

## RENÉ MÉNIL "THE SITUATION OF POETRY IN THE CARIBBEAN" (1944)

Ménil, René. "The Situation of Poetry in the Caribbean." Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean. Ed. Michael Richardson. Trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson. London: Verso, 1996. 127-133.

Here, Menil's outlook is informed by a mixture of Hegelianism and Freudianism that is reminiscent of Bloom's notion of the anxiety of influence in many respects. "Every Renaissance" (127), Menil argues "puts the old quarrel of substance and form back on the agenda" (127). Each renaissance is tantamount to a "renewal of the substance of human realities that have become outmoded: ideas, feelings and acts" (127) and "life so recreated must tend towards a new form and expression" (127). Most members of a society tend to be "nostalgically attached . . . the old style of life" (127) and will question the "validity of the new life as well as its new expression" (127). The "crisis of consciousness" (127) which, in his view, is currently "in the process of upsetting Caribbean mentality" (127) is "determined by historical evolution" (127) and has in turn inevitably led to the "traditional quarrel" (127) of substance versus form. In his view, the

new conception of life that, through our efforts, currently haunts the Caribbean community with the authority and seduction of a myth, already constitutes the historic originality of our renaissance. But this internal renewal seeks its expression in the light and shade of a cultural creation in which, everything being put into question, the old models and styles have been disqualified precisely because of their age. (127)

By contrast, what Menil calls the "agitated critical mind . . . proposes principles" (127) drawn "from 'eternal reason'" (127). Informed by the universalism and ahistoricism which informed the philosophy of the early modern period and the Neo-classical view of art which it spawned, such critics spout "reactionary nonsense" (128) such as "It's too late, everything has already been said" (128) and although "human realities change, at least the language in which they are expressed must be immutable" (128). Menil is of the view that such claims are "sufficiently well disproved by the sequence of heterogeneous transitions that form the history of peoples" (128).

Menil advances several principles. First, "[e]very renewal of mankind brings with it a corresponding renewal of cultural expression" (128) for which reason "we need to create a new style to express the new sentiment of life" (128). Menil cites Andre Gide's view that "no new thinking enter into the temple of art in borrowed robes" (128). Second, the "idea of pouring new content into an old form arises from a 'false dialectical appearance,' which makes the two *notions* of substance and form independent metaphysical entities" (128). Menil is of the view, by contrast, that "for anything that has concrete reality, substance and form are inseparable. (Without its stripes the zebra does not exist)" (128). The "idea of clothing new feelings in old forms" (128) is not an issue for Menil and co. but because "if the feeling is a reality qualified by the simple fact that we feel it at the moment, the old form, which is only a *notion*, is disqualified by the fact that it is, in comparison with the living feeling, only the emptiness of the conjurer" (128). Third, it is "within the new thing itself that, in a virtual state, the form of the newness lies" (128). The zebra, he says, "does not need to chase after its stripes" (128). Moreover, "form and substance are . . . one and the same thing; Form does not join substance on the outside; it is essentially inherent in it" (128). In the "poetic process, we are therefore waiting for thought itself to find its form, in other words for it successfully to complete itself" (128). Fourth, "*formlessness does not exist*. All that exists does so because of its form. . . . You cannot have a thought with no form, which would be the thought of nothing" (128-129). When

we call something 'formless,' Menil argues, it is usually a question of one's inability to find the "*fixed form*" you are seeking" (129).

Menil argues that culture "will develop through life (a period indistinctly seeks its expression, like an adolescent undergoing a crisis of maturity; an idea leads organically towards its form) rather than by an artificial overlapping of new thoughts in a ready-made style" (129). However, "if we define culture as the ordinarily fetishised tradition of earlier cultural works and forms" (129), it would not be surprising to find that "all truly new art affects, perhaps especially in the eyes of 'cultivated people,' the appearance of a barbaric style precisely because its newness negates the old formulas" (129). This is why a "whole population . . . can hanker after perfection" (129) even as they are "face to face with perfect works whose perfection is invisible because of its unwonted quality" (129). The "whole history of art lies in these misunderstandings" (129).

Menil turns his attention at this stage to the relevance of the musical art form of jazz to the conception of art which is advancing. The "essence" (129) of jazz is "improvisation" (129) which allows us "conceive of the *historical* character of substance and form within the work" (129): an

aesthetic derived from jazz would be a *Technique for creating beauty as you go along*. For jazz results from an approach constituted precisely by the jolts of life and its *style* is only an immediate investigation by music or any other means . . . of feelings and images as they appear in the mind. Any crystallisation, any indolent self-imitation, any hardening of life threatens the validity of our fragile formulation. . . . No detailed rhythm is fixed in advance. . . . No concrete content is preconceived. . . . No rhythm, no content except in the form of a *hunger for life*, a life delineated by, let's say, a passion that demands satisfaction, substitutively, by the sublimation of song. . . . The 'player' does not know and must not know what he will play next, what his next word will be, what his next adventure will be; yet he goes on, like an acrobat, across the tightrope of circumstance. . . . A beautiful work is a work of circumstance. (129)

Menil contends that the "age in which we live is poisoned by eternity" (129) and jazz is the "best means to purge it and re-create within us the meaning of the instant and of transition" (130). In "*actuality*" (130), Menil argues, is the found the "place of resolution of all human problems" (130). By the same token, "all human faults (aesthetic as well as moral or political) . . . stem from a certain oversight concerning the actuality of a particular age" (130).

Menil then attempts to correct a potential misunderstanding. He argues that "since Hegel it has been impossible to conceive of actuality except, in any becoming, as the ultimate outcome of this becoming that assumes the becoming" (130). Otherwise, Menil asks, "what would it be the actuality of?" (130). He stresses that, for this reason, "all the previous moments of this becoming lie within the actuality, since in a life 'what is surpassed at the same time remains conserved, having merely lost its immediate existence, but for all that it is not destroyed" (130). This is why the "actuality of a being is its present, but this present is that very being marked by the extreme temporal sign of its duration. For a living being, there is thus no irreconcilable contradiction between its present and its past" (130). There is "no antinomy between modernity and older works, between new (unconsecrated) works and culture. The latest work, however little . . . currently of value . . . supposes all the stages society has passed through" (130).

This is why the poet is not modern through rejecting or ignoring the past, but a dialectical sublation of its stages, which means at once a vibrant negation and a

conservation of previous cultural forms. And his modernity will be so much more complete and valid to the extent that he is fully aware of the past. (130)

If the "cultural tradition exists within the poet, it cannot be as a model (there is no model for that which is not yet born), but as the past which is entrusted within him and inflexibly situates him in time, making the modern man of a given age" (130). Menil defines "poetic necessity" (130) as the "whole past within you" (130), and "poetic liberty" (130) as the "indistinct future ahead of you" (130).

Menil then announces that he has engaged in these "abstract considerations about form and substance" (130) merely to "situate poetic activity in the Caribbean" (130). For modern and, more particularly, Caribbean poets, the "fundamental problem" (130) has not been "how they might refurbish poems endlessly reproduced from earlier times, but how to discover previously forbidden zones of the mind and of reality, in order to claim them for the poetic domain" (130-131). The problem is less one of "style" (130) than of "fresh territory" (131). Citing the pioneering poetry of Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Rimbaud, and Breton, Menil contends that the latter two in particular have given "us access to human regions whose existence was unsuspected before them" (131). The "poetic problem is for this reason that of the conquest of man by himself" (131). He asks:

is not our task, if we want to reclassify our place within humanity, in all necessity to devote all our effort to the discovery within us of a freshness able to bring forth a content worthy of being universally applicable in our lives? More than for anyone, the problem for us is not of form, but of a new element within us. (131)

One of the "most effective ways to bring about this renewal" (131), in Menil's view, lies in "surrealism as defined by [André] Breton in his Manifesto of Surrealism" (131): this method, founded on Freud's important discoveries, offers us the best means today in the psychological domain to bring to light the miraculous spoils of those tendencies, feelings and reactions that have been repressed in the Caribbean mentality by a particularly obnoxious psychological authority" (131)

He argues that an "analytical and historical examination of Caribbean mentality reveals that the present *superego* of the Caribbean people (formed . . . in the not-too-distant good old day of slavery) results from a triple process" (131):

First, a

traumatic repression of the way of life (African Totemism) of black slaves, which explains the pressure of secular anxiety which . . . overwhelms the collective consciousness in the Caribbean. (131)

Second, *the*

*establishment, in place of the repressed spirit, of the representative authority of the master in slave consciousness, an authority instituted at the heart of the collectivity and keeping watch over it as a garrison does over a conquered city. This explains the inferiority complex of the Caribbean people. (131)*

Third, a

return towards blackness, even in its aggressiveness which, unable to be manifested even slightly in a society founded on exceptional cruelty, returned to strangle its own consciousness. This explains the existence of a certain masochism among Caribbean peoples. (131)

All this

enables us to see that the critical mind of the Caribbean community could

not present any evidence to confirm the role as persecutor and morality that it plays in relation to our unconscious. It would therefore be incumbent on us to *listen*, within ourselves, scornful of that critical spirit, to grasp our physiologically most concealed voices. Bringing our gifts into the light could be effected thanks to the natural mechanism of *psychic automatism* granted its functional irresistibility. (131-132)

Surrealism, Menil reminds us by alluding to the dictionary definition, is the means by which one may "express (whether verbally, in writing or by any other means), *the real functioning of thought*. Dictation of thought in the absence of any control exercised by reason and beyond any aesthetic or moral preoccupation" (132).

Our "most urgent task" (132) is to "give content to our lamentably formal life" (132). The "style of that life must guarantee it a certain beauty already visible through the gap in the curtains" (132). Moreover, he argues, "if the content of our life is merely the result of our black anatomy, the style of this life can come only from the West, cast as we are into the current of French culture" (132). He adds this proviso, though: a "form encountering an alien content adapts itself, through the mysterious processes of life, to become one with that content and so itself necessarily changes" (132). This is why he claims that the

present situation of poetry in the French Caribbean can only be that of France: I mean that in its expression it can only be the extreme [ultimate] moment of an evolution whose landmarks are (to mention only arbitrarily the most significant) Racine, Hugo, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Breton. Each of these examples represents the surpassing and conservation of earlier moments. The Caribbean poet will be qualified on condition that he contains organically within himself these significant and indispensable stages of French poetic necessity cast by life. (132)

This, Menil contends, is "where Caribbean romanticism and its new conception of Creole beauty is to be found" (132). He defines Caribbean romanticism as a "cultural movement of the Caribbean people convulsively overwhelmed with consciousness of its own life" (132) and "effectively launched only in 1940 . . . through spontaneous poetic suggestion" (132) and predicated on "firm techniques arising from human sciences such as psychoanalysis, historical materialism and ethnography" (132). He concludes: the "key figure in this revolution was Aimé Césaire" (132).