenda, might be explained by his willingness to bind all at once the exalted individualism of surrealism with the determinism Marxist as well as the negritude and its concept of revolt and brotherhood. This work is marked by an incompatibility between the poet's tireless quest for the absolute and the limited resources at his disposal. King Cristophe of Haiti and Patrice Lumumba, two eminent political symbols of Césaire's dramatic work, must both endure the agony of defeat at the end of a glorious career with a bitterness hardly alleviated by the obsessive hope in a bright future for their people. One can find in most of Césaire's works, these alternated sequences of purifying violence, tenacious hope, anguish of failure, and this mood of disenchantment which at the end always clouds the poetic perspective.

'[. . .] Somewhere in the world a tomtom celebrates my defeat.

Les Armes

[. . .] Nothing will happen and the season is void.

Soleil Cou Coupé

[. . .] My head leaning against the ground, I heard the future fading away.

[. . .] Untying the rope of our grief I just cry.

Cadastre'

Sometimes, overcoming his bitterness, the poet predicting future of happiness and justice recreates by the magic of words the new desired West Indies. He finds, then, the most exotic and colorful names of Martinique's flora in order to image this future eldorado 'full of sun and parrots { . . . } country of creeks, palmtrees and screw pines . . .' During those restful interval, the course of the poem reaching a more tranquil pace, adopts for a moment the traditional mold of classic poetry:

"I wish to hear a song of scattered rainbow

Forgotten beach where curlews perch

I want liana growing on the palmtrees" [. . .]  
Césaire: Ferrement, p. 70.

But those words of hope are rare, and the poet's ephemeral evocations of grandiose aurora, makes the future rather dim. Incapable to change the reality of things, and losing all confidence, the poet's mood becomes more anguished. Misunderstood by his fellow countrymen he has to repress an intense desire to leave for another more merciful land, weary out by this mass—of misery:

I am leaving, Maybe I will not arrive at all  
Never mind! But I shall take the road of arrival  
With my prognathic smile; I am leaving,  
And the spasm of despair cannot distort my lips".  
Césaire: *Les Armes Miraculeuses*.

Beyond the anguish of this uncertain departure, it is easy to discern the constant hope of the poet bound to this island by an excessive love for his countrymen and for his race. An exceptional love, gushing from a wider and more fundamental love: love of life, and intense desire of a reconciled world.

This notion of love differentiated moreover Césaire from the European surrealists. Despite their deep ideological dissension, Breton, Aragon, and Eluard would always stay faithful to the early surrealist concept on love and women. Love is surrealism's greatest source of inspiration, especially in the early days of this movement. Proclaimed Aragon in 1924: "There is for me no idea stronger than love. As for me, anything in opposition to love has to be destroyed."<sup>60</sup> This passionate concept of love must not be assimilated with the notion of platonic love. Although the surrealists idealize women, their concept of love is strongly affected by the notion of unrestrained sexual desire. Lust prevails over their feeling and for the surrealists, both sexual love and platonic love must be all one.

Breton magnifies this notion of *Amour fou* (crazy love) freed of sexual taboos, inhibition of desires and social restraints. One can not find in Césaire work this specific concept of love. For the Martinican poet, love is rather related merely to his people and to his race. Contrary to the European surrealists, the Martinican poet would never namely praise in his work his wife or another women. In a poem entitled *Chevelure*, the beloved women in this composition is a symbol in spite of the poet's *sweet embrace*:



And you sojourn of my insolence  
 Of my tombstone and storm  
 Mane bundle of liana, mighty hope of castaway  
 Sleep tenderly in the hollow of my sweet embrace  
 My wife, my strong hold.  
 Cadastre

In Césaire's poetical work, one can not find also those sensual descriptions of the women body celebrated by the Parisian surrealists. Césaire just glides over such descriptions:

You shall open your eyelid as an exquisite fanlight  
 The most triumphant season of the rarest ones  
 That shall be your hair [. . .]  
 Césaire: Antipode.

It is far away from Aragon and Breton's erotic imagery. Anyway, the title of this poem, *Antipode*, describes the contrary of this total fusion of soul and flesh implied in the surrealist concept of love. Césaire's love for his race permeates his entire poetical work. The poet himself qualified this love as a *Tyrannical* one, for he is craving to be all at once 'the father, the brother, the son, not the husband but the lover of this unique race' [. . .] (Césaire: Cahier, p. 123.) When the poet, total identification with his people and his race finally occurs, his exclusive feeling is translated as a tender sexual act with his island:

Island ringed together, unique love boat  
 I caress you with my oceanic hands.  
 And I turn you around with my windy words  
 Licking you over with my tongues of algae  
 And steering you away like a pirate" [. . .]  
 Césaire: Cahier, p. 123.

The symbolism of love extends sometimes to a broader notion of universal brotherhood. The black poet proclaims over and over that his excessive love is not out of hatred for other races: "As the herald of this unique race, what I want is for the universal hunger, and the universal thirst." (Cahier: p. 125) However, the black surrealist and his European counterparts share the same concept of love as a communion between man and nature. The Martinican poet also in his quest for the absolute is confident in man's potential power to recapture a lost eldorado where human being can reach to the absolute.

In Césaire's poetical work, the entire poetic universe is sexualized and its elements apprehended within a single embrace of love. The sun and the earth alike, endowed with the same androgynous characteristics, are sometimes engaged in a sexual relationship. Wrote the poet: "And you Earth, tense drunken Earthly great sex raised to the Sun [. . .] The Sun is a great master who violates until transparency the tight sex of the Earth [. . .]" Sartre, in his *Black Orpheus*, precisely underlined this cosmic feeling of sensuality which marks Negro-African poetry, because black's intimate communion with nature. Stated Sartre about those black writers, and their peculiar symbolism:

The black poet becomes in turn the female and the male of nature, and when he makes love with a woman of his own race, the sexual act seems to be a celebration of the mystery of Being [. . .] Thus, negritude in its most profound source is androgynous.<sup>61</sup>

In fact, such an erotic feeling is a dominant trait in Negro African poetry, but Sartre is far to be right when conferring this singular characteristic only to the poets of negritude. For the surrealists the symbolism of woman is not just sexual, it enables as well the poet to be in communion with all cosmic forces of the universe. This harmony between natural and sexual symbols is also obvious Eluard's poetic work, when he celebrated the chosen woman:

You are standing up and the water unrolled  
You are lying down and the water brightened up  
You are the water diverted from its abyss  
You are the earth taking roots [. . .]  
Eluard: *Les yeux Fertiles*

In his poetic verses *L'Union Libre* (Union without restraint), Breton likewise identifies the beloved woman with all elements of nature:

My woman with her woodfire hair  
With her tongue of amber and rubbed glass . . . My woman with springtime  
buttocks . . .  
With her sex of wild iris . . .  
A. Breton: *L'Union Libre*, in *Clair de Terre*.

Except for an erotic atmosphere willfully sought by the poet, this sexual symbolism associated with the elements of nature is similar to the Negro African notion of sexuality in harmony with the universe. It is the same

about this androgynous myth quoted by Sartre, regard to negritude poetry. This symbolism also is a dominant feature in surrealism mythology, and Breton clearly referred to this notion in his manifesto:

It is imperative to undertake the reconstruction of the primordial androgynous—that all tradition tells us of—and its supremely desirable and tangible incarnation within ourselves.<sup>63</sup>

This myth, which symbolizes an absolute complementarity between male and female having both the same sexual characteristics, would inspire many surrealists artists. For Breton, with such a procreative power, human being might ‘open the gate of a world where by definition it can no longer be question of evil or sin.’<sup>64</sup> This is quite different of the Negro African’s sexual symbolism, but even so, one can still find at the origin of both concepts a common fundamental idea: to reconcile mankind and a hostile universe.

## Notes

1. A. Césaire, Témoignage in *Nouvelle Observateur*, no. 49 (Paris: 5 Mai 1966), p. 37.
2. A. Césaire, Introduction a la Poésie Negro-Américaine, in *Tropiques* (2 Juillet 1941).
3. A. Césaire, Poésie et Connaissance, in *Tropiques* (Janvier 1945).
4. Ibid.
5. A. Césaire, *Art Poétic*, op. cit., p. 162.
6. A. Breton, *Nadja* (Paris: N.R.F., 1928).
7. Ibid.
8. A. Césaire, *Un Orphée*, op. cit., p. 161.
9. A. Césaire, *Cahier*, p. 75.
10. A. Césaire *Un Orphée*, p. 158.
11. Renée Dépestre, op. cit., p. 148.
12. Césaire, *Tropiques*, no. 6 (Février 1943).
13. Césaire, *Patience des Signes*, in *Ferrement* (Paris: Seuil 1960), p. 39.
14. L. Kesteloot, *Les Ecrivains Noirs*, p. 240.
15. A. Césaire, *Un Orphée*, p. 155.
16. J. Jahn, *Manuel de Littérature NéoAfricaine* (Paris: Resna 1969), p. 232.
17. Sartre, *Orphées Noirs*, op. cit. p. XXX.
18. G. Tougas, *Ecrivains Noir*, p. 130.
19. Sartre, op. cit., p. XXX.
20. R. Depestre, A. Césaire *un Orphée*, op. cit., P. 158 21. 21. Arthur Rimbaud, *Lettres du Voyant* op. cit.
21. Henry Peyre, *Qu'estce que le Symbolisme?* ( Paris: P.U.F. 1974), p. 58.
22. Sartre, op.cit., p. XX.
23. H. Heill, *Poètes de ce Temps*, no. 47.
24. A. Césaire, *Poésie et Connaissance*, p. 164.
25. P. Eluard, *Donnere A Voir* in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard Pléiade) tome I, p. 981.

26. Sartre, op. cit. p. XXVII.
27. Césaire, *Poésie et Connaissance* p. 167.
28. A. Breton, Manifeste, p. 51.
29. Ibid.
30. P. Eluard *L'Evidence Poétique* , in op. cit., p. 149.
31. Ibid., p. 541.
32. Césaire, *Poésie et Connaissance*, p. 167.
33. J. Monnerot, La poésie Moderne et le Sacré, op. cit.
34. A. Breton, *Introduction au Discours sur le Peu de réalité*, in Point du Jour (Paris: Gallimard Idée, 1970) p. 22.
35. Césaire, *Poésie et Connaissance*, p. 164.
36. Marcel Griaud, Dieu d'Eau (Paris: Fayard, 1966).
37. René Ménil, *L'action foudroyante* in Tropiques, no 9. (octobre 1941).
38. Césaire, Une Saison au Congo (Paris: Seuil, 1967), p. 94.
39. Césaire, *Poésie et Connaissance*, 4e proposition.
40. Césaire, *De forlongl*, Cadastre, p. 72.
41. A. Breton, Manifeste, p. 13.
42. Aragon, *Discours sur l'Imagination*, in Le Paysan de Paris.
43. Eluard, *Donner A voir*, in op. cit., p. 981.
44. Césaire, *Poésie et connaissance*, p. 165. Op. cit.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid, p. 164.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid, p. 169.
49. L. Kesteloot, op. cit., p. 181.
50. Césaire, *Poésie et connaissance*, p. 165.
51. Ibid.
52. J. Leiner, Entretien avec Césaire, op. cit. p. XXIV.
53. Révolution Surrealist no 910. Medium, no. 24.
54. Ibid.

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55. J. Leiner, Entretien, op. cit., p. XXIV.
  56. Césaire, *En rupture de mer morte*, In Tropiques, no. 3.
  57. Aragon, *Un Vague de Rêve* (Paris: H.C. 1924).
  58. Sartre, op. cit. p. XXVII.
  59. Aragon, *Libertinage* (Paris: R.P.F 19240), in preface.
  60. Sartre, op. cit., p. XXXIII.
  61. Eluard, op. cit. Tome I.
  62. A. Breton, *Manifeste*, p. 184.
  63. Ibid.

## Chapter 5

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# On Negritude

As one can see, there are some affinities between surrealism and some aspects of negritude. Both movements meet furthermore, in the same impossibility to reach a decisive definition of their specific goals. Césaire and Senghor, the first black authors who wanted to gather the themes of negritude within a single coherent doctrine, both propose more than ten different definitions underlining diverse aspects of this concept.

Damas, Césaire and Senghor defined in turn negritude in various formulas such as: a) The expression of an oppressed race. b) An instrument of struggle and of liberation. c) The manifestation of a particular way of being. Although they all agreed on those basic concepts, each of them seemed to privilege exclusively a distinctive aspect of their definitions.

For Damas, negritude consisted essentially of rejecting an assimilation that negated his spontaneity, and his real condition as a Negro, and as a Guianese.

According to Césaire, negritude represented above all a unique fact, which determines black people's way to deal with existence. He added further that negritude is just the awareness of being black, a simple acknowledgment of this fact which implies the sincere acceptance of it, and a taking charge accordingly of one's destiny as a black man, in regard of one's history and culture.<sup>1</sup>

Senghor who privileged cultural factors over political ones, understood negritude as a unique form of artistic expression. He wrote that 'the monotony of tone is the stamp of negritude, and the incantation giving access to the essence of things.'<sup>2</sup> However, Senghor prime definition is formulated in this statement: "Negritude is the cultural heritage, the values, and above all the spirit of the Negro-African civilization".<sup>3</sup>

When history and Culture are concerned, Césaire concept on negritude seems to agree with Senghor's; in fact, both notions rather differ. For

Senghor, black man is a being with particular characteristics, and unique inborn values different from the white man's values. He wrote in *Liberté, Negritude, and Humanisme*: "Black man traditionally used to live from the land, with the land, and by the land. He is sensual, a being with extensive feeling [. . .] subject and object all at once. He feels more than he perceives [. . .] Negro is not devoid of Reason, as one pretended that I said. His Reason is not discursive (proceeding to a conclusion through reason); it is synthetic. (Reasoning from the general to the particular). White Reason is analytical by utilization, black Reason intuitive by participation."<sup>4</sup>

Senghor's psychological profile that would make black people similar everywhere in the world is quite seductive; however, the theorist is far to be convincing, being unable to support his argumentation with specific facts. Senghor obviously undervalues the surrounding socioeconomic influences, and this inevitable racial and cultural crossbreeding; besides, in the course of their evolution, all civilizations have been first agricultural: the same holds true for Africa. It is hard to understand how those exclusive characteristics could all at once embrace the African tribes isolated from the outside world, the African elite in permanent contact with other civilizations, and those from the black Diaspora of the Americas assimilated to a different way of life.

Senghor's speculations were clearly influenced by LevyBruhl's questionable assumptions on primitive societies. This French ethnologist pretended that primitive man is generally a sensual and a mystic essentially affective, whose instinct and feeling overcome his reason. However, this scholar had later the courage to repudiate in his *Carnets* <sup>5</sup>, most of his early speculations, and would clearly acknowledge that there were no qualitative difference between the so called primitive mentality and the one more highly organized of civilized people.

Senghor was also influenced by other theories in that matter and he often referred to Sartre's authority to support his argumentations. In the preface of Senghor's Anthology, *Orphée Noir*, Sartre gave us this definition of negritude: "Negritude, in Heideggerian term, is the black man's being in the world."<sup>6</sup> By recalling Bergson's concept on the differentiation between intelligence and intuition, he explained further why the poetry of Black in close communication with nature is different from the more intellectual poetry of White. He told us of *agricultural poetry* opposed to *engineer's prose*, and that first of all, black is a peasant, the great male of the land [. . .] and plowing, planting, eating is like making love with the land. <sup>7</sup> Senghor formulated the same ideas, and the essential of his con-



cept on negritude meets Sartre's existential definition of black man with inborn characteristics.

In order to support this special aspect of Senghor understanding of negritude, some critics used to quote those particular excerpts from *Orphé Noir*, but without reference to the whole of Sartre's essay. Those critics were wrong. Although extolling negritude, Sartre's argumentation was far to sustain Senghor's concept or any other aspect of his doctrine on this matter. Those specific passages from Sartre's essay were just a step in a dialectical argumentation, and he reasserted this fact himself: "In fact, negritude appears only as a the minor term of a dialectical progression [. . .]"<sup>8</sup> In order to make clear his argumentation, Sartre illustrated his ideas by evoking the legendary Orpheus myth: the orphic descent of those poets into the sparkling inferno of the black souls, the tireless quest for a lost Africa, and the sublime awakening of consciousness. However, as the Orpheus legend want it to be, the negative aspect of this logic postulated that this chimeric three parts processes was doomed to failure. Orpheus must forever lose this Eurydice he was searching for, because he made the mistake of looking back at her, thus, transgressing the cruel order of the gods.

'In the moment where the Black Orpheus is tightly embracing his Eurydice—Africa—he feel that she is vanishing in his arms'.<sup>9</sup>

That was Sartre conclusion, and still further he clearly stated that: "Negritude exists in order to be destroyed, It is a transition not a result, a mean not a final ending".<sup>10</sup> Sartre's conclusion would raise passionate controversies among critics, and black intellectuals alike. By strongly stressing upon the touching ambiguity of the negritude concept that he apprehended as *a passion, a long Christ like suffering*<sup>11</sup>, Sartre was also underlining negritude's conflicting characteristics: the exaltation of a past legacy and its actual refusal, the simultaneous notions of revolt and brotherhood, of love and aggressiveness, and above all those political and social objective values mingled with those subjective cultural goals.

From a total denial to an acceptance without condition, the negritude concept would be differently welcome. Among the elders, the Marxist René Ménélik understand negritude as a conservative doctrine invented by some *intellectuals petit bourgeois* opposed to the struggle of liberation in the French colonies.<sup>12</sup> Frantz Fanon also emphasizes on the revolutionary aspect of this movement. He states on this matter: "The Negro-African culture is made manifest by revolutionary struggle, but not by

poetry, song or folklore [. . .] (president) Senghor did not hesitate to give order to the Senegalese delegation (at the United Nations) for baking up the French government over Algeria's independence war."<sup>13</sup> It is evident that Fanon's declaration was rather directed to the statesman than to the promoter of negritude.

For the Marxists in general, the negritude notion was just a mystification: assuming that the Revolution would extirpate racist manifestations, outcome of economic and social disparities. In his essay, *Bonjour et Adieu à la Negritude* (Welcome and Goodbye to Negritude), René Dépestre said to us that 'this present period must be dedicated to intercultural dialogue among nations'.<sup>14</sup> After having welcome negritude for many years, the former Marxist poet proclaimed it was time for him to say goodbye to this movement. Some intellectuals, especially in black Francophone countries, try to maintain the spirit of this movement, but without it's early aggressiveness. In a manual on negritude, the Haitian essayist Pené Piquion is still exalting the original negritude concept of Césaire and Senghor. In his manual, Piquion enumerates numerous domains that must be included in any definition of this movement: a) Negritude related to religion. b) Negritude related to political power. c) Negritude of giving and receiving. d) Negritude of revolt and violence [. . .]<sup>15</sup>

Partly, the black intelligentsia understands negritude as the struggle of a generation; an obsolete historic fact that must give way to renewed values. The negritude concept is entirely rejected by a new generation of black authors, among them, most of the African Anglophone writers. The Nigerian Wole Soyinka expressed his denial that way: *The tiger does not stalk about crying is tigritude*. Soyinka and his colleagues think that the name does not affect the matter, and thus, keep their distance from an ideology they consider too ambiguous. One must understand their concern. The confident declarations of their elders about negritude by no means expressed a clear certitude. The negritude movement was originated from a specific anguish an uncertain quest, and not from a serene conviction. This concept rather manifested the uncertain situation of people being torn apart between different cultures, tirelessly seeking an anchor in a world incessantly shifting its values. Those uncertainties are reflected in all the formulation of the negritude concept. That is to assume oneself as a Black, one has to look back toward a distant past, and at the same time looking forward to an uncertain future. In order to be different from others, it is necessary to refer oneself to another race and that inevitably give way to a new form of racism, a cultural chauvinism, or a blind return to the values of a civilization still not ratio-

nally inventoried. There are more incompatibilities in the notion that Blacks must all at once fight to death an oppressive structure, fraternally embrace his oppressors, and absorb their civilization. Those conflicting factors moreover reveal the essential ambiguity of the negritude concept's Western origins.

Thomas Melone, another ardent defender of this movement, affirmed that negritude is at the same time 'a selfdefense against racism, a challenge, a philosophy, a moral, and a political attitude'.<sup>16</sup> This generality evidences the impossibility of a precise definition, capable to express negritude's essential nature. That is to formulate exactly this concept, the theoretician must take into account all those required subject matters: anthropology, philosophy, history, politic, and culture. "For surrealism distorted by so many concerns, any formulation can come up to someone's expectation."<sup>17</sup> Jean Schuster's comment on surrealism definitions is also suitable to the negritude concept. Compelled to proceed from one subject to another without transition, the black writers were unable to include them all in a specific formula, without being inconsistent.

Trying to sum up all his notions on negritude, Césaire has put it somewhat emphatically in saying: "Thoroughly, what then is negritude if not the aggressive postulate of brotherhood." One can understand Césaire's clever feat, trying to embrace in a single formulation those contradictory assumptions: the black specificity, his revolt, and the concomitant desire of universal love inherent to Marxism—surrealism.

Perhaps, it is in the very nature of the negritude concept to be various and ambiguous, being bounded to proceed between the conflicting notions of Black is Beautiful, and Black Power. Nevertheless, in the review *Tropiques* that René Menil and Césaire were to publish in Martinique, the union of surrealism with negritude would be admirable.

## Notes

1. Aimé Césaire, *Entretien avec L. Kesteloot*, op.cit., p. 113.
2. L. Kestelot, *Les Ecrivains Noirs*, op.cit., p. 111.
3. Ibid., p. 110.
4. Léopold S. Senghor, *L'esthétique négro-africaine*, Liberté, Négritude et Humanisme, tome I (Paris: Seuil, 1964), p. 302.
5. Lucien LevyBruhl, *Fonction Mentales dans les Sociétés Inférieures*, (Paris: Alcan, 1910) *Les Carnets* (Paris: P.U.F., 1949).
6. Sartre, op.cit. p. XXIX.
7. Ibid., XII.
8. Ibid., XII.
9. Ibid., Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. René Ménélaux La négritude: *une doctrine réactionnaire*, in review *Action*, no 37 (Martinique: août 1963).
13. Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la Terre* (Paris: Maspero, 1966) p. 159–160.
14. R. Dépestre. Bonjour et Adieu à la Négritude, in review *Le Monde* (Paris: août 1979), p. 2.
15. René Piquion, *Manuel de la Négritude*, (Haïti: Deschamps, 1964).
16. Thomas Méléon, in *ibid.* op.cit.
17. Jean Schuster, in *Le Surréalisme*, C. Abastado. op. cit.
18. A. Césaire, in *Négritude et Situation Coloniale* (Camérout: Abia, 1968), p. 84.

## Chapter 6

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# The Review Tropiques and Surrealism

While leaving France occupied by Germany for a self exile in the United States, and during a unexpected transit in Martinique, André Breton would discover this island's real socio economic situation, and also the most surrealist of the surrealist reviews: *Tropiques*. A painting in the Louvre museum, *The Snake Charmer* seemingly inspired Breton for the title of this essay in which he recalled his journey in this island: *Martinique Snake Charmer*.<sup>1</sup> A lyric description of Martinique's colorful vegetation contrasting with a realistic description of a corrupted society debased by racial prejudices, and oppressed by a colonial bureaucracy.

Breton asserted that only a surrealist ambivalent language could allow him to describe all at once Martinique's wonder and evil. The first part of this essay, *Dialogue Creole*<sup>2</sup>, is a straightforward conversation between Breton and the surrealist painter André Masson. During this free exchange of ideas, both partners were trying to picture their conflicting emotions: the vision of Martinique's magnificent landscape, and the awful spectacle of this country's socio economic condition. The book ended with a study on Césaire's literary milestone, *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal* (Note Book of a Return to my Native Land), which was for Breton nothing less than the greatest lyric monument of this time<sup>3</sup>. Such a praise of a contemporary author was unprecedented in Breton's critical work. Proclaimed *the father of Surrealism* in this eulogy:

[. . .] And it is a black man who masters the French language as no white man can do today. A black man who guides us today through unexplored lands, building as he goes the contacts that will make us progress on lightning [. . .] Aimé Césaire's voice, beautiful like nascent oxygen.<sup>4</sup>

Although against any political commitment of poetry, Benjamin Peret in a lyricism outburst would applaud also Césaire's literary genius. He

wrote from Mexico, as a preface to the Spanish translation of Césaire's *Cahier*:

I have the honor to welcome a poet, the greatest French speaking poet ever seen since 20 years [. . .] The first great black poet who by breaking adrift I is going away without concern for any spiritual lodestar, simply led by his blind desire [. . .].<sup>5</sup>

Those praiseworthy criticism from two French surrealists leaders would appear many years after the first publication of Césaire's *Cahier* in the review *Volonté* (Paris 1939). At the time, this work was completely unnoticed by critics and readers alike.

It is Breton himself who wrote how on buying some ribbons for his daughter, during a transit in Fort de France, he happened to leaf through a publication lying on the counter. It was the first issue of a review entitled *Tropiques*. Recollected Breton:

"I could not believe my eyes, for what was said there was not only what had to be said, but was expressed in the most articulate and forceful way! All those grimacing shadows (I had sensed) were at last torn and scattered away; all those lies and derisions dwindled away. Man's voice had evidently not been stifled and subdued. In *Tropique*, this voice was ringing upright like spikes of light [. . .]."<sup>6</sup>

In the first issue of this publication which enraptured Breton, there were among other articles, a long excerpt from Césaire's *Cahier*, an original report on Frobenius by Suzanne Césaire (Césaire's wife), and an essay from René Ménénil, *The Birth of Martinique Art*, which was in part a summary of his articles already published in the magazine *Légitime Défense*.

That was on Césaire's initiative that the review was edited. During an interview with Jacqueline Lanier (the preface of *Tropiques* reedition), he recounted all those obstacles he had to face at the time. It was during World War II; Martinique is under the obedience of the French government representatives, collaborating with the Nazi occupants. 'No freedom of press, and a dangerous political situation'<sup>7</sup>, Césaire recalled. Because military embargo, the restrictions of supplies are severe. A lack of papers and books and quite a slow circulation of a review in need of readers aggravated the reluctance of cautious publishers, out of fear of being compromise. As for Ménénil, he also recollected under such a suspicious ambiance and precarious conditions the review *Tropiques* came to life. No longer enthusiastic about surrealism, Ménénil said further that adopting the ambiguous surrealism writing was just a way to escape a despotic

censorship. He states in an article at the forward of *Tropiques*' new edition, 'For a Comprehensive Reading of *Tropiques*:

In pretense of surrealist poetry, the most direct insult addressed to the authorities, confused the official censorship which granted its visa for the publication of compositions whose political intentions are obscure<sup>8</sup>

That was easy to say, because from the beginning, the authority in charge might be quite aware of the review's subversive character. Frequently, the poetic political statement was not so obscure, and the allusions to the local government were evident. Any naive readers could well understand those verses in prose from Césaire published in *Tropiques*' first issue.

You will not prevent me to speak  
I who profess to displease you.  
And the wind, sweet wings for my rustling nostril  
Shall upset your nice decent rottenness of cop  
Shoot well down in the bushy mountains.<sup>9</sup>

Still in this recent interview, Menil clearly attempted to belittle the surrealism influence in this publication when he said that the references to this movement must not suggest any easy surrealist interpretation of its literary contents. Thereby, Menil urged the readers to apprehend *Tropiques* through various philosophic thoughts. Stated Menil: "The reading of Bachelard's work would make me understand later, the real purpose of our groping search, and the clear meaning of our unsolved contradictions [. . .]"<sup>10</sup> Menil just wander from the point. Surrealism indeed, has been at the origin of *Tropiques* groping search and unsolved contradictions, and the reference to Bachelard's work explains better this major influence.

Bachelard's critics, underlying his relationships with surrealism, call him *The Philosopher of Surrealism*<sup>11</sup>. Mary Ann Caws in her essay on Breton and Bachelard, *Surrealism and Literary Imagination*, also put emphasis on this close kinship between Bachelard's surrationalism theory and the surrealist concept of Breton and his Parisian coterie. She concluded on that subject:

There is the same belief in the union of the super real and the real, the same optimism based on the openness of the human mind to all possibilities on the power of the imagination to transform the universe . . . And above all there is an intense awareness of personal duality and the hope of the reintegration of man at the center of the world by means of the image, combining child like wonder and lucid vision.<sup>12</sup>

Still further, Menil pointed out various influences which had shaped Tropiques' literary work, and he told us of Bergson's *impulse*, of Novalis, of Nietzsche and Freud, but also of Baudelaire, of Lautreamont and Mallarmé. Here also, Menil was just naming surrealism's first source of inspiration; thereby confirming as well Césaire's assertion that he was rather indebted to the precursors of surrealism than to surrealism itself.

In fact, surrealism did not arise from any socialist or utopian revolutionary doctrines, but rather from the works and thoughts of those authors and philosophers mentioned by Ménil. Surrealism proceeds from Bergson's concept of *Sensitive Intuition* as opposed to positivism, from Novalis' obsessive visions, from the Nietzschean idea of *Superior Man*, from Freud's psychoanalysis theories, from the symbolists' hermetic poetry, and above all from the exalted romanticism of Rimbaud and of Lautreamont. Indeed, it is Rimbaud's hopeless revolt and Lautreamont's aggressive intransigence, which ended nowadays in this romantic messianism of surrealism. This romanticism is manifested in this attitude of total irreverence, and this spirit of radical revolt confounded, however, with a sincere concern for morality. 'We belong to those who reject darkness', proclaimed Césaire. And the West Indian poet who strive to be the *Herald and the Cantor* of his people would say further:

My tongue shall serve those destitute who have no tongue, my voice the liberty of those who founder in the dungeons of despair.<sup>14</sup>

This romantic idealism and those passionate commitments are exemplified in every issue of Tropiques. In this spirit of total insubordination, and uncompromising moral pertaining to surrealism, there is a clear temptation toward nihilism and the total rejection of all values. This propensity to negate all traditional principles would be condemned by Albert Camus in *L'Homme Revolé* (The Revolted Man), when he wrote:

Total insubordination, radical destruction, humor and worship of the absurd, surrealism in first intent may be defined as the trial of everything, always beginning again [. . .] In this, there were nihilists.<sup>15</sup>

There is, in fact, certain nihilism in this total refusal of society traditional values and this negative attitude of revolt for the sake of revolt. However, the black surrealists would consistently repel this nihilist temptation, for their revolt had a specific goal. The white surrealists were fighting their own society's set of values; in the contrary, the obstacles set up by an hostile establishment were real and much more caustic for the Blacks.



The European surrealists, before all interested in art and literature, were displaying an exclusive passion for literary coteries, aggressive polemics, and intellectual speculations. That was otherwise serious for the West Indians who conceived surrealism not only as an aesthetic endeavor, but also rather like a system of principle with an implicit moral attitude, and a method action. The black poets were more romantic than surrealist in their literary endeavor, and they would use this movement for a more fundamental revolt. Wrote Sartre: "Surrealism, a European movement in poetry, has been stolen from the European by a black man who turns it against them and gives it a welldefined purpose".<sup>16</sup>

In order to find out this specific language different from their Parisian counterpart, a real feeling of anger and of aversion was needful, beside this incessant resentment of having to use the colonizer's medium of expression. Here, the spur of surrealism was essential for those black Francophone writers in their attempt to keep their distance from the French mold of strict construction. In that matter, Césaire himself recognized the positive influence of André Breton on his literary evolution. Those who like Césaire met Breton for the first time have been all greatly impressed by his natural magnetism and his strong personality. Césaire told us of his first meeting with the *Father of Surrealism*:

I met him and he completely fascinated me. He was a man with an extensive culture and uncommon sensitiveness for poetry. He felt poetry. He could literally sniff it like fine dust of pollen in the air [. . .] Breton brought us boldness; he helped us to select the right choice. He made our quest easier. I found out that Breton and surrealism have already solved many of our problems.<sup>17</sup>

However, all those problems investigated by the editors of Tropiques, were already brought forward in the single issue of *Légitime Défense*. Following the path of this review, the team of Tropiques would systematically denounce Martinique's unjust socioeconomic system, and calling for an original West Indian art. For the recovering of their true self, Tropiques proposed to the readers, the investigation of Martinican folklore, the acceptance of their African legacy, and surrealism.

The study of folklore might allow a better understanding of a cultural African heritage through its survival in the West Indian legends and tales. Thus, the Martinican no longer ashamed of their African origins could apprehend better the negative socio-economic effects of colonization, and then, stand against the master. The acceptance of the African legacy offered moreover two fold benefits: reevaluate black people's origin, denounce colonialism and its nefarious effect on Martinique's socioeconomic

structures. We have already seen how the protagonists of *Légitime Défense* made use of surrealism in their impassioned quest for social and cultural emancipation.

In Tropiques, surrealism became this *miraculous weapon* that would enable the poet to transform words into action, and even to contribute to the creation of the right society suitable to human need. Once considered as a simple instrument of investigation by the redactors of *L'Etudiant Noir*, surrealism was recovering all its prestige in the third issue of Tropiques—During Breton's journey in Martinique—. In this issue, Suzanne Césaire could even praise surrealism's permanent presence and vitality, although this movement was no longer active in Europe at the time. She proclaimed:

Many believed that surrealism was dead. Many wrote about that: childishness. Now a day, it is in expansion all over the world, and more alive than ever [. . .].<sup>18</sup>

In this impassioned article, beginning with an excerpt from her husband's poetry, Suzanne Césaire mentioned the multiple goals of surrealism assisting human being in his struggle for a complete liberation from oppression and social restraints. Surrealism seemed to be an antidote to all difficulties, the answer to all problems. As Suzanne Césaire puts it: “[. . .] Such are surrealist activities, multiple”.<sup>19</sup> Surrealism appeared as the only solution for Martinique's complex problems. The conclusion of this article would be an open declaration of war against the representatives of the French government of Vichy. There, Suzanne Césaire would not speak in innuendoes by using an obscure surrealist language. The attack would be direct, and the words chosen for their clearness:

We know where we stand here in Martinique [. . .] A society corrupt at its very core, relying for the present on injustice and hypocrisy, fearful of the future because its guilty conscience, must morally, historically, and inevitably disappears. From among the powerful war machines the modern world now places at our disposal, our audacity has chosen surrealism, which offers the greatest chance of success.<sup>20</sup>

The message would be well understood by the local government, and *Tropiques* would be banned. In a letter to the editors of this publication (May 10, 1943), the authority in charge explained that way the motifs of his interdiction: “It would be inconceivable that a civilized state, fully aware of its duties, allowed you to go on with the propagation of such an ideology.”<sup>21</sup> Ideology that the team of *Tropiques* would summarize in their answer two days later:

As you said: "Racist, Sectarian, Revolutionary, Traitor to our Country, Corrupters of Conscience", any of those names particularly inspire an aversion to us. Corrupters of conscience like Racine according to those Messieurs de Port Royal. Traitor to our dear country likes Zola, according to the extremist right wing press. Revolutionary likes Hugo of the Chatiments.

Sectarian passionately likes Rimbaud and Lautreamont.

Racist, yes, the racism of Toussaint Louverture, Claude McKay and Langston Hughes against the racism of Hitler.

As for the rest we do not speak the same language.<sup>22</sup>

This collective letter was undersigned in alphabetical order by all the collaborators of *Tropiques*: Aimé Césaire, Suzanne Césaire, Georges Gratiant, Aristide Maugée, René Ménil, Lucile Thésée. *Tropiques* would appear after the Liberation of France and would last about one year, still with the same goals, and the same spirit. In the last article of this publication, *The great Camouflage*,<sup>23</sup> Suzanne Césaire was still clamoring her refusal of a corrupt society doomed to disappear. Up to the end, she would scorn at the black authors lack of commitments, and at the mediocrity of their exotic art praised by an assimilated elite: "Tourist literature made of sugar and vanilla." With her youthful enthusiasm, she would describe further the characteristics of this future West Indian literature marked by the seal of surrealism and negritude.

Come now! Real poetry is somewhere else. Far from shyness, laments, soft breezes, parroting. We decree the death of frou-frou literature, and to hell with hibiscus, the scent of jasmine and bougainvillea. Either Martinique's poetry will be cannibal or there will be no poetry at all in Martinique.<sup>24</sup>

In the last issue of *Tropiques*, we still find a sample of Césaire's peculiar writing style recognizable among all by this mixed feeling of resentment and love, of despair and hope.

Ashes, dreams { . . . } both hands burning under the tray of the sun and the master's sadism and the slave's agony.

O Dead

For you I shall build with sun of parrots and bell of silk  
with tomtom of light steam  
with fierce tenderness of pearly cooper tone  
with Sunday dancing and baby talk [ . . . ]<sup>25</sup>

A critic attributed the *fecundity of surrealism* and its appeal to such different personalities to an inner contradiction in the nature of this movement: a will to change the world versus a desire to give up the world for a nirvana. This conflicting goal between pragmatic action and idealis-

tic achievement would be an essential dilemma for the European surrealists who were striving to change this world to quench their thirst for the absolute. Most of the black surrealists would not be concerned by such a metaphysical anguish, for their vision of a better time yet to come, although romantic, might be possibly attainable in a near future. *Surrealism tightrope of our hope*,<sup>26</sup> proclaimed Suzanne Césaire in *Tropiques*. Social misfit, unable to change an actual an unjust situation, the black poet would always hold to this tenacious hope of building in the future this world of justice in harmony with his generous wishes:

A world our world my world with curve shoulders of wind of sun of rain and full  
moon  
Of velvet golden coat and peaks in the valley  
Of frighten fawns calling and petals of roses [. . .]<sup>27</sup>

At the end of the last issue of *Tropiques*, this poem was conveying the last message of the Martinican poet who conclude *Tropiques'* surrealist journey with this grandiose prediction in a frenzied rhythm of joy, recreating with words the world of his desire. It is always this romantic and generous dream of surrealism.

## Notes

- 1 André Breton, *Martinique Charmeuse de Serpents* (Paris: J.J. Pauvert, 1972).
- 2 Ibid. p. 8.
- 3 Ibid., p. 99.
- 4 Ibid. p. 96, 109.
- 5 Benjamin Peret, Preface of Césaire's *Cahier* translates In Spanish, in *Tropiques* No 6, 7.
- 6 A. Breton, *Un grand poète noir*, op.cit., p. 93.
- 7 J. Leiner, *Entretien avec A. Césaire* in *Tropiques* new edition, p. lx.
- 8 René Ménil, Ibid.
- 9 Ibid. p. XXVI.
- 10 Ibid. p.XXVII.
- 11 G.C Christofides, Bachelard's aesthetic, in *Journal of Aesthetic and Art Criticism*, No XX, 1962, p. 263.
- 12 Mary Ann Caws, *Surrealism and Literary Imagination* (Paris: Mouton, 1966), p. 79.
- 13 Aimé Césaire: *Un grand poète noir*, op.cit., p. 99.
- 14 A. Césaire, *Cahier*, p. 61.
- 15 Albert Camus, *L'Homme Révolté* (Paris Wallimard
- 16 Sartre, *Orphées noirs*, op. cit.
- 17 Aimé Césaire, *Entretien*, op.cit., p. VI.
- 18 Suzanne Césaire, *Le surrealism et nous*, (Octobre 1943 new edition of *Tropiques*.
- 19 Ibid., p. XXV.
- 20 Ibid., Ibid.
- 21 Ibid., XXXVI.
- 22 Ibid.,XXXVII.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Suzanne Césaire, *Misère d'une poésie*, in *Tropiques*, no. 4 (Janvier 1942).
- 25 A. Césaire, *Poème*, in *Tropiques* no 2, p. 263.

26. Suzanne Césaire, *Le surrealisme et nous* op.cit., p. 263.
27. A. Césaire: *Poème* in Tropiques op. cit., p. 263.

## Chapter 7

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# Leopold Sedar Senghor and Surrealism

Like those of his generation, Senghor also sings his negritude, stands up to the colonialist oppressors, castigating their sins, and rejecting their false values. At the time of *L'Etudiant Noir*'s publication, Senghor also believed that surrealism was the essential weapon he was searching for, in his struggle against cultural alienation, and a hostile social order. He wrote in *Liberty I*:

It was between 1930 and 1938, those euphoric years of the New Negro in France. Strengthened by the miraculous weapon of automatic writing, and rather raging than destructive, we were throwing poisoned assegais and daggers of seven branches, blowing up all the Ethiopia's volcanos, and on Ascension Day burying all pundits under the rain fire of our resentments. At least we believe we were doing so.<sup>1</sup>

Still further, Senghor told us how the review *L'Etudiant Noir* was born during the thirties. *Ardent years* for a whole generation of young black student in Paris, confined in studies more vital than academic. "We were like endowed with foretelling power, going through blind walls, recreating wonders of childhood kingdom".<sup>2</sup> However, Senghor would never publish his early works of this surrealist period. His first publication in 1939 would be part of a collective social study.<sup>3</sup>

Born in 1906 in a family of traditional Senegalese landowners, Senghor spent his childhood in rural village, as he recollected those years: "I lived then in this kingdom, saw with my eyes, with my hears heard the fabulous creatures beyond the natural; the ancestral spirits in the tamarind trees; the crocodiles, guardians of the springs; the manatees who spoke to me [ . . . ]"<sup>4</sup> Senghor's first collection of poetry, *Chant d'Ombre*<sup>5</sup> (Song in the Shade), published in 1945 is a real pilgrimage in his childhood

kingdom of shepherds, farmers and warriors. Senghor is rooted in this civilization, heir to the ancient Mali Empire, which absorbed both Islam and Christianity in its original traditions. This return to the source is a real one for the Senegalese poet, contrary to those from the black diaspora calling forth a legendary Africa in their enduring exile.

Senghor clearly idealizes his childhood universe, but he wants before all to exemplify the ordinary values of a community deeply rooted in its history and its traditions. In his first collection of poems, Senghor praised those simple values, still alive in some African communities: worship of the ancestors, respect of the elders, sharp sense of honor, and community life. The religious values linking men to the divinities, and to all the elements of the universe, allowing the poet to apprehend the mysterious language of nature. Senghor recounted the time of his youth, when he was initiated to those esoteric knowledge:

Toko'Waly my uncle do you remember  
the long ago nights when my head  
grew heavy on your patient back  
when my hand in yours  
you led me through sign and shadow [. . .]<sup>6</sup>

In his second publication, *Hosties Noires (Black Host)*, Senghor still evoked with warm fervor, the lost paradise of his childhood universe.

I stand on the step of the dark deep dwelling  
My brothers and sisters cuddle against my heart  
In their numerous chicks' warmth  
I rest my head on the knee of my nurse Nga  
Nga the poetess and my head humming  
With the warrior gallop of the dyoungdyoung  
In the center of the court yard  
The solitary figtree, and under its moonlight shade  
The man's wives chatting with deep and solemn voice  
Like heir eyes and the nocturnal sources of Filma [. . .]<sup>7</sup>

This composition in free verses, close to the pattern of ordinary language, is far away from the surrealist's complex poetic imagery. This *surrealist furor* and those deep emotions, clearly displayed in Césaire's poetry, are insignificant in Senghor's. Those peculiar characteristics only could be sufficient to set Senghor aside from a surrealist classification. His poetry generally reflects a sensuous love for his country through the happy memories of a traditional Senegalese childhood. This sunny universe becomes often clouded by the anguishes of the poet torn between two



civilizations. But contrary to Césaire uncompromising revolt, Senghor would always forgive while remaining aware of his races suffering and the misdeeds of the French colonization. Senghor's *Priere de Paix* (Prayer for Peace) which expresses his deepest resentments is a call for forgiveness:

Lord forgive white Europe  
 It is true Lord that for four enlighten centuries  
 They have thrown the foam of their mastiffs on  
 my lands  
 And now the serpent of hate is stirring its head  
 In my heart, that serpent I believed was dead  
 Kill it Lord, for I must continue my journey [. . .]  
 Forgive France who hates all invaders  
 And imposes its colonization so heavily on me  
 [. . .]<sup>8</sup>

Although Senghor's accents are truly sincere, this composition is far to be poetic. Those free verses expresses an accusation rather than an evocation and they are closer to the form of political speech than related to poetry. Senghor the activist is speaking, but not the poet, for the ideas too easily understood, annihilate the poetical mood. Deplored Jean Onimus on that matter: "When poetry is just promoting an ideology, it becomes ordinary prose, its discourse is deteriorated by arguments, and at the end, it ceases to be, asphyxiated by ideas".<sup>9</sup> Those ideas sometimes too prominent in Senghor's work make his poetry declamatory and affected. Nonetheless, when he avoids this weakness, the poet often gives us magnificent verses, and some poems from *Nocturnes* are really splendid.

If we look for those who influenced Senghor's literary work, we must consider Saint-John Perse and especially Claudel. All those authors make use of the free verses in their poetical compositions in prose. Senghor himself acknowledges Claudel's influences, and he even finds some clear analogies between this poet's work and Negro African poetry<sup>10</sup>. We can not overlook the influences of Senegalese traditional poetry, whose literary method was assimilated by Senghor in his manner of celebrating in song a person he wishes to honor.

In spite of Senghor's mitigated declaration about surrealism, he was far to be affected by this movement's spirit of uncompromising revolt. Armand Guibert is not completely wrong when he presents the Senegalese poet as an elegiac whose work is 'a journey in the kingdom of tender'.<sup>11</sup> When Senghor occasionally adopts the surrealist writing, the influence of his

friend Césaire is manifest. Some Senghor's verses clearly recall the imagery of Césaire's *Cahier*: this one for example.

New York, let the black blood  
Flow into your blood  
Let it loosen the rust of your steely articulations like an oil of life.<sup>12</sup>

In the *Cahier*, Césaire also image those gnashing and steely articulations, which represent for both poets those materialistic Western communities as opposed to Negro African spirituality.

Listen to the white world  
Horribly exhausted from its immense effort  
Its rebellious articulations  
Cracking under the bleak stars [. . .]  
Hear its boastful victories  
Tumpet its defeats [. . .]<sup>13</sup>

The distinctive accent of each composition is obvious: Senghor is calling for peace and union, but Césaire's defiance is inflexible. 'Revolt, and only revolt can originate light',<sup>14</sup> proclaimed Breton over and over. The outcries of revolt are rare and promptly restrained in Senghor's work, for his concept of cultural brotherhood makes him the one who must compromise, forgive, and forget. At a time when European colonialism was at its zenith, Senghor also was dazzled by surrealism, which was protesting against practically everything at the time. Nevertheless, this attraction was not translated in his poetical works, but as a critic, his references to this movement will be numerous.

Senghor's cultural concepts are essentially based on this fundamental opposition between *black intuition* and *white reason*<sup>15</sup>. He told us that white man want to dominate object whereas black man assimilates himself with this object which is the best way to apprehend it. Since surrealism is the triumph irrationality it is also black poet's favorite writing style.

From there, Senghor stressing the difference between European and African surrealism infers that 'Negro-African surrealism is mystical', stemming from direct communion with an ultimate reality, while 'European surrealism is empirical', relying solely on experience, and practical observation<sup>16</sup>. One could understand the theorist concluding to a correspondence between both concepts, he is wrong when speaking of difference. Although European surrealism adopted materialism, and even denying the existence of God, the tendency to mysticism is clearly visible in the spirit of this movement. In his second manifesto, Breton stated that

'poetic intuition setting free by surrealism, must embrace all visible and invisible structures of the universe.' Although in complete contradiction, mysticism and materialism are the conflicting poles of the surrealism's thought in its quest for the absolute through the various strata of reality.

Furthermore, Senghor enlarge his concept on Negro-African rhythm to the level of a philosophy. This recurrent and ordered alternation of sound in the flow of the verses might enable the black artist or poet to participate in the vital cosmic forces. He asserted that, 'Negro poets are above all cantors<sup>17</sup>. They are tyrannically obedient to an inner music'. Senghor seems to have found this specific rhythm in the work of the West Indian Césaire, although the black poet has been cut off from all contact with his continent of origin.

However, the theoretician acknowledged this breaking bounds with Mother Africa when asserting that 'African rhythm is not given at first, for, it is not offspring of memory, of frantic remembrance [. . .]'<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, Senghor singles out in Césaire's poetry this specific' rhythm of African drum, lancinating, monotonous, and always despotic. As an example, he analyzed a poem from Césaire entitled *Tam-Tam*.<sup>19</sup>

In French, the tampo of this poem could indeed evoke the beat of an African drum, however, this rhythm is solely the result of a literary technique: recurrent alternation of strong and weak elements in the flow of sound, repetition of accented words and so one [. . .] Furthermore, this rhythm is far to be spontaneous: the very title of this poem expresses the author's voluntary intention of reaching such a lancinating and monotonous rhythmic pattern. Surrealists make use also of those traditional literary techniques. It is superfluous to have recourse to negritude in order to explain the rhythm in Negro-African literature.

## Notes

1. L.S. Senghor, *Liberté I* (Paris: Seuil, 1964), p. 84.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 99–100.
3. *L'Homme de Couleur* (Paris: Placon, 1939).
4. Senghor, *Liberté*, op. cit.
5. Senghor, *Chant d'Ombres* (Paris: Seuil, 1945).
6. *Ibid.*, p. 51–52.
7. Senghor, *Hosties Noires* (Paris: Seuil, 1948).
8. *Ibid.* op. cit., p. 148.
9. Jean Onimus, *Expérience de la poésie* (Paris: Desclée, 1967), p. 11.
10. Senghor, *La Parole Chez Paul Claudel et les NégroAfricains* (Dakar: Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1973).
11. Aimé Pétro Deux poètes noirs de langue française, in *Présence Africaine* no 3.
12. Senghor, *A New York*.
13. Césaire, *Cahiers*, p. 119.
14. A. Breton, *Arcane 17* (Paris: Sagittaire, 1946).
15. Senghor, *Liberté I*, op. cit., p. 209.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 210.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 164.
19. Césaire, *TamTam*, in *Armes Miraculeuses*, op. cit., p. 50.

## Chapter 8

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### Léon Damas and Surrealism

Of the three poets of negritude, Damas is the one who better recreates the incantatory beat of African drum in his verses so close to the spoken words, but so effective in their very simplicity. Everything in Damas's poetic work is rather suggested by rhythm than by words. One can quote among other example the poet's surprising use of the word *bientôt* (soon), in the poem entitled such as:

Soon now

I shall not only have danced

soon now

I shall not only have sung

soon now

I shall not only have scrubbed

soon now

I shall not only have danced

sung

rubbed

scrubbed sung danced rubbed [. . .]

soon now.<sup>1</sup>

As Sartre points out in his *Black Orpheus*, the use of French by those poets has amounted to a 'reshaping of the language to the rhythms of their own passionate commitment.' It is a fact that strong accentuated rhythm is not within the normally accepted rule of the French language syntax. So, it was a genuine attempt of realignment of sound patterns that was taking place in this composition—in French—. The first who published a collection of poems setting forth the negritude concept, Damas did not need the surrealist splashing imagery in order to reach the immediate efficiency of poetic message. In Damas' poetical universe, rhythm is an absolute ruler. In addition to this characteristic, an unequalled sense of

humor pervades his entire poetic works. In Damas *Bientôt*, this sense of humor can not hide the poet's bitterness against right thinking absurdities, injustices and prejudices. *Soon* means also hope, not the utopic surrealist expectation, but the firm belief in a very near future where Negroes, by being no longer somebody clowns or obedient servants would not have to dance or to scrub in order to survive.

However, Damas' first collection of poetry was prefaced by an unconditional French surrealist, Robert Desnos, and illustrated by the surrealist artist Frans Masereel. The title of this collection, *Pigment* '—characteristic color—was a specific reference to the author's race. In his preface, Desnos world first dwell with this fact, before underlining the humane and revolutionary significance of Damas' poems. "They do honor, those poems, to the whole immense native proletariat of the French colonies [. . .] those poems are also a song of friendship offered in the name of his entire race by my friend Damas, to all his white brothers."<sup>2</sup>

One could already find in *Pigment* the main ideas of the negritude concept: nostalgia and bitter resentment, revolt and compromise, despair and tenacious hope. Thereby, *Pigment* was in fact the forerunner to Césaire's *Cahier*. In both Damas and Césaire's poetical work there are the same nostalgic accents for a lost motherland, the same painful accents translating the bitterness of the unrooted assimilated Negro deprived of his cultural heritage on behalf of the colonizer's alien values. The symbolism of *Poupées Noires*—Black Dolls—summarizes those major themes of negritude.

'Give me back my black dolls  
Let them dispel the image of  
The pale face merchant of love who come and go  
On the boulevard of my boredom  
Give me back my black dolls  
That I may play with them  
The naive game of my instinct  
Remaining in the shadow of their law  
Recovering my courage my audacity [. . .]'.<sup>3</sup>

*Black Dolls* represent all at once for the poet, the nostalgia of a mythical Africa, his intense desire of recovering those ancestral traditions, and also his bitterness against those who robbed him of this heritage. Most of the time, reminiscence and rancor give way to hate and obsession of revenge:

There are nights with no name  
There are nights with no moon

When a clammy suffocation  
 Nearly overwhelms me  
 The acrid smell of blood  
 Spewing from every muted trumpet [. . .].<sup>4</sup>

In those moments of rage, the poet's language becomes even crude; the lean incisive spoken style precisely expresses his feeling: 'Me I say Merde (Shit), and that's just half of it [. . .],' was the message of the poet militant to those Senegalese soldiers, volunteers in the French army during World War II. He added further:

Me  
 I ask them to  
 Shove their bayonets  
 Their sadistic fits [. . .]  
 Me  
 I ask them  
 To begin  
 By invading Senegal [. . .].<sup>5</sup>

Direct and clear message from a writer who wants to be socially and politically committed, but who refuses any easy compromise. This spirit of refusal is conveyed through Damas' poetical work with this writing style voluntary sober but always elevated.

Some few poems in Damas' *Pigments* are clearly marked by surrealism, but the poet managed rather early to break away from this influence and to develop a personal style. Those early surrealist verses seem to express the poet's intimate feeling and fleeting impressions at a peculiar time of his life.

Leaning on my craving yesterday desire  
 Where sporadic persistent fragrance emanated  
 The tide was flowing  
 Any flight of flamingo worthless  
 And the voice of the beacon  
 Stronger than the mangroves' twilight fire [. . .].<sup>6</sup>

What essentially separates the surrealist way of writing, from the poetry of the preceding generation is not its emancipation from literary tradition, but rather its use of free words association, beyond the restraint set up by logic. For the surrealists, the sparks of imagery resulting from this spontaneous encounter of two different words might evoke in the mind a new reality. One can realize that Damas' style was not suited to this kind of writing for not having a bent for poetical amplification. Damas's poetic surrealist images recall very little, this *persistent fragrance*

imperfectly qualified *craving desire* and the *twilight fire* seems to be stronger than the 'voice of the beacon'.

Damas' attraction to surrealism was brief, and the poet would soon renounce to this hermetic writing style. He would recover his originality in those sharp and rapid expressions, which express accurately his feeling without needless veil. Here, nothing excessive in his deep and so simple verses.

In his *Anthology*, Senghor accurately described Damas, poetical work: "Poetry essentially unsophisticated; it is direct, crude, brutal, at times, but never vulgar, and far of being sentimental, although loaded with an emotion overwhelmed by humor."

It is difficult to agree with Senghor when he characterizes Damas' keen sense of humor as *Negro*, in opposition to European witticism, and the surrealists' black humor. Senghor upheld this notion in *Liberty I*, and came to the conclusion that this kind of humor inevitably connected with emotion and rhythm was just a peculiar aspect of negritude. Senghor would describe further this Negro humor as a 'comic of character and of situation, outcoming from a reaction to an absurdity.'<sup>8</sup>

No one can pretend being so conclusive on such a topic as the nature of humor. In *Le Rire* (On Laughter), Henri Bergson<sup>9</sup> rightly underlined that since the remotest times, the greatest thinkers strive hard, in vain, to comprehend the essence of laughter. It is not possible to exactly determine this uncertain line which separate humor from witticism or irony; although the so call English humor, the French witticism and Damas humor are clearly different. But from the ludicrous loud laughter to the pleasant little smile, humor is rather universal, how ever special it can be.

In the review *Tropiques* René Ménil grasped the essential when he said about humor: "It is with laughter that the tragic man bitterly weights in one's hand, the worthless value of his existence."<sup>10</sup> Here, the Martinican writer was not only speaking to his people. 'To reach universality through particulars,' was *Tropiques* essential principle. What was said in this review, Breton realized, 'was what had to be said [. . .] this land revealed by Césaire and his friends was also my land, it was our land which I had wrongly assumed to be one day overcome by darkness.'<sup>11</sup>

A few years later, André Breton will discover nearby Martinique such a similar land: Haiti.



## Notes

1. Léon Damas, *Pigments* (Paris: G.L.M. 1937). With a preface from Robert Desnos, and a jacket design from F. Masereel.
2. *Ibid.*, Preface.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
7. Senghor, *Anthology*, op. cit.
8. Senghor, *Liberté 1*, op. cit., p. 114.
9. Henri Bergson, *Le Rire* (Paris, new edition 1950).
10. René Ménil, *Laissez passer la poésie*, in *Tropiques*.
11. André Breton, *Un grand poete noir*, op. cit., p. 95.

## Chapter 9

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# Surrealism in Haiti

In December 1945, André Breton arrived in Port-au-Prince with the Cuban surrealist artist Wilfredo Lam, officially delegated by the French government to deliver some lectures on contemporary French literature. In his article entitled *Temoignage*<sup>1</sup> (Testimony), the Haitian poet Paul Laraque recalled with lyricism Breton's fascinating personality, and the enthusiastic welcome that the Haitian intelligentsia reserved to the *Pope of Surrealism*.

Leonine face, sparkling redhaired, semi-good begot by thunder, Breton comes up. Just by seeing him, one can easily apprehend the brilliance of the revolted angel. Any shadow becomes source of light. Tempestuous life stripped by thunder [. . .] Breton's first impressive character is that of olympian power.<sup>2</sup>

Haiti owned this visit thanks to the initiative of Pierre Mabilie, a cultural attaché at the French embassy at Port-au-Prince. Complex individuality said Sarane Alexandrian—a noted French literary critic<sup>3</sup>—speaking of Pierre Mabilie. This critic recounts further that a French surrealist poet acknowledged to her, 'to have been more impressed by Mabilie's personality than by Breton's.'<sup>4</sup> Surgeon and eminent psychologist, author of numerous communications in those disciplines, Pierre Mabilie was a former professor at the School of Anthropology in Paris, and was also very well versed in occultism. In Haiti, he used to carry on his official cultural activities conjointly with his anthropological researches, and his practice of medicine.

Mabilie was a convinced surrealist and a good friend of Breton who said about him: "A very wise man and an inspirer in the broad sense of this word, for being an active physician and an eminent scholar involves in the most advanced scientific researches, his scope of understanding could embrace science and esoteric concepts alike."<sup>5</sup> Mabilie's theories

on dreams and psychoanalysis concurred with Breton's concepts on those subjects.<sup>6</sup> Although Mabilille did not consider dream a '*highest form of reality*', as many surrealists did, he asserted nevertheless that 'the states of anxiety, of hope and of terror are similar in wakefulness and dream alike.'<sup>7</sup> That is for Mabilille, to take refuge in the *Mirror of Marvelous*<sup>8</sup> is not just an utopia but an ardent journey in which a passenger is sustained by the opposite forces animating the whole nature. One must understand that for Mabilille, the mirror which reflect reality is the symbol of man's awareness of another self related to a deeper reality. It is of no use trying to go through this mirror in order to reach the marvelous which is reflected on, because those reflections are merely man's very desires. Wrote Mabilille:

Behind the calm surface of the lake there is no illusive reality but the intense life of the water itself. Behind the mirror there is solely the silvering with its particular reflecting virtues. If it were possible to compare our mind with this mirror, its silvering would be made up with the silvery luster of our deep desires.<sup>9</sup>

Breton stated over and over that imaginary is something tending to become—real.<sup>10</sup> As a sincere surrealist, Mabilille might also believe that the act of desire could give form to the desired thing itself. On this matter, Sarane Alexandrian wrote that this scholar used to seek after the marvelous in his own life, and believed in the inner magical power of things. Mabilille recalled the story of an ancient plaster statue which 'originated inexplicable phenomenon, and bringing about radical change in his life from the moment he obtained this statue.'<sup>11</sup>

Mabilille could discover in Haiti this very surrealist land in which the structure of the Voodoo mythology was almost in harmony with the concept of *surrealist merveilleux*. The sacred objects of this popular Haitian religion, as well as the Hougan's (Voodoo priest) ritualistic words, were supposed to have this immediate and magical efficacy, tirelessly sought after by surrealists in their poetical and artistic creations. The state of trance of Voodoo worshippers when possessed by the *Loas* (Voodoo goods),—held to be mediums between the earthly world and the world of spirits—might fascinate those surrealists who were attempting to reach the unknown through mediums, and were speaking of poet's trance-like and automatic writing. Breton would say in *Pont Levis* (drawbridge) that he attended with Mabilille more than eight authentic Voodoo ceremonies in Haiti, and was so affected by the pathetic nature of those rituals he could not pretend having apprehended their real significance.<sup>12</sup> Besides, in this community which faiths are strongly marked by African animism,

one does not have to be surrealist in order to believe that dream is the continuation of everyday existence: the very symbolism of Breton's *Vases Communicantes* (Communicative Vessel).<sup>13</sup>

What the surrealists were looking for in religions was specially that strong emotional mystic feeling, calling forth by the ritual of any religious ceremonies. They are above all interested in a state of mind, and a pervading ritualistic atmosphere, but not in the worship of divinities. They are attracted by the mysteries of the unknown, but not by the sacred. The surrealists are mystics who ignore deities in their quest of surreality. *Quest of what?* Stated Breton in his manifesto: "I don't know, but quest however."<sup>14</sup>

Those distressing interrogations from Breton and the surrealists are originated in their insistence of transgressing the natural laws which limit human condition, and above all in their impossible quest of this unreal point in time where all contradictions might be reconcilable. Those unanswerable questions from the surrealists coincide with those from the mystics, looking for their answers in religion.

Breton was obviously attracted by esoteric rites and mysticism. Monnerot equals the surrealists with the ancient Gnostics who believed that knowledge of mysteries of the unknown could be attainable through faith alone.<sup>15</sup> But what is much more important for them is the quest for this indefinitely vanishing unknown, and this unfulfilled desire: the thrill of the chase not the capture of the prey. This quest, Breton said, providing it is impassioned, could instigate 'a state of trance-like which would bring about *extralucidity power*.'<sup>16</sup>

By stressing on this peculiar feeling (emotion *révélatrice*), Breton singled out the similarity between surrealism and the so called primitive society, because 'both aim to abolish the self consciousness influence on every day life on behalf of this extralucidity power which could reveal another reality.'<sup>17</sup> Breton was making those remarks while in Haiti, during an interview with the Haitian poet René Bédécarrats. Considering Bédécarrats's question about the incompatibility between dialectic materialism and surrealism's quest of the unknown, Breton explained that both concepts in fact was complementary. About the critics directed against surrealist poetry and its obscure language, Breton would reply that 'the surrealists, by releasing literary texts wrote under the dictation of thought, were not responsible for the ambiguity of their documents.' The interviewer was deliberately asking this last question.<sup>18</sup> René Bédécarrats was also one of those poets looking for a certain poetical obscureness, in order to unravel in their works the mysteries of a complex universe.

Nevertheless, Bélance was not the first self-proclaimed Haitian surrealist poet. Magloire Saint-Aude who had pledged allegiance to this movement since 1941, had already published at this time the most hermetic of his surrealist verses: *Dialogues de mes Lampes* (Dialogues with my Lamps).<sup>19</sup>

### **Magloire Saint-Aude: Anguished Obsession, and Disintegration of Language**

The title of Magloire Saint-Aude's works *Dialogue with my Lamps*, with its short verses strung in a succession of laconic reflections, already give us some indications on the state of mind of the self-centered poet. Besides, from the first verse of this fragmented work, the poet, an outcast in his own community, chooses to put out this symbolic light of the Lamp which could lead him out from a real seclusion.

From my feeling to words,  
My handkerchief for my lamps [. . .]  
Curled up in my obliterated eyes,  
The sorrow, the poem but the causes.<sup>20</sup>

Those verses express a confession of confusing sincerity: confession of a blasé who no longer believes in society's values. Without any hope, the poet is withdrawing within himself, within the emptiness of his anguish. Anguish is indeed the major feeling of this collection of brief poems whose titles are voluntarily chosen for their evocation of *Emptiness* and *Fear*, of *Sorrow*, and of *Peace*, which for Saint-Aude is the peace of the grave. Stressed Breton speaking of Saint-Aude's poetical work:

The wonderful keynote, which tames the poet's inner emotional uproar, is the unique cog where the wheel of anguish set going on ecstasy.<sup>21</sup>

Anguish of solitude, and ecstasy of death. Solitude of the poet who repudiated the material and spiritual values of his class, taking refuge in the atrocious poverty of Port au Prince's ghetto, and trying in vain to escape his hopeless condition. Ecstasy of an existence beyond earthly life, expressing the poet's sensation of death while still living.

Nothing is I,  
But my ogival orbits  
And my neck of image angel,  
Like my eyes filled of cold silk.<sup>22</sup>

In their very conciseness, those unusual metaphors brought back from the depth of the subconscious seem to be indeed the result unconscious automatism. Those words precisely express the poet's wave of obsessions: accurate images of the poet's disincarnate inner face, like those *ogival orbit*, bony socket of the eyes, cold face of death. This metaphysical obsession of nothingness and death pervades the entire poetical work of Saint-Aude who further confesses: "Nothing but the poet dulls doleful Dying away at Guadalajara."<sup>23</sup> For the poet, Death, equally concrete and mysterious like this exotic and unknown town of Guadalajara is the irrefutable evidence of an absurd existence. Existentialist philosophies urge men to challenge this absurd fatality of death by being responsible or by being engaged in revolutionary actions. With Saint-Aude there is no challenge but resignation, a kind of romantic stoicism at the manner of Vigny. The poet accepts the peace of death without any regret:

Sleep at least old chap.  
Who should love me,  
At the end, tombstone of my image.<sup>24</sup>

In the whole, *Dialogue with my Lamps* was not so hermetic. The deliberate confusion of Saint-Aude writing and this new form of poetry disconcerted a public used to the clear classical language. However, a critic at that time would review accurately this collection of poems. In his essay on *Dialogue with my Lamps* Edriss Saint-Amand could be the first to stress out this poetry's major characteristics. He told us in this essay:

Saint-Aude has some barbaric reactions in the presence of this alien classical aesthetic compelling the writers to express clearly his ideas [. . .] Turbulent child who is trying to smash his cradle's bars [. . .] he does not wish to be understood by every one; in the contrary that would be outrageous if that could be! Instead of dancing in this human carnival, he rather entirely gives himself up to silence: a caustic silence like salt, a silence like this empty and white bowl.<sup>25</sup>

By underlining Saint-Aude attraction toward laconism and muteness, and by stressing further that the poet's writing was rather intentional than spontaneous, Saint Amand was alluding as well to the black Francophone writers following French literary theories, and particularly surrealism.

Saint-Aude would have been a talented poet for the literary qualities of his poetry, and his sincere emotions. Nevertheless, in spite of those peculiar characteristics underlined by Breton in *La Clef des Champs*<sup>26</sup>. Senghor was right for not having selected Saint-Aude among those poets who illustrated his *Anthology of New Black Poetry*. That is as a black

surrealist poet, Saint-Aude is closer to the Parisian surrealists than he is to the Martinican Aimé Césaire. The revolted poet of the *Cahier* lets the words sustain his spirit while going through a certain automatism. Self-centered Narcissus, the author of the *Dialogue* is just a barbarian who intends to disorganize the language logical order only to master it. By setting up a new order of words, Saint-Aude expects to create a specific atmosphere evocative of his inner emotional turmoil. For Césaire, poetry is knowledge and action, and his language serves as a medium to communicate with himself, mankind and the entire universe. By breaking away from the French literary tradition of strict construction and logical thinking, the Martinican poet expects, says, to unveil a new reality from the releasing power of the words setting free. Stated Maurice Blanchot about this surrealist expectation:

Properly speaking, with the automatic writing it is not the words which become free but the words and my freedom that make one entity. I step in the words which retain my characteristics, my printed reality [. . .] In the other hand, this freedom also means that those words become free for themselves: they are not entirely dependant of things they are expressing, they are reacting independently, they are playing together, and as Breton said, they are making love.<sup>27</sup>

However, it should not be understood that Saint-Aude is less profound than Césaire, just for not being socially committed. As for the redactors of *Legitimate Defense*, it is not a question of subject matter, it is the poetical atmosphere of both poets and their language that are different. Atmosphere of ordinary emotion of intimate feeling, and of common images in Saint-Aude's work. With Césaire, everything is new; his ego mirrored the feeling of a whole community. The flowing stream of images in the *Cahier* is not restrained by any punctuation, and this poetry ends up on revolt and fraternity.

The conciseness of the verses in *Dialogue with my Lamps* with their exact punctuation restrains the poet and his accents. This poetry is confined within itself or merges sometimes with those *empty silences* as empty as a white bowl. That is the poet in his willingness to seek for perfection and specific mood, thanks to a literary techniques, and unable to express his whole feeling in such brief verses, was compelled to resort to muteness. Said Paul Laraque on this matter: "Poetry of silence. Arrogant confession for the facts disclosed as well as for those concealed. Poetry of refusal as the poet's life".<sup>28</sup> This total refusal of any social commitments characterizes above all Saint-Aude and his work alike. All the surrealists were not revolted against society's social inequities or wrong-

doing. Some surrealists gave in to desperation and even committed suicide: Saint-Aude is one of them. He did not arrive to this ultimate step; nevertheless one can find everywhere in his work this morbid contemplation of death. *Poison* evokes the poet:

Out of breath in the silk,  
In to the abyss of death.<sup>29</sup>

Reflect display as well the poet's obsession recalling those *Lamentations to the saliva of death*. This fascination recurs over and over in other verses. The poet enacts in *Tabou: Beware of my death* but the poem. He clearly predicts in *Dechu*:

'There is my discrowned shroud,  
[. . .]  
The star of the beggar  
Is listening to the breeze of my death.  
(Dechu, Dialogue, VI)

The mood of Saint-Aude's poetry appears too often to be chillingly despondent contrary to this exuberant sense of being so manifest in surrealist poetry. Most of the time, the poet's accents are always mournful, even when a few women are silhouetted in the course of his work. Fascinating and strange profile of this *Magdeleine in welded laces*. The poet recalls further *Angelique and the cold lips of Milady* and he tells us twice of an *Edith of Sunday emptiness* who seems to be the pale reflect of the poet facing his own death.

Restrained in the restless dark side  
Pale Edith, my face, myself'.  
(Emptiness Dialogue with my Lamps, p. 1)

It is always this sentimental and doleful atmosphere that the poet reveals to us from his solitude, and voluntary exile. However, thanks to surrealism, he was able to find out his peculiar language, and to equal the best black writers of his era. He differs also from those of his generation by his refusal of any political or social commitment, and his willingness to celebrate only his utterly confused inner turmoil.

Saint-Aude's total disengagement was severely criticized by his peers. The most scathing article comes from Jacques Roumain. The founder of the Haitian Communist Party took advantage of this opportunity to call into account the French surrealist movement. Roumain violently denounced



Saint-Aude's exclusively destructive poetry while praising its formal beauty: "I admire his poetry, however I do not have any consideration for his ideology which is an antibourgeois infernal machine but negative and anarchist."<sup>30</sup> Paul Laraque, who was also, Saint-Aude's friend, would condemn as well the poet's social disengagement and the negative aspect of his poetry: "Poetry of despair. Poetry of a doomed class. Desperate escape from the unacceptable reality [. . .] Omission of an ill made and unjust world, which then, remains unchanged."<sup>31</sup>

Without mentioning the fact of social disengagement, Breton would equal Saint-Aude to the best French speaking poet's of his generation. He would recall on that matter 'the superb disdain of the poet blessed by both the Caribbean and African fairies bewildered by Rimbaud [. . .]'<sup>32</sup> Paradoxically, the first Haitian poet claiming to be a surrealist was not a poet engagé.

### Jacques Roumain and the New Spirit

After his adventure in Martinique, Breton could not be disconcerted neither by Haiti's climate and flora, nor by its socio-political problems. With some differences, that was the same peculiar and sumptuous landscape, the same unjust social system: in short, the same atmosphere of magnificence and repulsion recalled by Breton in *Martinique Snakes Charmer*. In spite of a costly won independence, the usually despotic Haitian government, succeeding by waves since 1804, could not arrive to bring the mass out of poverty and ignorance. Adding to this fact, a running demography, very few natural resources, a derisive economic infrastructure, and above all the super power's aggressive hostility against this nation in the course of its evolution. The American occupation of Haiti which lasted more than 15 years did not solve any problems. Asserted *The Patriotic Union*, a newspaper of that time: 'The same economic problems, the same social contradictions still remain. The profiteers were the ones from the same oligarchy who were still making their political career such a lucrative exploitation that any other profitable speculations seem mediocre in comparison'.<sup>33</sup>

The perception of this situation by the Haitian would be at the origin of a social awareness, and of truly genuine literature. On this matter, the influence of PriceMars *So Said the Uncle*, and of the *Indigenist Review's* redactors have been already underlined.

For most of those Indigenist writers also, poetry was not a privileged diversion, but a mean of discovery, of communication and of action. In a

country where social injustice was the rule the poets of this generation intended to change their community's social structure by their writing and political commitment. Their works reflect rather the collective feeling of their race and community than their intimate emotions. This poetry, deeply marked by Marxist theories, praised all at once with romanticism: the proletarian fraternity, the universal value of social justices, and the particular values of negritude. Roumain is the one who expressed better this new awakening of conscience:

[. . .] No, brother, comrades, we will pray no more  
 Our revolt rises up like the cry of the tempest bird  
 Above the fetid ripples of the swamplands  
 We will sing no more the sad forlorn spiritual  
 Another song now springs up our throats  
 And we unfurl our red flags  
 Stained with the blood of our just  
 Beneath this sign we will march  
 We the damned of the earth now standing [. . .]  
 The convicts of famine now standing [. . .]<sup>34</sup>

Deeply aware of the importance of their problems, most of those writers would play or try to play a political role in their community. Jacques Roumain is the most prolific writer of this period, and the author of *Ebony*<sup>35</sup> one of the best from this generation of Negro African poets. In his *Anthology*, Senghor singled out Césaire's common literary characteristics with Roumain and conclude about his poetry: "Jacques Roumain has this peculiar power of transmutation, this virtue which forces the gate of darkness, and the gift of song was bestowed upon him."<sup>36</sup>

Well before the publication of *Legitime Defense* in 1932, Roumain was among the redactors of the first Black review being published in Paris: *Le Cri des Nègres*<sup>37</sup> (Negro Voices). He was also in Paris at the time of nascent surrealism, but apparently was not influence by this movement. However at that time, as a Black Francophone poet looking for new avenue of expression, and as a Marxist militant longing for changing society's socio economic structure, Roumain might have been affected by this *New Spirit* which was calling in question Western civilization traditional values. All those French *avant-garde* literary movements as, modernism, futurism, cubism and others that preceded surrealism were as well striving to subvert the traditional language and to create a new one. 'To put language in a state of effervescence,' asserted Breton in his *Entretiens*. One can clearly discern this New Spirit's influence in those splendid verses from Roumain, dedicated to the republican fighters of the Spanish civil war.

'The sky doesn't show any more a smile  
 Neither a fragment of blue  
 Nor an arch to launch the hope  
 Of an arrow of sun [. . .]  
 When the machine gun riddles  
 The strainer of silence  
 When explodes the cataract of fracas  
 And the canopy of heaven gives away [. . .]  
 On the bloody face of this child  
 But yes there is still a smile  
 Like a grenade crushed under the heel [. . .]'

Jacques Roumain (Madrid, Commune, Avril 1937.)

It is indeed the aesthetic of Reverdy and the literary cubism on the nature of poetic images as a 'pure creation of the mind'.<sup>38</sup> According to Reverdy, the literary image has an existence independent of the natural order of things. It is neither a quality of the poet who created it nor consistent with the objects of this world. A poetic image has its own reality for 'poetry is neither in life nor in things, it is what you do with them and what you add to them that count.'<sup>39</sup> From this premise, Reverdy would define the poetic image as such: "The spontaneous meeting of two very distant realities whose relationship is grasped solely by the mind. The more remote is the relationship; between the two realities, the stronger become its evocative power and its poetical reality."<sup>40</sup> Reverdy's theory on poetic metaphors, modified by Breton in his manifesto, would be a fundamental concept in surrealist poetic art.

However, Roumain's provocative metaphors are far away from the surrealist' sparkling but sometimes obscure images. Roumain's symbolism is more simple and intelligible. The militant who strives to wake up the *damned of the earth* and *the convicts of hunger*, wishes to be easily understood by the readers, and his writing is usually clear like his message:

White workers of Detroit, Black peon of Alabama  
 Numberless people in the capitalist galley  
 We proclaim together the unity of poverty and revolt  
 And we mix up the cement of fraternity  
 In the dust of idols [. . .]  
 Jacques Roumain, Ebony.

Roumain's accents are echoed in the works of many writers of his generation who adopt also this clear and almost classical writing, studded with sumptuous metaphors. Following the path of Roumain, Anthony

Lespes, and Roussan Camille in their literary work would also embrace the *parias of the earth*, with the same passion and generosity than the author of *Ebony* and *Governor of the Dew*. All those poets were tempted by the surrealist poetic imagery, but gradually, as their works became more militant, their writing adopted a more traditional pace.

In the threshold of his career, the surrealist writing style also tempted Jean Brierre. In *Secret Song*, one can find those unusual associations of images, and distant analogies evocative of the poet's beloved beauty, at the surrealist manner. But the poet would opt later for more traditional and more punctuated writing.

When you bleed, Harlem, my handkerchief grows crimson.  
 When you suffer, your moan is prolonged in my own sad song  
 With the same fervor in the very same night,  
 Black brother, we both are dreaming the same dream.  
 Jean Bri  re, 'Here I Am Again', in Harlem.

All those poets did not have to adopt surrealism in order to reach this *exceptional gift of song* which for Breton, characterize true poetry. 'There can be no salvation for the poet who does not sing'.<sup>41</sup> was Breton assertion about C  saire poetry. Those Haitian poets also were able to transcend their revolt in order to confer to their poetry the rhythm of an incantatory song, while avoiding the imperious ponderousness of the political message. In that order, they reach to genuine poetry while being as well revolutionary poets.

### Andr   Breton's Surrealist Adventure in Haiti

While praising Saint-Aude *superb disdain*, Breton appear to single out the egocentric character of this poetry, but without insistence. However, the conclusion of his first lecture delivered at Port au Prince was clear and unequivocal: the indispensable engagement of poetry, and for the poet, 'the imperious necessity to contribute to the transformation of an out-dated existing social order'.<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, Breton made some reservation on this matter when stressing on the poet's first obligation not to forget poetic activities' immediate aims: quest of the unknown, liberation of the mind, and man's reconciliation with himself and the world. Up to the end, Breton would remain faithful to this essential surrealist concept of combining Marx's socio economic theories with Rimbaud's poetical aspirations. Once more Breton would proclaim his creed during this lecture:

I can say that surrealism has historically responded to the necessity of conciliating human condition in its both material and spiritual aspects. We would always reject the dissociation of those aspects from each other [. . .].<sup>44</sup>

The review *Conjunction*, sponsored by the Alliance Francaise in Haiti under Pierre Mabille's direction, published integrally this lecture in its first issue of January 1946. Without those late occurrences—we will see further—its seems that *Conjunctions* would have adopted, at least in part *Tropiques's* objectives. It could not be otherwise under such guidance. During this lecture on the surrealist movement, after praising Haiti's revolutionary past, Breton traced the history of this movement in France, which was intermingled, according to the speaker, with his own life's major stage. He enumerated surrealism's essential literary and political concepts, and at the end, he came to the subject that many were expecting: the unavoidable encounter of Marxism and surrealism. Recalls Laraque about the audience's attitude during this lecture:

As soon as the Pope of surrealism began to speak, the atmosphere became electrified. The *Magnetic Field* is no longer the title of a book, but a lively surrealist moment. Breton's magnetism irresistibly attracted within his fields all of those who deserved to be surrealists, without their knowledge; the rest of the audience that was not enticed is instantly rejected or burned out on the spot.<sup>45</sup>

The Haitian critic Roger Gaillard, in his article entitled *In Memoriam*<sup>46</sup>, makes us also revive the peculiar atmosphere of this unforgettable evening. The majority of this audience was young students, but the president of Haiti and some high ranking civilians and militaries were also among the guests. One can understand why those latter could not share the public's tremendous receptive reaction to the speaker when he proclaimed: "Poetry can not stand apart from social revolution."<sup>47</sup> Breton's creed was obviously in agreement with the political ideas of the young redactors of *The Hive*<sup>48</sup> (La Ruche), revolutionary students' newspaper, which was leading the struggle against the president Lescot's dictatorship. In a special issue; entirely dedicated to Breton, *The Hive* stated in its editorial: "André Breton captivated our heart and won our appreciation for surrealism which is not only an enterprise for the human mind liberation, but also an antifascist movement which never failed to assert its faith in man's legitimate aspirations to social justice and freedom."<sup>49</sup> This issue was censored and seized, the newspaper closed down; some redactors were arrested, and others had to face police intimidation. Among the leaders of this group was René Dépestre, *The Hive's* editor in chief, and Jack Alexis

who used the pseudonym of *Jacque la Colère* (Irascible Jack) to under-signed his violent articles *Letters to the old men*.<sup>50</sup>

The Hive's interdiction and the arrest of some government's opponents originated students' demonstration against police brutality and political corruption. The students' strike became general and after some days of rioting, the dictator was forced to resign, and a junta took over the power. But let us turn once more to Breton who mentioned those events in his *Entretiens*. Questioned about his effective participation in the revolution of 1946 in Haiti, he first recalled this country's shocking socio economic situation, a repressive political climate 'a situation the more poignant, because the Haitian spirit many other one, wonderfully keeps on drawing its strength from the French Revolution.'<sup>51</sup> He recollected further about that event that he was witnessing firsthand:

The Hive newspaper, voice of the new generation, devoted to me a special issue, which had an immediate: "revolutionary impact. The interdiction of this newspaper originated a student manifestation following in the 43 hours by a general strike. Workers unions are organized everywhere, and democratic elections are expected."<sup>52</sup>

Whatever the case may be, it is insignificant to establish or not Breton's effective influence at the outset of those events which contributed to Lescot's resignation. At least one can speak of propitious circumstances or even of this *objective chance*, which determines all occurrences for the surrealists. The hope of an economic renewal in the aftermath of World War Two, an impoverished mass voicing his rights through those young leaders, Breton words and many other factors would have originated those events.

Breton spent more than 4 months in Haiti, and because his activities in this country, his friend Mabilie would be expelled later by the junta in power. Said Breton about this matter: "Although Mabilie could make me responsible for his dismissal by the French government, he was once more generous enough discard this matter which could have affected our relationship."<sup>53</sup>

However, although surrealism contributed to the resignation of a dictator, it was not able to break off this tragic succession of tyranny and oppression in this unfortunate country. But in the literary and artistic domain, no one can underestimate the importance of a certain cultural renewal provoked by the passage in Haiti of Aimé Césaire, Wilfredo Lam and André Berton.

## Notes

1. Paul Laraque, Témoignage, in review *Nouvelles Optiques*, (Montréal, Canada, Mai 1971).
2. Ibid., p. 127.
3. Sarane Alexandrian, *Le Surréalisme et le Rêve* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), p. 443.
4. Ibid., p. 444.
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## Chapter 10

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# René Dépestre: Poetry of Revolt and Merveilleux Universe of Voodoo

More than sixty Haitian poets, most of them scattered through Europe America and Africa illustrate Baridon and Philoctec's: Anthology<sup>1</sup> on contemporary Haitian poetry. Those critics rightly underline that this poetic recollection, really exceptional for the quantity and the quality of choice, could make envious many countries.—Regard to the relatively low percentage of the Haitian population's educated class—. Most of those poets have been more or less influenced by the surrealist spirit, and it is no coincidence that the author of this Anthology selected the year 1945 as a *terminus a quo*<sup>2</sup> of an exceptional cultural Renaissance in Haiti. Those poets share a common concern to change both the social and spiritual life of their fellowcountrymen, and agree as well to break the French traditional literary mold which limit the poet's impetus striving to reach the absolute of things. It is by confronting this universe and by unveiling its evils that they intend to act like poet. *A cosmic adventure*, proclaimed René Dépestre in his first collection of poetry:

Here I am  
Negro with mighty hope Launching my life  
In the cosmic adventure of poetry  
Sustaining all the volcanoes  
Hatching the new recovered land of my conscious.  
Dépestre, Etincelles—Sparks—(Haiti 1946) p. 3.

Such an adventure is not at all an escape for the poet who is rather determined to regenerate his milieu under the light of his refusals of a world of greed and hatred. By provoking sparkles with his words, as the legendary Rimbaud did in his *Illuminations*, the Haitian poet strives to instigate unprecedented visions of this unknown universe he is craving

for. It is the same Rimbaldian accents which recur in the first works of Dépèstre, 'the heir of Arthur Rimbaud and of Apollinaire's treasures', as the poet puts it. In *Season in Inferno*, Rimbaud attempting to recover the state of primitive innocence, embodied an outcast Negro to voice his aversion against the establishment:

I have never been on of them; I have never been a Christian. I am from those who used to sing under the rack [. . .] Yes; I am blind to your light. I am a beast, a Negro. But I can be saved. You are fake Negroes, you maniacs, fierce misers, merchants, you are fake Negroes Magistrate, general, emperor [. . .]

(Rimbaud, *Saison en Enfer*, p. 123)

As his model, the Haitian poet does not have to transform his true nature to voice his revolt. He makes it clear from the very, first that he is *son of distant Africa*, and proclaims in his *Saison de Colère* (Season of Anger):

My Negro skin formerly common place for spites and  
Tortures are now sesame opening invincible gates.  
I come from hideous race [. . .]

(René Dépèstre, *Saison de Colère*)

Like Rimbaud, the West Indian poet is longing for a tremendous dream of freedom and love and his work displays the same refusal of society traditional values. This total revolt against any established order is utterly proclaimed in his *Gerbes de Sang* (Bundles of Blood):

Moral: don't know  
Justice: don't know  
Clouds: don't know  
Sin: don't know [. . .]

R. Dépèstre, *Gerbes de sang* (Haiti, 1948)

And the poet keeps going with Glory, Inferno, Napoleon, Bible, Reason, and Flowers [. . .]: don't know. This litany can be mistaken for a Dadaist manifesto, but Dépèstre is far to be an anarchist advocating a utopian society in a state without law. His insistence upon the radical destruction of the establishment implies the edification of a new world order, and a new way of life.

[. . .] My blood betrayed every beating of my heart  
The sun surrendered without condition  
The moon is a bum. Innocence a myth

Ocean is just a trap. Heaven is a lie Love is gone in the enemy side  
 Let us say no more about that  
 Let us rebuild the world with our own means.  
 Ren   D  p  stre, *Gerbes de sangs*. (Bundles of blood)

One can find once more this surrealist rejection of the Western civilization traditional values. More than ever, it is always question of setting aside false idols, of freeing mankind from all restraints and prejudice, and of proclaiming a new declaration of human right. D  p  stre also intends to exploit to the utmost his ego's potentiality with this grandiose and romantic expectation, to change both the world and the way of life. However, from first recollection of verses, the poet clearly established his order of concerns: *For Revolution*, *For Poetry* 3. D  p  stre would never compromise on this priority; in that matter he strongly disagreed with Breton, in spite of his admiration for surrealism.

In his book, in part autobiographical, D  p  stre also recalled Breton's adventure in Haiti, while underlining surrealists' major influence on modern poetry. He told us further about the revolutionary activities of the Hive's protagonists and his meeting with Aim   C  saire and the Cuban surrealist painter Wilfredo Lam. Furthermore, D  p  stre would also underline Breton's fascinating personality and the subversive climate stirred up by his conference held at Port au Prince in December 1945. He wrote on this matter:

Breton's voice was bursting out over those stupidly official heads. President, senators, secretary of state [. . .] became entangled in Breton's speech, while the enthusiastic youth leadership in the lecture hall was cheering, climbing in Breton's lyricism like on a magic tree, arousing this subversive and scandalous climate of nascent surrealism. Without any doubt, it was one of the most salutary explosions in the surrealism movement's history.<sup>4</sup>

While agreeing with some aspects of surrealism, D  p  stre however singled out this movement's contradictions and limits, thus, resuming the same arguments that Sartre and other leftist writers were previously opposing to Breton: 'The real object of his concerns is human condition, well before social condition,' would say also D  p  stre. One can understand that the Marxist militant could not share such a concept. Nevertheless, the poet praises surrealism for its exceptional contribution to contemporary art, for opening new horizon to imagination, finally, for revealing automatic writing and the power of humor. 'Surrealism owns such an achievement thanks to Andr   Breton's genius' added D  p  stre who concluded:

The artistic revolution, complement of Revolution, can make use of various surrealist methods to destroy taboos, myths, and the absurd restraints with which capitalism has built the spiritual misery of its societies [. . .] In this path, Breton worked hard and poured forth his striking force of poet for the glory of modern poetry and art.<sup>5</sup>

In this matter, D  p  stre was not in agreement with the strict Marxist orthodoxy of social realism in art. However, by borrowing those surrealist methods to get across an alien cultural world, the Haitian poet would give us his magnificent *Arc-en-Ciel pour un Occident Chretien* (Rainbow for a Christian West), and would carry us through his native country's mythical and marvelous world of voodoo.

'The marvelous is always beautiful, anything marvelous is beautiful, in fact, only the marvelous is beautiful,'<sup>7</sup> claimed imperatively Breton in his manifesto. That is for the author of *Nadja*, the surrealist *merveilleux* by deliberately upsetting both the ordinary order of things and thought, might allow human beings to discover the absurdity of their condition, thus, the necessity to change their way of life. This marvelous is not just the introduction of mystery and irrational in every day reality, but for the surrealist it is the, widening of this very reality's scope of action. It is not the simple representation of this marvelous, which is of importance but rather its effective power to unveil a new reality within yourself. 'Marvelous is everywhere, but concealed to the common people's sight,'<sup>8</sup> affirmed Peret. In Haiti, this surrealist marvelous is rather visible, and overcoming all domains. D  p  stre told us that this sense of marvelous in the multiplicity of its manifestations is one of the constant historical components of Haitians' consciousness and feeling. For the poet, this marvelous is reflected not only in voodoo religion and the tradition inherited from Africa, but also in Haiti's historic adventure, and its struggle for independence. Wrote D  p  stre: "This marvelous has deeply marked Haiti's religion and political enigmas, and folklore, its literature in French or in Creole, its dance, its music's enchantment, and with a sparkling magnificence, its plastic arts."<sup>9</sup>

This impassioned quest for the *merveilleux*, which allowed surrealists to free their mind of all logic restraints and every day prejudices, would infuse an exceptional poetical strength to D  p  stre's free verses. The Rainbow's symbol, a connection between heaven and earth, dramatically embodies in this work the interdependence of the earthly and the gods of voodoo. In this poetical drama, the poet, in exile for many years, would aspire simultaneously to recover a lost identity, to reveal the true nature of a discredited religion, and through self-transformation and confrontation to reach at universal humanism.

At the heart of *A Rainbow for the Christian West* is the second part entitled "Epiphanies of the Voodoo Gods". This *Voodoo Mystery Poem*, as the poet subtitled it, is a surrealist fantasy imaging the deeper social and psychological issues of black white race relation and human self-destruction. The *Epiphanies* recollects a fictitious confrontation between the Voodoo Gods, with an imaginary respectable white American family. This Alabama judge's family symbolizes for the poem's narrator, America's betrayal of its religious and democratic ideals, personified by Jesus, and Abraham Lincoln.

In the first part of this poetic drama, *Prelude*, the poet by identifying his ego with the rainbow and all the cosmic forces of the universe, voices his anger at this Christian Western Civilization's cruelty and oppression.

Yes I am a storm Niger  
A Niger root of rainbow  
My heart get tighten like a fist  
Slapping fake idol's faces [. . .]  
The thunder roaring on your roof that's me, The wind crushing  
everything that's me  
The implacable virus that's me  
The disaster at the Stock Exchange that's still me [. . .]'

Ren   D  p  stre, *Prelude*, p. 11

From his personal burden of frustration, and through the living folk religion of his native land, the poet regains a deeper sense of self, and can warn this hostile *Christian West* of upcoming violence. The poet's inner return in his native land to recover the unrestrained vitality of his race, rekindle those original passions which were beginning to fade away during this long exile in alien countries.

Now I know what is dead whiting me  
I am a collector of monsters  
I also know the name of the tree growing inside me  
With huge wings of innocence!

R. D  p  stre, *Prelude*, in *Arc-en ciel*, p. 12.

This poetic drama's real moving force is voodoo, popular Haitian religion originated from the syncretism of African animism believes, and Roman Catholic worships. I have previously attempted to demonstrate how in its basic structures, voodoo is related to some surrealist concepts. As for the symbolism of rainbow, the ultimate goal of voodoo's rites is to link the visible to the invisible. Taking on the attributes of the *Loas*—voodoo gods—in constant metamorphosis, the poet would assault the

dark stagnation of a town in the South of United States, the most conservative stronghold of the Christian West.

The *Epiphany* begins as a fictitious confrontation with an imaginary white American family. An Alabama judge, his wife, his sons and daughters symbolize in this *Voodoo Mystery Poem*, America's democratic and religious breach of faith.

It was a summer evening in an Alabama city. Naked I advanced across the meadow of my misfortunes. Slave ships wore making tracks in all direction across my sky. Somewhere within me a loudspeaker was recalling the story of the childhood of my race. The word were falling in flames, they were crackling, knocking against each other like blind hawks. Yet they gave rise within me to an unbearable hope [. . .] it is tonight or never, I told myself. And with a burning black step I started up the walk leading to the house of the Whites [. . .]

R. D  p  stre: Pr  lude, in *Arcenciel*. p. 15-16.

The procession of the voodoo gods appears at this moment and the poet possessed by those *loas* is seemingly making use of certain *automatic writing* to express their dictates. 'Those words knocking at the window,' as Breton said about the *automatic writing process*, unveil an essential true concealed in the deep of the subconscious.<sup>10</sup> This state of trance like of the surrealist poets, writing under the dictation of their subconscious, has clearly some analogies with the religious trance of those possessed by the voodoo gods and the *Loas*.

The phenomenon of possession in the ritual voodoo is view by many, as similar in degree—if not in frequency—to the religious ecstasies of saints or to the seizure during Protestant revival meeting. Under this highly receptive emotional state, those possessed by the *Loas* were supposed to deliver some sacred injunctions from their deities. By taking on the personalities of those *Loas*, the Haitian poet can fiercely unleash the destructive and purifying power of their words at this well-off white family of Alabama, symbol of all the wrong doing perpetrated by the *Christian West*.

*Atibon-Legba*, endowed with the power to 'unlock the gate of the mind' is the first to be conjured up for his ability. He declares to the Alabama judge and his family that he is capable to transform the sterility of their life with his sword of justice:

I am Papa Legba God of your thresholds  
Tonight it is I the master of your pathways  
And Your White man's meeting places [. . .]  
I am the chief of all gateways

To the spirit and the human body [. . .]  
 I change my terracotta pipe into a sword  
 I also change into a sword  
 The blood of mine that you have shed [. . .]  
 AttibonLegba, Arcen ciel, p.27

*OgouFeraille*, the worrier god and the symbol of resurrection, comes up with the purifying fire, constantly burning, to renew human's vitality. He warns this white family of up coming vengeance, for he no longer endures black people's suffering.

[. . .] I am OgouFeraille  
 I come to say that my fire  
 Has not a single spark of patience left  
 At the bottom of his incandescent soul  
 The fire child is weary  
 Of crying of playing with dead leaves!  
 Ogou Feraille, Arcenciel, p.29

Damballah—Wedo, deity of water, comes up with a branch of basil, and the purifying water for the entire white family's new christening:

Here am I DamballahWedo,  
 I am the water beating heart  
 I am the water's turgid sex  
 Holding a thunder stone  
 A dip a twig of basil  
 In a glass of white wine  
 And sprinkle your pale faces  
 Baste your pale hysteria  
 I irrigate the cardinal point of your vice [. . .]  
 DamballahWedo, Arcenciel, p. 33.

This blessing of the judge's family induces their regeneration, and brings them a new life. Damballah, who is seen as a snake, represents also the sexual totality that encompasses the whole universe. The symbolic sexual union of this *Loas* with the judges' daughters reveals them the primordial source of wisdom:

If you see a green snake  
 Dancing with the eldest of your daughters It is I!  
 If you see a rainbow furiously kissing her pubis  
 It is I once more! [. . .]  
 Then the eldest daughter of an Alabama judge  
 Will lose her white attributes along my banks!  
 Ibid.

In this increasing procession, the voodoo gods would keep warning the white men that they can no longer rely on the Christian West's outdated traditional values or they would have to face reprisal and violence. All those *Loas*, once deities of life and love, would depart from their true forgiving nature, when confronted with this hostile world. Although they still hold their original attributes, those *Loas* become destructive when they materialize in the White Christian South. *Agoué Taroyo* calls himself the great sea monster dragging you down beneath his undertow. *Ogou Badagris* becomes a *cruel general* waving a sword with 'the sucking power of the quickest quicksand,' and Baron Samedi make sure to caution everybody that his attractive white beard is hiding 'a nest of savage wasps capable of the worst excesses'. During this religious procession, each of the sixteen *Loas* comes in turn into the judge's house for punishment and redemption. The poet calls upon both the destructive and purifying forces of the voodoo gods in order to exorcise the White Christian South from its evil spirit, but always with the ultimate vision of spiritual rebirth for everyone.

*Le Bain du Petit Matin* (Early Morning Bath) which concludes this surrealistic poetic drama is a ceremony of baptismal redemption, after the *Loas*'s symbolic destruction. In this ceremony, each of the voodoo god pours in this magic bath the purifying power of 'a dewdrop of Haitian popular wisdom' then, endowed with the *Loas*'s power of prophecy, the poet can transcend his earlier anger, and pronounce his ritual blessing:

Now dear Alabama family, drop your last illusions at my feet! I am going to dissolve the entire white dirt accumulated even in you heart. I am a god in sixteen *Loas* who pulse on the same wave length as my blood. I say that this water will defeat your delirium [. . .] I say that this water advances with all the allurements of hope [. . .] and carries within itself the infancy of human joy! I say that this water is a glorious Zodiac to vanquish all the monster of our night.

R. Dépestre, *Le Bain du Petit Matin*. (Early Morning B)

In her skilful analysis of Dépestre's *Rainbow for a Christian West*,<sup>11</sup> Joan Dayan told us of the significance in this work of fire and water as purifying ritualistic elements: "Throughout *Rainbow for a Christian West*", there is the constant paradox that death and rebirth are possible in the same instant. Through both fire and water lies the way to the ultimate climate, the ultimate vision, and the final purity."<sup>12</sup>

In this surrealist poetic drama, Dépestre uses the magical power ascribed to the *Loas* in the voodoo ritual for symbolically obliterate the West's wrong doing, and its false icons. By combining the concrete and



the magical under the fantastic light of the *merveilleux voodoo*, the poet was able to deliver his revolutionary message, both universal and particular, as the author of *The Surrealist Manifesto* wished it to be done. Moreover, this *sublime merveilleux* which might enlarge consciousness and deepen the sense of existence, would allow the poet to reconcile his present being with his original soul already impaired during those harsh years of exile in foreign countries.

Each part of this poetic drama is a violent ceremonial against oppression, hatred and injustice as well as a tender act of love, a ritual of giving and blessing by each of the voodoo gods. This work concludes on a parable that poignantly displays the poet's ardent aspiration to love and universal brotherhood as he confesses: "It is just *The Ballad of a Little Lamp*, not a great poem on its knees before the altar stone of pain [. . .]

(. . .) But a little Haitian lamp  
That wipes its tears away with laughter  
And with a single flex of wings  
Rise to the edges of the Sky  
Standing tall and free  
As the verdant innocence of all mankind  
Christian West my terrible brother  
Here is my sign of the cross:  
In the name of revolt and tenderness and justice  
May it be so!  
R. D  p  stre: Romancero d'une petite lampe (Ballade of a little lamp).

D  p  stre characterizes his work as a *Myst  re Voodoo*. *A Rainbow for the Christian West* is a combination of the French religious medieval genre of *Myst  re* with poetic fictions and voodoo ritual. The poet uses both traditional classical writing and modern surrealist verses. Like in a surrealist collage, where disparate images are pasted together over a unifying surface, in this work, fictive characters are dealing with deities side by side with well known black leaders, and real news release are intermixed with imaginary information. Without leaving reality, the poet could introduce the readers into an unknown and fantastic universe, which vision could make them aware of a surrealist reverse side of reality. Thus, the black poet during his metamorphosis, is transformed into a tortoise on a horseback, attending each morning a religious mass.

[. . .] While I was a tortoise I attended mass each morning without dismounting from my horse. The faithful found it very edifying. There is a Negro who has at least the sense of the divine! How naive they were. If at the time I had feeling for

anything, it was only for the music. I was a musician tortoise. Above all I liked to listen Gregorian chants. Likewise my horse: it was it's greenest grass! The day jazz was discovered one stopped wearing hoofs and shells to church [ . . ]

Prelude Arcenciel, pp. 21–22.

The iconoclast poet expects to throw down false myths and Western idols in a burst of laughter, and he invites the readers to share this sacrilegious hilarity. Thus, all of those visions, apparently absurd at first, find their justification by exactly expressing the poet's intimate ideas. In this passage, both Tortoise and Jazz symbolize the genuine and exuberant African values opposed to the rational order of Western classical and religious music. In this way, ideas, characters, object [ . . ] everything here is a symbol and everything become clear *dans l'éblouissement*—in a dazzling moment—as wished by the author of the Manifestos.

In this poetic drama, it is no question for the poet to describe a metaphoric image of human condition or to portray a symbolic illustration of his ideology. He rather seeks to amuse us with a certain logic of the imagination by shredding light upon some fallacious values of the Western societies. Even the language imaging this fictive universe, standing at the boundary of dream and reality seems unusual and irrational. This Voodoo lexicon, forcibly adjoined to the French syntax in order to renew it, gives to this language a peculiar poetical strength. The surrealist poet in trance-like denounces the false values of the Western civilization by displaying the hypocrisy of this respectable Alabama family summoning to his rescue all at once Jesus and the Ku Klux Klan, the Statue of Liberty and the Electric Chair. In the violence of his metamorphosis, the poet subsumes all the magic of his people whitening himself, endowed with the power to chastise and to purify.

[ . . ] Tonight all your idols are pledged to silence. There will be only this sound of an ax in the primitive forest of your hypocrisies. Tonight all the magic of my race tingles in my hands ( . . ) I choose for a Horse (1) tonight this one of your daughters the most rebellious to my diamond! Her alcohol and dynamite are suited to my temperament. I dress your other daughters in Bright Red (2). They are my Bossales (3). And you Alabama judge, out of your pride I make you my Bagui (4). I draw my Veve sign (5) in the middle of you living room. ( . . ) And your five sons the five candles for my libations. Your noble spouse is the Zin (6) in which I burn oil in homage to the gods of my native village.

Prelude, Arcenciel, p. 19.

### Voodoo vocabulary

1. Horse: The one possessed by the gods.
2. Bright Red: Ritual color.

3. Bossale: untamed, non-initiated novice.
4. Bagui: sanctuary, voodoo altar.
5. Veve sign: voodoo ritual drawing.
6. Zin: small caldron for the offering.

This unusual vision of the world framed in this special vocabulary really confers an exceptional poetical intensity to this poetic drama. Those images coming from the *merveilleux* of voodoo mythology proceed from an aesthetic different than the traditional one. Rimbaud, the adolescent poet claimed as a master by Depestre, was the first who was striving to invent a new language which might describe the unusual. In his *Paysan de Paris*, Aragon recommended the *merveilleux*, existing in every day myth, as a mean of liberation from the rational classical language.<sup>13</sup> ‘Some new myths arise at each step of ours’, he wrote. He would add further in *Preface to Modern Mythology*, that the *merveilleux* is just a method to get ride of some literary restraints and a new mean of access to the unknown. Rather than this modern urban mythology recommended by Aragon, the voodoo mythology could allow the Haitian poet to have a better access into this taboo domain, dreamed by Breton, where past, present, and future are joined together, and where all metamorphosis become possible. Thus, the poet might be able to image previously non-existent events, but just as the same than every day occurrences.

Those surrealist visions might allow the poet to discover those essential truths that would give him the strength to denounce this spiritless Western civilization.

[. . .] Listen first to the story of a few of metamorphosis! When I was a dog in a town without mercy, I spent my night running the streets. As a dog with glass on, I used to read the evening papers. I was looking for my daily bone in the classified ads. There never was one for me. Even the bones had fled from this country. The bones were in exile, while I was wearing out my dog’s eyes looking for them in the evening papers. For the sake of peace and quietness, I changed myself into cat [. . .] Sometimes I would run across Human Solitude hopping along the walls in evening clothes. She was a ravishing beautiful black girl, Solitude. I’m still wondering why she was calling me General Balthazar.

Prelude, Arcen-ciel, p.20.

Most of D  p  tre’s poetical strength lies in his faith in the power of words, which give life to the substance of his vision because through words, the impossible in made possible. This marvelous and irrational world, so coherently portrayed by the poet, allows him to display an absurd and complex reality. Thus, by sharing the poet’s intimate feeling, the

readers are compelled to find out by themselves, the multiple messages hidden in this strange puzzle.

With Humor, one of the surrealist's essential values, the black poet would rise above a mediocre daily existence, and be freed from its restraints. Dépèstre also exploits those kinds of humor used by Césaire in his *Cahier*, like those laconic aphorisms, linked together by hyphens, that one has to articulate as a single word:

[. . .] They were all there  
The-cadet-son-from-West-Point  
The future-Republican-son  
The future-Ambassador-to-Panama-son [. . .]  
Prelude, Arcenciel, p. 16.

Futhermore, Depèstre could underline sarcastically the absurdity of those traditions imposed by the Western civilization, at the time of slavery and colonialism.

[. . .] Seven millions of charcoal sacks  
were baptized during the late century [. . .]  
Aphorisme, Arcenciel, p. 118.

In his *Aphorisme and Parable of the New World*, the Haitian poet by denying the course history, made a scorning survey of atrocities, and of others notable events of our era. Here, the poet's humor hardly conceals his bitterness and his resentment.

The trade slave never took place. It is the creation of an insane historian. There in not in Africa a little port named Ouida from where they used to sail to the Americas as freights of black livestock [. . .] their despair never crossed the ocean loaded with fetters. The Secession War never took place, it is an obscure myth [. . .] The Ku Klux Klan, is the name of a collective phobia from the Prehistoric era [. . .] Nothing like that ever disgraced the face of the Earth and of the Oceans.  
Aphorism, Arcenciel, p. 115.

This ironic reversal of history urges the readers to have a second thought about some conventional teachings, and also to ponder on what could be this *surrealist reversal of things* unveiled by the poet's black humor.

The joy of possessing, and of sexually transforming the Alabama judge's daughters, allows the poet to laugh at this absurd concept of the Negroes' abnormal sexual potency. The black poet tell us about white girl obsessed to 'celebrate their brand new puberty with black man', he talks about 'rainbow furiously kissing pubis', and of 'phallus half a yard long', and of

'hot scent of female', and so on. With those erotic images that sparkle through this work, the poet can both challenge the establishment's Puritanism, and at the same time can free the readers' minds from those traditional taboos that limit the value of love and sexuality.

That is for the surrealists, love is at the same time the circle and the center of their universe. 'I love for the sake of loving and I shall die for love', proclaimed Eluard. Following the path of Rimbaud, and of the surrealists, the Haitian poet intended to reinvent love,<sup>15</sup> as he proclaimed in his *Season of Anger*: "For me, another caresses, another Season of afflictive sweetness, another trances with sharpest teeth another more insatiable women."<sup>16</sup> This concept of love and sensuality as a revolutionary attitude is a surrealist credo. Claude Roy, a French critic, who introduces a collection of D  p  stre's poetry, sheds light on his peculiar eroticism, which associates love, sex, and Revolution. Wrote Claude Roy:

[. . .] Such a concrete precision in eroticism, without any aura of sin, can be only found in ancient Greece literature, and sometimes in Chinese literature [. . .] Not this functional and neutral love, insipid like a glass of water, but the swift current, and its sweet truth.<sup>17</sup>

D  p  stre's social protest is closely related to his revolt against traditional literary values: from there, the Haitian poet also has to encounter inevitably surrealism with its ambitious aspiration to *change life and transform the world*.

In the *Rainbow for the Christian West*, D  p  stre would use successfully some surrealist's methods of literary investigation: the *merveilleux*, the automatic writing, the power of love, and the power of humor when facing adversity. In this literary endeavor, D  p  stre is clearly akin to the surrealists; it is no accident that most of his collections of poetry have as a preface, a quotation from Aragon, Eluard or C  saire. Said, D  p  stre of Eluard: "His poetry is indisputably one of the most true blessings that the 20th century has received from an exemplary human being". However, it is through Aim   C  saire's literary work. That D  p  stre has been influenced by surrealism. Both poets are gifted with poetical creative potency, and both share a common passion for those striking surrealist metaphors. D  p  stre never concealed his admiration for the Black Orpheus from Martinique who also said about his younger colleague: "A poet whose poetry, as an Artibonite (Haitian river) over pouring with images, actually convey away the best of Haiti".<sup>18</sup>

Like his elder, D  p  stre would have found, thanks to surrealism, this new language he was searching for, in order to express his own feeling,

and to display his own peculiar universe. Many other-black writers had also strongly voiced their negritude and their revolt, but without reaching Dépestre's poetical intensity. In fact, beyond the notion of content, it was primarily the literary form, and the poetical expressions in his work that were revolutionary. The poet acknowledged this fact when asserting:

[. . .] In short, does a revolutionary subject sufficient to produce a genuine work of art? If so, what would be Rimbaud's literary work without the carnal triumph of his verses [. . .]

In that matter, the Marxist poet—at the time—was embracing the surrealist position in that matter contrary to the strict socialist concept in art. Although Depestre may be characterized as an author akin to surrealism, for having adopted some fundamental surrealist literary methods nevertheless, those borrowed techniques clearly bear the poet's original marks. Dépestre uses the *merveilleux* as a mean of demystification, and if he recourses to the practice of automatic *writing*, he is far to give free rein to the inner power of words association, and to the images that those words suggest. The Haitian poet always arrives to control this flowing of verbal images, which exactly translate his bursting, desires, and generous obsessions. Besides, the poet militant who intends to convince his readers must also use a plain language. If some of Dépestre's free verses seem obscure, it is by dint of preciseness and abridgment. But usually, the poet's poetic images surprise a reader for their accuracy and unusual density. However, besides those surprising images, the poet also know when to tighten his style into more classical and regular lines. *La Machine Singer* (The Singer Sewing Machine) is an example of Dépestre's peculiar style, where traditional realism is blended with the most dazzling surrealist metaphors.

A singer, machine in a Negro home  
 An Arabic, Indian, Chinese, Annamite family  
 Or in any other desperate lodging  
 From the developing word  
 It was a Lare god (domestic god) who was mending  
 The broken days of our childhood.  
 In our home, its needle was setting up  
 Some fantastic traps to hunger.  
 Its needle challenged starvation [. . .]  
 Stitching up feathers at our nakedness.  
 A sewing-machine night and day strapped  
 To the endearment of a thirdworld fairy { . . . } ”  
 The Singer Machine': Poet à Cuba, R. Dépestre

This dual movement of the language, all at once lyric, and realistic, translates as well D  p  stre's double exigencies: *For Revolution, For Poetry*. In the fulguration of the moment, the poet was able to reveal to us, a childhood of poverty, the distress of the Third World, and a wonderful mother, a fairy full of devotion, and tenderness.

Ren   D  p  stre is inconstetably one of the best French speaking writer of his generation, but also a poet with universal stature. However, his poetry, this 'river outpouring with images, carries occasionally some twisted metaphors lacking originality and freshness. More often that occurs when the militant overcoming the poet, gives priority to his ideology over his feeling.

For example, in *Vegetation de Clarte*, when enthusiastic young Marxist, he was praising 'the solid frame of comrade Staline and his roots full of hope { . . . } his exploring glances not frighten by the threat of the swell, the huge reef, and the leap of the sharks { . . . } 'Those ambiguous images are rather ponderous those roots are imperfectly associated with hope, and there is nothing particularly frighten to 'the swell, the huge reef or the leap of the sharks.' Fortunately, those awkward passages occur rarely in D  p  stre's poetic work, because the poet does not allow his poetry to be stifled by the formal dictates of his political ideas. Even at the time of its Marxist commitments, the Haitian poet would have reached at genuine poetry, by always giving life precedence over doctrine. There are also in *Vegetation de Clart  * some original poems engag   like the one dedicated to the Turkish poet, Nazim Hickmet imprisoned for seventeen years for revolutionary activities:

Sharks who have robbed Nazim  
Of his most warm nights of love  
Bring back this man to the light  
That gave him birth.  
Bring him back to the source  
Longing for him for twelve years  
At the corner of an Istanbul street!  
Bring him back to the freedom that fed him  
And that laments now within us  
Like an ocean deprived of its major harmony.

D  p  stre: Nazim the invincible, in *Vegetation de Clart  *.

In his preface of *Poet in Cuba*, Claude Roy singled out the poet's furor against injustice and also his great warmth and generosity that are rooted in life. C  saire also, who has prefaced one of D  p  stre's collection of

poetry, told us of the poet's ability to embrace mankind adventure, and to recall this story loudly, and exuberantly. It is a persistent faith in the advent of this *world of justice*, which maintains this poetic furor displayed in *Poetry to Scream Out*, and *Litany of Cyclone-Men*. But the poet aspiring to *true life* will never forget neither the colorful *quetzal bird in his heart* nor those gorgeous *garden-women* wearing those erogenous *mini-suns*. The militant poet has had the sincerity and the impudence to confess:

My century, my cross, and my love  
Here I am laying down in your darkness  
My true illness is this lack of tenderness  
That suffocates our era [. . .]

Poet in Cuba: Ode to the 20 Century, R. Dépèstre.



# Notes

1. Silvio Baridon and Raymond Philoctète, *Poésie Vivante d'Haiti* (Paris: Les Lettres Nouvelles, 1978).
2. Ibid., Preface.
3. René Dépestre: *Pour la Révolution, Pour la Poésie*, op. cit.
4. Ibid., p. 210.
5. Ibid., p. 213.
6. Ibid., p. 58.
7. A. Breton, *Manifestes*, p. 24.
8. B. Peret, *La Parole est a Peret*, op. cit. p. 35.
9. R. Dépestre, in review *Courrier de L'UNESCO*, (Paris; 1979), p. 28.
10. A. Breton, *Manifestes*.
11. *A Rainbow for the Christian West* by R. Dépestre; Translated with in introduction by Joan Dayan (Amherst: U. of Massachusetts Press, 1977).
12. Ibid.
13. Aragon, *Paysan de Paris*, op. cit., p. 14.
14. Eluard, *Donner à Voir*, op. cit.
15. A. Rimbaud, *Une Saison en Enfer*, op. cit.
16. R. Dépestre, *Saison de Colère* op. cit.
17. Claude Roy, *Préface de Poète A Cuba de Dépestre* (Paris; Oswald 1976), p. 9.
18. A. Césaire, *Sur la poésie nationale*, in review *Présence Africaine* (Avril 1955), p. 39.
19. R. Dépestre, *La gloire d'Eluard*, in *Pour la Poésie Pour la Révolution*, op. cit., p. 224.

## Chapter 11

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# The Last Followers

### René Bélance's Poetic Fulfilment Through Surrealism

Following Magloire Saint-Aude's poetical endeavor, René Bélance would find in surrealism this peculiar language best able to bring into harmony, French literary expressions, and the plurality of Haitian traditions. Bélance appears to be the best to carry on the sheer tradition of surrealism for his passionate practice of contrasting metaphors, his refusal of a mediocre existence, and his generous ambition to enlarge its limits.

Bélance was one of the four Haitian poets introduced by Leopold Senghor in his *Anthologie*, as one of the best black Francophone poets of his generation. However, the rare times where Bélance voices his negritude are always in a low accent, and there is no vision of an Alma Mater Africa in his work. For, concedes the poet: "I have a soul greater than the spectacle of my desolation, and a tree cannot die from transplantation."<sup>1</sup>

From Bélance's first collection of poetry, both the major themes of his work are clearly displayed: intense desire of plenitude, despair of living in an unjust world of discontent and greed. By opting for surrealism, Bélance was attempting to go beyond negritude, Marxism, and idigenism, at the time the three major ideological poles of the Haitian intelligentsia. Going beyond a racial awareness, beyond a dogmatic dictate, beyond nationalistic poetry where folklore more often conceals life.

Bélance is from this breed of poets just revolted against this unacceptable condition and inevitable fate inflicted on all human being. He wrote his first poems in order 'To Celebrate the Absence' of love and of *true life*, in a world plague by poverty, torn by war, and social unrest. The poet who confronts those irreversible evidences can not escape this obsessive despair which pervades his first works, through those cold and

distressing images expressing, as he said: "the fear behind his verses of little hope."<sup>2</sup>

I know the transparency  
Of the great frozen lakes  
The chilliness of the field  
Burdened with ice the uproar of the waves  
Beneath the lost skiffs.

René Bélance, *Pour Célébrer l'absence* (Haiti: 1943), p.11.

Nevertheless, even hopeless, the poet does not entirely give up his struggle against this chilliness threatening to supersede human warmth, for he said: "I always move forward on the road sparkles with lights". In one of his somber moments of despair the poet exclaims: "While calling for salvation, even though all fervors recant, both my crossing arms would still rise from the darkness."<sup>3</sup> Jacques Roumain had already underlined the contrasting characteristics, which distinguished Bélance's ardent passion for life, from Saint-Aude's egotism and haughty despair. It is indeed Bélance's intense fervor, which seems to obliterate the poet inclination to pessimism and hopelessness. His poetical work, essentially an homage to mankind, usually reveal a new and free universe with human beings always standing up and fighting.

André Breton and Aimé Césaire's literary influences molded Bélance's formative years. Like his masters, he also conceives poetry as a privileged mean of communication, allowing him to apprehend the universe and to unveil the future. Like this lineage of poets claiming Rimbaud's heritage, Belance also aspires to nothing else than to translate those inexpressible visions of a distant unknown.

I shall make you wonder  
At a window overlooking the sea  
The Earth turning around our polar arms  
And all together we should have  
The vertigo of gravitation  
The privilege to stare  
At the mutation of seasons and the influence of your sight  
Over the tidal waves [. . .]

R. Bélance, *Vertige*, in *Epaule d'Ombre* (Haiti:1943).

Ultimate quest of poetry, here the language is no longer just a way to communicate but a mean to recreate through his lavish images, a new order of things, and from there the world itself. The poet revolted against an unjust social system is subverting its established literary usage; he aspires

as well to subvert the very rules of an alien universe and he utters, thanks to the magic power of his words, a new and better world.

There is the current of electrolysis  
 Endowing every caress with pubescence  
 Stand up conch whistlers  
 My resting-place is among the havens  
 at the end of sterile stratum  
 where are multiplying stone-gnawing fish { . . . }  
 Bélance: Gulf-Stream, in Epaule d'Ombre.

If in his early works Bélance displayed an obvious inclination for the Rimbaudian effect. However, in his later works Césaire's influence with his *Cahier* is prevailing. Like the Martinican poet, Belance is striving to endow his words with creative power for he believes as well that through words, the impossible can become possible over this limitation of space and time. For Bélance also poetry represents an anti rational literary process aiming at the subversion of both the language, and the traditional way of thinking. Sometimes, the poets depict to his readers this singular universe where objects and creatures, deviating from their traditional roles, propose to us their disturbing puzzle.

Cook, salt is burning on the clean sheet  
 Sorcerer, you can set hope in a leaked cookingpot [ . . . ]'  
 R. Bélance, Fuite, in Epaule d'Ombre, op. cit., p. 12.

Revealing language of this surrealist *reverse of the mirror* where marvelous and dream are blended with reality. The mirror is also a recurring theme in the poet's visions of the future.

To foresee your entering  
 in the mirror which embrace you  
 I dare you to deny all promises [ . . . ]  
 Ibid.

In Bélance poetical work, the *merveilleux surrealist* manifests the poet's need to outride the limits inflicted to human condition, and to suppress those obstacles, which prevent human being to be in harmony with the universe. That is for Bélance the poet's function in the community is 'to pursue fear [ . . . ], to reconcile all sounds in a concerto of joy, and above all to hasten the advent of a new world on the remaining accumulate all along the ages.'<sup>4</sup>

A city would rise up here  
 welcoming by merciful waves  
 A fertile land would arise  
 At the end of your dream  
 Here, in the tawny stifling heat  
 Of the tropics  
 I shall build a tower  
 A the confines of auriferous hills [. . . ]'  
 (Ibid)

It is always this grandiose, generous and romantic surrealist hope. In a collection of poetry published in *Conjunction* in 1952, Bélance language became rather conventional, and easily accessible to a general public. Nevertheless, the poet willingness to combine in the same impulse the marvelous and the concrete is still obvious. In this late work, Bélance always manifests the same surrealist ardor of the beginning, and still believes in the advent of this ideal future world he is longing for. Wrote Bélance in his preface of René Dépestre's *Gerbe de Sang*: "The Poet must remember that he is the host of an attentive, crowd [. . . ] On his way common sense shall bow, love shall defy all conventions, and freedom shall brake all human being limitation [. . . ]"<sup>5</sup> that was also the poet very creed.

### Paul Laraque and the Every Day Weapons of Surrealist Poetry

With his friend Bélance, Paul Laraque is one of those Haitian poets who expected to prolong the surrealism movement in their country. Both of them believe in the creative role of poetry, which was no longer to be an expression of ideas, but an *incantatory bewitchment*. To the contrary of the European surrealists, social and political commitments were their primary concerns, and both poets manifest their active empathy with the victims of all kind of exploitations.

Paul Laraque's well known collection of Poetry, *Ce Qui Demeure* (What Might Remain), written in 1945 will be however published in 1973 with a letter from André Breton as an introduction. In this letter, written in January 17, 1946, Breton who had read some verses from this collection was warmly urging Laraque to publish his work. Wrote Breton:

[. . .] Those verses are very beautiful. In a better moment I would try to tell you why (although it is hardly necessary) but, indeed, I do not feel, now, free enough blessed, enough to appreciate your work. Any way you must absolutely publish it.<sup>6</sup>

Paul Laraque further explains that his manuscript have been sent to Breton in France for publication in 1946. Being a senior officer in the Haitian army at the time, he knew later that his correspondence was censored and confiscated by the military junta who seized power in the aftermath of the 1946 revolution, after Breton departure from Haiti.<sup>7</sup>

The title of this collection of poetry, *What Might Remain*, is very significant. Paul Laraque who claims to be a poet engagé before being a politic, underlines the difference between the militant's ephemeral political writing, and the endless presence of universal poetry which expresses mankind enduring aspirations to happiness and justice. There is some contradiction between what Laraque proclaimed and the reality of his work. By admitting that he wrote *What Might Remain* from an initial drawing, the poet, then, discards the surrealist literary tradition of spontaneous writing. In the other hand, if the poet's work is following a rational order, his poetical universe seems clearly irrational, and even unconscious. For, as the poet stated: "Poetry is the fundamental jet allowing him to reach his inner being, and grasp the unknown," but also:

Poetry is a flower launch out  
 Into frightened nights  
 Azure suspended on tears  
 Skiff granted to the stars dreams  
 Marvelous journey to unexpected heavens  
 In the delirium of the moons  
 More scented than women wombs.

P. Laraque, *Ce qui Demeure*, p. 25.

For Laraque as well as for the surrealists, those lavish unexpected poetical images might bring to life an unknown universe; therefore, unveiling a new reality to the readers whom is expected to participate in the creative poetical act of the author. Here, it is no question of that impersonal and objective traditional poetical universe, but a universe embracing the poet's hope, desire, and love.

Love irradiates Laraque's work. Universal love for mankind, but above all, peculiar love for a specific woman. This poetry is pervaded by eroticism, and Laraque like Breton, 'have no fear to conceive love as the ideal place of occultation of all human thought.'<sup>8</sup> Proclaims Laraque: "Sensual image is call to sensuality, and naked woman awakening of vital instinct." He tells us further of 'caresses perceiving the rhythm of the skin'<sup>9</sup>, of the 'carnal remembrance of unveiled bosom and haughty tight'<sup>10</sup> [ . . . ] The poet wrote in *A Woman Bears Tomorrow*, title of his most surrealist poem:

Naked girl  
 Sleep walking at the edge of a roof-tree  
 I want your womb to be insult to the darkness  
 Free your lewd dance on the dance of the waves  
 Waiting for your throbbing rump  
 To crack the blissful face of the sky  
 And reversing the vault of Paradise [. . .]<sup>11</sup>

Woman and love symbolize for Paul Laraque completeness, and revolution as well as this surrealist *sublime point* where all opposites could join together. This concept of love as a revolutionary attitude is shared by most of the surrealists. They all agree with the dictate of Peret who declared that 'no one incapable of sublime love can be a poet.' Like most of the European surrealists, Laraque is also devoted to the *one and only one* love. The author's flattering attention to his wife by dedicating her *What Might Remain* is suggestive in this matter. He quoted Breton to tell her at the first page of his publication: "To my wife with eyes made of pure water to drink in jail, those fruits of a thunder, which preceded you".

There is a certain propensity to egocentrism in this surrealist concept of love, which places women on this singular pedestal, contrary to previous universal traditions, which limited woman position in society. This egocentric inclination is obvious among those who share this exalted concept of love that Laraque heartily endorses, when he claims:

{ . . . } Golden as honey  
 Girl moon light colored  
 Ebony smelling waters and sand  
 All of them made me proud  
 Of being a man.  
 What might Remain, p. 12:

It is still this surrealist concept of love which also claims that the women loved in a life time could be found all together in one of them being all at once mother, lover, and fairy. But, this exaggerated assertion of masculinity is sometimes inconspicuously displayed by the surrealists who always affirms as Laraque:

I discovered love as an infinite search for another soul making one with mine,  
 which cannot be separated from mine but which is in another body, a body  
 different and complementary of mine.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, Paul Laraque would not have been just a surrealist poet and a singer of love. *Fistibal* (Slingshot)<sup>13</sup> is a collection of poetry written in Haitian Creole during the fifties. This work clearly display the poet's

obsession to suppress this broad cleavage dividing the illiterate masses and the educated elite of his native country. Thus, the masses would at least be able to listen to the poet's work and understand the message of the militant. According to the poet's own admission, *Fistibal* is the work that really makes manifest his innate feeling, since Creole is the language most capable to express his intimate personality. *Armes Quotidiennes* and *Poesie Quotidiennes* (Daily weapons—Daily Poetry)<sup>14</sup>, are two collections of poems written between 1946 and 1965. *Daily weapons* represent the work of the militant poet who uses poetry as a weapon for the liberation of the *Wretches of the World*, united in the same exploitation. Like all of those surrealists' poets *engagés*, every time Laraque has to deliver a revolutionary message, his language becomes clear and more conventional.

According to Laraque, *Daily poetry* represents the outcome of a surrealist literary experiment during which, said the poet: "I strive to write at dawn in the privileged state of semi-drowsiness and awakening where mental images plentifully abound, and are quickly lost as well, for want of being caught into the network of memory<sup>15</sup> [. . .] For the surrealists, it is a direct appeal to a quite indistinct world, and a daring attempt to find an immediate contact with a sur-reality, thanks to the power of words set free. From this cloudy and lethargic state, the poet can deliver those unfamiliar images of a strange universe:

The roses of Savanna and alcohol of caresses  
Fondle the tiger in the mountain [. . .]  
The mountain of roses and the tiger of caresses  
In the savanna of alcohol [. . .]"

P. Laraque, *Poesie Quotidienne*

Here, the poet is trying to practice one of those surrealists *Jeux de Mots* (Play upon words) regulated by André Breton in his first Manifesto<sup>16</sup>. The surrealists found in those unconscious writing or automatic writing a new ground for the capture of word associations. In this quasi lethargic state of mind, the writer's hands write almost alone and transcribe spontaneously subconscious affiliation of words creating images of a new universe. The fortuitous juxtaposition of those words clearly originates those strange metaphors in Laraque's (*Poesie Quotidienne*): "A women rose up from the core of the light and the statue took of her clothes in the midst of the moment".<sup>17</sup>

The poet's dream-like visions are always erotic and even in his delirious hallucinations women still symbolize a promise of reconciliation of



man with himself and with all the cosmic forces of the universe, like in this litany:

I mingle your body with life  
 I mingle your body with poetry  
 I mingle your body with my country  
 I mingle your body with thunder [. . .]  
 P.Laraque, Poesie Quotidienne

Here, it is evident that those verses are elaborated and are not the fruit of any unconscious writing. Besides, the poet himself recognized having discontinued those literary experiments when he felt that repetition becoming a routine was taking the place of artistic creativity. In fact, by passively submitting themselves to the complete inner control of their unconscious, writers and artists willfully relinquish their power of creativity, which is primordial in the elaboration of a genuine work of art. Laraque understood this problem when he stated: "After all, the poet must let the words make love (As Breton said), but only when they want to do so". He was right, those theoretical speculations upon words always come to a dead end; after the wonderment of the first moment, technique and routine become a substitute for creativity which limit the scope of art. However, for Laraque, poetry more than a hobby is a dialectic as he put it himself:

Contradictory by itself, the aim of poetry is to save all contradictions. When history put up the question of life or death to a nation, it is natural that poetry becomes an every day weapon: The wonder is that life itself becomes every day poetry.<sup>18</sup>

This is the message of the surrealist activist poet striving to change the every day way of life, thanks to the suggestive power of words, and to live this life intensively.

### **Hamilton Garoute: Seer and Surrealist Premonition<sup>19</sup>**

*Jet Lucides* (Lucid Jets), the title of Hamilton Garoute's first collection of poetry provides for some confusions about the poet reliance to surrealism. Critics of his work deny him such a literary lineage for the term *Lucid* qualifying his poetry. In fact, a surrealist poet can not be plainly lucid since his first attribute is to provoke visions, and to give to others the ability to see, and to elucidate. But according to Paul Laraque, Garoute's

prefacer and companion in arms for many years, *Lucid* must be understood in its original etymological meaning of *light* (lucere): “a gush of light”, as he told us “a conscious impetus to gush forth the poet’s inner vision”<sup>20</sup>, not in its usual meaning of translucent and clear.

In the preface of *Jets Lucides*, while hardly stressing on the poet’s lake of maturity, Paul Laraque however was praising Garoute’s verses and the surrealism movement as well. In the first issue of *Conjunction*, a literary review sponsored by the *French Alliance* in Haiti, Pierre Mabilie was writing also an enthusiastic criticism of this work.

In order to entrap reality, one must avoid it. To go deeper inside it, one must first come out of it. Only surrealism can bring about such a miracle [. . .]<sup>21</sup>

Andre Breton was in Haiti at the time, and those flattering criticisms were rather an homage to the *Father of Surrealism* than a recognition of the aesthetic values of Garoute’s collection of poetry. This first poetical attempt was clearly immature, and not really a true success. The poet’s *Jet of Light* although glittering is not persistent in their courses; those sparkles of *Light* too quickly dissipate, leaving the reader with a sense of total incompleteness. Through his voluntary restricted poetical language, the poet gives us an emaciated image of the universe, and he leaves too much unsaid and difficult to apprehend.

Candles  
Incenses  
Fermata  
And the cross, the faint light  
The sorrow on the crucifix  
Angels with head down  
Weeping  
Over our appalling inhumanity [. . .]  
H. Garoute, Croix, in *Jets Lucides*, p. 31.

By displaying so evidently those mournful and distressing images, the poet expresses too much this anguish and this despair he is attempting to conjure up. By doing so, he destroy the evocative power of the words which were already a symbol of his disenchantment. In those strained comparisons, the poet is attempting further to suggest the *drought* in a poem bearing this title.

Dry throat of the land  
Asphyxia of seedling  
Desolated lands widow of promising harvest

Anxiety of the fences

At the cattle starving faces.

H. Garoute, *Secheresse* in *Jets Lucides*, p. 28.

The surrealists consider the poetic image not just representation of reality but an invention of the human mind directive of thing to come. It is precisely at the moment when words break away from their literal meaning that they capture new poetical value, which endow the language with creative power. In *Secheresse* (Drought), the poet's accurate representation of a subject matter is too realistic to escape from a prosaic atmosphere, and then, to be transmuted in poetical song, evocative of this physical and mental drought which plague his country. However, there are some moments of transparency in *Jets Lucides* where the poet reaches to genuine poetry, and when he can move a reader. Like many black Francophone writers of his generation, Hamilton Garoute came to surrealism under Aimé Césaire's prevailing influences at the time. At the introduction of *Jets Lucide*, Garoute quotes a passage from a lecture delivered in 1945 by Césaire in Haiti: "It is not the fear of madness, which will oblige me to leave the flag of imagination furled". (This passage attributed to Césaire was in fact from Breton). For the West Indian writers, surrealism was not an experimental or gratuitous game, as it often was for their European colleagues. On the contrary as Sartre puts it, it was like Orpheus with his torch in search of Eurydice. For Césaire, surrealism was above all a means to express his rejection of the Western's values, for Garoute surrealism was the only available instrument with which he could reach the depths of his consciousness, in order to find this new reality he was dreaming about. *A descent into hell* wrote Aristide Maugée about the black writers' search for knowledge when this descent into one's self occurs:

[. . .] In his search for spirituality, the black poet's desire is to break all shackles that hold his consciousness in bondage. To plunge deeper in order, like an exquisite rose, to welcome the supreme moment when man need no longer to compromise, to abase oneself, but in the contrary to rise and grow with the strength of his courage [. . .]<sup>22</sup>

In this passionate search, Hamilton Garoute would try to strip the veils from his unconscious to reach this essential self concealed by society established conventions, and every day enduring habits. In his later works, the poet recovering this real ego and mastering his words as well would give us his best poems.<sup>23</sup> Sometimes, when the rhythm of his verses is closely wedded to his emotion, his poetry takes on the aspect of incantation, and his words seem endowed with magical power. In *Vent de Caverne*

(Hollow Wind), written in 1946, the poet haunted by the vertigo of the absolute was able to overcome the present reality by giving free rein to his thoughts, and his imagination. In a single vision, he apprehended all together a fruitless past, an atrocious present and for himself and his people, a hopeless future. Then, he could exactly predict his own forthcoming tragic end. A senior army officer during the Duvalier regime, Hamilton Garoute would be put to death for alleged political crimes.

My flying bat told me of pains  
 which were not your pains  
 My wolf scented some fleshies  
 But none were yours  
 And wolves laugh at me  
 And wolves judge me  
 Condemn me execute me  
 Like if the queen of heaven  
 Was forbidden to me [. . .]  
 H. Garoute, Vent de Caverne,

However, the poet who wanted that his work remained for posterity, proclaimed in the last verses: "I am an Ariel (spirit) who can not die away". Even at the end, the poet still reaffirms his faith in love, which remains for him a 'source of miracles'. A distant woman, real or fictive, dominates by her preeminent presence the poet's universe of fear and desolation where everything seem to be carried away by a strange whirlwind of passion and tears.

Why I can't have  
 The warm tongue of the sun  
 On those adolescent nipples  
 Wondering under the stars  
 But I twirl and twirl  
 Is it the wind, which twirls? [. . .]  
 H. Garoute, Vent de Caverne.

This *Hollow Mind* who sustains the poet in his quest, perhaps image an existence in turmoil searching for an elusive Eldorado, glimpsed during an enliven vertigo. The poet's confidence always alternates with rejection, and his expectation with dread. This woman 'beautiful like a palmtree of moon' is called *Inaccessible*, and can wear away 'as fleet as the wind'. The climate of this poetry is permeated with the stoical philosophy of the absurdity of life leading to revolt. Concept in sharp contrast with this passionate surrealist quest for the absolute. Poetry of apprehension, unable

to fulfil the poet's expectations in the span of his short existence. But for having sought so deeply into his consciousness and expressed genuinely his true self, Hamilton Garoute would also have reach at authentic poetry, thanks to surrealism.

## Notes

1. René Bélance, Couvercle, in *Luminaire* (Haiti: 1941).
2. Ibid.
3. R. Bélance, *Luminaire*, op. cit.
4. R. Bélance, Rupture, in *Survivance* (Haiti: 1943).
5. R. Bélance, Preface de Gerbes de Sang, op. cit.
6. Paul Laraque, *Ce qui Demeure* (Montreal: Nouvelle Optique, 1973).
7. Ibid., Preface of Breton.
8. A. Breton, *Manifestes*, p. 142.
9. P. Laraque, *Ce qui demeure*, p. 14.
10. Ibid., p. 23–24.
11. P. Laraque, Une Femme Porte demain, in *Ce qui Demeure*, p. 47.
12. P. Laraque, Interview with the students of Fordham University (New York, 1977), in the University monthly review.
13. Paul Laraque, *Fistibal* (Montreal, Nouvelle Optique, 1974).
14. Paul Laraque, *Armes Quotidiennes, Poesie Quotidienne*, 1977.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Breton, Secret de l'art magique, in *Manifestes*, p. 42.
18. P. Laraque, *Armes Quotidiennes*, op. cit., in Introduction.
19. Hamilton Garoute, jets Lucides (Haiti, Deschamps, 1946).
20. Ibid., P. Laraque, in Preface.
21. *Conjonction*, no 1 (janvier 1946), p. 27.
22. A. Breton, *Manifestes*, p. 14.
23. *Locomotive*, (Haiti: 1948) / *Vent de Caverne* (Haiti, 1947).

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## Epilogue

Surrealism played a major role in the revival of Negro-African French speaking literature, and nowadays the best black Francophone writers and poets are more or less marked by the spirit of this movement. For having limited this essay to a certain period, I did not analyze Edouard Glissant's work. The author of *La Lézarde*, (Renaudot Prize, 1958) is likewise one of those poets relying upon the knowledge of the ego and the universe, as an open sesame for all metamorphosis.

[. . .] But I rescind the field and the storm  
Road to the land of knowledge  
Innocent in the air of mine  
And embolden myself to forget  
If come the hail [. . .]  
(E. Glissant: *Verset* 10, in *Terre Inquiète*.)

For the poet, to know himself is to transform himself, to reach the absolute of thing by displaying life in its multiplicity and everlasting development, always with the secret hope to hasten those transformations, thanks to the power of his words. Promethean dream, generous dream of the surrealists. Instead of facing the problem of any particular society, they want to confront the universe itself, and most of those poets foretell in unison the future desired world with the same passion and the same accents than Davertige:

Oh daylight my fragile butterfly  
With eyes surrounded by fear  
In my body sings a choir of golden crickets rebuilding the arks and the cities  
Belonging only too frantic eyes  
Full of dream [. . .]  
(Davertige: *Prologue*, in *Idem*.)

This master of images is related without doubt to surrealism for those most distant realities combined in flamboyant metaphors, which portray a tremendous hope. These poets are obsessed by the vertigo of the absolute, all of them feel responsible for a world they did not create, thereby, they prolong the surrealist spirit in their willingness to revise the entire universe merely by means of words.

What does it matter if you don't know the fire  
 I shall cover your body with suns  
 A wine of sugar cane shall flow along your course  
 You shall be young fever springing up again [. . .]  
 (Edouard Maunick: Ensoleillé Vif.)

Introducing a new generation of black Francophone poets, Marc Rombaut emphasized that they all utter the *Parole Essentielle* (Fundamental Words)<sup>1</sup>. Restoring language to its primitive functions of creativity is the constant dream of a majority of those poets who have the tenacious ambition of making the world *less hideous*. We consider ourselves poets because first of all, we challenge the worst conventionality: language,<sup>2</sup> proclaimed André Breton at the era of nascent surrealism. The Negro-African poets contest as well the traditional language search of those *words without wrinkles* capable of imaging a new vision of the universe. 'The words are deceased for having betrayed us,'<sup>3</sup> asserts Maunicks. Maxime N'Debeka wants to multiply words in order to apprehend his ego, for he says:

The dead revive in my words  
 Words die in my death  
 Souls are alive in my word [. . .]  
 (N' Debeke: Les Signes du Silences)

The surrealists have always stated that the real function of words is not only to name, but to create, to reveal, and to make concrete some ineffable visions. Through words, the impossible might become possible, and the gift of foresight would be confer upon the poets transcribing submissively those free association of words that produce sudden and psychically revealing images. Following the path of Aimé Césaire, all of those poets who are striving to convey the language to the limit of the inexpressible also believe in this exalted surrealist concept of poetry as action, as knowledge and foresight.

Words my shield and my sword  
 Words my gazebo



The being named and his opposite  
 My wife calling over and saying me [. . .]  
 (Anthony Phelps: Voyage Clos)

Anthony Phelps is also a poet who intends to contribute to the elaboration of these *fundamental words* capable of uniting in a new manner his ego to the universe, while embodying life in all its contradictions. Existential enterprise, indeed, rather than a literary one: the craving to reach the absolute of things brings those poets in contact with the vital forces of the universe, and allow them to apprehend this *Homme Total* (Universal Man) who could be the man of the future. This poetry sometimes difficult to understand, but always impassioned and cheerful, resumes some surrealist practices, and in those poets' works, images and metaphors convey as well social protest, celebrate love, and praise the function of humor.

It was impossible to analyze in the restricted length of this essay the poetical works of all of those poets and writers pertaining to the surrealist lineage. Even though surrealism was not a decisive factor of creativity in their works, they were at least inspired by this movement, for they all took advantage of the broad perspectives assigned by surrealism to language and modern poetry. To find a new language and new avenues of expressions is still an imperative goal for black Francophone writers. Herein, surrealism helped many of them to acquire this particular French language with a Negro-African or a West-Indian accent. With regard to literary surrealism, understood as this movement's determined effort to transform conventional language, it is possible to consider the work of Jacques Alexis. This writer rejected the surrealism credo because his orthodox Marxist convictions. However, Alexis as well as the surrealists denied the traditional western culture and its conventional languages. Quite before René Dépestre, Alexis had proposed the *Realism Merveilleux et Magique*<sup>4</sup> (Magical and Marvelous Realism) of his enchanted island, Haiti, as a mean of access to a new cultural identity. In his manifesto, Alexis describes this *Realism Merveilleux* as a symbolism in which a nation captures its past experiences, reflects its conception of the universe, and images its happiness and its hope<sup>5</sup>. For Alexis, this *Merveilleux* is the cosmic dream of abundance and fraternity of a nation, which has always suffered hunger and deprivation. Nevertheless, the *Romencero aux Etoiles* (*Romancero to the Stars*)<sup>6</sup>, which seems to illustrate this grandiose manifesto, does not clearly crystallize the author's literary ambition. This collection of folkloric fairy talelike stories, strictly conventional in form and in language is quite traditional in this literary genre.

The conciseness and the immediate communicative ability of poetry did not particularly attract Alexis. It is especially in his novel, *Compère Général Soleil*<sup>7</sup>, that he displayed those lavish images and vibrant metaphors, which embody the luxuriant tropical vegetation of his country and the multiple aspects of social life in its implications with, voodoo mythology. Claimed Alexis in the review *Présence Africaine*:

[. . .] Black people and underdeveloped countries are able—at least for a little while—to take from the Western countries the initiative in the enlargement and discovery of new artistic forms, thereby, enlighten posterity and art for the entire mankind.<sup>8</sup>

It is the spirit of this message that Edouard Glissant from Martinique intends to carry on. Glissant also wants to reject the, French linguistic mold of strict construction on behalf of a language and a style in close relationship with his island's historic and social particularities. His critical work on French poetry, *L'Intention Poétique*<sup>9</sup>—a reflection about language and linguistic expressions—is in accordance with Alexis' literary aspirations. In contemporary literature, there are few theoreticians like Alexis or Glissant promoting such an ambition for their countries cultural future. Herein, it is surrealism in its first intention to *recover language's original innocence* that has been at the origin of those ardent linguistic endeavors. So far, it is too early to estimate exactly the extent of the transformation the surrealist movement has brought about in the French language literature nowadays.

Still on this matter, one can place the *Spiralism* movement<sup>10</sup> in the surrealist lineage. The protagonists of *spiralism*, in their quest of new avenues of expressions capable to image a complex and different Haitian reality, intend also to operate a descent into the depth of language in search of its primitive structures. Spiralism holds more or less on the objectives of two French avantgarde linguistic movement: *Le Nouveau Roman* and *Tel Quel*. However, where this movement is akin to surrealism lies in its aspiration to reach a *total literature* in perpetual motion: the spirals motion. Frank Etienne who appears to be the best interpreter of this movement could proclaim:

[. . .] Writing is like rowing down and up an unknown river. Spiralist literary work gushes like a source, and as the water flows, it grows richer from other sources, becomes gradually a brook, a stream, a river, finally a delta feeding the sea, and feeding itself from the sea.<sup>11</sup>

In a prolix statement, it is nearly a surrealist aesthetic credo. That is for the surrealists, everything in the universe are within range of their words,

dependent on their power over them, on their ability to freely associate them, thereby, unveiling sudden revealing images to a reader who is supposed to participate in this literary process.

Surrealism was above all a stepping-stone for the black Francophone poets in their quest for a lost personality. This specific racial awareness differentiated more over the black surrealists from their European counterparts, and conferred a new dimension to the movement. However, Negro-African and European surrealists denounce together the hypocrisy and absurdity of a civilization, which in the name of reason, and morality approved exploitation and colonialism, justified wars and genocide. In order of fighting this unjust society, both black and white surrealists would respond by verbal violence to the violence of their era, opposing their stubborn refusal against the outdated ideal, of Western Christianity. Communism, which presented itself at the time, as the defender of human liberties, condemning class disparities and preaching revolution, would be surrealism's natural allied. Thereby, many black writers of this era would be marked by Marxist ideology. But this society contested by the European surrealists was theirs, contrarily to the Blacks regarded as second class citizens in this society, and facing restraints and prejudices from it. The Negro-African writers would literally strive to eradicate this hostile civilization which tolerated racism and permitted slavery in the past.

Black writers influenced by surrealism would particularly retain the political views of this movement, and most of them would play or try to play a political role in their country. There would never be in the black cultural communities, a surrealist coterie like the one in Paris. Black poets would never be attracted neither by mysticism and the realm of unknown, nor by those entertaining plays upon words, dear to Parisian surrealists. For Aimé Césaire, a writer must be committed to social struggle, René Dépestre uses voodoo ritual as a mean of demystification, and for Paul Laroque, poetry turns out to be a *daily weapon*. Dreams or accounts of dreams are very often for European surrealists an escape, a whirlwind untying man from a sordid reality just during a privilege moment. In Negro-African literature, accounts of dreams always translate the writer's obsession of their people condition or the vision of a remote happiness thanks to Revolution.

Negro-African surrealist poets share more often with European counterparts this exalted concept on love and sexuality; both idealize women and identify them with all elements of nature as well as their country, the fate of their people or a future Revolution. European and Negro-African surrealists share a common faith in the potential power of the human mind over both the subjective world and the world of concrete reality, and

they aspire to place poetry beyond its range of written representations. Black and white surrealist's contest Western civilization's traditional literary and artistic forms, they share a common passion for symbol and evocative metaphors, and most of them have the tendency to emphasize on literary manner at the expense of literary matter. In their rebellion against an absurd and unjust social system, humor acts as a subversive weapon and a way to stand aloof from a sordid condition by dominating it.

Surrealism exerted a deep influence on French-speaking black writers because it was suitable to their revolutionary impulse, to their intense desire for a New World free from racism and exploitation, and to their dissension against a language which was not their native dialect. Thereby, this influence has been positive, by allowing those black writers to assert their individual potentiality, and above all to find this particular language in accordance with their own feeling and their revolt. Herein, there were also some inconveniences inherent to this influence: the tendencies to excessive phraseologies, the risk of exhaustion of a momentary juvenile and romantic inspiration. Césaire and Senghor sometime duplicate their own works, and both, becoming the starlike of black Francophone literature, were unable to renew their poetical inspiration. Furthermore, far away from their original aspiration of an autonomous Negro-African literature, both poets became, despite of their allegation, even their own will, two authors incorporated into the French contemporary literature. Other black Francophone writers, like Dépestre and Glissant, are following their paths. It is perhaps the price to pay for a Parisian literary recognition. But herein, by becoming isolated from their people, with few or no readers from their native countries, those authors were doomed to elitism. That was inevitable for writers from ThirdWorld countries where poverty, illiteracy, and bilingual problems already limit a public to a few privileged numbers of readers.

Nevertheless, the primary aspiration of the Negro-African writers was to restore their people's pride and selfrespect, to make them aware of their roots and their cultural heritage, thanks to literature. That was almost an impossible task to accomplish, and those writers achieve it. The *miraculous weapon* of surrealism allowed them to *shout out loudly the wild Negro cry* (*Pousser le grand cri nègre*). Perhaps, as they intended to do, they did not *shake up the very foundation of the world* (*Secouer les assises du monde*), but they have at least given us hope that this world could be a better place to live. That must be also credited to their account.

## Notes

1. Marc Rombaud, *La parole noire*, in *Nouvelle Poesie NègroAfricaine*.
2. André Breton, *Deux Manifestes Dada* in *Les pas Perdus*, p. 66.
3. E. Maulnick, in *La parole noire* op. cit.
4. Jacques Stephen Alexis, "Prolégomène à un manifeste du réalisme merveilleux des Haïtiens", in *Dérives*, no 12, Montréal, 1978.
5. Ibid.
6. J.S.Alexis, *Romancéro aux Etoiles* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969).
7. J.S. Alexis, *Compère Général Soleil*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1955) *Les Arbres Musiciens* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957).
8. J.S. Alexis, *Ou va le roman*, in *Presence Africaine*, mai 1957, p. 100.
9. Edouard Glissant, *L'Intention Poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1969).
10. *Le Spiralisme*; a literary movement with Raymond Philoctète, Frank Etienne, and Jean-Claude Fignolé, Haiti 1965.
11. Frank Etienne, *Ultravocal*, *Spiral* (Haiti, 1972), p. 41.

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