From: "What Is Literature" and Other Essays

by Jean-Paul Sartre

(Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press, 1988)

Black Orpheus

WHEN YOU REMOVED the gag that was keeping these black mouths shut, what were you hoping for? That they would sing your praises? Did you think that when they raised themselves up again, you would read adoration in the eyes of these heads that our fathers had forced to bend down to the very ground? Here are black men standing, looking at us, and I hope that you—like me—will feel the shock of being seen. For three thousand years, the white man has enjoyed the privilege of seeing without being seen; he was only a look—the light from his eyes drew each thing out of the shadow of its birth; the whiteness of his skin was another look, condensed light. The white man—white because he was man, white like daylight, white like truth, white like virtue—lighted up the creation like a torch and unveiled the secret white essence of beings. Today, these black men are looking at us, and our gaze comes back to our own eyes; in their turn, black torches light up the world and our white heads are no more than Chinese lanterns swinging in the wind. A black poet—unconcerned with us—whispers to the woman he loves:

> Naked woman, black woman
> Dressed in your color which is life . . .
> Naked woman, dark woman,
> Firm fleshed ripe fruit, somber ecstasies of black wine

and our whiteness seems to us to be a strange livid varnish that keeps our skin from breathing—white tights, worn out at the elbows and knees, under which we would find real human flesh the color of black wine if we could remove them. We think we are essential to the world—suns of its harvests, moons of its tides; we are no more than its fauna, beasts. Not even beasts:

These gentlemen from the city
These proper gentlemen
Who no longer know how to dance in the evening by moonlight
Who no longer know how to walk on the flesh of their feet
Who no longer know how to tell tales by the fireside . . .

Formerly Europeans with divine right, we were already feeling our dignity beginning to crumble under American or Soviet looks; Europe was already no more than a geographic accident, the peninsula that Asia shoves into the Atlantic. We were hoping at least to find a bit of our greatness reflected in the domesticated eyes of the Africans. But there are no more domesticated eyes: there are wild and free looks that judge our world.

Here is a black man wandering:
to the end of
the eternity of their endless boulevards
with cops . . .
Here is another one shouting to his brothers:
Alas! Alas! Spidery Europe is moving its fingers and its phalanxes of ships . . .
Here is:
the cunning silence of Europe's night . . .

in which

. . . there is nothing that time does not dishonor.

A Negro writes:

At times, we will haunt Montparnasse and Paris,
Europe and its endless torments, like memories
or like malaises . . .

and suddenly France seems exotic in our own eyes. She is no more than a memory, a malaise, a white mist at the bottom of sunlit souls, a back-country unfit to live in; she has drifted toward the North, she is anchored near Kamchatka: the essential thing is the sun, the sun of the tropics and the

sea "lousy with islands" and the roses of Imangue and the lilies of Iarive and the volcanos of Martinique. Being [l'Etre] is black, Being is made of fire, we are accidental and far away, we have to justify our mores, our technics, our undercooked paleness of our verdigris vegetation. We are eaten away to the bones by these quiet and corrosive looks:

Listen to the white world
horribly weary of its immense effort
its rebel articulations crackling under hard stars,
its steel-blue stiffnesses piercing mystical flesh
listen to its exhibitionist victories trumpeting its defeats
listen to its wretched staggering with grandiose alibis
Have pity on our naïve omniscient conquerors.

There we are, *finished*; our victories—their bellies sticking up in the air—show their guts, our secret defeat. If we want to crack open this finitude which imprisons us, we can no longer rely on the privileges of our race, of our color, of our technics: we will not be able to become a part of the totality from which those black eyes exile us, unless we tear off our white tights in order to try simply to be men.

If these poems shame us, however, they were not intended to: they were not written for us; and they will not shame any colonists or their accomplices who open this book, for these latter will think they are reading letters over someone's shoulder, letters not meant for them. These black men are addressing themselves to black men about black men; their poetry is neither satiric nor imprecatory: it is an awakening to consciousness. "So," you will say, "in what way does it interest us, if it is only a document? We cannot enter into it." I should like to show in what way we *can* gain access to this world of jet; I should like to show that this poetry—which seems racial at first—is actually a hymn by everyone for everyone. In a word, I am talking now to white men, and I should like to explain to them what black men already know: why it is necessarily through a poetic experience that the black man, in his present condition, must first become conscious of himself; and, inversely, why black poetry in the

French langauge is, in our time, the only great revolutionary poetry.

It is not just by accident that the white proletariat rarely uses poetic language to speak about its sufferings, its anger, or its pride in itself; neither do I think that workers are less gifted than our bourgeois sons: "talent"—the efficacious grace—loses all meaning when one claims that it is more widespread in one class than in another. Nor is it hard work that takes away their capacity for song: slaves used to drudge even harder and yet we know of slave hymns. It must therefore be recognized that it is the present circumstances of the class struggle that keep the worker from expressing himself poetically. Oppressed by technics, he wants to be a technician because he knows that technics will be the instrument of his liberation; he knows that it is only by gaining professional, economic, and scientific know-how that he will be able someday to control business management. He now has a profound practical knowledge of what poets have called *Nature*, but it is a knowledge he has gained more through his hands than through his eyes: Nature is Matter for him—that crafty, inert adversity that he works on with his tools; Matter has no song. At the same time, the present phase of his struggle requires of him continual, positive action: political calculation, precise forecasting, discipline, organization of the masses; to dream, at this point, would be to betray. Rationalism, materialism, positivism—the great themes of his daily battle—are least propitious for the spontaneous creation of poetic myths. The last of these myths—the famous "Upheaval"—has withdrawn under the circumstances of the struggle: one must take up the matter that is most urgent, gain this and that position, raise this salary, decide on that sympathy strike or on some protest against the war in Indochina: efficiency alone matters. And, without a doubt, the oppressed class must first find itself. This self-discovery, however, is the exact opposite of a subjective examination of oneself: rather, it is a question of recognizing—in and by action—the

objective situation of the proletariat, which can be determined by the circumstances of production or of redistribution of property. Unified by an oppression which is exerted on each and every one, and reduced to a common struggle, workers are hardly acquainted with the inner contradictions that fecundate the work of art and that are harmful to the praxis. As far as they are concerned, to know themselves is to situate themselves within the context of the great forces that surround them; it requires them to determine both their exact position in their class and their function in the Party. The very language they use is free from the slight loosening of the screws, the constant frivolous impropriety, the game of transmissions which create the poetic Word. In their business, they use well-defined technical terms; and as for the langauge of revolutionary parties, Parain has shown that it is *pragmatic*: it is used to transmit orders, watchwords, information; if it loses its exactness, the Party falls apart. All of this tends more and more rigorously to eliminate the subject; poetry, however, must in some way remain subjective. The proletariat has not found a poetry that is sociological and yet finds its source in subjectivity, that is just as subjective as it is sociological, that is based on ambiguous or uncertain language, and that is nevertheless as exalting and as generally understood as the most precise watchwords or as the phrase "Workers of all countries, unite" which one reads on doors in Soviet Russia. Lacking this, the poetry of the future revolution has remained in the hands of well-intentioned young bourgeois who found their inspiration in their personal psychological contradictions, in the dichotomy between their ideal and their class, in the uncertainty of the old bourgeois language.

Like the white worker, the Negro is a victim of the capitalist structure of our society. This situation reveals to him his close ties—quite apart from the color of his skin—with certain classes of Europeans who, like him, are opposed; it incites him to imagine a privilege-less society in which skin pigmentation will be considered a mere fluke. But even though oppression itself may be a mere

fluke, the circumstances under which it exists vary according to history and geographic conditions: the black man is a victim of it *because he is a black man* and insofar as he is a colonized native or a deported African. And since he is oppressed within the confines of his race and because of it, he must first of all become conscious of his race. He must oblige those who have vainly tried throughout the centuries to reduce him to the status of a beast, to recognize that he is a man. On this point, there is no means of evasion, or of trickery, no "crossing line" that he can consider: a Jew—a white man among white men—can deny that he is a Jew, can declare himself a man among men. The Negro cannot deny that he is Negro, nor can he claim that he is part of some abstract colorless humanity: he is black. Thus he has his back up against the wall of authenticity: having been insulted and formerly enslaved, he picks up the word "nigger" which was thrown at him like a stone, he draws himself erect and proudly proclaims himself a black man, face to face with white men. The unity which will come eventually, bringing all oppressed peoples together in the same struggle, must be preceded in the colonies by what I shall call the moment of separation or negativity: this antiracist racism is the only road that will lead to the abolition of racial differences. How could it be otherwise? Can black men count on a distant white proletariat—involved in its own struggles—before they are united and organized on their own soil? And furthermore, isn't there some need for a thorough work of analysis in order to realize the identity of the interests that underlie the obvious difference of condition? The white worker benefits somewhat from colonization, in spite of himself: low as his standard of living may be, it would be even lower if there were no colonization. In any case, he is less cynically exploited than the day laborer in Dakar or Saint-Louis. The technical equipment and industrialization of the European countries make it possible for measures of socialization to be immediately applicable there; but as seen from Senegal or the Congo, socialism seems more than

anything else like a beautiful dream: before black peasants can discover that socialism is the necessary answer to their present local claims, they must learn to formulate these claims jointly; therefore, they must think of themselves as black men.

But this new self-discovery is different from that which Marxism tries to awaken in the white worker. In the European worker, class consciousness is based on the nature of profit and unearned increment, on the present conditions of the ownership of the instruments for work; in brief, it is based on the objective characteristics of the *position* of the proletariat. But since the selfish scorn that white men display for black men—and that has no equivalent in the attitude of the bourgeois toward the working class—is aimed at the deepest recesses of the heart, black men must oppose it with a more exact view of black *subjectivity*; consequently race consciousness is based first of all on the black soul, or, rather—since the term is often used in this anthology—on a certain quality common to the thoughts and conduct of Negroes which is called *negritude*. There are only two ways to go about forming racial concepts: either one causes certain subjective characteristics to become objective, or else one tries to interiorize objectively revealed manners of conduct; thus the black man who asserts his negritude by means of a revolutionary movement immediately places himself in the position of having to meditate, either because he wishes to recognize in himself certain objectively established traits of the African civilizations, or because he hopes to discover the Essence of blackness in the well of his heart. Thus subjectivity reappears: the relation of the self with self; the source of all poetry, the very poetry from which the worker had to disengage himself. The black man who asks his colored brothers to "find themselves" is going to try to present to them an exemplary image of their negritude and will look into his own soul to grasp it. He wants to be both a beacon and a mirror; the first revolutionary will be the harbinger of the black soul, the herald—half prophet and half follower—who will

tear Blackness out of himself in order to offer it to the world; in brief, he will be a poet in the literal sense of *vates*. Furthermore, black poetry has nothing in common with heartfelt effusions: it is functional, it answers a need which is defined in precise terms. Leaf through an anthology of contemporary white poetry: you will find a hundred different subjects, depending upon the mood and interests of the poet, depending upon his position and his country. In the anthology which I am introducing to you here, there is only one subject that all the poets attempt to treat, more or less successfully. From Haiti to Cayenne, there is a single idea: *reveal* the black soul. Black poetry is evangelic, it announces good news: Blackness has been rediscovered.

However, this negritude, which they wish to fish for in their abyssal depths, does not fall under the soul's gaze all by itself: in the soul, nothing is gratuitous. The herald of the black soul has gone through white schools, in accordance with a brazen law which forbids the oppressed man to possess any arms except those he himself has stolen from the oppressor; it is through having had some contact with white culture that his blackness has passed from the immediacy of existence to the meditative state. But at the same time, he has more or less ceased to live his negritude. In choosing to see what he is, he has become split, he no longer coincides with himself. And on the other hand, it is because he was already exiled from himself that he discovered this need to reveal himself. He therefore begins by exile. It is a double exile: the exile of his body offers a magnificent image of the exile of his heart; he is in Europe most of the time, in the cold, in the middle of gray crowds; he dreams of Port-au-Prince, of Haiti. But in Port-au-Prince he was *already* in exile; the slavers had torn his fathers out of Africa and dispersed them. And all of the poems in this book—except those which were written in Africa—show us the same mystical geography. A hemisphere: in the foreground—forming the first of three concentric circles—extends the land of exile, colorless Europe; then comes the dazzling circle of the Islands and of

childhood, which dance the roundelay around Africa; the last circle is Africa, the world's navel, pole of all black poetry—dazzling Africa, burnt, oily like a snake's skin, Africa of fire and rain, torrid and tufted; Africa—phantom flickering like a flame, between being and nothingness, more *real* than the "eternal boulevards with cops" but absent, beyond attainment, disintegrating Europe with its black but invisible rays; Africa, an *imaginary* continent. The extraordinary good luck of black poetry lies in the fact that the anxieties of the colonized native have their own grandiose and obvious symbols which need only to be gone into deeply and to be meditated upon: exile, slavery, the Africa-Europe couple and the great Manichaean division of the world into black and white. This ancestral bodily exile represents the other exile: the black soul is an Africa from which the Negro, in the midst of the cold buildings of white culture and technics, is exiled. And ever-present but concealed negritude haunts him, rubs against him; he himself rubs up against its silky wing; it palpitates and is spread throughout him like his searching memory and his loftiest demands, like his shrouded, betrayed childhood, and like the childhood of his race and the call of the earth, like the swarming of insects and the indivisible simplicity of Nature, like the pure legacy of his ancestors, and like the Ethics that ought to unify his truncated life. But if he turns around to look squarely at his negritude, it vanishes in smoke; the walls of white culture—its silence, its words, its mores—rise up between it and him:

> Give me back my black dolls, so that I may play with them
> My instinct's simple games
> that I may remain in the shadow of its laws
> cover up my courage
> my audacity
> feel me as me
> me renewed through what I was yesterday
> yesterday
> without complexity

yesterday
when the uprooting hour came . . .
they have ransacked the space that was mine

However, the walls of this culture prison must be broken down; it will be necessary to return to Africa some day: thus the themes of return to the native country and of re-descent into the glaring hell of the black soul are indissolubly mixed up in the *vates* of negritude. A quest is involved here, a systematic stripping and an *ascèse** accompanied by a continual effort of investigation. And I shall call this poetry "Orphic" because the Negro's tireless descent into himself makes me think of Orpheus going to claim Eurydice from Pluto. Thus, through an exceptional stroke of poetic good luck, it is by letting himself fall into trances, by rolling on the ground like a possessed man tormented by himself, by singing of his angers, his regrets, or his hates, by exhibiting his wounds, his life torn between "civilization" and his old black substratum; in short, by becoming most lyrical, that the black poet is most certain of creating a great collective poetry. By speaking only of himself, he speaks for all Negroes; it is when he seems smothered by the serpents of our culture that he is the most revolutionary, for he then undertakes to ruin systematically the European knowledge he has acquired, and this spiritual destruction symbolizes the great future taking-up of arms by which black men will destroy their chains. A single example will suffice to clarify this last remark.

In the twentieth century, most ethnic minorities have passionately endeavored to resuscitate their national languages while struggling for their independence. To be able to say that one is Irish or Hungarian, one must belong to a collectivity which has the benefit of a broad economic and political autonomy; but to *be* Irish, one must also *think Irish*, which means above all: think *in* Irish. The specific traits of a Society correspond exactly to the untranslatable

* The ascetic's movement of interiorization.—*Translator.*

locutions of its language. The fact that the prophets of negritude are forced to write their gospel *in French* means that there is a certain risk of dangerously slowing down the efforts of black men to reject our tutelage. Having been dispersed to the four corners of the earth by the slave trade, black men have no common language; in order to incite the oppressed to unite, they must necessarily rely on the words of the oppressor's language. And French is the language that will furnish the black poet with the largest audience, at least within the limits of French colonization. It is in this goose-pimply language—pale and cold like our skies, and which Mallarmé said was "the neutral language *par excellence*, since our spirit demands an attenuation of variegation and of all excessively brilliant color"—in this language which is half dead for them, that Damas, Diop, Laleau, Rabéarivelo are going to pour the fire of their skies and of their hearts; it is through this language alone that they can communicate; like the sixteenth-century scholars who understood each other only in Latin, black men can meet only on that trap-covered ground that the white man has prepared for them. The colonist has arranged to be the eternal mediator between the colonized; he is there—always there—even when he is absent, even in the most secret meetings. And since words are ideas, when the Negro declares in French that he rejects French culture, he accepts with one hand what he rejects with the other; he sets up the enemy's thinking-apparatus in himself, like a crusher. This would not matter: except that this syntax and vocabulary—forged thousands of miles away in another epoch to answer other needs and to designate other objects—are unsuitable to furnish him with the means of speaking about himself, his own anxieties, his own hopes. The French language and French thought are analytic. What would happen if the black spirit were above all synthetic? The rather ugly term "negritude" is one of the few black contributions to our dictionary. But after all, if this "negritude" is a definable or at least a describable concept, it must subsume other more elementary concepts

which correspond to the immediate fundamental ideas directly involved with Negro consciousness. But where are the words to describe them? How well one understands the Haitian poet's complaint:

* This obsessing heart which does not correspond
To my language, or to my customs,
And on which encroach, like a clinging-root,
Borrowed feelings and the customs
Of Europe, feel this suffering
And this despair—equal to no other—
Of ever taming with words from France
This heart which came to me from Senegal.

It is not true, however, that the black man expresses himself in a "foreign" language, since he is taught French from childhood and since he is perfectly at ease when he thinks in the terms of a technician, of a scholar, or of a politician. Rather, one must speak about the slight but patent difference that separates what he says from what he would like to say, whenever he speaks about himself. It seems to him that a Northern Spirit steals his ideas from him, bends them slightly to mean more or less what he wanted; that white words drink his thoughts as sand drinks blood. If he suddenly gorges himself, if he pulls himself together and takes a step backward, there are the sounds lying prostrate *in front of him*—strange: half signs and half things. He will not speak his negritude with precise, efficacious words which hit the target every time. He will not speak his negritude *in prose*. As everyone knows, every poetic experience has its origin in this feeling of frustration that one has when confronted with a language that is supposed to be a means of direct communication.

The reaction of the *speaker* frustrated by prose is in effect what Bataille calls the holocaust of words. As long as we can believe that a preestablished harmony governs the relationship between a word and Being, we use words without seeing them, with blind trust; they are sensory organs, mouths, hands, windows open on the world. As soon as we experience a first frustration, this chattering falls beyond us;

we see the whole system, it is no more than an upset, out-of-order mechanism whose arms are still flailing to INDICATE EXISTENCE in emptiness; in one fell swoop we pass judgment on the foolish business of naming things; we understand that language is in essence prose, and that prose is in essence failure; Being stands erect in front of us like a tower of silence, and if we still want to catch it, we can do so only through silence: "evoke, in an intentional shadow, the object *tu* by allusive words, never direct, reducing themselves to the same silence."[1] No one has better stated that poetry is an incantatory attempt to suggest Being in and by the vibratory disappearance of the word: by insisting on his verbal impotence, by making words mad, the poet makes us suspect that beyond this chaos which cancels itself out, there are silent densities; since we cannot keep quiet, we must *make silence with language*. From Mallarmé to the Surrealists, the final goal of French poetry seems to me to have been this autodestruction of language. A poem is a dark room where words are knocking themselves about, quite mad. Collisions in the air: they ignite each other with their fire and fall down in flames.

It is in this perspective that we must situate the efforts of the "black evangelists." They answer the colonist's ruse with a similar but inverse ruse: since the oppressor is present in the very language that they speak, they will speak this language in order to destroy it. The contemporary European poet tries to dehumanize words in order to give them back to nature; the black herald is going to *de-Frenchify* them; he will crush them, break their usual associations, he will violently couple them

with little steps of caterpillar rain
with little steps like mouthfuls of milk
with little steps like ball-bearings
with little steps like seismic shocks
Yams in the soil stride like gaps of stars[2]. . .

Only when they have regurgitated their whiteness does he adopt them, making of this ruined language a solemn,

sacred super-langauge, Poetry. Only through Poetry can the black men of Tenanarive and of Cayenne, the black men of Port-au-Prince and of Saint-Louis, communicate with each other in private. And since French lacks terms and concepts to define negritude, since negritude is silence, these poets will use "allusive words, never direct, reducing themselves to the same silence" in order to evoke it. Short-circuits of language: behind the flaming fall of words, we glimpse a great black mute idol. It is not only the black man's self-portrayal that seems poetic to me; it is also his personal way of utilizing the means of expression at his disposal. His position incites him to do it: even before he thinks of writing poetry, in him the light of white words is refracted, polarized, and altered. This is nowhere more manifest than in his use of two connected terms, "white" and "black," that cover both the great cosmic division of day and night and the human conflict between the native and the colonist. But it is a connection based on a hierarchical system: by giving the Negro this term, the teacher also gives him a hundred language habits which consecrate the white man's rights over the black man. The Negro will learn to say "white like snow" to indicate innocence, to speak of the blackness of a look, of a soul, of a deed. As soon as he opens his mouth, he accuses himself, unless he persists in upsetting the hierarchy. And if he upsets it in *French*, he is already poetizing: can you imagine the strange savor that an expression like "the blackness of innocence" or "the darkness of virtue" would have for us? That is the savor which we taste on every page of this book, when, for example, we read:

> Your round, shining, black satin breasts . . .
> this white smile
> of eyes
> in the face's shadow
> awaken in me this evening
> deaf rhythms . . .
> which intoxicate, there in Guinée,
> our sisters

> black and naked
> and inspire in me
> this evening
> black twilights heavy with sensual anxiety
> for
> the soul of the black country where the ancients
> are sleeping
> lives and speaks
> this evening
> in uneasy strength, along the small of
> your back . . .

Throughout this poem, black is color; better still, light. Its soft diffuse radiance dissolves our habits; the *black* country where the ancients are sleeping is not a dark hell: it is a land of sun and fire. Then again, in another connection, the superiority of white over black does not express only the superiority that the colonist claims to have over the native: more profoundly, it expresses a universal adoration of *day* as well as our night terrors, which also are universal. In this sense, these black men are reestablishing the hiararchy they have just upset. They don't want to be poets of *night*, poets of vain revolt and despair: they give the promise of dawn; they greet

> the transparent dawn of a new day.

At last, the black man discovers, through the pen, his baleful sense of foreboding:

> Nigger black like misery

one of them, and then another, cries out:

> Deliver me from my blood's night . . .

Thus the word *black* is found to contain *all Evil* and *all Good*; it covers up almost unbearable tension between two contradictory classifications: solar hierarchy and racial hierarchy. It gains thereby an extraordinary poetry, like

self-destructive objects from the hands of Duchamp and the Surrealists; there is a secret blackness in white, a secret whiteness in black, a vivid flickering of Being and of Nonbeing which is perhaps nowhere expressed as well as in this poem of Césaire's:

> My tall wounded statue, a stone in its forehead; my great inattentive day flesh with pitiless spots, my great night flesh with day spots.

The poet will go even further. He writes:

> Our beautiful faces like the true operative power of negation.

Behind this abstract eloquence evoking Lautréamont is seen an extremely bold and subtle attempt to give some sense to black skin and to realize the poetic synthesis of the two faces of night. When David Diop says that the Negro is "black like misery," he makes black represent deprivation of light. But Césaire develops and goes into this image more deeply: night is no longer absence, it is refusal. Black is not color, it is the destruction of this borrowed clarity which falls from the white sun. The revolutionary Negro is negation because he wishes to be complete nudity: in order to build his Truth, he must first destroy others' Truth. Black faces—these night memories which haunt our days—embody the dark work of Negativity which patiently gnaws at concepts. Thus, by a reversal which curiously recalls that of the humiliated Negro—insulted and called "dirty nigger" when he asserts his rights—it is the privative aspect of darkness that establishes its value. Liberty is the color of night.

Destructions, *autos-da-fé* of language, magic symbolism, ambivalence of concepts: all the negative aspects of modern poetry are here. But it is not a matter of some gratuitous game. The black man's position, his original "rending," the

alienation that a foreign way of thinking imposes on him, all oblige him to reconquer his existential unity as a Negro—or, if you prefer, the original purity of his plan—through a gradual *ascèse*, beyond the language stage. Negritude—like liberty—is a point of departure and an ultimate goal: it is a matter of making negritude pass from the immediate to the mediate, a matter of *thematicizing* it. The black man must therefore find death in white culture in order to be reborn with a black soul, like the Platonic philosopher whose body embraces death in order to be reborn in truth. This dialectical and mystical return to origins necessarily implies a method. But this method is not presented as a set of rules to be used in directing the spirit. Rather, it becomes *one* with whoever applies it; it is the dialectical law of successive transformations which lead the Negro to coincidence with himself in negritude. It is not a matter of his *knowing*, or of his ecstatically tearing himself away from himself, but rather of both discovering and becoming what he is.

There are two convergent means of arriving at this primordial simplicity of existence: one is objective, the other subjective. The poets in our anthology sometimes use one, sometimes the other, and sometimes both of them together. In effect, there exists an objective negritude that is expressed by the mores, arts, chants, and dances of the African populaces. As a *spiritual exercise*, the poet will prescribe allowing himself to be fascinated by primitive rhythms, letting his thoughts run in traditional forms of black poetry. Many of the poems included here are called *tam-tams*, because they borrow from the nighttime tambourine players a percussive rhythm which is sometimes sharp and regular, sometimes torrential and bounding. The poetic act, then, is a dance of the soul; the poet turns round and round like a dervish until he faints; he has established his ancestors' time in himself, he feels it flowing with its peculiar violent pulls; he hopes to "find" himself in this rhythmic pulsation; I shall say that he tries to make himself "possessed" by his people's negritude; he hopes that the

echoes of his tam-tam will come to awaken timeless instincts sleeping within him. Upon leafing through this collection, one will get the impression that the *tam-tam* tends to become a *genre* of black poetry, just as the sonnet or the ode was a *genre* of our poetry. Others, like Rabemananjara, will be inspired by royal proclamations. Still others will draw from the popular well of the Haintenys. The calm center of this maelstrom of rhythms, chants, shouts, is the poetry of Birago Diop, in all its majestic simplicity: it alone is at *rest* because it comes directly from Griot narratives and oral tradition. Almost all the other attempts have something contorted, taut, and desperate about them because they aim at *becoming a part* of folkloric poetry rather than emanating from it. But however far he may be from "the black country where ancestors sleep," the black man is closer than we are to the great period when, as Mallarmé says, "the word creates Gods." It is partically impossible for *our* poets to resume some closeness with popular traditons: ten centuries of scholarly poetry separate them from such traditions. Furthermore, folkloric inspiration is drying up: at the very best, we could only imitate its simplicity from a distance. The black men of Africa, on the contrary, are still in the great period of mythical fecundity, and French-language black poets are not just using their myths as a form of diversion as we use our epic poems:* they allow themselves to be spellbound by them so that the end of the incantation, negritude—magnificently evoked—may surge forth. This is why I call this method of "objective poetry" *magic*, or charm.

Césaire, on the contrary, chose to backtrack into himself. Since this Eurydice will disappear in smoke if Black Orpheus turns around to look back on her, he will descend the royal road of his soul with his back turned on the bottom of the grotto; he will descend below words and meanings—"in order to think of you, I have placed all words on the

* Sartre uses the word *chansons* for what I have translated as "epic poems." He is referring, of course, to the medieval French epic poems, the *chansons de geste.—Translator.*

mountain-of-pity"—below daily activities and the plan of "repetition," even below the first barrier reefs of revolt, with his back turned and his eyes closed, in order finally to touch with his feet the black water of dreams and desire and to let himself drown in it.* Desire and dream will rise up snarling like a tidal wave; they will make words dance like flotsam and throw them pell-mell, shattered, on the shore.

> Words go beyond themselves; and just as the old geography is done for, the high and the low [words] do not allow diversion either toward heaven or toward earth . . . On the contrary, they operate on a strangely flexible range at one level: on the gaseous Level of an organism both solid and liquid, black and white day and night.†

One recognizes the old surrealistic *method* (automatic writing, like mysticism, is a method: it presupposes an apprenticeship, exercises, a start along the way). One must dive under the superficial crust of reality, of common sense, of reasoning reason, in order to touch the very bottom of the soul and awaken the timeless forces of desire: desire which makes of man a refusal of everything and a love of everything: desire, the radical negation of natural laws and of the possible, a call to miracles; desire which, by its mad cosmic energy, plunges man back into the seething breast of Nature and, at the same time, lifts him above Nature through the affirmation of his Right to be unsatisfied. Furthermore, Césaire is not the first Negro to take this road. Before him, Etienne Léro had founded *Légitime Défense.*

* Sartre seems to have confused his images here, since Orpheus was instructed not to look back while he was *ascending* from Hades, *after* he had retrieved Eurydice from Pluto.—*Translator.*

† The French notion of "automatic writing" was so completely untranslatable that I have tried simply to give an English *approximation* of its sense. For those who care to consult the original French text, it runs as follows: "Les mots se dépassent, c'est bien vers un ciel et une terre que le haut et le bas ne permettent pas de distraire, c'en est fait aussi de la vieille géographie . . . Au contraire, un étagement curieusement respirable s'opère réel mais au niveau. Au Niveau gazeux de l'organisme solide et liquide, blanc et noir jour et nuit."—*Translator.*

"Légitime Défense," says Senghor, "was more a cultural movement than a review. Starting from the Marxist analysis of the society of the "Islands," it discovered, in the Antilles, descendants of African Negro slaves, who had been kept in the dulling condition of the proletarian for three centuries. It affirmed that only surrealism could deliver him from his taboos and express him in his entireness."

However, if one compares Léro with Césaire, one cannot help being struck by their dissimilarities, and this comparison may allow us to measure the abyss that prevents a black revolutionary from utilizing white surrealism. Léro was the precursor; he invented the exploitation of surrealism as a "miraculous weapon" and an instrument for reconnaissance, a sort of radar with which one probes the depths of the abyss. But his poems are student exercises, they are mere imitations: they do not go beyond themselves; rather, they close in on each other:

> The ancient heads of hair
> Glue to the branches floors of empty seas
> Where your body is only a memory
> Where Spring trims its nails
> Helix of your smile thrown far away
> On the houses we will have nothing to do with . . .

"The helix of your smile," "the spring which trims its nails": we recognize in these the preciousness and gratuitousness of surrealistic imagery, the eternal process that consists of throwing a bridge between two extremely unrelated or separated terms and hoping—without really believing—that this "throw of the dice" will uncover some hidden aspect of Being. It does not seem to me that, either in this poem or in the others, Léro demands the liberation of the black man: at the very most he lays claim to a categorical liberation of the imagination. In the completely abstract game, no combination of words evokes Africa even remotely. If these poems were taken out of the anthology and the name of their author hidden, I would defy anyone at all, white or black, not to attribute them to a European contributor to *La Révolution surréaliste* or *Le Minotaure.* The purpose of Surrealism is to rediscover—beyond race and condition, beyond class, behind the fire of language—dazzling silent darknesses which are no longer opposed to anything, not even to day, because day and night and all opposites are blended in them and suppressed; consequently, one might speak of the impassiveness and the impersonality of the Surrealist poem, just as there is a Parnassian impassiveness and impersonality.

A poem by Césaire, on the contrary, bursts and wheels around like a rocket; suns turning and exploding into new suns come out of it: it is a perpetual going-beyond. It is not a question of the poem's becoming part of the calm unity of opposites, but rather of making *one* of the opposites in the "black-white" couple expand like a phallus in its opposition to the other. The density of these words thrown into the air like stones from a volcano is found in negritude, which is defined as being *against* Europe and colonization. What Césaire destroys is not *all* culture but rather *white* culture; what he brings to light is not desire for *everything* but rather the revolutionary aspirations of the oppressed Negro; what he touches in his very depths is not the spirit but a certain specific, concrete form of humanity. With this in mind, one can speak here about *engaged* and even *directed* automatic writing, not because there is any meditative intervention but because the words and images perpetually translate the same torrid obsession. The white Surrealist finds within himself the trigger; Césaire finds within himself the fixed inflexibility of demands and feeling. Léro's words are feebly organized around vague general themes through expansion and a relaxing of logical ties; Césair's words are pressed against each other and cemented by his furious passion. Between the most daring comparisons and between the most widely separated terms runs a secret thread of hate and hope. For example, compare "the helix of your smile thrown far away"—which is the product of a free play of the imagination as well as an invitation to reverie—with

and the radium mines buried in the abyss of my innocence
will jump by grains
into the feeding-trough of birds
and the stars' stere
will be the common name of firewood
gathered from the alluvium of the singing veins of night

in which the "disjecta membra" of the vocabulary are so organized as to allow the supposition that there is a black *"Art Poétique."* Or read:

Our beautiful faces like the true operative power of negation.

Also read:

Seas lousy with islands cracking in the roses' fingers
flame-thrower and my lightning-struck body intact.

Here we find the apotheosis of the fleas of black misery jumping in the water's hair, islands in a stream of light, cracking under the fingers of the celestial delouser: dawn with rose-colored fingers, the dawn of Greek and Mediterranean culture—snatched from the sacrosanct Homeric poems by a black thief—whose enslaved princess's fingernails are suddenly controlled by a Toussaint L'Ouverture in order to crack the triumphant parasites of the black sea; the dawn, which suddenly rebels and is metamorphosed, which opens fire like that savage weapon of white men, the flame-thrower, the weapon of scientists, the weapon of executioners, strikes the tall black Titan with its white fire, and he arises intact and eternal in order to begin the assault on Europe and heaven. In Césaire, the great Surrealist tradition is realized, it takes on its definitive meaning and is destroyed: Surrealism—that European movement—is taken from the Europeans by a black man who turns it against them and gives it a rigorously defined function. I have pointed out elsewhere how the whole of the proletariat completely shut itself off from the destructive poetry of Reason: in Europe, Surrealism languishes and pales, rejected by those who could have given it a transfusion

of their own blood. But at the very moment when it is losing contact with the Revolution, it is, in the Antilles, grafted onto another branch of the universal Revolution; it develops into an enormous somber flower. Césaire's originality lies in his having directed his powerful, concentrated anxiety as a Negro, as one oppressed, as a militant individual, into this world of the most destructive, free, and metaphysical poetry at the moment when Eluard and Aragon were failing to give political content to their verse. And finally, *negritude-object* is snatched from Césaire like a cry of pain, of love, and of hate. Here again he follows the Surrealist tradition of *objective* poetry. Césaire's words do not describe negritude, they do not designate it, they do not copy it from the outside like a painter with a model: they *create* it; they compose it under our very eyes. Henceforth it is a thing which can be observed and learned; the subjective method which he has chosen joins the objective method we spoke about earlier: he ejects the black soul from himself at the very moment when others are trying to interiorize it; the final result is the same in both cases. Negritude is the far-away tam-tam in the streets of Dakar at night; voodoo shouts from some Haitian cellar window, sliding along level with the roadway; the Congolese mask; but it is also this poem by Césaire, this slobbery, bloody peom full of phlegm, twisting in the dust like a cut-up worm. This double spasm of absorption and excretion beats out the rhythm of the black heart on every page of this collection.

What then, at present, is this negritude, sole anxiety of these poets, sole subject of this book? It must first be stated that a white man could hardly speak about it suitably, since he has no inner experience of it and since European languages lack words to describe it. I ought then to let the reader encounter it in the pages of this collection and draw his own conclusions about it. But this introduction would be incomplete if, after having indicated that the quest for the Black Grail represented—both in its original intention and in its methods—the most authentic synthesis of revolutionary aspirations and poetic anxiety, I did not show that this complex notion is essentially pure Poetry. I shall

therefore limit myself to examining these poems objectively as a cluster of testimonies and to pointing out some of their principal themes. Senghor says, "What makes the *negritude* of a poem is less its theme than its style, the emotional warmth which gives life to words, which transmutes the word into the Word." It could not be more explicitly stated that negritude is neither a state nor a definite ensemble of vices and virtues or of intellectual and moral qualities, but rather a certain affective attitude toward the world. Since the beginning of this century, psychology has renounced its great scholastic distinctions. We no longer believe that the "facts" of the soul are divided into volitions or actions, knowledge or perceptions, sentiments or blind passiveness. We know that a feeling is a definite way of establishing our *rapport* with the world around us, that it involves a certain comprehension of this universe. It is a tension of the soul, a choice of oneself and of another, a way of going beyond the raw facts of experience; in short, a *plan* quite like the voluntary act. To use Heidegger's language, negritude is the Negro's being-in-the-world.

Furthermore, here is what Césaire tells us about it.

> My negritude is not a stone with its deafness flung out against the clamor of the day
> My negritude is not a dead speck of water on the dead eye of the earth
> my negritude is neither a tower nor a cathedral
> it plunges into the red flesh of the ground
> it plunges into the ardent flesh of the sky
> it perforates the opaque pressure of its righteous patience.

Negritude is portrayed in these beautiful lines of verse more as an act than as a frame of mind. But this act is an *inner* determination; it is not a question of *taking* the goods of this world in one's hands and transforming them; it is a question of *existing* in the middle of the world. The relation with the universe remains an *adaptation*. But this adaptation is not technical. For the white man, to possess is to transform. To be sure, the white worker uses instruments which he does not possess. But at least his techniques are his own: if it is true that the personnel responsible for the major inventions of European industry comes mainly from the middle classes, at least the trades of carpenter, cabinetmaker, potter, seem to the white workers to be a true heritage, despite the fact that the orientation of great capitalist production tends to remove their "joy in work" from them. But it is not enough to say that the black worker uses instruments which are lent to him: techniques are also lent to him.

Césaire refers to his black brothers as

> Those who have invented neither powder nor compass
> those who have never tamed either steam or electricity
> those who have not explored the seas and the sky . . .

But this haughty claim of nontechnicalness reverses the situation: what could pass as a deficiency becomes a *positive* source of wealth. A technical *rapport* with Nature reveals Nature as simple quantity, inertia, exteriority: Nature dies. By his haughty refusal to be *homo faber*, the Negro gives it life again. As if the passiveness of one of the members of the "man-nature" couple necessarily produced the other's activity. Actually, negritude is not passiveness, since it "perforates the flesh of the sky and of the earth": it is "patience," and patience appears like an active imitation of passiveness. The Negro's act is first of all an act on himself. The black man stands erect and immobilizes himself like a bird-charmer, and things come to perch on the branches of this fake tree. A magic inveigling of the world—through silence and rest—is involved here: the white man, by acting first of all on Nature, loses himself when he loses Nature; the Negro, by acting first of all on himself, claims to win Nature while winning himself.

> Seized, they abandon themselves to the essence of every thing
> ignorant of the surfaces but seized by the movement of every thing
> heedless of counting, but playing the world's game
> truly the elder sons of the world
> porous to all the breaths of the world . . .

> flesh of the world's flesh palpitating from the very movement of the world.

Upon reading this, one can hardly help thinking of the famous distinction between intelligence and intuition established by Bergson. Césaire rightly calls us

> Omniscient and naïve conquerors . . .

Because of his tools, the white man knows all. But he only scratches the surface of things; he is unaware of the duration of things, unaware of life. Negritude, on the contrary, is comprehension through instinctive congeniality. The black man's secret is that the sources of his existence and the roots of Being are identical.

If one wanted to give a sociological interpretation of this metaphysic, one would say that an agriculturist poetry is here opposed to an engineer prose. Actually, it is not true that the black man has no techniques: the *rapport* between any human group and the exterior world is always technical in one way or another. And inversely, I shall say that Césaire is imprecise: Saint Exupéry's airplane folding the earth below like a carpet is a means of disclosure. However, the black man is first of all a peasant; agricultural technique is "righteous patience"; it trusts in life; it waits. To plant is to impregnate the earth; after that, you must remain motionless and watch: "each atom of silence is a chance for ripe fruit," each instant brings forth a hundred times more than man gave, whereas the worker finds in the manufactured product only as much as he put into it; man grows along with his wheat: from minute to minute he goes beyond himself and becomes more golden; he intervenes in his watchful wait before the fragile swelling belly, only to protect. Ripe wheat is a microcosm because the cooperation of sun, wind, and rains was needed for it to grow; a blade of wheat is both the most natural thing and the most improbable chance. Techniques have contaminated the white peasant, but the black peasant remains the great male of the earth, the world's sperm. His existence is great

vegetal patience; his work is the yearly repetition of holy coitus. Creating and nourished because he creates. To till, to plant, to eat, is to make love with Nature. The sexual pantheism of these poets is undoubtedly what will impress us first of all: it is in this that they join the dances and the phallic rites of the Negro-Africans.

> Oho! Congo lying in your bed of forests, queen of tamed Africa
> May the phalli of the mountains carry your banner high
> For, through my head, through my tongue, through my belly, you are a woman,

writes Senghor. Also:

> and so I shall mount again the soft belly of the dunes
> and the gleaming thighs of the day . . .

and Rabéarivelo:

> the earth's blood, the stone's sweat and the sperm of the world

and Laleau:

> The conical drum laments under the sky
> And it is the very soul of the black man
> Sultry spasms of men in rut, lover's sticky sobs
> Outraging the calm of the evening.

Here, we are far from Bergson's chaste asexual intuition. It is no longer a matter of being congenial with life, but rather of being in love with all its forms. For the white technician, God is first of all an engineer. Jupiter orders chaos and prescribes its laws; the Christian God conceives the world through his understanding and brings it into being through his will; the relation between the created and the creator is never carnal, except for a few mystics whom the Church looks upon with a great deal of suspicion. Even so, erotic mysticism has nothing in common with fecundity: it is the completely passive wait for a sterile penetration. We are *steeped* in alluvium: statuettes come from the *hands* of

the divine sculptor. If the manufactured objects surrounding us could worship their ancestors, they would undoubtedly adore us as we adore the All-powerful. For our black poets, on the contrary, Being comes out of Nothingness like a penis becoming erect; Creation is an enormous perpetual delivery; the world is flesh and the son of flesh; on the sea and in the sky, on the dunes, on the rocks, in the wind, the Negro finds the softness of human skin; he rubs himself against the sand's belly, against the sky's loins: he is "flesh of the flesh of this world"; he is "porous to all its breaths," to all its pollens; he is both Nature's female and its male; and when he makes love with a woman of his race, the sexual act seems to him to be the celebration of the Mystery of Being. This spermatic religion is like the tension of a soul balancing between two complementary tendencies: the dynamic feeling of being an erect phallus, and that more deaf, more patient, more feminine one of being a growing plant. Thus, negritude is basically a sort of androgyny.

> There you are
> Upright and naked
> alluvium you are and remember yourself as having been
> but in reality you are the child of this parturient shadow
> feeding on lunar lactogen*
> then you slowly take the form of a bole
> on this low wall jumped over by the dreams of flowers
> and the perfume of summer at rest.
> To feel, to believe that roots are pushing your feet
> and running and twisting like thirsty serpents
> toward some subterranean spring . . .
>
> (Rabéarivelo)

And Césaire:

> Wornout mother, leafless mother, you are a *flamboyant*
> and now wear only husks. You are a calabash tree

* "Lactogen" is a neologism in the French text as well.—*Translator.*

> and you are only a stand of *couis* . . .†

This profound unity of vegetal and sexual symbols is certainly the greatest originality of black poetry, especially in a period when, as Michel Carrouges has shown, most of the images used by white poets tend to mineralize the human being. Césaire, on the contrary, "vegetalizes," "animalizes" sea, sky, and stones. More precisely, his poetry is a perpetual coupling of men and women who had been metamorphosed into animals, vegetables, stones, with stones, plants, and beasts metamorphosed into men. Thus the black man attests to a natural Eros; he reveals and incarnates it; to find a point of comparison in European poetry, one must go back to Lucretius, the peasant poet who celebrated Venus, the mother goddess, when Rome was not yet much more than a large agricultural market. In our time, only Lawrence seems to me to have had a cosmic feeling for sexuality. Even so, this feeling remains very literary in his works.

However, although negritude seems basically to be this immobile springing-forth, a unity of phallic erection and plant growth, one could scarcely exhaust it with this single poetic theme. There is another motif running through this collection, like a large artery:

> Those who have invented neither powder nor compass . . .
> They know the most remote corners of the country of
> suffering . . .

To the absurd utilitarian agitation of the white man, the black man opposes the authenticity gained from his suffering; the black race is a chosen race because it has had the horrible privilege of touching the depths of unhappiness. And even though these poems are anti-Christian from beginning to end, one might call negritude a kind of

† *Flamboyant*: a plant found in semitropical countries, especially in the Antilles; a poinciana, or peacock flower. *Couis:* apparently some kind of tree found in the Antilles.—*Translator.*

Passion: the black man who is conscious of himself sees himself as the man who has taken the whole of human suffering upon himself and who suffers for all, even for the white man.

> On the judgment day, Armstrong's trumpet will be the interpreter of man's sufferings.
>
> (Paul Niger)

Let us note immediately that this in no way implies a resigned suffering. A while ago I was speaking about Bergson and Lucretius; I would be tempted now to quote that great adversary of Christianity, Nietzsche, and his "Dionysianism." Like the Dionysian poet, the Negro attempts to penetrate the brilliant phantasm of the day, and encounters, a thousand feet under the Apollonian surface, the inexpiable suffering which is the universal essence of man. If one wished to systematize, one would say that the black man blends with the whole of nature inasmuch as he represents sexual congeniality with Life and inasmuch as he claims he is Man in his Passion of rebellious suffering. One will feel the fundamental unity of this double movement if one considers the constantly tighter relationship which psychiatrists establish between anguish and sexual desire. There is only one proud upheaval which can be equally well described as a desire plunging its roots into suffering or as suffering fixed like a sword across a vast cosmic desire. This "righteous patience" that Césaire evokes is both vegetal growth and patience against suffering; it resides in the very muscles of the Negro; it sustains the black porter going a thousand miles up the Niger under a blinding sun with a fifty-pound load balanced on his head. But if in a certain sense, one can compare the fecundity of Nature to a proliferation of suffering, in another sense—and this one is also Dionysian—this fecundity, by its exuberance, goes beyond suffering, drowns it in its creative abundance which is poetry, love, and dance. Perhaps, in order to understand this indissoluble unity of suffering, eros, and joy, one must

have seen the black men of Harlem dance frenetically to the rhythm of "blues," which are the saddest sounds in the world. In effect, rhythm cements the multiple aspects of the black soul, communicates its Nietzschean lightness with heavy Dionysian intuitions. Rhythm—tam-tam, jazz, the "bounding" of these poems—represents the temporality of Negro *existence.* And when a black poet prophesies to his brothers a better future, he portrays their deliverance to them in the form of rhythm:

> What?
> rhythm
> sound wave in the night across the forests, nothing
> —or a new soul
> timbre
> intonation
> vigor
> dilation
> vibration which flows out by degrees into the marrow
> revulses* in its progression an old sleeping body, takes
> it by the waist
> and spins it
> and turns
> and once more vibrates in its hands, in its loins, its
> sexual member, its thighs, its vagina . . .

But one must go still further: this basic experience of suffering is ambiguous; through it, black conscience is going to become historical. In effect, whatever may be the intolerable iniquity of his present condition, it is not to that condition that the black man first refers when he proclaims that he has touched the heart of human suffering. He has the horrible benefit of having known bondage. For these poets, most of whom were born between 1900 and 1918, slavery—abolished half a century earlier—lingers on as a very real memory:

> Each of my todays looks on my yesterday
> with large eyes rolling with rancor with

* *Revulses*: referring to the medical term *revulsion*, a counterirritant.—*Translator.*

shame
Still real is my stunned condition of the past
of
blows from knotted cords of bodies calcinated
from toe to calcinated back
of dead flesh of red iron firebrands of arms
broken under the whip which is breaking loose . . .

writes Damas, poet from Guiana. And the Haitian, Brierre:

. . . Often like me you feel stiffnesses
Awaken after murderous centuries
And old wounds bleed in your flesh . . .

During the centuries of slavery, the black man drank the cup of bitterness to the last drop; and slavery is a past fact which neither our authors nor their fathers have actually experienced. But it is also a hideous nightmare from which even the youngest of them are not yet sure of having awakened. From one end of the earth to the other, black men—separated by languages, politics, and the history of their colonizers—have a *collective* memory in common. This will not be surprising if one only recalls the French peasants who, in 1789, were still aware of the panicky terrors that went back to the Hundred Years' War. Thus, when the black man goes back to his principal experience, it is suddenly revealed to him in two dimensions: it is both the intuitive seizure of the human condition and the still-fresh memory of a historical past. Here, I am thinking of Pascal, who relentlessly repeated that man was an irrational composite of metaphysics and history, his greatness unexplainable if he comes from the alluvium, his misery unexplainable if he is still as God made him; that in order to understand man, one had to go back to the simple basic fact of man's downfall. It is in this sense that Césaire calls his race "the fallen race." And in a certain sense I can see the *rapprochement* that can be made between black conscience and Christian conscience: the brazen law of slavery evokes that law of the Old Testament, which states the consequences of the *Fault*. The abolition of slavery recalls this *other historical fact:*

Redemption. The white man's insipid paternalism after 1848 resembles that of the white God after the Passion. The difference being, however, that the expiable fault that the black man discovers in the back of his memory is not his own; it belongs to the white man. The first fact of Negro history is certainly a kind of original sin; but the black man is the innocent victim of it. This is why his concept of suffering is radically opposed to white "dolorism." If these poems are for the most part so violently anti-Christian, it is because the white man's religion is more clearly a hoax in the eyes of the Negro than in the eyes of the European proletariat: this religion wants to make him share the responsibility for a crime of which he is the victim; it wants to persuade him to see the kidnappings, the massacres, the rapes, and the tortures which have covered Africa with blood as a legitimate punishment, deserved tests. Will you say that it also proclaims equality for all men before God? *Before God*, yes. Only yesterday I was reading in *Esprit* these lines from a correspondent in Madagascar:

> I am as certain as you that the soul of a Malagasy is worth the soul of a white man . . . Just as, before God, the soul of a child is worth the soul of his father. However, if you have an automobile, you don't let your children drive it.

One can hardly reconcile Christianity and colonialism more elegantly. In opposition to these sophisms, the black man—by a simple investigation of his memory as a former slave—affirms that suffering is man's lot and that it is no less deserved for all that. He rejects with horror Christian stagnation, melancholy sensual pleasure, masochistic humility, and all the tendentious inducements to his submission; he lives the absurdity of suffering in its pure form, in its injustice and in its gratuitousness; and he discovers thereby this truth which is misunderstood or masked by Christianity: suffering carries within itself its own refusal; it is by nature *a refusal to suffer*, it is the dark side of negativity, it opens onto revolt and liberty. The black man promptly

"collaborate"; after all, in the prefaces he writes for the works of each poet, Senghor seems to distinguish between degrees of negritude. Does the poet who would be the Prophet for his colored brothers invite them to *become* more Negro, or does he disclose to them what they *are*, by a sort of poetic psychoanalysis? Is negritude necessity or liberty? For the authentic Negro, is it a matter of conduct deriving from essences, as consequences derive from a principle, or is one a Negro in the way that the religious faithful are believers, that is to say, in fear and trembling, in anguish, in perpetual remorse for never sufficiently being what one would like to be? Is it a given fact or a value? The object of empirical intuition or of a moral concept? Is it a conquest of meditation? Or does meditation poison it? Is it never authentic except when unmeditated and in the immediate? Is it a systematic *explanation* of the black soul, or a Platonic Archetype which one can approach indefinitely without ever attaining? Is it, for black men, like our engineer's common sense, the most widely shared thing in the world? Or do some have it, like grace; and if so, does it have its chosen ones? One will undoubtedly answer this question by saying that it is all of these at once, and still other things. And I agree: like all anthropological notions, negritude is a shimmer of being and of needing-to-be; it makes you and you make it: both oath and passion. But there is something even more important in it: the Negro himself, we have said, creates a kind of antiracist racism. He wishes in no way to dominate the world: he desires the abolition of *all* kinds of ethnic privileges; he asserts his solidarity with the oppressed of every color. After that, the subjective, existential, ethnic notion of negritude "passes," as Hegel says, into that which one has of the proletariat: objective, positive, and precise. Senghor says: "For Césaire, 'White' symbolizes capital, just as Negro symbolizes work. . . . When writing about the black men of his race, he is writing about the worldwide proletarian struggle." It is easy to say, not so easy to think. And it is certainly not just by accident that the most ardent cantors of negritude are also militant Marxists. Nevertheless, the notion of race does not mix with the notion of class: the former is concrete and particular; the latter, universal and abstract. One belongs to what Jaspers calls comprehension, and the other to intellection; the first is the product of a psychobiological syncretism, and the other is a methodical construction starting with experience. In fact, negritude appears like the upbeat [unaccented beat] of a dialectical progression: the theoretical and practical affirmation of white supremacy is the thesis; the position of negritude as an antithetical value is the moment of negativity. But this negative moment is not sufficient in itself, and these black men who use it know this perfectly well; they know that it aims at preparing the synthesis or realization of the human being in a raceless society. Thus, negritude is *for* destroying itself; it is a "crossing to" and not an "arrival at," a means and not an end. A poem by Jacques Roumain, a black communist, furnishes the most moving evidence of this new ambiguity:

> Africa I have held on to your memory Africa
> you are in me
> Like a thorn in a wound
> like a guardian mascot in the center of the village
> make of me the stone of your sling
> of my mouth the lips of your wound
> of my knees the broken columns of your humbling
> however
> I want to be only of your race
> peasant workers of all countries.

With what sadness he still retains for the moment what he has decided to abandon. With what pride as a *man* he will strip his pride as a Negro for other men! He who says both that Africa is in him like "a thorn in a wound," and that he *wants* to be only of the universal race of the oppressed, has not left the empire of afflicted consciousness. One more step and negritude will disappear completely: the Negro himself makes of what was the mysterious bubbling of black blood a geographic accident, the inconsistent product of universal determinism:

Is it all that climate extended space
which creates clan tribe nation
skin race gods
our inexorable dissimilarity.*

But the poet does not completely have the courage to accept the responsibility for this *rationalization* of the racial concept; one sees that he limits himself to questioning; a bitter regret is visible beneath his will to unite. Strange road: humiliated and offended, black men search deep within themselves to find their most secret pride; and when they have found it at last, it challenges its own right to exist. Through supreme generosity they abandon it, just as Philoctetes abandoned his bow and arrows at Neoptolemus. Thus, the rebel Césaire finds the secret of his revolts in the bottom of his heart: he is of royal blood:

it is true that there is in you something which has
never been able to yield, an anger, a desire, a sadness,
an impatience, in short a scorn, a violence . . . and now
your veins carry gold, not mud; pride, not servitude.
King you have been King in the past.

But he immediately thrusts aside this temptation:

There is a law that I cover up with a chain unbroken
as far as the confluence of fire which violates me
which purifies me and burns me with my prism of amal-
gamated gold . . . I shall perish. But one. Whole.

It is perhaps this ultimate nudity of man that has snatched from him the white rags that were concealing his black armor, and that now destroys and rejects that very armor; it is perhaps this colorless nudity that best symbolizes negritude: for negritude is not a state, it is a simple going-beyond-itself, it is love. It is when negritude renounces itself that it finds itself; it is when it accepts losing

* Although the poem itself and Sartre's interpretation of it suggest that there should be a question mark here, there is none in the text from which this was translated.—*Translator.*

that it has won: the colored man—and he alone—can be asked to renounce the pride of his color. He is the one who is walking on this ridge between past particularism—which he has just climbed—and future universalism, which will be the twilight of his negritude; he is the one who looks to the end of particularism in order to find the dawn of the universal. Undoubtedly, the white worker also becomes conscious of his class in order to deny it, since he wants the advent of a classless society: but once again, the definition of class is objective; it sums up only the condition of the white worker's alienation; whereas it is in the bottom of his heart that the Negro finds race, and he must tear out his heart. Thus, negritude is dialectical; it is not only nor above all the blossoming of atavistic instincts; it represents "going beyond" a situation defined by free consciences. Negritude is a sad myth full of hope, born of Evil and pregnant with future Good, living like a woman who is born to die and who feels her own death even in the richest moments of her life; it is an unstable rest, an explosive fixity, a pride which renounces itself, an absolute that knows it is transitory: for whereas it is the Announcer of its birth and of its death agony, it also remains the existential attitude chosen by free men and lived *absolutely*, to the fullest. Because it is tension between a nostalgic Past into which the black man can no longer enter completely and a future in which it will be replaced by new values, negritude adorns itself with a tragic beauty that finds expression only in poetry. Because it is the living and dialectical unity of so many opposites, because it is a Complex defying analysis, negritude is only the multiple unity of a hymn that can reveal both it and the flashing beauty of the Poem which Breton calls *"explosante-fixe."* Because any attempt to conceptualize its various aspects would necessarily end up showing its relativity—even though it is lived in the absolute through royal consciences—and because the poem is an absolute, it is poetry alone that will allow the unconditional aspect of this attitude to be fixed. Because it is subjectivity written in the objective, negritude must take form in a poem, that is

to say, in a subjectivity-object; because it is an Archetype and a Value, it will find its most transparent symbol in aesthetic values; because it is a call and a gift, it will make itself heard and offer itself only by means of a work of art which is both a call to the spectator's liberty and absolute generosity. Negritude is the content of the poem, it is the poem like a thing of the world, mysterious and open, obscure and suggestive; it is the poet himself. One must go still further; triumph of Narcissism and Narcissus' suicide, tension of the soul beyond culture, beyond words and beyond all psychic facts, luminous night of unknowing, deliberate choice of the *impossible* and of what Bataille calls "torture" [*supplice*], intuitive acceptance of the world and refusal of the world in the name of "the law of the heart," double contradictory postulation, demanding retraction, expansion of generosity—negritude is, in essence, Poetry. For once at least, the most authentic revolutionary plan and the purest poetry come from the same source.

And if the sacrifice is achieved one day, what will happen then? What will happen if, casting off his negritude for the sake of the Revolution, the black man no longer wishes to consider himself only a part of the proletariat? What will happen if he then allows himself to be defined only by his objective condition? If, in order to struggle against white capitalism, he undertakes to assimilate white technics? Will the source of poetry run dry? Or in spite of everything, will the great black river color the sea into which it flows? That does not matter: each era has its poetry; in each era, circumstances of history elect a nation, a race, a class to take up the torch, by creating situations that can be expressed or that can go beyond themselves only through Poetry. Sometimes the poetic *élan* coincides with the revolutionary *élan*, and sometimes they diverge. Let us greet today the historic chance that will permit black men to

> shout out the great Negro cry so hard that the world's foundations will be shaken.[3]

Translated by John MacCombie

Notes

A Note on the Texts

Index