

Aimé Césaire, the rebellious man

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Aimé Césaire is no more. The one nicknamed the “fundamental Negro” bowed out, his revolt intact, despite the honors which continued to surround him. His refusal, in 2005, to welcome Nicolas Sarkozy, to protest against the law of February 24 glorifying the “colonial work”, prolonged an entire life entirely dedicated to the “cause of the Blacks” and which mixed, in a marvelous unity, the most daring literary experiments in the radical fight against colonialism.

Born in Martinique, Aimé Césaire quickly distanced himself from a certain “island literature”, of a good exoticism which, instead of fighting against colonialist clichés, reinforced and constantly renewed them. Refusing to lock himself into the culture of his native island, he worked to link it to its distant, African origins, as well as to universal culture.

His meeting in Paris, in the 1930s, with other African students, including Léopold Sédar Senghor, was decisive for his journey. It made him discover at the same time as another part of his identity, “Africanness”, a hidden face of colonialism: the negation of the cultures of the colonized in the name of a conquering and illusory universalism. It was the starting point of a rich journey made up of various commitments: politics for the autonomy of the Martinique; literary in movements which, like surrealism, proclaimed their solidarity with the peoples of the South as vigorously as their concern to rid world literature of its heavy Euro-centrist heritage.

In distant Martinique, in this black diaspora with no hope of return, Aimé Césaire will become one of the authentic voices of Africa. The “Notebooks of a Return to the Native Country” (1939) celebrate this continent, not as the cradle of a tragic humanity, crushed, changing chains and always chained, but as the crucible of an immemorial revolt, where rises a ancient desire to belong to the world other than as a “primitive”, primitive land, as a reserve of ancient or modern slaves.

This umbilical link with Africa was one of the strong points of Aimé Césaire's political and literary activity. Rejecting the projects of assimilation of “French Blacks”, he founded in Paris, in 1934, with Léopold Sédar Senghor, “L'Étudiant noir”, a newspaper in which a new concept was patiently forged, “Negritude”, which gave its name to an immense artistic movement. In 1941, he created the magazine “Tropiques” with other Martinican writers and, in 1947, “Présence Africaine”, a publication appearing simultaneously in Paris and Dakar. In 1948, the publication of the “Anthology of New Negro and Malagasy Poetry” constituted the symbolic birth of the “Negritude movement”. It will be followed, in 1950, by “Discourse on Colonialism”, in which Aimé Césaire will highlight, to the scandal of right-thinking elites, the relationship between Nazism and colonial racism. While the destiny of the planet was being played out between the great powers, all “white”, all European, he recalled that anti-Nazism can only find its ethical fullness in the awareness of this other racism, always threatening despite the abolition of slavery, that which affects men and women of color. Cry of pride, howl of convicts no longer pleading with their jailers, “negritude” quite simply assumed the black identity. And while waiting for the future to become clearer, as Frantz Fanon wished, in the junction between all the “damned of the earth”, Aimé Césaire liked to

define it by what it was not, by what it rejected. “[It] is not a stone, a body of dead water in the dead eye of the earth”, nor “a tower or a cathedral”, he wrote in the “Discourse on Colonialism”.

A powerful echo of repressed or repressed age-old aspirations, negritude was not a racial doctrine. If she exalted the “black imagination”, it was less to proclaim its superiority than to restore it to its place in the history of universal genius. It was, to quote the right words of Jean-Paul Sartre, the necessary “negation of the negation of the black man”. It rehabilitated “the starvation man, the insult man, the torture man, who could be seized at any time, beaten, killed [...] without having to apologize. to no one ”. It announced a new humanism which frees it “from the reasons of the salons of sophisms, of pirouettes, of pretexts, of calculated hatreds, of humanized carnage”; a humanism which teaches that without Africa and Africans, scattered across Earth since the dawn of time, all humanity will be amputated, incomplete. In “Discourse on Colonialism”, Aimé Césaire put his finger, in sharp and lucid sentences, on the paradoxes of classical, European humanism: “It would be worth studying, clinically, in detail, the approaches of Hitler and Hitlerism and to reveal to the very distinguished, very humanist, very Christian bourgeois of the 20th century that he carries within himself a Hitler who is unaware of himself, that Hitler inhabits him, that Hitler is his demon , [...] that deep down, what Hitler does not forgive is not the crime in itself, the crime against man, it is the crime against the white man, it is humiliation against the white man, and having applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until now only affected the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India and the Negroes of Africa. » Luminous words that it would be difficult to engrave on his tomb if he were - as many French people wish - buried in the Pantheon and thus restored to this imposed "Frenchness", to which he opposed his identity as an "African of the Ocean", descendant of generations of dehumanized humans who have never forgotten the taste of freedom.