

Édouard Glissant

Édouard Glissant (b. 21 September 1928), the writer, theorist and philosopher hails from Martinique. His extensive œuvre has been discussed by among others Daniel Radford (*Édouard Glissant*, 1982), Michael Dash (*Édouard Glissant*, 1995), Celia Britton (*Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance*, 1999) and Jeannie Suk (*Postcolonial Paradoxes in French Caribbean Writing: Césaire, Glissant, Condé*, 2001).

Obituary

Aimé Césaire (1913–2008): The passion of the poet

The Balata road mounts through the primitive forest of Martinique straight up to Morne-Rouge and beyond, towards the plateaus of Ajoupa-Bouillon, Lorraine and Basse-Pointe, where the poet was born, and where one discovers and one experiences “the great hysterical lapping of the sea”. No one knows, no one can say, at what point, on this road, you leave the south of the country, with its dry radiance, its tamed beaches, its preoccupied lightheartedness, to enter into the domain of this north, with its heavy rains, and at times fog, where fruits, sweet chestnuts and apricots or terebinth-scented mangos, are heavy and present, and where one can hear the faint echo of storytellers and drummers. No doubt, we are all planted thus in our various childhoods, immobile, as in the red mud that marches boldly up to the Peru and Reculée hills.

But the youth of the poet is also marked by quiet wanderings. In the years immediately preceding the world war, the second, he was a student in Paris, having left the hills of northern Martinique, and the Schoelcher High School in Fort-de-France. He discovered what was called the old continent, but more than that he encountered Africa, “gigantically crawling its nudity at the foot of Europe where death sweeps the land in large swathes”. This is not the discovery of the explorer, but that, essential, of the son who returns to the source of his passions and anxieties. Among the Africans, West-Indians, Guyanese, Malagasies, natives of Réunion, who then comprised the intellectual emigration of the colonies to Paris, and who formed the margins of another of type emigration of the same origin, factory workers and sub-proletariats, as they were called at the time, and who would later be officially and systematically organized in keeping with the needs of post-war reconstruction, (some of us remember the famous *Bureau de migration des Départements d'outremer* (Bureau of Overseas Emigration), the very efficient *Bumidom*, which functioned until the beginning of the 1960s), Aimé Césaire was already a militant, who accompanied the writing of the reviews *L'étudiant noir* (The Black Student) and *Légitime Défense* (Self Defense), and probably attended the meetings held in Mrs Paulette Nardal's home, for the defense of the West-Indian and black personality. He met the Senegalese Léopold Sédar Senghor and the Guyanese Leon Gontran Damas, with who he was soon to form the inseparable négritude trio, but most of all, on his own, as we could say, at any rate through a

powerful effort, that went ignored at the time, it was in 1939, in a text published in province in a review called *Volontés*, which entered history because of this, that he unleashed, like a powerful kick aimed at a land which was nonetheless remote, *Le cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*), which I would immediately rank alongside Saint-John Perse's *Eloges*, published previously in 1917, and René Char's *Hypnos*, which followed in 1943, at the time of the French Resistance: one of the very great poems of our day, and which, in my opinion, signifies over and beyond its reputation as a militant work of art.

Thus wandering (*errance*), which is not just roaming here and there, and the discovery of the world, were radicalized in a deliberate movement, that of an immersion in the native land of Martinique, marked by the following characteristics: The *notebook* is not a text of realistic description, yet nothing is closer to the rhythms, to the suffocation, and to the drives of this reality, it is not a text of triumphalist exaltation, yet it was to become one of the sources of inspiration of the African diaspora, it weaves a poetics of tragedy, and without a drop of complaisance, the geography and the history of this country, yet unknown to itself, and, for the first time in our literatures, a communication, a relation, of this same country, with the civilizations of Africa, the histories, finally revealed, of Haiti and of the blacks of the United States, of the people of the Andes and of South America, with the sufferings of the world, its passion and its trembling. Thus, from this very beginning, the relationship with Africa was not sung in immediately political terms, did not proceed like Frantz Fanon, encountered further along the road, did not consist, as it did for Marcus Garvey and the blacks of the United States, in an exchange of population, in another *return*, which could have passed for an occupation (of Liberia or Sierra Leone): it took, instead, the form of a profound poetics of the historical suffering of the Americas and of the shared knowledge of the world.

These characteristics turned out to be all the more remarkable as the *Cahier* was to experience a second life, from 1940 to 1943 and 44, in a Martinique cut off from the world, occupied by the marines of admiral Robert, representative of the Vichy regime, and encircled by the United States' Caribbean and Atlantic fleet. The poem gained wealth from the texts of resistance, published at the time, by Aimé Césaire and his friends, (including Suzanne Césaire, his wife and René Ménil), in the *Tropiques* (*Tropics*) review, in which we can discover a manifesto, which remains underestimated, entitled "Poésie et connaissance" (Poetry and knowledge). The review was discovered, through a random glance at the window of bookstore, by André Breton, in 1941, and with it the work of Césaire at the same time, while the French poet was on his way to the Americas with a group of artists and intellectuals fleeing the Nazi occupation. During this period, Aimé Césaire wrote some of his most beautiful poems, "Le grand midi, Batouque" ("The great midday, Batouque") later collected in *Les armes miraculeuses* (*Miraculous weapons*), filled with telluric power. He registered with the French

Communist Party, from which he was to resign in 1956 (*Lettre à Maurice Thorez – Letter to Maurice Thorez*), and was elected on this grounds as of 1945 as deputy of Martinique, then mayor of Fort-de-France, a position he was to occupy for more than fifty years, in the name of the Parti Progressiste martiniquais (Martinican Progressist Party), that he founded after his separation from the French Communist Party. No one can say for sure whether his political combat was carried out to the detriment of his poetic production, or not. The simplest opinion would be that they sustained one another.

The relationships with the surrealists, in particular his friendship with André Breton and Paul Eluard on the one hand, and his very intimate relationship with Léopold Sédar Senghor and the Cuban painter Wifredo Lam on the other hand, help us to understand that there is a complicity between modern Western poetics, all based on contestation and on the revolution of language, and negro poetics, whose inspirations (power of rhythm, the fantastic, excessiveness, humour, fusion with the origins and the cosmic foundation of the word, and methods: accumulation, assonance, vertigo, etc.) meet without merging. Césaire was a surrealist because he created on the foundation of his *négritude*, and not the contrary. This *négritude* was both the revival of memory and the premonitory call to a renaissance, in a way, it *precedes* the blossoming of the modern *négritudes* of the African diaspora, in this sense it differs from Senghor's which *proceeds* from a millenary community, whose wisdom it summarizes. Aimé Césaire's poetics is one of volcanoes and eruptions, it is shattered by interminglings of consciousness, traversed by the floods unleashed by negro suffering, with, at times, a surprising surge of tenderness, like water from a spring, and riots of joy and jubilation.

The French reader sometimes reproaches his lack of moderation, although his poetry is moderation itself, but this moderation is the moderation born of excessiveness, that of the world itself. The poet is he who connects the beauties of his heritage to the beauties of becoming in the world. But he did not forget the Plantation, (he was born there), nor the slave ship. We can establish the difference between his elegies and those of Léopold Sédar Senghor, offered as a slow boat on the great river of the African country, and moreover, with those replete with the quays of rusting ports, the intense, tortured song, the tortured rhythms, the aftertaste of a stumbling into morning, those of Léon Gontran Damas. The astonishing dys-symphony between these three poetic words, which celebrate the source and the diaspora, revealing that these poetics have traversed together the diversities of the world.

However, the maturity of the poet is marked by fertile work. The collections of poetry, *Soleil cou coupé*, *Ferments*, *Cadastre*, are histories and geographies, always and forever enmeshed in the tragic quivering of the world, up until the last, *Moi, laminaire*, which is both luminous and laminated, which rising from the depths so many activities and responsibilities erects the statue of shadow of an essential and irreplaceable solitude. His works, the essays, on *Toussaint L'Ouverture* in particular, of which the most important remains the *Discours sur le colonialisme* (*Discourse on coloni-*

alism), in which the poet calls on his erudition as a former *normalien* in order to bring to the surface numerous racist remarks hidden at the root of Western elite culture. The acuity of his phrase strikes with a sure hand. The eloquence too, which opens onto fits of anger. Great poets are the greatest pamphleteers.

Aimé Césaire had a career as a playwright completely orientated in the direction of tragedy. We could approach it starting with *Une Tempête* (A Tempest), in which, in our name, he takes on board the character Caliban, the monster (cannibal?) in William Shakespeare's *Tempest*, and makes him to be nothing less than an inhabitant of a Caribbean island, conquered by the legitimate duke of Milan, the fountain of all science and knowledge, magical or logical. This refutation by Césaire of the legitimacy of colonization in its principle, and of its defense through action, would be a good introduction to his other plays – *La tragedie du roi Christophe*, and *Une saison au Congo*, which examine the relentless distortions which often follow struggles of decolonization and which are sometimes its aftereffects. It would appear that to complete this cycle, the poet had intended to write a tragedy on the situation of blacks of the United States, another aspect of colonization, one of its enormous varieties, one of its incalculable consequences. If tragedy is the resolution of a dissolution, it is right to consider the tragedies of anticolonialist poets, or more simply of poets from countries of the South, as attempts to resolve this inconceivable dissolution represented by the act of colonization and its consequences. The tragic word accompanies this other action which in turn opposes the gesture of the colonizer. Suddenly the monster Caliban becomes a consciousness. But it also happens that the resolution of the dissolution aborts, in tragic architecture as in the suffering reality of countries, and recent histories propose so many examples: the former colonized copies the manners, strategies, injustices of the former colonizer, the passion of power suffocates him and turns him against his people, in Haiti as in the Congo: tragedy speaks.

So, the poet stands on the ground of his combat. We recall the presence and the interventions of Aimé Césaire in the two international Congresses of black writers and artists, at the Sorbonne in 1956 and in Rome in 1959. This was the era of the difficult struggles for liberation in Africa, and it was, above all, a question of being of help in all these emancipations, but also, already, of preserving, as far as possible, African open-mindedness, the poetic word, the passion for exchange, the taste of being together in the world, that the *Présence Africaine* society and its director Alioune Diop had undertaken to defend, which Aimé Césaire accompanied with all his might.

The death of poets takes on a character that more overwhelming or terrifying misfortunes do not always assume. It is because we know that a great poet, while present among us, has already entered a solitude we cannot overcome. And at the very moment of his departure, we know that even if we were to follow him into the infinite shadows, we would forever be unable to see him, or to touch him.

Translated from the French by Antoinette Tidjani Alou