

THE WRITINGS OF LEON DAMAS
AND THEIR CONNECTION WITH
THE NEGRITUDE MOVEMENT IN LITERATURE

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by Merle Hodge

Introduction

The Negritude movement is a literary, cultural and socio-political manifestation which took place among intellectuals of the black French colonies in the first half of the twentieth century. It involved a reaction against ~~xxx~~ the French policy of cultural assimilation, and the assertion of the validity of African cultures, as well as the defence of the dignity of African peoples.

The word 'negritude' is used variously to denote the Negritude movement, the community of experience of black people with relation to the white world, and the more abstract idea (and subject to discussion) of there being a body of immanent characteristics common to all ~~xx~~ Negro-African peoples and their various cultures. Some theorists of Negritude put forward the highly doubtful assertion that this 'negritude' or supposed specificity of the African is discernible in his literary style even when he is writing in European languages.

One of the leading poets of the Negritude movement is Léon-G. Damas, born in French Guyana in 1912. Among the Caribbean writers the theme of race includes the subject of slavery, and the idealization of Africa, their ancestral country. The tone of Damas' work is bitter revolt against the white world for the crimes perpetrated ~~xxxi~~ against his race, with a strong note of protest against the cultural assimilation of the black man.

The theme of race does not occupy all of Damas' poetry: his work contains a body of more personal poetry, mainly love-poems.

The bibliography given at the end is limited, more or less, to works consulted. Quotations in the text for which no bibliographical reference is given have been gathered from conversations with Léon Damas.

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M. H.

Chapter One. La Négritude

... occidentalement
avance mon ombre
pareille à ma légende
d'homme-singe (1)

The question as to whether a tiger should find it necessary to go about proclaiming his 'tigritude',⁽²⁾ has been raised by Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian author and playwright. 'Negritude' is to many a startling word, and many who fail or refuse to understand its significance dismiss it as a black brand of apartheid.

But it is surely a phenomenon worthy of closer examination when black men, - to all appearances intelligent black men - feel the need to point out that they are black?

It is significant that the most sarcastic ridicule and harshest attacks have come from another 'camp' as it were of black men. For Soyinka's witticism underlines the lack of sympathy on the part of British-colonized Africans for this seeming aberration on the part of their French-speaking counterparts.

Négritude, originating among French West Indians and taken up by French Africans, created no stir in the corresponding British colonies. An independent literature has come quietly into being in British West Africa, while the twentieth century has also seen a striking literary awakening in the British Caribbean, in both cases without any apparent need for apologia and the preliminary blowing of trumpets. The now thriving literature of the French colonies, however, was preceded by a period of iconoclastic self-assertion, the Negritude movement, taking place in the first half of the twentieth century.

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- (1) ...westerly
weaves my shadow
forward
in accordance with my legend
ape-man (L.-G. Damas, 'Pareille à la légende', Pigments, p. 59).
- (2) Quoted by G. Moore, Seven African writers, London, Oxford University Press, 1962, p. xvi.

There is a variety of reasons why the French Empire should have been the setting of a manifestation of this nature. ~~The fundamental cause was France's relationship with this empire.~~

The French policy of assimilation had no parallel in the British colonial system. Britain's loose policy of 'indirect rule' left a measure of cultural freedom, whereas France, acting under a self-imposed mandate to spread Civilization, namely French culture, proceeded to turn black 'savages' into black Frenchmen,⁽¹⁾ a policy which led to the angry protest, in the twentieth century, of a generation of these black Frenchmen. For it had dawned on them that this action on the part of their colonizers was an insult, a threat even, to their blackness and what it represented in cultural terms, their 'negritude'.

In the wake of the First World War, Europe experienced a profound disillusionment as regards her civilization. For centuries European man had gone from strength to strength in the spheres of science, philosophy and the arts, and his self-confidence had been complete. There was potentially no problem which he could not one day solve by the light of his intellect. Then, in 1914, European man had found himself plunged into a war more bestial, more destructive than any in his entire history.

Civilization, then had failed. The reaction was to discredit and mistrust the principle upon which this civilization had been built, the almost exclusive reliance on Man's reason:

(1) Britain had no cultural policy at all with regard to her colonies. She did, of course, see the necessity of a minimum of education, enough to tame the natives, for the very practical purpose of communication with the ready-made labour-force. The French, it might seem, were idealistic enough to envisage these natives as potential Men and equals.

The French policy of assimilation claimed to be based on one of the great principles of the Revolution, that all men were equal - but only after they had been endowed with French culture. The French therefore dismissed as thoroughly worthless the cultures of the peoples they colonized and undertook to 'augmenter leur valeur d'humanité' (raise their human value) - G.Hardy, Histoire de la colonisation française, Paris, Librairie Larose, 1938, p. 323).

Another view of the policy of assimilation is that there was, too, a certain measure of expediency in the creation of a 'buffer layer' (assimilation was in the final analysis reserved for a minute percentage of the population, and the rate of literacy, for example, remained remarkably low in the French colonies) of French-oriented natives in every colony who were totally won over to the cause of 'the spread of French culture', otherwise known as French domination.

~~Maran~~

Il a bâti une civilisation atroce parce qu'il est devenu un monstre cérébral avec hypertrophie des facultés raisonnantes.(1)

(He has built an atrocious civilization because he has become a cerebral monster with hypertrophy of the reasoning faculties.)

The anti-intellectualist trend was strengthened by the theories of Freud which pointed to the repression of primordial instincts as the cause of the neuroses and frustrations so prevalent in Western civilization.

The 'noble savage', uncomplicated primitive Man, made a fresh entrance into the European imagination. The Surrealists, inspired by Freud, laid stress on the sub-conscious as a well-spring of poetry. The art and vision of ~~primitiv~~ the world of primitive peoples was put forward as being more authentic than European art in its over-intellectualization.

The beginning of the twentieth century saw 'l'entrée des arts africains dans le panthéon esthétique' (2) (the entry of African arts into the pantheon of aesthetics) hailed especially by Picasso and the Cubists. The Benin bronzes and ivory carvings had been brought to Europe since 1897. Ethnologists had begun to apply a new approach to the study of African cultures. Frobenius, for instance, in his extensive work on the history of African civilizations, was to affirm:

L'idée du "Nègre barbare" est une invention européenne qui a, par contre-coup, dominé l'Europe jusqu'au début de ce siècle.(3)

(The idea of the "barbarous Negro" is a European invention which has, in return, prevailed upon Europe right up to the beginning of this century.)

In France, the Prix Goncourt was awarded in 1921 to the French Guyanese René Maran, for his work Batouala, véritable roman nègre (4). This too

(1) M. Nadeau, Histoire du Surréalisme, Paris, Seuil, 1945, p. 29.

(2) J. Laude, Les arts de l'Afrique noire, Paris, Librairie Générale Française, 1966, p. 39.

(3) L. Frobenius, Histoire de la civilisation africaine, Paris, Gallimard, 1952, p. 15. This was first published in French in 1936, translated from the German work Kulturgeschichte Afrikas: Prolegomena zu einer historischen Gestaltlehre (1933).

(4) This award created something of a furore. Maran had been an administrator in a French African colony and in his novel laid bare to the French public the reverse side of their 'oeuvre civilisatrice' in Africa. He was accused of calumny and Batouala was prohibited in all the French colonies as a 'dangerous' book. It is considered to be a forerunner of Negritude.

was the decade of Blaise Cendrars' Anthologie Nègre (1921) and Petits Contes Nègres (1929), and of Gide's Voyage au Congo (1927) and its sequel Retour du Tchad (1928).

The African was deemed to possess a reserve of unspoiled primitivity which could be a refreshing distraction from the hypersophistication of Western civilization.

This vogue extended not only to the African in his original habitat, but it was considered that even transplanted into the midst of Western society he remained an oasis of 'naturalness'.

For Europe was also swept by a 'Negro fashion' which existed in the United States in the 1920s. America had found a new toy in jazz and in Negro entertainment in general. The sudden interest which America had begun to take in its black citizens was not altogether flattering to these latter. Langston Hughes, Afro-American poet, sums up the spirit in which white America took to jazz:

White people came to Harlem in droves ... Nor did ordinary Negroes like the influx of Whites toward Harlem after sundown, flooding the little cabarets and bars where formerly only coloured people laughed and sang, and where now the strangers were given the best ringside tables to sit and stare at the Negro customers like amusing animals in a zoo. (1)

This era saw the rise of figures like Paul Robeson, Louis Armstrong and Josephine Baker. Jazz was exported to Europe and was enthusiastically received.

In this general atmosphere of appreciation, the African in the New World, who had long been taught to regard his origins with shame, now began to see Africa and his own connection with Africa as a source of pride. He set about salvaging the remnants of African culture around him

In Cuba a movement known as 'Negrismo' or 'Afro-Cubanism' took place in the late 1920s. This differed from a 'Negro Renaissance' proper in that it was represented largely by writers who were not themselves of African descent. It was an attempt by Cuban writers, influenced by the prevailing 'Negro vogue', to exploit the potentialities of the vibrant

(1) L. Hughes, The Big Sea, London, Hutchinson and Co., 1940, p. 170.

life and folklore of Cuba's black minority. The excesses of Negrismo are to be deplored. Carrying to extremes the primitivist and anti-intellectualist motivation for European interest in the African, much of this literature reduces him to rhythm, animality and sexual abandon.

Afro-Cuabnism produced one black poet of note, Nicolas Guillén, born in 1902. While he too glorifies the colourful and the instinctive in African life, in his work this is less of a fashion, a fad, as it seems to be with the main body of Afro-Cuban writing. Guillén also shows an increasing ^{concern} for the social and economic condition of the black Cuban. In his work Afro-Cuban-ism rejoins the movements afoot in America and in Haiti.

The 'Negro Renaissance' on the American continent can be said to have ~~h~~ begun with the work of Marcus Garvey, who was born in Jamaica in 1887 and emigrated to the USA in 1916. His movement, which included a projected scheme to repatriate black Americans and set up a new kingdom in Africa, had a tremendous following. Garvey devoted his life to instilling self-respect into his kind through his organization The Universal Negro Improvement Association. He recalled to his disciples the past splendours of African civilizations. Those who had been great once would be great again. Many invested in Garvey's projected shipping company, the Black Star Line, which would transport Africa's lost children back to ^{mother-}their country, back to glory.

When Garvey was eventually arrested and imprisoned for fraud, and expelled from the country in 1927, his impact was irreversible. This had been the first great mass movement black Americans had known. Garvey's movement had promised to millions of black Americans the fulfilment of their most profound aspirations, an end to prejudice and oppression, the restoration of their human dignity. The Black Star Line had never sent a ship across the Atlantic, but the implications of the project remained: a line had been drawn connecting the two continents - the land of exile and shame, and the glorious mother-land.

In America the Negro vogue spread into literature. Not only did black

Americans and their life become the subject of novels,⁽¹⁾ but black writers were offered increased attention. Black American writing was greeted with an indulgence which fostered an unprecedented rise in their literary production.

Among the outstanding black authors of the 1920s were Claude MacKay (originally from Jamaica but generally considered among American writers), Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes. Some of the themes of this literature were to pass into the Negritude movement.

The attack on Western civilization, begun by Europeans, was taken up by black voices. The Afro-American, born into a Western society, condemned the civilization in which he saw himself doomed to be a misfit, an outcast. Western values were forced upon him, alienating him from himself, while Western society refused to grant him an equal place:

For civilization had gone out among these native, earthy people, had despoiled them of their primitive soil, had uprooted, enchained, transplanted and transformed them to labor under its laws, and yet lacked the spirit to tolerate them within its walls.

The grand mechanical march of civilization had levelled the world down to the point where it seemed reasonable for an advanced thinker to doubt that what was good for one nation or people was also good for another ... The hand of progress was robbing this people of many primitive and beautiful qualities. (2)

Deploing the attitude of the educated classes of black Americans who accepted the imposed scale of values so completely as to abdicate their racial pride,⁽³⁾ MacKay glories instead in his African ancestry, turning

(1) 'En Amérique, les écrivains d'après-guerre, révoltés à la fois contre la machine et contre la pruderie victorienne qui dominait encore la vie de la petite ville, crurent souvent trouver dans le personnage du Nègre une sorte de bon sauvage dont la spontanéité primitive avait été épargnée par les hideurs de la civilisation qu'ils condamnaient.' (In America, the post-war writers, revolting both against the machine and the Victorian prudery which still dominated small-town life, often presented in the personage of the Negro a kind of Noble Savage whose primitive spontaneity had been spared by the ugliness of the civilization they condemned.) (J. Wagner, Les poètes nègres des Etats-Unis, Paris, Librairie Istra, 1963, p. 175.)

(2) C. MacKay, Banjo, a story without a plot, New York, Harper, 1929, p. 323.

(3) 'The colored intelligentsia lived its life "to have the white neighbours think well of us" so that it could move peaceably into nice "white" streets.' (C. MacKay, op. cit., p. 320.)

to Africa and not to the West for self-identification. In his novel Banjo, the character Ray is a black American living in France, where he comes into contact with Africans:

He always felt humble when he heard the Senegalese and other West African tribes speaking their own languages with native warmth and feeling.

The Africans gave him a positive feeling of wholesome contact with racial roots. They made him feel that he was not merely an unfortunate accident of birth, but that he belonged definitely to a race weighed, tested and poised in the universal scheme. (1)

A certain nostalgia for Africa, for one's original primitivity, became a feature of this literature:

For the dim regions whence my fathers came
My spirit, bondaged by the body, longs.
Words felt, but never heard, my lips would frame,
My soul would sing forgotten jungle songs.
I would go back to darkness and to peace ... (2)

Langston Hughes, too, laments his alienation:

So long,
So far away,
Is Africa.
Not even memories alive
Save those that history books create,
Save those that songs
Beat back into the blood -
Beat out of blood with words sad-sung
In strange un-negro tongue -
So long,
So far away
Is Africa.

Subdued and time-lost
Are the drums - and yet
Through some vast mist of race
There comes this song
I do not understand,
This song of atavistic land,
Of bitter yearnings lost
Without a place -
So long,
So far away
Is Africa's
Dark face. (3)

(1) C. MacKay, op. cit., p. 320.

(2) C. MacKay, Selected poems, New York, Bookman Associates, 1953, p. 41.

(3) L. Hughes, Selected poems, New York, A. Knopf, 1959, p. 3.

Meanwhile in Haiti a movement for reidentification with Africa was taking place.

The republic of Haiti, where independence from France had been fought for bitterly and won, since 1804, was still, culturally, an outpost of France. That is to say that the literate classes still swore by ~~the~~ France and all things French. There was no question, once political independence had been wrenched from France, of relinquishing one iota of the French heritage.

However the cultural manifestations of the great mass of Haitians, their music, folklore and religion, were decidedly African. The upper classes took a dim view of the obstinate 'barbarity' and 'backwardness' of the Haitian peasant.

Haiti had gained victory over the then greatest military power in the world. But even their revolt against France had been inspired by the French Revolution; and even in their pride at being the first black republic they continued to affirm their attachment to French culture. Haiti was to be 'la France noire' ⁽¹⁾ (black France). Free Haiti would serve to glorify the black race in the eyes of the world by showing that it was capable of this high degree of civilization, French culture being the archetype of civilization.

Thus even their nationalism and racial pride took the form of a homage to France and French culture. Anténor Firmin in his De l'égalité des races, in stating that 'Haiti doit servir à la réhabilitation de l'Afrique' ⁽²⁾ (Haiti should serve towards the rehabilitation of Africa) does not for a moment envisage the fostering of African elements in Haitian culture. In the same way Hannibal Price in the essay De la réhabilitation de la race noire ⁽³⁾ attacks voodoo and other African survivals as being a blot on the image of Haiti.

The French Caribbean presented an extreme picture of the effects of cultural colonization, due to the complicity of a number of special circumstances. African slaves were brought thousands of miles from their homes to people territories where no indigenous culture existed, the original inhabitants, Amerindian peoples, having been exterminated or driven into the seclusion of

(1) J. Michelet, quoted by A. Viatte, Histoire littéraire de l'Amérique française, Paris, P.U.F., 1954, p. 379.

(2) A. Firmin, op. cit., Paris, 1885, p. xiii.

(3) Port-au-Prince, 1907.

the bush by successive waves of European colonists. The new West Indians, many of whom had been captured unawares and individually, and bundled onto slave-ships with a minimum of ceremony, arrived empty-handed. They were soon relieved even of their African names. Family groups were split up and members of different tribes were mixed together on each plantation as a measure against the plotting of escapes or risings, so that regrouping and cultural continuity were rendered difficult. Necessity and coercion caused them to abandon their own languages and adopt that of the slave-master. The latter had little difficulty in his task of denigrating (the irony of the word) his slaves' original cultures and instilling in them a holy respect for his own:

Aux Antilles, comme partout ailleurs, il fallait très tôt composer un alibi racial aux brigandages et à la dépersonnalisation systématique du colonisé. En fixant dans l'esclave nègre la somme des vices et des tares, le colonisateur se réservait le statut d'Homme et déguisait en mission philanthropique ses rapacités. Le nègre antillais devait être paresseux, laid, léger, vicieux, sale etc., comme ses frères d'Afrique noire ... ou d'Algérie deux siècles plus tard.

L'affirmation de la supériorité absolue du Blanc ne peut se fonder que sur l'affirmation systématique, absurde, de la non-humanité du nègre. (1)

(In the West Indies, as everywhere else, one had to invent as soon as possible a racial alibi for the plundering and systematic depersonalization of the colonized peoples. Fixing in the Negro slave the sum of vice and moral taints, the colonizer reserved for himself the status of Man and covered his acts of rapacity under the guise of a "philanthropic mission". The West Indian was made out to be lazy, ugly, aimless, depraved, dirty, etc., like his brothers of black Africa ... or of Algeria two centuries later.)

The affirmation of the absolute superiority of the white man could have no other basis but the systematic, preposterous affirmation of the non-humanity of the Negro.)

The scale of values whereby the Negro was deemed to be barbarous and inferior was transferred intact into the minds of Negroes. France was the centre of the Universe. At school black children were taught to recite 'nos ancêtres les Gaulois ...' (our ancestors the Gauls).

(1) Y. Leborgne, 'Le climat social' (one of a series of articles on the French Caribbean), Esprit, (Nouvelle série), No. 305, April 1962, p. 539.

Coupled with the effects of assimilation, was, inevitably, the economic factor. The system surviving slavery was one in which the wealthy white planter and proprietor occupied a position of unassailable superiority, followed by the privileged middle class, the members of which were more often than not mulattoes; finally there were the great majority of the people, the illiterate, poverty-stricken descendants of slaves, to all intents and purposes still in slavery.

Hence the peculiar stratification of a society virtually according to degrees of pallor or the inverse. The success of the colonist was complete. He had created a society of negrophobes composed of Negroes and part-Negroes.

The alienation of the bourgeoisie from the bulk of the population was comparable to the gulf between white colonist and black slave. They renounced the African part of their origins and were full of contempt for the peasantry who in their turn were sunk deep in a fatalistic resignation to the idea of their own inferiority. The whole aim in life of this 'bourgeoisie de couleur' (coloured bourgeoisie) was to escape the stigma of identification with the black masses. The bourgeois was careful to speak impeccable French at all times, condescending to speak Créole⁽¹⁾ only when addressing servants. Frantz Fanon reports that: 'En France on dit: parler comme un livre. En Martinique: parler comme un Blanc' (2) (In France one says "to speak like a book". In Martinique: "to

(1) Créole is the dialect spoken in the French Caribbean territories. It is in fact a 'dialect' with a vigorous existence of its own. The limited research so far carried out on it reveals similarities with the syntax and morphology of languages in those regions of Africa from which the slaves were brought. A percentage of the vocabulary, too, is African, but the greater part of it is French-derived. There is a sprinkling of words from other European languages, as in all the other dialects of the Caribbean area, where, apart from the inevitable linguistic interpenetration, over the centuries the language of a population changed each time a territory changed hands at a post-war conference in Europe.

Its robustness is testified to by the rich store of proverbs, songs, riddles and stories which comprise Créole folklore. Spoken by that element of society which rarely attained to literacy, its development has gone unhindered for centuries. Many relegate it to the status of 'petit-nègre' or 'pidgin' French. But if this can be presented as a claim to its independence a metropolitan Frenchman and an illiterate Martiniquan peasant are today mutually incomprehensible.

(2) F. Fanon, Peau noire, masques blancs, Paris, Seuil, 1952, p. 34.

speak like a White".) They went to ridiculous lengths to keep in step with the colonizer. Their behaviour is caricatured by Aimé Césaire:

Ceux qui disent à l'Europe: "Voyez, je sais comme vous faire des courbettes, comme vous présenter mes hommages, en somme, je ne suis pas différent de vous; ne faites pas attention à ma peau noire: c'est le soleil qui m'a brûlé ..." (1)

(they who say to Europe: "See, I know how to bow like you, to pay respects like you, all in all, I am not different from you; ~~take no notice of~~ my black skin: I'm just sunburnt ...")

Higher education was the monopoly of the upper classes, the would-be assimilés. Thus the literary production of the French Caribbean was directed ^{firmly} along lines laid down in the salons of Paris. The capacity to produce poetry similar to that written by Frenchmen proved the extent of one's assimilation: one had completed the final leap of evolution from the sub-regions of the Negro race to ^{the} pinnacles of whiteness. The French Caribbean writer at his time 'se fait un point d'honneur qu'un Blanc puisse lire tout son livre sans deviner sa pigmentation' (2) (prides himself on the fact that a White could read his whole book through without guessing at ~~indulging in~~ his pigmentation).

Such was their devotion to the literary trends of the metropolis that they came to indulge in the romantic exoticism with which some French authors portrayed the Caribbean islands. Much of this literature, in the ~~same~~ strain of Atala, had been written by people who had never visited these parts. But many a French West Indian author began to see his homeland as the Garden of Eden transplanted. Auguste Viatte in his study of French West Indian literature complains of their efforts: 'trop de cocotiers et d'oiseaux-mouches et de créoles indolentes' (3) (too many ^{coconut} ~~tree~~-trees and humming-birds and languid Creole belles).

The educated French West Indian's view of himself and of his own count

(1) A. Césaire, Cahier d'un retour au pays natal, Paris, Présence Africain 1956, p. 85. Césaire ironically reproduces, word for word (from the semi-colon onwards), part of the passage of the Old Testament which begins with the famous declaration 'Negra sum sed formosa ...' (Song of songs, I:5-6).
(2) E. Léro, 'Misère d'une poésie', in Légitime Défense, No. 1, Paris, June 1932, quoted by L.-G. Damas, Poètes d'expression française, Paris, Seuil, 1947, p. 13.

(3) A. Viatte, Histoire littéraire de l'Amérique française, P.U.F., 1954, p. 490.

ry was thus limited to a view held by outsiders. The calamity lay not in the fact that these poets chose to sing the beauty of their undoubtedly beautiful islands, but that this incomplete and sometimes inaccurate vision falsified and so tended to perpetuate the more sordid realities of life on these gems of the ocean. The vision became inaccurate when they peopled the paradise islands with lazy, contented natives who basked in the sun and picked their meals off trees. For the overwhelming majority of these natives, far from basking, toiled their lives away under a merciless sun, cultivating land which belonged almost entirely to a minute section of the population, labour for which they earned a meagre daily bread.

Thus the very class of this society in whose place it was to speak on behalf of the underprivileged turned a deaf ear, since it would hardly do to alienate the very elements whose favour and esteem one was striving to maintain.

In Haiti the top layer of this society, the white element, had been removed in the revolution of 1804. This brought little change to the colonized mentality. The assimilés now moved into the place left vacant by the fleeing or massacred Frenchmen, and France's position at the centre of the Universe was not seriously shaken.

In 1915 Haiti was occupied by American troops. This occupation lasted for fifteen years. The humiliating shock of submitting their proud independence and having their soil overrun by foreigners (a large number of them with deeply-bred racial prejudices) produced a recoil among Haitian intellectuals. There was a sudden interest in the folklore of Haiti. They explored and revalued the teeming peasant culture, the customs, religious practices, songs, dances, stories, handed down from one generation to the next since slavery.

The outstanding representative of this movement was Dr. Jean Price-Mars. His first work, an essay, La vocation de l'élite, published in 1917, and his later Ainsi parla l'oncle (1928) placed him at the head of the new school. Price-Mars drew the attention of his generation to the rich vein of folklore which existed among the peasantry, and encouraged writers to draw on this.

In continuing to disavow their African origins they were disregarding the immense cultural potentialities of their people and forsaking their own

authenticity:

Nous n'avons ~~pas~~ de chance d'être nous-mêmes que si nous ne répudions aucune part de l'héritage ancestral. Eh bien! Cet héritage, il est pour les huitdixièmes un don de l'Afrique. (1)

(We have no chance of being ourselves unless we cling to every last shred of the ancestral heritage. Well then, eighty percent of this heritage is the legacy of Africa.)

Educated Haitians should cease to despise the Créole dialect, voodoo and other African characteristics of Haitian culture. Their literature would remain sterile and unoriginal as long as they persisted in following French models and neglected to draw upon their own resources. (2) In another essay he contends:

N'est-il pas vrai que nous avons, nous aussi, quelque chose à offrir au monde qui ne soit pas une matière frelatée ou un produit d'imitation? Dans la mécanisation accélérée de la planète, quand tout ne sera plus que vitesse et sécheresse associées, nous serons encore pour le reste de l'univers une des réserves précieuses de poésie, de joie et d'amour. (3)

(Is it not true that we too have something to offer to the world other than bastardized or copied matter? With the accelerated mechanization of the planet, when all is but speed and bareness in association, we will yet be for the rest of the universe one of the precious reserves of poetry, joy and love.)

Dr. Price-Mars roused the enthusiasm of the young generation. The movement produced new reviews devoted to the exploration of Haitian culture, such as La Nouvelle Ronde, Revue indigène, La Trouée and Revue des griots. Dr. Price-Mars founded the 'Institut d'Ethnologie d'Haiti'.

Haitian life was exploited in the peasant novel, notably by Jacques Roumain, Joseph Zobel and Jacques-Stephen Alexis.

The poetry of this school foreshadowed that of the later Negritude poets, especially in their nostalgia for Africa across their 'borrowed' culture:

(1) J. Price-Mars, Ainsi parla l'oncle, Compiègne, Bibliothèque Haïtienne, 1928, p. 220.

(2) In reverse of Atala, it was not uncommon for a West Indian poet who had never left the West Indies to be inspired in his imagery by snow, and the flora and fauna of temperate countries.

(3) J. Price-Mars, Formation ethnique, folklore et culture du peuple Haïtien, Port-au-Prince, 1939, p. 145.

Ce coeur obsédant, qui ne correspond
 Pas avec mon langage et mes costumes,
 Et sur lequel mordent, comme un crampon,
 Des sentiments d'emprunt et des coutumes
 D'Europe, sentez-vous cette souffrance
 Et ce désespoir à nul autre égal
 D'appriivoiser, avec des mots de France
 Ce coeur qui m'est venu du Sénégal? (1)

(This obsessive heart that answers not
 To my language nor to my costumes,
 This heart that is chafed, as though by a clamp
 By feelings and customs borrowed
 From Europe, do you not feel this anguish
 This hopelessness unequalled
 At taming with words from France
 This heart that I have from Senegal?)

Many rejected the religion which Europe had imposed upon them with her civilization - the Church was seen as a major accomplice of colonization, conniving at and perpetuating the subjugation of colonized peoples:

La croix précède ou accompagne toujours le fusil. La dextre bénisseuse absout d'avance les crimes perpétrés au nom de la civilisation chrétienne, les injustices du capitalisme sans âme. L'Eglise enseigne aux têtes crépues et courbées avec une perfidie inégalable, l'art lénifiant de souffrir avec patience, la technique de la résignation sur cette terre dans l'espoir de jouir un jour, par-delà les tombeaux vides, d'une béatitude infinie. (2)

(The cross always precedes or accompanies the gun. The right hand which blesses grants absolution in advance for the crimes perpetrated in the name of Christian civilization, the injustices of capitalism which has no soul. With unsurpassable perfidy, the Church teaches the bowed woolly heads the soporific art of suffering patiently, the technique of resignation on this earth in the hope of enjoying one day, beyond the empty tomb, beatitude without end.)

There was, too, a Communist stream. Jacques Roumain in 1934 founded the Haitian Communist party. Another Communist writer of this school, Jean-François Brière, was to serve more than one prison sentence for anti-governmental activities.

The new wind was to reach a group of Martiniquan students in Paris. In 1932 they started a review which they called Légitime Défense. They were all members of the Martiniquan bourgeoisie de couleur, all but one,

(1) L. Laleau, 'Trahison', Musique nègre, Port-au-Prince, 1931, p. 9.

(2) J. Blanchet et R. Piquion, Essai sur la culture, Port-au-Prince, 1938, p. 12.

their leader Etienne Léro, mulattoes. The signal for revolution had come from within the ranks of the class which was to be the chief target of the revolution.

The group attacked the servility of their elders, and their sterile, imitative literature:

L'Antillais, bourré à craquer de morale blanche, de culture blanche, d'éducation blanche, de préjugés blancs, étale dans ses plaquettes l'image boursoufflée de lui-même. D'être un bon décalque d'homme pâle lui tient lieu de raison sociale aussi bien que de raison poétique. Il n'est jamais à son goût assez décent, assez empressé. - "Tu fais comme un nègre", ne manque-t-il pas de s'indigner si, en sa présence, vous cédez à une exubérance naturelle. Aussi bien ne veut-il pas dans ses vers "faire comme un nègre" ...

L'étranger chercherait vainement dans cette littérature un accent original ou profond, l'imagination sensuelle et colorée du Noir, l'écho des haines et des aspirations d'un peuple opprimé.(1)

(The West Indian, stuffed to bursting-point with white morality, white culture, white education, white prejudices, displays in his brochures a bloated picture of himself. To be a good copy of a pale man is his social as well as his poetic justification. He is never satisfied that he is sufficiently seemly, sufficiently up to scratch on formalities. - "You're carrying on like a Negro", he will not fail to remark with indignation if in his presence you give way to a natural exuberance. Likewise in his versifying he has no desire to "carry on like a Negro" ...

In vain will the outsider seek in this literature a note of originality or profundity, the sensual and colourful imagination of the black man, the echo of the hatreds and the hopes of an oppressed people.)

The contributors of Légitime Défense had been inspired by the writers of the Negro Renaissance and by the school of Jean Price-Mars:

Le vent qui monte de l'Amérique noire aura vite fait, espérons-le, de nettoyer nos Antilles des fruits avortés d'une culture caduque. Langston Hughes et Claude MacKay, les deux poètes révolutionnaires, nous ont déjà apporté, marinés dans l'alcool rouge, l'amour africain de la vie, la joie africaine de l'amour, le rêve africain de la mort. Et déjà de jeunes poètes haïtiens nous livrent des vers gonflés d'un futur dynamisme. (2)

(Let us hope that the wind rising from black America will make short work of wiping our Islands clean of the half-baked products of a decadent culture. Langston Hughes and Claude MacKay,

(1) E. Léro, 'Misère d'une poésie', in Légitime Défense, quoted by L.-G. Damas, Poètes d'expression française, pp. 12-13.

(2) E. Léro, art. cit., pp. 14-15.

the two revolutionary poets, have already brought us, soaked in red alcohol, the African love of life, the African joy of love, the African dream of death. And already young Haitian poets are affording us verses swelling out with a promised dynamism.)

The group announced their adhesion to the new Surrealist movement.⁽¹⁾ They were attracted by the extreme revolutionary spirit of the Surrealists. Not only was it the purpose of these latter to revolutionize literature - which corresponded with the aims of the students reacting as they were against the literary tradition of their own society - but the Surrealists proposed to carry this revolution beyond the realm of the intellect.

Literature was no longer to be purely contemplative - poetry was to be a means of disturbing and reshuffling the social order. It was precisely a complete upheaval and reorganization of the social structure of their country, and a reformation of the mentality of their compatriots, which the students envisaged.

Like the Surrealists, the young group saw in Communism a weapon of revolution and of liberation. In the foreword of Légitime Défense they announced their allegiance to Marxism. For the Marxists made common cause with colonized peoples against their capitalist exploiters, and Communist ideology proclaimed the brotherhood of the world proletariat across the lines of race, condemning racism. The situation of black people vis-à-vis their white masters corresponded to that of the dispossessed working-classes with relation to the capitalist. Many black intellectuals had already been attracted to Communism, among whom were the Haitians Roumain and Brière already mentioned, Nicolas Guillén and Langston Hughes.

The Martiniquans saw in Communism a remedy to the economic situation of their country. The condition of the masses was miserable. The necessity for children to earn their daily bread perpetuated the illiteracy of this class and the educated bourgeoisie aligned itself with ^{the} ruling class. It seemed a closed system which only an upheaval as drastic as that proposed by Marxism could break down:

Les blancs créoles à qui profitait l'esclavage et au profit

(1) Légitime Défense was also the title of a publication of André Breton which appeared in 1926.

de qui, principalement, il existe encore sous forme de salariat (le sort des coupeurs de canne de 1932 n'est pas meilleur que celui des coupeurs de canne de 1832) constituent une société fermée, inexorable ... (1)

(The Creole whites, to whose gain slavery functioned, and to whose gain, chiefly, slavery still exists in the form of salaried labour (the condition of cane-cutters in 1932 is no better than that of cane-cutters in 1832) constitute a closed, unshakeable society ...)

Légitime Défense was to have been a periodical publication. But the spirit of the first number proved so uncomfortable to the relevant sections of Martiniquan society that the government grants of some of the students were suspended and they were forced to hold their peace. Légitime Défense was discontinued but the group continued to exist, and, more important, their manifesto had helped to launch a movement the repercussions of which have never subsided.

A new group was formed, consisting of Caribbean and African students. The leaders of this group were the now celebrated triumvirate Léon-Gontran Damas of French Guyana, Aimé Césaire of Martinique and Léopold-Sédar Senghor of Senegal. They founded in 1934 a review known as L'Etudiant Noir (The Black Student).

The importance of the new manifestation lay in the fact that Africans and West Indians had joined forces on a single project. Their orientation differed from that of the Légitime Défense group in that culture was given priority over politics. They considered cultural liberation to be a sine qua non of a people's independence. There was no wholesale adhesion to any movement or ideology. They studied socialism with a view to applying elements of it to the peculiar conditions of their respective countries. Césaire was influenced by Surrealism and was to be a member of the Communist party for many years.

L'Etudiant Noir was a further repercussion of the movements begun earlier in America and in Haiti. During the early thirties the founders came into close contact with the ^{black} American authors MacKay, Toomer, Hughes and Cullen in Paris.

The first literary expression of the new spirit was Léon Damas' Pig-

(1) J. Monnerot, 'Note touchant la bourgeoisie de couleur française', in Légitime Défense, p. 3.

ments⁽¹⁾, a collection of poems. Next was Césaire's Cahier d'un retour au pays natal, (Diary of a homecoming), a long poem, parts of which were published in the review Volontés in 1939 but which went unnoticed until the poet was 'discovered' by André Breton two years later. The work was then published in full by Bordas⁽²⁾ with a preface by Breton. It was in this work that the term 'Negritude' was coined. In 1945 Senghor published his Chants d'ombre,⁽³⁾ a collection of poems he had written between 1936 and 1945. Two anthologies appeared, Damas' Poètes d'expression française (1947) and Senghor's Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française (1948) for which Sartre wrote an important preface, Orphée Noir. In 1947 was founded Présence Africaine, revue culturelle du monde noir, published simultaneously in Paris and in Dakar. The review was launched under the distinguished patronage of André Gide, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Michel Leiris and others.

The Negritude movement was a revolt against the basic assumptions concerning Africans which were the justification of slavery and assimilation. The African had nothing to offer and was entirely at the disposal of Europe mostly to be a beast of burden or on the other hand to be elevated to the status of humanity by being endowed with European culture:

Et ce pays cria pendant des siècles que nous sommes des bêtes brutes; que les pulsations de l'humanité s'arrêtent aux portes de la négrierie; que nous sommes un fumier ambulante hideusement prometteur de cannes tendres et de coton soyeux et l'on nous marquait au fer rouge et nous dormions dans nos excréments et l'on nous vendait sur les places et l'aune de drap anglais et la viande salée d'Irlande coûtaient moins cher que nous, et ce pays était calme, tranquille, disant que Dieu étaient dans ses actes. (4)

(And this land shrieked for centuries that we are brute beasts; that the pulsations of humanity stop at the gates of the barracoon; that we are a walking dunghill hideously potential in tender cane and silky cotton and we were stamped with the hot iron and we slept in our excrements and we were sold in the market-places and a length of

(1) Paris, Guy Lévi Mano, 1937; re-edition; Paris, Présence Africaine, 1962.

(2) Re-edited by Présence Africaine, Paris, 1956

(3) Paris, Seuil, 1945.

(4) A. Césaire, Cahier d'un retour au pays natal, Paris, Présence Africaine, 1956, p. 61. (All quotations from the Cahier will be from this edition.)

English cloth and saltmeat from Ireland were cheaper than we , and this land was calm, at peace, saying that God was in its doings.)

Césaire announces that his race will now defy its mentors:

Acco^mmendez-vous de moi, je ne m'acco^mmode pas de vous!(1)

he will (Make way for me, I am not making way for you!)
and/glory in all that for them constitutes his barbarity, his inferiority:

Je déclare mes crimes et qu'il n'y a rien à
dire pour ma défense
Dances. Idoles. Relaps. Moi aussi

J'ai assassiné Dieu de ma paresse de
mes paroles de mes gestes de mes chansons
obscènes.

J'ai porté des plumes de perroquet des
dépouilles de chat musqué
J'ai lassé la patience des missionnaires
insulté les bienfaiteurs de l'humanité.
Défié Tyr. Défié Sidon
Adoré le Zambèze.

L'étendue de ma perversité me confond!(2)

(I declare my crimes and that there is nothing to be
said in my defence
Dances. Idols. Relapses. I too

I have assassinated God with my laziness with
my words with my gestures with my songs so
obscene.

I have worn parrot-feathers the
remains of the musk-cat
I have eroded the patience of missionaries
insulted the benefactors of humanity.
Defied Tyre. Defied Sidon
Worshipped the Zambesi.
The extent of my perversity confounds me!)

Eia pour ceux qui n'ont jamais rien inventé
pour ceux qui n'ont jamais rien exploré
pour ceux qui n'ont jamais rien dompté (3)

('Ray for those who have never invented anything
for those who have never explored anything
for those who have never conquered anything)

(1) A. Césaire, op. cit., p. 55.

(2) A. Césaire, op. cit., (p. 50. ss-ssss), Blancs, Paris, France

(3) A. Césaire, op. cit., p. 71.

And Léon Damas laments the indignity of a 'second-hand' culture:

J'ai l'impression d'être ridicule
 dans leurs souliers
 dans leur smoking
 dans leur plastron
 dans leur faux-col
 dans leur monocle
 dans leur melon

J'ai l'impression d'être ridicule
 avec tout ce qu'ils racontent
 jusqu'à ce qu'ils vous servent l'après-midi
 un peu d'eau chaude
 et des gateaux enrhumés ...(1)

(I feel somehow foolish
 in their shoes
 in their dinner-jacket
 in their shirt-front
 in their collar
 in their monocle
 in their bowler

I feel somehow foolish
 with all their claptrap
 down to their habit of serving in the afternoon
 a little warm water
 and snotty cakes in wet spirits ...)

He claims again his African heritage:

... j'ai au toit de ma case
 jusqu'ici gardé
 l'ancestrale foi conique ...(2)

(I have kept till now
 in the roof of my hut
 the conic faith of the ancestors)

It is this Africa, Damas' lost continent, which his African friend would recall. For Senghor Africa is ~~not~~ very much alive, his exile is only temporary:

(1) L.-G. Damas, 'Solde'--(Hand-me-downs), Pigments, Paris, Présence Africaine, 1962, pp. 39-40. (All quotations from Pigments will be from this edition, unless otherwise stated.) Poem quoted in full in Appendix, p.

(2) L.-G. Damas, 'Shine', Pigments, p. 63.

Joal!

Je me rappelle

Je me rappelle les signares à l'ombre verte des vérandas
Les signares aux yeux surréels comme un clair de lune sur
la grève

Je me rappelle les fastes du Couchant
Où Koumba N'Dofène voulait faire tailler son manteau royal.

Je me rappelle les festins funèbres fumant du sang des troupeaux
égorgés
Du bruit des querelles, des rhapsodies des griots.

Je me rappelle les voix païennes rythmant le Tantum Ergo,
Et les processions et les palmes et les arcs de triomphe.

Je me rappelle la danse des filles nubiles
Les choeurs de lutte - oh! la danse finale des jeunes hommes, buste
Penché élané, et le pur cri d'amour des femmes
- Kor Siga!

Je me rappelle, je me rappelle ...
Ma tête rythmant
Quelle marche lasse le long des jours d'Europe où parfois
Apparaît un jazz orphelin qui sanglote sanglote sanglote (1)

(Joal!

I recall

I recall the signoras in the green shade of the verandas
The signoras with eyes surreal like moonlight on the shore.

I recall the pomp of the Sundown
When Kumba N'Dofenn would have his royal mantle trimmed.

I recall the funeral feasts steaming with the blood of the
slaughtered flocks
The noise of the squabbles, the rhapsodies of the griots.

I recall the pagan voices intoning the Tantum Ergo
And the processions and the palm-fronds and the triumphal
arches.

(1) L.-S. Senghor, Chants d'ombre, in volume Chants d'ombre suivi de Hosties Noires, Paris, Seuil, 1956, p. 19.

I recall the dance of the nubile girls
 The choruses of wrestlers - oh! the final dance of the young men
 torsos
 Leaning over, thrust, and the pure cry of love from the women
 - Kor Siga!

I recall, I recall...
 My head marking time
 To what weary march along the days of Europe where now and then
 Comes jazz the orphan sobbing sobbing sobbing)

The aim of the movement was to instigate the rehabilitation of the African cultures they had been taught to ~~■~~ despise, and to defend the dignity and rights of their peoples. Léon Damas published a book of ~~■~~ folktales from Guyane⁽¹⁾ and a collection of African traditional poetry.⁽²⁾ Senghor wrote a number of cultural studies and also translated Serer⁽³⁾ poems. Negritude literature is a committed one. The three leaders were also to offer their services to their respective countries in the field of active politics. Damas and Césaire were to sit in the French National Assembly as deputies for Guyane and Martinique respectively, with Senghor leading Senegal to independence and becoming its first president.

Much of the uncharitable criticism of Negritude springs from the fact that the term, which Sartre describes as 'un complexe rebelle à l'analyse'⁽⁴⁾ (a complex which resists analysis), offers a wide range of interpretations and thus breeds 'cross purpose' discussion.

There is on the one hand the Negritude movement, which took place in the first half of this century.

But there is the word itself, 'Negritude', an ~~■~~ abstract noun which came into being in the gestation of a poem.

The term is used to summarize the objective situation of African peoples, whose history has created a community of experience. For many

(1) Veillées Noires, Paris, Stock, 1943. The French name 'Guyane' will be used henceforth for the sake of brevity.

(2) Poèmes nègres sur des airs africains, Paris, Guy Lévi Mano, 1948.

(3) This is the name of the Senegalese tribe of which Senghor is a member.

(4) J.-P. Sartre, Orphée Noir, in L.-S. Senghor, Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache, p. xliii.

this is the only plausible definition of Negritude as a collective term, the common features of the ~~black man's~~ situation in the world, a situation created by centuries of colonization or slavery, cultural subjugation and continuing oppression and prejudice. (1)

But Negritude asserts a further common identity basic to the whole black race, a certain specificity characterizing Africans of Africa as well as those who comprise the diaspora.

Senghor's famous definition of Negritude is 'l'ensemble des valeurs culturelles du monde noir' (2) (the sum of the cultural values of the black world) and in essay after essay he proceeds to analyse 'Negro-African poetry', pointing out distinctive characteristics which he claims to find in poetry written by black men be they Senegalese, Congolese or American. He analyses what he calls the essentially 'African' qualities of their works, such as the peculiar significance of the image and other mystical traits which place on the writing of the black author the 'sceau de la Négritude' (3) (the stamp of Negritude). In an essay on black American poetry he affirms that 'La Négritude réside, plus que dans les mots, dans la qualité singulière de l'émotion et du style' (4) (Negritude lies not so much in the words as in the unique quality of emotion and style).

Janheinz Jahn and Petar Guberina in their studies on the modern literature of Africans all over the world writing in European languages would also seem to be applying a priori criteria of 'African literary values'. Jahn suggests that a thorough analysis of African writing would reveal that all the authors are unconsciously drawing on a common literary tradition and using the stylistic methods to be found in traditional African oral literature:

(1) 'I think it may be said that politics is the only ground for a universal Negro sympathy.' (G. Lamming, 'The Negro writer and his world', Présence Africaine, Paris, Nos. 8-10, June -Nov. 1956, Numéro spécial: Le I^{er} Congrès International des Ecrivains et Artistes Noirs, p. 320.

(2) L.-S. Senghor, Négritude et Humanisme, Paris, Seuil, 1964, p. 9, and elsewhere in his writings.

(3) L.-S. Senghor, 'Laye Camara et Lamine Niang, ou l'art doit être incarné', Négritude et Humanisme, p. 174.

(4) L.-S. Senghor, in op. cit., p. 119.

"[la] poésie néo-africaine" la poésie africaine de langue française, la poésie africaine de langue anglaise, la poésie afro-américaine de langue française, anglaise, espagnole, hollandaise et portugaise ... conserve des liens vivants avec la tradition poétique et récitative africaine par le fait qu'elle utilise des procédés stylistiques élaborés par celle-ci. la magie incantatoire des images s'ordonne selon un rythme spécifique -poésie et prose sont engagées, en poésie lyrique l'élément incantatoire a le pas sur l'élément descriptif... (1)

("neo-african poetry", African poetry in the French language, African poetry in the English language, Afro-American poetry in French, English, Spanish, Dutch and Portuguese ... preserves living ties with the African tradition of poetry and recitation by the fact that it employs stylistic devices developed by this tradition. The incantatory magic of the images is ordered according to a specific rhythm - poetry and prose are functional, in lyric poetry the incantatory element prevails over the descriptive element.)

And Jahn manages to detect a 'ligne mélodique descendante' (2) (descending melodic line), such as is to be found in African languages, in the works of some black authors, notwithstanding the fact that they write in a European language.

In a study called 'Structure de la poésie noire d'expression française', Petar Guberina analyses 'Negro poetry' from the point of view of the poetic image and arrives at the conclusion that

Les poètes noirs ont leur propre conception du rapport entre les choses et les hommes, et c'est à partir de cette conception qu'ils créent des images poétiques. (3)

(Black poets have their own conception of the relation between things and men, and it is according to this concept that they create poetic images.)

He analyses in detail the essential characteristics of what he terms 'black poetry' as opposed to 'white poetry' and points out wide differences in their interpretation of certain poetic symbols such as the sun and the mountain, and the essentially 'African' use of words.

The observations of these critics are doubtless the result of deep

(1) J. Jahn, 'Sur la littérature africaine', Présence Africaine, Paris, 4^e trimestre, 1963, p. 155.

(2) J. Jahn, op. cit., p. 157.

(3) P. Guberina, op. cit., Présence Africaine, Paris, No. 5, Dec. 1955-Jan. 1956, p. 55.

study and are perhaps not to be dismissed wholesale. But there are points which could be raised which cast into doubt the whole question of the relation between race and literature.

In the first place the degree of cultural unity which their remarks suggest is not valid even for Africa alone. The African continent is vast-er than Europe where the national cultures of the component cultures vary so appreciably in details. One can subscribe to the idea of only a very basic core of common 'African cultural values', much in the way that one refers to a 'European civilization' with a certain number of recognizably constant characteristics. But one suspects that one cannot safely speak of 'l'image noire'⁽¹⁾ (the black image) or 'la mythologie noire'⁽²⁾ (black mythologie) without creating arbitrary umbrella concepts.

Jahn in effect asserts that there are no purely racial literary criteria:

I have been protesting in Germany for years against the use of terms like "black literature", "negro literature", "literature of the black races", because they show that those who employ them believe that the colour of a writer's skin automatically determines his literary genre and is enough to classify him. (3)

Poetry written by a Black born and bred in Germany will belong to the German literary tradition and no other, yet:

On the other hand, an Afro-American poetry does exist because its authors are not isolated Africans who arrived on the American continent and inserted themselves into a foreign culture; they are Africans who arrived together, bringing with them definite traditions which they kept before them, and these traditions are reflected in their poetry and are quite distinct from the Euro-American traditions. (4)

This is no more acceptable than the deception he is seeking to destroy. There is no question, for the black writer of the New World, of any automatic and unconscious use of African literary methods. African culture has survived in varying degrees in the African communities of America. But the written literature of West Indians, of Afro-Americans, of Brazil-

(1) P. Guberina, op.cit., p. 58.

(2) P. Guberina, op. cit., p. 57.

(3) J. Jahn, 'Rhythm and style in African poetry', in African literature and the Universities, ed. G. Moore, Ibadan, 1965, p. 51.

(4) J. Jahn, op. cit., p. 52.

ians is the work of intellectuals, that is to say, men who by the fact of their education are twice removed from any original African archetype, men who will have stepped out of the line of any African literary tradition. The only literature which might show traces of African descent are ~~x~~ the songs and stories of the popular culture, the folk-lore of these countries. Because 'Education' consists of training in a Greco-Latin or Anglo-Saxon tradition as the case might be, the literary formation of the writer is not African. And the mere fact that he is writing in French or English places his work to some extent in the line of the literary traditions of these languages, except when he is quite deliberately drawing on an African tradition or the extension of an African literary tradition in an Afro-American culture. If he writes in French then he is as subject to the demands of French syntax and morphology as any French author. It may be a commonplace to state, but French is French - there is a limit to the liberties which can be taken with any language, or the modifications, conscious or unconscious, which can be performed upon it and still leave it recognizable. It is for this reason that Créole is no longer French.

Thus if we might presume to reverse Senghor's summary statement that 'ce qui fait la négritude d'un poème c'est moins le thème que le style' ⁽¹⁾ (the 'negritude' of a poem consists not so much in its theme as in its style), we would affirm, on the contrary, that it is almost only the subject-matter of this body of literature which brings it under any common heading. There is no obvious and constant stylistic touchstone which identifies poetry written by men as far afield as Haiti, Guyane, Senegal and Madagascar as being essentially 'Negro'. A perfect illustration of this is to be found in a comparison of the work of the three leading figures of the movement. For in the poetry of Senghor, Damas and Césaire we find three utterly different expressions of similar themes.

There is nothing racial about style. Where the characteristics of an author's work are to be traced to the tendencies of a collectivity, this collectivity remains a narrow one. Senghor's poetry, for instance, is eminently 'African' in that it is full of Serer influences; but the Serer

(1) L.-S. Senghor, Anthologie, p. 173.

tribe is but one tribe of Senegal, which is but one region of Africa. It never occurs to anyone to analyse a French poem from the point of view of its 'blanchitude'. To what extent can one speak of 'the Aryan image', or an 'Asiatic style'?

It is an understandable excess that in the desire to assert the oneness of African peoples, some should go overboard and seek to establish points in common and bonds of similarity even in areas where these cannot exist. It was Europe who first fixed the whole of Africa and its peoples into one homogeneous lump. Perhaps there would have been less likelihood of any manifestation such as Negritude or Pan-Africanism taking place had Europe not circumscribed the entire race with its attitudes of misunderstanding and prejudice:

Le colonialisme, qui n'a pas nuancé ses efforts, n'a cessé d'affirmer que le nègre est un sauvage, et le nègre pour lui n'était ni l'Angolais ni le Nigérien. Il parlait du Nègre. Pour le colonialisme, ce vaste continent était un repaire de sauvages, un pays infesté de superstitions et de fanatisme, voué au mépris, lourd de la malédiction de Dieu, pays d'anthrophages, pays de nègres. La condamnation du colonialisme est continentale. L'affirmation par le colonialisme que la nuit humaine a caractérisé la période anté-coloniale concerne l'ensemble du continent africain. Les efforts du colonisé pour se réhabiliter et échapper à la morsure coloniale, s'inscrivent logiquement dans la même perspective que celle du colonialisme ...

...Le colonialisme n'a pas cru devoir perdre son temps à nier les unes après les autres les cultures des différentes nations. Aussi la réponse du colonisé sera-t-il d'emblée continentale.(1)

(Colonialism, which has never taken the trouble to introduce nuance into its work, has continually affirmed that the Negro is a savage, and the Negro for him was neither the Angolan nor the Nigerian. He meant The Negro. In the eyes of colonialism, this vast continent was a lair of savages, a land infested with superstition and fanaticism, doomed to contempt, weighed down with the malediction of God, land of cannibals, land of Negroes. The condemnation of colonialism is continental. The affirmation by colonialism that the night of humanity characterized the pre-colonial period concerns the whole of the African continent. The effort of the colonized man to rehabilitate himself and force his way out of the clamp of colonization logically adopts the

(1) F.Fanon, Les damnés de la terre, Paris, Maspéro, 1961, p. 159.

same perspective as colonialism...

...Colonialism did not think fit to waste its time belying one by one the cultures of the various nations. In the same way the reply of the colonized man will automatically be continental.)

Negritude is a reflection, or more properly an attempt by the black man to correct the reflected image of himself which he receives from the white world. 'C'est le blanc qui crée le nègre' ⁽¹⁾ (It is the white man who creates the Negro). In a negative sense the Negro thereby continues to be influenced by Europe's attitude to him - he is still reacting under the stare of the Other, even if this stare no longer hypnotizes him into accepting that he and his culture are inferior. And it is interesting that Negritude and the similar movements out of which it arose were preceded by a European trend towards the revaluation of African culture. Europe had relegated this to a position of inferiority, and because of her prestige Europe's judgments were irreversible except by herself.

One of the dangers of a manifestation such as Negritude - a pitfall which, fortunately, has been avoided, - is that it might lead to the setting up of some literary orthodoxy. The black writer does not automatically follow an African literary tradition as a Frenchman follows (or reacts against) his literary tradition which he inherits by the fact of going to school. On the contrary, because the African writer went to school the continuity of his tradition is broken, and to rejoin it across a foreign language must involve a conscious return. Some authors attempt this successfully, but it could easily make for artificiality. It would be most unfortunate if the writer came to feel that he should make his work 'sound Negro' at all costs.

Janheinz Jahn is among those who advocate that the sooner traditional African literature is brought into schools the better. But one cannot be equally enthusiastic about another suggestion which he makes:

Que des poètes africains commencent à soumettre leur langue d'adoption à des tentatives d'africanisation, et il en résultera un double bénéfice: primo, la langue européenne africanisée sera mieux à même d'appréhender la vie africaine et de l'exprimer plus poétiquement, et secundo, l'écart qui sépare la lingua franca européenne de la langue vernaculaire diminuera. (2)

(1) F. Fanon, L'an V de la révolution algérienne, Paris, Maspéro, 1960, p. 27.

(2) J. Jahn, 'Sur la littérature africaine', p. 161.

(Let African poets begin to submit their adoptive language to attempts at Africanization, and the result will be a double advantage: first, the Africanized European language will be better fitted to capturing African life and expressing it more poetically, and secondly, the gulf between the European lingua franca and the vernacular tongue will be narrowed.)

There exists African literature which is in fact the successful product of this crossing, such as Senghor's poetry in which he swells out the French language with unfamiliar imagery, and Amos Totuola's 'English' pervaded by its strong Yoruba flavour. But one should beware of setting it up as a duty to 'africanize' or 'creolize' English or French in one's writing:

Cultural nationalism ~~has~~ today has potent forces of persuasion at its disposal; those concerned with the well-being of literature must take their stand defensively, on the inalienable right of the writer to be himself ... Some writers may possess an interior nationality; others do not and are not the worse for that reason; and yet others stand at the confluence of more than one tradition, and are the richer because of it, drawing their strength from the tension between cultures. To demand conformity to a collective pattern, however carefully that pattern is extracted from actual achievement, is to violate the writer's title to his own speech. (1)

No author should be expected to sprinkle his work with 'local colour' for its own sake, for this soon becomes tiresome exoticism, or literature becomes an anthropological or sociological treatise. The search for cultural identity should not lead to tourist-brochure literature:

S'il y a chez ces écrivains volonté de rupture avec les formes littéraires liées à l'enseignement officiel, cette volonté tendue vers un avenir plus aéré ne saurait revêtir une allure folklorisante. (2)

(If these writers are desirous of breaking with the literary forms connected with official education, this desire which looks towards a more open future cannot take on a folkloristic character.)

We quote the healthy protest of the South African writer Ezekiel Mphahlele: 'I refuse to be put in a Negro file - for sociologists to come and examine me' (3)

(1) 'English as highway or as barrier', The Times Literary Supplement, London, Sept. 16th., 1965, p. 796.

(2) M. Leiris, 'Martinique, Guadeloupe, Haïti', Les Temps Modernes, Paris, No. 52, 1950; p. 1347.

(3) E. Mphahlele, 'A reply', African literature and the Universities, p. 26.

The Times Literary Supplement contributor who affirms that 'as an experiment in literary form the movement has proved a disappointment',⁽¹⁾ is, we are inclined to think, off the mark. Despite the theorizers of Negritude, the movement was not 'an experiment in literary form'. One need only choose a few poems at random from Senghor's anthology for instance to be assured that writing coming under the heading of Negritude is as varied and independent in form from one writer to ~~the next~~ another as these writers are different men. Negritude, like the Surrealist movement to which it was attached in its beginnings, was essentially a movement of liberation. In practice it did not establish any criteria of style or form, even as there is no standard Surrealist poem. To place it back in the strict context of a distinct literary and cultural movement, it was originally a reaction by French West Indians against the servility of French Caribbean literature to French models. It did not reject the formalization of literary schools to impose a new tyranny of form. Léon Damas, in the introduction to his anthology of French colonial poets, observes:

Bien qu'extrêmement différents entre eux, ils n'en ont pas moins en commun un grand désir d'individualisme. Car chacun d'eux manifeste sa personnalité avec indépendance, farouchement. Et nous nous pensons, en particulier, à ceux qui ont toutes nos préférences, ceux de la jeune génération...

Avec eux, fini le règne de l'imitation, de la décalcomanie!⁽²⁾

(Although very different one from another they yet have this in common - a great desire for individuality. For each of them asserts his personality with fierce independence. And we are ~~think~~ thinking in particular of those who have our greatest preference - ence, those of the young generation...

With them, out goes the reign of imitation, of transfer-copy!)

There is no question of uniformity of stylistic characteristics, unconscious or deliberate.

While one is sceptical about the notion that literary traditions, which are necessarily learned and not transmitted by some sort of biological heredity, can survive intensified acculturation as in the case of black intellectuals of the New World, or that whatever basic unity there might be to African cultures extends into the personal literary creations of

(1) 'Twilight of a dark myth', T.L.S., Sept. 16th. 1965, p. 805.

(2) L.-G. Damas, Poètes d'expression française, p. 9.

individuals all over the globe, yet one would also hesitate to accept the categorical assertion by our T.L.S. contributor that

The plain truth is that the only thing which an unemployed, police-hounded Harlem Negro has in common with a West African cocoa-growing tribeman is the colour of his skin. (1)

In support of this statement he draws attention to the fact that 'Harlem Negroes have little affection for the West Indian immigrants they encounter in New York'. (2) As if the possibility of traits in common had ever been known to be a guarantee of mutual affection.

Perhaps the whole question of racial characteristics belongs strictly in ^{the} field of anthropological study. Lilyan Kesteloot offers the very apt suggestion that what constitutes the specificity of the African is

moins une affaire de race que de civilisation, qui tient moins à la couleur de la peau qu'au climat culturel dans lequel les Noirs d'Afrique ont baigné de longs siècles. (3)

(not so much a matter of race as of civilization, which has not so much to do with the colour of the skin as with the cultural climate in which the Blacks of Africa have basked for long centuries.)

One cannot dismiss altogether the idea that the same factors which produce culture, or the purely external trappings of custom, etc., do eventually also produce a temperament or collective génie.

Those who take Negritude to task because it draws attention to racial difference at a time when it is one of the most obvious imperatives of human progress that racial barriers be dissolved, are perhaps confusing fraternity with sameness. The harmony which is built on the premise of uniformity - which today too often means uniformity with Western patterns - is a specious one. Negritude is one antidote to the tendency of modern civilization to crush cultural diversity.

If the partisans of Negritude are against the submersion of their individuality it is not their purpose to set up a rebel kingdom where they may contemplate their Negritude at will. If they step aside and assert their uniqueness it is in order to rejoin the rest of humanity on a new basis, the basis of equality. For as long as they are acceptable

(1) 'Twilight of a dark myth', T.L.S., p. 806.

(2) Op. cit., p. 806

(3) L. Kesteloot, Les écrivains noirs de langue française, Brussels, Institut de Sociologie de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1965, p. 114.

only to the extent of their conformity, only in so far as they consent to be dutiful carbon copies of a European prototype, fraternity remains a hollow slogan. Senghor assures us that

La Négritude n'est donc pas racisme. Si elle s'est faite, d'abord, raciste, c'était par anti-racisme, comme l'a remarqué Jean-Paul Sartre dans Orphée Noir. En vérité, La Négritude est un Humanisme. (1)

(Thus Negritude is not racism. If in the beginning it took on a racist character, this was out of anti-racism, as Jean-Paul Sartre has pointed out in Black Orpheus. In effect Negritude is a form of Humanism.)

And the aim of its proposers is

... la présenter au monde, comme une pierre d'angle dans l'édification de la civilisation de l'Universel, qui sera l'oeuvre commune de toutes les races, de toutes les civilisations différentes - ou ne sera pas. (2)

(... to present it to the world, as a corner-stone for the building of the civilization of the Universal, which will be the common work of all the races, all the civilizations - or will not be.)

There are no short cuts to universality - or at any rate we do not arrive at genuine universality by all taking the obvious route, a route already trodden by others. However ~~the~~ divergent the paths of individual human cultures, pursued far enough they all lead ultimately and inevitably to a common centre: Man. And individualistic art, moving ~~farther~~ even further away from conformity, is even more appreciably universal:

... les oeuvres les plus humaines, celles qui demeurent le plus d'intérêt le plus général, sont aussi bien les plus particulières, celles où se manifeste le plus spécialement le génie d'une race à travers le génie d'un individu. Quoi de plus national qu'Eschyle, Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Molière, Goethe, Ibsen, Dostoïevsky? Quoi de plus généralement humain? Et aussi de plus individuel? - Car il faudrait enfin comprendre que ces trois termes se superposent et qu'aucune oeuvre d'art n'a de signification universelle qui n'a d'abord une signification nationale; ~~mais~~ n'a de signification nationale qui n'a d'abord une signification individuelle. (3)

(... the works that are most human, whose interest ~~is~~ remains

(1) L.-S. Senghor, Négritude et Humanisme, p. 8.

(2) L.-S. Senghor, op. cit., p. 9.

(3) A. Gide, 'Nationalisme et littérature', Oeuvres complètes, N.R.F., 1934, Vol. VI, p. 4.

most general, are also those that are most particularized, those that manifest most specifically the spirit of a race through the spirit of an individual. What could be more national than ~~A~~ Aeschylus, Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Molière, Goethe, Ibsen, Dostoïevsky? What could be more generally human? And also more individual? For in fact it must be understood that these three terms are ^{to be} superimposed one upon the other, and that no work of art has a universal signification unless it first has a national signification; no national signification unless it first has an individual signification.)

As for defining precisely what constitutes 'africanity' on the ~~personal~~ individual level, it was, as we have said, perhaps not the work of poets to undertake to analyse this. And it was because a great deal of their Negritude remained a subjective thing that poetry was the favoured medium. The tension between the 'acquired' personality and the 'authentic' self was a potential source of poetry.

Perhaps Negritude writing does contain a certain measure of superfluity, because ~~it~~ of the need which the black writer felt to objectify and give expression to the intangible, to draw attention to what others could take for granted, as Mr. Soyinka and his tiger doubtless take themselves for granted. ⁽¹⁾ 'C'est au choc de la culture blanche que [la] negritude est passée de l'existence immédiate à l'état réfléchi' ⁽²⁾ (It is with the impact of white culture that negritude has moved from immediate experience into the sphere of contemplation), observes Sartre. The only way to save their Negritude was to externalize it and make it manifest.

(1) Perhaps the final answer to Mr. Soyinka's tiger joke, keeping the metaphor in the animal kingdom, is this quotation from Césaire's Cahier d'un retour au pays natal:

'et tous zèbres se secouent à leur manière pour faire tomber leurs zébrures en une rosée de lait frais' (p. 85)

(and every zebra shakes himself after their fashion for his zebra-stripes to fall away in a dew of fresh milk.)

Césaire is referring to the anxiety with which the French West Indian assimilé seeks to shed his Negritude. It was in reaction to this that Césaire and his colleagues found it necessary to go about proclaiming their Negritude. Mr. Soyinka has of course never come across the case of a tiger who had reason to believe that his stripes were in peril.

(2) J.-P. Sartre, Orphée Noir, p. xv.

It was in this spirit that they undertook to rehabilitate African cultures and bring them to the notice of the world, as one means of manifesting 'l'âme noire' (the black soul): 'La Négritude fournit une réponse au monde nègre dans sa recherche angoissée de sa propre image,'⁽¹⁾ (Negritude supplies a response to the Negro world in its anxious search for its own image).

Sadly enough, the native culture of the assimilé is to some extent reduced to the status of 'folklore' in his own eyes. So that the rehabilitation of these cultures is largely an objective stock-taking - the intellectual is now looking at his culture rather more than participating in it, and much of the traditional culture the educated African can no longer in all honesty participate in:

... la situation culturelle dans les pays coloniaux est tragique. Partout où la colonisation fait irruption, la culture indigène commence à s'étioler. Et, parmi ses ruines, prend naissance non pas une culture, mais une sorte de sous-culture, une sous-culture qui, d'être condamnée à rester marginale par rapport à la culture européenne, et d'être le lot d'un petit groupe d'hommes, "l'élite" placée dans des conditions artificielles et privée du contact vivifiant des masses et de la culture populaire, n'a aucune chance de s'épanouir en culture véritable. (2)

(the cultural situation in the colonized countries is tragic. Wherever colonization breaks in, the indigenous culture begins to crumble. And, among its ruins there springs up not a culture, but a kind of sub-culture, a sub-culture which, since it is bound to remain marginal with relation to European culture and to be the portion of but a tiny group of men, "the elite" placed as it is in artificial circumstances and deprived of stimulating contact with the masses and the popular culture, has no chance of opening out into a true culture.)

To remedy this, the task must be undertaken of satisfactorily reintegrating elements of the traditional culture into modern life. The Negritude movement instigated the building of a new culture which would bridge the gap between the Westernization the spread of education ~~would~~ bring, and the

(1) T. Melone, De la Négritude dans la littérature négro-africaine, Paris, Présence Africaine, 1962, p.17.

(2) A. Césaire, 'Culture et colonisation', Présence Africaine, Paris, Nos. 8-10, June-Nov. 1956, Numéro spécial: Le 1er Congrès International des Ecrivains et Artistes Noirs p. 203.

traditional culture. They hastened to draw attention to and so conserve the African values so that there would be less question, in the future, of alienation. Whereas for instance European cultures evolved automatically discarding elements as they were 'outgrown' and absorbing in a natural and unforced manner elements of other cultures, the Negritude generation were faced with the necessity of fusing together a past which was in danger of extinction and a present which they could not conceivably deny. That which elsewhere was the result of centuries of natural growth⁽¹⁾ would be the task of one or two generations:

Notre rôle n'est pas de bâtir à priori le plan de la future culture noire; de prédire quels éléments y seront intégrés, quels éléments en seront écartés. Notre rôle, infiniment plus humble, est d'annoncer la venue et de préparer la venue de celui qui détient la réponse: le peuple, nos peuples libérés de leurs entraves, nos peuples et leur génie créateur enfin débarrassé de ce qui le contrarie ou le stérilise.

Nous sommes aujourd'hui dans le chaos culturel. Notre rôle est de dire: libérez le démiurge qui seul peut organiser ce chaos en une synthèse nouvelle, une synthèse qui méritera elle le nom de culture, une synthèse qui sera réconciliation et dépassement de l'ancien et du nouveau.(2)

(Our rôle is not to draw up an a priori blueprint for the black culture of the future; to predict what elements will be integrated into this culture, which ones will be discarded. Our role, infinitely humbler, is to hail the advent and to prepare the advent of those with whom the answer rests: the people, our peoples freed of their shackles, our peoples and their creativity rid at last of all that thwarts and sterilizes it.

Today we are in a state of cultural chaos. Our role is to say: liberate the demiurge who alone can organize this chaos into a new synthesis, a synthesis which will then be worthy of the name culture, a synthesis which will reconcile and transcend the old and the new.)

(1) 'Le grand reproche que l'on est fondé à faire à l'Europe c'est d'avoir brisé dans leur élan des civilisations qui n'avaient pas encore tenu toutes leurs promesses, de ne leur avoir pas permis de développer et d'accomplir toute la richesse des formes contenues dans leur tête.' (A. Césaire, 'Culture et colonisation', p. 195.) (The great reproach that one is justified in bringing against Europe is that of having truncated the impetus of civilizations which had not yet fulfilled all the promise they held, of depriving them of the opportunity to develop and realize all the wealth of the patterns still locked away in their heads.)

(2) A. Césaire, 'Culture et colonisation', p. 205.

There is no question of returning to dwell among the excavated relics of precolonial Africa. Cultural crossing is not only inevitable, but desirable, necessary; but in the words of Senghor which have become a slogan of Negritude, the object is 'Assimiler, non être assimilés',⁽¹⁾ (Assimilate, not be assimilated).

A deliberate movement of this sort was apparently necessary in the French colonies to break the rigid polarity towards the metropolitan culture, whereas British-colonized Africans, less alienated from their indigenous culture, have gone on to forge the necessary synthesis without loud announcements. Many have suggested that these latter were influenced, too, by the more pragmatic attitude of their colonizers, whereas the Negritude movement was as much a product of French culture as a reaction against it:

... the taste for literary "movements" is much more Gallic than Anglo-Saxon, and there can be little doubt that the intellectual attitudes of the colonial powers have affected their former subjects profoundly. (2)

At any rate there seems to have been less need in British Africa for a desperate salvaging of the native culture: 'The British love Africans in museum cases, so they left much of African culture intact.'⁽³⁾

Be that as it may, it is to be remembered that Negritude was originally a Caribbean movement. There the combined effects of separation from Africa, slavery and assimilation were deep-rooted, and it was necessary that someone shout from the hill-tops that

il-est-beau-et-bon-et-légitime-d'être-nègre⁽⁴⁾

(it-is-a-right-and-good-and-proper-thing-to-be-Negro)

Thus Negritude from the very beginning meant something rather different on either side of the Atlantic. For Senghor Africa is not far-away Promised Land, and the matter of finding his roots was not as much of a pilgrimage for him as it was for the West Indians.

(1) L.-S. Senghor, Négritude et Humanisme, p. 39. ('Vues sur l'Afrique noire, ou Assimiler, non être assimilés' title of an article first published in 1945, and elsewhere in his writings.)

(2) G. Moore and U. Beier, Modern poetry from Africa, London, Penguin, 1965, p. 18.

(3) E. Mphahlele, in African literature and the Universities, p. 26.

(4) A. Césaire, Cahier, p. 90.

The Caribbean writers are often accused of indulging in romanticism about their 'lost homeland' instead of turning and accepting the reality of their new circumstances as citizens of New World countries. These criticisms are most unfair in the case of men who have so completely identified themselves with their immediate situation as their political involvement and their literary campaigns on behalf of their people suggest. No one who has read Damas' Retour de Guyane⁽¹⁾ or Césaire's Cahier d'un retour au pays natal can accuse these men of escapism:

"Ma bouche sera la bouche des malheurs qui n'ont pas de bouche, ma voix, la liberté de ceux qui s'affaissaient au cahot du désespoir."

Et venant je me dirais à moi-même: "Et surtout mon corps aussi bien que mon âme, gardez-vous de croiser les bras en l'attitude stérile du spectateur, car la vie n'est pas un spectacle, car une mer de douleurs n'est pas un proscénium, car un homme qui crie n'est pas un ours qui danse..."(2)

("My mouth shall be the mouth of ills that have no mouth at ~~all~~ all, my voice, the liberty of those decaying in the jail-cell of despair.")

And coming I would say to myself: "And above all my body even as my soul, beware of folding your arms in the sterile posture of the spectator, for life is not a spectacle, for a sea of woes is not a proscenium, for a screaming man is not a dancing bear..."(2)

They could not be more passionately concerned with the fate of their respective peoples. Damas is haunted by the poverty of the great mass of his countrymen:

... Ceux que ma mémoire
retrouve encore en Exil
assis de nos jours sur le pas de la case en bambou de lattes
tressées
qui insultent au soleil éclatant des Antilles-Heureuses
d'être à jamais esclaves...(3)

(They whom my memory
in Exile still encounters to find
sitting to this day on the step of the bamboo-hut of plaited
laths
insulting the glaring sky of the Happy-Caribbean
with that they are forever slaves)

(1) Paris, Corti, 1938.

(2) A. Césaire, op. cit., p. 42.

(3) L.-G. Damas, Black-Label, Paris, Gallimard, 1956, p. 21.

And he speaks loudly on ~~the~~ behalf of his impoverished, neglected country, this

... Pays de Guyane à mon coeur accroché (1)

(Land of Guyana fastened to my heart)

We shall see in the study of Damas' work how important reidentification with Africa was to people who had had the ground cut from under them, who had inherited the conviction that their race had accomplished nothing and had no place in history. For the Caribbean poets, Negritude is a journey of self-discovery, a symbolic return trip to Africa bringing back reinforcements:

... Je vois l'Afrique multiple et une
verticale dans la tumultueuse péripétie
avec ses bourrelets, ses nodules,
un peu à part, mais à portée
du siècle, comme un coeur de réserve

Et je redis: Hoo mère!
et je lève ma force
inclinant ma face

Oh ma terre!

que je me l'émiette doucement entre pouce et index
que je m'en frotte la poitrine, le bras,
le bras gauche,
que je m'en caresse le bras droit.

Hoo ma terre est bonne,
ta voix aussi est bonne
avec cette apaisement que donne
un lever de soleil!

Terre, forge et silo. Terre enseignant nos routes,
c'est ici, qu'une vérité s'avise,
taisant l'oripeau du vieil éclat cruel ...(2)

(I see Africa multiple and one
vertical in the tumultuous peripety
with its folds, its nodules
a little apart, but within reach
of the century, like a reserve-heart

(1) L.-Damas, Black-Label, p. 21.

(2) A. Césaire, 'Pour saluer le tiers monde' (A greeting to the Third World), Ferremets, Paris, Seuil, 1960, p. 83.

And I say again: Hoo mother!
 and I raise my strength
 bowing my face

Oh my ground!

Let me crumble it gently between thumb and forefinger
 let me rub it on my breast, my arm,
 my left arm,
 let me stroke my right arm with it.

Hoo my ground is good
 and your voice too is good
 like that soothing brought
 in a sunrise!

Ground, forge and silo. Ground showing us our paths,
 it is here that a truth is glimpsed,
 silencing the tawdriness of the old cruel glare....)

Sartre observes that 'la Négritude est pour se détruire, elle est passage et non aboutissement, moyen et non fin dernière' ⁽¹⁾ (Negritude is self-annihilating, it is transition and not finality, a means and not an ultimate end), and that the African is 'celui qui marche sur une crête entre le particularisme passé qu'il vient de gravir et l'universalisme futur qui sera le crépuscule de sa négritude' ⁽²⁾ (a man walking along a ridge between the former particularity that he has just climbed up and the future universality which will be the sundown of his negritude). He predicted that the stage of 'secession' and self-assertion would necessarily pass.

Negritude has in fact largely spread out into a flourishing French African literature. It has proved to be not the literary morass that many feared it would be, but the beginning of a new stream entering world literature.

(1) J. -P. Sartre, Orphée Noir, p. xli.

(2) J. -P. Sartre, op. cit., p. xlii.

Chapter Two. Léon-G. Damas: Biographical sketch

...voilà
voilà
voilà
qu'il recommence
qu'il recommence à dire
Merde (1)

As his writing announces, Léon Damas is an uncompromising man, unapologetic, stooping to endear himself to no one, least of all to critics. Thus his reaction, or rather the absence so far of a reaction on his part to the charge of racism so complacently levelled against him. 'Vous savez bien, n'est-ce pas,' he suddenly volunteers with a mock-gravity that conveys his amusement, 'que dans toute cette affaire, moi je suis la bête noire, le fameux raciste!' (You know of course don't you, that in this whole business I'm the black bogey, the famous racist!) Damas has never replied to these accusers for whom he is the nigger in the woodpile of Negritude, those for example of the species he calls the 'négrophages' (negro-eaters) - who baulk at the bitter fare ~~xxxx~~ which has been Damas' revolt.

It is certain however that the charge of racism has been damaging to his reputation, for the embarrassed hush which surrounds Damas' name in much of the voluminous babel that Negritude has released detracts attention from a work of very real literary value, and from the fact that Damas, who wrote as early as in 1930 some of the poems which were to become veritable 'reference-poems' of Negritude - for example the famous 'Ils sont venus ce soir' - is, in terms of chronology as well as of leadership, the first poet of Negritude. Damas began to publish his poems in 1934, while Senghor, for example, began to write in 1936.

Damas was born on the 28th. of March, 1912, at Cayenne, French Guy-

(1) ... there
there
there
him again
him again saying
Shit

(L.-G. Damas, Black-Label, p. 29.)

ana. His twin-sister Gabrielle, named after their mother, lived for about six months, while Léon-Gontran remained bed-ridden until the age of six years, stricken with infantile asthma. They were the last of six children. Damas' mother, who was known as 'Ma-Gabi', was a mixture of African and Amerindian strains, and his father was mulatto.

The family belonged to the bourgeoisie of the colony, this class for whom the assiduous observance of French bourgeois rules of conduct was a means of separating themselves from the black lower classes and belying their own African ancestry. Damas as a child suffered bitterly from the exaggerated respectability of his family, their determination to direct him away from identifying or being influenced by the black society surrounding him, and the restrictions they imposed upon him in this endeavour - for instance he was forbidden to speak Créole. Damas retains the memory of a confined and constricted childhood, due as much to the over-protection afforded a sickly child as to the constraint of his bourgeois upbringing. He recalls for instance that he did not speak until the age of five, partly on account of his illness, but also out of a certain resentfulness at being continually surrounded and watched by solicitous grown-ups.

In 1923 he went to Fort-de-France, Martinique,⁽¹⁾ to the Lycée Schoelcher, where he was the fellow-pupil of Aimé Césaire. Damas recalls that it was here in Martinique that his racial consciousness began. For he was startled by the resounding discrepancy revealed in the fact that whereas squalor and degradation were the norm for the black masses of the island, he, son of a bourgeois family, thoroughly rehearsed in French manners, was accorded a kind of honorary whiteness in Martiniquan society by virtue of his ~~whiteness~~ assimilatedness. In his native Guyane racial complexes were somewhat modified by the existence of the notorious penal settlement - since 1852 France had taken to shipping off to Guyane her recidivists and other of her citizens who were undesirable. The convicts were required by the system of 'doublage' to remain at Cayenne, after their release from the convict settlement proper, for a period of time

(1) Damas is perhaps as much a Martiniquan as he is a Guyanese, since a great part of his childhood was spent on this island, and some of his closest relatives are settled there. Much of his poetry, too, is set in Martinique, or 'les Iles'.

equal to that of their sentence, so that there existed a white population whose status was infinitely lower than that of any Black, and who were at the disposal of any black bourgeois family who cared to employ them as domestics. The ex-convicts were the town's night-soil men, scavengers, etc. The presence of a despised white underdog (women who had relations with the ex-convicts, for example, were ostracized) tended to blur the straightforward black-white inferior-superior case. Damas considers that another reason for this fact is Guyane's position between Surinam and Brazil where the question of racial prejudice, if by no means non-existent, was also less clear-cut than in the island colonies.

Damas went to France in 1928, to the Collège de Meaux, two years later proceeding to Paris to continue his studies. It was in this his eighteenth year that he wrote his first poems.

In Paris his contacts were to be of the most fecund. He came into close association with the Surrealist poets and others whose names have been connected with Surrealism - Aragon, Tzara, Queneau, Prévert, Audiberti, Eluard, and above all Robert Desnos who prefaced his first book of poems, Pigments. Desnos was his great patron - to him Damas submitted his first literary efforts, through him he had access to the literary and artistic avant-garde of Paris. Among other French writers whose acquaintance he was to make were Gide, Cocteau, Sartre, Camus, Leiris. In 1937 at the Congress of Revolutionary Writers held in Paris he came into contact with ~~xxx~~ writers of the American Negro Renaissance such as Langston Hughes (his friendship with Hughes was to last until the latter's recent death), Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Alain Locke, Sterling Brown, as well as the Afro-Cuban poet Nicolas Guillén and the Haitian writer Jacques Roumain.

Perhaps the epithet most frequently applied to Damas by those who have known him is the word 'actif'. Among his consuming extra-curricular activities was the mission he undertook of being a kind of free-lance liaison officer between Africans and West Indians in Paris at the time. He was among the first to propose that the black community in Paris, consisting of Americans, West Indians and Africans, should make common cause. There was a near-antipathy, for instance, between West Indian and African, for the West Indian, more assimilated to European culture,

saw the African through European eyes as uncivilized and inferior. Damas saw the need for a united front in the face of racial ^epréjudice - he himself sought out and fraternized with Blacks in Paris of every description.

In view of this, one is inclined to envisage Damas as having possibly inspired the founding of the review L'Etudiant Noir⁽¹⁾, launched in 1934 with Damas, Césaire, Senghor and Maugée as directors. L'Etudiant Noir was successor to the short-lived but immensely important Legitime Défense⁽²⁾ which had been directed by Damas' friend Etienne Léro. Of the new review Damas writes:

L'Etudiant Noir, journal corporatif et de combat avec pour objectif la fin de la tribalisation, du système clanique en vigueur au Quartier Latin. On cessait d'être un étudiant essentiellement martiniquais, guadeloupéen, guyanais, africain, malgache, pour n'être plus qu'un seul et même étudiant noir. Terminée la vie en vase clos. (3)

(The Black Student, a magazine of unity and combat which aimed at putting an end to the tribalism, the clan system operated in the Latin Quarter. One ceased to be essentially a Martiniquan, Guadeloupean, Guyanese, African or Madagascan student, to become simply one and the same black student. No more living in pigeon-holes.)

Damas had undertaken legal studies which he abandoned after two years; at the same time he studied Oriental languages at the 'Ecole des Langues Orientales Vivantes' (this because he hoped to translate Pushkin one day), was registered at the 'Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes' (Section des Sciences Religieuses et Section des Sciences Historiques et Economiques) at the Sorbonne, and prepared the Diploma in Ethnology at the Institut d'Ethnologie.

In 1934, on the recommendation of his Professor at the Institut d'Ethnologie, he was commissioned by the Musée du Trocadéro (now Musée de l'Homme) to carry out a study of ~~African~~ survivals of African culture in America, a mission which took him to the West Indies, Surinam and Guyane, and during which he lived for some time among the Bush Negroes of the Guyanese jungle; the Bush Negroes are the descendants of runaway slaves living in stubborn seclusion in an impenetrable part of the forest in a society

(1) See Chapter One, p. 17.

(2) At Léro's untimely death in 1939, it was Damas who was left in possession of his manuscripts, and he was to publish some of Léro's poems in his anthology Poètes d'expression française.

(3) L.-G. Damas, Notre génération, (unpublished).

whose organization, language and customs are to this day characteristic of the Ashanti peoples from which their ancestors came.

On his return the same year he started upon a career of journalism, which was something of a deviation from the beaten track of sons of French West Indian bourgeois families who had duly collected their diplomas in Paris

Ne voulant être ni administrateur de colonie en Afrique, ni professeur, ni militaire, je suis entré dans le journalisme.

(Since I had no desire ~~xxxx~~ either to become a colonial administrator in Africa, or to enter the teaching or the military professions, I took up journalism.)

He began under the patronage of Lucien Vogel, who directed the magazines Vu, Lu and Vogue, contributing documentation on Guyane. Damas participated in the founding of the review Esprit in 1932, with his colleagues Emmanuel Mounier, André Ullman, Edmond Humeau, Adrien Miatvlev. In 1934 some of his poems were published in Esprit. He also contributed to various other reviews and periodicals such as Cahiers du Sud (in which some of his poems were published in 1936), Soutes, Charpentes, Les Oeuvres Libres, Marianne, Petit Journal, Paris-Midi, La France Extérieure et Coloniale, Petit Parisien and Excelsior. Damas was given a post at the 'Département Colonial de l'Agence Radio'.

The poems which Damas had begun to write since his arrival in Paris he collected into the volume Pigments, which he published in 1937. It was in Pigments that the Negritude movement, which was to have echoes far away and beyond the literary salon, was given its first expression, a sharp, menacing voice. In his preface Robert Desnos hails the era which Pigments ushers in:

Damas est nègre et tient à sa qualité et à son état de nègre. Voilà qui fera dresser l'oreille à un certain nombre de civilisateurs qui trouvent juste qu'en échange de leurs libertés, de leur terre, de leurs coutumes et de leur santé, les gens de couleur soient honorés du nom de "Noirs". Damas refuse le titre et reprend son bien. (1)

(1) R. Desnos, Preface to Pigments, Paris, G.L.M., 1937.

(Damas is a Negro and insists upon his quality ~~and~~ his ~~condi~~ condition as a Negro. This is sure to startle a certain ~~num~~ number of civilizers who consider it perfectly in order that in exchange for their liberty, their land, their customs and their well-being, ~~people of~~ people of colour be honoured with the appellation "Blacks"(1). Damas refuses the title and demands his property back.)

The inflammatory poems of Pigments won Damas immediate acclaim among the black student community of Paris.

In 1938 Damas published a strong and detailed report on political, social and economic conditions in his country, compiled from information and impressions he had collected on his visit in 1934. He protests against the official neglect and lack of policy which made this potentially rich land an impoverished backyard of the French Empire, 'une fosse septique au service de la Métropole' ⁽²⁾ (a cesspool at the disposal of the Metropolis). Guyane was still then a penal settlement:

... pour /l'le français/, la Guyane c'est le bagne et les Guyanais des fils de bagnards, avec, toutefois, quelques nègres pour l'exotisme. (3)

(to /The Frenchman/, Guyane is the convict settlement, and the Guyanese sons of convicts, with a few Negroes thrown in, however, for the sake of exoticism.)

Après trois longs siècles, son oeuvre en Guyane peut lui être opposée comme une injure ou un défi. De sa ~~fondation~~ fondation à nos jours, cette contrée, pourtant si ~~essentielle~~ essentiellement riche, n'aura subi que mépris, maladroites; la Métropole ne se sera souvenue d'elle et ne l'aura ~~sortie~~ sortie des cartons des ministères que pour l'infecter. (4)

(1) By a quirk of linguistics the reverse choice is being made by Damas' English-speaking counterparts, on the American continent and elsewhere, with exactly the same motivation, the identical gesture of self-definition by overturning the usage of the received language and adopting the terms generally intended as 'uncomplimentary' against appellations seen as euphemistic or patronizing in intent: 'Negro' and 'coloured' are thus being rejected in favour of 'black'.

(2) Retour de Guyane, p. 172.

(3) op. cit., p. 10.

(4) op. cit., p. 15.

(After three long centuries, his achievement in Guyane might be thrown at him as an insult or a challenge. From its foundation to this day this region so essentially rich has had nothing but scorn and blunders; the Metropolis has only ever thought of it and brought it forth from the ministerial filing-cases in order to infect it.)

... tout n'est pas pour le mieux dans le meilleur des mondes.(1)

(all is not for the best in the best of possible worlds.)

A part of the book is devoted to a discussion of the policy of assimilation and its effects in French West Indian society.

Upon the publication of Retour de Guyane, Damas relates, immediate action was taken:

Le gouverneur de la Guyane en a racheté 500 exemplaires qu'il fit brûler à l'intérieur de son palais (construit par les Jésuites), dans le but évident d'en limiter la diffusion à l'intérieur de la colonie, exécutant en cela fidèlement, en chien dressé, les ordres de Paris.

(The Governor of Guyane bought 500 copies and had them burnt inside his palace (built by the Jesuits), evidently in an attempt to limit its circulation inside the colony; in this he carried out like a well-trained ~~dog~~ and obedient dog his instructions from Paris.)

The book, however, through the five hundred copies which survived, received interested attention in the daily and literary press; René Maran devoted an article to it in the Dépêche de Toulouse.

In June 1939 Damas published an article in the last issue of Esprit to appear before the war broke out, an issue offered as a tribune to 'les réprouvés' (the damned, the outcasts). Other contributors to the issue were a Jew, a footsoldier and a Czech (Czechoslovakia was at this time under Nazi occupation). In this article⁽²⁾ Damas discusses 'le problème noir français' (the French ~~xxxxxx~~ problem of colour) and compares unfavourably the economic position of the French-colonized African with that of the African in Anglo-Saxon colonies. In the same year he publ-

(1) Op. cit. p. 170. He is quoting Voltaire's phrase, the 'refrain' of Candide. It will be remembered that Voltaire's ideal kingdom of El Dorado (Candide, Ch. XVIII) is situated, after the sixteenth-century legend, in Guyane.

(2) 'Misère noire', Esprit: revue internationale, nouvelle série, Paris, June 1st. 1939. The article is an extract from an unpublished essay.

an article in Europe on the work ~~*****~~ Black Jacobins which had just appeared by his Trinidadian friend C. L. R. James.

At the outbreak of war an event in the Ivory Coast, French West Africa, took Damas further along his chosen career of bête noire. There Pigments had been translated into Bawle, one of the principal languages of the territory, and now his poems of revolt, in particular the poem 'Et caetera',⁽¹⁾ were chanted by rebellious Ivorians refusing to be mobilized; in Paris the premises of Guy Lévi Mano, his publisher, were searched as well as Damas' own home, and copies of Pigments seized: 'pour atteinte à la sécurité extérieure de l'Etat' (for endangering the external security of the State), recites Damas, with the afore-mentioned gravity.

Damas himself was mobilized in 1940. At the French defeat he was demobilized in Marseilles, but was unable for the moment to return to his home in Paris, since the occupying authorities ~~xxxx~~ refused to grant admission beyond the line of demarcation-'ni aux Juifs, ni aux Nègres, ni aux Israélites, ni aux hommes de couleur, pas même aux Martiniquais' (neither to Jews, nor Negroes, nor Israelites, nor Coloureds, not even to Martiniquans), to quote, after Damas, the official communiqué issued at the time. Damas was active in the Resistance.

From April to November he was posted as Chief Third Class Inspector of Press Censorship at the Information Service of Toulouse, later at Lyon. He abandoned this post at the Allied debarcation in North Africa and the total occupation of the metropolitan territory. Returning to Paris, he was a member of the anti-racist study-group set up to lay the foundations of the proposed Communauté Française, which was to be a ~~KXXX~~ union of all the French colonies and France into a kind of liberal commonwealth. This study-group, which worked under the direction of François Perroux, Professor of Law and Secretary ~~xx~~ General of the 'Fondation des Problèmes Humaines', charged Damas with the task of compiling a report as detailed as possible on 'la situation des Hommes de Couleur en France, de 1919 à 1940' (the situation of Men of Colour in France, from 1919 to 1940).

(1) Poem reproduced in the Appendix, p.

In 1943 he published a collection of Guyanese folk-tales, Veillées Noires, and then set to work on an anthology of French colonial writers. The latter was to have been published in three volumes, but only the first volume appeared, in 1947, a collection of poetry by authors from all over the French Empire, from the Caribbean, Africa, Madagascar and Indochina. This was the first work ever to seek to fulfill the pressing need of a forum bringing together writing from all the corners of the French-speaking world, for as Damas points out in his very important preface, no metropolitan literary review had as yet seen fit to draw attention to this literature springing up within the French language. & Senghor's anthology published the following year was to draw heavily upon Damas'.

Shortly after the Liberation Damas was a member of the group, which included among others Jean-Louis Baghio, René Maran, L.-S. Senghor, Jacques Rabemananjara, Prince Buuloc and Phan Van Ky, who were responsible for the setting up of the Overseas Broadcasting Service of La Radiodiffusion Française.

In 1946 he left Paris for a short stay in Cayenne and remained two years. When he returned to Paris it was as Deputy to the National Assembly - elected on the 4th. January 1948 to represent Guyane. At the National Assembly he was to rejoin Césaire and Senghor, also representing their countries.

Damas did not however abandon his literary interests; in 1948 he published a book of African oral poetry which he had adapted into French from a variety of African languages. He continued to direct at Editions Fasquelle the collection 'Ecrits d'Outre-Mer' which he had begun after the Liberation. It was through this collection that authors such as Raphaël Tardon, Birago Diop, ⁽¹⁾ Phan Van Ky, Gilbert de Chambertrand,

(1) The story of Damas' part in bringing to light Birago Diop's Contes d'Amadou Koumba is related in the book in the series 'Littérature Africaine' devoted to Diop's work. (M. and S. Battestini, Birago Diop, Coll. Littérature Africaine, 6, Paris, F. Nathan, 1964).

René Jadford, Léonard Sainville and others were made known, and through this collection too that the attention of the larger publishing-houses was drawn to the new literature of Africans writing in French.

Damas came to the National Assembly two years after a law had been passed making Guyane, Martinique, Guadeloupe and Réunion (an island in the Indian Ocean) 'départements' of France, overseas counties, as it were. Damas had been one of a tiny minority who opposed this proposition, while Césaire and other French West Indian politicians welcomed the measure, seeing in it the prospect of an automatic raising of social conditions to the standards which obtained in the metropolitan departments. This has not been the case, as Césaire ruefully reflects in 1956,⁽¹⁾ and as Damas had vigorously prophesied in 1938:

Veut-on nous faire accroire que les rapports d'un Guyanais ou d'un Antillais quelconque, quel que soit l'endroit où il réside et travaille, seront améliorés du seul fait que son pays, au lieu d'être une colonie, sera un département situé à dix-huit lieues des autres? On en revient toujours à la même question: qu'y aura-t-il de changé?(2)

(Is one to believe that the condition of any Guyanese or any West Indian, wherever it is he lives and works, will be bettered by the mere fact that his country, instead of being a colony, will be a department situated at eighteen leagues from the others? We are back again at the same question: what difference will it make?)

In Retour de Guyane he had drawn attention to the essential problem which was economic, and therefore not to be solved by sentimental gestures like gathering the scattered little colonies to the benevolent bosom of Mother France to feed them on ~~*****~~ self-applauding rhetoric and little else; Damas reproduces the draft bill at full length and sums it up by quoting from it:

(1) 'L'égalité était désormais totale dans le droit. L'inégalité s'aggravait chaque jour davantage dans les faits ... c'est naïveté de croire que l'on peut en pays colonial abolir l'inégalité sans abolir le régime colonial lui-même.' (There was henceforth complete equality in legal terms. Inequality increased day by day in reality ... it is naïve to think that in a colonial country one can abolish inequality without abolishing the colonial regime itself.)-A. Césaire, preface to D. Guérin, Les Antilles décolonisées, Paris, Présence Africaine, 1956, pp. 12-13.

(2) Retour de Guyane, p. 174.

Décortiquant ce texte de sa phraséologie, on peut en tirer à près ceci: l'assimilation sera "l'affirmation et le témoignage devant l'univers civilisé de l'excellence et du triomphe de la politique traditionnelle de la France en matière coloniale". (1)

(After shelling away the phraseology of this text, one is left with this, more or less: assimilation will be "the affirmation and the testimony before the civilized universe of the excellence and the triumph of the traditional policy of France in colonial affairs.")

... avant de songer à l'assimilation politique, il faudrait peut-être que les esprits généreux de la Métropole voulussent bien s'attacher à réaliser l'intégration économique. (2)

(before contemplating political assimilation, it might well be that the generous spirits of the Metropolis would do better kindly to apply themselves to the matter of economic integration.)

Damas continued to denounce the inoperative departmentalization of these territories throughout his career in the French Parliament, where his allegiance was Socialist. Today he sees the measure ~~as~~ as a direct cause of the moral rot of the French Caribbean, the disheartening apathy and acceptingness of his countrymen:

J'ai prédit à l'époque que cette loi allait nous retarder de cinquante ans. On a clochardisé ces pays - on nous a donné la mentalité d'Assistés Sociaux. Les gens ne savent même pas se battre.

(I predicted at the time that this measure was going to keep ~~us~~ us back fifty years. These countries have been beggarized - we have been given a State-Welfare-recipient mentality. People don't even know about fighting.)

Damas' entry to the National Assembly coincided with a ^rperiod of unrest in various parts of the French Empire. In March 1947 a nationalist insurrection in Madagascar was brutally crushed. Three separate manifestations in the Ivory Coast between January 1949 and January 1950 were also swiftly suppressed. In 1950 Damas was placed on a commission sent to investigate the causes of the troubles in the Ivory Coast. Given the task of inter-

(1) Op. cit., p. 167.

(2) Op. cit., p. 163.

viewing Ivoirians, Damas returned to compile a huge report full of their grievances,⁽¹⁾ by which it would seem he again incurred a measure of opprobrium from the direction of the authorities. Pressure was brought to bear upon him to withdraw this report and sign another, more temperate report, which invitation he rejected.⁽²⁾ After the independence of the Ivory Coast Damas' report was published in the country by the ruling Parti Démocratique de la Côte d'Ivoire, in a three-volume edition⁽³⁾ bound with the colours of the nation's flag - orange, white and green, and every member of the party was required to possess a copy of this work which had been instrumental in preparing the country's accession to independence.

In 1952 Damas published Graffiti, a volume of personal poetry, mainly love-poems. In 1956 he published Black-Label, a long poetic work, largely autobiographical, a kind of reminiscent ramble over various points of his life. Black-Label was at least begun by 1947, for a long section of it is published in his anthology Poètes d'expression française, and the same passage is reproduced in Senghor's anthology (1948) and in the fourth number of Présence Africaine, also in 1948. In 1962 Présence Africaine published a definitive edition of Pigments, prefaced by Robert Goffin, to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of its appearance. Damas' most recent publication is Névralgies, a volume of love-poems and other personal poetry, which incorporates Graffiti.

Among the works he is preparing are: a biography of Langston Hughes, with translations of poems by Hughes; an essay entitled De la littérature négrière à la Négritude; a collection of Afro-Amerindian folk-tales, called La moisson des trois domaines and which will incorporate Veillées Noires; a poem: Dernière Escale; and an anthology of Brazilian poets and a study of the contribution of the African of the New World to European literature and culture.

(1) Rapport No. 11 348, Assemblée Nationale Française, Année 1950.

(2) Information supplied by Damas.

(3) Rapport No. 11 348, sur les incidents survenus en Côte d'Ivoire, établi par M. Damas, Abidjan, 1965.

Chapter Three. Negritude or the theme of race in Damas' work.

ET BLACK-LABEL
pour ne pas changer
Black-Label à boire
à quoi bon changer (1)

We have stated that what is called the Negritude movement in literature consisted in the emergence of certain themes in the writing of black French-speaking writers after 1930. The themes of Negritude occupy a part of two of Damas' poetic works, Pigments and Black-Label, and we propose to draw as well upon his prose writings where they complement or amplify these themes.

Negritude as a literary movement perhaps remains primarily a Caribbean manifestation, and some of the preoccupations of the writers of the New World are necessarily absent from the work of the African-born writers associated with Negritude, or at any rate do not loom as large in their writing. One such theme is the Slave Trade.

In Retour de Guyane Damas recalls that the policy of bringing slaves from Africa to the New World was not without its humanitarian motives:

A cette époque . . . Monseigneur Berthélmy de las Casas avait lancé son fameux axiome: "Le travail d'un seul nègre vaut celui de quatre Indiens". Ce Prélat sévillan qui avait dessein de sauver les Américains du prochain massacre habituel, réussit à coup sûr: il sauva effectivement un certain nombre de fois quatre Indiens de la mort physiologique ou morale. (2)

(At this time Mgr. de las Casas had already delivered his famous axiom: "One Negro can do the work of four Indians". This Sevillian Prelate whose intention it was to save the "Américains" from the next routine massacre, certainly succeeded: he did in fact manage to save a certain number of times four Indians from physical or spiritual death.) (3)

It is this death, reserved for the imported slaves, which Damas laments in his often-quoted poem where he evokes the first traumatic encounter between slave-trader and African, the brutal uprooting and the prolonged echoes of this event:

(1) AND BLACK-LABEL
for the sake of not changing
Black-Label to drink
why bother changing (L.-G. Damas, Black-Label, p. 9.)

(2) Retour de Guyane, p. 22.

(3) It seems that the Church was as yet in some doubt as to whether to decree unto the Negro a soul, and in the interim, (as indeed thereafter) he was expendable.

← Ils sont venus ce soir où le

tam

tam

roulait de

rythme

en

rythme

la frénésie

des yeux

la frénésie des mains

la frénésie

des pieds de statues

DEPUIS

combien de MOI MOI MOI

sont morts

depuis qu'ils sont venus ce soir où le

tam

tam

roulait de

rythme

en

rythme

la frénésie

des yeux

la frénésie

des mains

la frénésie

des pieds de statues (1)

(They came that evening as the

tom

tom

was rolling

into

rhythm

after rhythm

the frenzy

of eyes

frenzy of hands

frenzy

of statue-feet

AND SINCE

oh how many the death of ME of ME of ME

since they came that evening as the

tom

tom

was rolling

into

rhythm

after rhythm

the frenzy

(1) 'Ils sont venus ce soir', Pigments, p. 11.

of eyes
frenzy
of hands
frenzy
of statue-feet)

Materially and psychologically, slavery did not end with any Act of Emancipation. A major preoccupation of all of Damas' writing is the continuing abject poverty of the masses of the French Caribbean, the rigid structure of a society which concentrated all wealth and privilege in the hands of a few, condemning the majority of the people to a position not far from that which they occupied under slavery. In Retour de Guyane, pointing to the widespread necessity of child labour, his comment is bitter:

Que ce soit par wagonnets circulant sur la voie ferrée, sur brouettes, ettes, sur charrettes, voitures, [l'enfant] est apte à tirer, pousser, traîner tous les véhicules.

Bien sûr, ce n'est qu'un négriillon! (1)

... Mais alors, qu'y-a-t'il de changé depuis Schoelcher? (2)
Je voudrais bien qu'un des savants discoureurs des commémorations au mausolée de l'Abolitioniste veuille bien me l'expliquer.(3)

(Be it by wagons running on the railway, on wheelbarrows, carts, carriages, [children] are used for drawing, pushing, dragging all kinds of vehicles.

Of course, they're only picanninnies!

... But then what is the great change from Schoelcher's time? I should very much like one of the learned speechifiers at the commemorative ceremonies before the Abolitionist's tomb to explain this to me.)

Equally disquieting to Damas is the ~~xxxx~~ lasting scar on the mentality of the descendants of slaves. This is the moral death which enslavement brought. The 'liberated' slave remained a subjugated creature, his spirit broken. It is as though he awakens with difficulty from a long nightmare:

(1) The passage calls to mind the beginning of the poem by the Guadeloupean poet Guy Tirolien 'Prière d'un petit enfant nègre' (Prayer of a little Negro child):

'Seigneur je suis très fatigué

Je suis né fatigué ...'

(Lord I am very tired

I was born tired ...) - G. Tirolien in: L.-G. Damas, Poètes ~~del~~ d'expression française, p. 54.

(2) Victor Schoelcher, (1804-1893) French statesman, chief advocate of ~~del~~ abolition of slavery in the French colonies.

(3) Retour de Guyane, p. 135.

Ils me l'ont rendue
la vie
plus lourde et lasse

Mes aujourd'hui ont chacun sur mes jadis
de gros yeux qui roulent de rancœur
de honte

Les jours inexorablement
tristes
jamais n'ont cessé d'être
à la mémoire
de ce que fut
ma vie tronquée

Va encore
mon hébétude
du temps jadis
de coups de corde nouveaux
de corps calcinés
de l'orteil au dos calcinés
de chair morte
de tisons
de fer rouge
de bras brisés
sous le fouet qui se déchaine
sous le fouet qui fait marcher la plantation
et s'abreuver de sang de mon sang de sang la sucrerie
et la bouffarde du commandeur crâner au ciel(1)

(My life they have left
my life
a limp and tired load

My each today turns back upon my long ago
eyes of rebuke rolling with rancour
with shame

The days inexorably
dismal
never have ceased to be
a memorial
to what once was
my mutilated life

(1) 'La complainte du nègre' (The Negro's complaint), Pigments, p. 45.

Still today
 my stupor
 of time past
 the cracks of cords knotted
 the scorched bodies
 bodies scorched from top to toe
 the dead flesh
 the firebrands
 the red-hot iron
 the bones breaking
 under the whip turned loose
 under the whip that drives the plantation
 and stokes the sugar-mill with blood my blood with blood
 and sends the overseer's pipe-smoke swaggering skyward)

But Damas has no such sympathy for those of ~~this~~ his countrymen whose prolonged enslavement is voluntary, the would-be bourgeoisie:

Ceux dont l'attitude immuable d'esclaves
 insulte à la sagesse antique et belle
 de leurs propres Anciens ... (1)

(They whose immutable posture of slaves
 insults the ancient and beautiful wisdom
 of their own Ancients ...)

Damas' choicest darts of sarcasm are reserved for the members of the bourgeoisie de couleur, the educated classes of the French Caribbean, whom he designates more than once as 'nos négriers nègres' ⁽²⁾ (our Negro Negro-Slave-Traders). In Retour de Guyane, in a passing reference to his mission among the Bush Negroes, he takes the opportunity of contrasting the proudly independent spirit of these latter with the ingratiating behaviour of the bourgeois:

(1) Black-Label, p. 17. This recalls a proposition made by one of the young Martiniquans writing in Légitime Défense (see Ch. 1, pp. 14-17):

'Un documentaire cinématographique sur la formation de la bourgeoisie de couleur française, si les vitesses étaient augmentées à une échelle suffisamment folle, montrerait le dos courbé de l'esclave noir devenant ~~l'éc~~ l'échine à courbettes du bourgeois coloré, distingué et salueur à qui dans l'inappréciable intervalle de deux images auraient poussé un complet veston et un chapeau melon.' (A film documentary on the formation of the French coloured bourgeoisie would show, if the projection were speeded-up to a sufficiently dizzy rate, the bent figure of the black ~~slave~~ becoming the bowing figure of the coloured bourgeois, distinguished ^{he} and expert in homage - in the imperceptible interval between two images, ^{he} has grown a ~~msuit~~ and bowler-hat.) - J. Monnerot, 'Note touchant la bourgeoisie de couleur française', in Légitime Défense, Paris, 1932, No. 1, p. 3.

(2) 'Misère noire', p. 342.

subi

...ceux de leurs congénères qui, après avoir subi l'esclavage, donnent dans une des formes les plus inquiétantes du masochisme et qui, perdant toute dignité, essaient de se composer une allure de petits-fils de Gaulois ... (1)

(those of their kind who, after submitting to slavery, now practise one of the most disquieting forms of masochism, and shedding all dignity strive to comport themselves like grandsons of Gauls ...)

But their behaviour, apart from its potential comedy, had lamentable consequences for the whole of French West Indian society. A theme to which Damas gives much attention is the tragic fact of what he calls 'la trahison de nos clercs' (2) (the betrayal of our learned). The educated classes of the French Caribbean, in their assiduous pursuit of whiteness, abdicated the social role which their education imposed upon them, indeed constituted a firm obstacle to social progress:

... avec une duplicité qui fait chaque jour place à un tranquille cynisme, ces nègres, bourgeois français de la onzième heure, composent une franc-maçonnerie coloniale aux sentiments plus conservateurs, plus réactionnaires, plus racistes que les bourgeois blancs eux-mêmes ... (3)

(with a duplicity that is being steadily succeeded by a complacent placent cynicism, these Negroes, eleventh-hour French bourgeois, form a colonial free-masonry with sentiments more conservative, more reactionary, more racist than those of the white bourgeois themselves.)

In Pigments there is very little anger against the figure who has come to be known as 'le bon nègre' (the good Negro), the downtrodden Negro fatalistically resigned to the place allotted him. Damas' attitude is for the most part sympathetic. In one poem he does call for an end to what he sees as the Negro's prostitution of himself:

Trêve de blues
de martèlements de piano
de trompette bouchée
de folie claquant des pieds
à la satisfaction du rythme

(1) Op. cit., p. 9.

(2) 'Price-Mars, le père du Haïtianisme', Présence Africaine, June-Sept. 1960, Nos. 32-33, p. 177.

(3) 'Misère noire', p. 347.

Trêve de séances à tant le swing
 autour de rings
 qu'énervent
 des cris de fauves

Trêve un instant
 d'une vie de bon enfant...(1)

(Let up with the blues
 with hammering on pianos
 with muted trumpets
 with mad-tapping feet
 gone on the rhythm

Let up with the showings at such and such the swinging
 round ringsides
 hysterical
 with jungle cries

Let up for one moment
 with the good-dog existence ...)

Yet in Pigments Damas envisages imminent revolution - the black man will one day no longer be content with his position of inferiority. The present untenable state of affairs will of itself sooner or later produce an upheaval:

Ils ont si bien su faire
 si bien su faire les choses
 les choses
 qu'un jour nous avons tout
 nous avons tout foutu de nous-mêmes
 tout foutu de nous-mêmes en l'air

Il ne faudrait pourtant pas grand'chose
 pourtant pas grand'chose
 pas grand'chose
 pas grand'chose (2)

(They fixed up things so good
 so good they fixed it up
 so good
 that one day one day everything
 all by ourselves we damn well blew
 we damn well blew up everything

(1) 'Trêve' (Let up), Pigments, p. 21. Poem reproduced in full in the Appendix, p.

(2) 'Ils ont', Pigments, p. 71.

.....
 Wouldn't take much anyway
 not much anyway
 not much
 not much)

In Retour de Guyane he hints more than once that the black masses of the French Caribbean might at any moment be roused to take their fate into their own hands:

... il ne faut pas que le Français de la Métropole se retourne avec fureur contre toute la race noire ... lorsque quelque population, au hasard d'un caprice diplomatique, aura été conviée à s'exprimer directement. Que le Français prête l'oreille à cette avertissement: il peut y avoir des Sarres africaines et même ~~des~~ d'autres Cubas en Amérique. (1)

(let not the Frenchman of the Metropolis turn against the whole of the black race in a furious backlash ... when some population, at the occasion of a diplomatic whim, is called upon to express itself directly. Let the Frenchman heed this warning: there can be African Saars and even other Cubas in America.)

But in Black-Label, published in 1956, the theme of slavery and its extension in the degradation of his people again occupies a large place, and here his sympathy is strained.

The spectacle presented by the French Caribbean territories was indeed a depressing one. Those who had assumed the role of champions of their cause had found that their fervour had no echo among those they championed. Aimé Césaire, after years as Martinique's deputy to the National Assembly, laments his failure to arouse the indignation of his constituents, seemingly doomed to perpetual slavery:

mon peuple
 quand
 hors des jours étrangers
 germeras-tu une tête bien tienne sur tes épaules renouées
 et ta parole

le congé dépêché aux traîtres
 aux maîtres
 le pain restitué la terre lavée
 la terre donnée

(1) Op. cit., p. 85.

quand
 quand donc cesseras-tu d'être le jouet sombre
 au carnaval des autres
 ou dans les champs d'autrui
 l'épouvantail désuet...(1)

(my people
 when
 outside of foreign days
 will you sprout a head truly yours on your shoulders tied together
 /again
 and your word

dispatching leave to the traitors
 to the masters
 restoring the bread washing the land
 giving the land

when
 when say will you cease to be the dark toy
 in the carnival of others
 or in the fields of others
 the antiquated scarecrow...)

The French West Indies remained deep in its moral torpor, unaffected by the wind of change blowing from other parts of the black world. For by now Senghor, the colleague of Césaire and Damas, was leading his country Senegal to independence; and elsewhere in French Africa decolonization was proceeding. In that year that Black-Label was published, the first conferences were being held with regard to the future federation of the British West Indies, a step towards independence, and in the next year Ghana was to be the first of the British colonies in Africa to accede to independence.

The French Caribbean meanwhile showed no aspiration towards any ~~kind~~ degree of autonomy. In 1946, the year after Senegal had attained to self-rule, the people of Martinique, Guadeloupe and Guyane had accepted ~~with~~ with enthusiasm the proposal to bind them even closer to the Metropolis by making them 'départements d'outre-mer' (overseas departments). Thus they continued to exist, departments of France in terms of political bonds, but the poor relations, hardly less neglected and poverty-stricken. A prophet has no honour in his own country - the Negritude movement formed the groundwork of the movements for independence in French Africa, which

(1) A. Césaire, 'Hors des jours étrangers', Ferrements, Paris, Seuil, 1960.

means that the anger of long-exported and alienated Africans, while efficacious in sweeping a large tract of the African continent with revolt, is yet to budge the relatively microscopic societies which produced the ~~in~~ founders of Negritude.

In Black-Label Damas brings a new dimension to the theme of slavery. Without minimizing the guilt of the European slave-trader, he recalls the fact that the prosperity of the Slave-Trade was due in part to the complacency or complicity of fellow Africans:

... Ceux qui permirent le déracinement de DEUX CENT
CINQUANTE MILLIONS des leurs

Ceux qui ordonnèrent les razzias
ceux qui obéirent à l'ordre de razzias
ceux qui dépistèrent les razziés

Ceux dont les Pères vendirent les fils à l'encan
et les fils à leur tour la Terre-Mère
ceux dont les frères donnèrent si gentiment la chasse
à leurs frères

Ceux qui se laissèrent prendre à ce jeu de famille ...(1)

(They who allowed the uprooting of TWO HUNDRED
AND FIFTY MILLION of their own

They who ordered the hunting-raids
they who obeyed the order to raid
they who tracked down the raided

They whose Fathers sold their sons by auction
and the sons in their turn the Mother-Land
they whose brothers so obligingly went a-hunting for to catch
their brothers

They who let themselves be caught at this family-game ...)

Even when Damas in Black-Label recalls the worst indignities and cruelties which the slaves suffered at the hands of the traders, one has the impression that this is less an attack on Europe than a sort of cathartic evocation for the benefit of his countrymen. He hopes to shame his people into ridding themselves of the last marks of this humiliating experience:

(1) Black-Label, p. 17.

... Ceux dont les Ancêtres étampés
 fleurdelisés
 marqués au fer rouge
 aux lettres du navire au Large
 puis parqués
 enchaînés
 rivés
 cadenassés
 et calés
 furent bel et bien du voyage
 sans air
 sans eau
 sans fin

Ceux dont les Ancêtres furent jetés au cours du voyage
 sans fin
 sans eau
 sans air

Ceux dont les Ancêtres
 eurent la chair tout brûlée à vif
 au-dessus des seins
 sur les omoplates
 sur le gras du bras ...(1)

(They whose Ancestors
 stamped
 fleur-de-lysed
 marked by the red-hot iron
 with the letters of the ship out at Sea
 then parked
 chained
 riveted
 padlocked
 clamped
 were well and truly on their way
 without air
 without water
 without end

They whose Ancestors were thrown overboard on the way
 the way
 without end
 without water
 without air

They whose Ancestors
 had their flesh all burnt alive
 above the breasts
 on the shoulder-blades
 on the thick part of the arm ...)

(1) Black-Label, p. 19.

For the self-contempt inculcated into the slave in order to assure his acceptance of his position continues, hardly impaired, in his descendants, and with the same effect. Damas compiles a whole catalogue of terms of ~~xx-~~ ~~xxx~~ self-deprecation to be found in the Créole dialect:

... Ceux qui se traitent eux-mêmes
de sauvages
sales nègres
soubarous
bois-mitan
grôs-sirop
guinains
congos
moudongues
fandangués
nangues ... (1)

(They who call themselves names like
savage
dirty nigger
jungle-man
bush-people
molasses
Guinea
Congo
Moudong
Fandang
Nango...)

Damas hints that the exaggerated religiosity of his people,⁽²⁾ played upon by the Church, is one of the causes of their submission:

... ~~Ceux qui comptent les étoiles~~
Spoo — Ceux qui se signent de grâce et d'effroi à l'étoile
qui file

Ceux qui lisent dans les nuages

Ceux qui remercient le Ciel à tout vent

Ceux satisfaits d'eux-mêmes
qui se contentent de peu
se contentent de rien

(1) Black-Label, p. 16. 'Soubarou' is a Créole corruption of 'sous l'arbre' (under the tree) - the term refers in Martinique to the descendants of runaway slaves who continue to live in the seclusion of the bush. 'Bois-mitan' (middle-of-the-bush) has the same meaning. The last five terms are the names of African tribes, it being among the gravest of insults to be likened to an African.

(2) 'La religiosité est assurément le seul terrain sur lequel Petit Bourgeois, Jeune Citadin et Homme Rural s'entendent comme oiseaux en cage'. (Religiosity is certainly the one ground upon which Petty-Bourgeois, Young Town-dweller and Rural Man come together like birds in a cage.) Retour de Guyane, p. 82.

.....

Ceux dont la sainte résignation n'a d'égale
 que le sacré mépris de l'Eglise où le Curé préfère
 au blanc de blanc catholique et romain
 un cul-sec de coeur de chauffe
 des isles à sucre
 des isles à rhum
 des isles à mouches
 des isles à miel
 des isles à
 des isles à mènes
 ainsi soient-elles
 ainsi soit-il
 Amen ...(1)

(They who count the stars

They who cross themselves for grace and for terror at the shoot-
 ing star

They who read the clouds

They who thank Heaven at every turn

They who are awright
 happy enough enough with little
 happy enough with nothing

.....

They whose holy resignation has only one match
 the blessed scorn of the Church where the priest prefers
 to the very and Catholic white sacrificial
 a bottoms-up of white rum from
 the sugar-isles
 the rum-isles
 the fly-isles
 the honey-isles
 the-isles
 the amen-isles
 and so be they
 and so be it
 Amen ...)

Damas, introducing the poetry of a new generation of black writers of
 the New World, notes with satisfaction that they have kept alive

(1) Black-Label, pp. 21-23.

le souvenir du déracinement, de la traite, du martyrologe enduré, le sentiment du crime commis contre une race d'hommes ravalés au niveau de bêtes de somme, de bêtes de trait, la trace qu'a laissée l'esclavage. (1)

(the memory of the uprooting, of the Slave-Trade, of the martyrdom endured, the sense of a crime having been committed against a race of men reduced to the level of beasts of burden, draught-beasts, the mark which slavery has left.)

For Slavery is no mere history-book memory of statistics, a superannuated balance-sheet which it were best now to erase, as decreed by Senghor in his pontifications from the other side of the Atlantic:

Nous avons tout oublié comme nous savons le faire: les deux cent millions de morts de la Traite des Nègres, les violences de la Conquête, les humiliations de l'Indigénat. Nous n'en avons pas retenu que les apports positifs. (2)

(We have forgotten everything, as we are capable of doing: the two hundred million dead in the Negro Slave Trade, the violence of the Conquest, the humiliations suffered by the Native population. Of all this we have retained nothing but the positive gains.)

There can be no question of forgetting Slavery while the quality of the lives of millions of people today continues to be the direct result of Slavery, while the maiming social and economic injustice upon which Slavery was based is still rampant in these societies. There is no apology to be made for wishing to cry out against this looming fact of our history, this pressing reality of our existence. The facile 'racist' epithet has been conferred upon Damas in the same way that it is dished out today to so many who in their ~~xxxx~~ racial revolt can find no room for apology. There is no apology to be made for a poem such as this:

Si ce n'est, son sentiment de race d'effraie
attent qu'un salon aboyant la nuit

(1) L.-G. Damas, in Nouvelle somme de poésie du monde noir, Paris, Présence Africaine, 1966, p. 355.

(2) L.-S. Senghor, Négritude et Humanisme, Paris, Seuil, 1964, p. 9.

Si souvent mon sentiment de race m'effraie
 autant qu'un chien aboyant la nuit
 une mort prochaine
 quelconque
 je me sens prête à écumer toujours de rage
 contre ce qui m'entoure
 contre ce qui m'empêche
 à jamais d'être ~~un homme~~
 un homme

Et rien
 rien ne saurait autant calmer ma haine
 qu'une belle mare
 de sang
 faite
 de ces coutelas tranchants
 qui mettent à nu
 les mornes à rhum (1)

(Often so often my sense of race scares me
 like a dog in the night barking
 news of death coming
 to someone
 I feel that I shall never cease to foam with rage
 at all that surrounds me
 at all that prevents me
 forever from being
 a man

And nothing
 nothing would calm my hate
 like a goodly sea
 of blood
 made
 with those keen-edged cutlasses
 that whisk clean
 our rum-bearing slopes)

When we abolish hate from the range of human emotions we shall first have succeeded in abolishing the wrongs which provoke it. And there is a poignant twist to Damas' 'racism'; in this passage from his love-poetry the imagery of 'Si souvent' returns:

... je dis tout
 et je dis
 mon dernier rêve

(1) P 'Si souvent', Pigments, p. 47.

La nuit dernière
 au beau mitan du Ciel
 des Isles
 un soleil rouge de feu rouge à brûler vif
 des torsos et torsos et torsos et torsos nus
 des bacouas
 des bacouas des bacouas en bataille
 des pantalons au trois quarts retroussés
 des coutelas flambants neufs
 au lieu de belles cannes
 coupaient
 coupaient des théories de têtes
 de têtes
 de têtes
 de têtes blondes
 comme la vôtre
 mon bel amour (1)

(I will tell all
 and I will tell
 my latest dream

Last night
 smack in the centre of the Sky
 of-the Islands
 a red sun fire-red fit to burn you alive
 torsos torsos torsos torsos bare
 strawhats
 strawhats strawhats in battle
 pants rolled up three-quarters
 cutlasses flaming new
 instead of good cane
 were chopping down
 were chopping down files of heads
 heads
 heads
 heads blond
 like yours
 oh my beautiful love)

The fact remains that in Negritude poetry Damas' is the most bitter towards the white world. The works of the three leading poets, Damas, Césaire and Senghor, can be taken together, ~~as~~ under more than one aspect, as a kind of spectrum of Negritude. Senghor may be seen as reflecting the African expression of Negritude, where revolt and bitterness do not occupy a very large place and were quickly superseded by the present confident flowering of French African literature. The African writers, like Senghor,

(1) Black-Label, p. 41.

had the benefit of an upbringing which provided a firm grasp of their ancestral culture, so that assimilation could become positive enrichment rather than alienation from self.

Among the Caribbean writers bitterness is keener, in part because of their sense of having ~~been~~ deprived of a heritage. But the further ~~Anglo~~ difference of degree of bitterness between Damas and Césaire is significant. Césaire was born into the vast impoverished lower class of Martinique, the class with whom rests the residue of African culture to be found in French West Indian society. Césaire's childhood was hard, but he was not brought up in the frustrating atmosphere of hyper-respectability and inauthenticity to which Damas was subjected. An interesting comparison can be drawn by quoting from their respective works passages on their childhood. Damas recalls the voice of his mother:

... Il m'est revenu que vous n'étiez encore pas
à votre leçon de vi-o-lon
Un banjo
vous dites un banjo
comment dites-vous
un banjo
vous dites bien
un banjo
Non monsieur
vous saurez qu'on ne souffre chez nous
ni ban
ni jo
ni gui
ni tare
les mûlatres ne font pas ça
laissez donc ça aux nègres (1)

(...It occurs to me that you were not
at your vi-o-lin lesson again
A banjo
you said a banjo
what did you say
a banjo
you did say
a banjo
No my good man
I'll teach you that in this house
we put up with neither
ban
nor jo
nor gui
nor tar
mulattoes are not given to those things
leave that to the negroes

Césaire describes the Christmas festivities in which he participated as a child, and the scene inside 'une petite église pas intimidante' ⁽¹⁾ (a little church that was not intimidating):

... Et ce ne sont pas seulement les bouches qui chantent,
mais les mains, mais les pieds, mais les fesses, mais
les sexes, et la créature toute entière qui se liquéfie ~~en~~
en sons, voix et rythme. (2)

(... And not only mouths singing, but hands, but feet, but
buttocks, but genitals, and the whole creature lique-
fied into sounds, voice and rhythm.)

Senghor meanwhile ~~xxxxxx~~ presents fondly idyllic evocations of his African childhood. (3)

Senghor and Damas stand at opposite poles - while Senghor has come to be regarded as the symbol of reconciliation among this group of writers, Damas is seen as Negritude's poet of anger. Apart from the factor of character or temperament, Damas' propensity to bitterness stems also from a lasting feeling of having been cheated out of himself. A recurrent theme in his ~~po~~ poetry is the frustration of his childhood in which he sees himself as having been ~~systematically~~ estranged from his own authenticity, in the name of assimilation to European culture. In one passage he recalls how he envied the freedom enjoyed by other children:

... Désirs comprimés

Les vacances toujours proches à Rémire ⁽⁴⁾
où les Cousins parlaient si librement patois
crachaient si aisément par terre
sifflaient si joliment un air
lâchaient si franchement un rot
et autres choses encore
sans crainte d'être
jamais mis au pain sec
ni jetés au cachot

Désirs comprimés ... (5)

...Hankerings repressed

-
- (1) A. Césaire, Cahier, p. 34.
(2) A. Césaire, op. cit., p. 35.
(3) See poem quoted in Appendix, p.
(4) Rémire - country district of Guyane.
(5) Black-Label, p. 64.

The holidays ever near in Remire
 where the Cousins so freely chattered in patois
 so easily spat on the ground
 so prettily whistled a tune
 so openly let out a belch
 and more things yet
 with no fear of ever being
 put on dry bread
 or thrown into the dark-room

Hankerings repressed ...)

Damas was never moved to write anything in the nature of a 'fraternity poem' to dispel the possible suspicion of racism. Almost all the other Negritude writers declare within their poetry, side by side with their revolt, their desire for racial harmony. In Damas' poetry there is no such declaration to be found. But here and there in his other writings are passages which make nonsense of the view of Damas as a maniacal bigot preaching black racism, as in his article 'Misère noire', for example, where he ~~has~~ recognizes the desirability of solidarity between black and white 'masses'. He draws attention to the fact that the French people in 1794 and 1848 attempted to extend the benefits of their revolutions to the colonies, but that these benefits were subsequently nullified by the action of succeeding governments:

chaque fois que les masses françaises prennent elles-mêmes en main la conduite de leur destin, pour un temps si court soit-il, elles n'ont jamais manqué d'exiger l'égalité pour leurs frères de couleur. (1)

(each time that the French masses take into their own hands the conduct of their affairs, for however short a time, they have never failed to demand equality for their coloured brothers.)

Further on he argues:

[il faut] rejeter définitivement toutes tendances à trouver dans une sorte de contre-racisme la solution au problème noir français. Toute l'histoire coloniale montre la race noire solidaire dans son destin à la masse française.

Il faut toujours se garder de confondre la France - précisément celle qui ne perd pas une occasion de se proclamer l'amie des noirs, sans perdre par ailleurs une occasion de les maintenir impitoyablement en esclavage - avec une autre France qui n'a pas le droit à la

(1) Op. cit., p. 334.

parole, qui ne perd jamais une occasion, même dans les jours les plus tragiques de son histoire, d'affirmer efficacement sa fraternité fût-ce brutalement, si nécessaire. (1)

(/One must/ reject once and for all any tendency to see in a kind of counter-racism the solution to the French problem of colour. The whole of colonial history shows that the fate of the black race unites it in solidarity with the French masses.

One must always beware of confusing France - to be precise that France which misses no opportunity of proclaiming itself the friend of the Blacks, otherwise missing no opportunity of maintaining them pitilessly in slavery - with another France which has not the right to self-expression, which never misses an opportunity, even in the most tragic hours of its history, of effectively affirming its fraternity, brutally if necessary.)

In another article he dissociates himself and his colleagues in Negritude from any hint of this ~~xx~~ counter-racism:

Surtout qu'on nous entende bien: nous nous découvrons nègres - tout en nous gardant de tout racisme - dénonçant par avance, les premiers, on ne sait quel racisme à rebours que d'aucuns n'auraient pas manqué de prôner.(2)

(Above all let there be no misunderstanding: we discovered that we were Negroes, yet at the same time eschewing any racism - we were the first to condemn in advance a sort of inverted racism which some would readily have preached.)

For Damas sees the function of Negritude as:

la recherche de l'égalité, la suppression des préjugés, l'abolition définitive de toutes les oppressions, de tous les esclavages, de tous les racismes, aussi bien blanc que noir! (3)

(the pursuit of equality, the suppression of prejudices, the final abolition of all oppressions, of all slaveries, of all racisms, white as well as black!)

One of the essential themes of the Negritude movement was the attack on the dehumanization of Western civilization, an attack begun by elements

(1) Op. cit., p. 340.

(2) L.-G. Damas, 'Price-Mars, le père du Haïtianisme', p. 177.

(3) L.-G. Damas, Nouvelle somme de poésie du monde noir, p. 356.

in Europe itself. The Negritude poets presented as it were a revised scale of worth whereby it was precisely the 'inferiority' of their race which constituted a certain merit over the civilization they had been taught to revere.⁽¹⁾ For them the black race held in reserve an essential humanity lost to European man as his civilization advanced. Damas' statement of this idea is perhaps somewhat crude, and shocked one critic into calling it 'defiant nonsense'.⁽²⁾ Against the European's vision of himself as Man perfected, Damas presents the Negro as the embodiment of primal humanity:

... car la beauté est nègre
 et nègre la sagesse
 car l'endurance est nègre
 et nègre le courage
 car la patience est nègre
 et nègre l'ironie
 car le charme est nègre
 et nègre la magie
 car l'amour est nègre
 et nègre le déhanchement
 car la danse est nègre
 et nègre le rythme
 car l'art est nègre
 et nègre le mouvement
 car le rire est nègre
 car la joie est nègre
 car la paix est nègre
 car la vie est nègre ...⁽³⁾

(for beauty is negro
 and negro wisdom
 for endurance is negro
 and negro courage
 for patience is negro
 and negro irony
 for charm is negro
 and negro magic
 for love is negro
 and negro bouncy walking
 for dancing is negro
 and negro rhythm

(1) Passages by Césaire and Senghor on this theme are quoted in the Appendix; Césaire: Extract from the Cahier; Senghor: 'A New York', App. pp. , respectively.

(2) G. Moore, Seven African writers, p. xix.

(3) Black-Label, p. 52.

for art is negro
and negro movement
for laughter is negro
for joy is negro
for peace is negro
for living is negro)

Damas often points to what he considers to be a lurking barbarity behind the refinements of Western civilization. More than once he uses the word 'théories' ⁽¹⁾ with reference to Europe's bad faith, the structure of rationalizing with which she supported her basest motives:

... les théories qu'ils assaisonnent
au goût de leurs besoins ... (2)

(their a-priorities flavoured
to taste according to their needs)

By many specious arguments Europe justified her inhumanity towards the other peoples of the earth. And now, at the time of Pigments, the stage was being set on the European continent itself for yet another grisly chapter of racism, in which the Jews were to be the victims. Damas suggests that Nazism is but one manifestation of a spirit liable to be unleashed elsewhere, should Hitler's enthusiasm spread:

A ce moment-là seul
comprendrez-vous donc tous
quand leur viendra l'idée
bientôt cette leur viendra
de vouloir vous en bouffer du nègre
à la manière d'Hitler
bouffant du juif
sept jours fascistes
sur
sept

A moment-là seul
comprendrez-vous donc tous
quand leur supériorité
s'étalera
d'un bout à l'autre de leurs boulevards
et qu'alors
vous les verrez
vraiment tout se permettre
ne plus se contenter de rire avec l'index inquiet
de voir passer un nègre

(1) This would correspond roughly with Césaire's 'alibis grandioses' - Cahier, p. 73.

(2) 'Solde', Pigments, p. 40. Poem reproduced in Appendix, p.

mais
 froidement matraquer
 mais
 froidement descendre
 mais
 froidement étendre
 mais froidement
 matraquer
 descendre
 étendre
 et
 couper leur sexe aux nègres
 pour en faire des bougies pour leurs églises (1)

(Then only then
 will you see then all of you
 when the fancy only takes them
 soon this fancy will take them
 to want to **stuff themselves with nigger**
like Hitler stuffing jew
 seven fascist days
 out of
 seven

Then only then
 will you see then all of you
 when their superiority
 spreads out along
 the length and breadth of their boulevards
 and then
 you see them
 really taking liberties
 not stop at giggling with a nervous forefinger
 to see a nigger passing
 but
 coldly bludgeon
 but
 coldly bring down
 but
 coldly lay out
 but coldly
 bludgeon
 bring down
 lay out
 and
 cut off niggers' genitals
 to make candles for their churches)

And as for the conflagration which he saw to be approaching once more,
 Damas wryly concludes that Western civilization, built up on a secular in-

(1) 'S.O.S.', Pigments, p. 49.

humanity, perhaps needs its element of barbarity in order to thrive:

Rien que pour le fonctionnement
d'usines à canons
obus
balles
la guerre
elle
elle va bientôt venir
s'enivrer encore à la marseillaise
de chair fumante

Et chaque Creusot
travaillera des nuits
des fours à bloc

Et tous les Schneiders
s'empliront les poches de billes
pour la roulette
grâce au fonctionnement nouveau
d'usines à canons
obus
balles ...(1)

(Just to get them going again
the factories that churn out
guns
shells
bullets
war
war is on its way
coming to drink itself giddy again
to the marseillaise
of smoking flesh

And all the Creusot works
for nights on end
will cram the furnaces full

And all the Schneiders
will fill their pockets
with balls
to play roulette
thanks to the factories' going again
the factories that churn out
guns
shells
bullets ...)

(1) 'Des billes pour la roulette' (Balls to play roulette), Pigments, p.72

But the critique of European civilization did not - could not - involve any real 'rejection' of Europe, any more than a modern European writer making these same criticisms effectively 'rejects' European civilization. Damas states the position of the Negritude generation:

Nous n'entendions nullement rejeter l'esprit de l'Occident. Nous voulions seulement l'utiliser à nous découvrir et à nous construire, comme la charrue d'Europe à cultiver la terre d'Afrique. (1)

(We had no intention of rejecting the spirit of the West. We wanted simply to use it to discover ourselves and to form ourselves, like the plough of Europe to cultivate ~~the~~ the soil of Africa.)

This is another statement of Senghor's dictum 'Assimiler, non être assimilés' (Assimilate, not be assimilated). Among the themes of Negritude it is perhaps the theme of assimilation which inspires the intensest lines of Damas' poetry.

In Retour de Guyane he devotes a large place to ~~the~~ discussing ~~of~~ the policy of assimilation. He expresses particular concern about the system of education which he sees as defeating the purpose of education:

Il ne saurait être question de donner au Guyanais, ni une conscience de soi-même, ni des possibilités de se développer dans un sens propre à ses tendances, à son milieu social, à sa race. Il est question bien au contraire de subjuger son coeur, son libre arbitre, son esprit.

Dans l'attente d'une libération physique et cérébrale, l'éducation continue d'être en Guyane un instrument de domination sournois mais certain. (2)

(There is no question of giving the Guyanese either self-awareness, or an awareness of the possibilities of developing himself along lines that correspond with his tendencies, with his social environment, with his race. It is a question, very much to the contrary, of subjugating his heart, his free will, his mind.

Until there is effected a physical and mental liberation, education in Guyane meanwhile continues to be a sly but certain instrument of domination.)

(1) 'Price-Mars, le père du Haïtianisme', p. 51.

(2) Op. cit., p. 97.

For education, under the assimilationist system, has the effect of convincing the colonized man of his own inferiority and of the necessity of measuring up to the inscrutable ideals proposed to him. Hence the existence of what amounts to psychological imbalance on the part of the Assimilated French West Indian, a phenomenon examined in detail by Franz Fanon in his study Peau noire, masques blancs.⁽¹⁾ This education, then, undermines rather than build:

l'éducation que reçoit le Guyanais est dépourvue de bases solides et tend forcément au déséquilibre de la pensée et du verbe.

Cette éducation ne comporte ni l'histoire, ni la géographie du Continent Américain où vit l'individu qui la reçoit, ni l'organisation sociale, ni les origines des premiers hommes qui habitèrent la région, encore moins la tragédie d'où naquit la réalité présente.

... Cette enseignement singulier se rapporte invariablement à un pays qui s'appelait la Gaule, aux habitants de ce pays, les Gaulois, à leur héroïsme dans l'espace, à leur incontestable autorité dans le temps, au respect qu'ils méritent, à leur humanité supérieure, à leur conception mystique de la race. On y sent sourdre le principe de l'inégalité des hommes. (2)

(the education which the Guyanese receives is lacking in solid foundations and leads of necessity to an imbalance of thought and of expression.

This education includes ~~***~~ neither the history nor the geography of the American continent upon which the individual being educated lives, neither the social organization nor the origins of the first men to inhabit the region, and far less the tragedy out of which the present reality was born.

... this remarkable instruction is invariably something to do with a country that used to be called Gaul, the inhabitants of this country, the Gauls, their heroism in space, their indisputable authority in time, the respect which they merit, their superior humanity, their mystical conception of race. Here one sees springing up the principle of the inequality of men.)

(1) 'Il ya chez l'homme de couleur tentative de fuir son individualité, de néantiser son être-là'. (There is in the coloured man a striving to flee his individuality - to annihilate his own presence.) F. Fanon, op. cit., p. 69

(2) Retour de Guyane, pp. 96-97.

And it is because of the assimilé's anxiety to justify himself by rigidly conforming to his colonizer's standards that the cultural efforts of the upper classes are sterile, their imagination ^{a/}pralyzed by what Damas likens to 'décalcomanie' ⁽¹⁾ (picture-transfers). In literature they hover timorously in the wake of metropolitan models: ⁽²⁾

Des conférences ont lieu. Invariablement, les sujets tournent autour de l'antique ou du solennel; classiques et romantiques sont fort à l'honneur. Sans doute, dans une cinquantaine d'années, les Guyanais s'occuperont-ils de l'époque qu'ils vivent actuellement. Dans l'attente, Racine, Molière, Musset, Vigny font tour à tour les frais de dissertations difficiles; conférences qui valent ce que vaut tout brigandage en matière littéraire. ⁽³⁾

(Lectures are held. The subjects invariably centre round the ancient or the solemn: the Classics and the Romantics are riding high. Doubtless, in about fifty years or so, the Guyanese will turn their attention to the age in which they are living at present. Meanwhile Racine, Molière, Musset, Vigny take turns at being the victims of difficult dissertations; lectures that are worth what all literary brigandage is worth.)

Damas contrasts the state of the arts among the upper classes with the vigorous culture to be found among the underprivileged masses, a culture which could flower richly if the condition of this class were improved, and the

(1) Poètes d'expression française, p. 9.

(2) The same observation is made by Etienne Léro in Légitime Défense: 'Le bourgeois antillais est ici plus méfiant que jamais. Son complexe d'infériorité le pousse dans les sentiers battus: "Je suis nègre, vous dira-t-il, il ne me sied point d'être extravagant."

De même qu'il refuse de voir dans la France d'aujourd'hui autre chose que la France de 89, le bourgeois antillais se refuse à adopter toute règle poétique que cent ans d'expériences blanches n'aient point sanctionnée.' (Here the West Indian bourgeois is more than ever on his guard. His inferiority complex pushes him into beaten paths: "I am a Negro", he will say to you, "it wouldn't do for me to make myself conspicuous."

Just as he refuses to see in the France of today anything but the France of 89, so the West Indian bourgeois refuses to adopt any poetic convention that has not been sanctioned by a hundred years of white experimentation.) - Quoted in Poètes d'expression française, p. 13.

(3) Retour de Guyane, p. 93.

gulf between the elite and the mass of the people closed:

La troisième catégorie est certainement de toutes la plus intéressante. C'est incontestablement là, dans les rangs de cette classe ennemi du tapage, que le destin viendra recruter les éléments qui dégageront un avenir logique de la Guyane.

... C'est encore chez eux que l'on retrouve les pièces d'un folklore d'une richesse incommensurable ... Leurs chansons, leurs danses, sont nettement de tradition africaine. D'eux, on peut attendre beaucoup. Ils sont naturels, spontanés, simples et forts de cette simplicité. (1)

(The third category is certainly the most interesting of all. It is indisputably there, in the ranks of this class that shrinks from hullabaloo, that destiny will eventually recruit the elements for the construction of a logical future for Guyane.

... Again it is among them that one finds samples of a folklore of immensurable richness ... Their songs, their dances are clearly of African origin. From them much can be expected. They are natural, spontaneous, simple, and strong because of this simplicity.)

He speaks of 'le fonds africain qui sommeille chez le plus européenisé des gens de couleur' ⁽²⁾ (the African core lying dormant in the most Europeanized of coloured people) and considers that no amount of assimilation is completely effective in 'whitening' the black man. Assimilation is a misguided policy, based on ^a lasting lack of understanding of the peoples ~~xx~~ on whom it is practised. Its premiss is that they are a kind of cultural table rase upon which 'Civilization' is to be imprinted, a gesture which offers returns of satisfaction to the Civilizer:

Ignorant la texture de la masse à assimiler, le Français, avec un certain élan, voit dans l'assimilation une réparation, la proclamation qu'il tient l'être en face pour un égal. Ce couronnement de son oeuvre n'est pas sans lui apporter une certaine satisfaction d'amour-propre. Ce qu'il ne distingue pas très clairement, c'est que le colonisé, qu'il veut assimiler, est et peut être un égal; mais qu'il est autre. (3)

(Ignorant of the quality of the mass to be assimilated, the Frenchman, borne on a kind of wave of enthusiasm, sees

(1) Op. cit., p. 80.

(2) Op. cit., p. 160.

(3) Op. cit., p. 161.

in assimilation a reparation, the proclamation that he considers the man before him to be his equal. This crowning of his work does afford a certain amount of satisfaction to his pride. What he does not perceive very clearly is that the man he has colonized, the ~~man~~ man he wishes to assimilate, is and can be an equal; but that he is another.)

In his poetry, Damas' protest against assimilation is bitter. He sees it as an indignity, a presumptuous condescension on the part of those who would 'civilize' him:

Se peut-il donc qu'ils osent
me traiter de blanchi
alors que tout en moi
aspire à n'être que nègre
autant que mon Afrique
qu'ils ont cambriolée...(1)

(But can they really dare
to write me down whitened
when all my being craves
to be nothing but negro
as negro as my Africa
that they have plundered ...)

The same idea is implicit in the title of the poem 'Solde' (2) where he steps back to contemplate with a wry smile the picture of himself, trussed up in the finery of his traditional masters, much as they would dress up a performing animal and teach it to imitate their mannerisms, down to the last elegant and meaningless formality.

In the last stanza of this poem Damas pursues to its logical conclusion the idea of assuming European civilization in toto. He arrives at a vision of complicity by association in the crimes of this civilization, its crimes against the other peoples of the earth. As we have seen, in Retour de Guyane he points out that education under the assimilationist system transmits into the mind of the colonized the world-view of the colonizer, even his ~~idea~~ idea of a hierarchy of races. The incongruity of this Damas underlines in another seemingly light-hearted poem:

(1) 'Blanchi' (Well-bleached), Pigments, p. 57.

(2) Repr. in full in the Appendix, p. . We take the title not in the sense of 'Balance-sheet' (E. Mphahlele, The African image, London, Faber and Faber, 1962, p. 26) nor 'wages' (G.R. Coulthard, Race and colour in Caribbean literature, London, Oxford University Press, 1962, p. 44), but in its other sense of 'remnants', 'left-overs', or, more colloquially, 'hand-me-downs'.

Mes amis j'ai valsé
 valsé comme
 jamais mes ancêtres
 les Gaulois
 au point que j'ai le sang
 qui tourne encore
 à la viennoise

Mes amis j'ai valsé
 valsé toute mon enfance
 vagabondant sur
 quelque Danube bleu
 Danube blanc
 Danube rouge
 Danube vert
 Danube rose
 Danube blanc
 rouge
 vert
 rose
 au choix

Mes amis j'ai valsé
 valsé
 follement valsé
 au point que souvent
 souvent
 j'ai cru tenir la taille-
 de tonton Gobineau
 ou de cousin Hitler
 ou du bon aryen qui mâchonne sa vieillesse
 sur quelque banc de square (1)

(Friends I have been waltzing
 waltzing fit
 to out-waltz my ancestors
 the Gauls
 so much that my blood
 still throbs
 in Viennese time

Friends I have been waltzing
 waltzing all my childhood
 straying along
 some Danube so blue
 Danube so white
 Danube so red
 Danube so green
 Danube so pink
 Danube so white

(1) 'Nuit blanche', Pigments, p. 55.

red
green
pink
as you like it

Friends I have been waltzing
waltzing
madly waltzing
so much that many a time
many a time
I thought that I was holding onto
Uncle Gobineau
or cousin Hitler
or the good Aryan munching away his old age
on some park bench)

Assimilation has made of him a superfluous incongruity. The French West Indian, brought to dissociate himself from his African past, indeed to feel shame at it, sees his justification in the extent of his assimilation to French culture. He comes to rest in the thought that he is a kind of black offshoot of the metropolitan culture, so that the recognition of the reality that he is not, in fact, descended from the Gauls is a moment of nakedness. The question of identity may never arise until he finds himself in the metropolis, in the midst of a people and of a civilization of which he is supposedly a part. Damas sees himself as a stranger to this civilization, for all his assimilation confined to its outer ~~fringes~~ fringes, yet alienated from himself. He is a faceless non-entity in borrowed clothes:

...pourquoi m'avoir décanté l'air
...et me priver du droit de m'afficher moi-même ...(1)

(... why have you drawn off my ways
... and why take away my right to make my own showing ...)

It is this feeling of rootlessness, of unoriginality, which largely dictates the contours of the ancestral land to which he now looks to provide him with a history and a justification. Sartre, in his study 'Orphée Noir', charts the 'mystical geography' of Negritude poetry:

... tous les poèmes de ce livre (sauf ceux qui ont ~~été écrits en~~ été écrits en Afrique) nous offriront la même géographie mystique. Un hémisphère; au plus bas, selon le premier de trois cercles concentriques, s'étend la terre de l'exil, l'Europe incolore; vient le cercle éblouissant des Iles et de l'enfance qui dansent la

(1) Black Label, p. 25.

ronde autour de l'Afrique; l'Afrique dernier cercle, nombril du monde, pôle de toute la poésie noire, l'Afrique éblouissante, incendiée, huileuse comme une peau de serpent, l'Afrique de feu et de pluie, torride et touffue, l'Afrique fantôme vacillant comme une flamme, entre l'être et le néant, plus vraie que les "éternels boulevards à flics" (1) mais absente, désintégrant l'Europe par ses rayons noirs et pourtant invisible, hors d'atteinte, l'Afrique, continent imaginaire. (2)

all the poems in this book (except those that were written in Africa) will present to us the same mystical geography. A hemisphere; at the bottom, following the first of three concentric circles, is spread out the land of exile, colourless Europe; then comes the dazzling circle of the islands dancing around Africa; Africa the last circle, navel of the world, pole of all black poetry, Africa shimmering, afire, oily like the skin of a serpent, Africa of fire and rain, torrid and bushy, Africa a phantom flickering like a flame, between being and non-being, truer than the "eternal boulevards crawling with cops", but absent, disintegrating Europe with its black rays and yet invisible, unattainable, Africa, imaginary continent.)

In Pigments Africa, lying far away clouded in nostalgic mists, is at one moment a kind of primeval Eden, a lost Paradise, where he was truly a man, a person in his own right:

... Rendez-moi mes poupées noires
que je joue avec elles
les jeux naïfs de mon instinct
resté à l'ombre de ses lois
recouvré mon courage
mon audace
redevenu moi-même

(1) This is taken from Damas' poem 'Un clochard m'a demandé deux sous', Pigments, p. 37: 'l'éternité de leurs/ boulevards à flics' (the eternity of their/ boulevards crawling with cops).

(2) J.-P. Sartre, 'Orphée Noir', p. xvi. An African writes:

'You are not a country, Africa
You are a concept
Fashioned in our minds, each to each
To hide our separate fears

To dream our separate dreams' (A. Nicol, 'The meaning of Africa' in A book of African verse, ed. by J. Reed and C. Wake, London, Heinemann, 1964, p. 45.

nouveau moi-même
 de ce que Hier j'étais
 hier
 sans complexité
 hier
 quand est venue l'heure du déracinement ...(1)

(... Give me back my dark dolls
 let me play with them
 play the artless games of my instinct
 beneath its overshadowing
 my courage regained
 my daring
 become myself again
 become myself anew
 myself that I was Yesterday
 yesterday
 free of complexity
 yesterday
 at the hour of the uprooting ...)

Elsewhere Africa becomes a potentially mighty force to be reckoned with, Langston Hughes' 'sleepy giant/ ... resting awhile',⁽²⁾ whose rise will vindicate her wronged children:

... Blanchi

Abominable injure
 qu'ils me paieront fort cher
 quand mon Afrique
 qu'ils ont cambriolée
 voudra la paix la paix rien que
 la paix ...(3)

((... Well-bleached

Abominable affront
 that they will pay for dearly
 when my Africa
 that they have plundered
 demands peace peace nothing but
 peace ...)

(1) 'Limbé', Pigments, p. 41. 'Limbé' is a Créole word for 'blues', depression. See poem in full in Appendix, p.

(2) L. Hughes, 'Africa', Selected Poems, New York, Knopf, 1959, p.284.

(3) 'Blanchi', Pigments, p. 41.

In Africa he finds proud ancestors to replace the Gauls of old. He finds culture with which he might identify himself, and which invests him with dignity to heal the humiliation of his borrowed clothes:

Les jours eux-mêmes
ont pris la forme
des masques africains
indifférents
à toute profanation
de chaux vive ...(1)

(The very days
have taken on
the shape of African masks
aloof from any
profanation
quicklime
showered ...)

Certain critics attack the West Indians for idealizing Africa in their poetry. Africa is indeed only a poetic myth, a symbol, in West Indian writing - it could hardly be otherwise. In fact Africa must have gathered its aura of myth in the minds of its exportees even before all concrete memory of the place had faded - there was, for instance, the belief among Haitian slaves that Africa (covered by the vague appellation 'Guinée') was a Heaven to which their souls would return when they died. The idealization of Africa in Negritude poetry warrants rather less harsh judgement than it has attracted. It is a harmless, even slightly pathetic myth that at no time threatened to become a mystification, and as we have recalled the feeling for Africa did not turn their attention away from the very real problems of their own societies.

In Black-Label there is a shift of emphasis. Whereas Pigments is a painful straining between the close and to him alien reality of Europe - 'leur smoking'^(2a) (their dinner-jacket); 'leur musée de chien d'hiver' (their dog-nose winter); 'leurs boulevards'^(2c) (their boulevards) - and the distant and irretrievable Africa - 'mon Afrique qu'ils ont cambriolée'⁽³⁾ (my Africa that they have plundered) - Black-Label is a homecoming. This

(1) 'Position', Pigments, p. 25. Poem in full in Appendix, p.

(2) Pigments: (a) 'Solde', p. 39; (b) 'Savoir-vivre', p. 65; (c) 'S.O.S.', p. 49. In each case the italics are ours.

(3) 'Blanchi', Pigments, p. 57.

work might be seen as Damas' Cahier d'un retour au pays natal. Black-Label is pervaded by the French Caribbean, with Guyane and Martinique floating in and out of the scenery, borne in upon refrains, on the notes of the 'flûte de bambou du Pâtre éveillé modulant la rengaine en sourdine' ⁽¹⁾ (bamboo-flute of the wakened Herdsman modulating the old refrain in muted tones on reminiscences, vignettes of West Indian life, glimpses of the landscape. The colourful wealth of place-names is a striking feature of the second half of the work. It is as though the poet, in evoking these places, drawing them out of absence by naming them, were doing so in order to immerse himself in the reality of their existence. ⁽²⁾ There is a sprinkling of Créole dictums and Creolisms throughout the book.

In Black-Label Africa retreats into the perspective of 'La Terre-Mère' ⁽³⁾ (The Mother-Country). There is no regretful contemplation of his lost past, but instead a jubilant reidentification with his countrymen (perhaps the only truly joyful note in Damas' poetry) from whom he was estranged in his childhood. ⁽⁴⁾ In the last section of Black-Label Damas seems to be consciously taking up the imagery of the first poem of Pigments, 'Ils sont venus ce soir' ⁽⁵⁾ where in the African village a dance is interrupted by

(1) Line of refrain occurring in Sections II and IV of Black-Label.

(2) 'Comme Anthée, chaque fois que je mets pied sur ma terre, je me sens reprendre des forces' (Like Antheus, each time I set foot on my soil, I feel that my strength is renewed) - Damas.

(3) Op. cit., pp. 17, 18.

(4) '...tes sens fermés au sens de la réalité ta réalité
... ton infirmité à pleinement jouir
intensément jouir
de tous ces riens qui font une âme euphémiquement
créole ...'

(... your senses shut to the sense of reality your reality
... your frailty that could not fully enjoy
intensely enjoy
all those trifles that make up a soul euphemistically
creole) - Black-Label, p. 61.

(5) Quoted on p. 54 of this chapter.

the arrival of the slave-traders. The drum which was silenced then is unbraced on the opposite shore and the dance begun again:

... où dégainé le Tambour-ka
 où débandé le tambour-ka
 enjambé le tambour-ka
 entouré le tambour-ka
 raisonné le tambour-ka
 cajolé le tambour-ka
 réchauffé le tambour-ka
 résonné le tambour-ka
 enivré le tambour-ka
 éreinté le tambour-ka
 essoufflé le tambour-ka
 et
 déchaîné le K a m o u g u é (1)
 le K a m o u g u é (1)
 (when unsheathing the drum
 when unbracing the drum
 bestriding the drum
 surrounding the drum
 persuading the drum
 cajoling the drum
 hotting-up the drum
 sounding the drum
 intoxicating the drum
 exhausting the drum
 winding the drum
 and
 loosed
 the K a m o u g a y)

The heritage of Africa still lives among his people, and he rejects the servility of his bourgeois predecessors to partake of this heritage:

...DIEU SOIT LOUE
 Il me suffit
 d'avoir deux pieds

 j'en aurais beaucoup
 beaucoup trop de douze
 douze pieds comptés pesés
 scandés d'un doigt
 toujours le même
 tout prêt à tout
 bon à couper ...(2)

(1) Black-Label, p. 78. The Kamougé is a Guyanese dance.

(2) Black-Label, p. 79.

... GOD BE PRAISED

All I need ~~to be~~
is two feet

It would be too many
too many for me twelve
twelve feet counted measured
scanned with a finger
always the same
ready-made all-purpose
cut along dotted line ...)

Black-Label begins with the affirmation of his mixed ancestry:

... Trois fleuves
trois fleuves coulent
trois fleuves coulent dans mes veines (1)

(... Three rivers
three rivers flow
three rivers flow in my veins)

This is also symbolic of the fact that he is the product of cultural crossing. He is 'afro-amerindian' ⁽²⁾ and culturally he is also inextricably European. The refrain running through the work establishes that his African ancestry will be his ballast, his foundation:

ET BLACK-LABEL
pour ne pas changer
Black-Label à boire
à quoi bon changer (3)

(AND BLACK-LABEL
for the sake of not changing
Black-Label to drink
why bother changing)

Strong in his Negritude, he can accept with equanimity what before was hopeless bastardy, namelessness. In Pigments the waltz, in the poem 'Nuit blanche', was an incongruous exercise and symbolic of the imposed European culture which he saw as transporting him away from his own reality. Here

(1) Black-Label, p. 9. The 'three rivers' which symbolize his mixed ancestry are the Oyapock, the Maroni and the Mahury, the three largest of the great network of rivers that intersects and irrigates Guyane like a rich bloodstream. The name 'Guyane' or 'Guyana' comes from an Amerindian word meaning 'land of the numberless rivers.'

(2) Black-Label, p. 84; Névralgies, p. 27.

(3) Black-Label, p. 9.

the Polish mazurka also symbolizes this culture in which he may now participate willingly, and not merely in spite of himself:

... Hiers-bleus-limbés⁽¹⁾ sans fards et sans dilemme
 jamais à pile ou face
 toujours à pile et face et pile et face et pile et face
 et pile et face et pile et face et pile et face et face
repiguée la mazurka (2)

(...Yesterdays-blues-dumps without masks and without dilemma
 never at heads or tails
 ever at heads and tails and heads and tails and heads and tails
 and heads and tails and heads and tails and heads and tails
 ahead(3))

In Névralgies he can speak of 'ma triple fierté de sang-mêlé'⁽⁴⁾ (my triple mixed-blood pride).

Negritude, in Damas' work, finds its most virulent expression. His racial ~~in~~ sentiment is a veritable 'black label', worn, often brandished, with defiant pride. Léon Damas is also probably the most assimilated of the Negritude poets. And thus it is that in the very loudness with which he vindicates his race and exalts his blackness, one overhears a hint of desperation, and a profound regret for which something of an analogy may be found in the albeit milder dismay of the American Langston Hughes who when he visited Africa was not accepted by Africans as being of their race, and explains ruefully: 'You see, unfortunately, I am not black.' (5)

(1) Poem entitled 'Limbé' quoted on p. 82 of this chapter.

(2) Black-Label, p. 81.

(3) Note on translation: the last 'face' means here 'about face', 'turn around and face'.

(4) Névralgies, p. 46.

(5) L. Hughes, The Big Sea, London, Hutchinson, 1941, p. 13. Hughes was a very light-skinned mixture of European, American Indian, Jewish and African strains - an American 'Négro'.

... l'âpre et rude et dur chemin
 qui mène
 non pas
 au CHRIST
 mais à Damas ...(1)

The danger of 'protest' or 'committed' writing is that it might come to dilute a writer's talent. It is understandable that many black writers feel ~~that~~ it would be an unforgivable luxury ever to 'step out of their skins' as it were and indulge their talents in themes which might more properly engage men whose skin-colour does not need vindicating. And it is probably true that the 'world market' of literature to a certain extent imposes upon the black writer the duty of 'colouring' his work if he is to receive attention. But one can be imprisoned by one's skin, and the question might pose itself as to what the fate of the protest writer would be if his cause were to vanish overnight. Would the poet ^{still} find words with which to move us?

It is possible that Damas' first impulse to write poetry was his need to give vent to the rage and the revolt of Pigments and to give form to feelings which would be less well ^{accomodated} in cold prose, such as the romantic nostalgia for Africa. It is equally possible that Pigments represents a detour in a course which he would have taken in any case but which had to be deferred because of the pressing business of revolt. For in Pigments one occasionally stumbles upon a poem which gives the odd impression that it must have fallen in from the 'outside'. These poems assure us that he is a poet in his own right, and that his poetic imagination extends beyond the frame of this revolt.

His next published book of poetry is Graffiti, which at first disconcerts because it is all but racially anonymous - the burning preoccupations of Pigments are totally absent. A few years later in Black-Label, which had been in preparation all the while, the theme of race returns, but much

(1) the rough and hard and harsh road
 that leadeth
 not to CHRIST

but to DAMAS (Black-Label, p. 12.) The name 'Damas' is the French form for Damascus. The ironic reference here is to St. Paul's encounter with Christ and his conversion, on the road to Damascus, where his mission was to have been the persecution of the Christians.

of the work is strongly personal. His latest work, Névralgies, is also composed of personal poetry.

If we take the works Pigments, Black-Label and Névralgies (which incorporates Graffiti as a trilogy - Black-Label, as we have noted, though published after Graffiti had also been in preparation for at least five years before Graffiti was published - taken together the three works show the poet progressively recoiling into himself. Although the poems of Pigments are intensely 'first hand' and are therefore poetry rather than standard-bearing, yet the angry 'moi' of these poems is often meant as a collective voice, a cry from the poet assuming the fate of his whole race. A few of the poems of Pigments which are outside the field of race are hermetic poems. Some of the personal poetry of Black-Label is also quite private. A large proportion of Névralgies, which is entirely personal, remains in a tantalizing half-light.

The progression towards completely personal poetry reminds one of Sartre's prediction that the racial revolt and self-assertiveness of the Negritude movement would be but a necessary stage in the development of modern literature in the French ex-colonies.⁽¹⁾ Damas, having vented his racial rage and asserted his identity (the latter being as much for his own benefit as in a gesture of revolt), moves towards poetry which has a wider human reference for delving deeper into the experience and feelings of one man. So that paradoxically his poetry opens out by becoming more egocentric. In Pigments he is vehemently black, proclaiming with all his might his racial identification and solidarity; in Black-Label, considerably mellowed, he takes up his narrower identity of a West Indian. In his love-poetry he is first and foremost a man.

The note of personal affliction which in Pigments remains a part of his racial awareness merges in his later works with a more general sadness and disillusionment with life. When Damas re-edited Pigments in 1962, he made ~~xxx~~ but one major palliative adjustment, which is a significant one. In this poem the word 'haine' (hate) is replaced by 'peine' (affliction): the bitterness of Damas the black man has become the unhappiness of Damas the man:

(1) See Ch. One, p. 37.

Il est des nuits sans nom
 il est des nuits sans lune
 où jusqu'à asphyxie
 moite
 me prend
 l'âcre odeur de sang
 jaillissant
 de toute trompette bouchée

Des nuits sans nom
 des nuits sans lune
 la peine qui m'habite
 m'opprime
 la peine qui m'habite
 m'étouffe

Nuits sans nom
 nuits sans lune
 où j'aurais voulu
 pouvoir ne plus douter
 tant m'obsède d'écoeurement
 un besoin d'évasion

Sans nom
 sans lune
 sans lune
 sans nom
 nuits sans lune
 où le dégoût s'ancra en moi
 aussi profondément qu'un beau poignard malais (1)

(There are nights nameless nights
 there are nights nights with no moon
 when a very suffocation and a sweat
 and a sweat
 take hold of me
 the bitter smell of blood
 that shoots
 from every muted trumpet

Nights nameless nights
 nights nights with no moon
 this pain within me
 presses down
 this pain within me
 stifles

(1) 'Il est des nuits' (There are nights), Pigments, p. 23.

Nights nameless nights
 nights nights with no moon
 when I could wish
 to do away with doubt
 such is the sickness when I am beset
 by this wanting to escape

Nameless
 no moon
 no moon
 nameless
 nights with no moon
 nameless nameless
 when a nausea roots itself in me
 and settles down deep like a goodly Malay dagger)

It is this deep gloom which is to spread into all his later poetry, for

La peine immense
 s'est à jamais
 bel et bien installée
 au coeur gonflé de l'homme ...(1)

(The immense pain
 became well and truly
 and for ever
 planted
 in the swollen heart of the man)

His love-poetry reveals a cause of his unhappiness. Damas is a poet of loss, deprivation, unfulfilment. His lament for his lost self, the loss of his 'black dolls',⁽²⁾ gives way to a lament on the loss of love. The happier aspects of love are totally absent from his love-poetry. It is almost in its entirety on the death or the absence of love. A poem in Graffiti is perhaps meant to explain the title of the volume; and might be the title-poem for all of Damas' love-poetry:

Tandis qu'il agonise
 sans peur
 sans prêtre
 plus blanc que drap
 plus essoufflé qu'un train qui rentre en gare
 d'un fabuleux parcours
 l'amour râle un poème
 comme d'autres
 confient un dernier acte

(1) Black-Label, p. 11.

(2) 'Rendez-les moi mes poupées noires ...', 'Limbé', repr. in full in the Appendix, p.

Et
 d'eux-mêmes
 les vers
 s'inscrivent
 au fronton du mausolée marmoréen
 debout à l'image agrandi
 de ce qui fut
 au rythme d'une nuit
 afro-cubaine (1)

(On its very death-bed
 without fear
 without priest
 whiter than a sheet
 more breathless than a train coming in
 from a fabulous run
 love rattles a poem
 as others
 commit a final act

And
 of themselves
 the lines
 are inscribed
 on the fronton of the marmoreal mausoleum
 erect in the enlarged image
 of that which was
 to the rhythm of
 an Afro-Cuban night)

The incident of the 'Afro-Cuban night' ⁽²⁾ is presumably what is described in the beautiful third section of Black-Label. ⁽³⁾ In the refrain repeated twice in this passage, an ominous note is sounded:

IL A ETE PENDU CE MATIN
 A L'AUBE UN NEGRE COUPA-
 BLE D'AVOIR VOULU FRAN-
 CHIR LA LIGNE (4)

(HANGED THIS MORNING
 AT DAWN WAS A NEGRO
 GUILTY OF WANTING TO
 CROSS THE LINE)

(1) Névralgies, p. 61.

(2) 'Afro-Cuban' because the setting is the 'Cabane Cubaine', a Paris night-club.

(3) See Appendix, p. . This is the passage which appeared in his anthology in 1947.

(4) Black-Label, p. 58.

In fact, the theme of the sexual taboo between the races does not loom very large in Damas' love-poetry. It does provide a certain shading, but perhaps the most explicit treatment of it is in this poem:

Contre notre amour qui ne voulait rien d'autre
que d'être beau comme un croissant de lune au beau mitan
du Ciel à minuit
et pur comme le premier ris du nouveau-né
et vrai comme le verbe être
et fort comme la mort d'où nous vient toute vie

Contre notre amour
qui rêvait de vivre à l'air libre
qui rêvait de vivre sa vie
de vivre une vie
qui ne fut
ni
honteuse
ni lépreuse
ni truquée
ni tronquée
ni traquée
ils ont invoqué NOE
et NOE en appela à SEM
et SEM en appela à JAPHET
et JAPHET s'en remit à NOE
et NOE en appela à MATHUSALEM
alors MATHUSALEM ressortit de l'arsenal
tous les oripeaux
tous les tabous
tous les interdits en fanal rouge

Attention

Ici danger

Déviation

Chasse gardée

Terrain privé

Domaine réservé

Défense d'entrer

Ni chiens ni nègre sur le gazon (1)

(1) Névralgies, p. 32. In this article 'Misère noire' in discussing ~~the~~ relations between white and black, he touches on the question of the sexual taboo. He sees it as 'la forme la plus irritante du préjugé des races' (the most irritating form of racial prejudice - p. 338), one of the white man's 'théories qu'ils assaisonnent/ au goût de leurs besoins' (a-priorities flavoured/to taste according to their needs - Pigments, p. 40), and not only irritating but 'd'une répugnante bassesse' (of a repugnant baseness - p. 338). The taboo is raised in one circumstance: 'la prétension de n'admettre les rapports sexuels d'une race à l'autre que sous la forme d'une sorte de conquête coloniale continuelle: le bon blanc honorant la belle esclave de son

(Against our love that asked nothing
 but to be as beautiful as a moon-crescent smack in the centre of the
 Sky at midnight
 and pure as the first sneer of the new-born child
 and true as the verb to be
 and strong as death from whence comes all our life

Against our love
 that dreamt of living in the free open air
 that dreamt of living its life
 of living a life
 that was
 neither
 shameful
 nor leprous
 nor humbug
 nor hunted
 nor hacked down
 they invoked NOAH
 and NOAH called upon SEM
 and SEM called upon JAPHET

caprice, parfois même de son amour' (the assumption that sexual relations are only admissible between one race and another when they take the form of a kind of continuing colonial conquest: the kindly White honouring the beautiful slave with his whim, sometimes even with his love - p. 338), while the frantic guardianship surrounding the white woman is called 'the protection of the race'. He dismisses this as a rather ludicrous and undignified burlesque. 'Cette forme de préjugé est non seulement inopérante mais agit à contre-sens ... Le résultat répugnant pour le bénéficiaire est que le nègre se trouve ainsi nanti d'une auréole de trouble séduction' (This form of prejudice is not only inoperative but acts in the opposite direction ... The result, repugnant for the beneficiary, is that the Negro finds himself thereby endowed with an aura of disturbing seductiveness - pp. 339-340).

'pour le moins averti, il apparaît de plus en plus que la fameuse protection de race est destinée à protéger une chose infiniment moins élevée ... Il semble qu'aux yeux de ceux qui considèrent la femme blanche comme sacrée, ce tabou s'exerce moins en faveur d'une idée que d'une valeur marchande' (to even the least observant of people it is becoming more and more obvious that the famous protection of the race is meant to protect something infinitely less noble ... It would seem that in the eyes of those who consider the white woman as sacred, this taboo is not so much to do with an idea as with a market value - p. 339).

'cette sorte de brimades laisse indifférents [la grande majorité des nègres] pour qui la femme blanche est une femme et non le sexe d'une autre race' (all these monkey-tricks leave [the great majority of Negroes] indifferent - to them the white woman is a woman and not the sexual organ of another race - p. 340).

and JAPHET referred back to NOAH
 and NOAH called upon METHUSELAH
 then METHUSELAH brought forth out of the arsenal
 all the trappings
 all the taboos
 all the prohibitions in red lanterns

Attention

Danger

Detour

Game preserve

Private grounds

Reserved property

No entry

No dogs or Negroes allowed onto the grass)

Elsewhere, in a playful mood, he seems to make the 'discovery' that she is one of 'the Enemy', and that they are making a mockery of the war:

D'où vient que non contente
 d'avoir de l'Autre
 les yeux
 tu aies
 parfois de l'Autre
 les lèvres
 d'un beau couleur de chair de sapotille
 mûrie
 cueillie
 sur pied
 et veloutée à souhait...(1)

(How can it be that not content
 with having the Other's eyes
 you have
 sometimes the Other's
 lips
 a beautiful colour of sapodilla-flesh
 ripe
 plucked
 in full bloom
 as velvety as one could wish ...)

In Pigments there are a handful of poems in this ~~***~~ tender strain, revealing a side of his nature perhaps more fundamental than the intransigent anger which characterizes the book as a whole. In this poem, for instance, he suddenly steps out of the fray to speak with a softer voice, to muse upon the old age which overtakes all men:

(1) Névralgies, p. 28.

Quand sur le tard
 quand sur le tard mes yeux
 mes yeux se brideront

Quand sur le tard
 quand sur le tard j'aurai
 de faux yeux de Chinois

Quand sur le tard
 quand sur le tard
 tout m'aura laissé
 tout m'aura laissé jusqu'à la théorie
 jusqu'à la théorie choir

Quand sur le tard
 quand sur le tard
 suivra la pente
 suivra la pente le bâton
 qui soutient les vieux corps

M'acheterez-vous
 m'acheterez-vous dites
 des fleurs
 que sais-je
 pour qu'au bistrot de l'angle
 pour qu'au bistrot de l'angle
 j'aïlle
 ranimer l'âtre
 d'un grand verre de bordeaux (1)

(When after all
 when after all my eyes
 my eyes become a wrinkle

When after all
 when after all I have
 my Chinaman's play-eyes

When after all
 when after all
 everything has left me
 everything has left me even philosophy
 even philosophy left me to fall

When after all
 when after all
 down too slides
 down too slides the stick
 that holds up old bodies

(1) 'Regard' (A look), Pigments, p. 68.

Will you buy
 tell me will you buy of me
 flowers
 anything
 that I can go
 to the bar on the corner I can go
 to the bar on the corner
 I can go
 and stoke the old fire
 with a big Bordeaux)

This streak of tenderness comes into its own in Damas' love-poetry, where the grim combatant gives way to the quite gentle and sensitive man. Harshness, violent flashing anger subside into quiet sadness. In Pigments the effect of these few poems is heightened by the surrounding ones - they are pools of shade in a merciless light. And in the same way one perhaps appreciates Damas' love-poetry all the more when it is seen against his militant poetry. ~~Against his militant poetry.~~ Against the fierce defiance of some of the poems of Pigments, a poem such as this has an even greater appeal - it is as though, divested of his armour and of his thunderbolts, he were left naked and vulnerable:

Désir d'enfant malade
 d'avoir été
 trop tôt sevré du lait pur
 de la seule vraie tendresse
 j'aurais donné
 une pleine vie d'homme
 pour te sentir
 te sentir près
 près de moi
 de moi
 seul ...(1)

(Longing of a sick child
 for having been
 too soon weaned from the pure milk
 of the only true tenderness
 I would have given
 a whole life-time
 to feel you
 feel you near
 near to me
 to me
 alone...

(1) Névralgies, p. 38.

But the spirit of the combatant never leaves him to fall, like the 'bâton qui soutient les vieux corps' (stick that holds up old bodies). Damas' poetry drifts into a claustrophobic nightmare of loneliness, regret, insomnia - 'névralgies', yet a certain stoicism remains to bolster up the tone. Never does he slip into self-pity. Much of the beauty of these poems lies in their restraint, the wistfulness born of resignation in sadness. Over-sentimentality finds no place in even the most melancholy of poems. It is outraged stoicism which accounts for the irritation of poems such as this:

Je ne sais rien en vérité
rien de plus triste
de plus odieux
de plus affreux
de plus lugubre au monde
que d'entendre l'amour
à longueur de journée
se répétant à messe basse ...(1)

(I know of nothing in truth
nothing more dreary
more hateful
more hideous
more lugubrious in the world
than to hear love
the livelong day
repeating itself
in low mass ...)

But in this poem and many others in the same strain, Damas' irritation could well be directed at himself. His stoicism is by no means facile. It is achieved at the cost of constant effort and sometimes even betrays a hint of bravado. But his poems would be less moving if they betrayed a superman riding above his griefs, and in that case they would probably never have been written - many of these poems are his effort at rallying:

Il n'est pas de midi qui tienne
et parce qu'il n'a plus vingt ans
mon coeur
ni la dent dure
de petite vieille

(1) Névralgies, p. 29.

pas de midi qui tienne
je l'ouvrirai
pas de midi qui tienne
je l'ouvrirai
pas de midi qui tienne
j'ouvrirai
pas de midi qui tienne
j'ouvrirai la fenêtre
pas de midi qui tienne
j'ouvrirai la fenêtre au printemps
pas de midi qui tienne
j'ouvrirai la fenêtre au printemps que je veux éternel
pas de midi qui tienne (1)

(Noon can never keep
 and because it's no longer twenty
 my heart
 nor sharp-toothed
 like a little granny

noon can never keep
I will open it
noon can never keep
I will open it
noon can never keep
I will open
noon can never keep
I will open the window
noon can never keep
I will open the window to the spring
noon can never keep
I will open the window to the spring that I want eternal
noon can never keep)

There are other poems where 'midday' and 'midnight' represent an elusive, precariously beautiful fulfilment. It is an image which often strikes his imagination, the noon of his childhood when the sun would hover for a moment at the highest point in the sky and all but abolish shadow: (2)

au beau mitan du Ciel
 des Iles
 un soleil rouge de feu rouge... (3)

(1) Névralgies, p. 69.

(2) 'Midi qui échappe à sa propre ombre' (Noon escaping its own shadow) - Névralgies, p. 46. At midday in the tropics one's shadow is reduced to a tiny pool at one's feet because the sun is then directly overhead.

(3) Black-Label, p. 41.

(smack in the centre of the Sky
of the Islands
a red sun fire-red ...)

and midnight with the moon in place of the sun:

...notre amour qui ne voulait rien d'autre
que d'être beau comme un croissant de lune au beau mitan du Ciel
à minuit ...(1)

(our love that asked nothing
but to be beautiful as a moon-crescent smack in the centre of the
Sky at midnight)

And so in another poem of resignation he soliloquizes:

... passé minuit
minuit passé
passé minuit

Inutile d'insister

.....

(1) Névralgies, p. 32. But unlike Senghor who continually glorifies and revels in darkness and night, the teeming African night:

'Nuits chères Nuits amies, et Nuits d'enfance, parmi les tanns parmi les
bois

Nuits palpitantes de présences, et de paupières, si peuplées d'ailes et
de souffles

De silence vivante ...'

(Nights dear friendly Nights, and Nights of childhood, among the marshes
among the woods

Nights palpitating with presences, with eyelids, so peopled with wings
and breathings

With silence alive...) -L.-S. Senghor, 'Elégie des circoncis', Nocturnes,
Paris, Seuil, 1961, p. 63, in Damas' poetry night (as opposed to his symbol-
ic use of 'midnight' and the moon) is usually portrayed as excruciatingly
lonely, insomniac, besieged by unwelcome thoughts:

...je me sens soudain seul
emmuré vif dans l'angoisse
de la mort silencieuse
de mes nuits d'insomnie
tiraillées de remords ...

(I sense a sudden loneliness
I am immured alive in the anguish
of the silent death

of my nights of insomnia
torn by remorse) -Névralgies, p. 74. See also 'Il est des nuits', supra
p. 91.

Inutile
de vouloir après-coup
de vouloir à tout coup
de vouloir à tout prix
 soulever à tout prix le MONDE

Le monde a vois-tu
bien d'autres choses en tête
que de s'attendrir sur un fruit mûr piqué des vers
sur des amours frappées à l'origine à mort du doute amer (1)

(...gone midnight
 midnight gone
 gone midnight

Useless insisting

.....

Useless
after the event to want
in any event to want
at any cost to want
 to stir up at any cost the WORLD

For you see the World has
a lot more on its mind
than to be saddened when a ripe fruit is bitten by the worms
when a love-affair is struck dead from the start by bitter doubt)

It is only in a handful of poems such as these that Damas approaches anything in the nature of overt moralizing. What emerges by way of a philosophy is a kind of protective near-pessimism which far from leading to despair, favours acceptance and recovery. He debunks love as inherently precarious, and ends the book Névralgies on a note of resignation: (2)

Citez-m'en
 citez-m'en un
 citez-m'en un
 un seul de rêve
 qui soit allé
 qui soit allé
 jusqu'au bout du sien propre(3)

(Tell me then
 tell me then of one
 tell me then of one
 one single dream
 that went
 that went
 right to the end of its very own)

(1) Névralgies, p. 58.

(2) In the same way he ends Graffiti with the poem 'Il n'est pas de midi qui tienne', quoted above, and here there are a few lines which do not appear in the version of Névralgies; in Graffiti the poem ends thus:

'...Prenez en donc votre parti
 vous autres
 qui ne parlez jamais d'amour
 sans majuscule
 et larme en coin
 il n'est pas de midi qui tienne

(... So say what you will
 you out there
 who never speak of love
 without capital letters
 and a tear in the corner
 noon can never keep) - Graffiti, p. 36.

(3) Névralgies, p. 78.

But the tendency in Damas' love-poetry is not towards generalizing. His poems are wrung out of a very particular experience, and if the woman addressed is not presented in very great physical detail, largely effaced into an absent 'ELLE' often thus written in capitals ~~XXXXXXXX~~, she is not idealized into an abstraction of Woman. Some of the poems are made up of details and allusions which shut us out, but for the most part the fact that the décor of a poem is a very specific one makes for a ~~quality~~ quality of familiarity and intimacy whose appeal is quite the opposite of that of the more abstract forms of love-poetry, where a couple are sublimated into Eternal Man and Eternal Woman floating free of particularities. This poetry has its own attraction, lifting us out of the circumstantial into the vaguer realms of the Ideal (occasionally leaving us mere wondering spectators, staring up ~~xxx~~ at figures who, in the process of sublimation, have become ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ lamentably disembodied).

There is on the other hand love-poetry in which we are permitted to eavesdrop on the relationship of two individuals who are decidedly corporeal, firmly grounded in time and space and in the details of their experience, but who in their very particularity share in the nature of Eternal Man and Woman. Because they are palpably alive with their own particular life, they are part of the stuff out of which Eternal Man and Woman are fashioned. Damas applies no capital letters to his experience and delivers no homilies on Love. His poems remain intimate and untheatrical, never inflated by rhetoric or by conscious generality. In one or two cases he may be said to have fallen into the opposite sin, of insignificance, where he fails to call forth a response because the poem remains tied down by the smallness of its details. But usually the effect is the exact opposite. The reader may participate because the details are on such a scale as to fall ~~within~~ within the scope of his own possible experience - they are recognizable. And so Damas' love-poetry assumes wider dimensions by proceeding from the unpretentious small end of the telescope. He captures transitoriness - a mood, a reflection, a touch of frivolity - so intimate and so familiar that his poems of themselves rise out of the personal and private into the human:

Je te vois
je te sens
je te veux en tailleur gris
et pourquoi diable mon dieu en tailleur gris
et non plus marron comme tes yeux qui semblaient
parfois invoquer dieu
parfois le diable
jusqu'à ce qu'ils eussent enfin
soumis les miens que tu m'auras souvent dit
toi qui incarnes le diable en diable
être à la fois et ceux de dieu
et ceux du diable (1)

(1) Névralgies, p. 35.

(I see you
 I feel you
 I want you in tailored grey
 and why the devil my god in tailored grey
 and no longer brown like your eyes that seemed
 sometimes to be invoking god
 sometimes the devil
 until at last
 they had subjected mine that you so often said
 you who incarnate the devil's own person
 were all at once god's
 and the devil's)

The sad smile in this poem is characteristic of much of his love-poetry. Throughout his personal poetry, joyless as the tale might be, his sense of humour does not desert him, and this is another factor contributing to keeping his poetry from being submerged in wearying complaint, in the same way that humour in Pigments makes bitterness palatable by tempering it into superb irony. There are still ^{Flashes} of this familiar irony, but Damas' humour⁽¹⁾ in his later personal poetry is, in general, not of the cutting type. It is considerably softened, subdued - it is a wry shrug rather than a whiplash. But in Pigments, from the detachment of irony he yet plunges into the occasional fit of rage. Névralgies, on the other hand, is the work of a collected man - it is on the whole consistent in its restraint, and the more bitter poems are among those reproduced from the earlier Graffiti. The overall impression of his personal poetry and of Névralgies in particular is a wry, dogged buoyancy:

Pas d'ombres
 surtout chinoises
 j'entends
 j'entends rester seul et
 maître
 de la rade
 seul maître du navire en rade
 qui tanguet et tanguet et tanguet
 qui danse et danse et danse au lazaret de mon coeur en quarantaine ... (2)

(No shadows
 above all shadow-theatre
 I mean
 I mean to stay alone and
 master
 of the ship's course
 sole master of the laid-up ship
 that bounces bounces bounces
 that dances dances dances in the lazaret of my heart in quarantaine ...) (3)

(1) Often in Damas' poetry humour is a barricade, laughter is a grimace: 'et mon rire effroyable est fait pour repousser le spectre des lévriers traquant le marronage'

(and my fearful laugh is meant to rout the apparition of hounds tracking down runaway slaves) - 'Shine', Pigments, p. 63.

(2) Névralgies, p. 37.

(3) Unfortunately this poem, as indeed many others, has been all but destroyed in translation - it is one continuous play on words. 'Ombres' should rightly be translated here as 'ghosts', but the equivalent of 'ombres chinoises' in the next line is 'shadow-theatre', so that 'shadows' better conveys something of that pun.

[Footnote cont'd overleaf]

Not only does Damas withdraw into the isolation of self-reliance, but as we have noted, his tendency towards hermetism grows. Damas is a believer in metempsychosis;⁽¹⁾ the title of his forthcoming collection of poems 'Dernière Escalé' (Last Stop) is to be interpreted in the context of transmigration. The theme of metempsychosis would seem to shed light on a number of his decidedly esoteric poems, although it does not by any means provide crystal clarity. On the contrary, Damas maintains an intriguing half-light of equivocality over many of these poems, like the 'clair obscur' (dim brightness) which he evokes in one poem,⁽²⁾ a light reminiscent of that grey glare which is the setting of dreams - as in this poem for example:

Tant de vies
Tant de vies en une seule
gachées

Tant d'assiettes
tant d'assiettes
échouées
sous l'évier du drame
que l'homme fut seul à porter
à l'origine de toutes choses
dans le faux jour
dans le faux jour de la dernière invite (3)

Further on 'rade' means 'road' or 'course', but the word is repeated in the next line in the expression 'en rade' and this means 'laid up'. 'Tangue' means 'pitches', the movement of a ship, but it is also the word for 'tango' and here it means both. 'Lazaret' means 'quarantine' and so does 'quarantaine' further on - but 'quarantaine' also means 'forty-odd', i.e. here: 'about forty years of age'; so that 'my heart in quarantine' in the French also means here, (to paraphrase unpoetically): 'my heart now that I am in my forties'.

(1) In his introduction to Veillées Noires, his collection of folk-tales from Guyane, he tells us that he has learnt the stories from a very old woman who is ageless because she is a reincarnated being:

'Tètèche n'avait pas plus d'âge que toute la Forêt, que la Terre qui porte la Forêt, que le Fleuve qui écartèle la Terre et la Forêt.'

Tètèche avait, en vérité, mené bien des existences, et subi vivante, à travers de successives Tètèches, de subtiles metempsychoses.

Man-Gabi, ma mère, connaissait sensiblement la même Tètèche que moi: une Tètèche-chérie qui avait eu de toujours et conservait le même âge.

Man-Gabi, ma mère, avait vieilli et Tètèche me surveillait vieillir à mon tour.'

(Tètèche had no more years than all the Forest, than the Earth which bears the Forest, than the River that quarters the Earth and the Forest.

Tètèche had, in fact, led many lives and undergone, alive, through one Tètèche after another, subtle metempsychoses.

My mother, Ma-Gabi, knew, I could sense, the same Tètèche as I: a Darlin'-Tètèche who had always been and always was the same age.

My mother Ma-Gabi had grown up and Tètèche was watching me grow up in my turn) - Veillées Noires, p. 7.

(2) 'Parce que la Comédie', Névralgies, p. 62.

(3) Névralgies, p. 75.

(So many lives
so many lives in one
squandered

So many plates
so many plates
shattered
under the sink of the story
that the man carried all alone
at the very beginning of all things
in the false light
in the false light of the last round)

There are other similar allusions to a point lost in the mists of time, or simply a previous age - 'la nuit des temps perdus proches' ⁽¹⁾ (the night of the lost ages night); 'de temps immémoriaux' ⁽²⁾ (from time immemorial); 'à l'âge amérindien du monde' ⁽³⁾ (in the Amerindian age of the world); 'une vie antérieure' ⁽⁴⁾ (a former life). Reference to a 'dream recreated' might be interpreted in the context of metempsychosis or might be taken as allusions to what seems to be an actual dream which he relates in a passage of Black-Label ⁽⁵⁾ and certain details of which recall a poem of Pigments ⁽⁶⁾. There is only one overt mention of reincarnation - this poem is addressed to his twin-sister who died in bayhood:

Qui pourrait dire
si ce n'est ~~pas~~ mort-né
l'autre moi-même

Qui pourrait dire
qu'en ce jour anniversaire
j'eusse à célébrer l'absence
de toi mon double

Qui pourrait dire
si ce n'est toi toi
autre moi-même
réincarné mon double... ⁽⁷⁾
mort-né... ⁽⁷⁾

(Who could say
if not my still-born
other self

Who could say
that on this anniversary day
I would have your absence to celebrate
my double

(1) Névralgies, p. 7.

(2) Op. Cit., p. 26.

(3) Op. cit., p. 73.

(4) Black-Label, pp. 58-59.

(5) Black-Label, pp. 46-47.

(6) 'Captation', Pigments, p. 13.

(7) Névralgies, p. 73.

Who could say
if not you.
my other self
reincarnated my double
still-born ...)

There are other poems where the idea is expressed of a mystical correspond-
ance between himself and a woman. This is ^{to} the suggestion throughout the pass-
age from the third section of Black-Label which we have already referred, ⁽¹⁾
and where for instance we find the lines:

tout est là ce soir où nos vies
ont cessé d'être parallèles (2)

(all is here this evening when our lives
have ceased to be parallél)

And in a number of other poems there would seem to be the same thought that
she is his predestined completion:

elle avait eu par devers elle à mon insu de temps immémoriaux
les clefs de la clé du Royaume (3)

(unknown to me she had had about her person from time immemorial
the clues to the key of the Kingdom)

The theme of metempsychosis, or the repeated reincarnation of a soul until
it has completed its term of transmigration, can be placed in the context of
a theme which pervades all of Damas' poetry, that of fulfilment, or, more often
than not, unfulfilment. His poems are full of metaphors and images of desire,
of satisfaction out of reach - 'Accoudés au désir de la veille insatisfait'
(Brooding on yesterday's unfulfilled wanting - Pigments, p. 15); there is the
refrain of the section in Black-Label where he recalls the longing of his
constricted childhood: 'Désirs comprimés' (Hankerings repressed - pp. 63-65);
in Névralgies the theme of unfulfilment returns to dominate the book - the
first poem is entitled 'Pour que tout soit en tout' (That all be in all - p. 7),
and the last poem declares this fulfilment to be unattainable (the poem 'Citez-
m'en' quoted on p. 102 of this chapter), while the whole book abounds in images
such as 'carrefour' (crossroads), midi (midday), 'minuit' (midnight), 'mangue
mure' (ripe mango), 'fruit mûr' (ripe fruit) and other images of crisis, of
ripeness, of eating and drinking, hunger and thirst - 'marron qui mange à sa
faim' (maroon eating his fill - p. 24), and there is also the longing for
an end, an overdue climax or completion: 'le plaisir d'en finir avec un dilemme'
(the satisfaction of having done with a dilemma - p. 11), 'l'autobus pressé
d'en finir au passage' (the bus in a hurry to have done with the trip - p. 53),
and in more than one poem the termination or fulfilment he longs for is no

(1) Appendix, p.

(2) Black-Label, p. 60.

(3) Névralgies, p. 26.

less than death: 'la mort dont je rêve' (the death I dream of - p.67).

But this his private mysticism,⁽¹⁾ the belief in metempsychosis, does not make him amenable to the mysteries of religion. The Church which in Pigments receives only merest of amused sarcasm - in a poem about his upbringing - is suddenly the object of intermittent attacks in Graffiti and thereafter. The attention which the Church receives in his more personal ~~private~~ works is perhaps not to be explained in the light of his bourgeois upbringing alone. Some poems suggest that he had had a more recent contact with the Church to which he was now reacting:

Il me souvient encore
de l'année foutue
où j'eusse
pu
tout aussi bien sucer
et le pouce
et l'index
du sorcier en soutane
au lieu de l'avaler l'hostie
ma foi mon dieu
mains jointes (2)

(I still recall
the rotten year
when I
could
just as well suck
both the thumb
and the forefinger
of the cassocked sorcerer
instead of swallowing it the host
oh faith my god
hands joined)

He reduces the Church to a set of lugubrious and hypocritical forms and prohibitions, and in contrast to its 'Dieu unique et triple, implacable comme un grand prêtre du Temple de Jérusalem, et imbécilement bon comme un vieux sacristain de "La Croix"⁽³⁾ (God who is single and triple, implacable as a High Priest of the Temple of Jerusalem, and as imbecilically good-natured as an old sexton of "The Cross"), invokes some animistic god of his ancestors, whom his ancestors worshipped with joy and self-abandon:

... Mon Dieu mien
magnifié en tout ce qui vibre
magnifié en tout ce qui vit

Mon Dieu mien
que l'on invoque
non pas à genoux
les yeux faussement baissés
les mains menteusement jointes

(1) The writers Damas relished most in his youth were Edgar Allan Poe (through Baudelaire's translations), Mallarmé, Jules Verne and H.G. Wells.

(2) Névralgies, p. 10.

(3) Retour de Guyane, p. 97.

Mon Dieu mien
 que l'on invoque
 dans la joie de l'amour
 dans l'amour de la joie
 dans l'amour de la vie
 dans la vie de l'amour

Mon Dieu mien
 qui se rit
 de l'encens et des ors
 et qui se rit
 de cette grande lithurgie de mots

Mon Dieu mien
 dont le corps ni le sang
 ne sont à prendre à jeun
 en hostie blanche
 en vin de messe...(1)

(...My own God
 magnified in all that vibrates
 magnified in all that lives

My own God
 who is invoked
 not down on the knees
 eyes falsely lowered
 hands deceitfully joined

My own God
 who is invoked
 in the joy of love
 in the love of joy
 in the love of life
 in the life of love

My own God
 who mocks
 at incense and pomp
 and who mocks
 at that great liturgy of words

My own God
 neither his body nor his blood
 are to be taken on an empty stomach
 in white ~~white~~ host
 in sacrificial wine ...)

These lines suggest that he is rejecting the god of Christianity as being part and parcel of Western civilization in its loss of contact with the life of the

(1) 'Tu m'as bel et bien dit', Névralgies, p. 47.

earth, its loss of humanity. His most frequent attack on the Church is the charge of hypocrisy, the accusation that worship has become largely formulae and regulation behaviour lacking in sincerity and meaningfulness. The third stanza here is obviously inspired by Etienne Léro's words in Légitime Défense:

Langston Hughes et Claude MacKay, les deux poètes révolutionnaires, nous ont apporté, marinés dans l'alcool rouge, l'amour africain de la vie, la joie africaine de l'amour, le rêve africain de la mort.(1)

(Langston Hughes and Claude MacKay, the two revolutionary poets, have brought us, soaked in red alcohol, the African love of life, the African joy of love, the African dream of death.)

Damas evokes 'African' worship as being more vital and sincere than the ossified religion of Western civilization. One however hesitates to attribute to him a 'personal religion' on the strength of passages such as this. His allegiance to this god of his one suspects is purely intellectual identification by reaction to Christianity, rather than a declaration of faith, quite like Césaire's gesture in the Cahier d'un retour au pays natal:

J'ai porté des plumes de perroquet des
dépouilles de chat musqué
J'ai lassé la patience des missionnaires

.....

Adoré le Zambèze ...(2)

(I have worn parrot-feathers the
remains of the musk-cat
I have eroded the patience of missionaries

.....

Worshipped the Zambesi...)

Damas' deliberately coarse irreverence is only one characteristic which recalls the work of Jacques Prévert. In a mock prayer, for instance, he enquires after the state of God's hearing,⁽³⁾ and offers a possible cause of His deafness, which

(1) E. Léro, quoted by L.-G. Damas, Poètes d'expression française, pp.14-15. The same words seem to have inspired one of the refrains of Black-Label:

'SONNE ET SONNE
sonne à mon coeur mariné dans l'alcool
dont nul n'a voulu tâter à table hier...'

(SOUND AND SOUND

sound to my heart soaked in the alcohol
that none would touch at table yesterday...) -Black-Label, p. 37.

(2) A. Césaire, Op. cit., p. 50.

(3) As Prévert's nightwatchman expresses concern over the Pope's powers of ~~hear-~~ apprehension:

'Je viens demander au pape s'il est sourdingue ... comprenez je viens lui demander s'il est dur de la feuille et s'il sait lire s'il sait compter...' (I come to ask the Pope if he's not a little hard of hearing ... d'you get me I come to ask him are his ears stopped-up and can he read can he count) -J. Prévert, 'La crosse en l'air', Paroles, Paris, Gallimard, 1949, p. 118.

seems to be his own very original and blasphemous interpretation of one of the 'Madonna and Child' poses:

... SEIGNEUR

à moins de les avoir bien sales
pour n'avoir plus à vos côtés Marie-l'Unique
à la fois Vierge et Mère
qui avait l'oeil à votre oreille
comme au jour le jour veille
l'homme à la ruche ...(1)

(LORD

unless they've got really dirty
for no longer having at your side Mary-the-Unbeateble
all at once Virgin and Mother
who kept an eye on your ear
like the day-to-day watch
of the bee-keeper ...)

The book Black-Label is introduced as the work of 'un Prévert africain' (2) (an African Prévert). The question of style is discussed in a later chapter. Damas does not acknowledge Prévert as a master - he considers that he has been influenced, among modern French poets, above all by Desnos. Damas has known Prévert, and shows an unmistakeable enthusiasm for his work, where he discovers a kindred spirit; he was acquainted with Prévert's poems, (3) published in reviews, sometimes in reviews with which Damas was associated, before Prévert collected them into Paroles, his first book of poetry, in 1945. Damas' first book of poetry had however already been published, nine years before, so that the question of influence can certainly be overdone, and the affinities to be established in the work of the two poets are perhaps for the most part to be traced to a confluence of aims and attitudes.

In the work of both men one finds the same impudence, the same sense of humour delighting in underlining accepted incongruities, the same rebelliousness and resentment of authority and restraint. As Prévert speaks contemptuously of 'le bon Dieu des flics' (4) (the Heavenly Father of cops) so the uniformed defender of the established order figures more than once in Damas' work as the object of irritation or aversion:

... me revient mon enfance
dans un hoquet secouant ~~mon instinct~~
mon instinct
tel le flic le voyou ...(5)

(1) Black-Label, p. 23.

(2) Introduction on back cover - anonymous.

(3) In Retour de Guyane, (1938) Damas quotes from one of Prévert's poems - p.173.

(4) J. Prévert, 'Le Temps des Noyaux', Paroles, p. 74. This is also the poem from which Damas quotes in Retour de Guyane: 'le temps des vieux vieillards est passé' (the time of grand grandads is past).

(5) 'Hoquet', Pigments, p. 33.

(my childhood comes back
in a hiccup shaking
my instinct
like a cop and a delinquent)

... l'éternité de leurs
boulevards à flics ...(1)

(the eternity of their
cop-ridden boulevards...)

Prévert's attacks on the tedium and repression of school find an echo in Damas' evocations of his own school life, with lessons (in his case even more dry and devoid of relevance from the child's point of view) contrárying his inclination. Like Prévert's schoolchildren the boy Damas longed for freedom from the prison of the classroom and its unpalatable fare:

... Et brimades en bambou⁽²⁾
pour toute mangue tombée⁽³⁾
durant l'indigestion
de tout morceau d'histoire de France...⁽⁴⁾

(And bamboo-beatings
for every mango falling
during the indigestion
of every swallow of the history of France)

...CHARLEMAGNE en pied pendu à l'un des quatre murs
de la classe un Enfer...⁽⁵⁾

(CHARLEMAGNE in full-length hanging on one of the four walls
of the class a Hell)

... tes nuits
... tes nuits qu'agitaient
des leçons anonnées en dodine ...⁽⁶⁾

(your nights tossed about
with lessons mumbled in a trance)

Damas by reaction to his upbringing shares Prévert's anti-bourgeois attitude, his aversion for 'le Beau Monde'.⁽⁷⁾ The members of the social class in which Damas grew up did not differ substantially from the bourgeois caricatures which abound in Prévert's work. One particularly delightful passage in Black-Label on Damas' childhood recalls a poem ~~xxxx~~ of Prévert's⁽⁸⁾ in which a misdemeanour on the part of a child scandalizes the propriety of its elders and produces

(1) 'Un clochard m'a demandé dix sous', Pigments, p. 37.

(2) Thin sticks of bamboo are used as switches.

(3) He refers to the forbidden stoning of mango-trees in the schoolyard.

(4) 'Rappel', Pigments, p. 61.

(5) Black-Label, p. 75.

(6) Black-Label, p. 65.

(7) J. Prévert, 'Pour rire en société', Spectacle, Paris, Gallimard, 1951, p.118.

(8) J. Prévert, 'Le beau langage', La pluie et le beau temps, Paris, Gallimard, 1955, p. L32.

painful results:

... Les cris de joie feinte
 d'autres diraient de rage
 que tu poussais à perdre haleine
 à la toute dernière fessée reçue pour t'être
 sous le regard acerbe de ta mère offusquée
 et à la gêne polie de tous
 farfouillé le nez
 d'un doigt preste et chanceux
 au goûter de Madame-La-Directrice-de-l'Ecole-des-Filles (1)

(The cries of feigned joy
 others might call it rage
 that you kept upfit to make you breathless
 at the very last spanking you got because
 before the reproving eyes of your scandalized mother
 and to the polite embarrassment of all
 you rummaged in your nose
 with a nimble daring finger
 at the tea-party of Missus-Headmistress-of-the-Girls'-School)

Prévert's sympathy for the poor is matched by Damas' preoccupation in his writings with the poverty of his people. And in a passage where Damas evokes the peasant misery of the French Caribbean, he almost certainly has in mind a section of Prévert's 'Dîner de têtes', for apart from the similarity of the theme - the poverty of the many maintaining the refined luxury of the few, their 'betters' - there is the similarity of expression:

... Ceux qui se nourrissent de morue et d'igname
 de piment et de sel
 tous les jours que Dieu fait
 et que Dieu fait
 sans vin sans pain
 sans rien
 d'autre
 que souskaye à mangos
 que mangos à souskaye (2)

Ceux qui se lèvent tôt
 pour que se lèvent tard
 et se gavent
 se dandinent
 se pommadent
 se déodorisent
 se parfument
 se lotionnent
 se maquillent
 se gargarisent
 se congratulent
 se jalousent
 se débinent
 s'enrichissent
 d'autres ... (3)

(1) Black-Label, p. 64.

(2) Souskaye is a dish composed of green mangoes, salt and red-pepper.

(3) Black-Label, p. 22. We here quote the relevant part of Prévert's poem:
 '... ceux qui mangent la mauvaise viande
 ceux qui fabriquent les épingles à cheveux
 ceux qui soufflent vides les bouteilles que d'autres boiront pleines

[footnote cont'd overleaf]

✱ (They who live on saltfish and yam
pepper and salt
everyday that God sends
and God sends
without wine without bread
without anything
else
but mangoes in souskaye
and souskaye with mangoes

They who get up early
to let them get up late
and gorge themselves
and pet themselves
and pommade themselves
and deodorize themselves
and perfume themselves
and lotion themselves
and paint themselves
and gargle their throats
and pride themselves
and envy each other
and run down each other
and make themselves rich
those others...)

Prévert too in a number of his poems makes common cause with the poor, the colonized, the oppressed, the underdog of the whole world.

One critic sums up Damas' work as 'resounding racism ending in an emotional cul-de-sac'.⁽¹⁾ Despite this resounding inaccuracy, Damas' inspiration is at no

ceux qui coupent leur pain avec leur couteau

.....
ceux qui ne savent pas ce qu'il faut dire
ceux qui traient les vaches et ne boivent pas le lait

.....
ceux qui fabriquent dans les caves les stylos avec lesquels d'autres écriront
en plein air que tout va pour le mieux ...'

(They who eat bad meat
they who make hair-pins
they who blow bottles empty that others will drink from full
they who cut their bread with their knife

.....
they who don't know the right thing to say
they who milk the cows and don't drink the milk

.....
they who manufacture down in cellars the fountain-pens with which others will
write up in the open air that everything is dandy ...) -J. Prévert, 'Tentative de description d'un dîner de têtes à Paris-France', Paroles, p. 15.

(1) W. Feuser, 'Négritude - The Third Phase', The New African, London, Vol. 5, No. 3, April 1966, p. 63.

point bounded by race, and far less by racism. His purely racial writing is as necessary and as justifiable as the whole Negritude movement, but his work follows a pattern which is the best direction that Negritude, in ~~purely~~ literary terms, could take. There is a limited number of successful works that can be written around the affirmation that one is black. Damas continues to engage himself actively in the cultural rehabilitation which has been an important aim of the Negritude movement, after his political involvement, which was ⁽¹⁾ another corollary of Negritude. His poetry does not end ~~with~~ at the defence and ~~with~~ exaltation of his 'Negritude'. It is his common humanity above all which is revealed in his love-poetry, and it is a strange racism which moves a man to declare to one of the race which is the object of his racism:

... nous ne sommes
qu'une même somme
qu'un seul et même sang ...(2)

(we are but
one same sum
one same and single blood)

(1) Damas indicates that this chapter is by no means closed: 'La vraie bagarre est encore à commencer - et j'y assisterai!' (The real commotion is yet to begin - and I'll be there!')

(2) Névrologies, p. 74.

... je dis méзамies
 avec un rien d'intonation
 un rien d'inclination
 un rien d'accent
 un rien d'humour
 un rien de sel
 un de ces riens
 si proprement
 si pleinement
 si gentiment
 si joliment
 si bellement
 créoles ... (1)

We do not propose to undertake the study of Damas' style in the light of any supposed criteria of Negritude. Damas is however one of those poets who is directly influenced by specifically African forms.

An interesting point from which to begin ~~the~~ a discussion of Damas' style in his poetry is this passage from his introduction to Poèmes nègres sur des airs africains, his collection of traditional African poems:

Ces quelques textes que nous donnons aujourd'hui auront l'avantage de révéler les aspects multiples de la poésie nègre d'expression et d'inspiration. Poésie dont la caractéristique essentielle réside dans le fait qu'improvisée elle n'est jamais déclamée ni dite, mais chantée.

... un poème ... jamais ne diffèrera du langage familier. C'est que l'Africain, qui est né poète et a vite fait d'improviser un chant, ne compose pas pour des savants. Il compose pour être écouté du peuple. Ce qui explique les moqueries, les calembours, les jeux de mots, la simplicité dans l'expression. (2)

(These few texts we present here will have the merit of revealing the multiple aspects of poetry of Negro expression and inspiration. Poetry whose essential characteristic lies in the fact that, delivered extempore, it is never declaimed or spoken, but sung.

... a poem ... will never depart from everyday speech. This is because the African, who is a born poet and makes ~~sh~~ short work of improvising a chant, does not compose for learned folk. He composed

- (1) ... I say girlfriends
 with a taste of intonation
 a touch of inclination
 a shade of an accent
 a drop of humour
 a grain of salt
 one of those trifles
 so truly
 so fully
 so nicely
 so prettily
 so beautifully
 creole ...

(2) Op. cit., p. 7.

- 'Foi de marron', Névrologies, p. 24.

ed folk. He composes in order to be heard by the people. Hence the leg-pulling, the puns, the plays on words, the ~~simplicity~~ simplicity of expression.)

Damas' observations are probably general to the poetry of most literatures at a stage before the language is dichotomized into the popular and the literary.

One stream of 'anti-poetry' following upon the Surrealist movement is a 'return', represented notably by Jacques Prévert and Raymond Queneau, to this age where, in the lyrical expression of Jacques Bens 'les hommes parlaient comme des poètes, et les poètes comme tout le monde' ⁽¹⁾ (all men spoke like poets, and poets like all men). Queneau and Prévert are of that line of French poets who react against the learned stylization and literariness which ~~had~~ crept into French poetry since the seventeenth century and ~~which had~~ effected a divorce between the language of poets and the living language. They draw a great deal upon the spoken language for **the stuff of their poetry** and make use of 'popular' poetic devices, such as punning and other plays on words, repetitions and refrains. In their work, poetry often regains its affinity with the song - and some of their poems have in effect been set to music.

This is also the direction of Damas' poetry, which, in the words of Senghor is 'essentiellement non sophistiquée' ⁽²⁾ (essentially unsophisticated). Damas' admiration for the poet Langston Hughes is significant. And Damas' ~~savoury~~ translations of Hughes' poems (they are to ~~be~~ form part of the biography of Hughes which he is preparing and which he hopes to publish on the anniversary of his friend's death) are a remarkable testimony of their affinities as poets. In Retour de Guyane, during his discussion on ^{cultural} assimilation, he quotes a poem by Hughes - 'l'étonnant poète américain' ⁽³⁾ (the astounding American poet) - written in his presence, and comments upon it:

Ainsi un noir américain assimilé, retrouvait spontanément une veine poétique originelle, et parvenait même à plier l'instrument rigide et précis de l'Anglais à une complainte d'une subtilité dans la raillerie essentiellement africaine. ⁽⁴⁾

(Thus an assimilated ^{black} American ~~found~~ found again an original vein of poetry, and even succeeded in bending the rigid and precise instrument of the English into a lament that is typically African in its blending of subtlety with raillery.)

Damas is perhaps bestowing too much of the credit for this achievement upon his friend - it was not Hughes alone but the whole of the black American commun-

(1) J. Bens, Raymond Queneau, Paris, Gallimard, 1962, p. 42.

(2) L.-S. Senghor, Anthologie, p. 5.

(3) Retour de Guyane, p. 159.

(4) Op. cit., p. 160.

ity before him who had thus refashioned their adopted language. If Hughes' poetry is indeed in any way African, then this would bear out our point⁽¹⁾ that it is in the popular culture of Afro-American communities that any direct continuity of African literary traditions is to be sought: much of Hughes' poetry is written in the vernacular of black America and is modelled on the rhythms and forms of its blues, spirituals, work-songs and jazz.

Damas was influenced both by Hughes and by traditional African poetry, his interest in which led him to compile the collection already mentioned. Thus by also setting out to rejoin a popular tradition he converges with the modern French poets who had a similar aim.

We have already quoted the passage from Black-Label where he proposes to forsake the restricting poetic conventions with which the literate among his countrymen had hitherto enslaved their talents, and instead 'chanter le poème à danser'⁽²⁾ (sing the dancing-poem) for which the 'rules' are minimal:

POEME
poème à danser que chantent
ceux dont je suis ... (3)

DIEU SOIT LOUE
Il me suffit
d'avoir deux pieds

J'en aurais beaucoup
beaucoup trop de douze
douze pieds comptés pesés
scandés d'un doigt
toujours le même
tout prêt à tout
bon à couper ... (4)

(POEM
poem to dance to that they sing
them I belong to ...

GOD BE PRAISED
All I need
is two feet

It would be too many
too many for me twelve
twelve feet counted measured
scanned with a finger
always the same
ready-made all-purpose
cut along dotted line ...)

The poet must have been singularly gratified when his poems achieved what must have seemed to him their supreme fulfilment - to be ^{translated} ~~turned~~ into ~~songs~~

(1) Ch. 1, p.

(2) Black-Label, p. 76.

(3) Op. cit., p. 77.

(4) Op. cit., p. 79. He is referring of course to the French Alexandrine, the standard twelve-foot line.

an African language and chanted by Africans as songs of revolt.⁽¹⁾ Thus his work of himself had completed the final stage of the famous 'retour aux sources'⁽²⁾ (return to the sources).

Many of Damas' poems could easily belong to his collection of African chants. There are for instance the rhythms which he adopts. In a poem such as 'Bientôt' there is a distinct drum-beat rhythm,⁽³⁾ and one imagines a duet of drums, the refrain 'bientôt' taken up by an ominous deep-voiced drum and the other lines in a higher-pitched, staccato notes, with, at the end, a final defiant slap of the drum:

Bientôt
je n'aurai pas que dansé
bientôt
je n'aurai pas que chanté
bientôt
je n'aurai pas que frotté
bientôt
je n'aurai pas que trempé
bientôt
je n'aurai pas que dansé
chanté
frotté
trempé
frotté
chanté
dansé

Bientôt(4)

(Just wait
I'll show you more than a dance
just wait
I'll show you more than a song
just wait
I'll show you more than a rub
just wait
I'll show you more than a dip
just wait
I'll show you more than a dance
a song
a rub
a dip
a rub
a song
a dance

But just wait)

(1) In the Ivory Coast in 1939 - see Chapter 2, p.

(2) Another of the favourite slogans of Negritude - e.g. L.-S. Senghor, Négritude et Humanisme, p. 228.

(3) We are aware that the notion of 'drums-in-poetry' has rather lost its respectability from being overworked by critics, and that we are here in danger of provoking humour in the 'tigrityde' tradition.

(4) 'Bientôt', Pigments, p. 53.

But often a drumming session does not end thus abruptly - another effect is to fade out gradually, as in the ending of the poem 'Limbé', where the diminishing sounds reflect his nostalgia for a past which has slipped away irretrievably:

... Rendez-les moi mes poupées noires
 mes poupées noires
 poupées noires
 noires
 noires (1)

(Give me back my dark dolls
 my dark dolls
 dark dolls
 dark
 dark)

Damas' poetry is the poetry of everyday speech. Many of his poems read like a sentence uttered on the spur of the moment, a thought immediately transaltered into words apparently without passing through any medium of arrangement, such as this poem still hot with the impatience of the reflection:

Pourquoi
 grands dieux
 pourquoi pourquoi
 faut-il que tout se chante
 fût-ce
 l'amour
 à tout jamais soudain
 d'une pureté d'albâtre (2)

(Why
 great gods
 why why
 must everything proclaim itself
 be it love
 for now and always suddenly
 alabaster-pure)

Another poem is like a piece of reverie with the trend of thought suddenly broken before it is completed as an ensuing reflection drifts into the mind:

Par la fenêtre ouverte à demi
 sur mon dédain du monde
 une brise montait
 parfumée au stéphanotis
 tandis que tu tirais à TOI
 tout le rideau

Telle
 je te vois
 te reverrai toujours
 tirant à toi

(1) 'Limbé', Pigments, p. 43.

(2) Névralgies, p. 23.

tout le rideau du poème
 où
 Dieu que tu es belle
 mais longue à être nue (1)

(Through the window half-open onto
 my scorn of the world
 a breeze was rising
 perfumed with stephanotis
 and all the while you were pulling towards you
 all the curtain

Like that
 I see you
 will always see you
 pulling towards you
 all the curtain of the poem
 in which
~~Jesus~~ but you're beautiful
 but long at undressing)

One almost hears an involuntary whistle in the exclamation which 'escapes' from him.

In his love-poetry on the whole the simplicity of his expression makes for a quality of intimacy and pressing sincerity:

Quand bien même
 je t'aimerais mal
 en est-ce bien sûr
 au point d'en avoir mal
 pour sûr
 tu sais bien que je t'aime
 c'est sûr
 au point d'en avoir mal
 pour sûr
 de t'aimer mal
 en est-ce bien sûr
 toi qui m'aimes
 toi qui m'aimes mal
 c'est sûr (2)

(And even if
 I loved you ill
 is it truly surely
~~so~~ you should suffer ill
 for sure
 you know well that I love you
 that's sure
~~so that~~ I suffer ill
 for sure
 for loving you ill
 is it truly surely
 you who love me
 you who love me ill
 that's sure)

The spoken language is Damas' domain, and he shares with Prévert a certain preoccupation with the language almost for its own sake. In Damas' poetry

(1) Névralgies, p. 36.

(2) Op. cit., p. 64.

one has the impression now that words are laughing mockingly at words, now that they are in mischievous conspiracy with one another; that Damas is both using words to make a mockery of words and obsessed by them, sharply alert to and fascinated by their quality, by the possibilities humorous, bizarre, compelling or frivolous contained in the sense and the sounds of words. He summons all the echoes and undertones lurking in them, so that in his poetry words are surreptitious, protean, shifty - see again the poem 'Pas d'ombres' quoted on page , and the note concerning its translation.

Damas delights in exploring ordinary figures of speech, familiar colloquialisms which have come to be taken very much for granted but which he retrieves from banality by highlighting them in one way or ~~xxx~~ another, by ^{this} fixing upon them an attention denied them in normal use. At times he exploits their comic potential lost with familiarity. In this poem for instance, with a hint of tongue-in-cheek he juxtaposes two metaphors which have an element in common, thus producing a kind of semi-pun:

... Alors
je vous mettrai les pieds dans le plat
ou bien tout simplement
la main au collet ...(1)

(And then
I'll put my foot in it for sure
or maybe just
my hand to your throat ...)

Often one metaphor is telescoped into another, with striking poetic effect. A great number of these are metaphors involving parts of the body, especially the eyes:

Toute la peine
au poids de l'eau que portent
les femmes frêles
de l'Issa-Ber
je l'ai lue en tes yeux
qui n'avaient d'yeux
que pour la peine
au poids de l'eau
qu'à l'épaule portent
les femmes frêles
de l'Issa-Ber (2)

(All the pain
in the weight of the water they carry
the frail women
of Issa-Ber
I read in your eyes
that only had eyes
for the pain
in the weight of the water
they carry on their shoulders

(1) 'Pour sûr', Pigments, p. 51.

(2) Névralgies, p. 39. Issa-Ber is a region of the Ivory Coast.

the frail women
of Issa-Ber)

Damas is greatly taken up with the sounds of words, and a feature of his poetic style is alliteration. With ~~h~~ this he gains a number of remarkable effects, as in this line where he produces a significant reverberative echo with the complicity of vowel-sounds:

le néant de mes nuits au néon à naître (1)
(the nothingness of my neon nights nearing)

Sometimes this more playful:

les deux doigts à thé pointus pointés et pointant
juste (2)

(the two fingers at tea pointedpointing and poised
just right)

It is as though he were unable to resist the temptation of doubling or echoing a sound, repeating it under as many forms as the unity of his theme will allow:

... l'âme
l'amour
la mort

la vie de la TERRE-MERE ... (3)

... Trêve de lâchage
de léchage
de lèche ... (4)

(... Let-up with the letting-go
the lapping-up
the licking ...)

This device he often uses for derogatory effect - he will compile a list of words which have some similarity in their sounds or their rhythm, for example lists of participles or adverbs, but which may be quite nonsensical in juxtaposition:

... des reposoirs sur qui pleuvaient
roses effeuillées
roses parfumées
roses d'encens
miraculées
immaculées
matriculées ... (5)

(altars onto which there rained
stripped-apart roses
sweet-scented roses
rosemary-roses
miraculated

(1) Black-Label, p. 25.

(2) Op. cit., p. 27.

(3) Op. cit., p. 78.

(4) 'Trêve', Pigments, p. 21.

(5) Black-Label, p. 38. See also poem 'Et cetera', Appendix, p. 158. This is
[cont'd overleaf]

immaculated
matriculated ...)

And his juggling of words and sounds for various effects is endless:

les bouches à mouches bées (1)

... dénoué
le jeu coulant du noeud
le noeud coulant du jeu
le jeu du noeud coulant ... (2)

(un-knotted
the slippery game of the knot
the slip-knot of the game
the game of the slip-knot)

Occasionally rhyme comes into its own, all in the same strain of playing with sounds.

Repetition or parallelism is one of Damas' favourite devices. In his note on traditional African poetry he describes one of the characteristics of its form:

Poésie où la rime et le nombre de syllabes n'ont forcément aucun rôle à jouer. Poésie qui attend tout de la cadence ou de la mélodie. Tout de la répétition qui engendre le rythme. (3)

(Poetry in which rhyme or the number of syllables do not necessarily have any part to play. Poetry which depends wholly upon the rhythm and the melody. Wholly upon repetition which engenders rhythm.)

Apart from the repetition of sounds characteristic of Damas' style, he also employs simple repetitions of a word or a group of words.⁽⁴⁾ One procedure is to repeat the ending of each line at the beginning of the next:

D'avoir cru un instant
un instant cru
à la main dégantée
à la main dégantée au printemps
au printemps né
né de la magie
de la magie du rythme ... (5)

also a favourite game of Prévert's: 'la délégation des malheureux prélats carbonisés miraculés béatifiés et affamés' (the delegation of the unhappy prelates carbonized miraculated beatified and famished) - J. Prévert, 'La crosse en l'air', Paroles, p. 125.

(1) Black-Label, p. 83.

(2) Névralgies, p. 70.

(3) Op. cit., p. 7.

(4) In his re-editions of his poems (Pigments in 1962 and Graffiti later incorporated into Névralgies) the most frequent change which he carries out upon the form of a poem is to repeat a word or a group of words not repeated in the original.

(5) Névralgies, p. 22.

(For trusting one moment
 one moment trusting
 the hand ungloved
 the hand ungloved in the springtime
 the springtime born
 born of the magic
 of the magic of rhythm ...)

This device he also employs in the poems already quoted 'Regard',⁽¹⁾ and 'Ils ont',⁽²⁾ The effect is^a deliberate, hovering rhythm during which the poem seems to gather momentum towards a point, usually at or near the end, where it soars or is simply relaxed.

Most of Damas' poems move towards a ^{finale} finale of some kind. In certain cases for instance ('Hoquet',⁽³⁾ 'S.O.S.',⁽⁴⁾ 'Nuit blanche',⁽⁵⁾ 'Contre notre amour',⁽⁶⁾) the tone throughout a fairly long poem is near-humorous or dispassionate in its denouncement, and the movement not a straight line but a sauntering rhythm which loiters over playful repetitions and other 'word-games', all of which has a lulling effect, until, at the end, there is a sudden deadly serious twist which jolts the attention.

But even when an ending is not particularly dramatic, the last part of his poems is usually significant in some way, a significance marked by the fact that the final sections are in most cases a departure from whatever regularity there may be in the structure of the rest of the poem.

Often, for instance, the last sentence of the poem is rather longer than the other lines and this has the effect of causing the poem to open out or unfurl at the end. This is very effective in the poem 'Il n'est pas de midi qui tienne',⁽⁷⁾ in the poem 'Il est des nuits',⁽⁸⁾ where the slowing down which is the result of the lengthening of the last line conveys the deliberateness of the movement described; and in this poem of Pigments where again the relative length and plodding rhythm of the final line matches perfectly the action it contains and provides a slow, ironic climax or anti-climax to the whole:

Il est des choses
 dont j'ai pu n'avoir pas perdu
 tout souvenir

-
- (1) Ch. 4, p. .
 (2) Ch. 3, p. .
 (3) Appendix, p. .
 (4) Ch. 3, p. .
 (5) Ch. 3, p. .
 (6) Ch. 4, p. .
 (7) Ch. 4, p. .
 (8) Ch. 4, p. .

Et brimades en bambou
pour toute mangue tombée
durant l'indigestion
de tout morceau d'histoire de France

Et flûte

Flûte de roseau
jouant sur les mornes des airs d'esclaves
pendant qu'aux savanes
des boeufs sagement ruminent
pendant qu'autour
des zombies rôdent
pendant qu'ils éjaculent
les patrons d'Usine
pendant que le bon nègre
allonge sur son grabat dix à quinze heures d'Usine (1)

(There are things
that I have kept
from all forgetting

And bamboo-beatings
for every mango falling
during the indigestion
of every swallow of the history of France

And a flute

Reed-flute playing
wafting slave-music over the slopes
while in the savannas
cattle gravely masticate
while round about
zombies prowl
while Factory bosses
ejaculate
while Uncle-Tom
stretches out on his pallet ten to fifteen Factory hours)

Often the endings of Damas' poems take the form of a post-script, such as this tragi-comic after-thought to a defiant outburst:

Pour sûr j'en aurai
marre
sans même attendre
qu'elles prennent
les choses
l'allure
d'un camembert bien fait

Alors
je vous mettrai les pieds dans le plat
ou bien tout simplement
la main au collet
de tout ce qui m'emmerde en gros caractères
colonisation
civilisation
assimilation
et la suite

(1) 'Rappel' (Remembrance), Pigments, p. 61.

En attendant
vous m'entendrez souvent
claquer la porte (1)

(One day for sure I'll have had
my fill
without even waiting
for things
to set
like a well-done camembert

And then
I'll put my foot in it for sure
or maybe just
my hand to your throat
you and all your shit in capital letters
colonization
civilization
assimilation
and the rest of it

Meanwhile
you'll often hear me
slam the door)

In a great number of his poems a series of stanzas is begun with the same sentence or group of words ('Solde',⁽²⁾ 'Nuit blanche',⁽³⁾ 'Regard',⁽⁴⁾); or it may be a 'list' of single lines, often with parallel rhythms, which he begins with the same word or group of words, to achieve a cumulative effect:

...la Ligne
qui mène encore
aux Isles de l'Aventure
aux Isles à la Dérive
aux Isles de la Flibuste
aux Isles de la Boucane
aux Isles de la Tortue
aux Isles à Nègreries
aux Isles à Sucreries
aux Isles de la Mort-Vive ... (5)

(... the Line
that leads yet to
the Isles of Adventure
the Isles drifting Leeward
the Isles of the Buccaneers
the Isles of the Pirate-Ships
the Isles of the Turtle-Back
the Isles of the Barracoons
the Isles of the Sugar-Mills
the Isles of the Living-Death ...)

Sometimes it is a whole stanza which is repeated, often with some rearrangement in the words, such as in this poem:

(1) 'Pour sûr', (For sure), Pigments, p. 51.

(2) Appendix, p. .

(3) Ch. 3, p. .

(4) Ch. 4, p. 57.

(5) Black-Label, p. 10.

Et les sabots
des bêtes de somme
qui martèlent en Europe
l'aube indécise encore
me rappellent
l'abnégation étrange
des trays matineux
repus
qui rythment aux Antilles
les hanches des porteuses ,
en file indienne

Et l'abnégation étrange
des trays matineux
repus
qui rythment aux Antilles
les hanches des porteuses
en file indienne
me rappellent
les sabots
des bêtes de somme
qui martèlent en Europe
l'aube indécise encore (1)

(And the hooves
of beasts of burden
in Europe hammering at
the still-hesitant dawn
recall to me
the strange abnegation of
laden
morning trays
in the Islands
bouncing into rhythm
the hips of women moving
Indian file

And the strange abnegation of
laden
morning trays
in the Islands
bouncing into rhythm
the hips of women moving
Indian file
recall to me
the hooves
of beasts of burden
in Europe hammering at
the still-hesitant dawn)

In poems of this structure there may be a point of emphasis in the middle rather than at the end, as in the poem 'Toute la peine' ⁽²⁾ and especially in 'Ils sont venus ce soir' ⁽³⁾ where the poem rolls up to a climax and then unrolls again.

Damas makes frequent use of refrains, as in 'Bientôt' ⁽⁴⁾, 'Il n'est pas de midi qui tienne' ⁽⁵⁾ and notably, throughout the whole length of Black-Label.

(1) 'En file indienne' (Indian file), Pigments, p. 29.

(2) Ch. 5, p. .

(3) Ch. 3, p. .

(4) Ch. 5, p. .

(5) Ch. 4, p. .

It is repetitions and the multiplication of near-synonyms or words with similar sounds, and the repetition or multiplication of parallel images, which, in purely structural terms, give body to an essentially tenuous style. One of Damas' strong points is his gift of succinctness, his power of suggestiveness by means of quick and unelaborated strokes. A tiny, almost skeletal poem of Névralgies perhaps merits detailed attention as an example of the quite unforced concentration of resources which is the strength of his effective shorter poems:

Comme un rosaire
s'égrène
pour le repos
d'une âme
mes nuits
s'en vont par cinq
dans un silence
de monastère
hanté (1)

(Like telling
beads
for the repose
of a soul
my nights
go by in fives
in a silence
like a monastery
haunted)

Perhaps the bareness of the poem in itself conveys the bleakness described, as its shortness reflects the feeling of time slipping away. Almost every sound contributes to the whole. The effect of hollowness is created by the great proportion of nasals and nasal vowels and by the hum of r's; the long vowels on every line convey prolonged dreariness; the silence is evoked by the many sibilants - and for the reader even the three unpronounced ones cannot but play a part in this. Even the functional particles 'un', 'mes', 's'en', 'dans', are important to the whole effect because of their sounds. The one word 'hanté' placed at the end and standing alone suggests an eerie echo which prolongs the poem and its effect of reverberating emptiness. The rhythm is an even tread which conveys monotony, especially in the line 's'en vont par cinq'. The one image of bead-telling for the dead conjures up absence, faithfulness and the sad stringing out of time, and time which seems both drawn out and fleeting because of its unrelieved sameness. The monastery brings further associations of deprivation, stillness, darkness. Thus a wealth of effects is produced in the space of a short, unpretentious poem.

Contrasts between Damas and Senghor suggest themselves at every turn - it is not only in his attitude but in his style, too that Damas is the complete antithesis of Senghor. Against the latter's gently rolling, image-laden

(1) Névralgies; p. 17.

lines, we have Damas' bare, tense, often staccato style. It is perhaps not altogether fanciful to see a reflection of Senghor's perfect collectedness in the sustained, even undulation of his lines while the brittleness and precipitateness of Damas' poetry reflect a more highly-strung, volatile temperament.

At times Damas' poems owe their impact to their abruptness, their brutal directness and lack of adornment, for instance the more violent poems of Pigments.

His tendency towards concentration produces beautifully suggestive turns of phrase:

des yeux qui tendent la main (1)
(eyes holding out their hand)
les yeux ventre creux (2)
(hollow-belly eyes)

At times his style is reminiscent of Latin in its incisive condensation:

une vie étrange et mienne(3)
(a life foreign and mine)

His elliptical style often serves to delay apprehension, or it may create permanent obscurity or equivocality.

The weakness of a ^alaconic style is that unless a certain tension is maintained, unless the lines are sufficiently charged, a poem may leave very little impression - it is as evanescent as it is short. One or two of Damas' little poems are the victims of this slackening.

The book Black-Label invites specific discussion, as it seems to represent a departure, to Lilyan Kesteloot⁽⁴⁾ an unsatisfactory departure, from the conciseness of style which for the most part characterizes his previous poetry.

Black-Label is a long poetic work, divided into four sections, each section being a continuous whole. The recurrence of refrains from one section to another also provides a certain measure of overall continuity. There is a dominant refrain running through the book, and there are subsidiary refrains within the respective sections. One refrain, which occurs in both the second and fourth sections, grows by one line at each repetition.

But the continuity is only structural - what strikes one is the looseness,

(1) 'Un clochard m'a demandé dix sous', Pigments, p. 37.

(2) idem, p. 38.

(3) Névralgies, p. 52.

(4) 'Ses qualités si rares: sobriété, ellipse, allusion ... sont noyées dans ce long poème épique, souvent verbeux malgré d'excellents passages!' (Those rare qualities of his: sobriety, ellipsis, innuendo ... are drowned in this long epic poem which often becomes verbose, despite some excellent passages!) -L. Kesteloot, Les écrivains noirs de langue française, p. 147.

the free digression and the general lack of sequence. Parts of each section might be lifted out as independent poems. Often one fails to grasp the justification for a transition ~~xxx~~ from one theme to another. In general the scenario is as fluid as that of a Surrealist film, with its abruptly-shifting décor.

However the fact that one or other refrain is always interposed before an abrupt transition or digression confirms the impression that Black-Label is less a 'long poème' than a series of poetic musings strung together by these refrains which are meant to establish a loose relatedness. The author himself introduces the book as 'poèmes', although he might mean each of the four sections to constitute a poem.

It is very likely that Damas, perhaps inspired by Langston Hughes' experiments in this direction, modelled the structure of this work on that of a jazz piece,⁽¹⁾ the impromptu 'jam session'. The digressions, the frequent expansive embroidery, the occasional prolonged jingle (one sometimes gains the impression that it is no longer a case of him playing with sounds, but of sounds running off with him), all of this would be in keeping with the diffuse character of free jazz improvisation. Thus the refrain would form the basic theme which in a jazz piece may be taken up in turn by different instruments introducing new variations.

The style of Black-Label is dictated by the nature of its subject-matter. The element of narrative and description, the wandering reminiscences impose their own expanded style - they could hardly be fitted into sharp, tight poems.

The tendency to linger on words, as opposed to the economy and concision of his style elsewhere, considered by Kesteloot to be 'inauthentic' is a tendency already evident in Pigments - there is for instance the middle stanza of 'Nuit blanche'⁽²⁾ and notably 'Et caetera'⁽³⁾ - and also ~~x~~ in a few poems of Graffiti. But Black-Label is a more relaxed work than the two preceding ones, less tense both in its organization and its general tenor, and in it he gives freer rein to the temptation to 'play' with words. This development of his style persists into his latest work Névralgies, where there is far more alliteration, juggling around of words and phrases, more longer poems, and as we have already noted, poems reproduced from Graffiti have words and lines repeated. But he certainly does not desert his more concentrated style, and it is perhaps unfair to imprison him in it and to consider any other a deviation from type.

As in most modern poetry, where the actual setting out of lines upon the page is no longer predetermined by a limited number of poetic forms, typography is itself to be taken into account when considering the characteristics of Damas' style.

(1) Which is perhaps one of the reasons for the title being in English.

(2) Ch. 3, p. .

(3) Appendix, p. .

(4)

We have already referred to the lengthening of last lines. In the poem 'Ils sont venus ce soir',⁽¹⁾ the diagonal arrangement of the words very effectively conveys the cascading of the rhythm into a shuffling frenzy', cut short by the looming capitals 'DEPUIS'. The breaking down of words into syllables is a gesture of contempt:

votre leçon de vi-o-lon (2)
 (your vi-o-lin lesson)
 /Ie/ sang de leur ci-vi-li-sa-tion (3)
 (the blood of their ci-vil-i-za-tion)

There are a number of poems of Pigments where the rearrangement of lines in the second edition has ruined effects gained in their original form. In the poem 'La complainte du nègre',⁽⁴⁾ for instance, the final part is thus set out in the 1937 edition:

va encore mon hébétude du temps jadis
 de
 coups de corde nouveaux de corps calcinés
 de l'orteil au dos calcinés
 de chair morte de tisons de fer rouge de bras
 brisés sous le fouet qui se déchaîne sous le fouet qui
 fait
 marcher la plantation s'abreuver de sang
 de mon sang de sang la sucrerie ... (5)

(still today my stupor of time past
 the
 cracks of cords knotted the scorched bodies
 the bodies scorched from top to toe
 the dead flesh the firebrands the red-hot iron the bones
 breaking under the whip turned loose under the whip that
 drives
 the plantation and stokes the sugar-mill with blood
 my blood with blood ...)

The running together of the details on the page, the prolonged lines and enjambement produce a striking effect of breathless, impassioned accumulation and overflowing of emotion, lost in the rather stiff enumeration of the present edition. The same is true of poems such as 'Solde',⁽⁶⁾ and 'Limbé'.⁽⁷⁾ But this is in keeping with Damas' declared intention to introduce a greater element of rhythm into his poems, as the breaking down of lines is a multiplication of stress. Almost all the poems of Pigments at the reprinting are modified in this way - the lines are cut down into smaller segments, and this tendency is apparent in his other poetry.

(1) Ch. 1, p. 1.

(2) 'Hoquet', Pigments, p. 36.

(3) 'Solde', op. cit., p. 40.

(4) Quoted in Ch. 3, p. .

(5) Pigments, Paris, GLM, 1937, (unpagged edition).

(6) Appendix, p. .

(7) Appendix, p. .

He makes increasing use of typographical devices. In Black-Label he constantly varies the margin spacing and uses more capitals than before. In Névralgies he also uses italics in a number of poems (italic print in Black-Label is used mainly for Creole words) and in one place he 'illustrates' his poem with a line of dots:

Toujours tu viendras
comme tu es venue
quand bien même
je serais
à l'autre bout du Monde
toujours tu viendras
comme tu es venue
chasser la fièvre
de mon front brûlant
de tes mains
qui fleuraient le jasmin
mais combien moites
d'effroi

.....

Quand bien même je serais au bout du Monde
toujours tu viendras
passée la ligne (1)

(Always you will come
as you came
even though
I were to be
at the other end of the World
always you will come
as you came
to chase away the fever
from my burning forehead
with your hands
that were flowering jasmin
but oh how moist
with terror

.....

Even though I were at the end of the World
always you would come
across the line)

Despite his connection with the Surrealist poets and despite his long tribute in his anthology⁽²⁾ to Etienne Léro's work of bringing Surrealism to French Caribbean poetry, Damas' own poetry is no more Surrealist than any other French poetry produced in this century after the generally loosening impact of Surrealism, the access to a sub-rational layer of the consciousness - dreams, fancies, snatches of incoherence, incongruous or gratuitous images. Among the poems which might have been directly influenced by Surrealism, this poem of Pigments has the bizarre and gratuitous quality of dreams and could have been

(1) Névralgies, p. 51; 'la ligne' is both the Equator and the other imaginary line, between races. (See passage from Black-Label, Appendix, p. .)

(2) Poètes d'expression française, pp. 11-16.

inspired by an actual semi-dream touched off by the sound of a running tap heard between sleeping and waking:

Névràlgie d'un robinet qui coule
emplit le broc de ma concierge
qu'un arc-en-ciel aspire

Fermez la névràlgie du robinet qui coule
emplit le broc de ma concierge
qu'un arc-en-ciel aspire

Enlevez du robinet qui coule
le broc de ma concierge
qu'un arc-en-ciel aspire

Ou coupez de la main jusqu'au coude
l'arc-en-ciel qui aspire
le broc de ma concierge
qu'emplit la névràlgie
d'un robinet qui coule (1)

(Neuralgia from a running tap
fillings my caretaker's pitcher
whilst a rainbow breathes it in

Shut off the neuralgia from the running tap
filling my caretaker's pitcher
whilst a rainbow breathes it in

Take away from the running tap
my caretaker's pitcher
that a rainbow is breathing in

Or chop away from hand to elbow
the rainbow that is breathing from
my caretaker's pitcher that is
filling with neuralgia from a running tap)

In discussing the style of Damas' poetry one should perhaps also consider his collection of African poems. It is of course difficult to judge a translation if one has no access to the original. But perhaps the ultimate test of any translation is whether it stands or falls independent of its original.

The reviewer of the English version of Damas' Poèmes nègres sur des airs africains ⁽²⁾ is not convinced that they are translations:

These poems were not translated from any African language into French by Damas, but are obviously inspired by African ~~verse~~ verse.

... when a writer of part-African descent can identify himself so completely with Africa, can absorb so fully the African conscience and merge it with his own mind and emotions, then he is truly a disciple of negritude. (3)

(1) 'Névràlgies', Pigments, p. 19.

(2) African songs of love, war, grief and abuse, trans. By M. Koshland and U. Beier, Ibadan, Mbari publications, 1961.

(3) O.O.R. Dathorne, Review of op. cit., Black Orpheus, Ibadan, No. 11, 1962, p. 70.

The reviewer seems to consider them to be original creations - he identifies the attitudes expressed in them with Damas' own sentiments; for instance in commenting on the section 'Chants de guerre' he speaks of 'the insurmountable hope and zealous determination which Damas praises'.⁽¹⁾

It is to Damas' credit that these poems do not read like translations; however, their detail, the very particular area of experience out of which they arise, suggest that they could hardly be the products of Damas' own imagination, merely 'inspired' by African poetry in general, but are based on quite particular poems. It would be strange, for instance, if Damas had of his own accord devised the long poem of praise to a Sotho warrior-chief, 'Gloire à Mosheh', peopled as it is with characters and incidents all belonging to a very particular setting:

... Elles disent
 Mosheh est un vieux léopard sans dents
 Il a déchiré de ses griffes
 Le manteau de toiles d'araignée
 Son bras est moucheté
 Son bouclier brille comme un tison ardent
 Et luit comme la demi-lune

Elles disent
 Mosheh s'est emparé de la vache blanche
 Il lui a rasé la tête
 Il a tondu la genisse de Namékoé ...⁽²⁾

(The women are saying
 Mosheh is an old toothless lion
 With his claws he has torn apart
 The coat of spiders' webs
 His arm is speckled
 His shield shines like a burning fire-brand
 And glows like the half-moon

The women are saying
 Mosheh has got hold of the white cow
 He has shaved his head
 He has shorn Namaykway's heifer ...)

The poems of this book are in fact songs and chants which Damas heard 'un peu partout' (all over the place) in the course of his extensive travels in Africa. He noted them down with the aid of interpreters, later to create these adaptations, which are necessarily to some extent new poems.

Two considerations seem to have been uppermost in his mind. One, that the equivalent of the language of African oral poetry is not what was traditionally ^{taken} to be 'poetic' French, a learned and purified idiom, but the very opposite, the spoken tongue; so that we find him deliberately making use of colloquialisms and familiar French in general:

Nous étions trois femmes
 Trois hommes
 Et moi Kodio Ango
 Nous allions turbiner à la ville ...⁽³⁾

(1) O. R. Dathorne, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

(2) *Poèmes nègres*, p. 18.

(3) *Op. cit.*, p. 24.

(We were three women
Three men
And me Cudjoe Ango
We were going to town to grind ...)

::: Mais moi la vieille
Moi la vieille je dis
Je n'ai plus de fils
Je n'aurai plus rien à metmettre
Rien à me mettre sous la dent
Je n'aurai plus rien à metmettre
Rien à me mettre sur le dos
Or je suis vieille ... (1)

(But me the old woman
Me the old woman I say
I have no more son
I'll never more have a thing to put
A thing to put in my belly
I'll never more have a thing to put
A thing to put on my back
Now I am old ...)

The other task which he sets himself is less straightforward, for as Ulli Beier remarks in the preface to his collection of traditional African poems, it is impossible to convey into a European language the complicated rhythms of African poetry.⁽²⁾ However, as in many of his own poems, Damas constantly strives to beat into the language rhythms rather stronger than are native to it. In this poem for example he employs short vowels, sharp accentuation and repetitive sounds⁽³⁾ (for instance 'avalér la calébasé') to create an arresting rhythm:

Arrachons retournons rejetons-nous le coeur
Que l'homme fasse la récolte du manioc
Arrachons retournons rejetons-nous le coeur
Que l'homme fasse la récolte du manioc
Nous les Amazones
Arrachons déchirons rejetons-nous le coeur
Que l'homme fasse la récolte du manioc
Jusqu'à ce que notre bouche s'ouvre pour avaler la calébasé
Le chemin du sang reprendra le chemin du sang
Arrachons déchirons rejetons-nous le coeur
Que l'homme à notre place
Fasse la récolte du manioc (4)

(Let us drag it out turn it round throw away our heart
Let the man go dig the cassava
Let us drag it out turn it round throw away our heart
Let the man go dig the cassava
We the Amazons
Drag it out tear it up throw away our heart
Let the man go dig the cassava
Till our mouths open up to swallow down the calabash
Path of blood will follow down the path of blood again
Drag it out tear it up throw away our heart
For the man to go instead of us
Go dig the cassava)

(1) Op. cit., p. 22.

(2) U. Beier, African poetry, Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1966.

(3) It is these same qualities in the Spanish language which were exploited in Afro-Cuban poetry (see Ch. 1).

(4) Op. cit.

As we have shown, Damas' own poetry bears affinities with African oral poetry. But even as his adaptations of African poems have all the spontaneity of original creations, so Damas' own poetry shows ~~no~~ trace of any strained attempt to write 'Negro' poetry.

Any definition of Damas' poetry would have to ~~take~~ into account both the accessibility of his language and the tendency towards the cryptic; his terseness and his wordy 'vagabondage'; an almost fragile delicacy and the most unflinching crudity: all these and a corresponding variety of rhythms. But perhaps the unifying characteristic of his style is an apparent spontaneity, the freedom with which he ranges up and down this scale of moods to render us now in one voice, now in another, these verses which his friend Senghor has called 'les poèmes-chansons de Damas' ⁽¹⁾ (the song-poems of Damas).

(1) L; -S. Senghor, 'L'apport de la poésie nègre au demi-siècle', Négritude et Humanisme, p. 145.

Chapter Six. Conclusion.

There can be no doubt that Negritude as a cultural, socio-political, and literary movement was historically justified. Its cultural and socio-political implications continue, while Negritude as a source of themes for poetry is necessarily limited. No specific 'Negro style' has emerged - Negritude only released individual initiative, and French African literature has been spared the wastefulness of a period of (albeit voluntary) literary servitude such as occurred in the French Caribbean, and even in Haiti after political independence had been won. The new generation of French African writers, though not be dragged protesting under the Negritude banner as is too often done, are nevertheless 'post-Negritude' writers in that they take it for granted that peculiarly African attitudes and preoccupations have droit de cité in their writings, whereas had the Negritude movement never taken place French Africans, (who are still today eminently francophile), might have sought to eradicate these peculiarities⁽¹⁾ and instead strive to prove themselves well-taught 'évolués'.⁽²⁾

It has been some time now since the Haitian Laleau made his clumsy complaint:

... sentez-vous cette souffrance
Et ce désespoir à nul autre égal
D'appriivoiser avec des mots de France
Ce coeur qui m'est venu du Sénégal? (3)

(... do you not feel this anguish
This hopelessness unequalled
At taming with words from France
This heart I have from Senegal?)

notwithstanding which difficulty, the medium of the Negritude movement, a reaction against French culture, was the French language.

The fact that the Negritude writers chose to write in French had two very solid practical reasons. One was that ~~xxx~~ Negritude being a revolt against their French colonizers it was desirable that these latter understand them. Another reason was the literacy factor. To write in their own languages would be to restrict their audience to the narrow educated layer of their compatriots. There was little point in writing in Serer or Wolof if the only people who could read what one had written would be the relatively small percentage of these tribes who had received an 'education'. The French language provided a

(1) This is an opinion also expressed by Ulli Beier in 'The theme of the ancestors in Senghor's poetry', Black Orpheus, Ibadan, No. 5, May 1959, p. 17.

(2) 'Evolved persons' - official term used in the French colonies for 'Natives' having attained to a certain degree of assimilation to French culture.

(3) Quoted Ch. 1, p. .

ready lingua franca for the supra-national community established by Négritude.

But the success of French African and Caribbean literature proves that the French language is in fact no more alien and uncomfortable to the black writers than were Damas' 'smoking' and collar when he wrote 'Soldat' (1) They were able thus effectively to articulate their revolt against the cultural assimilation undertaken by their colonizers because this assimilation had thoroughly (2) equipped them with the very weapons of their colonizers. There was no need to steal their fire - it had been thrust into their hands.

It is to be hoped that the spread of literacy - and literacy also in African and not exclusively European languages - will open the way for the establishment of separate national literatures in African languages, which would come to the rest of the world in translation. But for the time being French African literature is inextricably a part of French literature, bringing a fresh and ~~is~~ distinctive note to it.

Léon Damas is perhaps the most controversial figure of the Négritude movement, controversial without being in any way flamboyant. Most of his notoriety has grown out of one slim volume of poetry, Pigments. He is not a prolific writer, and since the publication of Pigments in 1937 he has largely effaced himself behind activities such as anthologizing, cultural research, political writing and political involvement, only bringing forth a volume of his own poetry at sporadic intervals.

The recognition which Damas has gained as a literary figure is by no means merely to be seen as a succès de scandale. Those who have seen fit to dismiss him as a racist have not been able to dismiss his poetry. Had Damas' work been no more than sloganizing (as is a regrettable quantity of matter today which manages to be published, under the auspices of 'Negro poetry'), it would hardly have imposed itself in the first place upon the attention of his critics to the extent to which it has imposed itself.

One day in the future a generation of French West Indians will not entirely comprehend the rage of Pigments. But poets as opposed to pamphleteers continue to be read and appreciated long after the questions which animated their writing are no longer burning issues, and the literary value of Damas' 'racial' poetry will survive the relevance of his protests.

(1) Appendix, p

(2) 'Je pense en français; je m'exprime mieux en français que dans ma langue maternelle'. (I think in French; I express myself better in French than in my mother tongue) - L.-S. Senghor, 'Le français, langue de culture', in Négritude et Humanisme, p. 361. '... le français n'est plus pour moi un "véhicule étranger" mais la forme d'expression naturelle de ma pensée.' (French is no longer for me a "foreign medium", but the natural form of expression for my thought.) - Quoted by A. Guibert, Léopold-Sédar Senghor, l'homme et l'oeuvre, Paris, Présence Africaine, 1962, pp. 144-145.

Pigments is the beginning of the Negritude movement in literature. And Damas' career presents a complete embodiment of the movement in all of its aspects. But he is also a worthy representative of Negritude in that his poetry has developed with Negritude. If his first book of poetry is the most violently racial among Negritude poetry, his latest work, in his own words, wears the 'nouveau visage de la négritude'⁽¹⁾ (new face of negritude), which is a face turned towards the rest of humanity.

(1) Interview with Damas. (1967)

HOQUET

Et j'ai beau avaler sept gorgées d'eau
trois à quatre fois par vingt-quatre heures
me revient mon enfance
dans un hoquet secouant
mon instinct
tel le flic le voyou

Désastre
parlez-moi du désastre
parlez-m'en

Ma mère voulant d'un fils très bonnes manières à table
Les mains sur la table
le pain ne se coupe pas
le pain se rompt
le pain ne se gaspille pas
le pain de Dieu
le pain de la sueur du front de votre Père
le pain du pain

Un os se mange avec mesure et discrétion
un estomac doit être sociable
et tout estomac sociable
se passe de rots
une fourchette n'est pas un cure-dents
défense de se moucher
au su
au vu de tout le monde
et puis tenez-vous droit
un nez bien élevé
ne balaye pas l'assiette

Et puis et puis
et puis au nom du Père
 du Fils
 du Saint-Esprit
à la fin de chaque repas

Et puis et puis
et puis désastre
parlez-moi du désastre
parlez-m'en

Ma mère voulant d'un fils mémorandum

Si votre leçon d'histoire n'est pas sue
vous n'irez pas à la messe
dimanche
avec vos effets des dimanches

Cet enfant sera la honte de notre nom
cet enfant sera notre nom de Dieu

Taisez-vous
Vous ai-je dit ou non qu'il vous fallait parler français
le français de France
le français du français
le français français

And for all I may swallow seven gulps of water
three or four times every twenty-four hours
my childhood comes back
in a hiccup shaking
my instinct
like a cop and a delinquent

Disaster
talk about disaster
tell me

My mother having set her heart on a
very-good-good-table-manners son

Hands on the table
bread is not cut
bread is broken
bread is not wasted
bread of God
bread of the sweat of your Father's brow
bread of bread

A bone is eaten with restraint and discretion
a stomach should be sociable
and a sociable stomach
manages without belches
a fork is not a tooth-pick
nose-blowing forbidden
in the open
in the open sight of all
and then do hold yourself upright
a well-raised nose
doesn't wipe the plate

And then again
and then in the name of the Father
the Son
the Holy Ghost
to round off every meal

And then again
and then disaster
Talk about disaster
tell me

My mother having set her heart on a
memorandum son

If you don't know your history lesson
then you shan't get to come to Mass
on Sunday
in your Sunday things

This child will be disgrace of our name
this child will be our unnameable ruin

Be quiet
have I told you or have I not that you are to speak French
French of France
French of the French
French French

Désastre
parlez-moi du désastre
parlez-m'en

Ma mère voulant d'un fils
fils de sa mère

Vous n'avez pas salué voisine
encore vos chaussures de sales
et que je vous reprenne dans la rue
sur l'herbe ou la Savane
à l'ombre du Monument aux Morts
à jouer
à vous ébattre avec Untel
avec Untel qui n'a pas reçu le baptême

Désastre
parlez-moi du désastre
parlez-m'en

Ma Mère voulant d'un fils très do
très ré
très mi
très fa
très sol
très la
très si
très do
ré-mi-fa
sol-la-si
do

Il m'est revenu que vous n'étiez encore pas
à votre leçon de vi-o-lon

Un banjo
vous dites un banjo
comment dites-vous
un banjo
vous dites bien
un banjo

Non monsieur
vous saurez qu'on ne souffre chez nous

ni ban
ni jo
ni gui
ni tare

les mulâtres ne font pas ça
laissez donc ça aux nègres

Pigments

Disaster
talk about disaster
tell me

My Mother having set her heart on a
like-mother-like-son son

You haven't said good-day to the neighbour
your shoes are dirty again
and let me catch you at it the street again
on the grass or the Savanna
round the Memorial
frolicking
cavorting with This-and-That
with This-and-That who has not been baptized

Disaster
talk about disaster
tell me

My Mother having set her heart on a
very doh
very ray
very mi
very fa
very so
very la
very ti
very doh
ray-me-fa
so-la-ti
doh
son

It has occurred to me that you were not
at your vi-o-lin lesson again

A banjo
you said a banjo
what did you say
a banjo
you did say
a banjo

No my good man
I'll teach you that in this house
we put up with neither

ban
nor
jo
nor gui
nor tar
mulattoes are not given to those things
leave that to the negroes

Pigments

- TU ETAIS AU BAR
 et moi
 - parmi d'autres -
 à même la piste enduite
 et patinée de steps
 de stomps
 de slows
 de songs
 de sons
 de blues

Et de la table où un Blanc à lunettes
 s'ennuyait à lire un journal son journal
 je te regardais boire un Canadian Club

Fasciné peut-être
 soudain ton regard
 affronta le mien
 mais de toi ou de moi qui déjà n'étions
 qu'un seul beau désir insatisfait
 je ne sais plus lequel
 vint au-devant de l'Autre
 alors que l'orchestre scandait

Esclavo Soy

Je ne sais plus lequel

Et ce fut le vertige

Accrochée à tes pas
 accrochée à tes yeux
 accrochée à ton âme
 je me laissai aller
 au rythme de ton drame

Et j'en vins à souhaiter en moi-même
 que le chemin à parcourir fût aussi long que le temps mis
 à nous voir l'un et l'autre
 face à face au Carrefour

Brisant l'effroi qui nous rendait muets
 tu m'avais dit

- JE ME RIS DU HASARD MAIS JAMAIS DU DESTIN
 qui déroule à sa guise le film
 et tout est là ce soir qui rappelle
 d'une vie antérieure
 l'âpre parfum du jour
 où malgré l'interdit

IL A ÉTÉ PENDU CE MATIN
 A L'AUBE UN NÈGRE COUPA-
 BLE D'AVOIR VOULU FRAN-
 CHIR LA LIGNE

l'amour s'était promis à soi-même
 d'être à jamais fidèle à son désir

Soudain ce soir surgis
 vos mains vos lèvres
 vos yeux sont ceux de la stupeur
 ceux du désarroi
 ceux de la salive amère avalée

- YOU WERE AT THE BAR
and I

- among others
out on the floor that was plastered
and polished with steps
and stomps
and slows
and songs
and sounds
and blues

And from the table where a White with spectacles
wearied of reading a paper his paper
I watched you drinking a Canadian Club

Fascinated perhaps
suddenly your eyes
confronted mine
but was it you or was it I the two of us already but
one beautiful unsatisfied desire
I don't know now which one
came before the Other
and the orchestra tapping out

Esclavo Soy

I don't know now which one

And it was dizziness

Hanging on your steps
hanging on your eyes
hanging on your soul
willingly I ~~was~~ carried
on the rhythm of your story

And so I came to wishing within me
that the road to be covered were just as long as the time we took
at seeing each other
face to face at the Crossroads

Breaking through the terror that made us mute
you had said to me

- I MOCK AT CHANCE BUT NEVER AT FATE
that rolls out as it will the film
and all is here this evening that recalls
from a former life
the harsh perfume of the day
when despite the interdict

HANGED THIS MORNING
AT DAWN WAS A NEGRO
GUILTY OF WANTING TO
CROSS THE LINE

love had made the promise to itself
to be forever faithful to its desire

Suddenly this evening rising up
your hands your lips
your eyes are those of the stupor
of the confusion
of the bitter saliva swallowed

ceux de la larme versée en un coin de ma peine
 ceux de ma détresse
 ceux de la torture
 ceux de la souffrance
 ceux de la patience
 ceux de l'angoisse
 ceux de l'attente

Car
 ce soir soudain surgis
 vos mains vos lèvres
 vos yeux sont ceux
 de mon tout premier rêve
 alors qu'enfant mon cœur
 ignorait la puissance du mépris
 la puissance de la haine

Mais tout est là ce soir qui rappelle
 d'une vie antérieure
 l'âpre parfum du jour
 où malgré l'interdit

IL A ÉTÉ PENDU CE MATIN
 A L'AUBE UN NEGRE COUPA-
 BLE D'AVOIR VOULU FRAN-
 CHIR LA LIGNE

l'amour s'était promis à soi-même
 d'être à jamais fidèle à son désir

ET
 tout est là ce soir où nos vies
 ont cessé d'être parallèles

- Accrochée à tes pas
 accrochée à tes yeux
 accrochée à ton âme
 je me laissai aller
 au rythme de ton drame ...

Black-Label (extract), pp. 57-60

of the tear shed in a corner of my sorrow
of my distress
of the torture
of the suffering
of the patience
of the anguish
of the waiting

For
this evening suddenly rising up
your hands your lips
your eyes are those
of my very first dream
when a child my heart
knew not the power of contempt
the power of hate

But all is there this evening that recalls
from a former life
the harsh perfume of the day
when despite the interdict

HANGED THIS MORNING
AT DAWN WAS A NEGRO
GUILTY OF WANTING TO
CROSS THE LINE

love had made the promise to itself
to be forever faithful to its desire

AND
all is here this evening when our lives
have ceased to be parallel

- Hanging on your steps
hanging on your eyes
hanging on your soul
willingly I was carried
on the rhythm of your story ...

Black-Label (extract)

SOLDE

J'ai l'impression d'être ridicule
dans leurs souliers
dans leur smoking
dans leur plastron
dans leur faux-col
dans leur monocle
dans leur melon

J'ai l'impression d'être ridicule
avec mes orteils qui ne sont pas faits
pour transpirer du matin jusqu'au soir qui déshabille
avec l'emmaillotage qui m'affaiblit les membres
et enlève à mon corps sa beauté de cache-sexe

J'ai l'impression d'être ridicule
avec mon cou en cheminée d'usine
avec ces maux de tête qui cessent
chaque fois que je salue quelqu'un

J'ai l'impression d'être ridicule
dans leurs salons
dans leurs manières
dans leurs courbettes
dans leur multiple besoin de singeries

J'ai l'impression d'être ridicule
avec tout ce qu'ils racontent
jusqu'à ce qu'ils vous servent l'après-midi
un peu d'eau chaude
et des gateaux enrhumés

J'ai l'impression d'être ridicule
avec les théories qu'ils assaisonnent
au goût de leurs besoins
de leurs passions
de leurs instincts ouverts la nuit
en forme de paillasson

J'ai l'impression d'être ridicule
parmi eux complice
parmi eux souteneur
parmi eux égorgueur
les mains effroyablement rouges
du sang de leur ci-vi-li-sa-tion

Pigments

HAND-ME-DOWNS

I feel somehow foolish
 in their shoes
 in their dinner-jacket
 in their shirt-front
 in their collar
 in their monocle
 in their bowler

I feel somehow foolish
 with my toes which were not meant
 to sweat from morning until night-time liberates them
 with all this binding bandage depressing my limbs
 and denying my body its loin-cloth splendour

I feel somehow foolish
 with my neck in its smoke-stack collar
 with these head-aches that let up
 every time I say good-day

I feel somehow foolish
 in their salons
 in their mannerisms
 in their bowings
 in their multiple need of mimicry

I feel somehow foolish
 with all their claptrap
 down to their habit of serving in the afternoon
 a little warm water
 and snotty cakes in wet spirits

I feel somehow foolish
 with their a-priorities flavoured
 to taste according to their needs
 according to their passions
 according to their instincts that roll out in the night
 like a folding-mattress

I feel somehow foolish
 an accomplice
 an abettor
 a murderer with them
 my hands a horrible red
 with the blood of their ci- vil-iz-at-ion

Pigments

ET CAETERA

Devant la menace allemande, les
Anciens Combattants Sénégalais adres-
sent un câblogramme d'indéfectible
attachement. (Les Journaux.)

Aux Anciens Combattants Sénégalais
 aux Futurs Combattants Sénégalais
 à tout ce que le Sénégal peut accoucher
 de combattants sénégalais futurs anciens
 de quoi-je-mêle futurs anciens
 de mercenaires futurs anciens
 de pensionnés
 de galonnés
 de décorés
 de décavés
 de grands blessés
 de mutilés
 de calcinés
 de gangrenés
 de gueules cassées
 de bras coupés
 d'intoxiqués
 et patati et patata
 et caetera futurs anciens

Moi
 je leur dis merde
 et d'autres choses encore

Moi je leur demande
 de remiser les
 coupe-coupe
 les accès de sadisme
 le sentiment
 la sensation
 de saletés
 de malpropretés à faire

Moi je leur demande
 de taire le besoin qu'ils ressentent
 de piller
 de voler
 de violer
 de souiller à nouveau les bords antiques
 du Rhin

Moi je leur demande
 de commencer par envahir le Sénégal

Moi je leur demande
 de foutre aux "Boches" la paix

Pigments

ETCETERA

In the face of the German peril, the Association of Senegalese Ex-Servicemen has dispatched a telegram pledging their undying loyalty. (The newspapers.)

To Senegalese Ex-Sevicemen
 to Future Senegalese Servicemen
 to anything Senegal happens to throw up
 Senegalese servicemen ex- or future
 what-the-hell future ex- or future
 mercenaries ex- or future
 the pensioned-off
 the many-striped
 the medal-hung
 the broken-down
 the battle-scarred
 the maimed-for-life
 the fire-scorched
 the gangrenous
 disfigured men
 the amputees
 inebriates
 and folderol and falala
 etcetera and future ex-

I
 I say to them
 balls
 and a few other things

I will ask them
 to pack in the
 machetes
 the fits of sadism
 the urge
 the itch
 for the ugliness
 for the obscenities in store

I will ask them
 to silence the need they feel
 to pull apart
 to plunder
 to violate
 to foul again the ancient banks
 of the Rhine

I will ask them
 to begin by invading Senegal

I will ask them
 to piss-off from the "Boshes"

Pigments

TREVE

Trêve de blues
de martèlements de piano
de trompette bouchée
de folie claquant des pieds
à la satisfaction du rythme

Trêve de séances à tant le swing
autour de rings
qu'énervent
des cris de fauves

Trêve de lâchage
de léchage
de lèche
et
d'une attitude
d'hyperassimilés

Trêve un instant
d'une vie de bon enfant
et de désirs
et de besoins
et d'égoïsmes
particuliers

Pigments

POSITION

Les jours eux-mêmes
ont pris la forme
des masques africains
indifférents
à toute profanation
de chaux vive
qu'encense
un piano
répétant la rengaine
d'un clair de lune à soupirs
tout format
dans les halliers
gondoles
et caetera

Pigments

LET UP

Let up with the blues
 with hammering on pianos
 with muted trumpets
 with mad-tapping feet
 gone on the rhythm

Let up with the showings at such and such the swinging
 round ringsides
 hysterical
 with jungle cries

Let up with the letting-go
 the lapping-up
 the licking
 and
 with this hyper-whitened posture

Let up for one moment
 with the good-dog existence
 the desires
 the strivings
 the selfishness
 to each his own

Pigments

POSITION

The very days
 have taken on
 the shape of African masks
 aloof from any
 profanation
 quicklime
 showered incense-like
 from a piano
 beating out the old refrain
 of a moonlight night complete with sighs
 comes in all sizes
 shady woods
 gondolas
 et cetera

Pigments

LIMBÉ

Rendez-les moi mes poupées noires
 qu'elles dissipent
 l'image des catins blêmes
 marchands d'amour qui s'en vont viennent
 sur le boulevard de mon ennui

Rendez-les moi mes poupées noires
 qu'elles dissipent
 l'image sempiternelle
 l'image hallucinante
 des fantoches empilés fêssus
 dont le vent porte au nez
 la misère miséricorde

Donnez-moi l'illusion que je n'aurai plus à contenter
 le besoin étale
 de miséricordes ronflant
 sous l'inconscient dédain du monde

Rendez-les moi mes poupées noires
 que je joue avec elles
 les jeux naïfs de mon instinct
 resté à l'ombre de ses lois
 recouvrés mon courage
 mon audace
 redevenu moi-même
 nouveau moi-même
 de ce que Hier j'étais
 hier
 sans complexité
 hier
 quand est venue l'heure du déracinement

Le sauront-ils jamais cette rancune de mon coeur
 A l'oeil de ma méfiance ouvert trop tard
 ils ont cambriolé l'espace qui était mien
 la coutume
 les jours
 la vie
 la chanson
 le rythme
 l'effort
 le sentier
 l'eau
 la case
 la terre enfumée grise
 la sagesse
 les mots
 les palabres
 les vieux
 la cadence
 les mains
 la mesure
 les mains
 les piétinements
 le sol

Rendez-les moi mes poupées noires
 mes ~~pou~~pées noires
 poupées noires
 noires
 noires

Pigments

BLUES

Give me back my dark dolls
 let them chase away
 this vision of pallid tarts
 trading in love
 that come along and go and come
 along the boulevard of my boredom

Give me back my dark dolls
 let them chase away
 this haunting vision
 this hallucinating vision
 of puppets with piled and padded bottoms
 and the breeze wafting up to my nose
 their misery oh mercy

Give me the illusion that never again to reckon with
 the need of mercies
 stale and rumbling
 under the world's oblivious scorn

Give me back my dark dolls
 let me play with them
 play the artless games of my instinct
 beneath its overshadowing
 my courage regained
 my daring
 become myself again
 become myself anew
 myself that I was Yesterday
 yesterday

free of complexity
 yesterday
 at the hour of the uprooting

Oh can they ever know this rancour that I bear
 Forever will bear in my heart in my mistrust that wakened alas too late
 they have plundered the patch that was mine
 the custom
 the days
 the life
 the singing
 the rhythm
 the toil
 the footpath
 the water
 the hut
 the fire-blackened ground
 the wisdom
 the words
 the palavers
 the elders
 the tempo
 the hands
 the beat
 the hands
 the stamping feet
 the earth

Give me back my dark dolls
 my dark dolls
 dark dolls
 dark

dark

Pigments

Extract from Cahier d'un retour au pays natal, Aimé Césaire.

... ceux qui n'ont inventé ni la poudre ni la boussole
 ceux qui n'ont jamais su dompter la vapeur ni
 l'électricité
 ceux qui n'ont exploré ni les mers ni le ciel
 mais ceux sans qui la terre ne serait pas la terre
 gibbosité d'autant plus bienfaisante que la terre
 déserte
 davantage la terre
 silo où se préserve et mûrit ce que la terre a de
 plus terre

.....
 Eia pour le Kaïlcédrat royal!
 Eia pour ceux qui n'ont jamais rien inventé
 pour ceux qui n'ont jamais rien exploré
 pour ceux qui n'ont jamais rien dompté

mais ils s'abandonnent, saisis, à l'essence de toute
 chose
 ignorants des surfaces mais saisis par le mouvement
 de toute chose
 insoucieux de dompter, mais jouant le jeu du
 monde

véritablement les fils aînés du monde
 poreux à tous les souffles du monde
 aire fraternelle de tous les souffles du monde
 lit sans drain de toutes les eaux du monde
 étincelle du feu sacré du monde
 chair de la chair du monde palpitante du
 mouvement même du monde!

.....
 Ecoutez le monde blanc
 horriblement las de son effort immense
 ses articulations rebelles craquer sous les étoiles
 dures
 ses raideurs d'acier bleu transperçant la chair
 mystique
 écoute ses victoires proditoires trompeter ses défaites
 écoute aux alibis grandioses son piètre trébuchement

Pitié pour nos vainqueurs omniscients et naïfs!

Eia pour la douleur aux pis de larmes réincarnées
 pour ceux qui n'ont jamais rien exploré
 pour ceux qui n'ont jamais rien dompté

Eia pour la joie
 Eia pour l'amour
 Eia pour la douleur aux pis de larmes réincarnées...

Extract from Diary of a homecoming, by Aimé Césaire.

.. they who invented neither gun-powder nor the compass
 they who never learned to conquer either steam or
 electricity
 they who have explored neither the seas nor the sky
 but they were it not for whom the earth would not be the earth
 a hump that more bountiful as the earth
 deserts
 more and more the earth
 a silo preserving and ripening all on earth that is most
 of the earth

.....
 'Ray for the royal Kaïlcedrat!
 'Ray for those who have never invented anything
 for those who have never explored anything
 for those who have never conquered anything

 but they give themselves up, gripped, to the essence of all
 things
 knowing nothing of surfaces but gripped by the movement
 of all things
 not caring to conquer, but playing the game of the ~~world~~
 world

truly the elder sons of the world
 porous to all the breaths of the world
 fraternal reservoir of all the breaths of the world
 bed without drain of all the waters of the world
 spark of the holy fire of the world
 flesh of the flesh of the world palpitating with the
 very movement of the world!

.....
 Hear the white world
 horribly weary of its enormous effort
 its rebellious joints cracking beneath the
 hard stars
 its blue steel stiffness piercing the
 mystic flesh
 hear its deceitful victories trumpeting its defeats
 hear in its grandiose alibis its wretched tottering

Pity on our omniscient and naive conquerors!

'Ray for sorrow with the worst of reincarnated tears
 for those who have never explored anything
 for those who have never conquered anything

'Ray for joy
 'Ray for love
 'Ray for sorrow with the worst of reincarnated tears ...

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Extract from 'A New York' (Ethiopiques) - L.-S. Senghor.

... Harlem Harlem! voici ce que j'ai vu Harlem Harlem! Une brise verte de blés
sourdre des pavés labourés par les pieds nus de danseurs Dans
Croupes ondes de soie et seins de fers de lance, ballets de nénuphars
et de masques fabuleux
Aux pieds des chevaux de police, les mangues de l'amour rouler des
maisons basses.
Et j'ai vu le long des trottoirs, des ruisseaux de rhum blanc des ruisseaux
de lait noir dans le brouillard bleu des cigares
J'ai vu le ciel neiger au soir des fleurs de coton et des ailes de séraphins
et des panaches de sorciers
Ecoute New-York! ô écoute ta voix mâle de cuivre ta voix vibrante de hautbois,
l'angoisse bouchée de tes larmes tomber en gros caillots de sang
Ecoute au loin battre ton coeur nocturne, rythme et sang du tam-tam, tam-tam
sang et tam-tam

New-York! je dis New-York, laisse affluer le sang noir dans ton sang
Qu'il dérouille tes articulations d'acier, comme une huile de vie
Qu'il donne à tes ponts la courbe des croupes et la souplesse des lianes

.....

Voilà tes fleuves bruissants de caïmans musqués et de lamantins aux yeux de
mirages. Et nul besoin d'inventer les Sirènes.
Mais il suffit d'ouvrir les yeux à l'arc-en-ciel d'Avril
Et les oreilles, surtout les oreilles à Dieu qui d'un rire de saxophone créa le
ciel et la terre en six jours.
Et le septième jour, il dormit du grand sommeil nègre.

--

Extract from 'A l'appel de la race de Saba' (Hosties Noires) - L.-S. Senghor.

... Je suis sur les marches de la demeure profonde obscurément.
Mes frères et mes soeurs serrent contre mon coeur leur chaleur nombreuse
de poussins.
Je repose la tête sur les genoux de ma nourrice Ngâ, de Ngâ la poétesse
Ma tête bourdonnant au galop guerrier de dyoun-dyouns(1), au grand galop
de mon sang de pur sang
Ma tête mélodieuse des chansons lointaines de Koumba l'Orpheline.
Au milieu de la cour, le figuier solitaire
Et devisent à son ombre lunaire les épouses de l'Homme de leurs voix graves
et profondes comme leurs yeux et les fontaines nocturnes de Fimla.
Et mon père étendu sur des nattes paisibles, mais grnad mais fort mais beau
Homme du Royaume de Sine, tandis qu'alentour sur les Kôras (2), voix héroïques,
les griots font danser leurs doigts de fougue
Tandis qu'au loin monte, houleuse de senteurs fortes et chaudes, la rumeur
classique de cent troupes.

(1) 'dyoun-dyoun' - tam-tam royal de la Cour de Sine, d'origine malinké.

(2) 'Kôra' - sorte de harpe de 16 à 32 cordes.

Extract from 'To New York' (Ethiopiennes) - L.-S. Senghor

... Harlem Harlem! here is what I saw Harlem Harlem! A breeze green with corn
springing up out of pavements ploughed by naked feet of dancers dancing
And in

Rumps moving folds of silk and breasts spear-heads, ballets of water-lilies
and fabulous masks

Under the feet of the police horses, the mangoes of love rolling out of low
houses.

And I saw along the sidewalks streams of white rum streams of black milk in
the blue mist of cigars

I saw the sky in the evening snowing cotton-flowers and seraph-wings and
sorcerers' plumes

Listen New York! oh listen to your voice male with copper your voice vibrant
with oboes, the stopped-up anguish of your tears falling in great
pebbles of blood

Listen to your nocturnal heart beating in the distance, rhythm and blood of
tom-tom, tom-tom blood and tom-tom.

New York! I say New York, let black blood flow into your blood-stream

Let it rub the rust off your steel joints, like an oil of life

Let it give to your bridges the curve of rumps and the suppleness of lianas

.....

See your rivers rumbling with musky caymans and manatees with mirage-eyes.

And no need of inventing the Sirens.

But it is enough to open your eyes to the rainbow of April

And your ears, especially your ears to God who with a laugh of the saxophone
created Heaven and Earth in six days

And on the seventh day, he slept the great Negro sleep.

Extract from 'In answer to the call of the race of Saba' (Hosties Noires) -
L.-S. Senghor

...I am on the steps of the dwelling that is sombrely deep.

My brothers and sisters are pressing against my heart like chickens their
teeming warmth.

I am resting my head on my nurse Ngâ's lap, Ngâ the poetess

My head throbbing with the warrior galop of the jung-jungs(1), with the
grand galop of my blood pure blood

My head singing with the distant songs of Kumba the Orphan-girl.

In the middle of the yard ~~the~~ lone fig-tree

And gossiping in its lunar shade the wives of the Man with their voices

grave and deep like their eyes and the distant nocturnal fountains of Fimla.

And my father stretched out on peaceful mats, but tall but strong but handsome
Man of the Kingdom of Sina, while around on the Kôras (2), heroic voices, the
griots dance their fingers of fire

While in the distance surging, heavy with warm strong odours, the classic
murmur of a hundred herds.

(1) 'jung-jung' - royal tom-tom of the Court of Sina, of Malinkay origin.

(2) 'Kôra' - sort of harp with 16 to 32 ~~xxxx~~ strings.

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