

INTRODUCTION

The literature of Martinique and Guadeloupe is an attempt to solve a number of problems, economic, cultural and psychological. It is a problem-solving literature which combines the realism of the French West Indian's concrete circumstances with the fictional image of a black man who is proud of himself. This statement is based on a consideration of the works of three novelists - Joseph Zobel and Edouard Glissant of Martinique, and Michèle Lacrosil of Guadeloupe. These writers are products of the war era in these two islands where the problems posed by their colonial status escalated to bring about a "prise de conscience" in the whole population. In these three novelists we find a similar concern with the situation of their black countrymen, and narrowing it down, with the aim of disalienating the black from his political, historical and cultural attitudes of inferiority. All three have recourse to autobiographies, focusing on the theme of growing up and becoming aware of the social and political events that influence life in these communities. Secondly, they all focus on the importance of their history, hoping to eradicate feelings of shame that have been associated with slavery. At the same time they turn to the rural black who symbolises for them the continuation of Africa in the West Indies. Going hand in hand with the desire to reconsider the African past, they analyse the relations between black and whites in their societies and in Europe.

These themes were born of the special circumstances that produced this literature. The tensions in the society came to a head in

the period 1939-1945. This too was the period when the first novels of Zobel were written. The racial tensions ever-present in these islands augmented under the Vichy régime during which both Martinicans and Guadeloupeans suffered racial discrimination by the French sailors who were forced to remain on the islands. The repressive measures of Admiral Robert's administration exacerbated social malaise which in Martinique had erupted in riots in 1939. In Guadeloupe antagonism found a political dimension when the president of the General Council attempted to organise a rebellion.¹ This period of intense political oppression coupled with near-famine conditions due to the blockade of the islands, led to a rethinking of the links between the two islands and the metropolis. Radical movements sprung up attempting to deal with the economic problems. The "Front Démocratique" in Guadeloupe demanded nationalisation of agriculture and industry.¹

In this ferment the intellectuals began to examine the racial, cultural, political and historical ills of their societies. The glaring inequalities cried out for remedy, and in this atmosphere of a genuine concern for their whole society the literature was born. The intellectuals had become seriously introspective:

"C'est d'abord le combat pour l'existence nationale qui débloque la culture, lui ouvre les portes de la création".²

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P. Blanshard Democracy and Empire in the Caribbean (The Macmillan company, New York, 1947), p. 263.

2

F. Fanon "Fondement réciproque de la culture nationale et des luttes de la libération", Présence Africaine, Deuxième Congrès des Ecrivains et Artistes noirs, (Fev. - Mai 1959), p. 87.

The tendency to use literature as a social and political weapon fits into a tradition of twentieth century writing, where the writer attempts to spread his ideas through the written word. Here in the West Indies one could look at Haiti which had experienced a flowering of its literature in response to a problem - namely the occupation of Haiti by the United States Marines. This took place in 1915, when the powers which might have wanted to protect their interests in Haiti, were too engaged in World War I, to contest the United States. The Occupation dealt a severe political and psychological blow to Haiti. Haiti, the only slave rebellion to have succeeded in all history, found itself once more under a foreign power. The intellectuals despaired but they took a long searching look at their country, trying to diagnose the reasons that could make it an easy prey of the United States.

Haiti provides a prefiguration of what was to happen in Martinique and Guadeloupe when the intellectuals were forced to take cognisance of the ills of their society:

"The morrow of 1915 created a new generation which, seeking an ideal to oppose to Anglo-Saxon imperialism, descended into the depths of the unconscious to emerge, reassured, brandishing this necessity of knowing itself to rediscover in the ethnic heart, in what we have been, in what we are, the path to follow". 3

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René Victor. Quoted from E. Efron "The 'New Movement' in Haiti", Caribbean Quarterly, IV, I, p. 15.

This path was indicated by the Haitian Dr. Price-Mars who decided to restore confidence in the intellectuals and in all his countrymen, by counteracting the United States influence. He suggested that the intellectuals look more closely at their country, and especially at the majority of the population, which is of predominantly African origins. The intellectuals in Haiti as elsewhere in the Caribbean, were divorced from the masses, and prone to ridicule the beliefs and behaviour of the lower class.

Price-Mars suggested that the intellectuals embrace the African part of their heritage which they tended to dismiss in their aping of French culture.

"Nous n'avons de chance d'être nous-mêmes que si nous ne répudions aucune part de l'héritage ancestral".⁴

Furthermore he recommended that in literature use should be made of all the folklore of African origin that had been preserved by the lower class. The emphasis for him was on local material the abundance of which he demonstrated in Ainsi parla l'oncle in 1928.⁵

This was not only to add a touch of local colour, but to deal with the problems of the Haitians.

"La littérature haïtienne doit pouvoir exposer, étudier, définir les problèmes de l'homme haïtien de telle façon que soit établi que ce

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J. Price-Mars. Quoted by L. Senghor "Hommage à l'Oncle", Témoignages sur la vie et l'oeuvre du Dr. Jean Price-Mars 1876-1956. (Imprimerie de l'Etat, Port-au-Prince, 1956), p. 3.

5

J. Price-Mars Ainsi parla l'oncle (Compiègne, Bibliothèque Haïtienne, 1928).

spécimen de l'espèce humaine est un produit du milieu qui l'a formé".⁶

Already Price-Mars is concerned with defining the national identity in creative works so that the originality of the Haitian should be gleaned from his literature. In re-orienting Haitian writing towards the African-based traditions of the poorest members of the community, and towards the importance of Africa to West Indian society in order to eradicate feelings of inferiority, and in recommending the intellectuals to show pride in their blackness and to use the folklore in artistic works, Price-Mars was in fact a precursor of negritude:

"Car il est, sans que le mot soit encore prononcé, le premier moment de la négritude - et de la négritude comme idéologie de combat; aussi le point de départ d'une nouvelle littérature, la découverte d'une veine (...)"⁷

He directed Haitian writers to look into Haiti's past and to Africa to discover the roots of their society. Price-Mars had indicated the path to be followed by other French West Indian writers in the negritude movement - the reappraisal of the contribution of Africa to the culture of the West Indian society, and the need to reconsider the historical past.

The concern with the most authentic manifestations of local culture, i.e., the customs of the most underprivileged of the society, was not restricted to Haiti. In other black societies at that period there were socio-literary movements that brought into focus the conflict

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J. Price-Mars De Saint-Domingue à Haïti (Présence Africaine, 1959), p. 32.

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R. Bastide "Price-Mars et le vaudou haïtien", Présence Africaine, no. 71, p. 19.

between the culture of the masses and that of the elite. In the United States the "New Negro" movement made its apology on behalf of the black man and recommended that he take stock of the roots of his culture. Black writers were determined to rehabilitate the history of the blacks that had been deformed by the slavers. The "New Negro" movement was a spiritual quest to save the black American from his alienated personality. As in Haiti a new awareness of their ethnic originality and a desire to fight oppression was sweeping through the black American communities and had found its way into the literature. Mackay stated:

"Plonger jusqu'aux racines de notre race et bâtir sur notre profond fond, ce n'est pas retourner à l'état sauvage, c'est la culture même".⁸

Like Price-Mars, Mackay recommended that to find the least deformed values one should turn to the working class who in spite of hardships, had managed to retain race pride. He also saw in this class the true humane values of the black race, i.e. its vitality and joy of living.

In Africa itself the plea for black culture is represented by René Maran. In 1921 he had published Batouala which had gained great publicity due to the controversy surrounding its being awarded the Prix Goncourt of that year. The subject matter was unique. Presenting his work as a "véritable roman nègre", Maran had achieved originality in producing a novel in a truly African setting with only black characters from whose point of view the whole question of colonialism was examined. Batouala, the main character, is critical of the colo-

nisers, and Maran uses him to debunk the myth of colonialism as bringing important benefits to the colonised. Rather he shows how native customs were being eroded and tribes decimated due to the whites.

Maran dealt with a number of questions that reappear in later black French novels. He tried to show the validity of African cultures, revealing their different outlook. He did this in such a way to show that African civilisations were not inferior to, but merely different from white ones. In fact he was making a plea on behalf of the denigrated African who saw himself cast aside in his own society.

In his preface he claimed to be producing a work without polemical intent.

"Ce roman est donc tout objectif. Il ne tâche même pas à expliquer: il constate. Il ne s'indigne pas: il enregistre".⁹

In spite of this kind of statement, Maran's approach to his work showed that he was in fact writing with the aim of righting certain wrongs.

Paris in the thirties was the place where the leaders of the various black movements met and could easily pass on their ideas to students from the different French colonies. The leaders of the Harlem Renaissance Movement, Mackay and Langston Hughes, met the Haitian Price-Mars and also René Maran who by that time was an established writer. From this point their ideas influenced Martinique and Guadeloupe. The most direct influence was that of the black Americans on the works of Emmanuel Flavia-Léopold who had translated the works of some of the black American writers. For the first time themes of slavery, the

African past, colour prejudice and local landscapes were treated by Martinican and Guadeloupean writers. There was none of the fierce national pride that characterises the negritude movement, but already there is a turning to more local themes.

In addition young Martinicans and Guadeloupeans were in contact with Price-Mars and the black Americans in Paris. Léro collaborated with Price-Mars and Mackay on La Revue du Monde Noir. It has been stated that the group around Légitime Défense was a dissident faction of this review. Rejection of colonial oppression, racism and the western superiority complex appear in the literary manifesto published by a group of French West Indians in 1932 in Paris under the name of Légitime Défense. Its point of departure was its violent reaction against the assimilation of the West Indian middle class to European values. The writers declared:

"Nous nous dressons ici contre tous ceux qui ne sont pas suffoqués par ce monde capitaliste, chrétien, bourgeois dont à notre corps défendant nous faisons partie". 10

In their desire to put forward new values in opposition to the white-orientation of the bourgeoisie, they turned to what was for them the most despised and the most exploited - the black proletariat. These young men introduced a new note into the analysis of the Caribbean situation, namely class analysis. In their hasty application of marxism they identified the bourgeoisie in general with the colonial bourgeoisie of their islands that did not generate wealth or control eco-

conomic or political power. They attacked the assimilated middle class, but overlooked the role of the "békés".

If their political analysis was faulty, they nevertheless pointed to the role that marxism and socialism would play in the literature in providing a solution to the poverty and inequality of wealth in that society. They put their finger on the causes of the mediocrity of the literature of their islands. They noted that the aping of European literary movements had prevented earlier writers from looking seriously at their society. René Ménil later said of them:

"Des gens qui ont derrière eux trois siècles de Récitation et qui toujours vinrent aux assises de la culture les mains vides, n'ayant jamais rien fait. Nous avons Lu la culture des autres". 11

These men participated in the iconoclasm of the surrealist movement. From this movement they found tools for coming to terms with their own reality. They felt that their literature should be freed of the concepts of western rationalism. They suggested trends to be followed by West Indian writers if they wanted to produce a literature that reflected the society from which it emanated:

"On n'y exprime (dans les romans antillais) ni d'étranges sursauts venus de loin, ni des révoltes millénaires, ni des besoins fondamentaux condamnés qu'ils sont pour cette seule raison qu'ils ne se rencontrent pas dans la littérature européenne. Sentiment du coupeur de cannes devant l'usine implacable, sentiment de solitude du noir à travers le monde, révolte contre les injustices dont il souffre souvent dans son pays surtout, l'amour, l'amour des rêves d'alcool, l'amour des danses inspirées, l'amour de la vie et de la joie, le refus de puissance et l'acceptation de la vie etc., (...)" 12

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R. Ménil "Naissance de notre art", Tropiques, I (1941).

12

R. Ménil Légitime Défense, p. 8.

Ménil was inviting the writer to turn to the social and political situation of the black proletariat as the source for revitalising the literature as well as for producing a literature that could be identified as specifically belonging to the islands. Re-echoed in his recommendations is the belief that the negro is the keeper of human values.

He was not calling for the addition of a touch of local colour. He, like so many black writers from Haiti and America was concerned with the fact that the cultural identity should be sought out in creative works. He recommended two means of doing this: either the writer should deal with the problems of the society in a literature which would be addressed to the exploited to help them modify their existence, or the writer should delve into the depths of his personality to rediscover his old African self. Like Price-Mars and Mackay he felt that the way to authenticity lay in a return to Africa.

At the same time the signatories of Légitime Défense were rejecting the ideal of "l'art pour l'art" that had guided their predecessors. Politics and literature were intermingled. By borrowing from the European movement of surrealism and by applying Marxist ideology, René Ménil and Léro were coming closer to dealing with the concrete circumstances of the French West Indian, and they saw literature as a means of changing the lot of the dispossessed black proletariat.

Their recommendations for the use of surrealism were more applicable to poetry than to the novel. It is perhaps significant

that while their recommendations for the renewing of the subject matter could be easily transferred to the novel, its form has not seen any major changes.

Despite its short life Légitime Défense delineates the attitudes and expectations of the younger writers. Kesteloot says that this manifesto contained:

"toutes les idées d'où allait germer la renaissance culturelle des Noirs d'expression française: critique du rationalisme, souci de reconquérir une personnalité originale, refus d'un art asservi aux modèles européens, révolte contre le capitalisme colonial ..." 13

It is this group of writers that helped to crystallise the ideas and attitudes of future French West Indian writing. It was closely allied to the black literary movements in Paris represented by Langston Hughes, Price-Mars and Maran. A member of this group, Léon Damas, established important links with Césaire.

The link between Légitime Défense and L'Etudiant noir was supplied by Léon Damas. While the collaborators of the earlier group had turned to the proletariat as the focal point of the writer, the participants in L'Etudiant noir in 1934, comprising Césaire, Damas and Senghor, united Africans and West Indians, and put forward the need for coming to terms with the African component in West Indian society. Influenced by the ethnological works of Fröbenius and others, they discovered with pride that Africa had produced vibrant civili-

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L. Kesteloot Les Ecrivains noirs de langue française: naissance d'une littérature (Editions de l'Institut de Sociologie de l'Université libre de Bruxelles, 1963), p. 26.

sations and by plunging into learned works the West Indians could supplement their vague notions of Africa. At the same time Césaire and Damas gathered greater confidence in the validity of the African heritage as they saw famous European artists turning for inspiration to the so-called "primitive societies".

This preoccupation with the African element in West Indian society, combined with a view of the importance of culture as a weapon for counteracting the inferiority with which the black West Indian views himself, finds its greatest exponent in Césaire. In 1939 he published Le Cahier d'un retour au pays natal, strong in its praise of the African roots of the Martinican, as well as declaring the concern of the intellectual for his fellow country men. Despite the barrenness, flatness and hideousness of the capital, Fort-de-France, he sees the potential for a meaningful destiny if people can really know their history and the value of the West Indian experience of slavery. He hopes that "la vieille négritude se cadavérise",¹⁴ i.e. that the old mentality of self-hatred be shed. He praised certain aspects of the African-based tradition, e.g. the power of the sorcerer and rejected the stranglehold of western reason to put forward a case for the cultural originality of his people. While Césaire was not blind to the social ills of his island, he directed his attention to psychological attitudes believing that all changes would stem from altered mental attitudes. He rejected the world of the coloniser and European values to proclaim that black was beautiful and that the black was the champion of humane values.

The concerns with disalienating the French West Indian were continued into Césaire's later productions. He used the heroes of the past to inspire confidence and highlight genius in West Indian figures for a people who felt that they lacked great men. It is in Tropiques that Césaire between 1941 and 1942 tried to disseminate the ideas that guided his poetry. He influenced Zobel who collaborated on Tropiques with him, and Glissant and Fanon who were his pupils at the Lycée Schoelcher. In Tropiques the preoccupation with validating the African contribution to the society was continued. Quoting authorities like Frobénus, they attempted to define the Martinican as an African, or more precisely as having a "sentiment éthiopien de la vie". They felt that the way to the rediscovery of their true identity was through Africa, through the revaluation of their African heritage that the majority had wanted to dismiss.

At the same time Césaire and his collaborators tried to make the readers aware of their cultural originality by giving them a new look at local folklore, and by re-introducing them to folk tales so that they could discover through these, their personality and their social situation. This was to help in the development of a specifically Martinican personality: "l'épanouissement de la personnalité autochtone".

The focus was not merely on the black West Indian. An effort was made to introduce the readers to other black literatures. Césaire wrote an article on black American poetry. He declared:

"l'écrivain noir doit assumer sa totale nature et la peindre avec sérieux et passion, de façon à faire un héros du nègre de tous les jours, le nègre quotidien dont toute une littérature a pour mission de dénicher

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le grotesque ou l'exotisme".¹⁵

On the basis of the success of black American writing Césaire was deducing the kind of hero that he would recommend to other black writers. Haiti had produced "le roman paysan" focusing on the peasant. The writers of Légitime Défense had advocated that writers turn to the black proletariat of the islands to examine their hardships, and also that the literature should be directed to them. Tropiques wanted a middle of the road hero, the every day negro who was to be esteemed by an altered literary treatment. It is obvious that the focus was on a black lower class hero, whether urban dweller or peasant, who incarnated for these various movements the kind of authenticity that they wanted to see introduced into the literature.

Complementing this new black hero was a new kind of aesthetics. Tropiques repeated the efforts of Légitime Défense to debunk the European oriented view of their predecessors.

"la plupart du temps l'esthétique de l'homme de couleur de la Martinique n'est pas ethnique, elle est européenne".¹⁶

There was an attempt to reduce western culture to its place;

"un moyen, sans plus, d'exprimer quelque chose qui n'est pas occidental: la réalité martiniquaise".¹⁷

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A. Césaire "Introduction à la poésie négro-américaine" quoted by L. Kesteloot Les Ecrivains noirs, p. 225.

16

R. Hibran "Le problème de l'art de la Martinique", Tropiques, III (Octobre 1941).

17

L. Kesteloot Les Ecrivains noirs, p. 223.

European culture was no longer to play an over-riding role. If Césaire and this group could not totally reject tools from Europe, they certainly opened the way to the search for a kind of expression more suited to the reality and characters that the black writer would want to use.

Ménil proposed in Tropiques that the new aesthetics of their art should be based on realism. This was a restatement of the private and public concerns of the artist that were already evident in Le Cahier. There, through the examination of his private dilemma, Césaire had hoped to rid himself of his own attitudes of self-hatred, and free his compatriots as well. Ménil felt that by looking at the concrete events of his life the author would have experienced greater insights into his community.

"Et l'on pénètre dans la réalité des hommes et des choses exactement aussi profondément que l'on pénètre en soi-même (...)"¹⁸

These twin concerns might explain the frequency with which the authors resort to the autobiographical novel. Through the details of their fictionalised lives, they analyse problems that surpass those of the individual and broaden into the general society. It might explain why these novels never deal with private matters like love. The happenings of the society seem always to encroach on the individual.

By 1942 the literary currents had been established - the concern with eradicating the inferiority complex of the black, the desire

to reconsider the African part of the heritage, whether it be through an examination of the contribution of Africa to the culture, or through a reappraisal of slavery to destroy any fixed uncomplimentary ideas on the roles of blacks and whites during that period. In addition the writer presents black historical figures to invalidate all notions of black inferiority. The writers focus on the black lower class hero who incarnates their desire to turn away from Europe and formulate their own ideals. Politics, history and culture guide these writers.

The three authors accept the black hero but they differ in their view of his reactions. This is understandable in the light of their varied backgrounds. Zobel, the oldest of them, was writing already in 1940. He began his writing career in Martinique, and he had published Diab'-là and Les Jours Immobiles before going to France to continue his studies. His early years with his grandmother, a cane worker, have provided material for his work and given an added authenticity to his concern for the dispossessed. His "grass roots" experience in addition to his contact with Césaire with whom he collaborated on Tropiques, has helped to maintain the pride in blackness that pervades his work. Zobel was clearly influenced by the ideas of negritude as his work shows.

Glissant was a student at the Lycée Schoelcher when Césaire published Le Cahier, and later taught at his school on his return. Césaire has greatly influenced Glissant's generation, and some of Glissant's techniques might be attributed to an attempt, similar to Césaire's successful one, to incorporate surrealist and modern tech-

niques to get to the core of understanding his fellow islanders. He studied history and ethnology in France, and these two disciplines inform his work which seeks to re-examine the slave past.

Lacrosil's work differs in many ways from that of Zobel and Glissant. It might be explained by her Guadeloupean origins which provide experiences not always similar to the Martinican ones. She collaborated on La Revue Guadeloupéenne where she published her early work. Less assured than Zobel and Glissant about pride in blackness, she shows great ambivalence and conservatism in her treatment of black characters. She seems more influenced by existentialism than by the school of negritude. She seems obsessed with mulatto psychological problems.

One of the noticeable features of these works is the kind of characterisation that appears in them. Cajou, Sapotille, Diab'-là, Mathieu and Jab-Herma are all the focal points of their various novels, yet they can hardly be considered memorable. Not all of this is due to weak characterisation. It is the concept of character that has changed, and these novelists are no longer aiming to create overwhelming figures.

According to one Haitian it might be because "l'homme bute constamment sur des forces supra-humaines",¹⁹ which prevent him from totally controlling his life. This kind of characterisation fits into a history of struggle and a present of exploitation. He states further: "la lutte contre ces forces prend parfois des proportions épiques,

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U. Pierre-Louis "Le roman français contemporain dans une impasse", Présence Africaine, (Août-Nov. 1959), p. 59.

donne au roman un rythme étrangement original, une coloration particulière (...)"²⁰

Writers casting a realistic look at their society eventually are unable to find dominating characters.

On the whole these novelists have been immune to the theories of the new novel. Robbe-Grillet had tried to discredit the old novelistic theories. He brought about what can be termed from the point of view of the French West Indian writer: "le roman français contemporain dans une impasse". The ideals of the new novel seemed contrary to the needs of novelists now awakening to the workings of their society and to the originality of their personality, and they opted instead for realism. Glissant is the only one who claims to have been influenced by the new novel. His frequent poetic diction could just as easily be attributed to his love of poetry (for he is a poet), as to modern influences. What emerges from this is that the renewal of the subject matter has not been accompanied by any major change in form.

In their desire to present the analysis of their society, usually from the view point of proletarian oppression and deprivation, the novelists produce what is called the "roman engagé", of which Sartre is the main exponent in France. The writers all want to contribute to the solution of the social ills of their country. They sacrifice aesthetics for "engagement".

"Quel que soit son attachement au parti ou aux idées généreuses,

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"Quel que soit son attachement au parti ou aux idées généreuses,

l'instant de la création ne peut que le ramener aux seuls problèmes de son art".²¹

This is an interesting thought which conflicts with those of French West Indian writers dating from the time of Légitime Défense, through Tropiques and right down to Présence Africaine. At the "Deuxième Congrès des Ecrivains et artistes noirs" these recommendations for black writers were put forward:

"Je voudrais qu'ils examinent le dilemme de l'existence ou de l'inexistence d'une identité antillaise (...). Il faut qu'ils montrent qui sont ces personnes, et pourquoi elles le sont, en permettant à l'action (...) de se développer à partir d'un cadre social".²²

"La mission du romancier comme celle du poète ou du philosophe, est donc surtout d'aider à la prise de conscience totale de ses frères de couleur".²³

In this literature Marxist analysis and "la responsabilité de l'intellectuel noir envers son peuple" are of overriding importance. So that

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A. Robbe-Grillet Pour un nouveau roman (Les Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1963), p. 42.

22

T. Theobalds "La littérature engagée et l'écrivain antillais", Présence Africaine, (Août-Nov. 1959), p. 44.

23

L. Sainville "Le roman et ses responsabilités", Présence Africaine, (Août-Nov. 1959), p. 44.

when Kesteloot questions Glissant and Zobel on their goals neither has any hesitation in saying: "souci esthétique, libérateur, désir de s'exprimer, éducateur" -- namely a fusing of the roles of the writer and the pamphleteer.

We shall see then how they examine the questions that are the most crucial for the society in their opinion; these are Africa and the cultural components of the society, the question of the slave past and the social ills that plague the black dispossessed particularly.

There are trying to justify the negro and his civilisation in order to erase the stigma attached to the African past. This attitude can be summed up thus:

"L'Afrique ne signifie pas pour nous un élargissement vers l'ailleurs, mais tout un approfondissement de nous-mêmes".¹

It was not simply a movement of rediscovery of a distant and relatively unknown geographical entity, but a rediscovery of himself by Caribbean men.

The question of using the theme of Africa to indicate to the French West Indian that he need not be ashamed of his African ancestry, and to help him to look at himself anew through accepting the black part of his make-up, was voiced by Dr. Price-Mars in Haiti. He indicated the cultural components that should constitute the return to Africa. He directed Haitian writers to look particularly at the peasant class that had retained a large number of Africanisms.

1. Glissant "Le Problème est le problème des civilisations", Tropiques, I (April 1942).