AN INTRODUCTION TO NÉGRITUDE

A Primer of Black Awareness Among Afro-French Writers

In the United States, the black-consciousness movement in its activist form is a child of the 'Sixties. It was brought to the attention of the general public by the black student protests and sit-ins of the first several years of that decade, and it was the logical outcome of years of oppression and discrimination imposed by a racist society, and the culmination of less spectacular resistance and less fruitful sporadic protests that go back to slavery and the Underground Railroad.

The success of the revolt of Blacks in Montgomery, Alabama, against Jim-crow bus laws, a South-wide practice that was patently unjust and deeply humiliating, under the capable and inspired leadership of the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1958, encouraged young, impatient, and idealistic black students to make an all-out attack on all forms of segregation in the South. And the outcome of their non-violent efforts, despite the use of fire hoses, police dogs, frequent jailings, intimidation and other forms of violence to maintain the status quo, is too well known for detailed consideration here.

Black awareness in the United States as a concept and as a literary phenomenon may be traced back to such black intellectuals as Dr. W. E. B. DuBois (whose Souls of Black Folks had become the bible of the black militants before Frantz Fanon's writings) and the earliest Afro-American writers, and it reached its apogée during the so-called Negro Renaissance of the 1920's, with Claude MacKay, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Sterling Brown, et al., who played an important role in the birth of black awareness among students and writers of African origin who were enrolled as students in Paris in the late 1920's and in the 1930's. The students in question were from

French Africa, the French West Indies (Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Haiti) and French Guiana in South America.

The principal architects of the concept and the tern Négritude were Aimé Césaire of Martinique, French West Indies, Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal, West Africa (now its president), and Léon Damas of Guadeloupe, French West Indies.

Césaire, Damas, and Senghor were among a group of black students in Paris who, in the late 'Twenties and early 'Thirties, became aware of their common heritage and their cultural isolation in an ambiance which, though not hostile, was either indifferent to them or expected them to be black Frenchmen, renouncing thus their African background and blending perfectly with their Parisian cultural (though, obviously, not with their ethnical) environment. In dress, speech, and manners, they were expected to reflect the culture and customs of the French. Their education was French. History was taught them with a French bias, which, of course, meant that colonialism was viewed as a blessing and not a bane to Blacks "fortunate" enough to have the French for colonial masters. African and West Indian Blacks under French rule were expected to develop into what some years later Frantz Fanon was to characterize as "Black Skins, White Masks." While a handful of select blacks were fortunate enough to study in Paris, the intellectual Mecca of the West, the wretched masses of their people back home were victims of poverty, ignorance, and disease largely because of colonial exploitation, discrimination, insults, and humiliation--conditions from which they, as expatriates ostensibly accepted by the French, could not excape, even if they had wanted to do so. It was the realization of this unhappy situation which brought these Afro-French Blacks together in organized efforts to assess their plight and to take some sort of action to remedy it. They were intellectuals, and as such their activism was to be of an intellectual order.

They founded two papers, the short-lived L'Etudiant Noir, around 1932, and, later Légitime Défense to serve as organs of black student thinking and protest in Paris--to assert the black personality and defend African social and cultural values. In this, they made cause commune with a few Negro Americans who were also students in Paris at that time and who joined them in meetings at the salon litteraire of an interested, sympathetic Parisian, Mlle Andree Nardal, where topics of common interest and works of Afro-American writers were discussed. The concept of Négritude thus came into being, born of that association and those discussions. The term Négritude first appeared in print in an article published by Aime Cesaire in Légitime Défense but, it did not gain widespread recognition until the publication of Cesaire's first poetic collection, Cahier d'un retour au pays natal (written in 1937-38 but published only in 1947 by Bordas after having appeared in Présence Africaine, an excellent and scholarly black magazine that was also a product of black intellectualism and that appeared simultaneously in Daker, Senegal, and Paris). Moreover, Rene Maran's Goncourt Prize-winning novel of protest, Batoula (1921) exercised a great impact on the élan toward the black solidarity out of which the concept of Négritude was to emerge. Thus was awakened the conscience of young French-speaking Africans and West Indians (including Haitians), who grouped themselves under the leadership of Senghor, Cesaire, and Damas.

The use of the term Negritude in Cahier (whose full title we translate as Notebook of a Return to the Native Country), occurs when Césaire tells of an experience in Paris which was a turning-point in his way of thinking about his blackness--his Négritude, if you will.

Césaire was on a Paris street car one evening when a homely, ridiculously dressed Negro was seated facing him. This hapless black, an obvious mis-fit in this urbane setting, became instantly the object of derision on the part of other (white, of course) passengers. His clothes were too big for him, and in

every way he "swore with" his surroundings, as the French say. "Son nez," Césaire says, "semblait une péninsule en dérade et sa négritude même qui se décolorait sous l'action d'une inlassable mégie (His nose seemed like a peninsula carried out to sea, and his "négritude" or blackness even which was discolored by a tireless whitening action)."

Further described, the Negro who was the subject of general derision was, according to Césaire, "as tall as a pogo-stick" but he tried to make himself small on that dirty tramway bench...and to "abandon" (hide) his gigantic legs and his "trembling hands" like those of a "starving boxer, an ungainly Negro without rhythm or measure, a Negro "whose eyes rolled a blood-stained lassitude," "whom an unspeakable wretchedness had driven itself mad to (had knocked itself out, as we say informally) to perfect, leaving him unshaven, arched of back, panic-stricken--in a word, a hideous, ill-tempered, melancholy Negro: a "comic and ugly Negro... and the women behind me snickered as they looked at him."

Admittedly a victim of cowardice, Césaire tells us that he turned his eyes away, "proclaiming that I had nothing in common with that monkey." The ultimate effect on the poet was, however, this: it served to make him re-examine his position as a black man in a white culture, to re-assess his whole racial philosophy and outlook. The result was that he came to realize that his fate and that of the ridiculous Black on the Paris tramway were inextricably linked to one-another--that, in spite of his French exterior, he was also a Black and basically no different from the humblest, most ignorant, most ridiculous Black. This realization was a turning point in his life and led Césaire to declare, as if in a profession of religious faith, "j'accepte, j'accepte tout cela...toute cette négritude" (I accept, I accept all that...all that négritude).

Since the publication of Cahier, the term négritude has been widely used and variously defined, connoting different things to different people; but it has remained largely an esoteric term, used and understood by a relatively limited segment of humanity: those interested in Afro-French writers from 1930 to the present, especially the protest writers (Senghor, Césaire, Damas, et al.) who, unlike the white proletariat, use poetry as their literary medium. And these writers are not second-rate rhymsters but top-flight artisans of the medium, men who have mastered all the tools of the trade and who are recognized even in France as ~~representatives~~ worthy of the highest plaudits in the most difficult of literary genres, one of them, Leopold Senghor, having been awarded the International Poetry Prize in 1963.

It was Senghor who gave us the best definition of Négritude, which he characterizes as "le patrimoine culturel, les valeurs et surtout l'esprit de la civilisation Negro-Africaine" (the cultural patrimony, the values and especially the spirit of black-African civilization). Elsewhere, he calls it "l'ensemble des valeurs et des civilisations noires" (the sum-total of black values and civilizations).

As we assess the use of the concept and the term Négritude in the works the writers under consideration here, we are inclined to define it, in a larger context, which includes the above definitions, as the totality of the black experience, including all the poverty, suffering, humiliation, and injustices which have gone into it.

Each of the men previously characterized as "architects of the concept and term Négritude, expresses his Négritude and his reaction to it in accordance with his personal experiences and his philosophy of human and interracial relations. We shall treat first Senghor, who is perhaps the most eloquent and restrained

spokesman for négritude.

Léopold Sédar Senghor

Senghor was born in 1906, of rather well-to-do parents, in the Senegalese town of Joal, which he immortalizes in a poem, "A Joal," of his first collection, intitled Chants d'ombre (Songs of Darkness). He did his elementary studies (études primaires) at Ngasobie and Dakar, the latter city being the modern and attractive capital of his native Senegal. He belongs to the Sérère tribe. Young Senghor was sent to Paris for his secondary and higher education, the former having been done at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, an old and prestigious school that boasts such distinguished graduates as the seventeenth-century playwright Molière and France's current President, Georges Pompidou, a contemporary and friend of Senghor (one of his poems is dedicated to M. Pompidou); and the latter having been obtained at the Sorbonne, and the Ecole Normale Supérieure, France's highest teaching-training institution that admits only the intellectual "crême de la crême." He came out of the Ecole Normale Supérieure as agrégé de grammaire (a highly competitive degree of scholastic achievement--with a specialization in French grammar--required of candidates for positions as teachers in the French lycées). In 1935, Senghor was appointed a professor in the Lycée of Tours, France, being the first African to teach in a French lycée. He studied African languages, which he later taught in Ecole des Hautes Etudes Coloniales in Paris.

In 1939, as a French subject, Senghor saw service in the French Army and was taken prisoner by the Germans and placed in a concentration camp, from which he managed to escape. One of his poems, "Camp 1940," was inspired by his experiences in the concentration camp. After the war (World War II), Senghor was appointed Député from Senegal to the National Constituant Assembly (L'Assemblée Nationale Constituante), which drew up the Constitution for the Fourth Republic in France,

which lasted from 1946 to 1958. (This writer, who met Senghor in 1935-36 through a common friend, Aimé Césaire, observed Senghor in action at a session of the Assemblée Constituante which he was invited to attend by Messrs. Césaire and Senghor). In the assembly, Senghor was appointed chairmanoof the committee charged with the responsibility of seeing that the new Constitution was drawn up in impeccable French--a tribute to his command of the language and a recognition of his authority as an agrégé de grammaire. Senghor's political philosophy and orientation lined him up with the French Socialist Party in the Assembly (he was later to write a treatise on African Socialism, published around 1964 and translated into English by Howard University Professor, and former U. S. Ambassador to the Niger and Senegal, Mercer Cook).

Senghor founded, in 1946, a magazine called Condition Humaine; and in 1947, he became editor of Présence Africaine, a scholarly review dedicated to Black African letters and culture. In 1948, he founded the Senegalese political party known as le Bloc Démocratique Sénégalais and left the French Socialist Party. And, in 1951, he became the head of the faction of the Indépendants d'Outremer (overseas Indopendants) in the French Chamber of Deputies, the lower legislative House under the Fourth Republic. In 1956, he was elected Mayor of the Senegalese city of Thies; and, in 1958, he founded the Bloc Sénégalais Progressiste (Progressive Senegalese Bloc). The following year (1959), he became President of the Federal Assembly of Mali (the former French Sudan).

The year 1960 saw a shower of national independancies fall on Africa, liberating a score of former European colonies. Senegal was among them. In August of 1960, Léopold Sédar Senghor was elected the first President of the Republic of Senegal, and today, ten years later, he still serves as the chief executive of

His beloved fatherland. It is ironic that the former official residence of the Governor General of French West Africa, a stately mansion overlooking the Dakar waterfront, now serves as the official residence of the President of the Republic of Senegal and is occupied by a black man who dwarfs all previous occupants in intellectual, literary, and political stature. (All of colonial French West Africa was administered from Dakar).

The distinguished scholar, who is a once poet, President and politician, has published the following collections of poetry: Chants d'ombre, Hosties Noires, Ethiopiques, and Nocturnes, the latter having singled him out for the Prix International de Poésie in 1963.

M. Senghor has to his credit, also, an impressive number of prose works and articles.