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Aimé Césaire and *The Divine Comedy*: Self-enlightenment and the dialectic of relation in *And the Dogs Were Silent*

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a close reading of the lyrical drama *And the Dogs Were Silent*, and Aimé Césaire's unique deployment of a Dantean imaginary. It argues, specifically, that Dante's "symbolic process" in the *Commedia* provides a metaphorical structure for the hero's initiation in this work and for the poet's articulation of a philosophy of postcolonial relationality. Showing how Dante's *katabasis* is used to analogize the creative power of Césaire's hellish abyss, it offers Édouard Glissant's theory of Relation as a guiding framework to emphasize fluid connectivity in Césaire's poetic project.

KEYWORDS

Aimé Césaire; Édouard Glissant; Dante; *Commedia*; poetics of Relation; *katabasis*

This article considers the spiritual journey of the protagonist in Aimé Césaire's *And the Dogs Were Silent*¹ and its deployment as a *katabasis*, or hero's descent to the underworld. Its aim is not only to read the *katabasis* as a mythical trope through which Aimé Césaire articulates the form and content of his poetic aesthetic, but also to show how it conveys a dialectical approach to identity which is that of "Relation", a philosophical concept developed by Édouard Glissant. Showing how Glissant's theory of Relation sheds light on Césaire's poetic project, the article contributes to recent revisions of familiar (often dismissive or Manichean) critiques of Negritude and revisits widely held teleological interpretations of Césaire's poetics.

Thanks to the genetic research of Alex Gil (2011, 2013), we now know that *Et les chiens se taisaient* was written initially as a play about the Haitian Revolution and that Césaire began to write this play from as early as 1941. Written during Admiral Robert's occupation of Martinique (1940–43), and its blockade by the military and collaborationist Vichy regime, this primitive historical text, the earliest known version of *And the Dogs Were Silent* (lost to scholars since the 1940s and rediscovered in 2008), seems to portray a sort of "season in hell". "Ghoulissh visions of a revolutionary bloodbath" (Gil 2013, 30) attend the depiction of a struggle that eventually results in freedom from France and the proclamation of the Republic of Haiti. In the text's first published version (the "lyrical oratorio" that formed part of *Les armes miraculeuses*, Césaire 1946), and in the subsequent "theatrical arrangement" (Césaire 1956), Césaire's intention seems to have shifted to a larger fresco – poetic and

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without temporal references – of the hellish experiences of the slave trade and of colonialism, as viewed through the eyes of a Rebel, a symbol of the anticolonial revolutionary and, more particularly, of Toussaint Louverture.

Césaire moved towards a depiction of this particular, yet universally significant, history with the aid of the archetypal model of the descent into hell. If the Orphic intertext seems undeniable,² one *katabasis* in particular, namely that of Dante in the *Divine Comedy*, seems to stand out by the weight of its influence on the depiction of hell in *And the Dogs Were Silent*. The imaginary journey of Césaire's hero, haunted by the suffering souls of the Atlantic slave crossing, has more in common with the katabatic journey of Dante than with that of Orestes, Odysseus or any other Greco-Roman hero. The souls of the dead he encounters in the beyond evoke various memory images meant to “bear witness” to the most unfathomable sufferings in human experience.

Césaire's renewed commitment to the surrealist mode as stated in a letter to André Breton (Césaire 1943) is something to which the Dantean model lent itself, providing also a new, vital energy to his previous attempts at a historical drama of the Haitian Revolution.³ Dante's world of the grotesque and of the dreamscape offered an imaginary which Césaire could exploit and put to the service of an aesthetic already invested in the recording and performance of personal and cultural memories linked to the hellish slave trade and to colonial violence. Additionally, the movement from historical particularity to a more universal accessibility which characterizes *And the Dogs Were Silent* from 1946 onwards coincides with the author's renewed vows to surrealism and his belief in its power to translate a broader liberatory aesthetic, without sidestepping the historical mooring of his poetics. For Césaire, who had until then considered himself a prisoner of reality, of the *Cahier* (Césaire [1939] 1956) and of its “theme”, surrealism offered the possibility “to let yourself speak. To let your dreams invade you. To let its images dominate you. It wasn't a question of ‘thesis’ or ‘theme’ anymore. It was simply a matter of braving life, all of life” (Césaire quoted in Gil 2013, 122).

Without forsaking the “thesis” or the “theme”, this refined position allowed Césaire to summon Dantean patterns of the descent as part of the revolutionary surrealist aesthetic he fashions in *And the Dogs Were Silent*. The goal of a poetic reconnection with the unconscious seems to echo in the Rebel's “journey” of self-discovery, one that represents a “symbolic process” in Jungian terms – a path opened into the hero's unconscious, which brings about a renewal of consciousness, in a way highly reminiscent of Dante's experiences in the *Divine Comedy*:

The symbolic process is an experience *in images and of images*. Its development usually shows an enantiodromian structure [...], and so presents a rhythm of negative and positive, loss and gain, dark and light. Its beginning is almost invariably characterized by one's getting stuck in a blind alley or in some impossible situation; and its goal is, broadly speaking, illumination or higher consciousness, by means of which the initial situation is overcome on a higher level. (Jung 1980, 38–39; italics in original)

Doubtless, it is his enduring belief in the affinities between Black history and surrealism that causes Césaire to exclude from his own French “arrangement théâtral” (Césaire, 1956) the major structural and aesthetic changes made for the German radio adaption of 1956. He preferred to remain faithful to the surrealism and mythicism of the 1946 “lyrical oratorio” rather than opt for the readability and “logical”, “dialectical” movement of action proposed by Janheinz Jahn during their collaboration (see Mbondobari Ebamangoye 2009, 261). Evidently then, for Césaire, adapting *And the Dogs Were Silent* into the dramatic

composition of 1956 (published at *Présence Africaine*), was not to be at the expense of the work's mooring in myth.

Not surprisingly, the mythical elements of the drama have been widely studied in the existing scholarship, perhaps nowhere as amply as in Marianne Wichmann Bailey's (1992) rich study that shows the links between Césaire's drama and the world of the ancient Greeks, their syncretism and ritualism. Bailey's work is, moreover, one of the rare studies to consider the katabatic pattern of *And the Dogs Were Silent*. Arguably, its most significant contribution is to show how the ritualism of ancient Greek theatre helped Césaire access a form of surrealism that allowed him to exploit his connection to the primitive worlds of African and Afro-Caribbean mythology. Yet the absence of any reference to Césaire's deployment of Dantean patterns of the underworld descent is something of a missed opportunity for Bailey to broaden demonstration of one of her key arguments; that is, that Césaire's drama invests in, as one of its constitutive patterns, a "miming and re-experiencing" of "primordial myths" (1992, 53). Indeed, that argument takes on added multilayered significance when one considers the "constitutional syncretism" (Iannucci, Kilgour, and Lombardi 2013, viii) of one of Césaire's key intertexts, the *Divine Comedy*, in its blending of genres and sources.

The text's affiliations with the *Divine Comedy* are particularly strong with respect to the formal aspect of Césaire's hell. From the moment the curtain rises, the atmosphere of the lyrical drama is that of a pit at the bottom of which prisoners are trapped, undergoing torture, and awaiting death:

*The curtain is raised.
In the barathrum of terror, a vast
collective jail, peopled with black
candidates for madness and death,
day thirty of famine, torture, and
delirium* (Césaire 1990a, 9; italics in original)

The appearance of this place of torment recalls that of Dante's hell, whose shape is that of a funnel or an upside-down cone, filled with suffering souls in the throes of the most extreme torture and agony. Moreover, in form, Césaire's drama recalls the inexorable nature of suffering and pain in the *Inferno*. Throughout the work, the Rebel sojourns in an apocalyptic geographical space consisting of a terrestrial and marine universe teeming with deadly, venomous animals and insects – South American pit vipers, spiders, scorpions, etc – as well as numerous other dangerous and hostile creatures.

Thanks to Léopold Senghor, we know that Césaire was an avid reader of Dante. Speaking in a 1966 interview about his friendship with Césaire and his years as a fellow student in Paris, Senghor remarked: "He would have been able to take the examination [*aggregation*] in literature, naturally, but also in grammar, philosophy, history, geography, English, or Italian. As I recall, he used to read Dante in the original" (Senghor quoted in Davis 1984, 44). Thus, the *Divine Comedy* is a work that left its mark on Césaire's imagination during his years of apprenticeship in writing. As such, it is not surprising to find the use of Dantesque patterns of *katabasis* and *anabasis* elsewhere in Césaire's poetry, such as in "Spirales", from the collection *Ferrements* (1960).

Though the variety of classical intertexts deployed by Césaire carry significant importance for the understanding of *And the Dogs Were Silent*, the *Divine Comedy* constitutes a metaphysical and thematic framework for the movement of thought and the

progression of the imagination in the work (just as it does for the poem “Spirales”). I place special emphasis on this fact that, though crucial for understandings of *And the Dogs Were Silent*, has so far not been highlighted in critical studies of the work. This intertext provides the framework within which the poet develops the themes of trauma and suffering, redemption, awakening and the quest for paradise (represented through images of regeneration and glorious illumination at the end of the work). The journey of spiritual renovation of Dante the Pilgrim is the basis for the representation of the gradual emergence of consciousness and the inner journey in the psyche in Césaire’s work, where the hero, without an escort or tutelary Virgilian figure, finds himself in the position of guide to his people.

Like the writer of the *Divine Comedy* who endeavours to highlight the depth and arduousness of the descent, Aimé Césaire depicts a geographical and moral landscape that becomes increasingly vile in the hellish geography through which his protagonist travels. The Rebel testifies to an unquantifiable flow of Black bodies and of human suffering, through sights, sounds and odours rising from the depths of the earth, assailing his senses and repeatedly producing a somatic distress:

It rises ... it rises from the depths of the earth ... the black flood rises ... waves of howling ... marshes of animal smells ... the storm frothy with human feet ... and still more are pouring in a swarm down paths of the mornes, climbing the escarpments of ravines, obscene and savage torrents swollen with chaotic streams, rotted seas, convulsive oceans, in the coal-black laughter of cutlasses and cheap booze. (Césaire 1990a, 14)

Césaire’s hero undertakes his spiritual journey while trapped in a dark dungeon full of corpses and teeming with “*great hallucinatory shadows and grim nightmarish realities*” (64; italics in original). In his dismal pilgrimage, he traverses all the geographies represented by the trauma of upheaval and displacement suffered by his ancestors – the sea, the lands of Africa, the new country. The reader is struck by the hostile nature of the landscapes and by their savagery. It is a journey characterized by the morbidity and degradation of the hero’s world; by the lexical and semantic fields created around blood and flesh; by abjection, vileness and surrealist disproportion and excess; by the atmosphere of dysphoria created by an abundance of hostile animals and insects.

The atrocities of colonialism, depicted by the Rebel as a Gehenna of the modern world, take centre stage in *And the Dogs Were Silent*. The Chorus describes the first moments of colonization, announcing the arrival of the slave traders with the line “The whites are landing, the whites are landing” (Césaire 1990a, 8). A “terrified” Chorus repeats the line, after the Rebel himself confirms this arrival and suggests impending devastation: “The whites are landing. They are killing our daughters, comrades” (8). The Chorus’s narrative, interspersed with the Rebel’s commentary, creates vivid, episodic pictures of the devastation brought on by the arrival of the “Whites”. The Semichorus’s apostrophe – “Spring forth, tears” (8) – adds apocalyptic tones to the canvas. Living up to its initial billing as “oratorio”, the play retells the atrocities of colonialism through a concert of voices. In the following exchange the Narrator and Half-Chorus replay collective memories of the slave trade while the Rebel retraces the phases of the capture and sale of enslaved Africans (52).

Narrator: My memories throat the kidnapping ... the carcan ... the tracks in the forest ... the baracoon ... the slave ship.

Semichorus: They would brand us with hot irons. (52)

Numerous “visions” depict to the reader (or spectator) the terrible atrocities of slavery, its brutal annulment of life, its numerous abominations, injustices and unimaginable suffering. These different visions, reminiscent of Dantean visions of the different circles of hell, present slavery from almost every angle, as is attested by numerous passages, some of which will be discussed below.

Katabasis and poetic creation

Césaire’s deployment of the *katabasis* in *And the Dogs Were Silent* conveys a deep metaphorical narrative: the *katabasis* functions allegorically in representing the poet’s initiation into the act of writing, to art and to creation, but also the initiation into action for the heroic figure, who must sacrifice himself so that his community can gain new life. In other words, the idea of initiation through the *katabasis* evokes the testimonial function of the hero or poet. This is alluded to at the beginning of Act I, in the first utterances of the Lover, a character who embodies the life instincts of the Rebel and questions his sacrificial longings. In a question posed to the Rebel, the Lover exhorts him to not give into death and to renounce his desires for martyrdom, by mentioning the duty placed upon him: “without us will pearl oysters appease the sinuosity of the / secret wound with long sleepy gestures under the cover of / time?” (Césaire 1990a, 6–7).

The terms “cover of time” (based on the image of the oyster’s shell) and “secret wound” (*blessure obscure*) evoke a shared meaning trait – that of the sea – in their allusions to the marine creature and to the traumatic memory of the slave trade. This trait represents the realization both of the difficulty of remembering and the necessity to remember. The phrase “sinuosity of the secret wound” seems to allude to the act of writing insofar as it suggests the act of finding a creative path through a difficult space: the poet must find his own way in a psychic terrain marked by the dislocation and suffering accumulated by history. It calls to mind Césaire’s “narrow path of the surge in the blur of fables”, from the poem “Mémorial de Louis Delgrès” (Césaire 2013, 571).

The blurring of routes and the passage through shadowy paths is an important trope in the collection *i, laminaria ...* (Césaire 1990b). The flora in this collection of poems is often an intermingling of trees and roots, and the atmosphere often dim and hazy. Furthermore, the notion of meandering and winding is suggested in the poem “algae” (Césaire 1990b, 133) in which Césaire compares his poetry to the laminaria, the poetic impulse (“the resurgence”) being associated with the inflow of water which causes this alga to ripple: if the Caribbean archipelago is a labyrinth, it seems that only these algae allow the poet to make his way through it, thanks to their rippling motion with which one must merge (into the inflow of water) so as to emerge from the bottom of the sea. Césaire constantly brings his poetry back to the site of the primal wound – the sea. The marine creature with which the poet identifies in this collection (the laminaria) is an organism belonging to the most elementary species of sea creatures. This suggests that the regression to the formless, to the pre-human, is the only metaphor capable of accounting for the dehumanizing erasure of memory caused by the Atlantic slave crossing. The morphologically inferior creatures which populate Césaire’s work, including *And the Dogs Were Silent* (the laminaria, the pearl oyster, the madreporé, etc), are endowed with a driving force (“the properties of the spume” [Césaire 1990b, 133]) which impels poetry, and which gives it power and virtue: “the resurgence / takes place /

laminarian alga”. This descent into the abyssal depths of the sea is a katabatic quest which gives birth to poetry and activates the deep forms of the imagination.

Memory and writing are thus linked by the inscription of a trace that is not only mnemological but also material, in that it manifests itself formally: to show the disturbance that the displaced African experiences with respect to his new country, Césaire draws on images of geographical and cosmic disorder. These images, which recur often, translate the obsession with which the poet seeks rootedness. One example can be found here:

The mandrake perfume has evaporated; the hill is
dragging its hawsers; the great eddies of the valleys are
making waves; forests are losing their masts, birds are
sending distress signals from where our bodies lost are
rocking with whitened wreckage. (Césaire 1990a, 7)

In these apocalyptic images, the protagonist seems to remember the crossing of the slave ship, since he assimilates the cosmic disorder of the land to the bodies lost in the open sepulchre of the sea. The inscription of the ship’s trace is symbolized in the hill that drags “its hawsers” in the backwash of the waves. The landscape is transformed into the primal image of the boat. Furthermore, this cataclysmic inscription suggests the act of writing, metaphorical in memory and actual on the page in the disjointed rhythm of the lines. The clipped, staccato rhythm, the visual profusion of images, the dizziness suggested by the punctuation (a succession of short independent clauses separated by semicolons), the flora subjected to the most unusual metamorphoses (“forests are losing their masts”) – all suggest a universe out of control. As the elements of nature (mandrakes, hills, valleys, forests, birds, bodies) become intertwined, the dysphonia created by sibilant fricatives ([s]), decouples the sensation of disorder. Writing then becomes the translation of an imprint or vestige in the geographical space – it gives birth to a narrative schema that is the reflection of a traumatic and chaotic history. The words “dragging”, “eddies” and “waves” are semantic features that allow the reader to envision the scene of writing emerging from the cataclysm of the Middle Passage (and the experience of spatio-temporal rupture). The geographies of trauma are thus inscribed as genetic geographies: poetry endlessly restages the inaugural scene: “every night a hunger awakens them amidst the madrepores” (Césaire 1990a, 21).

In the image of this anonymous multitude inhabiting the madrepoire, we find an echo of that which haunts the circles of the *Inferno*. In Césaire’s oratorio, the torture suffered by those killed in the Middle Passage is continually renewed: “every night a hunger awakens them”; it resembles the torment inflicted on the sinners of the *Inferno*, which, in Dante’s words, was “caused [...] from grief / Felt by those multitudes, many and vast” (Dante 1909–14, 17; *Inferno*, Canto IV, l. 27–30), and which evokes, in turn, the suffering of the lost souls of the *Apocalypse*.⁴ The image that Césaire paints here of the damned souls of the Middle Passage is that of a uniform mass, comparable to Primo Levi’s (1996) descriptions of the masses of detainees of the *Lager*: “an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men” (90).

The impossibility of knowing what happened at the “source”, of returning there, is what impels writing in this work. It is a matter of constantly searching, of always trying to reactivate memory in a never-ending gesture. The narrator points to this fact in the following lines: “now I am merely fodder; / sharks play in my wake” (Césaire 1990a, 16). The verse is inscribed on the page like the opening of a pathway in the surge. The speaker is “merely

fodder” as he is crushed by sharks. But his trail, which, no doubt, is meant to suggest the trail of the slave ship, is the scene of writing. The trail left by the body, the abject victim of the Middle Passage, is the poem’s image of what in “Mémorial de Louis Delgrès” is called the “path of the surge”.

Thus the strong links between writing, wounds (or trauma) and katabatic descent become apparent in nature and its disorder. Between reference to the landscape and geography of the Middle Passage (to the waves, to the ship’s masts, to lost bodies), the origins sung by the Rebel are those of a multifaceted trauma. In the eyes of Césaire, the Antillean epic can take root in such origins. This landscape, reclaimed through the dialectical reversal of the despised and reviled into a creative aesthetic, produces a distinctive poetic paradigm based on this surreal geography reflected in the disturbance of nature and in the landscape, a strange hybrid of land and sea where spatiality is suspended. Césaire takes upon himself the Adamic task of naming his surroundings, as if to take possession of his chaotic space and time.

The geography depicted in *And the Dogs Were Silent* is an abyss. Not only is the sea, where millions of slaves were lost, represented as a gulf, within the depths of which the hero tries to navigate, but the new, unknown land constitutes, along with the space of the sea, a spatio-temporal chasm for the “naked migrant”, the Rebel’s ancestor. Thus, the pelagic image is ever present in the poetic consciousness and often carried into various semantic fields, particularly those of the zoological and the insectiform, producing strange metamorphoses. Indeed, the memory of the sea constitutes the basic network of images around which the entire infernal geography of *And the Dogs Were Silent* takes shape. The surrealist manifestations of the sea, subject to various metamorphoses, are the means by which the poet attempts to access the deep layers of the collective unconscious. These pelagic manifestations encompass the land-based geography and carry the signs of a Dantesque imagination shaping its harrowing zoology, in which the Mediterranean barracuda (Césaire 1990a, 20) exists alongside the shark and the venomous scolopendra (23), bringing to mind the pests of Dante’s *Inferno* or the tormenting demons of the eighth circle of Hell, where Césaire’s grotesque weaver-spider (4) recalls Geryon, the web-winged monster (Dante 1909–14, 72; *Inferno*, Canto XVII, l. 7), symbol of unspeakable pain and suffering, and where the devouring hound and other ferocious and menacing animals abound.

Separated from the rest of his people, the Rebel is invested, like the hero of the *Divine Comedy*, with a mission: that of being an eyewitness for mankind. The character Dante, who is merely a visitor to the underworld but who is invited there by Virgil to witness what happens in the *Inferno*, is compelled to try and narrate what he sees:

Who, e’en in words unfetter’d might at full
Tell of the wounds and blood that now I saw,
Though he repeated oft the tale. No tongue
So vast a theme could equal, speech and thought
Both impotent alike. (Dante 1909–14, 114; *Inferno*, Canto XXVIII, l. 1–5)

Dante is preoccupied with the problem of expressing the unspeakable. Similarly, much is at stake for the Rebel, who journeys in the infernal world of sea and slavery lands. He sees, he hears, he speaks:

I hear children’s cries in the blacks’ shacks ... and the tiny
stony bellies bulging through their overgrown navels
are swollen with hunger, with the black mush of
earth and tears and snot and urine. (Césaire 1990a, 53)

Thus, Césaire engages a Dantean semantics of witnessing (anguish, sadness, torments, filth, crowds, etc.) to define a culture's traumatic bonds: the spiritual takes the place of embodied presence in this mode of witnessing, in which the hero's journey occurs in the imagination. The sense of "travelling" with the mind rather than, or as well as, with the body is key in the *Paradiso*, where, in Canto I, Dante is not sure whether he is in Heaven, in his human body, or out of it: "If I were only what thou didst create, / Then newly, Love! by whom the Heaven is ruled; / Thou know'st, who by Thy light didst bear me up" (Dante 1909–14, 287; *Paradiso*, Canto I, l. 71–73). Yet the entire experience is presented as a real journey, since at the opening of *Paradiso* he affirms that "In heaven, / That largiest of His light partakes was I, / Witness of things" (Dante 1909–14, 285; *Paradiso*, Canto I, l. 3–5). Thus, the journey goes beyond time and space, and is one that happens to the traveller, unlike something he does of his own will and using his own physical forces. The narrativity of the *Commedia* thus analogizes the performer–audience dynamic, in which the spectator is necessarily a double – simultaneously an embodied presence and a perception that "travels" and "moves" in the dramatic space of which the stage is a contingent signifier. Engaging the performance paradigm suggested in this mode of witnessing, Césaire underscores the highly problematic nature of time, both diegetically and phenomenologically. The work becomes a kind of venue around which the reader/audience is free to wander, and where any attempt to reconstruct an external chronology leads to an impasse. Furthermore, as reader-spectator of the Dantean fresco, Césaire creates his own dramatic, fictional space from the *Commedia*'s signs (its images, tropes and metaphysical perspectives), which he organizes in the context of a Caribbean postcolonial phenomenology of space and time.

The philosophy of relation or the overcoming of contradiction

By reconfiguring the abyss as a poetic network in its own right, Césaire opens up the space of the Middle Passage and of slavery, moving it beyond the polarizing dynamics of the colonizer/colonized divide. The reconception of the Atlantic slave crossing is at the heart of a project of mythical reformation. In articulating the concept of a Caribbean transoceanic identity around that of the "Atlantic renaissance" – the abyss of the Middle Passage is the space in which a new humanity comes to life – the poet advocates a new and distinct modernity which, in our contemporary times, takes on great importance by virtue of its promotion of a global relational paradigm. The principle of the creative abyss opens up the field of Césaire's poetic project to the theory of Relation advanced by Édouard Glissant (1997a): it emerges as an alternative to the analytical models which view this work through the prism of a narrowly defined – Afrocentric – poetics of Negritude.

Relation is a philosophy that seeks to come to terms with the tragic origins of the modern world, by fashioning from the upheavals of imperialism the productive myth of a modern, global identity, one forged in a network of shared histories, memories, cultures and aesthetics and synthesized through violence. As testimony to this, the opening section of Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, "The Open Boat", offers a new rendering of the genesis of the modern Caribbean, one which takes the form of an eschatology: the boat, which is the slave ship, the "silent boat of our births" (1997a, 7), is a womb, "a womb abyss" (6). Glissant's poetic text addresses a listener-deictic "you":

This boat [...] generates the clamor of your protests; it also produces all the coming unanimity. Although you are alone in this suffering, you share in the unknown with others whom you have yet to know. This boat is your womb, a matrix, and yet it expels you. This boat: pregnant with as many dead as living under sentence of death. (Glissant 1997a, 6)

And since the “naked migrant” shares “with others whom [he has] yet to know” the unknown void of a new, uncharted world, he is linked with these “others”, even with his captors, who also experience the beginnings of this world, though differently. As Glissant points out, this experience of a genesis in imperialist violence gives rise to a “unity-diversity” (Glissant 1997a, 1) of the post-imperial world.

This principle of the “abyss” calls into question the suitability of theoretical frameworks that read Césaire’s identity politics as being essentially ethnocentric, nationalistic and identitarian. It allows us to revisit Negritude, reframing it in the true Césairian sense as one that remains open to the relational. Revisiting Negritude through this lens, in the context of Glissant’s dialectic of Relation, challenges Manichean criticisms of the philosophy, showing, in the words of Gregson Davis “a poetically constructed myth [...] closer to the spirit of Césaire’s coinage than interpretations that seek to grasp it in purely sociological terms” (1984, 20). Indeed, Negritude is a movement of mythic aspirations, which frames a community’s struggle against domination as an attempt to rediscover a “lost way” and thus awaken to itself and to the universal concert of the free. As Davis asserts,

Only by dramatizing both negative and positive aspects of his racial identity can the poet achieve a concrete awareness (and acceptance) of his blackness. [... The *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*] as a whole (and as an embodiment of negritude) is a presentation of the complex process of self-awareness, using concrete images to convey a progressive rediscovery of the self. (20)

Mbom (1995) echoes this sentiment when he reads the Rebel’s descent to the underworld as depicting a “metamorphosis” in Césaire’s work: “the abandonment of the old man (“l’être ancien”) and the emergence of the new [...] assimilated to a new birth, a renaissance” (232). In other words, understanding one’s subjectivity (as formed through historical marginalization and rootlessness) is the prerequisite for exchange with the colonizing other, since, according to the paradigm of Negritude, interrelationship can only be achieved if mediated through the principle of mutual respect between irreducible individual identities. As such, Negritude, far from being merely a nationalistic or counter-discursive ideology, is concerned with global connectivity and interrelation, which, as it shows, only become possible at the junctures where self-knowledge meets freedom.

This fact challenges the root/rhizome (Burton 1993, 25; Dash 1995, 147), organicism/becoming (Dash 1998, 61) dualisms invoked by critics to reduce the Negritude paradigm to the status of a “pre-modern” (Burton 1993, 25) philosophy. It also invalidates those readings of Césaire’s Negritude as a primal stage in the teleological unfolding of Caribbean poetics and which represents Glissant’s thought as a more evolved paradigm of Caribbean subjectivity. The argument that Glissant’s dialectical conception of Caribbean identity forms an “epistemological break” (Dash 1995, 148; Burton 1993, 16) with Césaire’s Negritude is a reductive one: it overlooks the dialectical approach to identity at work in Césaire’s poetry which constitutes the fundamental problematic of Relation, namely the process of cultural and aesthetic inter-relationship emphasized by Césaire’s poetic project.

Thus, as a philosophy that rests fundamentally upon the principle of mutual respect and enrichment of all communities and peoples, Negritude inscribes itself as a journey of progress, which recalls the quest for truth that drives Dante. It is the mythopoeia of the aspiration to freedom, of the emergence into the world through freedom, and seeks to “conjure a future society” achieved on the basis of a “revolutionary humanism” (Wilder 2015, 26). In the words of Gary Wilder, the Antillean humanism in the poetry of Césaire

signals not only the end of colonial domination but the inauguration of a new humanity that has recovered its poetic relationship to knowledge and life, one that has reconstituted the relation between painful histories and possible worlds, one that has reconciled human, natural, and supernatural dimensions of life. (2015, 29)

We can see the force of Relation – where the weight of history intersects with Césaire’s tireless search for a poetic form capable of accounting for the chaotic and unpredictable nature of this lived experience – in the will to reinsert oneself into the world: the poetic aesthetic that aids the poet to find his place in the world is part and parcel of this philosophy of Relation. Thus the collective Antillean vertigo is manifested at the level of literary creation in the convulsion of language and its representation. We are faced with what might be termed a writing of the disproportionate. In other words, to achieve metaphysical transcendence, the Caribbean subject must be born to himself. He begins by “taking stock of his environment” (Glissant 2013, 1697) with all its abjection, atrocities and magnificence. He sings of abjection and violence: “Hatchets my sweet canticles / spilled blood my warm fur / massacres, my massacres, the smoke, my smoke” (Césaire 1990a, 31). He apostrophizes the heroes of his past; the deprecation is (self-)affirming, and reverses the valence of abjection: “And you, knights of the hoe, / princesses of the vetiver / paladins of the cutlass” (65). It restages the tragedy of his people’s past, but also their capacity to overcome, by drawing force from this tragedy, and transmuting them into a positive value, revealing thereby a progressive change of psychic and mental being:

all the violence of the dead world
beaten with rods, given over to beasts
dragged in his shirt a rope around his neck
doused with gasoline
and I awaited the hour of the auto-da-fé in my sanbenito
and trampled, betrayed, sold, I drank urine
and I ate excrement
and I acquired the power to speak
louder than rivers
more forcefully than disasters (61)

It is by looking at his own history, his ailing country, and by awakening to the spectacle of the basest suffering, that the hero “takes stock of what is his, only his”, that he is born “*with* the world [*la ‘co-naissance’ au monde*], *into* the world, and *to* [... himself]” (Glissant 2013, 1698; emphasis in the original).

The spaces of the chthonic imagination thus open up a pathway to the transcendence of the ego and to a transpersonal openness which Césaire describes as “the true universal humanism” (quoted in Lapoussinière 2003, 45; translation mine). Far from the “universality of oneness” which Glissant denounces in *Traité du Tout-Monde* (1997b), this universal is part and parcel of a “cosmic whole” – as laid out in the essay “Poetry and Knowledge” – envisioned by Césaire as a pathway to poetry’s deepest potentialities.

Thus, the idea of rootedness in plurality, a constitutional dialectic of Césaire's thought, is closely linked to the author's use of myth. The primitive patterns of the imagination supply a "taste for [...] wholeness" (Césaire 1990c, liii) and envisage the relational as a cosmic infinity constituted by the interpenetration of cultures and the co-presence of all beings and objects. This conception of the world as *mundi in toto* is embodied in the image of the archipelago in the final verses of *And the Dogs Were Silent*. When the Rebel dies, fulfilling his tragic destiny, the Narratress pronounces, before collapsing: "Islands, I am one of you!" (Césaire 1990a, 70). The metamorphosis that takes place in the imagination highlights the desire to move towards the world, to extend oneself, in one's fullness, towards the plenitude of the other, as suggested by the word "islands". The poet rejects the schema of imperialism, offering the framework of the archipelago instead, the geographical configuration of the Caribbean as a model of relation between peoples and cultures. By underscoring the idea of the archipelago, Césaire shows that there are no more centres or peripheries, all the more so, since what is between the islands – the sea – must be considered as a vector of Relation. Even if the Rebel dies, the oratorio ends on the notion of a kind of ascension towards this utopian ideal. Paradisiac visions of the Caribbean replace those of the underworld: "*Vision of the Caribbean spangled with gold and silver islands in the scintillation of the dawn*" (70; italics in original). It is the *anabasis* of the poet himself who emerges from the inferno where his own journey of exploration and self-discovery had led him. This key image, symbolizing the accomplishment of the initiation journey, conveys the vital impetus of a new birth (into the world), from which emanate openness and movement.

It thus speaks of a Caribbean (poetic) space from which Césaire imagines a humanism that is archipelagic – plural, refracting and shared – a conception that has strong resonances with Glissant's *Tout-Monde*, itself based on the metaphor of the archipelago, figuring a shared, infinite, refracting totality of networks and encounters of consciousness. Consequently, without eliding distinctions between Césaire and Glissant, these convergences invite renewed study of the continuities between their philosophies, particularly with respect to the concepts of Relation and *Tout-Monde*. The *katabasis* throws into relief an archetypal form of the imagination that gives shape and meaning to the poetry of Césaire: the motif of the abyss as both disappearance and spatial in-betweenness. In redeploying the Dantean underworld journey in a Martinican and Caribbean (post)colonial context, Césaire foregrounds the process of initiation which inheres in his poetry and theatre aesthetics. In *And the Dogs Were Silent*, the nihilism of the ego consciousness gives way to revaluation and progressive transformation of psychic being and to the dialectical synthesis of man and world that the hero attains through the pathway of myth. Like the spectre that haunts the stage, constantly returning in the form of character and its new embodiment in each performance, Césaire's Dante is the Dante of an "infinite rehearsal";⁵ a necessary Dante of the present, contemporary postcolonial world – a Dante who depicts a historical transcendence that is a gateway, not only to psychic transformation for the oppressed, but to transglobal relationality and wholeness – antidotes to the new shadows that now take shape in our western world.

Notes

1. All references to *Et les chiens se taisaient* (*And the Dogs Were Silent*) are to the translation by Eshleman and Smith (Césaire 1990a).

2. Jean-Paul Sartre (1948) identifies the influence of the Orpheus myth on the poetic imagination of Césaire in his essay “Orphée noir”.
3. Gil (2013) offers an exhaustive genetic study of *Et les chiens se taisaient* and particularly of the different formulations of the historical drama which constitutes the earliest version of the work.
4. One notes, however, that contrary to the Apocalypse or to the Divine Comedy, where the damned are sinners, in Césaire’s work, the lost souls of the Middle Passage are represented as innocents, having found themselves in hell, not through any fault of their own but by virtue of their skin colour and geographical positioning.
5. I have borrowed the phrase “infinite rehearsal” from the writer Wilson Harris (1987).

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