

The Liberating Power of Words: An Interview with Poet Aimé Césaire

by

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Aimé Césaire (1913-2008) was born in Martinique. In his poetry, plays and political activities he waged a lifelong struggle to restore dignity to colonized peoples. First and foremost a poet, here he talks to Annick Thebia Melsan about his faith in the power of words. The following interview is from the May 1997 issue of *UNESCO Courier* published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (www.unesco.org), reproduced here in honor of his contribution to human culture and the articulation of Négritude as a state or condition of being African that incorporates a consciousness of pride in the cultural and physical aspects of being a person of African descent in the world.

ATM: The usual way of trying to place you is by reference to various things such as time and place, writing, poetry and its different categories, political action and so on, but how would you place yourself?

AC: *That's a terribly difficult question to answer but, well, I'm a man, a man from Martinique, a coloured man, a black, someone from a particular country, from a particular geographical background, someone with a history who has fought for a specific cause. It's not very original but, broadly speaking, my answer would be that history will say who I am.*

ATM: You are from the north of Martinique. . . .

AC: *I've always had the feeling that I was on a quest to reconquer something, my name, my country or myself. That is why my approach has in essence always been poetic. Because it seems to me that in a way that's what poetry is. The reconquest of the self by the self.*

ATM: And what is your preferred instrument for that purpose?

AC: *I think words are the essential instrument!*

For a painter it would be painting! For a poet it is words!

I think it was Heidegger who said that words are the abode of being. There are many such quotations. I believe it was Rene Char, in his surrealist days, who said that words know much more about us than we know about them.

I too believe that words have a revealing as well as a creative function.

ATM: Revealing, creative . . . exploratory, perhaps?

AC: *Exploratory is very well put: It's the plummet dropped in the water, the homing device that brings the self back up to the surface.*

ATM: You have often said that the Black person's first words, after the long years of silence, are bound to be revolutionary words. Does that mean that poetry is "revolutionary" as well?

AC: *Yes, it is revolutionary because it is the world turned upside down, ploughed up, transmuted.*

When the review Tropiques came out in Martinique under the occupation in 1941, in the middle of the world war, like a plunge into the contradictory wellsprings of the West Indian soul, a stark glimpse into the depths of colonial alienation, it was truly a cultural revolution.

And when the Vichy censor banned Tropiques in 1941 with the comment that it was revolutionary, he showed himself to be a very good critic. It's true! It was a cultural revolution.

We were carrying out a kind of Copernican revolution. There was good reason to be surprised! And the Martiniquais were themselves surprised as they stood revealed to themselves. It was a strange encounter!

It modified quite a number of values.

ATM: Which ones?

AC: *We are by definition complicated beings. That is the general rule for any society but one that is particularly applicable in the case of societies where complex layers of sediment have been laid down as a result of the inequalities of colonial life. Not everything was negative, far from it. The hybridization of which we are the outcome has achievements and positive values to its credit wherein the West and Europe also had their share. There was, as I say, a positive side, the effects of which were only belatedly felt by the non-Europeans but which are undeniable and in which we are simultaneously agents and partners - and, I should add, sometimes the beneficiaries as well. The Abbe Gregoire(1), Victor Schoelcher(2) and all those who spoke out and still speak out, who campaigned for human rights without distinction of race and against discrimination, these were my guides in life. They stand forever as representatives of the West's great outpouring of magnanimity and solidarity, an essential contribution to the advancement of the ideas of practical universality and human values, ideas without which the world of today would not be able to see its way forward. I am forever a brother to them, at one with them in their combat and in their hopes.*

ATM: You made an important speech in Geneva in 1978, at the event called "Geneva and the Black World", in which you said: "The effective power of poetry, with its two faces, one looking nostalgically backward, the other looking prophetically forward, with the redeeming feature of its ability to redeem the self, is the power of intensifying life". Was your *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, published in 1939, just such a primary utterance?

AC: *Yes, that is how I see it: a new starting-point, a real start - there are many false starts in life.*

But I think that was, for me, the real start.

Disinterring memories, all that was buried, bringing it back, presenting it so that it bursts forth fully formed upon the world - I think this sends an important signal. To express, not suppress, the force of one's reaction, to wield reinvigorated words as a miraculous weapon against the silenced world, freeing it from gags that are often imposed from within.

ATM: How does one set about "ungagging" the world?

AC: *I simply believe in the redeeming power of words.*

ATM: Is that enough to dent with the human condition and the way it repeatedly slides out of control?

AC: *Probably not, not without love and humanism.*

I really do believe in human beings. I find something of myself in all cultures, in that extraordinary effort that all people, everywhere, have made - and for what purpose?

Quite simply to make life livable!

It is no easy matter to put up with life and face up to death.

And this is what is so moving.

We are all taking part in the same great adventure.

That is what is meant by cultures, cultures that come together at some meeting-point.

ATM: You invented the term "Négritude", which has been the mortar holding together a historic movement. Does not the assertion of Négritude carry with it the risk of separating you from others, from "non-blacks"?

AC: *We have never regarded our specificity as the opposite or antithesis of universality. It seemed to us - or at least to me - to be very important to go on searching for our identity but at the same time to reject narrow nationalism, to reject racism, even reverse racism.*

Our concern has always been a humanist concern and we wanted it to have roots.

We wanted to have roots and at the same time to communicate.

I think it was in a passage in Hegel emphasizing the master-slave dialectic that we found this idea about specificity. He points out that the particular and the universal are not to be seen as opposites, that the universal is not the negation of the particular but is reached by a deeper exploration of the particular.

The West told us that in order to be universal we had to start by denying that we were Black. I, on the contrary, said to myself that the more we were Black, the more universal we would be.

It was a totally different approach. It was not a choice between alternatives, but an effort at reconciliation. Not a cold reconciliation, but reconciliation in the heat of the fire, an alchemical reconciliation if you like.

The identity in question was an identity reconciled with the universal. For me there can never be any imprisonment within an identity.

Identity means having roots, but it is also a transition, a transition to the universal.

ATM: Fire, one of the main life forces?

AC: *Yes, as you say, fire.*

There is an obvious fiery quality in my poetry, but why? I belong to this island. . . . Why this obsession in my poetry? It is not something that I deliberately seek. I am aware - everyone is aware - that the volcano is out there. It is earth and it is fire.

Fire is not destructive. The volcano is not destructive except in an indirect way. It is a cosmic anger, in other words, a creative anger, yes, creative!

We are far removed from that romantic idyll beneath the calm sea. These are angry, exasperated lands, lands that spit and spew, that vomit forth life.

That is what we must live up to. We must draw upon the creativity of this plot of land! We must keep it going and not sink into a slumber of acceptance and resignation. It is a kind of summons to us from history and from nature.

ATM: How, then, do you explain the fact that your "primary utterance" was expressed in the language of the colonial power, of colonialism?

AC: *I have no problem with that.*

It was not something I wanted, but it happens that the language I used was the language I had learned at school. That didn't bother me in the slightest, it didn't in any way come between me and my existential rebellion and the outpouring of my innermost being. I bent the French language to my purposes.

Nature and history have placed us at the crossroads of two worlds, of two cultures if not more. There is the African culture, which I see as being below the surface; and precisely because it is below the surface, overlooked, treated with contempt, it needed to be expressed, to be brought out alive into the light.

But the other culture was the obvious one, the one we were conscious of from books and from school, and which was also ours, an integral part of our individual and collective destiny.

And so I have tried to reconcile those two worlds, because that was what had to be done. On the other hand, I feel just as relaxed about claiming kinship with the African griot and the African epic as about claiming kinship with Rimbaud and Lautreamont - and through them with Sophocles and Aeschylus!

ATM: But what does the African griot think when he sees the tragic events unfolding in Rwanda or Zaire and the pall of hopelessness hanging over Africa, the Africa of which you dreamed so often while you campaigned for decolonization?

AC: *I have never harboured any illusions about the risks of history, be it in Africa, in Martinique, in the Americas or anywhere else. History is always dangerous, the world of history is a risky world; but it is up to us at any given moment to establish and readjust the hierarchy of dangers.*

I saw that very clearly as early as 1966, at a time when great hopes had been aroused by the accession of many countries to independence. Indeed, I spoke out about this at the opening seminar of the World Festival of Black and African Arts in Dakar in April 1966, before an assembly of African dignitaries who were new to their jobs and, it must be admitted, unclear in their minds about the world and the power relationships in it, about themselves and about their irreversible responsibility.

I have the words of my speech of 6 April 1966 here in front of me. This is what I said:

"Africa is under threat, threatened by the impact of industrial civilization, threatened by the internal dynamism of Europe and America. You may ask why we should talk of threats when there is no European presence in Africa, when colonialism has disappeared and Africa has become independent.

"Unfortunately, Africa will not get off so lightly. The disappearance of colonialism does not mean that the danger of African culture disintegrating has also disappeared. The danger exists and everything contributes to it, whether the Europeans are there or not: economic development, modernization, political development, higher school attendance rates, education, urbanization, the integration of Africa into the world network of relationships, and so on and so forth.

In short, just at the moment when Africa is truly being born into the world, it is in greater danger than ever of dying unto itself. That does not mean it should not be born into the world. It does mean that in opening itself up to the world it should keep its eyes wide open to the dangers and that, in any event, the shield of a merely political independence, political independence unaccompanied and un-supplemented by cultural independence, would in the long run prove to be the most unreliable of shields and the most untrustworthy of safeguards."

On top of that there has been political irresponsibility, and the whole gamut of cynicism has been run through! Fortunately, however, there have also been shining examples of the greatness of Africa, such as Nelson Mandela. Africa is experiencing the human adventure, and I am prepared to wager that the vital force of eternal Africa will once more inspire the song of the griot.

ATM: What about the Marxist Utopia to which you subscribed in 1946 and which you condemned before the Budapest crisis in your Letter to Maurice Thorez, in which you set out your reasons for breaking with the Communist Party?

AC: *It is true that, like so many of my contemporaries, I believed in what turned out to be a false Utopia. I am not at all ashamed about this. In the postwar context it expressed a heartfelt enthusiasm, a spiritual yearning.*

But it was very soon followed by disappointment, a feeling of being manipulated, a conviction that one was being lied to and, as I said at the time, an unbearable awareness of "the collapse of an ideal and the poignant illustration of the failure of a whole generation". I felt an irresistible need not to keep silent and, regardless of the prevailing conformism, to break away at whatever risk to myself from the then all-powerful framework of the Marxist apparatus. It was part of my ontological choice as a human being aware of the non-negotiable responsibility that goes with a consciously accepted identity.

ATM: In *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1950), you said that "nobody can colonize with impunity, there is no innocent colonization. There will be a heavy price to pay for reducing humanity to a monologue".

AC: *Yes, I am deeply convinced that universal civilization has a great deal to lose by reducing whole civilizations to silence.*

I think it would greatly impoverish human civilization if the voices of African, Indian and other Asian cultures were to fall silent. If the globalization we are now being offered were to reduce the dialogue of cultures to a monologue, it would create a civilization doomed to languish and decline. I believe in the importance of exchange, and exchange can only take place on the basis of mutual respect.

ATM: Is it still relevant, in 1997, to think in terms of combat?

AC: *We are always, all of us, warriors. The war takes different forms at different times, but there are always things to rebel against. One is always in rebellion against something, things that are unacceptable, things I will never accept. That is the inevitable way of the world, probably for everyone. There are things with which I cannot come to terms. I cannot accept that a people be stifled or that Africa be obliterated, I cannot resign myself to such things.*

I desire - passionately - that peoples should exist as peoples, that they should prosper and make their contribution to universal civilization, because the world of colonization and its modern manifestations is a world that crushes, a world of awful silence.

ATM: At the age of eighty-four, Aimé Césaire, well over half a century after *Retour au pays natal*, are you still faithful to your belief in the urgent relevance of poetry?

AC: *Of course I am. I no longer have the same elemental energy, or the same strength, but I stand by it, I have not reneged on it.*

ATM: Is poetry still effective today? Will it always be?

AC: *At any rate, it is for me the fundamental mode of expression, and the world's salvation depends on its ability to heed that voice. It is obvious that the voice of poetry has been less and less heeded during the century we have lived through, but it will come to be realized more and more that it is the only voice that can still be life-giving and that can provide a basis on which to build and reconstruct.*

ATM: *Wouldn't you say that underlying the poetic dimension of your work there is always a purpose, an ethical aim?*

AC: *Yes indeed, there is an ethical aim underlying everything. From the time of the Cahier d'un retour au pays aural onwards, a concern for humankind emerges, a searching for the self but also a searching for fellowship and universality, a searching for human dignity, which I believe to be the bases of ethics.*

ATM: *And yet this century has not been one where ethics has triumphed, has it?*

AC: *Certainly not, but one must speak out, whether one is heeded or not; we hold certain things to be fundamental, things that we cling to. Even if it means swimming against the tide, they must be upheld.*

What we seek is reconciliation, to be in league with the cosmos, in league with history, to be in keeping with ourselves.

In other words, poetry is for me a searching after truth and sincerity, sincerity outside of the world, outside of alien times. We seek it deep within ourselves, often despite ourselves, despite what we seem to be, within our innermost selves.

Poetry wells up from the depths, with explosive force.

The volcano again.

No doubt I have reached the moment of crossing the great divide but I face it imperturbably in the knowledge of having put forward what I see as essential, in the knowledge, if you like, of having called out ahead of me and proclaimed the future aloud.

That is what I believe I have done; somewhat disoriented though I am to find the seasons going backwards, as it were, that is how it is and that is what I believe to be my vocation.

No resentments, none at all, no ill feelings but the inescapable solitude of the human condition. That is the most important thing.