AIMÉ CÉSAIRE: A BIO-BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

by Thomas A. Hale

Aimé Césaire was born on June 26, 1913 in Basse Pointe, a small town on the wave-pounded northeast coast of the island of Martinique. He was one of six children raised by parents who were a cut above the field workers in social status, but hardly wealthy. His father was a local taxation officer, and his mother was a seamstress. Following family tradition, Césaire learned to read at the home of his grandmother when he was four years old. After primary school education in his hometown, he attended the Lycée Schoelcher in Fort-de-France, where he performed well enough to earn a scholarship to attend the prestigious Lycée Louis-le-grand in Paris.

Césaire spent eight years in Paris, and eventually earned several diplomas, including a *diplôme d'études supérieures* for a dissertation on "Le thème du sud dans la littérature nègre américaine."

It was during his stay in Paris that Césaire discovered not only Afro-American literature but also Africa in the person of Léopold Sédar Senghor and other students from the francophone colonies on the continent. Césaire, Senghor, and Léon-Gontran Damas drew on a variety of sources and influences to develop a cultural response to the French policy of assimilation which denied any value to their African heritage. For Césaire, this new sense of ethnic pride was symbolized by the term *négritude* which he created in the late 1930s.

In 1939, on the eve of World War II, Césaire returned to Martinique to take up a position as a teacher of literature at the Lycée Schoelcher. His first, and most famous, poem, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal,* appeared shortly before his return to Martinique, but went largely unnoticed. During the war, however, Césaire launched a cultural journal, *Tropiques,* in which he published other examples of his poetry, some of which was later to be integrated into the final version of the *Cahier.* Much of this poetry, however, was somewhat more hermetic than his first long poem, and represented Césaire's attempt to develop a personal esthetic which would allow him to penetrate the subconscious. His sources of inspiration were some of the precursors of surrealism, so it comes as no surprise that the leader of the surrealist movement, André Breton, should find in Césaire a kindred spirit when he stopped in Martinique on the way from Europe to New York in 1941.

After the war, Césaire's poetry attracted the attention of a much wider circle of readers, thanks in part to the efforts of Breton, Sartre, and Senghor to encourage the new young generation of Black francophone writers to publish their work. Césaire produced a series of collections of poetry, still very much in the surrealist mode, during the immediate postwar period: *Les Armes miraculeuses* (1946), *Soleil cou coupé* (1948), and *Corps perdu* (1950). In spite of the hermetic nature of much of this poetry, one finds the dominant césairean themes and images throughout: slavery, freedom, paradise, earth, sun, volcanoes, islands, trees, and animals. For some critics, Césaire was guilty of what they termed verbal excesses—repetition, exotic imagery, and a difficult vocabulary, while the poet's comrades in the French Communist Party took him to task for the apparent obscurity of his art and his links with Breton.

Césaire was drawn into politics as the War came to a close, and it was difficult for him to lead the double life of poet and political leader. Elected Mayor of Fort-de-France in 1945 and one of Martinique's three legislators in France's parliament, Césaire worked hard to improve the economic conditions of his constituents at home. He favored the transformation of Martinique from colony to overseas department in 1946, because he felt that this would bring significant changes in the economic and social life of the island. By 1950, however, he was fully aware of the emptiness of promises which the government had made. At the same time, as the left lost power in parliament, he felt a growing sense of powerlessness to make further progress for his people at home. Finally, as the French Communist Party lost influence, Césaire began to sense a new feeling of alienation within the party. He was colonized not only from a political point of view, but also within the Party. For these and other reasons, Césaire became less active politically in the early 1950s. At the same time, he appeared to produce less poetry than before.

By the mid-1950s, however, both his literary and political life underwent important changes. He produced less hermetic poems, and rewrote for the stage *Et les chiens se taisaient* (1956), a lyric oratorio about a rebellious slave which had appeared in *Les Armes miraculeuses* in 1946. In *Ferrements* (1960), a collection of poems which spans the entire decade of the 1950s, he wrote of people and events in Africa, the Caribbean, and Afro-America in a style which was somewhat more open than that in his earlier collections. It was during this period that he broke with the French Communist Party (1956), began to speak out in a series of international forums for the liberation of the Third World, and eventually launched his own political party at home: the Parti Progressiste Martiniquais. He began to

discuss culture as an important weapon in the movement to secure and maintain independence for the colonized peoples of the world. To get his message across to a broader audience, he shifted from poetry to theatre, a genre, he argued, which offered what he termed a multiplication of poetic force.

In *La Tragédie du roi Christophe* (1963), he portrays an early 19th century Haitian ruler whose heroic vision is warped by a cultural inferiority complex and insensitivity to the material needs of his people. Shakespearean in tone, the play is a blend of verbal forms from several different cultures, and constitutes Césaire's message to the leaders of the newly-independent states of Africa. The play was generally well-received in Europe, Canada, the Near East, Africa, and the Caribbean.

Une saison au Congo (1966), less successful than *Christophe*, was Césaire's effort to demystify the story of Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of Zaïre. Césaire's Lumumba is a hero with common roots and a sweeping pan-African vision set in a format with Brechtian overtones.

His last play, *Une tempête*, is a Black version of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* which displeased European critics but drew praise in the Third World. Césaire attempted to show a servant's view of the Elizabethan play by providing a Black cultural heritage for Caliban. Prospero is portrayed as a decadent colonizer condemned, in the end, to life with Caliban on the island.

Although Césaire has not published any more plays since 1969, he continues a rather active life as political leader and poet. In 1976, his son Jean-Paul, published a three-volume collection of his writings which included a new set of poems under the title *Noria*. In December 1981, he announced that a new collection of poems would appear soon. (*Moi laminaire*, Le Seuil, 1982.)

Meanwhile, with the election of François Mitterand to the presidency of France in 1981, Césaire and his followers found hope for a revision of the current departmental statute which allows so little local control of the island. Although at this point it is difficult to predict how far the move for decentralization will go, neither Césaire nor his closest associates are pushing for independence—at this time.

The product of Caribbean experience, French education, and African studies, Césaire has had relatively limited contact with the continent of his ancestors, even though images of Africa dominate his writing. Critics are divided over the importance of these diverse cultural influences in his work, but many agree that he is the most widely-read and studied Black writer in the francophone world today.