

**Édouard Glissant** Obituary

Édouard Glissant (b. 21 September 1928), the writer, theorist and philosopher hails from Martinique. His extensive œuvre has been discussed by among others Daniel Radford (*Édouard Glissant*, 1982), Michael Dash (*Édouard Glissant*, 1995), Celia Britton (*Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance*, 1999) and Jeannie Suk (*Postcolonial Paradoxes in French Caribbean Writing: Césaire, Glissant, Condé*, 2001).

**Aimé Césaire (1913–2008):  
The passion of the poet**

The Balata road mounts through the primitive forest of Martinique straight up to Morne-Rouge and beyond, towards the plateaus of Ajoupa-Bouillon, Lorraine and Basse-Pointe, where the poet was born, and where one discovers and one experiences “the great hysterical lapping of the sea”. No one knows, no one can say, at what point, on this road, you leave the south of the country, with its dry radiance, its tamed beaches, its preoccupied lightheartedness, to enter into the domain of this north, with its heavy rains, and at times fog, where fruits, sweet chestnuts and apricots or terebinth-scented mangos, are heavy and present, and where one can hear the faint echo of storytellers and drummers. No doubt, we are all planted thus in our various childhoods, immobile, as in the red mud that marches boldly up to the Peru and Reculée hills.

But the youth of the poet is also marked by quiet wanderings. In the years immediately preceding the world war, the second, he was a student in Paris, having left the hills of northern Martinique, and the Schoelcher High School in Fort-de-France. He discovered what was called the old continent, but more than that he encountered Africa, “gigantically crawling its nudity at the foot of Europe where death sweeps the land in large swathes”. This is not the discovery of the explorer, but that, essential, of the son who returns to the source of his passions and anxieties. Among the Africans, West-Indians, Guyanese, Malagasies, natives of Réunion, who then comprised the intellectual emigration of the colonies to Paris, and who formed the margins of another of type emigration of the same origin, factory workers and sub-proletariats, as they were called at the time, and who would later be officially and systematically organized in keeping with the needs of post-war reconstruction, (some of us remember the famous *Bureau de migration des Départements d'outremer* (Bureau of Overseas Emigration), the very efficient *Bumidom*, which functioned until the beginning of the 1960s), Aimé Césaire was already a militant, who accompanied the writing of the reviews *L'étudiant noir* (The Black Student) and *Légitime Défense* (Self Defense), and probably attended the meetings held in Mrs Paulette Nardal's home, for the defense of the West-Indian and black personality. He met the Senegalese Léopold Sédar Senghor and the Guyanese Leon Gontran Damas, with who he was soon to form the inseparable négritude trio, but most of all, on his own, as we could say, at any rate through a

powerful effort, that went ignored at the time, it was in 1939, in a text published in province in a review called *Volontés*, which entered history because of this, that he unleashed, like a powerful kick aimed at a land which was nonetheless remote, *Le cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*), which I would immediately rank alongside Saint-John Perse's *Eloges*, published previously in 1917, and Rene Char's *Hypnos*, which followed in 1943, at the time of the French Resistance: one of the very great poems of our day, and which, in my opinion, signifies over and beyond its reputation as a militant work of art.

Thus wandering (*errance*), which is not just roaming here and there, and the discovery of the world, were radicalized in a deliberate movement, that of an immersion in the native land of Martinique, marked by the following characteristics: The *notebook* is not a text of realistic description, yet nothing is closer to the rhythms, to the suffocation, and to the drives of this reality, it is not a text of triumphalist exaltation, yet it was to become one of the sources of inspiration of the African diaspora, it weaves a poetics of tragedy, and without a drop of complaisance, the geography and the history of this country, yet unknown to itself, and, for the first time in our literatures, a communication, a relation, of this same country, with the civilizations of Africa, the histories, finally revealed, of Haiti and of the blacks of the United States, of the people of the Andes and of South America, with the sufferings of the world, its passion and its trembling. Thus, from this very beginning, the relationship with Africa was not sung in immediately political terms, did not proceed like Frantz Fanon, encountered further along the road, did not consist, as it did for Marcus Garvey and the blacks of the United States, in an exchange of population, in another *return*, which could have passed for an occupation (of Liberia or Sierra Leone): it took, instead, the form of a profound poetics of the historical suffering of the Africas and of the shared knowledge of the world.

These characteristics turned out to be all the more remarkable as the *Cahier* was to experience a second life, from 1940 to 1943 and 44, in a Martinique cut off from the world, occupied by the marines of admiral Robert, representative of the Vichy regime, and encircled by the United States' Caribbean and Atlantic fleet. The poem gained wealth from the texts of resistance, published at the time, by Aimé Césaire and his friends, (including Suzanne Césaire, his wife and Rene Ménil), in the *Tropiques* (Tropics) review, in which we can discover a manifesto, which remains underestimated, entitled "Poésie et connaissance" (Poetry and knowledge). The review was discovered, through a random glance at the window of bookstore, by André Breton, in 1941, and with it the work of Césaire at the same time, while the French poet was on his way to the Americas with a group of artists and intellectuals fleeing the Nazi occupation. During this period, Aimé Césaire wrote some of his most beautiful poems, "Le grand midi, Batouque" ("The great midday, Batouque") later collected in *Les armes miraculeuses* (*Miraculous weapons*), filled with telluric power. He registered with the French

Communist Party, from which he was to resign in 1956 (*Lettre à Maurice Thorez – Letter to Maurice Thorez*), and was elected on this grounds as of 1945 as deputy of Martinique, then mayor of Fort-de-France, a position he was to occupy for more than fifty years, in the name of the Parti Progressiste martiniquais (Martinican Progressist Party), that he founded after his separation from the French Communist Party. No one can say for sure whether his political combat was carried out to the detriment of his poetic production, or not. The simplest opinion would be that they sustained one another.

The relationships with the surrealists, in particular his friendship with André Breton and Paul Eluard on the one hand, and his very intimate relationship with Léopold Sédar Senghor and the Cuban painter Wifredo Lam on the other hand, help us to understand that there is a complicity between modern Western poetics, all based on contestation and on the revolution of language, and negro poetics, whose inspirations (power of rhythm, the fantastic, excessiveness, humour, fusion with the origins and the cosmic foundation of the word, and methods: accumulation, assonance, vertigo, etc.) meet without merging. Césaire was a surrealist because he created on the foundation of his *négritude*, and not the contrary. This *négritude* was both the revival of memory and the premonitory call to a renaissance, in a way, it *precedes* the blossoming of the modern *négritudes* of the African diaspora, in this sense it differs from Senghor's which *proceeds* from a millenary community, whose wisdom it summarizes. Aimé Césaire's poetics is one of volcanoes and eruptions, it is shattered by interminglings of consciousness, traversed by the floods unleashed by negro suffering, with, at times, a surprising surge of tenderness, like water from a spring, and riots of joy and jubilation.

The French reader sometimes reproaches his lack of moderation, although his poetry is moderation itself, but this moderation is the moderation born of excessiveness, that of the world itself. The poet is he who connects the beauties of his heritage to the beauties of becoming in the world. But he did not forget the Plantation, (he was born there), nor the slave ship. We can establish the difference between his elegies and those of Léopold Sédar Senghor, offered as a slow boat on the great river of the African country, and moreover, with those replete with the quays of rusting ports, the intense, tortured song, the tortured rhythms, the aftertaste of a stumbling into morning, those of Léon Gontran Damas. The astonishing dys-symphony between these three poetic words, which celebrate the source and the diaspora, revealing that these poetics have traversed together the diversities of the world.

However, the maturity of the poet is marked by fertile work. The collections of poetry, *Soleil cou coupé*, *Ferremets*, *Cadastre*, are histories and geographies, always and forever enmeshed in the tragic quivering of the world, up until the last, *Moi, laminaire*, which is both luminous and laminated, which rising from the depths so many activities and responsibilities erects the statue of shadow of an essential and irreplaceable solitude. His works, the essays, on *Toussaint L'Ouverture* in particular, of which the most important remains the *Discours sur le colonialisme* (*Discourse on coloni-*

alism), in which the poet calls on his erudition as a former *normalien* in order to bring to the surface numerous racist remarks hidden at the root of Western elite culture. The acuity of his phrase strikes with a sure hand. The eloquence too, which opens onto fits of anger. Great poets are the greatest pamphleteers.

Aimé Césaire had a career as a playwright completely orientated in the direction of tragedy. We could approach it starting with *Une Tempête* (A Tempest), in which, in our name, he takes on board the character Caliban, the monster (cannibal?) in William Shakespeare's *Tempest*, and makes him to be nothing less than an inhabitant of a Caribbean island, conquered by the legitimate duke of Milan, the fountain of all science and knowledge, magical or logical. This refutation by Césaire of the legitimacy of colonization in its principle, and of its defense through action, would be a good introduction to his other plays – *La tragédie du roi Christophe*, and *Une saison au Congo*, which examine the relentless distortions which often follow struggles of decolonization and which are sometimes its aftereffects. It would appear that to complete this cycle, the poet had intended to write a tragedy on the situation of blacks of the United States, another aspect of colonization, one of its enormous varieties, one of its incalculable consequences. If tragedy is the resolution of a dissolution, it is right to consider the tragedies of anticolonialist poets, or more simply of poets from countries of the South, as attempts to resolve this inconceivable dissolution represented by the act of colonization and its consequences. The tragic word accompanies this other action which in turn opposes the gesture of the colonizer. Suddenly the monster Caliban becomes a consciousness. But it also happens that the resolution of the dissolution aborts, in tragic architecture as in the suffering reality of countries, and recent histories propose so many examples: the former colonized copies the manners, strategies, injustices of the former colonizer, the passion of power suffocates him and turns him against his people, in Haiti as in the Congo: tragedy speaks.

So, the poet stands on the ground of his combat. We recall the presence and the interventions of Aimé Césaire in the two international Congresses of black writers and artists, at the Sorbonne in 1956 and in Rome in 1959. This was the era of the difficult struggles for liberation in Africa, and it was, above all, a question of being of help in all these emancipations, but also, already, of preserving, as far as possible, African open-mindedness, the poetic word, the passion for exchange, the taste of being together in the world, that the *Présence Africaine* society and its director Alioune Diop had undertaken to defend, which Aimé Césaire accompanied with all his might.

The death of poets takes on a character that more overwhelming or terrifying misfortunes do not always assume. It is because we know that a great poet, while present among us, has already entered a solitude we cannot overcome. And at the very moment of his departure, we know that even if we were to follow him into the infinite shadows, we would forever be unable to see him, or to touch him.

Translated from the French by Antoinette Tidjani Alou

Hein Willemse    Commendatio

Afrikaans Onbeperk – die lewens-  
bydrae van Patrick J. Petersen

Die digter wat u vandag vereer, het só oor sy geboorteplek geskryf:<sup>1</sup>

Ek wil waterblommetjies  
doer op Wolseley gaan pluk  
dit verkoop langs die witpad  
vir andere se geluk.  
Ek wil Kersfees kerk toe,  
die berge toe met sneeu  
en my hart weer nat  
in leivore gaan maak.  
Soms vat ek my fiets  
om deur die pas te ry  
ontdek dan by tolhuis  
die vers waardeur ek sny.

[...]

Uit: "Ek wil waterblommetjies" (*Advent*, 43).

Dit is op Wolseley, die Bolandse dorpie tussen die berge dat Patrick Petersen in 1951 gebore is. In sy herinneringsgedigte sou hy telkens terugkeer na die lewe op die platteland, sy jeugervarings en sy herinnerings aan sy ouers. Vir sy ma "die siel van ons huis" skryf hy die volgende "versbewondering":

ek skryf vir jou 'n versie  
moedersdag-stoofpatats-waterblommetjies-  
boontjiesop-pampoenbredie-meidag-versie  
'n versbewondering van naby

want jy is my boompie rubber myne  
wat lewenssap (sic) uitsweet vir diens  
want wat is 'n lui-uil sonder ma-lief  
siel van ons huis o dierbare ma  
jy laat my kamer ruik van swart afrika  
jy laat (my) in jou skoot voorankerlê  
en laat my uitstap oor landmyne

[...]

Uit: "mamma" (*amandla ngawethu*, 3).

Terwyl sy herinnering aan hartkos en sy gehegtheid aan sy ma in hierdie gedig vooropstaan, kenmerk formaliteit en ambivalensie sy herinnering aan sy pa, 'n polisieman wat "wit mag" moes administreer. Die pa is dienaar van die gereg, maar terselfdertyd ook "dienaar van die nagereg"; en soms moet die verwagte versnapering – "tjoklit en humbugs" – van 'n pa vir sy seun – "vir één dag" – uitgestel word:

[...]

wanneer ek aan u werk dink pappa-piet  
sien ek  
'n hart wat vuiste maak; haat wat opgroei en 'n  
grootman raak; die maan wat snags u beatstap  
tel; die wind – altyd weer die wind op wolseley  
wat die dood in sy knope opgaar; blink geelkoperknope –  
waarin die volksnag lawenis (sic) soek; lexingtons  
en way side twak; die apostoliese hawe – 'n kloekbaai  
wat haar skuitjies bymekaar hou.

en eenkant langs die tafel voor die stoof sit slaap  
my skaduwee en ek. wag vir die kedoes medi  
husse met lang-lang ore. wag vir tjoklit en humbugs.  
wag vir die dienaar van die nagereg. wag vir één dag.

Uit: "dienaar van die nagereg" (*amandla ngawethu*, 4).

Tog was Petersen nie net 'n digter van die huislike sfeer nie. Selfs in hierdie liriese huisgedigte spoel die omringende sosiale omgewing donderend aan. Vir hom is die persoonlike of huislike sfeer nooit los te lees van die eietydse sosiaal-politieke omgewing nie. In hierdie verband kan 'n mens die voorwoord tot sy debuutbundel *amandla ngawethu* (1985) lees as 'n manifest waarin die digter beken dat hy die lewe sien as "'n opeenvolging van humor waarin die wêreld saam lag, van bitterheid,

fanatieke haat, kleurapartheid in eie geledere, grenslose liefde, hoop en uiteindelik die dood." As 'n gevoelige mens was hy uitermate bewus van sy sosiale plek in Suid-Afrika. Vir hom het sy digterskap 'n omonwonde funksie gehad: "swart afrikaanse poësie," sê hy is 'n "boodskapdraer van die mense", want in Suid-Afrika is "niks" neutraal nie, daarom kan "niemand in suid-afrika [...] neutraal skryf nie". Sy "werk-gereedskap kom uit die geledere van die vegtende stem waar swart nie 'n duplikaat van wit is nie".

Apartheid het die jongmense van sy geslag, in kategorieë verdeel waarin hulle gedwing was om die toevallighede van hul herkoms as ondeurdringbare grense te beskou. Sy geslag was die geslag van apartheid, maar dit was ook die geslag van bewuste opstand. Wanneer Petersen teen die einde van die sestigerjare Teologie aan die Universiteitskollege van Wes-Kaapland begin studeer, is die belangrikste studentebeweging van sy tyd die Black Consciousness-beweging. Kan u u die wonderlike gevoel van selfbevryding voorstel wat hierdie geslag studente ervaar het? Hulle lewe voorheen was gekenmerk deur 'n identifikasie van die negatiewe – die afsonderlikheid van aparte universiteite of negatiewe staatsbenoemings in wette waar die woordjie *nie* prominent vooropstaan. As 'n lid van die Steve Biko-geslag kon hulle nou hul eie identiteit skeep. Hulle kon hulself *positief* identifiseer en assosiasie soek met mense oor apartheidsgrense heen. Hul kon hul eie identiteitskeuses maak wat die apartheidsonderuitdaag en geen regering kon dit van hulle weg neem nie.

Black Consciousness het 'n regstreekse invloed op Petersen gehad. Trouens, dit het sy belangrikste lewenskeuses grondig beïnvloed. Hy sê in 'n onderhoud wat ek jare gelede met hom gevoer het: "Deur Black Consciousness het ek van 'n skaam mens [...] eenvoudig 'n ander mens geword [...] Was dit nie vir Black Consciousness nie dan sou ek waarskynlik ook nie in die teologie opgegaan het nie. [...] Hierdie gevoelens kon ek ook (deurtrek) na my gedigte." (Petersen 1991: 20) Dit is hierdie kwaliteit, die selfbewuste breë sosiale identifikasie en die politieke strydvaardigheid wat sy digterskap van vroeë digters onderskei.

Sy digterskap moes in sy woorde as "'n helder, duideliker stem [...] uitkom vir die mense wat luister [...] Ons het geskryf vir gewone mense – sodat mense hulle lewe kon herwaardeer en kon veg teen alle strukture wat hulle tot onmens wil maak." Hy het geen twyfel gehad oor die belang van sy poësie nie: "[O]ns (het) in Afrikaanse digwerk 'n ander stem gekry wat anders praat as die wit stem. Vorentoe sal daardie stem belangriker word. Hy sal langs ander bane praat, maar dis 'n stem wat nie geïgnoreer kan word nie" (Petersen 1985). Sommige letterkundige kommentators het hulle verset teen die benaming "swart Afrikaanse skrywers", dikwels vanweë kortsigtige eiebelang en meesal vanweë oningeligtheid en onkundigheid. Vir Petersen was daar egter geen onduidelikheid nie: "Ons moet nie nou skuldgevoelens oor swart Afrikaans ontwikkel nie," sê hy in 1991, "Ons moet onthou dit is ook vanuit hierdie hoek dat Afrikaans bevry geraak en aanvaarbaar geword het. [...] Swart Afrikaans is 'n stuk



[...]  
die mos droog tot 'n doodse vaalheid  
aan ons voete  
ons dra dit aan ons sole saam  
ons het 'n ver pad gekom  
ons dra die dood tussen ons tone  
deur die Koup, oor die Nuweveld al  
langs die loop van die Grootbrakrivier  
een dag op 'n slag

ons hoor hoe roep die Amazivoël op die  
vooraand van 'n helder dag  
ons wag bang vir d-dag  
o, die sekerheid van onsekerheid  
in hierdie mooi en droewe land  
hier  
waar die nag verskeie geluide gesels  
leef ons bo bossies om ver te sien  
leef ons in die woestyn ingedruk tussen  
weerloosheid en helder sien  
en sien word sin word praat  
met die wind

Uit: *Ons kom van ver af* (80–1)

Petersen het al sy werk self gepubliseer. Vir hom was die Afrikaanse publikasieomgewing vasgevang in 'n uitsluitende estetisisme en politieke verbondenheid, ten spyte van plegtige uitgewersuitsprake tot die teendeel. Sy eksplisiete politiek- en sosiaal-betrokke werk het hy gevoel, het geen kans gestaan om uitgegee te word nie. Hy het ook 'n oortuigde behoefte gehad om sy geslag digters te publiseer, 'n begrip wat saamgehang het met 'n kernwaarde van Black Consciousness: *self-reliance* – selfhandhawing en selfstandigheid. Met die afwesigheid van 'n simpatieke publikasiebedryf het hy sy uitgewery, Prog-uitgewers, begin en uit sy pastorie op Vredenburg bedryf. Hy het nie net sy eie poësie gepubliseer nie, maar ook dié van ander digters. Hy het sy eie befondsings- en verspreidingskanale geskep en soms selfs die gesin se huishoudelike geld gebruik om sy droom te finansier.

Sy publikasies dra noodwendig die spore van selfpublikasie; van die digwerk sou strenger gekeur of tegnies beter versorg kon word, maar ons bly hom dank verskuldig dat hy die Afrikaans van die “vegtende stem” sedert 1985 en tot met sy oorlye lewendig gehou het. Hy was 'n gebore leier en vir talle jong digters was hy 'n herder –

een wat bewustelik ruimte en publikasiegeleenthede geskep het. Met sy dood, elf jaar gelede het ek geskryf: "Was dit nie vir Pat nie, het ons vandag nie geweet van 'n groot gros Afrikaanse digters se kollektiewe stryd teen die mensontering van apartheid of die selfstandigheid van 'n jonger geslag skrywers nie." (Willemse 1997: 4)

Die demokrasie van 1994 het nuwe ontwikkelinge gebring en Petersen het vir hom nuwe vooruitsigte gestel. Hy het hom aktief beywer vir 'n oorkoepelende Afrikaanse skrywersvereniging, hy wou groter skakeling met gevestigde uitgewers bewerkstellig, hy wou in die sakewêreld betrokke raak. Die nuwe Suid-Afrika het soveel moontlikhede ingehou en hy wou daarby betrokke wees. Ek hoor nou nog die afwagting in sy welluidende baritonstem:

in die hitte van die stryd  
wanneer die nag sy aantog begin  
                  op ons melk- en koffieweë  
as ons mooi luister, hoor ons  
                  die voetstappe van die maan  
                  in die gange van ons vrees  
ons luister so omineus  
ons kyk na alles wat dreigend  
                  terugkyk  
ons blaai deur die stiltes van die  
                  woestynnag  
broos vra ons:  
wat wag môre?  
wat bring oormôre?

Uit: *Ons kom van ver af* (79)

Patrick James Petersen is op 6 Julie 1951 op Wolseley gebore. Hy matrikuleer aan die Hoërskool Bergrivier op Wellington en in 1975 voltooi hy sy teologiese studies aan die Universiteit van Wes-Kaapland. In 1976 word hy beroep na Oudsthoorn se NG Sendinggemeente en later sou hy ook beroepe aanvaar na Danielskuil, Lime Acres en Vredenburg. Hy publiseer *amandla ngawethu* (1985), *Advent* (1988) en *Vergenoeg* (1993). Sy gedigte is opgeneem in die versamelbundels *Aankoms uit die skemer* (1988), *Optog* (1990) en *Ons kom van ver af* (1995). Later sou sy werk ook in bekende Afrikaanse en Nederlandse bloemlesings opgeneem word. In 1995 behaal hy sy M.Th-graad aan die Universiteit van Wes-Kaapland met 'n studie getiteld *Etiek van luister – 'n Analise van Swart Afrikaanse poësie in die jare sewentig en daarna*.

Hy sterf in 'n motorongeluk op 7 Junie 1997 en hy het sy dogter, Renate; sy vrou Elize en hul seun Amos nagelaat. Ek het destyds my radiohuldeblyk met die volgende woorde afgesluit: "Sy heengaan is vir die Afrikaanse letterkunde 'n ramp, en

hy laat 'n leemte wat ons eers later ten volle sal besef. Hy het nog so baie planne, en so baie idees gehad, maar helaas ..." (Willemse 1997: 5)

Ek is besonder bly dat u Patrick Petersen postuum vereer, want vandag is hierdie woorde waarder as wat dit in 1997 was.

#### Aantekening

1. Hierdie commendatio is op 20 April 2008 op die Spier-landgoed in Stellenbosch gelewer. Tydens die geleentheid het die ABSA-Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees Patrick J. Petersen vereer met hul Afrikaans Onbeperk: Lewensbydrae-erkenning. Ek bedank graag mev. Elize Petersen vir haar versoek dat ek die commendatio skryf en lewer.

#### Bronnelys

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