

*Refusal of  
the Shadow*

Surrealism and the Caribbean

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*1978 Introduction to*  
Légitime défense

PUBLISHED IN PARIS in 1932 by a group of Martiniquan students, this first and sole issue of the journal *Légitime défense* was to remain practically unrecognized by Martiniquan society – a few intellectuals curious about our historical past excepted – for more than four decades.

It is a strange thing, this refusal of a society to acknowledge texts nevertheless written for it and by its own intellectuals.

Doubtless we must blame the ban it received from the colonial power when it was published. But beyond this, the reason for what has to be considered a rejection lies within Martiniquan social consciousness itself, which was distorted by the colonial regime to such an extent that it is blind to the truths of its own development as revealed in the mirror.

In the meantime, literary criticism in the different countries of Europe and Africa has underlined the historical role played by *Légitime défense* in the birth of modern black literature of French expression.

The reader who wishes to consider the criticism and evaluation of *Légitime défense* is referred to the studies by Lilyan Kesteloot, Jack Corzani, Régis Antoine, Janheinz Jahn, Iay Kimoni, and so on, who have come to different conclusions, as is only to be expected.<sup>1</sup>

I would point out, in passing, that it would be anachronistic to expect *Légitime défense* to have raised questions or to have proposed solutions that have arisen only after it appeared and disappeared, through the evolution of contemporary history. A journal dated June 1932 could not identify and express problems that would result from the upheavals that shook the colonial empires and the consciousness of colonized blacks in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Senghor's recent reading of *Légitime défense* which he reproaches with, among other things and in an unexpected way, failing, in 1932, to 'advocate the independence of Africa, still less that of the Caribbean' is undoubtedly anachronistic. The reason for this unpardonable error, in his view, was that those who signed *Légitime défense* were misled into Marxism. Is there any need to point out that, although Senghor did not commit the sin of being a Marxist, nevertheless he did not, any more than did the signatories of *Légitime défense*, dream in the thirties of demanding the independence of Africa – and even less that of Senegal, we would add.

If the main problems expressly raised in these texts – the political and social liberation of colonial peoples; the problem of a Caribbean culture taking account of race and history; the problem of an aesthetic to be worked out on the basis of what is particular about life in our islands – remain hanging in the air, subsequent unexpected events have still brought new content to the troubled problems and fresh ways of considering them. Some of the problems that seemed vital for us at the time these texts were published have become obsolete and the charge they had for us has become displaced elsewhere.

The sensual joy of writing shines through in *Légitime défense*. A cruel aggressive pleasure, a settling of accounts with colonial ugliness (sadism) and also a pleasure of experiencing the wounds received in order to be better able to proclaim the legitimacy of the cause (masochism).

Some critics have wondered, not without reason, whether *Légitime défense* did not, unknown to itself, contribute to some extent to negritude's entry onto the scene.

Certainly, considered in its unity and structure, the discourse of *Légitime défense* is not a discourse of negritude. Where negritude affirms the priority of the cultural struggle over the political struggle and the priority of 'black values' over social contradictions, *Légitime défense* was, on the contrary, principally alert to the anti-imperialist struggle which roused colonial peoples against both the Western and its own bourgeoisie, situating political action in the Marxist framework of social transformation without conceiving the development of 'black values' other than within such political conflict.

This project was more Fanonist before its time than Senghorian or even Césairist – although at that date Césaire had still not declared himself about this.

But it must be admitted that *Légitime défense*, making use of a naïve and spontaneous – thus false – psychology, had already begun (without

knowing it) to sketch the features of a general black mentality which, amplified and pushed to an extreme, is found anew in the fantastic caricature of the 'African black' of which Senghor became the humourless theorist. Already in *Légitime défense* one can see the emergence of that black who is 'endowed with a sensual and colourful imagination', that black who 'refuses power and accepts life', that black who 'has a more generally elevated potential for revolt and joy in as much as he has a materially determined ethnic personality', the black who has 'a love of inspired dances', and so on.

In *Légitime défense* these psychological features had a polemical value, and were determined by a historically concrete and temporary situation – a situation imposed on colonized Caribbean blacks by imperialism – and not as eternal and universal features of a black mentality. The fact is that the signatories of the journal did not express this with enough prudence to preclude its use in the constitution of an alienating mythology.

It is perhaps this insufficiently critical approach to the black question that reveals most clearly the limits of *Légitime défense*. Nevertheless, the editors of the journal must be credited with having been aware of that insufficiency and giving a warning to their readers: 'We apologize,' they say, 'for the necessity to make a start, something that has not allowed a certain maturity.'

No doubt there are also limits in the way Marxism as it was conceived and practised in the thirties was applied – a Marxism still inflexible and incapable of adapting to life's complexities in order to grasp and illuminate them.

Because of this, it was unable to appreciate the unity between the world of material life (economy, social questions and politics) and the world of the imagination (poetic reverie). In *Légitime défense* we accommodated ourselves to a disjunction that was to be shocking for us after the event. On the one hand we took account of Caribbean colonial society and offered a realist critique and description of it. But on the other hand we produced poems with no roots in that society, poems from nowhere, and by no one.

In cries and in fury, *Légitime défense* announces and promises.

We did not have to wait long for *Pigments* by Damas (1937) and *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* by Césaire (1939), both of which responded to this hunger for the kind of literature of which the journal was the impassioned expression.

July 1978

## Editor's Note

1. See, for example, Lilyan Kesteloot, *Les Écrivains noirs de langue française: Naissance d'une littérature*; Jack Corzani, *La Littérature des Antilles-Guyane français* (1978) Fort de France: Editions Désormeaux; Régis Antoine, *La Littérature franco-antillaise: Haïti, Guadeloupe, Martinique*; Janheinz Jahn, *A History of Neo-African Literature*; and Iay Kimoni, *Destin de la littérature négro-africaine* (1976) Kinshasa: Presses Universitaires du Zaïre.

Légitime défense: *Declaration*

THIS IS JUST a foreword. We consider ourselves totally committed. We are sure that other young people like us exist prepared to add their signatures to ours and who – to the extent that it remains compatible with continuing to live – refuse to become part of the surrounding ignominy. And we've had it with those who try, consciously or not, with smiles, work, exactitude, propriety, speeches, writings, actions, and with their very being, to make us believe that things can continue as they are. We rise up against all those who don't feel suffocated by this capitalist, Christian, bourgeois world, to which our protesting bodies reluctantly belong. All around the world the Communist Party (Third International) is about to play the decisive card of the 'Spirit' – in the Hegelian sense of the word. Its defeat, however impossible it might be to imagine that, would be the definitive end of the road for us. We believe unreservedly in its triumph because we accept Marx's dialectical materialism freed of all misleading interpretation and victoriously put to the test of events by Lenin. In this respect, we are ready to accept the discipline such conviction demands. In the concrete realm of means of human expression, we equally unreservedly accept surrealism with which our destiny in 1932 is linked. We refer our readers to André Breton's two manifestos and to all the works of Aragon, André Breton, René Crevel, Salvador Dalí, Paul Eluard, Benjamin Péret and Tristan Tzara. We consider it to be one of the disgraces of our age that these works are not better known wherever French is read. And in Sade, Hegel, Lautréamont and Rimbaud – to mention just a few – we seek everything surrealism has taught us to find. We are ready to use the vast machinery that Freud has set in motion to dissolve the bourgeois family. We are hell-bent on sincerity.

We want to see clearly into our dreams and we are listening to what they have to tell us. And our dreams allow us to clearly perceive the life they claim to be able to impose on us for such a long time. Of all the filthy bourgeois conventions, we despise more than anything humanitarian hypocrisy, that stinking emanation of Christian decay. We despise pity. We don't give a damn about sentiments. We intend to shed a light on human psychic concretions similar to that which illuminates Salvador Dalí's splendid convulsive paintings, in which it sometimes seems that lovebirds, taking wing from assassinated conventions, could suddenly become inkwells or shoes or small morsels of bread.

This little journal is a provisional tool, and if it collapses we shall find others. We are indifferent to the conditions of time and space which, defining us in 1932 as people of the French Caribbean, have consequently established our initial boundaries without in the least limiting our field of action. This first collection of texts is devoted particularly to the Caribbean question as it appears to us. (The following issues, without abandoning this question, will take up many others.) And if, by its content, this collection is primarily addressed to young French Caribbeans, it is because we think it opportune to aim our first effort at people whose capacity for revolt we certainly do not underestimate. If it is especially aimed at young blacks, it is because we consider that they in particular suffer from the effects of capitalism (apart from Africa, witness Scottsboro) and that they seem to offer – in having a materially determined ethnic personality – a generally higher potential for revolt and joy. For want of a black proletariat, from which international capitalism has withheld the means of understanding us, we are addressing the children of the black bourgeoisie. We are speaking to those who are not already branded as killed established fucked-up academic successful decorated decayed provided for decorative prudish opportunists. We are speaking to those who can still accept life with some appearance of truthfulness.

Determined to be as objective as possible, we know nothing of anyone's personal life. We want to go a long way and, if we expect a lot from psychoanalytical investigation, we do not underestimate (among those initiated into psychoanalytic theory) pure and simple psychological confessions which, provided that the obstacles of everyday conventions are removed, can tell us much. We do not accept that we should be ashamed of what we suffer. The Useful is that convention constituting the very backbone of the bourgeois 'reality' we want to dissect. In the realm of intellectual investigation, we oppose this 'reality'

with the sincerity that allows man, through his love, to disclose the ambivalence that tolerates the elimination of that contradiction decreed by logic by which we are forced to respond to a given affective object *either* with the feeling defined as love *or else* with the feeling defined as hate. Contradiction is one of the tasks of the Useful. It does not exist in love. It does not exist in dream. And it is only by gritting our teeth horribly that we are able to endure the abominable system of constraints and restrictions, the extermination of love and the confinement of dream, generally known under the name of Western civilization.

Emerging from the French mulatto bourgeoisie, one of the most depressing things on earth, we declare (and we shall not retract this declaration) that, faced with all the administrative, governmental, parliamentary, industrial, commercial corpses and so on, we intend – as traitors to this class – to take the path of treason so far as possible. We spit on everything they love and venerate, on everything that gives them sustenance and joy.

And all those who adopt the same attitude, no matter where they come from, will find a welcome among us.<sup>1</sup>

*Etienne Léro, Thélus Léro, René Ménéil, Jules-Marcel Monnerot,  
Michel Pilotin, Maurice-Sabas Quitman,  
Auguste Thésée, Pierre Yoyotte  
1 June 1932*

### Note

1. If our critique is purely negative here, if we put forward no positive proposals against what we irrevocably condemn, we apologize for the necessity to make a start, something that has not allowed a certain maturity. From the next issue, we hope to develop our ideology of revolt.