

# “Césaire at Mid-Century”

by Jacob Siefring

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## Reviewed and discussed:

*Return to My Native Land* by Aimé Césaire. (Trans. Anna Bostock and John Berger.) Archipelago. \$12.80, 74pp.

*The Original 1939 Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* by Aimé Césaire. (Trans. A. James Arnold and Clayton Eshleman.) Wesleyan University Press. \$24.95, 120pp.

*Solar Throat Slashed: The Unexpurgated 1948 Edition* by Aimé Césaire. (Trans. A. James Arnold and Clayton Eshleman.) Wesleyan University Press. \$26.95, 183pp.

## I.

As a writer-statesman, Aimé Césaire belongs in a small category of twentieth-century writers that includes Léopold Sédar Senghor, Václav Havel, Winston Churchill, and probably a dozen others. This remarkable man from Martinique, who died in 2008 at age ninety-five and was the author of a score of plays, essays, and volumes of poetry, served for an astonishing *ffty-six consecutive years* as mayor of Fort-de-France and deputy to the French National Assembly. Perhaps because his contribution bridged literary and political domains, Césaire’s mark on the ideological climate of France’s former colonial empire remains quite palpable today. Students coming of age across the francophone world learn his name and read his oft-anthologized verses.

It was in the years immediately following the Second World War that Césaire began to emerge as a major voice in French poetry. When his “Cahier d’un retour au pays natal” (“Notebook of a Return to the Native Land”) was published in France in 1939, it brought no great acclaim to the author; but in 1947 Bretano’s and Bordas reprinted it in New York and Paris, fronted by a new introduction from André Breton. The previous year, France’s premier literary publisher, Gallimard, had published the poetry collection *Les Armes miraculeuses* (*The Miraculous Weapons*). The year 1948 saw *Solar Throat Slashed* (*Soleil cou coupé*) brought out in a limited press run by a small avant-garde publisher. Also in 1948, selections from these aforementioned works appeared alongside the poems of a number of other black francophone men in the *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*. Jean-Paul Sartre’s essay “Black Orpheus”<sup>1</sup> introduced the collection and situated Césaire at the forefront of the negritude movement, pegging him as its “black Orpheus” and singling him out as its most talented mind.

Much if not all of Césaire’s work has been available in English for many decades, but several recent re-releases and new editions of his works draw fresh attention to his writing and legacy. This August will in fact mark seventy-five years since the first publication of “Notebook of a Return to the Native Land,” an anniversary that coincides more or less exactly with the publication by Archipelago Books of *Return to My Native Land*. This translation was first completed by Anna Bostock and John Berger for Penguin in 1968, appearing in 1969. Wesleyan University Press has also brought out two bilingual scholarly editions

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<sup>1</sup> Sartre’s essay “Black Orpheus” can be found in *We Have Only This Life to Live: Selected Essays of Jean-Paul Sartre, 1939-1975* (NYRB, 2013).

of Césaire's work, *The Original 1939 Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* and *Solar Throat Slashed: The Unexpurgated 1948 Edition*, both translated and introduced by A. James Arnold and Clayton Eshleman. The numerous cuts and revisions Césaire made to these texts are an especially interesting aspect of his development as a poet and politician. These books offer a new vantage point on his legacy, and, I predict, will be of particular interest to readers of avant-garde poetry and scholars of postcolonialism, race, and identity politics.

## II.

Of Césaire's literary works, "Notebook" is probably the most oft-mentioned and often read. It first appeared in August of 1939 in the final issue of the avant-garde magazine *Volontés*. It unofficially marked the culmination of eight years Césaire had spent in Paris, the poet originally arriving in 1931 to attend the *École Normale Supérieure* on scholarship. During this decade he formed valuable friendships with fellow black poets Léopold Sédhar Senghor and Léon Damas; in the student magazine *L'Étudiant Noir*, to which all three contributed, Césaire first publicized the term *négritude*, a concept which would remain a rallying point for all three for years to come. Defining this term was never a matter as urgent as proposing it. "Notebook" and other writings by Césaire and his peers provide the contours for *négritude*, being its dynamic, textual expression.

To characterize "Notebook" in the most cursory way, one might say it's a representation of the psychic struggle of one modern black colonial subject; a dramatic poem whose subject is colonialism, slavery, and their spiritual legacy. The poem's speaker is effectively

indistinguishable from Césaire, being a young black man who returns home to his island in the West Indies after a long sojourn abroad. An intimate passage describing the narrator's family's home cuts right to the issue of origins.

At the end of first light, beyond my father, my mother, the shack chapped with blisters, like a peach tree afflicted with curl, and the thin roof patched with pieces of gasoline cans, which create swamps of rust in the stinking sordid gray straw pulp, and when the wind whistles, these odds and ends make a noise bizarre, first like the crackling of frying, then like a brand dropped into water the smoke of its twigs flying up . . . And the bed of boards from which my race arose, my whole entire race from this bed of boards, with its kerosene case paws, as if it had elephantiasis, that bed, and its kidskin, and its dry banana leaves, and its rags, yearning for a mattress, my grandmother's bed (Above the bed, in a jar full of oil a dim light whose flame dances like a fat cockroach . . . on this jar in gold letters: MERCI).

(Arnold and Eshleman)

At the juncture of the first and second sections, the poet imagines symbolically laying claim to his fellow men upon his return home, much like a shepherd or hero:

These are mine: these few gangrenous thousands who rattle in this calabash of an island. And this too is mine: this archipelago arched with anxiety as though to deny itself, as though she were a mother anxious to protect the tenuous delicacy with which her two Americas are separated; this archipelago whose flanks secrete for Europe the sweet liquid of the Gulf Stream; this archipelago which is one side of the

shining passage through which the Equator walks its tightrope  
to Africa.

(Bostock and Berger)

The circle of affiliation grows wider, broader, encompassing  
Guadeloupe, Haiti, and “the comic little tail of Florida where they are  
just finishing strangling a Negro,”—until, in a final, majestic sweep, the  
circle pans out in global diaspora:

My name is Bordeaux and Nantes and Liverpool and New  
York and San Francisco  
not a corner of this world but carries my thumb-print  
and my heel-mark on the backs of skyscrapers and my dirt in  
the glitter of jewels! Who can boast of more than I?

(Bostock and Berger)

These celebratory lines are matched by those which soon follow, its  
most famous and most anthologized passage:

O friendly light  
O fresh source of light  
those who invented neither powder nor compass  
those who could harness neither steam nor electricity  
those who explored neither the seas nor the sky  
but those without whom the earth would not be the earth

(Arnold and Eshleman)

These verses are beautiful, uplifting; but they form only one end of the  
continuum through which “Notebook” moves. Opposite these are  
countless moments of shame and abjection, spiritual turmoil and  
struggle. Part of it is an attitude of revolt, revolution, righteous

hostility, refusal of the old situation. It's present in the image of "an English lady stupefied at finding a Hottentot's skull in her soup tureen"; and it's also present in the disgust and sardonic irony found so abundantly in the poem's middle sections:

As a result of an unforeseen happy conversion I now respect  
my repellent ugliness

(Bostock and Berger)

By a sudden and beneficent inner revolution I now honor my  
repugnant ugliness.

(Arnold and Eshleman)

Any reader who has marvelled at Rimbaud's tone of spiritual revolt in *A Season in Hell* (1873) will find common cause here.<sup>2</sup> But Césaire's tongue is sharper, his material more visceral. There is no precedent anywhere in French literature that I know of for the numerous passages of "Notebook" that channel deep ancestral trauma.

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<sup>2</sup> Glancing back at *A Season in Hell* by Arthur Rimbaud—an influence Césaire acknowledged—I'm amazed at the extent to which Rimbaud's racial identifications echo, in advance as it were, the Martiniquan poet. Three salient examples:

"Sure, my eyes are closed to your light. I'm a beast, a nigger."  
("Bad Blood," trans. Bertrand Mathieu)

"I have been of an inferior race from all eternity."  
("Bad Blood," trans. Oliver Bernard)

"Do you want nigger songs, houri dances?"  
("Hellish Night," trans. Bertrand Mathieu)

"Notebook" contains lines nearly identical to these. (Citations from: *Rimbaud: Selected Verse* (trans. O. Bernard, Penguin, 1962) and *A Season in Hell & Illuminations* (trans. B. Mathieu, Boa Editions, 1991).)

The slave ship! [...] I hear coming up from the hold enchained curses, the death gasps of the dying, the sound of someone thrown into the sea . . . the baying of a woman in labor . . . the scraping of fingernails searching for throats . . . the flouts of the whip . . . the seething of vermin amidst the weariness

(Arnold and Eshleman)

For centuries this country repeated that we are brute beasts; that the human heartbeat stops at the gates of the black world; that we are walking manure hideously proffering the promise of tender cane and silky cotton, and they branded us with red-hot irons and we slept in our shit and we were sold in public squares and a yard of English cloth and salted Irish meat were cheaper than us and this country was quiet, calm, saying that the spirit of God was in his acts.

(Bostock and Berger)

The exhilarating lucidity and force of the second passage, its ideological potency and compression of historical subject matter through detail—these remain as cogent and persuasive today as they were in the late thirties. A more razor-sharp encapsulation of the situation of African slavery could not be found.

### III.

By extension, and because this poetry has to do profoundly with race, it's worthwhile to consider the question of the poem's audience, or audiences, its readers. Who are we to be reading these verses? For whom did Césaire first write them? Does it matter? Sartre's remarks in

this regard are instructive. He offered two (seemingly contradictory) propositions: (1) The literature of negritude consists of black men “addressing themselves to black men about black men”; (2) “this poetry—which seems racial at first—is actually a hymn by everyone for everyone.”

If there is a seeming contradiction here as I’ve suggested, it’s easily resolved in light of the fact that a text’s audience often grows far beyond its initial addressees. Usually once it does, the text’s meaning alters, sometimes marginally, but in other cases significantly. And so I’m led to wonder about the way Césaire’s texts might affect readers differently or variably along racial lines. For instance, the ancestral, racial, and/or ethnic affiliations of readers will vibrate in response to Césaire’s texts, and inform the experience of reading him. It’s not a point that should be insisted on, but it deserves to be acknowledged that contemporary readers of Césaire’s text might alternately recall that their forebearers either were slaves, or employed slaves—a condition not all that uncommon in the United States, for instance. Possibilities like these are an important and reactive aspect of Césaire’s reception.

It’s difficult, though, to speak in this way about the question of Césaire’s audience without at least partially reinforcing and legitimizing a white-black binary. Sartre did this in his day by positing a framework of literary publication-reception that corresponded more or less rigidly to the categories [black men poets / white readership], a division present from the outset. A jeering address to a white colonizer figure is the essay’s starting point: “When you removed the gag that was keeping these black mouths shut, what were you hoping for? That they would sing your praises?” This trope, which is borrowed straight out of Césaire’s repertory of provocations and affronts, leads to Sartre’s

idea that the poetry of negritude will occasion some discomfort or anxiety for its white readers—“Here are black men standing, looking at us, and I hope that you—like me—will feel the shock of being seen.”

Most of Sartre’s operant assumptions here probably need to be fundamentally revised in light of developments since 1948; but the uneasiness Sartre envisaged on the part of white readers remains one possible response among many.

#### IV.

For its translator(s), “Notebook” imposes a number of unique challenges. One of these is the range of problems attaching to the slur *nègre*, which recurs throughout “Notebook” (and *Solar Throat Slashed*) and plays an important part in the unfolding psychodrama. Obviously, this term *nègre* is etymologically pivotal for the concept of *nègritude* underlying the poem. In numerous instances it simulates a hateful, dehumanizing attitude (as in for instance “*niggers-are-all-the-same, I tell you*”), but at its conclusion it is ecstatically appropriated and redeemed in a symbolic mutiny aboard the slave ship. It’s an exemplary and compelling problem well summarized by translator and scholar A. James Arnold. Here he pores over the possibilities in his introduction to *Solar Throat Slashed*:

How could one avoid translating as “niggers” the “massacred niggers or redskins” in “Disaster”? The deprecatory context renders every other choice meaningless. In “Tornado,” which is set in a stereotyped southern U.S. town, the phrase “stinking

like ten thousand niggers crammed into a train” called for the same solution to render racist violence. In “Idyll,” the translation “like a house nigger bearing agile milk” would have called for “Negro” a half-century ago in the United States. Today the same translation would lose the expressive condemnation contained in Césaire’s use of nègre. In “To Africa,” however, the praise for the peasant laborer contained in the lines “for you have neither the glistening strength of the buffalo nor the mathematical science of the ibis nor the patience of the black man” called for a respectful term to represent the architect of Africa’s future.

Césaire’s frequent use of arcane diction presents another critical issue in translation. The speaker in “Notebook” may say: *The man who couldn’t understand me couldn’t understand the roaring of a tiger*—but that’s quite a half-truth if there ever was one. To really understand Césaire you’ll be using a dictionary to look up things like “a syzygy of blebs,” “matutinal aldebaran,” *filaos, erysipelas, sisal, fumeroles, noctiluca, involucre, halaza, uvula, holothurian, ipomea, madrepole, oriflammes, sapodilla, carnassial, chimborazo, malvaceae, ceibas, palanquin*. If you want to be really thorough, you’ll also need to consult René Hénané’s *Glossaire des termes rares dans l’œuvre d’Aimé Césaire*. How many other authors, I wonder, have a monograph devoted to inventorying the rare terms employed in their work?

Given that there is so much arcana here, it’s important to note briefly its overall effect. It seems to me to connote the language of the French colonial empire, the language of bureaucratic administration. It’s also—more importantly perhaps—a conspicuous display of Césaire’s mastery of the imperial language. It’s almost as if Césaire is brandishing the language of the colonizer before him as if to say, *look*

*how little you know, and look what I know.* It strikes me as both very important and very effective.

Of the two translations of “Notebook” here, only Arnold and Eshleman’s expresses the full etymological weirdness of this, by regularly sticking with English cognate forms wherever they are available. In Bostock and Berger’s text these unfamiliar signs routinely drop away, modulated to the nearest familiar synonym. Their translation thereby gains in immediate force and intelligibility (and believe me, there’s much to be said for this), but the strange and erudite quality that’s so distinctive and present in the text drops away.

For example, in a list enumerating the afflictions of the island inhabitants, Césaire writes of *les prurits, les urticaires*. Bostock and Berger gloss this as *itches, rashes*. Even if it risks obscurity, Arnold and Eshleman’s corresponding translation (*the pruritus, the urticaria*) preserves the archaic medical sound of the original. It’s the same with *calcaneus, disencasement, and teratical*, which we find in Arnold and Eshleman’s translation, but not in Bostock and Berger’s, where *calcaneus* becomes *heel-print*, *disencasement* modulates to a use of a more familiar verb form (*disengage*), and *teratical* becomes *monstrous*. Such substitutions don’t necessarily do a disservice to “Notebook,” but they do stray far from Césaire’s deployment of a terminology that is at times *deliberately* esoteric.

As I mentioned before, the nature of Césaire’s revisions are in and of themselves an interesting matter. Both “Notebook” and *Solar Throat Slashed* changed after their initial publication, appearing in altered form in subsequent years, and, in fact, this is the whole rationale behind the publication of the two texts by Wesleyan—their original incarnations haven’t been legible to anglophone readers for all these

years. Until recently, English readers have known “Notebook” primarily in various translations of the poem’s 1956 incarnation, which is essentially a palimpsest of the original 1939 text incorporating subsequent changes.<sup>3</sup> The overall tendency of these changes, as summarized by Arnold, was to de-emphasize the poem’s original spiritual and apocalyptic registers, to rein in the use of sexual and animistic metaphor, and to reorient “Notebook” “toward a sense of collective socialist action.” The most noticeable change was certainly the addition of a hostile, anti-authoritarian attitude at the poem’s outset, which segues disjointedly into the original beginning (dawn breaking over Martinique):

At the end of the small hours . . .

Get away, I said, you bastard of a cop, swine get away. I hate the livery of order and fish-hooks of hope. Get away foul ju-ju, bedbug of a monk. Then I turned to dream for him and his lost ones’ paradises more calm than the face of a woman telling lies. [...]

Despite the changes made to “Notebook” between 1939 and its 1956 republication by *Présence Africaine*, and despite the difference of translators, the Archipelago and Wesleyan texts don’t feel radically different one from the other. Where the difference between editions really counts is in the supporting material and in the bilingual

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<sup>3</sup> Aside from the two translations of “Notebook” reviewed here, four other English-language translations of it have appeared, by the following translators: Abel and Goll’s (*Brentano’s*, 1947), which was never re-printed and is very rare; Snyder (*Présence Africaine*, 1971); Eshleman and Smith (Wesleyan University Press, 2001); and Pritchard and Rosello (*Bloodaxe Books*, 1995).

presentation of the Wesleyan. The introduction, biographical chronology, and notes on the poem do a great service to readers by helping to place the texts in relation to Césaire's life and work. I need hardly add that Arnold and Eshleman are exceptionally well suited for their work on these two volumes, given the extent of their knowledge into Césaire's work: Arnold is the author of *Modernism and Negritude: The Poetry and Poetics of Aimé Césaire*, and the lead editor of Césaire's complete literary works in French; Eshleman has previously translated Césaire's work, as well as the poetry of César Vallejo and Antonin Artaud.

## V.

When Césaire edited *Solar Throat Slashed* (1948) to include selections from it in the 1961 collection *Cadastres*, the cuts and revisions were far more extensive and censorious than the mutations "Notebook" underwent after its initial publication. Of the seventy-two original poems, Césaire eliminated thirty-one and cut material from another twenty-nine.

Seen as a whole, the poetry in *Solar Throat Slashed* is uproariously impudent, brutal, jagged. Fatality and revolution are forces of urgency animating the collection, disposing the poet to dispatch all pretense with a swift stab in the throat of bourgeois decorum. Revolt and insurrection are the overarching themes, recurring against a background of blood and vultures, murder, disease, and corpses. That undoubtedly sounds bleak, but the dominant tone tends to be transcendent and affirming, infused with the ecstatic pulse of the speaker's imagination and convictions. In other instances the tone is

formally mute, occurring less as a spoken monologue than elliptically, symbolically, in the flat plane of written language. Césaire's predilection for arcane diction is intensified, pushed to the point of becoming grotesque. Whereas "Notebook" tempered its hostility with an element of quiet solemnity—the Christian prayer-like quality expressed in such lines as "at the execution let my heart preserve me from all hate / do not make of me that man of hate for whom I have only hate"—*Solar Throat Slashed* has none of that. Political, spiritual, and existential revolt are fused together as one.

By the time it took God to notice  
that he had drunk one hundred glasses of executioner  
blood too many  
the city was a brotherhood of white and black spots scattered  
in cadavers on the hide of a horse felled at full gallop  
(“The Tornado”)

What's most sublime about these poem is their attitude of violent affront, where the syntax is often short and extremely forceful and immediate. Take the opening of "Preliminary Question":

As for me should they grab my leg  
I vomit up a forest of lianas  
Should they hang me by my fingernails  
I piss a camel bearing a pope and vanish in a row of fig  
trees that quite nearly encircle the intruder and strangle him in  
a beautiful tropical balancing act

Scatological sacrilege, then papicide: it's hard to tell which is the greater provocation. You might even say that *Solar Throat Slashed* imagines a form of symbolic retribution for slavery in such passages as

this one. Given the centuries of religious and colonial rule that generations of blacks endured, it's an aesthetically and morally satisfying reversal.

For this reason it seems mildly unfortunate that so many of these passages and poems were censored (like that above), even if by Césaire himself. Conversely, it's thrilling that Arnold and Eshleman have resurrected this collection in its original form. They've restored the defiant envoi to "At the Locks of the Void":

Europe

eminent name of the turd

and countless other such delights that probably struck Césaire as gross indiscretions a dozen years after their publication. To examine one passage of greater length—one that didn't get cut—look at the mockery with which "Ex-Voto for a Shipwreck" begins:

Hélé helélé the King is a great king

let his majesty deign to look up my anus to see if it contains diamonds

let his majesty deign to explore my mouth to see how man carats it

contains

laugh tom-tom

laugh tom-tom

I carry the king's litter

I roll out the king's carpet

I am the king's carpet

I carry the king's scrofula

I am the king's parasol

laugh laugh tom-toms of the kraals

The speaker proceeds by way of mixed logic, moving so briskly that we easily miss the contradictory implications. The image of the speaker's ass as full of diamonds evokes a parallel between exploitation of slave labor and mining of minerals, while the regal address (*let his majesty deign...*), inverts the king-subject roles and figures the speaker as Sovereign. The ultra-staccato first, fourth, and fifth lines and the short, clipped syntax throughout sound the drumbeat this chant of revolt describes, being an uncanny marriage of content and form. It's a brilliant and powerful, sublime moment.

Elsewhere, these poems conjure awe and sublimity through a logic of fracture and disjunction, successive transformations and metamorphoses. This shape-shifting technique, which infuses the whole collection, is exemplified most plainly by these lines:

from each grain of sand a bird shall be born  
from each simple flower a scorpion shall emerge (everything  
being compound)

("Calm")

And it's equally present in the following lines:

I've eaten my prey  
and my eyes have grown like yams in an original field  
my eyes are harder than stone  
my eyes have crucified have lapidated have flagellated my brain  
my brain  
comes and goes

in the white blouse of logarithms  
and since we are talking about the economy of thought  
hold on devourer

(“Devourer”)

Similarly, a strong predilection for *density* is an important feature of Césaire’s ambition in this collection. This tendency gives rise to clusters of nouns packed tightly together, lacking a clear syntax or dominant theme. The syntax is broken, or just overloaded, stopped up. A near-total absence of punctuation marks, an overwhelming use of cryptic diction, plus unclear prepositional nestings intensify the challenge of reading such passages as these:

Amoebic swelter

miltic swelter true gossamers of the immaculate virgin in the  
auroras of the sea when the maslin made skin and plunder of  
the damned

(“Redemption”)

Very powerful pendant the mosquitoes equipped with  
maremma grapeshot-loaded volutes gigolo of brutality with  
wild boar wallow darky feet

(“When in the Heat of the Day Naked  
Monks Descend the Himalayas”)

The effect of such breathless clustering is at once exhilarating and irritating. It’s a quality germane to many works of the avant-garde—there is an accretion of nouns too densely strewn together to parse, the result of what would appear to be a pronounced striving for

transcendence. That transcendental aim is reached just part of the time, fleetingly, in fits and bursts. In this respect, *Solar Throat Slashed* bears a striking resemblance to Tristan Tzara's *L'Homme approximatif* (1931; *The Approximate Man*). Despite the feelings of awe and wonderment Tzara's book induces in me, these inevitably alternate with feelings of boredom and annoyance, sentiments which routinely deter me from journeying to the book's end. Likewise, the anti-grammatical clustering tendency of the *Solar Throat Slashed* poems may well be their greatest weakness.

Nevertheless, these limitations are of a piece with the collection's strengths, which are legion. The experimental techniques at work here never seem gratuitous, but function to disrupt the smug complacency of old Europe. I'm more than willing to forgive these poems their difficulty and occasional hermeticism, and to marvel at their blinding, blistering radiance. It's truly awesome to behold.