Knowing Grasses:
Aimé Césaire’s ‘Cahier d’un retour au pays natal’
and Walt Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself’

By Robert Bray

Par de savantes herbes le temps glisse.
‘Through knowing grasses time slips.’
–Aimé Césaire, ‘Les pur-sang’

In 1955, just before he broke with the French Communist Party, Aimé Césaire entered into a mostly friendly exchange of views with René Depestre in the pages of the Présence Africaine. The topic was poetry’s role in fomenting world socialist revolution and especially what forms of poetry were required to accomplish this goal. Césaire maintained that truly revolutionary poetry came not from traditional metrical arrangement or rhyme or stanzas but from the poet’s mind and feeling: “The poetry of Rimbaud is not his stylistics; it is his revolt. The poetry of Whitman is not his verset, it is . . . his ‘great heart’.”

In a single sentence Césaire shrewdly disarmed the aesthetics of what French communist literary ideologues were demanding of poetry—onward and upward songs in rhyme and meter appropriate for proletarian singing—even as he declared that free verse and experimental forms were the ‘miraculous weapons’ that Whitman and Rimbaud had deployed to what they hoped would be revolutionary effect. At least since Romanticism it has been a commonplace that great poets’ ‘great heart[s]’ are always in revolt. But against what? Against tepid unblooded verse, certainly, but even more stridently against modern dehumanization and social and racial injustice. What Césaire said to Depestre in prose he lyricized in a complementary poem entitled ‘Le verbe marronnier.’ Poets worthy of their call should flee the metropolitan academy and its poetasters who spend their café days ‘polishing up sonnets,’ and go ‘marrooning,’ in Césaire’s famous coinage, running like escaping Caribbean slaves into the mountains, from which exalted and free perspective they might prepare the poetic revolution. For, as a poem ‘is not a mill for/ grinding sugar cane absolutely not,’ so in Césaire’s ars poetica ‘le fond conditionne la forme’—which I shall translate here as equivalent to Louis Sullivan’s famous architectural dictum, ‘form follows function.’ And we might also recall what Walt Whitman took to heart from his mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson: ‘it is not meters, but a meter-making argument that makes a poem.’

Rimbaud and Whitman mentioned in Césaire’s same breath of a sentence: why would he associate the two poets in his mind? Though close in literary chronology, they were distant in geocultural space and poetic affinity. Or so we would think. When it came to Césaire’s poetic genealogy, Rimbaud was of the fat part of the tree trunk from which Césaire in 1939 sent out a new lateral branch called ‘Cahier d’un retour au pays natal,’ whose leaves would reach for sunlight outside the umbrage of tradition. But what of Whitman, who was an American isolate and at least two generations removed from Césaire? We would not expect to read his name juxtaposed with Rimbaud’s—or for that
matter Baudelaire’s, Lautreamont’s, Mallarmé’s, or even St. John Perse’s—all poets in a direct line of descent to Césaire’s modernism and surrealism. But perhaps we should not be surprised. Whitman’s poetic reputation in France was, and is, second only to Edgar Allan Poe’s; and many of the finest French poets from the Symbolists on, took Whitman to heart, both in his free verse manner and his vaticism. Yet this considerable influence Whitman, from the other side of the Atlantic, heard about only distantly, if at all, though he would have been pleased by the homage and pleased to join his French anti-Parnassian brethren, had he known of their comradeship: and so there he hankers within that single sentence of Césaire’s: Walt Whitman, ‘one of the roughs,’ a ‘kosmos,’ ‘the friendly and flowing savage,’ an American appearing amidst the French as in one of his insouciant young manhood photos, right arm carelessly akimbo, right hip suggestively cocked, all unconscious of the oddity or the honor of being linked by an Afro-Caribbean poet to a French Symbolist poet in a Marxist argument with a Haitian poet about what politically responsible poetry should be and do to redeem the world.

Though the allusion to Whitman in the letter to Depestre is, so far as I know, Césaire’s sole reference to the great American poet—there may of course be others of which I’m unaware, and I hope there are—it is all the more tantalizing for its singularity. Taking Césaire’s reference as a provisional warrant, and relying on the well-established influence of Whitman on the French Symbolists of the late 19th century (see note 3 below), I shall be speculating that the young Martinican poet had in Paris found Whitman’s Leaves of Grass and its heart-poem ‘Song of Myself;’ had come to know them from his intensive study of British and American literature during the Paris years, 1931-39, having read Whitman both in English editions and French translations. But my riskiest guess is one that, lacking any confirmation from the poet, can only be inferred from the poems themselves: that as he composed ‘Cahier d’un retour au pays natal,’ Aimé Césaire had Walt Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself’ somewhere, consciously or otherwise, in some part of his integrative mind as a model poem from a kindred seer poet.

Before delving into ‘Song of Myself’ and ‘Cahier,’ some coincidences, textual and contextual:

‘Cahier’ and “Song of Myself” are firsts for their writers: 1939 and 1855.
Both are born apparently ex nihilo and yet were received at the time and continue to be read as astonishingly mature at nativity.
Whitman’s work appears accompanied by a birth announcement from the proud father in the shape of a preface elaborating the ‘original energy’ of the poem and its visionary individual, national and universal purpose: personal liberty and enlightenment, democracy and justice for all, to be achieved through surrender of the poet-voice to the creative demiurge and the boon brought back to humanity in the form of the inspired ‘Song,’ which like its singer will ‘contain multitudes’ and be serviceable as the sacred text of American democracy.

Césaire provides the ‘Cahier’ with a prose justification a few years after first publication in the essay ‘Poesie et connaissance’ (‘Poetry and Knowledge’), in which the poet of the ‘Cahier,’ now speaking as an intellectual stand-in for the Poet-Seer, announced (to an audience of philosophers!) that the purpose of poetry was to ‘rediscover the original creative capacity of the species. . .the precious vortex: ego, id, world. . . . The whole individual stirred anew by poetic inspiration. And, in a more disturbing manner, the cosmic whole as well.”
These are remarkably parallel artistic manifestoes.

What is more, both poems have outsized godfathers, Andre Breton, ‘the high priest of surrealism,’ for the ‘Cahier’ and Ralph Waldo Emerson, the ‘Sage of Concord’ and prophet of American Transcendentalism, for ‘Song of Myself.’ They vouch for the legitimacy of the children because poetic parentage is humble, irregular: who are these fathers, ask the authorities, and where are the mothers? Well, say Breton and Emerson, if you won’t accept the poems as self-created out of a mythic mother (earth) or as androgynes of art, then give way and we’ll come to the other side of the font and do the baptizing ourselves, in the name of ‘absolute literature.’

Over the next decades, the authors, like fathers worried about the manly health of their sons, reject the putatively perfect birth and revise, prune, graft, and otherwise train the poems in a vain effort to restrain them within the decorative trellis of verse, as if ‘Song’ and ‘Cahier’ would without tending grow rank and anarchic outside the book (which they would indeed, since that’s what organic forms do, animated as they are (in Whitman’s phrase) by ‘Nature without check and with original energy.’

In the 1855 self-published version of Leaves of Grass, ‘Song of Myself’ presents to an unsuspecting and unready world an untitled continuous poem of some thirteen hundred lines, heralded by its ‘I’ in very free verse, verse redolent of sensuous imagery, crammed with syntactic catalogs, salted with neologisms, foreign borrowings (including a number of sometimes deviant but interesting French adaptations), and an American vocabulary as exotic if not as learned as Melville’s—all in the service of an argument that pushes the law of contradiction to the brink of repeal. The 1855 ‘Song’ proceeds without section breaks, using white space and ellipses to indicate any divisions of thought—or rather the ellipses mark accumulations and metonymic associations, not omissions but sustained emissions, always more to come, all the way from the initial ‘I celebrate myself. . .’ to the final ‘I stop some where . . .’ (the high-circling ‘spotted hawk’ descends to complain of the voice’s ‘gab and loitering,’ urges him to get on with his ‘barbaric yawp,’ finish his messiahship ‘over the roofs of the world;’ and so the voice tells us in benediction: wait and watch: which is the commandment of the master, the ‘friendly, flowing’ and shape-shifting savage, that we, his élevés, not despair of his return, nor expect apocalypse, but proceed in our own good time toward the timeless reunion with our first parents, the earth and the sea, the earth and the sun). What Whitman later christened ‘Song of Myself’ was born genreless—neither epic nor lyric nor anything else a critic could hang a sign on. Its form was deliberately disguised as formlessness, as open-ended as waves washing rocks (‘to be in any form, what is that?’ asks the I-voice, and the question applies to whatever can take form, crystals, quahogs, humans, I-voices, poems.). Readers and critics have often classified the poem as this or that or, baffled, dismissed it as less than the sum of its parts. After nearly a century and a half, ‘Song of Myself’ remains sui generis—founding a genre though not deriving from one. And we are at last coming to recognize its elusive form: I believe that ‘Song of Myself’ is best read as what M. L. Rosenthal and Sally Gall identify as one of two 19th century precursors (the other being certain of Emily Dickinson’s fascicles) of what evolved into the 20th century ‘modern lyric sequence;’ that is, ‘a grouping of mainly lyric poems. . . rarely uniform in pattern, which tend to interact as an organic whole. . . . Intimate, fragmented, self-analytical, open, emotionally volatile. . . . [I]ts object is neither to resolve a problem nor to conclude an action but to achieve the keenest, most open realization possible.’
Now the parallels with Césaire’s ‘Cahier’: published in its first version in 1939 in the Paris review Volontés, the ‘Cahier’ is about the same length as ‘Song of Myself.’ It likewise in its infancy lacks a definitive title, is vagrant in its punctuation, undifferentiated by sections, even freer and noisier in its free verse. It has often been called—one suspects out of critical desperation—a prose poem, but among the ‘Cahier’s’ recent close-readers, Gregson Davis has helpfully accorded the poem the more formal and exact taxonomy of ‘a sustained lyric prose-poem,’ which seems perfect for ‘Cahier’s’ voice, tone, extent and power, and quite similar to Whitman’s ‘modern lyric sequence’ in ‘Song of Myself.’ As we might expect, given its French modernist grounding, the ‘Cahier’ is even riper in its surreal imagery and metaphor, calling attention to its word coinages, celebrating its oxymorons, sending French and English readers scurrying to their dictionaries. The poem is Whitman’s equal in the assurance of its capital-I annunciation, though clearly more oblique in its self-identification. Finally, though both ‘sustained lyrics’ culminate in apotheoses, Césaire’s is the more spectacular, an Elijah-like ascension on the wings of a dove.

The ‘Cahier’ is in no particular form but that in which it bound itself—or I should say in which Césaire bound it (none of this ‘automatic writing’ spiritualism, please)—because, to reiterate, for this poet, as for Whitman, ‘content conditions form.’ And the more fully organic the form of that content, the more the embodiment may appear formless. Thus with a similar arrogation of nature’s ‘original energy,’ the ‘Cahier’ embodies immanently the truth of nature’s power to affirm through regeneration (genesis of Négritude) and speaks (Négritude’s) truth in the face of the unnatural power of colonialism. This it does from the opening [no-nonsense] imperative to the night watchman (‘flic’) to get lost before he gets hurt, through the staggeringly strong catalog of ‘I hate...’ to the penultimate ‘I follow you’ in which the voice apostrophizes the rising Dove (Colombe) and the rising wind that bind him into the indenture of poetry. Both poets use birds, noticed in Martinique and on Long Island, of course, but also inherited from Romanticism: ascending Dove and wind are corollaries of Whitman’s many birds of the I-voice’s rite of passage into poetry; Césaire too is the ‘outsetting bard’ whose agonizing vision of his people and place has brought him from the suicidal despair of arrival, and the urge to destroy everything within the scope of his clairvoyant gaze, to the holy, myth-making vocation of the seer, both father and mother to the poem emerging from what Césaire’s friend and partner in Négritude, Leopold Senghor, called ‘a painful parturition.’ As Whitman’s vision led to the poetry of Democracy, Césaire’s imaginative return from the visionary to the mundane brings the sacramental boon of the poetry of Négritude (‘and the great black hole wherein I longed to drown myself the other moon—that’s where I now long to fish out the baleful tongue of night in its lustral stillness’ [Davis translation, 59].

Original stories, stories of origin

What is a ‘cahier’? It is a notebook, a journal, a bound, lined composition book such as college students still use today. There is a well-known and well-attested story about how Césaire came to begin his poem. He was on holiday along the Dalmatian coast, staying at the home of his Paris-met friend, Petar Guberina. One day, rising early, Césaire in a contemplative mood, he may have been homesick, was looking out on the Adriatic at an island in the distance. Later he asked Guberina what the island was called: ‘Martinska,’ he
answered, which was the equivalent of Martinique. So he was looking at a phantom of the home island. Césaire at once demanded pen and paper: no pens, but Guberina did have a pencil; no foolscap sheets, but there was a notebook. All right, Césaire said, bring me those. And he sat down to set down his ‘Cahier’ in his cahier.11

Walt Whitman had his notebook too, avade mecum: ‘On an off since about 1847 [Whitman] had carried with him’ a small notebook ‘bound in green boards with a leather backstrip and three leather loops along the side edges to hold a pencil.’ Sometime in 1854 he ‘began—for the first time, as far as anybody knows—to sound his voice over the roofs of the world. In Biblically cadenced, unrhymed verse he celebrated a psychic revolution: the single self happy merely to exist. . . .’ This was the genesis of ‘Song of Myself.’ We can imagine Whitman nooning in Brooklyn under a spreading oak, leaning against its great trunk, pencilling in the epochal opening lines: ‘I celebrate myself,/ And what I assume you shall assume,/ For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you./ I loafe and invite my soul,/ I lean and loafe at my ease. . . . observing a spear of summer grass’ (2).

When Whitman sent a copy of the 1855 Leaves of Grass to Emerson, the Sage of Concord, [already long-famous nationwide in the United States], responded enthusiastically, like a battle-wearied John the Baptist rejuvenated by the appearance at last of the young untried Jesus: ‘I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere. . . .’ Emerson saw in the book ‘incomparable things said incomparably well.’ In sum, Whitman’s Leaves was ‘the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed.’13 Glad of the praise as he was, Whitman the self-promoter and the proclaimed messiah, treated the testament as his due, as what we would call a blurb, tipping it in entire with the second edition of Leaves of Grass. Emerson, though miffed at this liberty and somewhat squeamish about the joyously sexual poems Whitman added later, remained a believer and a supporter: tut-tut he might and call for decorum; but repudiate, never: he had found his American Bard.

In another of those non-coincidences that make life into art, Andre Breton, as the familiar story goes, had discovered Aimé Césaire and the ‘Cahier’ not in France but outre-mer. In 1941, on his way to New York, he had been detained in Martinique by the Vichy government’s officials on the island. Freed from house arrest, he was strolling through the streets of Fort de France when he spotted a bright-yellow paperback in the display window of a millinery shop in Fort-de-France, Martinique. It was a copy of the latest issue of Tropiques, the number that contained the ‘Cahier.’ The sheer odds against the find no doubt added to Breton’s delight in the prose and verse. Soon he met Césaire and had from the author a copy of the ‘Cahier.’ After the war, Breton arranged a bi-lingual edition of the ‘Cahier,’ prefaced by himself, ‘the high priest of surrealism;’ ‘And it is a Black who handles the French language in a way that no White can handle it today. And it is a Black who guides us today into the unexplored. . . . And it is a Black who is not only a Black but all of Man, who expresses all human doubt, anxiety, hope and ecstasy, and who is ever more forcefully for me the prototype of human dignity.’14 A clarion tribute, to be sure, as was Emerson’s for Whitman. Yet one might just sense that the godfathers saw their charges, uneasily or with just a touch of condescension, as avatars of Dr. Johnson’s dancing dog: because unexpected, astonishing; because outre-mer, unprecedented.

But the dances Césaire and Whitman danced they choreographed in ungainly giant steps to their own shocking yet eurhythmic songs. For all the talk about ‘great hearts’ composing freely, of instrumentality of revelation, whether divine or unconscious, Césaire
and Whitman were *Meistersingers*. So ‘content conditions form:’ in no sense does this diminish the work of forming, which is artisanal and of the *last importance*. This is what is meant by ‘absolute literature,’ a phrase I take from Roberto Calasso’s *Literature and the Gods*: “Literature” because it is a knowledge that claims to be accessible only and exclusively by way of literary composition; “absolute” because it is a knowledge that one assimilates while in search of an absolute, and that thus draws in no less than everything; and at the same time it is something... freed from any duty or common cause, from any social utility."\(^{15}\)

In other words, poetry for its own sake, which is for myth’s sake. But wouldn’t both Whitman and Césaire object immediately and forcefully to this last characteristic of ‘absolute literature,’ that it is ‘freed... from any social utility’? The young poets, the ‘outsetting bards,’ yes: they really believed they could remake their worlds through poetry. The ‘good gray poets’ of forty and fifty years on, I’m not so sure: Césaire turned to politics and *did* change his world for the better; but Whitman, the optimist’s optimist, by the end of his life, lacking readers and unable even to place single poems in important American magazines, would have been forced against his good will to agree with W.H. Auden that ‘Poetry makes nothing happen.’ And, worse than his personal failure, the United States he left in the 1890s was a democracy but not democratic (not, that is, Whitman’s cherished Democracy).

What history makes into art may first accomplish its good progressive work. Césaire’s I-voice in the ‘Cahier’ asks, ‘What can I do?’ which is not so much a poet’s question as a reformer’s or a revolutionary’s. After all, ‘One must begin somewhere.’ And then another question, this one asked unrhetorically of the ‘I:’ ‘Begin what?’ And finally the ‘I’ once more, higher now in pitch and perspective: ‘The only thing in the world worth beginning: The end of the world of course.’ The old rotten order (ordure) shall be swept away like St. Pierre by Mt. Pelée in 1902. And with the marvelous figure of the ‘torte,’ the malnourishing, dessicate and poisonous ‘cake’ of the old world, Césaire compresses the negative All that he will annihilate in the volcanic blast of ‘ENOUGH OF THIS OUTRAGE!’:

Torte

   oh torte of the terrifying autumn
   where the new steel and the perennial concrete
grow
   torte oh torte
   where the air rusts in great sheets
   of evil glee
   where the sanious water scars the great
   solar cheeks
   I hate you (55)

A ‘torte’ (as most translators render the French ‘*tourte*’) is commonly thought of as a flourless dessert cake, most often chocolate, so decadently rich as to be called a ‘*bombe*’ in French. But this is the meaning of ‘torte’ in German, from which English borrows. A ‘*tourte*’ in French is typically a meat or fish pie, not a dessert, and I think that Césaire has in mind nothing sweet, still less nourishing, but a concoction out of necessity from the
leavings of colonial poverty. Consider the Haitian woman, sitting legs spread wide in the sun on the flat roof of an abandoned prison in Port-au-Prince, patiently making mud pies out of dirt, seawater, bouillon cubes and margarine. This will be actually be her family’s dinner—or really and surreally some Haitian family’s dinner—and it will seem filling to those who force it down (and bring it back up in cultural bulimia: ‘the morn crouching before bulimia’ [37]?). As mud pies are obviously mostly mud, so the eucharist of poetry when formed without Césairean ‘content’ into a mud ‘toure’ of a poem makes an obscene spiritual meal, not only unfulfilling but also horribly false in its self-representation as something nutritious, as the basis for a sustaining communion.

In the face of such a ‘reality,’ the poet who cares through poetry must take the surreal in life and language as given; he or she begins with word-acts of violent destruction: ‘je vous hais,’ and proceeds against moral outrage (‘scandalle’) with outrageous words, images, rhythms. Thereby the poet out-rages rage and carries the conflict outre-mer. Not the tables of the money changers in the temple but the table of the Last Supper must be overturned, then re-set for a new Meal. Through acts of ‘creative anger’ (Césaire’s own phrase for the motive force of the ‘Cahier’), the new world should be re-formed in the trinitarian image of sacrificer, sacrificed and resurrected. The ‘painful parturition’ of nativity, the excruciating passion, and an equally hard rebirth: all One Act of identification. From a more theoretical perspective (and in an extra-literary context), Edouard Glissant suggests a cultural cause for the strikingly different initial epic standpoints of Césaire’s and Whitman’s lyrics:

The conquered. . . peoples are. . . forced into a long and painful quest after an identity whose first task will be opposition to the denaturing process introduced by the conqueror. A tragic variation of a search for identity. For more than two centuries whole populations have had to assert their identity in opposition to the processes of identification or annihilation triggered by these invaders. Whereas the Western nation is first of all an ‘opposite,’ for colonized peoples identity will be primarily ‘opposed to’—that is, a limitation from the beginning. Decolonization will have done its real work when it goes beyond this limit.17

Sometimes we of the United States forget (or simply haven’t conceived) that we went through our own process of ‘decolonization’ during and after the Revolutionary War (two processes, in fact, when we consider that the emancipation of African-American slaves and the historical agony of the long road to racial equality was also a process of decolonization.) Whitman represents the ‘painful parturition’ of the United States and republican democracy through General George Washington’s suffering after the bloody and nearly cause-ending battle of New York. And Césaire has his own Afro-Caribbean historical parallel in the ‘Cahier’s’ splendid passage of remembrance of Toussaint l’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution (‘Haiti where negritude rose for the first time’ [47]).

At least at the world-making level, isn’t this the ultimate ‘social utility,’ the work of decolonization? Yes, but it is also ‘absolute literature’ in its liberation from any ideology
or practical plan other than that of the poet-seer’s seeing through to a ‘real’ identity that is not so much beyond as prior to what we commonly call ‘action.’ What needs to be conditions what needs to happen. Thus before anything should happen, something must be put absolute among the myriad contingencies of making identity. I believe Césaire would agree with Calasso that literature is that absolute which allows—no, requires—the terrifying motivation of ‘creative anger’ because such anger is purer than the hatred from which it is alchemized: hate violently expressed in ‘Words? Ah, yes, words!’ is already at the instant of first utterance become something else, something absolute: the illocutionary act ‘I hate. . .’, though as a transitive verb requiring some grammatical object, does not entail any further objective action in the ‘real world’: it is itself the job well done of Glissant’s incipient decolonization.

From a voice stuttering from hate (‘But who misleads my voice? who grates my voice? Stuffing my throat with a thousand bamboo fangs. A thousand sea urchin stakes. It is you dirty end of the world. Dirty end of the wee hours. It is you dirty hatred.’ [55]) the ‘Cahier’s’ I-voice moves in what Gregson Davis has neatly described as a musical rondo and a theatrical asking and unasking of trial identities. 18 Each turn moves through expression, insight, acceptance; each round brings voice and poem a little higher and closer to stability (what Davis calls ‘spiraling upward’). Higher is also deeper, as the lyric careens towards a shock of recognition: the I’s complicity in the very evil he hates, the confession of ‘the extent of his cowardice’ (in the vignette of the ‘COMICAL AND UGLY’ ‘nigger’ on the streetcar—the sleek Parisian black in his natty three-piece suit joins in the white laugh and is immediately, horribly ashamed [63]). The consequent suffering brings on a dark night of the soul. Not that a fully justified hatred of the anti-world—colonialism, racism, impoverishment—is reduced to self-hatred: but the I-voice, as in ‘Song of Myself,’ must recognize that while not the cause of Antillean misery he is nonetheless palpably implicated in it. Hence self-hatred, or perhaps we should name it self-disgust, is also a ground of the greater movement of the poem, for without such a crucial moral and psychological recognition, the seer-poet-I-voice could hardly be reborn into his vocation, nor would that vocation be legitimately of and for the people. And this is how the rondo ends, with the dramatically moving ‘J’accepte. . . j’accepte. . . entièrement, sans réserve. . . ’ in which the I-voice unconditionally embraces Négritude, then utters, chants, in the way of ‘Whitmanomanie’ (this is an actual French coinage by one of Whitman’s important French translators, Henry D. Davray 19) what we may call, I hope without straining the intertextual relation, a catalog of Négritude’s birth-pangs:

my race that no ablution of hyssop mixed with lilies could purify
my race pitted with blemishes
my race a ripe grape for drunken feet
queen of spittle and leprosy
my queen of whips and scrofula
my queen of squasma and chloasma (oh those queens I once
loved in the remote gardens of spring
against the illumination of all the candles of the chestnut trees!)
I accept. I accept.
and the flogged nigger saying: ‘Forgive me master’
and the twenty-nine legal blows of the whip
and the four-feet-high cell
and the spiked collar
and the hamstring of my runaway audacity
and the fleur de lys flowing from the red iron into the fat of my shoulder... (73).

Similarly, somewhere just past the mid-point of ‘Song of Myself,’ the I-voice launches a long flight over the world and into the universe, an imaginative flight for the reader but mystically real for the ‘I’ (and for Whitman?). He announces, ‘I am afoot with my vision,’ and with that he is off. Now ensues the longest catalog in the poem, indeed in any of Whitman’s poems, each item among the multitude that the visionary sees tagged with a preposition (‘over’), a subordinate conjunction (‘where’), or a participle (‘pleas’d). Overall, wherever he goes, he is pleas’d with the prospect, which is the always-recurring moment of the present that carries forward the United States’ foundational past. And though Whitman, like White-man generally, be sometimes vile in ‘the malady of the quotidian,’ the voice is even pleas’d to accept that vileness: he shoulders it optimistically, and carries the white-man’s burden along with all of the other sins of the (western) world:

All this I swallow, it tastes good, I like it well, it becomes mine,
I am the man... I suffered... I was there.

Why is he so hopeful? Because to the man-in-full, nothing is irredeemable. Ecce Homo, behold the man with the bloody crown of thorns (compare this to the image of a lynching from the ‘Cahier’: ‘–a dragged man on a bloodspattered road/ a rope around his neck/ standing in the center of a huge circus,/ on my black forehead a crown of daturas... What did he suffer, what accept as his own “Négritude”? [53]).20 Whitman’s catalog of observed, internalized human miseries comprises allegorized American types rather than Césaire’s Négritude-specific sufferers, and so the representation in ‘Song of Myself’ is more ikonic than personal: martyrs disdainful of death, mothers condemned and burnt as witches, hounded slaves, crushed firemen, dying generals, and on and on. ‘Agonies are one of my changes of garments;/ I do not ask the wounded person how he feels... I myself become the wounded person.’ And when all the pain is taken in, it is ‘jetted’ forth again, transfigured: ‘Distant and dead resuscitate,/ They show as the dial or move as the hands of me... and I am the clock myself” (58-60).

But this is, despite the objects of suffering made subject, a rather rarefied redemption: and the I-voice knows it. In a passage shouting its introit uncannily like Césaire’s ‘ENOUGH OF THIS OUTRAGE!’ Whitman snaps out of his cosmic identification, which has proved to be alienation:

Enough! Enough! Enough!
Somehow I have been stunn’d. Stand back!
Give me a little time beyond my cuff’d head, slumbers, dreams, gaping,
I discover myself on the verge of a usual mistake.

That I could forget the mockers and insults!
That I could forget the trickling tears and the blows of the bludgeons and hammers!

That I could look with a separate look on my own crucifixion and bloody crowning! (69)

Earth to Walt: come back, all will be well. And he does, and it is. His moment of illumination is close to Césaire’s: neither had really gone away (‘partir’). Whitman had all along been, to adapt Thoreau, been traveling a good deal in Brooklyn, in Jersey, on Long Island. Césaire’s imaginative return to the native land during the composition of the ‘Cahier’ is prefaced by an actual return in 1936 and then reenacted as the final return to Martinique from ‘academic exile’ in 1939 (ironically, neither the I-voice nor the ‘I’ behind the voice exactly wades ashore in a MacArthur-like triumph). The voice’s first act, standing before the Morne in pre-dawn Fort-de-France, is one of repudiation: he tells the cop who would ask his business to get lost if not to drop dead (and we can almost see the animistic decolonization of the island beginning); and then he ‘turned toward paradises lost for him and his kin. . . and there, rocked by the flux of a never exhausted thought I nourished the wind, I unlaced the monsters and heard rise, from the other side of disaster, a river of turtledoves and savanna clover which I carry forever in my depths. . . (35).’ This is another imaginative re-turning, since to face out from the Morne is to face the sea and to face in is to confront the ‘teratical’ (monstrous) hell of Martinique in the epitome of ‘the Morne crouching before bulimia. . . slowly vomiting out its human fatigue. . . . the famished Morne. . . this bastard Morne’ (37). So the visionary ‘looks’ beyond distressing reality, beyond ‘disaster,’ over the Morne’s horizon, prospectively, to gain an imaginative haven of relief, an apriori ideal (the literary absolute mentioned above) that is necessary before beginning the work of recovery. Yet the consolations of sentimental memory and the pastoralism of these ‘paradises lost’ are contextually counter-valenced by the image of a ‘venereal sun’ shining ‘night and day’ upon ‘the most arrogant houses’ and the ‘putrefying force of crepuscular surroundings’–more than counter-valenced, one feels after reading the lines aloud! Martinique just before dawn, except for the single ‘flic’ warned off by the anger of the black and mysterious stranger just landed, is deserted, dead; it is death; and worse: it is a crawling with the ‘teratical’ death of the undead.

If there is a whisper of consolation in this darkest of openings, it is that the ‘paradises lost’ of a ‘river of turtledoves and savanna clover’ are not irrevocably lost to everyone but will be imaginatively fulfilled hundreds of lines later in the complex figure of the rising Dove and rising wind at the end of the poem. The initial dramatic situation in the ‘Cahier’ is very different from that in ‘Song of Myself,’ owing mainly to the voices’ respective modes of identification at the moment they set out on their poetic quests. When asked the question, who are you? Whitman reflexively replies, I am you and you are me. He means this, on every level from the cell to the fond of the kosmos. The word ‘we’ in ‘Song of Myself’ occurs rarely; when it does it functions relationally, something like the Rastas’ ‘I-and-I.’ The problem then is not identifying with the other but somehow beguiling the other to identify with him in an act of melding or relation, in the sense in which Glissant speaks of Whitman’s ‘total poetics of Relation’–which according to Whitman is the natural order of things though the world has seemingly fallen into a confusion of divided selves and selves divided. In other words, Walt is perfectly healthy (‘I, now thirty-seven years old
in perfect health begin,/ Hoping to cease not till death.’) and as he shall show the world is only apparently ill and thereby redeem us from illusion. By contrast, Césaire’s initially alienated position demands sharp divisions of self from other. His voice, asked to produce its carte d’identité, in order to re-enter what should properly be his alone, says to the flic screw you, you are not me and though we are both human I am not you. It is ‘[M]oi seul’ or ‘moi rien que moi’ that stands beneath ‘ce morne batard’ without soul-mates to help him in his immense task of reclamation. For the pays natal really is diseased, and so is the voice (‘My dignity wallows in puke’), and from the same cause. Purge the infected self of the ‘vomit of the slave ships’ and the way opens to purging all the implications of the Middle Passage, the way opens, that is, to the triumphant ‘We.’

Even more than in their sometimes cognate voices, where the poems most deeply correspond is in their organicism: of form, as already noted, but likewise of matter—natural matter. Formally, we might say that the score of the ‘Cahier,’ after the forte of the ‘sit-down chord’ of ‘Beat it,’ moves from the surreal nocturne of the Morne, in a nightmarish minor-key, through a long crescendo, with increasing tempos (with variations appropriate to the going-round-coming-round of Davis’s rondo structure), to its climax in the ‘J’accepte’ section, followed by a gradual diminuendo all the way to the rising dove of the ending (here the orchestra is playing tutti but not loudly, the music sounding ecstatic but with brasses under control!). Opening as it does with a remembered summer morning, ‘Song of Myself’ at first sings quietly, sort of C-majorishly, as the voice loafes and invites his soul; then has its own extended crescendo, continuing the major-key optimism and inclusiveness, during the long visionary flight, the abrupt crash of which (‘Enough! Enough! Enough!’) is perhaps the only major minor modulation and dissonance in the poem; and finally the serene hushing apotheosis (doubly a lied von der erde) with which it concludes: ‘The last scud of day holds back for me,/ It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadow’s wilds,/ It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.’

To understand the organic topology common to ‘Cahier’ and ‘Song of Myself,’ we may begin simply by noting the abundance of natural imagery in the poems (a superabundance in the case of ‘Cahier,’ and one that includes geological and geographical features of the island). Whitman’s botany is more homely and limited than Césaire’s, based as it is on the grass, which he employs as his controlling each-in-all and all-in-each emblem of democratic self and society. Césaire delights in exotic flora with esoteric powers and meanings, such as the ‘clump of cecropia’ in the mouth of mother earth (more of this below). But the point of their use is the same: the poets gathered what they saw around them—herbs, weeds, flowers, shrubs, trees—on walks along dusty roads, or by the sea, or in woods or rain-forest. These they pressed into their verse to indicate the natural sources of their voices’ poetic power, which power in turn became the sacramental means of self-identification. When Whitman declares that ‘if nothing lay more develop’d the quahaug in its callous shell were enough,’ he affirms the élan vital that permeates creation and links him to all other life. In living at all, they live the same: the bi-valve quahaug filters nourishment from the sea-water that flows through it, while the considerably more evolutionarily developed poet ‘filter[s] and fibers’ the blood of whatever flows through him, which is everyone and everything (and it is fair to say that the voice is here speaking of the actual ontology of the democratic self, though the poet behind the speaker is stringing him along metaphorically). Césaire’s zoomorphia, on the other hand, is a vengeful nature ‘red in tooth and claw,’ consisting of the ‘unlaced. . . monsters’ of the
beginning of the poem, the ‘cynocephalus’ or dog-headed jackal (or ape), the ‘white hawk of white death’ and the man-devouring wolves of the middle, and the ‘white dog’ and ‘black serpent’ at the end. Unlike the prepotent plants gathered on walks, these are not the fauna of Martinique but of the poetic unconscious. Césaire’s speaker stands like the fabled beastmaster in the vortex of natural re-creation and commands his demi-mythic animals to assist in the regenerative violence, the centrifugal expulsion of evil from the deadened land. The gospel of the ‘Cahier’ is harsh, and not intended for just anybody: ‘Whoever would not understand me would not understand any better the roar of a tiger’ (45).

Whitman’s morning contemplation of the grass: ‘I loaf and invite my soul./ I lean and loaf at my ease. . . . observing a spear of summer grass.’ Inviting ‘you’—which comprises everyone and perhaps every being—to join with him, telling no one to get lost, not even the detestable ‘flics.’ ‘Song of Myself’s’ I-voice cleaves to the other, dissolving it in Glissant’s ‘Relation,’ where the ‘Cahier’s’ cleaves the other from itself as a necessary separation prior to identification. Whitman would bring us all to salvation through himself: Christ in Majesty; Césaire holds out for justice: Christ in Judgment. Whitman moistens creation’s clay to remold nature’s sundered whole: the artist’s will insisting all the while that the split in the universe is apparent not real. Césaire grinds tectonic plates together, that in the ensuing earthquake, fire and flood there may be purgation: his artist’s will reforges ‘les armes miraculeuses’ from the iron ashes of the leveled Morne and the indefinite battle resumes.

It may well be that these do not sound like kindred poems, no matter how hopefully I have tallied similarities of ‘verset’ and voice. Yet great poetry will often react to past greatness, when it does not simply redact the previous text (‘make it new’). Did Aimé Césaire’s voice in the ‘Cahier’ accept at last that ‘a kelson of the creation is love’? And would Walt Whitman’s accept Négritude’s ‘bitter brotherhood,’ the necessity of ‘creative anger’ in poetry as in social revolution? In the end, if there is an end, does the one’s chiding, hunting hawk become the other’s rising dove? Does hawk strike and devour the dove; or do they become emblems on the same flag; or do they pass in dignified recognition and mutual possession of the Word?

But less metaphysically where do the poems meet? In a dithyrambic exaltation of the male body? What initially bothered Whitman’s first French readers was not only what they regarded as prurience but even more what they rightly saw as his forthright rejection of Cartesian dualism. ‘I am the poet of the body and of the soul’ and neither was to be above the other, though if he ‘worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread of [his] own body’ and the electric sexuality that plays like small lightning along the skin and flashes translucently beneath the skin. An early English critic was outraged at what he termed Whitman’s ‘ithyphallic audacity,’ and indeed the voice could be brazen—‘Copulation is no more rank to me than death is—’ and Dionysiac ritual poetry, though never rising to a frenzy, is assuredly present in Leaves of Grass. The phallus exalts itself too in the homoerotic, in oral and anal sex, male-male sex, as the natural complement of heterosexual intercourse. This is more nearly explicit in ‘Calamus’ and ‘Children of Adam,’ sections of poems added later (and which caused Emerson to flinch in his advocacy of Whitman). But in ‘Song of Myself’ male-male sexuality is mostly euphemized rather than trumpeted: ‘Through me forbidden voices,/Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil’d and I remove the veil,/Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur’d./I do not
press my fingers across my mouth,/ I keep as delicate around the bowels as around the
head and heart’ (39).

The I-voice’s mystical vision in ‘Song of Myself’ begins with an erotic union
evoked–narrated, dramatized, lyricized–in some of the most seductive (and notorious) lines
in all of American poetry:

Loafe with me on the grass . . . loose the stop from your throat,
Not words, not music or rhyme I want. . . not custom or lecture,
not even the best,
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valvèd voice.

I mind how we lay in June, such a transparent summer
morning;
You settled your head athwart my hips and gently turned over
upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your
tongue to my bare-stript heart,
And reached till you felt my beard, and reached till you held
my feet (8).

Homo? Hetero? Auto? Yes: the archetype of all-gendered and all-engendering sexual
union. Readers have long wondered at and wondered about this ecstatically beautiful
passage. Its transporting eros is all of the above and, characteristically, together not
separate. The ‘you’ is the I-voice’s soul, seduced by the body; yet the soul it is that makes
love to the body! And what a love! ‘Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and joy
and knowledge that pass all the art and argument of the earth’ (8). The sexual communion
of soul and body completes the I-voice’s being near the very beginning of the poem
and brings the orgasm that launches being-in-full broadcasting, radiating outward. Completion,
depletion, repletion: all will be well, even the darkness of apparent evil: the ‘prurient
provokers’”gang-rape of the bewildered voice out ‘on the headland’ (Section 28), the ‘I’
humiliated, violated, abused but finally recognizing complicity: desiring touch, ‘I went
myself first to the headland. . . . my own hands carried me there.’

Is there any parallel to this eroticism in Césaire’s ‘Cahier’? Phallic celebrations, to
be sure, but if the poem has its homoerotic moments, they are less ‘out’ than in Whitman,
more carefully coded:

At the end of the wee hours,
the male thirst and the desire stubborn,
here I am, severed from the cool oases of brotherhood
this so modest nothing bristles with hard splinters
this too safe horizon is startled like a jailer (45-7).

This is unlikely to be a homoerotic cryptogram; it may even be silly to insinuate as
much. But however deployed there is plenty of male erotic energy in the ‘Cahier.’ Like
Whitman’s, Césaire’s voice is fascinated by the ‘Urge and urge and urge, Always the
procreant urge of the world’ and determined to harness it for poetry. Eros is the anarchic
kosmic energy of procreation, symbolically expressed in and from the phallus. But as the passage above may be insinuating, the phallus in the beginning of the ‘Cahier’ is dry, flaccid. Because the I-voice of the ‘Cahier’ is so to speak ‘running on empty’ at the outset of the poem (or draining the negative fuel of hate which is in any case the opposite of Whitman’s complet), he will have to recall nature’s power to himself, which, given his initial state of impotent anger, is hard to do, but which, done, will lead to renewal through intercourse, conception, parturition. Inversion: if the I-voice is to inseminate a new world, nature (mother nature, earth) will have first to inseminate him, as he beseeches her in these roiling, boiling-over lines:

. . . I would have words vast enough to contain you earth
taut earth drunk earth great vulva raised to the sun
earth great delirium of God’s mentula
savage earth arisen from the storerooms of the sea a clump
Cecropia in your mouth earth whose tumultuous face I can
only compare to the virgin and mad forest which were it
in my power I would show in guise of a face to the
undecking eyes of men all I would need is a mouthful of jiculi milk to
discover in you always as distant as a mirage–a thousand times more native and
made golden by a sun that no prism divides—the earth where everything is free
and fraternal,

my earth (45).

The earth’s seeking quim raised toward the sun, toward God’s penis; earth ready to
receive, with ‘a clump of Cecropia’ in her mouth, ready to conceive and give birth to the
autochthonous founder (half snake, half man, as the founder of Athens, Cecropes, was said
to have been) of New Martinique. What would it take for the I-voice to possess ‘words vast
enough to contain you earth’—that is, to show her forth in poetry, ikons of the ‘virgin and
mad forest. . . show[n] in guise of a face to the undeciphering eyes of men,’ or to discover
and overcome the ‘distant mirage’ of a land made golden ‘by a sun that no prism divides,’
an ‘earth where everything is free and fraternal, my earth’? It would take an act of
generation, of course, generation of the fatherless and self-fathering autochthon, but also
his nurture after birth: ‘a mouthful of [mysterious] jiculi milk’ suckled from mother earth’s
dugs is all that is asked. The ‘jiculi’ is a Césairean botanical coinage that the poet himself
has said he adapted from ‘jiquilite,’ a variety of indigo planted on San Salvador—the first
landfall of Columbus (Colombe, Colon, ‘dove,’ ‘colonialist’!) (401). But why this ‘milk’
and how could it be so potent as to constitute the I-voice’s ‘all I would need’?

Mother’s milk from an indigo plant: possibly that’s just what surrealists do. Or. . .
. . ? One wonders how cute to get with this, but then one should likewise never
underestimate Aimé Césaire’s botanical esoterica. So here follows a little bit of surrealistic
criticism: indigo is a dark-blue dye, a deep-dyed dye (permanent, unfading) that was an
important commercial crop until, in the 20th century, it was chemically synthesized and,
like so much else in the colonial tropics, the market died and the crops dried. But in its
heyday it was made—in the place of its growing—by fermenting the macerated plants in
water until the clear colorless essence of indigo emerged; stir this liquid and oxidation
turning indigo blue. But lexically the color ‘indigo’ is also dark-gray-red-purple, that is to
say, black. And, taxonomically, the name ‘indigo’ is given to two other closely related genera, \textit{amorpha} and \textit{baptisia}. So the fermented indigo becomes ‘jiculi milk,’ mother earth’s nourishing intoxicant, a black milk that baptizes the formless (amorphous) into form, life, Word. \textit{Voilà le poète!}

The ‘Cahier’ opens ‘just before dawn,’ a ‘liminal’ time in the diurnal round (as Davis has noted), when dark and light do not so much contend as merge and the potential for change is actualized. As I read this opening, the atmosphere is palpably anxious, portentous, which is why I would say in English ‘just before dawn’ rather than the unidiomatic and jejune ‘at the end of the wee hours’ of the standard translation.\textsuperscript{24} The voice shouting at the Morne in stands solitary in the lightening darkness, and we know that even over this dystopian landscape the sun will rise. It may prove blackly cancerous and ultra-violent when it does—‘sun cutthroat’—‘soleil cou coupé’—but the adjuring, conjuring poet can somehow put the god right with the world, restore the old sun of inseminating light. Thus does Whitman’s ‘transparent summer morning’ has its double in a wonderful passage that occurs at about the mid-point of the ‘Cahier,’ right before the ‘negative definition’ of Négritude:

\begin{verbatim}
under the reserve of my uvula there is a wallow of boars
under the grey stone of the day there are your eyes which are a
shimmering conglomerate of coccinella
in the glance of disorder there is the swallow of mint and broom
which melts always to be reborn in the tidal wave of
your light
Calm and lull oh my voice the child who does not know that the
Map of spring is always to be drawn again
the tall grass will sway gentle ship of hope for the cattle
the long alcoholic sweep of the swell
the stars with the bezels of their rings never in sight will cut the
pipes of the glass organ of evening zinnias
coryanthas
will then pour into the rich extremity of my fatigue
and your star please from your luminous foundation draw
lemonian being—of man’s unfathomable
sperm the yet undared form


carried like an ore in woman’s trembling belly! (67)
\end{verbatim}

There are so many apostrophes in the ‘Cahier,’ and so many second-person pronouns without proximate antecedents, that it is sometimes very difficult to say confidently what or whom Césaire is addressing. The context of this passage unfortunately does not make the reference clear. I would venture that the quoted lines form the central section of an extended apostrophe to light, one that modulates through cognates of imagery and metaphor—‘tepid dawn,’ illumination of the self from within, sun and moon, ‘grey stone of day,’ ‘tidal wave of light,’ stars and ‘you star,’ ‘oh friendly light’ and ‘oh fresh source of light.’
The dramatic situation of the passage is also obscure, though I believe it is comparable to the ecstatic encounter of self and soul in ‘Song of Myself.’ The line preceding the quoted extract reads: ‘let the wolves come who feed in the untamed openings of the body at the hour when my moon and your sun meet at the ecliptic inn.’ This is the auspicious hour of union. ‘[Y]our sun’–the sun, that is, which emerges from ‘tepid dawn’–violently mating with ‘my moon.’ But what is the moon’s correlative? It is the voice’s voice, ‘[c]alm and lull [berce] oh my voice.’ Whitman’s ‘I,’ speaking as the body to the soul, had hushed his lover from speech, desiring sound alone: ‘Only the lull I like, the hum of your valvèd voice.’ The parallel is clearer in Whitman: when the child asks the voice ‘what is the grass?’ he can answer out of illumination, the marriage of music and light, through a lullaby [berceuse] of sounds become words and words become emblems (‘I guess it must be the flag of my disposition’ or ‘the handkerchief of the Lord,’ or ‘the beautiful uncut hair of graves’–but always and everywhere a ‘uniform hieroglyphic’ (9-11). Césaire puts his voice’s voice in apposition to ‘the child who does not know that the map of spring is always to be drawn again’ (67); we cannot tell from this whether the voice’s voice is speaking to the child or is that child. Assuming the former, Césaire’s child too wants to know something, and the poet, likewise illuminated, reveals it: ‘the map of spring is always to be drawn again’ and ‘the tall grass will sway [as a] gentle ship of hope.’ Union, illumination, lulling voices, children: the least we can say is that the commonalties are striking. What is the most we might say about the brotherhood of Whitman and Césaire?

Their kingdoms come will be human and here and now, earthly; not divine and then and elsewhere, heavenly. Nonetheless, the poets flirted with the temptation of situating their surrogate I-voices on god’s right hand (or in Whitman’s case, of displacing god altogether from his throne). In the 1939 ‘Cahier’ Césaire, according to A. James Arnold, ‘included numerous specifically Christian references and at one point presented his speaker as a martyr.’ Césaire excised most of the Christianity from later editions of the poem (as the good communist he had become would have had to), though he left in a memorable passage–more nostalgic than ironic, more social than religious–evoking a Catholic Christmas in impoverished Martinique, including chants from the Kyrie of the Mass [39-41]). To revise is not always to suppress, however, and Césaire’s pentimento shows through his overpainting. The ‘Cahier’ as we read it today remains capaciously religious. In addition to its Catholicism, the poem enfolds western and eastern mystical and prophetic ways, along with African and Afro-Caribbean modalities (the rhythmic drum refrain, ‘Voum rooh oh. . . voum rooh oh’; the Vodun conjuring, the flying sorceress, and, not least, the tropical herbarium–all the powers of ‘Martinique, the snake-charmer’ (as Breton called her), possessing the snake-handling I-voice, impelling the hope ‘that the promised times may return’ [53]). What good had the Catholic Church been to the Afro-Caribbean peoples? The Kyrie’s call for this-world mercy had gone unanswered for four hundred years; but the invocation of animistic nature promised local healing, or at least surcease of pain, and brought forth poet and prophecy and the apocalyptic expectation of fulfillment for a people whose dreams had long been not so much deferred as denied.

The last movement of the ‘Cahier’ opens with what the voice calls his ‘virile prayer,’ an extended passage of intense and dynamic lyricism that beseeches an inflow of creative power. But beseeches what or whom? According to Gregson Davis the ‘virile prayer’ is voiced by a ‘hierophant who also has prophetic powers,’ in a ‘conciliatory’ tone intended
to reconcile opposites, a ‘peoples’ work’ or liturgy that ‘simultaneously solicits and affirms the need for both creation and destruction. . . .’ This is cogent. Yet it still does not identify the addressee of the prayer. Though Davis notes a subsequent ‘dialogue with his own no longer divided self’ (‘mon coeur’), in fact the prayer has from its beginning been to the speaker’s heart rather than to any divinity, transcendent or mundane, outside himself:

... and as for me, my heart, do not make me into a father nor a brother, nor a son, but into the father, the brother, the son, nor a husband, but the lover of this unique people (71).

As I understand the ‘virile prayer’ to the speaker’s heart, the self-empowerment that Davis senses is quite close to Whitman’s illumination out of the marriage of body and soul: the invocation of Africa (Négritude) is like the invocation of Democracy: both commence from a realization within: the ‘transfiguration’ Davis so aptly describes in Césaire’s voice occurs when the heart answers the incomplete self’s prayer, when the heart confers (imparts, accords, inseminates) a benevolent, universal morality upon the animal will and intellect of the subject of injustice and inhumanity. There is now much for both poets’ voices to accept everything, including death; but now they are fully capable of such acceptance. Whitman says, ‘there is that in me, I do not know what it is, but it is in me;’ Césaire, more strenuously, says, ‘Suddenly now strength and life assail me like a bull and the water of life overwhelms. . . ’(77). Both completed, fulfilled selves are at last prepared to command a pre-Copernican mythopoetic universe: ‘we know now that the sun turns around our earth lighting the parcel designated by our will alone and that every star falls from sky to earth at our command’ (77). And both poets strut their stuff in the music and dance of a kind of Renaissance humanism hitherto denied to the oppressed and the common and the new: voicing the sun to shine equally or be damned.

For his part, Whitman could afford not to reveal his itching personal dislikes—say, his anti-clericalism—because he pitched his I-voice so far above and beyond institutions. ‘What blurt is this about virtue and about vice?/ Evil propels me and reform of evil propels me.’ He knows ‘perfectly well’ his own egoism in ignoring formal religion in favor of the thing-in-himself, the religious personified. ‘I do not despise you priests, all time, the world over,’ he says, slyly patronizing generations of employees of the institution called ‘church.’ But the kosmic point is content (and I note here Césaire’s emphatic statement: ‘what interests me is content’), which is a function not of ‘Sermons, creeds, theology’ but of ‘the fathomless human brain,’ not of ‘the panorama of the sea. . . but the sea itself’ (77-79). Whitman’s Christian critics were predictably appalled by what they took to be his pantheism; Césaire’s animism is equivalent, and also, when we place the word in the aesthetics of sublimity, properly appalling.

One could adduce textual parallels time and again until, for even patient readers of this essay, both ‘Song of Myself’ and the ‘Cahier’ collapsed into one undifferentiated poem. Tit for tat: Césaire has his hymn to the earth, Whitman has his (‘Smile O voluptuous coolbreathed earth!’ 32); Whitman intones what is owing his body, what his body owes, with the beating refrain, ‘it shall be you’ (‘Root of wash’d sweet-flag! timorous pond snipe! nest of guarded duplicate eggs! it shall be you! (39); Césaire replies with an assertion of ‘what is mine:’ everything: ‘not an inch of this world devoid of my fingerprint’
One’s hubris says ‘I know I have the best of time and space, and was never measured and never will be measured,’ and (87); the other’s answers, ‘Put up with me. I won’t put up with you!’

And so on and on, a fanciful clash of titans which is really camaraderie, ‘free and fraternal,’ on their earth: all of which would prove no more than my perverse persistence in joining together what history and time have put asunder. To put a stop to such compiling, let the texts speak one last time in call-and-response, with what seems to me to be the most striking affinity of all, one that shows how hugely heroic the poems’ I-voices are intended to be. The ultimate measure of a western hero’s height and depth and force is relative to the sun; and not surprisingly both ‘I’s’ both love the sun and surpass it (him?) In the ‘Cahier,’ recall the kosmogonic sexuality of the sun and the paean to ‘ancestral dawn’ discussed above; yet withal, near the end of the poem, Césaire’s ‘I’ can assert that ‘the unequal sun is not enough for me’ (83). Potent as it is, god-of-gods, the sun is a means. Words from D. H. Lawrence’s *Apocalypse* (1931) spring to mind: ‘What we want is to . . . re-establish the living organic connections with the cosmos, the sun and earth, with mankind and nation and family. Start with the sun, and the rest will slowly, slowly happen.’

Césaire and his voice do ‘start with the sun:’ from ‘just before dawn’ to midday and beyond the ‘Cahier’ will employ the sun in his reshaping of the world; but the sun, as father, procreator, is ultimately necessary but not sufficient for the epic work of world-making (what is sufficient, we should remember, is the drink of jiculi milk from the teats of the earth, so that which is of the earth, maternal, is what moves in the I-voice: transcendence is for action, not action for transcendence). Similarly, ‘Song of Myself’ more than once praises the sun, ‘not’—and here I import a line from Wallace Stevens’s ‘Sunday Morning’—‘not as a god but as a god might be.’ Yet the ‘I’ with a son’s presumption takes the measure of the father-sun and declares his new young self sound even in the face of Ra: ‘Dazzling and tremendous how quick the sun-) rise would kill me, / If I could not now and always send sun-rise out of me’ (41). Finally, in this connection, we may note that the two principal attributes of the Egyptian representation of Ra, the sun-god, are conferred one each on the I-voices at the end of the poems: the image of the hawk on Ra’s head for Whitman, and the uraeus, or sacred serpent of Ra for Césaire.

Césaire’s male Martinicans gather in the late afternoon of ‘midsummer’s day’ on the ‘Rue De Profundis’ to horse-trade. The name of the street, the I-voice observes, is ‘at least honest enough to announce an onrush from the shoals of Death’ (61). From the depths, a grave sound in the bass: harness the sun like ‘A fine horse difficult to mount,’ or the sun will go down and all of us with it into death. In *Moby-Dick* (1851), Herman Melville’s Captain Ahab was the Manichean dark foil to Whitman’s ever-optimistic and sun-drenched Walt. Yes, to the Captain of the *Pequod* the sun was also a god, perhaps God, but that was the problem: Ahab snarls in tragic rage when he blasphemes before a shocked Starbuck, ‘I’d strike the sun if it insulted me!’

Why intrude Melville and Ahab into an account of two natural lyric optimists? Because Melville presciently drew in Ahab the prototype of the totalitarian wielder of power. If C. L. R. James is right when he asserts that Ahab represents ‘the most dangerous and destructive social type that has ever appeared in Western Civilization,’ the model for Hitler and Stalin, and that Melville alone among 19th century artists and intellectuals had been able to foresee the dire social consequences of such a monster, then it is important to point out that Whitman and Césaire stood (and stand) heroically opposed to Melville’s
world-withering pessimism; in their poetry and comportment they held out against the ravening will of Ahab, and for the equal possibility of a beneficent will-to-power in human affairs. In other words, both tried to live the lives they made ideal in poetry; and neither did so naively or without effect.

Though James compares Whitman invidiously to Melville, faulting the former for his lyric individualism so uninformed by (Marxian) history, for, in James’s contemptuous words, all his ‘hoarse-voiced shouting . . . about democracy . . . ,’ we must remember that this individual acted in good social faith. As a nurse in the Civil War, Walt Whitman did what he could to lessen the pain of the wounded whom he tended, even when the soldiers were too far gone to return to health, in which hundreds of cases he helped make them easier, consoled the dying boys with gentle words and his all-too-human touch. As a social builder of post-colonial community in Martinique, Aimé Césaire, the half-century-long mayor of Fort-de-France and delegate to the French National Assembly, has shown himself entirely on the side of Whitman’s positive, democratic angels. The ‘creative anger’ of the ‘Cahier’ was the raw material of Césaire’s political ‘apprenticeship,’ as he himself termed it. That force long ago sublimated into an even greater one of optimistic energy, poetically and politically applied to the process of ‘good decolonization.’ Just as, however, one may react to Whitman and his verse as too good to be true, and so scrutinize author and text almost forensically for traces of crimes said not even to have been committed, let alone covered up, so may we be forgiven if we imagine Césaire the poet, in his darker (whiter) aspect as Leviathan, exulting in at last having dispatched the colonial Pequod to the bottom of the Caribbean Sea, while simultaneously through his lighter (blacker) self representing Ishmael expelled from the vortex, floating in his coffin-shaped island, a single, separate person alone left to tell the tale—which begins the world again, en-masse.

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NOTES


3 See Oreste F. Pucciani, *The Literary Reputation of Walt Whitman in France* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1987 [1943]). And virtually all the French Symbolist poets, Rimbaud included, were influenced by Whitman. See also Betsy Erkkila, *Walt Whitman Among the French* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), especially Ch. 2: ‘[Rimbaud’s] *Une Saison en enfer* and *Illuminations* are sufficiently similar to *Leaves of Grass* in theme and technique to suggest that Rimbaud had the great American poet in mind when composing these works’ (63).
There is another route by which Césaire may have come to Whitman. During his Paris years Césaire read widely among the poets, playwrights and novelists of the Harlem Renaissance, whose works were available in both French and English editions. Among those he mentioned by name as having an impact on him, Claude McKay and Langston Hughes were the most important. And Hughes owed a particularly large debt to Whitman—for the gift of an inclusive, democratic, trans-racial voice if not for the father-poet’s large rhetorical free verse. See René Depestre, ‘An Interview with Aimé Césaire’ (1967), in Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, Joan Pinkham, trans. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 71.

Arnold, 56.

Except where otherwise noted, all references are to the 1855 text of ‘Song of Myself,’ as reprinted in James E. Miller, Jr., ed., *Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself’—Origin, Growth, Meaning* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1964).


Kaplan, 202-3.


Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, Betsy Wing, trans. (Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997 [1990]), 17. Applying Glissant’s concept of identification to Whitman as well as Césaire may help us understand why there is no posited ‘other’ in ‘Song of Myself,’ since ‘American’ identity is founded on the myth that pre-national colonists colonized an empty land. The ‘American Revolution’ was therefore, at least mythically, a struggle of natural rights and freedom against an oppressive foreign power, not a war of conquest against native Americans with those same rights and a prior claim to the ‘property’ that was euphemized as ‘pursuit of happiness’ in the Declaration of Independence. The westward expansion of the new nation continued and strengthened this myth of rightful possession and identity [vide Frost’s ‘The Gift Outright’ read as
sacred text at the John F. Kennedy inauguration in 1961]. For several centuries after the ‘discovery’ of America, indigenous peoples could be indefinitely and extra-legally pushed back into new empty western land; they were thereby not so much discounted as a confronted but inferior ‘other’ as not even recognized, that is, identified. Simultaneously, chattel slavery in the South was similarly mythologized in United States culture, though the ‘peculiar institution’ proved, after the Declaration and the Constitution, much more intractable in the agon of establishing ‘American’ identity. Whitman was too large, too gifted a poet merely to ‘discount’ or not recognize the blight on unopposed identity that slavery cast. His poetic solution to this problem was characteristically optimistic: inclusion of slaves as people and as Americans well before there was a revolution based on ‘opposition’ that began the protracted process of making transplanted Africans and their generations of descendants what Whitman in 1855 poetically insisted they ‘by nature’ already were, Americans.

18 Davis, 22-24.

19 Pucciani, 141.

20 The datura, also known as the thorn apple, is a strong-scented, sometimes poisonous shrub whose flowers dessicate into thorny knobs.

21 Césaire went back to Martinique during the summer of 1936, his first visit since leaving in 1931. Ronnie Leah Scharffman, Engagement and the Language of the Subject in the Poetry of Aimé Césaire (Gainesville FL: University of Florida Press, 1980), 29.

22 Glissant, 34. Glissant’s ‘Poetics of Relation’ seem to me consistent with what Calasso means by ‘absolute literature:’ ‘the poetics of Relation remains forever conjectural and presupposes no ideological stability. It is against the comfortable assurances linked to the supposed excellence of a language. A poetics that is latent, open, multilingual in intention, directly in contact with everything possible’ (32).

23 Quoted in Pucciani, 30.

24 ‘Au bout du petit matin . . . ’ This opening and oft-reiterated phrase of the ‘Cahier’ has been variously (and incompatibly) translated into English. Here are versions from four of Césaire’s most important critics and translators (all mentioned or cited in the text and notes of this essay):
- At the end of the wee hours. . . . [Eshleman/Smith]
- At the brink of dawn. . . . [Rosello/Pritchard]
- At the end of early dawn. . . . [Davis]
- Shortly after dawn. . . . [Kestlelloot]

My own rendering, ‘Just before dawn. . . .’ is, I believe, more idiomatic in American English and indicates the actual ‘time of day’ Césaire had in mind.

25 Arnold, 31.

26 Davis, 51-2. The Greco-Latin root meaning of ‘liturgy’ is ‘peoples’ work.’ My thanks to Kristen Mahlis for pointing this out.


28 D. H. Lawrence, Apocalypse (New York: the Viking Press, 1960 [1931]), 200. Like most modernists, Lawrence diagnosed many of the pathogens of post-World-War I Europe; but he also
prescribed a cure for the western malaise. More forcefully than any other modernist, perhaps, Lawrence insisted upon the necessity of mythopoeic reconnection: ‘What we lack is cosmic life, the sun in us and the moon in us. We can’t get the sun in us by lying naked like pigs on a beach. The very sun that is bronzing us is inwardly disintegrating us–as we know later. Process of katabolism. We can only get the sun by a sort of worship: and the same with the moon. By going forth to worship the sun, worship that is felt in the blood’ (47). Like Césaire (but not Whitman) Lawrence recognizes the ‘malefic’ aspect of the sun brought about by long ages of out-of-tune human ‘sense-consciousness:’ ‘The sun strengthens us no more, neither does the moon. In mystic language, the moon is black to us, and the sun is as sackcloth’ (46). But all three poets envision a kosmic reintegration: through nature (Lawrence), through democracy (Whitman) and through Négritude (Césaire). For intertextual connections between Lawrence and Césaire, see Arnold, 63; for Lawrence’s appreciation of Whitman, see his Studies in Classic American Literature (New York: Viking Press, [1923] 1964), 163-77.

29 ‘Ahab’ was the weak, idolatrous Israelite king who was persuaded by his wife, Jezebel, to worship Baal rather than Yahweh. Baal was the Canaanite (Semitic) ‘Lord of the Universe,’ i. e., a Sun God. Perhaps Melville’s Ahab’s monomania derives from his rage at the dilemma of humankind’s agnostic relationship with the divine: if God is ‘there,’ God is nevertheless inaccessible in total transcendence; if God isn’t ‘there,’ nothing is. And in either case the human result is nihilism:

30 C. L. R. James, Mariners, Renegades and Castaways (New York: C. L. R. James, 1953), 5-7.


32 ‘[T]he man of culture, whether writer, poet, or artist, achieves this [good decolonization] for his people because, within the colonial situation itself, the creative cultural activity which precedes the concrete collective experience is already an apprenticeship.’ Césaire, ‘L’homme de culture et ses responsabilités,’ Présence Africaine, Feb.-May, 1959; quoted in Kestlelloot, 8.