

Such is surrealist activity, a total activity, which alone is able to free man by revealing his unconscious and among those that will contribute to people's liberation by illuminating the blind myths that have brought humanity to this point.

And now a return to ourselves.

We know our situation here in Martinique. Our human task is dizzily revealed to us by the arrow of history: a society tarnished in its very origins by crime and maintained today through injustice and hypocrisy, made to fear its development by an uneasy conscience, must – morally, historically and necessarily – vanish. And from among the powerful machines of war, the bombs and explosives, the modern world places at our disposal, our audacity chooses surrealism which currently offers it the best chance of success.

One result is already secured. Not for a moment during the hard years of Vichy domination did the image of freedom completely fade here, and surrealism was responsible for that. We are glad to have maintained this image of freedom under the noses of those who believed they had erased it forever. Their blindness was the result of their ignorance and they didn't see its insolent and aggressive laughter in our pages. When they did realize it, they became faint-hearted, scared and ashamed.

And so, far from contradicting, reducing or diverting our revolutionary attitude to life, surrealism gives it a focus. It nourishes an impatient force within us, ceaselessly maintaining the vast army of negations.

And I'm also considering tomorrow.

Millions of black hands will thrust their terror into the raging skies of world war. Delivered from a long slumber, the most disadvantaged of all peoples will rise up across plains of ashes.

Our surrealism will then deliver it the bread of its depths. Finally those sordid contemporary antinomies of black/white, European/African, civilized/savage will be transcended. The magical power of the mahouillis will be recovered, drawn forth from living sources. Colonial stupidity will be purified in the blue welding flame. Our value as metal, our cutting edge of steel, our amazing communions will be rediscovered.

Surrealism – the lightrope of our hope.

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The Situation of Poetry in the Caribbean

EVERY RENAISSANCE PUTS the old quarrel of substance and form back on the agenda. Every renaissance results, on the one hand, from a renewal of the substance of human realities that have become outmoded: ideas, feelings and acts. But, on the other hand, life so re-created must tend towards a new form and expression. Most people in a society in which such a transformation takes effect, nostalgically attached (as they gladly are) to the old style of life, will bad-temperedly debate the problem of the validity of the new life as well as its new expression.

It was thus predictable that the crisis of consciousness that, at this very moment, is in the process of upsetting Caribbean mentality – a crisis determined by historical evolution but also in part by how much consciousness we have assumed of its necessity and meaning – it was, as I say, predictable that, at a certain stage of its development, this crisis would lead of itself to the traditional quarrel. 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 in question, the old models and styles have been disqualified precisely because of their age. It is at this juncture that the agitated critical mind, on the margins of cultural criticism, gets exhausted in useless discussions and proposes principles that, as a good philistine, it draws from 'eternal reason'. It is pertinent – even if only to confirm the poet in his peace and quiet, for he writes poems in an age when the critical mind wonders if poems are possible – to establish some evidence in such a controversial matter as the balance between substance and form in the cultural work.

Let's not waste time refuting the reactionary nonsense so often made: 'It's too late, everything has already been said . . . ' as well as another equally widespread misconception that, if human realities change, at least the language in which they are expressed must be immutable: these two misrepresentations are sufficiently well disproved by the sequence of heterogeneous transitions that form the history of people. For my part, I believe it is possible to determine the following points which have the value for us of being both theoretical and practical

1. Every renewal of mankind brings with it a corresponding renewal of cultural expression.

It follows from this principle that we need to create a new style to express the new sentiment of life. 'In spite of André Chemier's precept

Let us form ancient verses on new thinking

I believe,' wrote André Gide, 'that no new thinking enters into the temple of art in borrowed robes.'

2. Besides, 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. Yet for anything that has concrete reality, substance and form are inseparable (Without its stripes the zebra does not exist.)

The idea of clothing new feelings in old forms would not occur to us for we know that 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.

3. It is within the new thing itself that, in a virtual state, the form of the newness lies. (The zebra doesn't need to chase after its stripes.) Form and substance are moreover one and the same thing. Form does not join substance on the outside: it is essentially inherent in it.

In the poetic process, we are therefore waiting for thought itself to find its form, in other words for it successfully to complete itself. This is what the idea of perfection really means once purged of the fetishistic prejudices of 'people of taste':

4. And for this reason, finally, the formless does not exist. All that exists does so because of its form. The formless is the void. You cannot

have a thought with no form, which would be the thought of nothing. Make care not to call something formless simply because you are unable to find a fixed form you are seeking.'

It would appear from these considerations that the cultural work self-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. On the other hand, if we define culture as the ordinarily fetishized tradition of earlier cultural works and forms, it would not amaze us 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. In the end, it is easy to understand how a whole population (of idle onlookers) can hanker after perfection face to face with perfect works whose perfection is invisible because of its unwonted quality. The whole history of art lies in these misunderstandings.

For us, the important phenomenon of jazz notably allows us, more certainly than any critical reflection, to conceive of the historical character of substance and form within the work, while ultimately conceding it only a so to speak instantaneous value.

The essence of jazz is improvisation. 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 (I can see how such an aesthetic might interest poetry in general) of feelings and images as they appear in the mind. Any crystallization, 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.

But who will believe that, in Goethe's words, the only durable works are those of circumstance?

The age in which we live is poisoned with eternity. Jazz has been one

of the best means to purge it and re-create within us the meaning of the instant and of transition. For our part, we do not hesitate to see in actuality, however poorly defined, the place of resolution of all human problems in this realm as well as others. In fact all human faults (aesthetic as well as moral or political) seem to us on analysis to stem from a certain oversight concerning the actuality of a particular age. But it is worth recalling, to avoid misunderstanding, 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. Otherwise, what would it be the actuality of? Consequently, 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? 2

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 except in the minds of those who like splitting hairs. Equally, in a social sphere there is no antinomy between modernity and older works, between new (unconsecrated) works and culture. The latest work, however little qualified it is (I mean currently of value), supposes all the stages society has passed through in the realm under discussion.

Thus the poet is not modern through rejecting or ignoring the past, but by 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.

Yet if the cultural tradition exists within the poet, it cannot be as a model (there is no model for what is not yet born), but as the past which is entrusted within him and inflexibly situates him in time, making him the modern man of a given age.

Such is poetic necessity: the whole past within you.

Such is poetic liberty: the indistinct future ahead of you.

These abstract considerations about form and substance are set down here only to serve as an introduction to these propositions which seem to us able to situate poetic activity in the Caribbean.

For poets the fundamental problem during the past century has rightly been not 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. The problem for them was not so much of style as of fresh territory. Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Rimbaud, Breton: the first two annexing the domains of evil and humour (which had previously been considered prosaic) to poetry; the latter two giving us access to human regions whose existence was unsuspected before them. It was discovered that the poetic problem is for this reason that of the conquest of man by himself. And this benefits us. For is not our task, if we want to reclassify our place within humanity, in all necessity to devote all our efforts 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.

One of the most effective ways to bring about this renewal, without the slightest doubt, is surrealism as defined by Breton in his *Manifesto of Surrealism*. 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. A particularly obnoxious psychological authority, we say: in fact an analytical and historical examination of Caribbean mentality reveals that the present *supererogo* of the Caribbean people (formed, let's not forget, in the not-too-distant good old days of slavery) results from a triple process. First, a traumatic repression of the way of life (African totemism) of black slaves, which explains the pressure of secular anxiety which, in the face of this world, overwhelms the collective consciousness in the Caribbean. 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. Third, a return towards blackness, even in its aggressiveness which, unable to be manifested even slightly in a society founded on an exceptional cruelty, returned to strange its own consciousness. This explains the existence of a certain masochism among Caribbean people. 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 moralist 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.

Let's recall: 'Surrealism: *n.* pure psychic automatism, by which one proposes to 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.'³

To give content to our lamentably formal life is the most urgent task. But the style of that life must guarantee it a certain beauty, already visible through the gap in the curtains. And we propose another principle: if the content of our life is merely the result of our black anatomy,⁴ the style of this life can come only from the West, as we are into the current of French culture. But let us also add that 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.

If we try to be as precise as we can, we would say that, from the technical point of view, 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 moment of an evolution whose landmarks are (to mention arbitrarily only 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.⁵

This is where Caribbean romanticism and its new conception of Creole beauty is to be found.

To sum up:

Caribbean Romanticism: a cultural movement of the Caribbean people convulsively overwhelmed with consciousness of its own life. Conceived in 1932 with the publication of *Legitime defense*, this movement was effectively launched only in 1940, in an extraordinary way, through spontaneous poetic suggestion. It was constantly oriented on firm techniques arising from human sciences such as psychoanalysis, historical materialism and ethnography. The key figure in this revolution was Aimé Césaire.

Notes

³ Gide: 'Any completely new appearance or thoroughly astounding form (of a sonata or painting) is soon declared formless, even though form is required by the awareness of the content.'

⁴ Hegel.

⁵ André Breton, 'Manifesto of Surrealism', in his *Oeuvres complètes*, no. 1 (Paris: Gallimard (my emphasis)).

⁶ I know! Caribbean people insist on being called mulattos in order to have the right to despise Africans. What would become of us, in this world made hierarchical in such a corrupt way, if there was no one to despise? How fortunate that Caribbean negroes have negroes who are more negro than they. So much the better! We are not excluding any style, something which, let us be clear, is to be avoided. Here I am defining a point of departure and not of arrival. As much should be self-evident.

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