NOTES
for
NOTEBOOK OF A RETURN
TO THE NATIVE LAND ...

by
AIME CESAIRE

translated by
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for reading on Desolo Luna Vox Theatrum
[Page 3]: *the volcanoes will explode:* a reference to Mount Pelee, which erupted in 1902, destroying Saint Pierre, the former capital of Martinique.

[Page 5]: *Josephine ... conquistador:* Josephine Tascher de la Pagerie (1763-1814), the first wife of Napoleon Bonaparte. She was born in Martinique into the white settler class; she became "Empress of the French" when Napoleon took the title of "Emperor of the French" in 1804. The liberator is Victor Schoelcher (1804-1893), the French abolitionist whose statue stands in the present-day capital, Fort-de-France. The conquistador refers to Pierre Belain d'Esnambuc, who occupied Martinique in 1635 and claimed it for France.

[Page 5]: *morne:* This term, "used through the French West Indies to designate certain altitudes (usually with beautiful and curious forms) of volcanic origin, is justly applied to the majority of Martinican hills, and unjustly sometimes to its mightiest elevation --- Mount Pelee (Hearn, *Two Years*). In Cesaire's time, slum areas were often located on mornes on the outskirts of Martinican towns.

[Page 6]: *why the suicide choked:* Slaves committed suicide by choking on their own tongues (the hypoglossal nerves are at the base of the tongue).

[Page 6]: *the Capot River:* a stream in northern Martinique.

[Page 6]: *Queen-Blanche-of-Castille:* A French queen in the Middle Ages, mother of Saint Louis.

[Page 8]: *Trinite to Grand-Riviere:* towns in northern Martinique.

[Page 13]: *MERCI:* "thank you" (French), the inscription is probably addressed to God.

[Page 14]: *rue Paille:* "Straw Street" (French), a street in the poorest sections of Martinican towns, whose houses are roofed with straw.

[Page 14]: *the sand is black:* because of its volcanic origin.
mentula: "penis" (Latin), based on an Indo-European stem designating a stick agitated to produce fire.

jiculi: according to Cesaire, a variation on the word "jiquilite," a kind of indigo tree planted in El Salvador in the 19th century. The word could also be a variation on "jique," a Cuban timber tree. Whatever it is, in the poem it suggests that its ingestion produces a hallucinatory effect.

a little ellipsoidal nothing trembling four fingers above the line: probably refers to Martinique, which is oval shaped and close to the equator.

Haiti where negritude rose for the first time: The Haitian slave revolt, led by Toussaint Louverture (1743-1803), brought about the independence of Haiti in 1804. Although Cesaire was by no means the sole exponent of negritude, the word is now inseparable from his name, and partially responsible for his prominent position in the Third World. Coined with his friends Leon-Gontran Damas and Leopold Senghor while editing their newspaper, L'Etudiant noir (The Black Student), in Paris in the mid-1930s, the word first appeared in poetry in the Notebook. A neologism, it is made up (perhaps on the model of the South American negrismo) by latinizing the derogatory word for a black ("negre") and adding a suffix for abstract nouns (latitude, solitude, exactitude, etc.). It signified a response to the centuries-old problem of the alienated position of the blacks in history, and implicitly called upon blacks to reject assimilation and cultivate consciousness of their own racial qualities and heritage. For Cesaire, identity in suffering, not genetic material, determined the bond among black people of different origins.

To consider negritude also brings up the problems in translating the word "negre" when it occurs in Notebook. Put briefly, the lexical background is as follows: Before the Second World War the French had three words to designate individuals or things belonging to the black race. The most euphemistic was "noir" (noun or adjective). The derogatory was "negro." In between, on a sort of neutral and objective ground, was the word "negre," used both as a noun or as an adjective (as in "l'art negre"). For the general public, "noir" and "negre" may very well have been interchangeable, but the very civilized and very complexed Antilleans considered themselves as "Noirs," the "negres" being on that distant continent, Africa. And it is in this light that one must read Cesaire's use of the word "negre"
and its derivatives, "negritude," "negrillon," and "negraille": he was making up a family of words based on what he considered to be the most insulting way to refer to a black. The paradox, of course, was that this implicit reckoning with the black's ignominy, this process of self-irony and self-denigration, was the necessary step on a path to a new self-image and spiritual rebirth. From the point of view of the translator, it is therefore important to translate "negre" as "nigger" and its derivatives as derivatives or compounds of "negre" and "nigger" (negritude, little nigger, and nigger scum).

[Page 20]: *Bordeaux ... San Francisco:* Bordeaux and Nantes in France and Liverpool in England were the principal ports from which, in a triangular circuit, the slave ships sailed out to Africa and, after being loaded with their human cargo, crossed to America, returning with produce to Europe. New York and San Francisco appear here as symbolic of the economic exploitation of black people.

[Page 20]: *the Jura:* Louverture was a self-educated slave who, by 1801, was governing the entire island of Haiti. A year later, he was seized by Napoleon-sent forces and returned to France, where he died in a dungeon at Fort-de-Joux in the French Jura.

[Page 21]: *a white horse:* probably in this context, refers to Baron Samedi, the spirit of death in Haitian folk belief (comparable to the horse of death in European iconography).

[Page 21]: *the Keys:* coral reefs in the Caribbean.

[Page 21]: *patyura:* according to Cesaire, a variation on "patira," the name of a peccary found in Paraguay.

[Page 22]: *corolla:* the strands of a whip used on slaves.

[Page 23]: *maroons:* from the French "marron," a chestnut, or, as an adjective, chestnut-colored. The secondary meaning in the West Indies (perhaps influenced by the American Spanish "cimarron" --- wild, unruly, or run-away) applies to a black fugitive slave, or his black descendant. Runaway slaves, hiding in trees, often made animal sounds as signals to
each other. Cesaire's ironic use of the phrase is derived from a popular French saying, "tirer les marrons du feu," itself borrowed from the fable "Le singe et la chat," by La Fontaine. It means "to perform a difficult task on behalf of another person and without benefits from one's labor."

[Page 23]: likouala-likouala: The Likouala River is in the interior of the present-day Republic of Congo. By repeating the word, Cesaire stresses his fascination with its sound.

[Page 25]: voum rooh oh: In this and the following two stanzas, Cesaire evokes a shamanistic incantation. Instead of wearing the classic Western laurel, he has "on [his] black forehead a crown of daturas" (a hallucinatory plant known as jimsonweed in the United States). The "mountains uprooted at the hour when no one expects it" in the second of these three stanzas probably refers to the sudden eruption of Mount Pelee.

[Page 27]: Torte: a tourte in France is a crude cobbler pastry.

[Page 28]: the Great Fear: The end of the first millennium, A.D. 1000, was supposedly awaited with a terrible foreboding known as "The Great Fear." To "play" the game of "the millennium" would be to gamble on a total transformation of the way things are.

[Page 28]: vitelline membrane: the membrane protecting the egg and corresponding to the cell wall of an ordinary cell. Cesaire is envisioning his own breakthrough, or self-birth, here. "The first drops of virginal milk" ten lines later which the self-born poet drinks suggests that his conception has been immaculate.

[Page 30]: quirts: usually a riding whip, but according to Jourdain, the word was also a popular term for a slave whip.

[Page 31]: Gros-Morne ... rue "De Profundis": Gros-Morne is north of Fort-de-France. The street name here, "De Profundis," means "out of the depths" in Latin, from a liturgy for the dead.
Amazons ... Madhis: Amazons in this context refers to female warriors in the ancient African kingdom of Dahomey. Ghana is the medieval West African empire after which the modern nation is named. Timbuktu was an outstanding educational center of the Middle Ages. Askia the Great was ruler of Songhai (a 15th-century Malian empire). Djenne, in present-day Mali, was a university and trade center in the Middle Ages. Madhis are Islam leaders of a holy war.

chicote: a Portuguese knotted leather slave whip.

the Calabars: a people from southeastern Nigeria. The city of Calabar was a slave depot.

Nothing could ever lift us ... the shape of their pelvis: The stanza is a mishmash of physiological arguments used to describe the inferiority of the black race, notably by the French writer Arthur de Gobineau, whose theories are alluded to here. A craniometer is an instrument for measuring skull size, once thought to be a factor in the brain's evolution. "Homo sum" means "I am man," from the Latin of the Roman playwright Terrence (who as a boy was the slave of a Roman senator who educated him and gave him his freedom).

COMICAL AND UGLY: Cesaire's phrase appears to allude to Charles Baudelaire's poem "The Albatross," where it occurs. There an albatross, once "prince of the clouds," is trapped by sailors and forced to drag its great wings about on deck.

menfenil: According to Jourdain, the menfenil (also known as the malfini) is the *Falco sparverious caribaerum*, or the Caribbean sparrow haws ("funereal" here not only because of the mood of the poem at this point but also because of the bird's black plumage).

chalaza: a whip made of hard fibers.

postillion: a household servant dressed in fine clothes whose task was to welcome the newly arrived captives and give them the impression that slaves were well
[Page 41]: *Eia* for the royal *Cailcedra*: "Eia" is a triumphant cry; the cailcedra (a Wolof word) is the African mahogany.

[Page 43]: *to gird one's loins like a brave man*: an echo of God's words to Job: "Gird up now thy loins like a man" (Job 38:3).

[Page 44]: *wounds cut in its trunk*: probably a reference to the rubber tree, which thrives on incisions made in its trunk to produce sap.

[Page 46]: *oh those queens ... chestnut trees*: probably refers to Cesaire's memories of the Luxembourg Garden, in Paris's Latin Quarter, with its many statues of queens under chestnut trees.

[Page 46]: *the twenty-nine legal blows of the whip*: the limit prescribed by the 1865 Code Noir (Black Code) designed to regulate slave owner's treatment of their slaves. In this line, and in the twenty that follow, Cesaire lists the tortures, the names of some slave holders who carried them out, and the torture devices. All of this material is documented in the writings of Victor Schoelcher (the French legislator who was most responsible for pushing the abolition laws through parliament in 1848) and are reprinted in *Esclavage et Colonisation* (Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1948), a collection of Schoelcher's texts, to which Cesaire contributed a Preface. See in particular the chapter "La condition servile."

[Page 46]: *the fleur de lys*: The fleur de lys, or lily flower, is the emblem of the French Bourbon Dynasty, with which recaptured slaves were branded.

[Page 46]: *Mayencourt*: a slave holder who caused the death of one slave by keeping him in a dog house for six months.

[Page 50]: *the penetrance of an apocalyptic wasp*: perhaps an allusion to the plague that
descended on the Egyptians before the liberation of the Israelites in Exodus 5:11.

[Page 51]: *the "lance of night" of my Bambara ancestors:* The Bamanan, known in French as Bambara, are the people of Mali. In the past, they sprinkled human blood on their spears to ensure their effectiveness in battle.

[Page 51]: "You see ... the sun did it.": The latter part of this speech, from "pay no attention" on, is from the Song of Solomon 1:6. These lines are paraphrased from a speech by the black Queen of Sheba, beloved of Solomon.

[Page 57]: *veerrition:* According to Cesaire, his "veerrition" was coined off the Latin verb "verri," meaning "to sweep, to scrape a surface, to scan." Our version attempts to preserve the "veer" or turning motion (set against its oxymoronic modifier "motionless") as well as the Latin sound of the original.