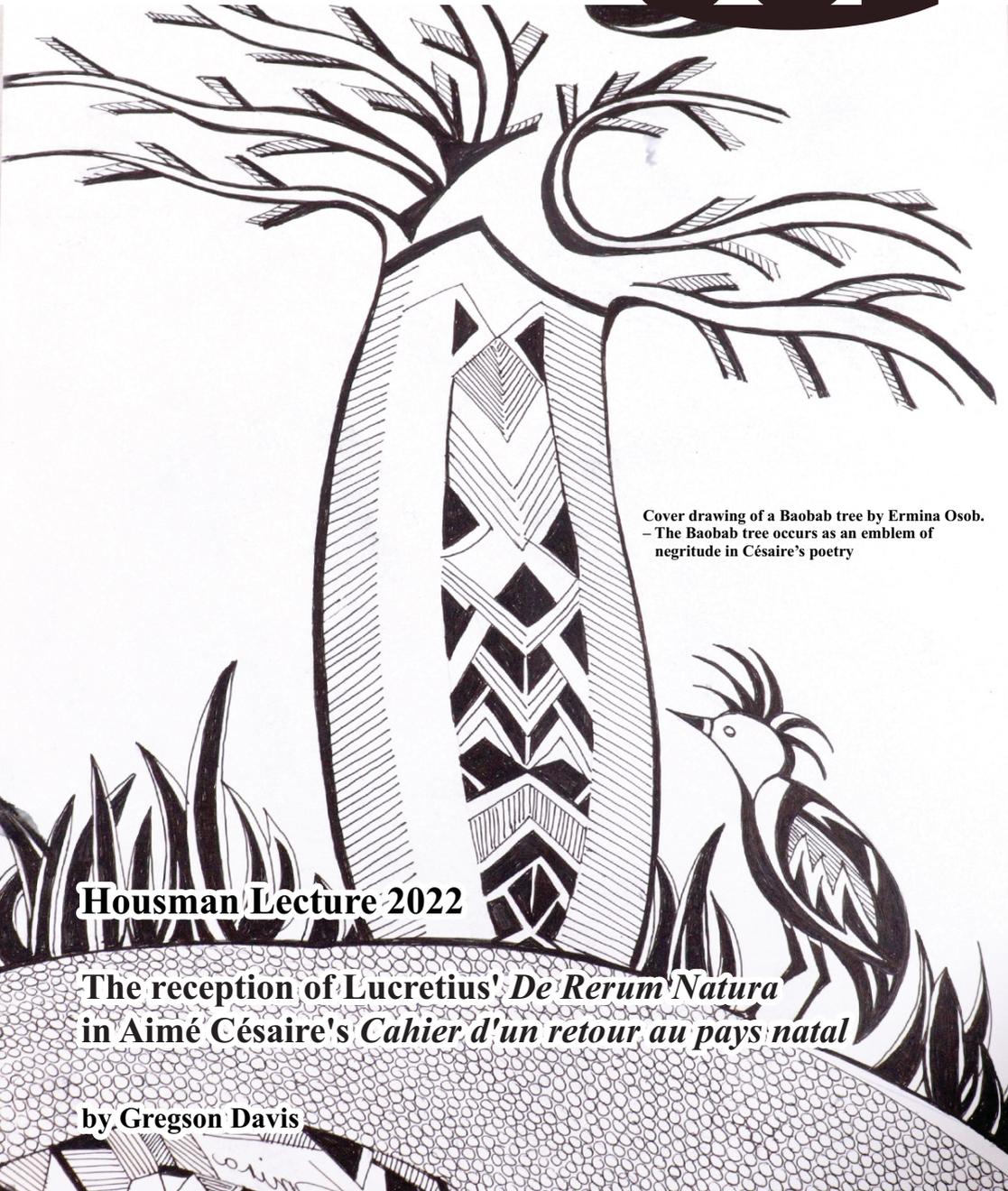




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Cover drawing of a Baobab tree by Ermina Osob.
– The Baobab tree occurs as an emblem of
negritude in Césaire's poetry

Housman Lecture 2022

**The reception of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*
in Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal***

by Gregson Davis

The reception of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* in Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*

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The invitation by the Department of Latin and Greek at University College London to deliver this year's A.E. Housman Lecture has provided me with the opportunity to elucidate the nature and scope of the reception of Lucretius' great poem, *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*) on the part of a representative "classic" of postcolonial literature of the French Antilles. The focus of my elucidation will be on the highly acclaimed masterpiece by the late Martinican poet, Aimé Césaire: *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, of which I have recently published a new English translation under the title *Journal of a Homecoming*.¹

I begin with a very condensed profile of Aimé Césaire for the benefit of those who may not be conversant with his creative work.

Aimé Césaire was regarded in his lifetime (1913–2008) as the preeminent poet of the francophone world. For most of his adult career, he adeptly combined the roles of creative writer and prominent politician, having served for several decades as mayor of Fort-de-France, capital of Martinique, and deputy to the French National Assembly. His literary corpus, which encompasses lyric poetry and drama as well as expository prose, earned him very high esteem in France in the form of prestigious literary prizes and an honorific plaque in the Panthéon in Paris in the company of celebrated giants of the French intellectual canon. His claim to international fame as a social reformer and revolutionary thinker rests on his paramount role as a co-founder of the black consciousness movement that goes by the name of 'Negritude'.²

Before embarking on a thematic comparison of two iconic monuments of world literature – one ancient, the other modern –, I wish to make a few preliminary remarks of a general nature as critical background to understanding the nuanced modalities of reception of the Greco-Roman literary canon from the vantage point of a modern author whose masterwork is rooted in the hybrid cultural terrain of an ex-colonial Caribbean society.

As scholars who till the fertile field of 'reception studies' are keenly aware, the modalities of reception are multifaceted and complex. In the case of authors native to the postcolonial polities of the Caribbean, it is essential that we pay attention to their intellectual and cultural formation, or *Bildung* – to annex that useful German term –, in the context of the education systems transplanted to the islands by the European colonizers. Those systems were uniformly modelled on elite European prototypes and were originally intended to educate the small white ruling class of plantocrats and administrators who governed the predominantly black subject populations of the islands. After virtually exterminating the indigenous peoples of the region, the major European powers fashioned new-fangled overseas societies based on the brutal enslavement of a vast number of black Africans – a labour

A.E. Housman (1859–1936)

Born in Worcestershire in 1859, Alfred Edward Housman was a gifted classical scholar and poet. After studying in Oxford, Housman worked for ten years as a clerk, while publishing and writing scholarly articles on Horace, Propertius, Ovid, Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles. He gradually acquired such a high reputation that in 1892 he returned to the academic world as Professor of Classics at University College London (1892–1911) and then as Kennedy Professor of Latin at Trinity College, Cambridge (1911–1936).

Housman Lectures at UCL

The Department of Greek and Latin at University College London organizes regular Housman Lectures, named after its illustrious former colleague (with support from UCL Alumni). Housman Lectures, delivered by a scholar of international distinction, originally took place every second year and now happen every year, alternating between Greek and Roman topics (Greek lectures being funded by the A.G. Leventis Foundation).

This is the fourteenth Housman Lecture, and it took place in May 2022.

¹ Davis and Irele (2017). My citations of the poem in English translation and French original are from this bilingual edition. The numeration of the poem's 'paragraphs' is also adopted from this edition.

² On the origin of the name, see Véron (2021) 284–93. The ideology of the movement is fully discussed in Irele (2011) and, more recently, Rabaka (2015).

force that eventually came to constitute the demographic majority in the insular mini-states of the Caribbean.³ In the post-Emancipation era access to secondary education was selectively extended to the descendants of the slaves. The post-primary educational institutions continued to inculcate the values embedded in the elitist European examination systems that had been translocated wholesale from the colonizer nations.

The normal curriculum of the *lycée* (in the French case) or the 'public' secondary school (in the British case) was heavily weighted in favour of the traditional Humanities disciplines. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Classical languages (primarily Latin and, to a lesser extent, Greek) were staples of the curricular programs of the leading secondary schools in the entire region. Because the scholastic assessment, as implemented in the school certificate examinations, was conducted in the respective colonizing European nation itself, there was a very high bar of matriculation for the restricted number of students who excelled in the higher forms of the schools.⁴ The most successful of the matriculated students were thereby well qualified for admission on coveted scholarships to elite colleges and universities in the pertinent European country.

The educational career of our representative French Caribbean author, Aimé Césaire, conforms closely to this template. After attending the local *Lycée Schoelcher* in the Martinican capital, Fort-de-France, Césaire went on to pursue higher education in Paris at the prestigious *École Normale Supérieure*, where he received a thorough grounding in the European philosophical and literary traditions. His enrolment at the *École Normale* was preceded, as was the custom, by a preparatory course of study at the venerable Parisian *Lycée Louis Le Grand*, where the gruelling curriculum included the study of major canonical Greco-Roman authors. When Césaire eventually returned to Martinique at the conclusion of his studies in the metropolis, he took up appointment as a professor at the *Lycée Schoelcher* in Fort-de-France, where his range of teaching responsibilities included instruction in the ancient 'Classical' languages and literatures.

As far as Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, in particular, is concerned, we have intriguing documentary evidence – if such were needed – that Césaire was thoroughly familiar with the poem in the Latin original. A polemical article he authored in a famous student periodical that he co-founded while in Paris contains an imaginary dialogue with a petty colonial official in charge of reporting the progress of the Martinican scholarship students. In the course of Césaire's sardonic rebuttal of the official's defence of his own lack-lustre performance, he quotes a phrase from Book 4 of the Lucretian text: *surgit amari aliquid* ('a bitter taste is welling up'). The extraordinarily casual, almost off-the-cuff, manner in which he cites the phrase in the original fully justifies the assumption that, not only Césaire himself, but also his black student readership was conversant with the Latin language, if not with the actual text of the *De Rerum Natura*.⁵ In the course of this paper I will be offering further evidence in support of Césaire's deep familiarity with Lucretius' Latin text on the basis both of verbal allusions and of adaptations of major motifs and tropes.

The subtle influence of the *De Rerum Natura* on both the imagery and, *mutatis mutandis*, the ideology of certain passages in Césaire's *Journal of a Homecoming* is most apparent, in my view, in the critique of religion that constitutes

a recurrent motif in the 'argument' of the entire poem. A very brief sketch of the contours of Césaire's astringent indictment of proselytizing Christianity in colonized societies will serve to situate the critique of religion within the broader argument of the *Cahier*.

The *Cahier* may be regarded as having a quasi-didactic purpose in the broad sense that it models a process of robust self-examination as a precondition to realizing a vision of human freedom based on cognitive enlightenment.⁶ The poem's visionary trajectory charts an arduous upward path from a state of social abjection (along with collective denial) on the part of the Martinican people to an ideal state of cultural decolonization. As an elaborate speech-act, it stages a poetic drama of liberation from the nightmare of slavery and its socio-economic and intra-psychic sequelae. The programme of decolonization entails the exposure of the pernicious ideology inculcated by the colonizer/master, in which the manipulation of religious belief plays a crucial role in the process of subjugation.

In a famous passage from Book 1 of the *De Rerum Natura* Lucretius adduces the example of the Homeric hero, Agamemnon, who, according to one version of the myth, went so far as to sacrifice his own daughter, Iphigeneia, on the altar of Artemis in an effort to persuade the goddess to provide favourable winds to take his stranded fleet of warriors to Troy. Lucretius' oft-quoted line excoriating religion that caps the recounting of the sacrifice of Iphigeneia must have rung a loud bell for the anti-colonialist Caribbean thinker:

tantum **religio** potuit suadere malorum (Lucr. 1.101)

'so potent was **religio** in persuading [men] to [commit] evil deeds'

For Césaire, the ritual slaying of a daughter by her own father in the name of religious devotion in the Greek legend invites comparison with the horrendous sacrifice of black African peoples on the altar, so to speak, of European capitalist expansion into the New World.

Before tracing the main lines of Césaire's debt to certain aspects of the ancient Epicurean view of religion as articulated by Lucretius, it will be helpful to glance briefly at the contributions to the critique of religion made by two influential modern thinkers whose controversial views helped to shape his development as a philosophical poet.

Chief among these modern thinkers was none other than Karl Marx, whose systematic analysis of the capitalist system and Western imperialism had made a lasting impression on the young Martinican with the result that on his return to the island after terminating his studies in the metropolis, he successfully ran for office on a French Communist party ticket.⁷ His deep familiarity with Marxist theory as well as his actual political engagement – eventually at the head of his own political party in Martinique – brought him face to face with the issue of the function of religion in the context of colonial society, as summed up in the Marxian aphorism: 'Religion is the opiate of the people.' The idea that the inculcation of the religion of the master in the mind of the enslaved subject functioned as a potent drug whose effect was to dull the pain and suffering of the oppressed proletariat of the Caribbean recurs in several passages of the *Cahier*.

³ The classic treatment of the subject is Eric Williams' pioneering work *Capitalism and Slavery* (Williams 1944), which is finally beginning to receive the recognition it deserves.

⁴ See Greenwood (2010) for a sophisticated study of the role of Classics in the anglophone Caribbean school system.

⁵ Lucr. 4.1134. The full sentence reads: *nequiquam, quoniam medio de fonte leporum / surgit amari aliquid in ipsis floribus angat* (lines 1133–4). I am grateful to Professor Kora Véron, who kindly provided me with the quotation from the Césaire article that survives in a single known copy of the journal issue in private hands.

⁶ See Davis (2010).

⁷ He famously later broke with the Communist Party after his disillusionment with the rigidly centralized Stalinist bureaucracy that largely ignored the issues of colonialism and racism in the Antilles and other French territories. For a full statement of his reasons for breaking with the party see Césaire (1956).

Where does the materialist foundation of Epicurean thought as transmitted by Lucretius fit into the evolution of Marx's views on socio-economic class division? Such a connection is not as far-fetched as it might at first appear, if we consider that Marx's doctoral dissertation (or the equivalent), awarded at the University of Jena, was entitled: 'On the Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature'.⁸ In the concluding segment of that dissertation Marx launches into praise of the Hellenistic philosopher in the following terms: 'Epicurus is therefore the greatest representative of the Greek Enlightenment, and he deserves the praise of Lucretius.' He then proceeds to quote the following passage from the opening book of the *De Rerum Natura*:⁹

humana ante oculos foede cum vita iaceret
in terris **oppressa gravi sub religione**,
quae caput a caeli regionibus ostendebat
horribili super aspectu mortalibus instans,
primum Graius homo mortalis tollere contra
est oculos ausus primusque obsistere contra,
quem neque fama deum nec fulmina nec minitanti
murmure compressit caelum, sed eo magis acrem
inritat animi virtutem, effringere ut arta
naturae primus portarum claustra cupiret.
ergo vivida vis animi pervicit, et extra
processit longe flammantia moenia mundi
atque omne immensum peragravit mente animoque,
unde refert nobis victor quid possit oriri,
quid nequeat, finita potestas denique cuique
quanam sit ratione atque alte terminus haerens.
quare **religio** pedibus subiecta vicissim
obteritur, nos exaequat victoria caelo. (Lucr. 1.62–79)

When man's life lay for all to see foully grovelling upon the ground, **crushed beneath the weight of religion** [*religio*], which displayed her head from the regions of heaven, lowering over mortals with horrible aspect, a man of Greece was the first that dared to uplift mortal eyes against her, the first to make a stand against her; for neither fables of the gods could quell him, nor thunderbolts, nor heaven with menacing roar, but all the more they goaded the eager courage of his soul, so that he should desire, first of all men, to shatter the confining bars of nature's gates. Therefore, the lively power of his mind prevailed, and forth he marched far beyond the flaming walls of the world, as he traversed the immeasurable universe in thought and imagination; whence victorious he returns bearing his prize, the knowledge [of] what can come into being, what cannot, in a word, how each thing has its powers limited and its deep-set boundary mark. Therefore religion [*religio*] is now in her turn cast down and trampled underfoot, whilst we by victory are exalted high as heaven.

⁸ The text of Marx's German dissertation in English translation is available in Schafer (2006) 84–184. See also the selection from Marx's 'Notebooks on Epicurean Philosophy', *ibid.* 185–201.

⁹ Lucr. 1.62–79. The English translation is reproduced, with slight modification, from Rouse and Smith (1982).

That Lucretius derived the Latin noun, *religio*, from the compound verb <re-ligare> ('to bind') can be inferred from a passage in which he prepares the reader for receiving a liberating message:

primum quod magnis doceo de rebus et **artis**
religionum animum nodis exsolvere pergo (Lucr. 1.931–2)

first because my teaching is of high matters,
and I proceed to unloose the mind from
the close bonds of religious beliefs [*religionum*]

The derivation may have played a role in Marx's (and Césaire's) identification of religion as one of the strongest mental 'bonds' that keep enslaved people from understanding the material causes of their oppression.¹⁰ A second modern intellectual tributary to the confluence of ideas that Césaire assimilated concerning the 'bondage' inflicted on the mind of man by religious belief and practice has its source in the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche. We have direct documentation in the pages of *Tropiques* – the innovative local journal founded by Césaire along with a group of Martinican intellectuals, including his wife, Suzanne Césaire –, showing that Nietzsche's radical opinions concerning European cultural decadence were intensely studied by the group along with those of the surrealists and their affiliates among the contemporary French left.¹¹ On the subject of the baneful role played by the Christian religion, in particular, Nietzsche's polemic was notoriously strenuous. In his book, *The Anti-Christ*, for instance, he rails repeatedly at the Christian adherence to what he saw as degrading falsehoods at the root of man's dependent relationship to the divine. By way of illustration, I quote from a passage in that work in which, not unlike the young Marx, he expresses admiration for some aspects of the Epicurean detraction of conventional *religio*:

One should read Lucretius to comprehend what Epicurus fought: not paganism but 'Christianity', by which I mean the corruption of souls by the concepts of guilt, punishment, and immortality. He fought the subterranean cults which were exactly like a latent form of Christianity: to deny immortality was then nothing less than a real salvation.¹²

In his unremitting castigation of Christianity, Nietzsche frequently employs the metaphor of sickness to describe the decadent condition of modern European man. In a typical tirade on the subject, in which he goes so far as to assert that 'sickness is of the essence of Christianity', the figure of the cleric is singled out for special denunciation: 'The complete lack of psychological cleanliness in the priest [...] is a consequence of decadence.'

¹⁰ In the case of Césaire, the title of one of his collections of lyric poems *Ferremets (Iron Bonds)* alludes not only to the physical shackles placed upon the plantation slaves, but also to the internal psycho-dynamics that bind the oppressed colonized to their parlous spiritual condition.

¹¹ We have additional indirect testimony to Césaire's acquaintance with the Nietzschean corpus in the meta-theatrical prelude he affixed to his play *Une Tempête*, in which the *meneur de jeu* [dramaturgical persona] distributes masks to the players of the impending drama. The actor who chooses to don the mask of Prospero in this postcolonial adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is portrayed as evincing 'the will to power' (*volonté de puissance*) in a clear reference to that central Nietzschean concept. (Césaire 1969).

¹² I cite passages from Nietzsche in the translation of Kaufmann (1976) 649.

If we now compare the opening stanza of the *Cahier*, we find a parallel defamation of the unhealthy cleric, though with the significant difference that Césaire's dismissal of the figure is strictly related to the latter's historical collusion with the police state in enforcing 'law and order' in the colonies:

Au bout du petit matin . . .
 Va-t-en, lui disais-je, gueule de flic, gueule de vache, va-t-en
 je déteste les larbins de l'ordre et les hannetons de l'espérance.
 Va-t-en mauvais gris-gris, punaise de moinillon

At the close of foreday morning . . .
 Buzz off, I told the man, pig-snout, honkie-snout, buzz off!
 I despise your law-and-order lackeys, your hope-infesting termites.
 Buzz off, foul grigri, vile specimen of a cleric

Césaire's pejorative term, 'vile specimen of a cleric', is not meant to be a wholesale rejection of the Christian religion, but rather of the toxic hypocritical form it assumes as an instrument of subjugation of the black 'other' in the historical context of New World slavery. With no less virulence of tone he attacks the hypocrisy of the missionizing European colonizer in his short treatise, *Discourse on Colonialism*:

Pursuing my analysis, I find that hypocrisy is of recent date; that neither Cortez discovering Mexico from the top of the great teocalli, nor Pizzaro before Cuzco (much less Marco Polo before Camulac) claims that he is the harbinger of a superior order [...]; that the [apologists for slavery] come later; that the chief culprit in this domain is Christian pedantry, which laid down the dishonest equations Christianity = civilization, paganism = savagery, from which there could not but ensue abominable colonialist and racist consequences, whose victims were to be the Indians, the yellow peoples, and the Negroes.¹³

The motif of the blatant hypocrisy of the imperialist promoters of conventional *religio* recurs intermittently throughout the text of Césaire's *Journal of a Homecoming*. Of the numerous passages in which he employs religious imagery in the service of ironic detraction, few are more striking than these lines from §20 of the poem:

Et nos gestes imbéciles et fous pour faire revivre
 l'éclaboussement d'or des instants favorisés, le cordon
 ombilical restitué à sa splendeur fragile, **le pain, et le vin**
de la complicité, le pain, le vin, le sang des épousailles véridiques

And our idiotic, insane gestures to revive the golden
 shower of privileged moments, the umbilical cord
 restored to its fragile splendor, **the bread, and the wine**
of collusion, the bread, the wine, the bloodstain of true nuptials

Here the central rite of the Catholic mass – the communal consumption of the consecrated bread and wine, the transubstantiated body and blood of Christ in Catholic theology – is reduced to just one more instance of *gestes imbéciles* ('our idiotic, insane gestures') on the part of the forcibly converted island masses. Césaire's defiant use of the symbolism of the Christian eucharist dramatizes the complicity between the vile cleric and the slave master, as well as the ancillary fiction, promulgated by the European colonizer, to the effect that imperialist expansion was motivated principally by the desire to spread the gospel to the heathen. Césaire's burning indignation at this 'collusion' (*complicité*) was fuelled in part by his own in-depth historical study of the colonialist propaganda concerning the 'civilizing mission' that accompanied the inhuman traffic in slaves.

Let us now shift our attention to certain thematic implications of a salient metaphor for social anomie that is shared by both authors, viz. that of chronic malaise. The disease trope is unfolded at several pivotal junctures in the *Cahier*. In the poem's binary macro-structure, as I envisage it, a suite of images denoting the social abjection of the Martinican ex-slave, in the first sombre movement, is superseded by counter-images of luminous liberation in the second. There is a corresponding sequence of major metonyms in which an initial pathological state of being is cured in the latter part of the poem by a large-scale therapeutic cleansing, with the poet in the exalted role of healer. Among the densely packed iterations of disease metaphors that occur in first movement, the major image of the plague can be shown to predominate. I will limit my exposition to a few of its key occurrences in which Lucretian echoes are clearly discernible.

I begin with the hair-raising catalogue of woes that the speaker intones in an unrelenting crescendo in §17:

Au bout du petit matin, l'échouage hétéroclite, les puanteurs
 exacerbées de la corruption, les sodomies monstrueuses de l'hostie et du victimaire, les coltis
 infranchissables du préjugé et de la sottise, les prostitutions, les hypocrisies, les lubricités, les
 trahisons, les mensonges, les faux, les concussions – l'essoufflement des lâchetés insuffisantes,
 l'enthousiasme sans ahan aux poussis surnuméraires, les avidités, les hystéries, les perversions, les
 arlequinades de la misère, les estropiements, les prurits, les urticaire, les hamacs tièdes de la
 dégénérescence.
 Ici la parade des risibles et **scrofuleux bubons**, les poutures
 de microbes très étranges, les poisons sans alexitère connu,
 les sanies de plaies bien antiques, les fermentations imprévisibles
 d'espèces putrescibles.

At the close of foreday morning, the aberrant running aground,
 the high stench of corruption, the monstrous sodomies of host
 and sacrificer, the insurmountable beak-head prows of prejudice

¹³ Césaire (1955) 11.

and stupidity, the prostitutions, the hypocrisies, the lecheries,
 the treasons, the lies, the deceptions, the peculations – the loss
 of breath induced by cowardly ineffectual acts, the lackluster
 enthusiasm in redundant pushing and shoving, the greeds, the hysterias,
 the perversions, the comic routines of poverty, the crippings,
 the itchings, the hives, the lukewarm hammocks of decadence.
 Here passes by the ridiculous parade of **bubonic scrofulas**,
 the cultures of unfamiliar microbes, the poisons without
 known antidotes, the oozing pus from very old sores,
 the unpredictable fermentations of species prone to rot.

This litany of symptoms ascribed to the Martinican people strikingly combines moral and spiritual as well as physical components. The list culminates in a description of bodies ravaged by diseases that correspond to chronically degenerate inner states of mind afflicting the colonized subject – a state that has its endemic manifestation in bubonic plagues (cf. the phrase: 'the ridiculous parade of bubonic scrofulas', 'la parade des risibles et de scrofuleux bubons').

This portrayal of a mind/body disease syndrome invites comparison with the famous account of the plague that occupies the final lines of the *De Rerum Natura* 6 (6.1138 to end). The Lucretian passage, which purports to render an account of the plague at Athens in 430 BCE as related by Thucydides (2.47–52), has elicited a minor (and hopefully obsolete) debate among some older philologists, some of whom had tended to treat the Lucretian re-narration as a flawed attempt to reproduce an accurate Latin rendition of Thucydides' Greek text. The major share of the credit for having proposed a more sophisticated explanation of the discrepancies between the accounts in Thucydides and Lucretius goes to the credit of the scholar Henry Steele Commager, who pointed out the ethical (i.e. moral) subtext underlying Lucretius' account of the plague. To quote from his perceptive discussion:¹⁴

for Lucretius no less than Epicurus, this correspondence
 between body and mind was no stylistic flourish but a controlling assumption.
 The concept of a sick mankind, to be cured
 by the healing draughts of Epicureanism, was [...] a familiar
 one to Lucretius. This imaginative habit [...] makes it not
 unlikely that he should see in a physical description of disease
 an emblem of the human estate in its unregenerate form.

In his subtle transmutation of the Thucydidean intertext, Lucretius introjects a view of the plague's victims as evincing 'a mental or psychological despair, resulting from the failure of any "well founded reason (*certa ratio*)".¹⁵ This reading of the Latin poet's re-narration of the famous plague as emblematic of mankind's mental degeneration is corroborated by the terms in which Lucretius introduces the disease motif at the very start of Book 6 (1–2):

¹⁴ I cite from his path-breaking article on the subject: Commager (1957) 110.
¹⁵ Commager (1957) 113.

primae frugiparos fetus **mortalibus aegris**
 dididerunt quondam plaeclaro nomine Athenae

It was Athens of illustrious name that first in former days
 spread abroad the corn bearing crops **among suffering mankind**.

Drawing on Commager's insight, the scholar Martin Ferguson Smith has pointed out the verbal repetitions between the beginning and the end of Book 6 and concluded: 'These verbal parallelisms ... confirm that Lucretius views the Athenian plague as a physical disaster that involved moral disaster as well, and as symbolizing the moral condition of unenlightened mankind.'¹⁶ For Epicurus' fervent Latin disciple, the widespread despair of the citizenry during the emblematic plague at Athens was augmented principally by the fear of death and the desire for immortality – both anathema to central tenets of Epicurean philosophy.

Césaire's characterization of a form of putatively local disease as 'bubonic scrofula' merits further unpacking in view of his intimate knowledge of the Lucretian text. Elsewhere in his lyric corpus he had deployed the colloquial designation of scrofula as 'The King's Evil'. I quote from his poem entitled 'Ex-voto pour un naufrage' ('Ex-voto for a shipwreck'), in which the lyric speaker chronicles, in the paratactic style typical of his poetics, the historic subjugation of people of colour to imperialist states both Eastern and Western:¹⁷

I bear the king's litter
 I spread the king's carpet
 I am the king's carpet
 I bear the 'King's Evil'

The 'I' of the poem is spokesman for his subordinated race, a role that the first person pronoun also enacts, so to speak, in the pages of the *Cahier*. In the latter poem the noun, scrofula, is modified by the epithet, bubonic, which imparts a referential load especially pertinent to our analysis, for although the poem is quasi-autobiographical in tone, the authorial persona draws upon motifs and tropes that derive from conventional topoi in European literature. The naming of the emblematic disease as 'bubonic' underscores the hyperbolic aspect of the description, since the Caribbean archipelago has not historically experienced this particular endemic. This is true even in the case of Haiti, the former French colony of St. Domingue, which has been notoriously plagued by primarily tropical diseases, such as malaria, yaws and yellow fever. Césaire's inflated language in ascribing bubonic plague infestations to the populace of his native land attests to literary license in re-framing inherited tropes in line with his rhetorical agenda.¹⁸ It is noteworthy in this regard that the portrayal of the plague as an emblem of spiritual abjection has had many exemplars in modern literature, including the famous novel by Albert Camus entitled *La Peste* (*The Plague*).¹⁹

¹⁶ See Rouse and Smith (1982) 492–3 n. a.

¹⁷ See my bilingual edition of this poem, with exegetical annotations: Davis (1984) 120–4.

¹⁸ Epidemic diseases were described in the Greek medical writers (Hippocrates and Galen). However, modern scholars have not arrived at a consensus in identifying the great Athenian plague as belonging to the 'bubonic' type. See further the commentary of Bailey (1947) 1723–4, which points to the Lucretian account as a template imitated by later Latin authors, including Vergil.

¹⁹ Camus' novel (Camus 1947) was published in the same year as the Bordas edition of the *Cahier* (Césaire 1947).

Césaire's re-appropriation of the disease trope as seen through an Epicurean prism carries a historically and culturally nuanced perspective. The focus of the poet's vitriol is not, initially, on sick mankind as a whole, but rather on the abject black subject in the French Antillean context, who remains ignorant of the deeper causes of his condition, chief among them the historical and cultural disaster wrought by transatlantic slavery. In his lyric corpus Césaire occasionally refers to this catastrophic enslavement simply as *la désastre* ('the disaster'), a term that echoes the phrase that Lucretius employs to introduce his scientific account of the origin of plagues, *clades nova pestilitasque* ('novel disaster or pestilence'; Lucr. 6.1125).

The motif complex that represents the historical disaster of slavery as inflicting a figurative epidemic on black Africans is well illustrated in a later passage from the *Cahier*, in which the poet conjures up a triumphant uprising of slaves on board a slave-ship – a truly magnificent vision that symbolically reverses the genocidal horrors of the Middle Passage. As the slaves arise like ghosts from the ghastly disease-ridden hold of the slave ship and cast off their foul state of chained abjection, Césaire imagines a voice from on high proclaiming a new-found consciousness.

Et nous sommes debout maintenant, mon pays et moi,
 les cheveux dans le vent, ma main petite maintenant dans
 son poing énorme et la force n'est pas en nous, mais au-dessus
 de nous, dans une voix qui vrille la nuit et l'audience comme
 la pénétrance d'une guêpe apocalyptique. Et la voix prononce
 que l'Europe nous a pendant des siècles **gavés de mensonges**
et gonflés de pestilences, car il n'est point vrai que l'œuvre de l'homme est finie que nous
 n'avons rien à faire au monde que nous parasitons le monde qu'il suffit que nous nous mettions au
 pas du monde

And we are upright now, my country and I, hair in the wind,
 my tiny hand in its gigantic fist, and the force is not within us
 but above us, in a voice that pierces the night and the hearing
 like the invasive wasp of the apocalypse. And the voice announces that Europe has for centuries
gorged us with lies and bloated us with plagues, for it is by no means true that the work of man
 is finished, that we have nothing left to do in the world, that we parasite the world that we need
 only keep in step with the world

The voice unequivocally indicts the slave-masters for having perpetrated the horrors of the disaster, which is represented as having caused multiple chronic pestilences. Images such as these trenchantly convey the thought that the disastrous 'plagues' of European origin have led to the partial demise of whole cultures originating on the African continent.

Our argument in favour of a Lucretian intertext for Césaire's version of an emblematic plague finds support in an analysis of key items in his invented vocabulary. The text of the *Cahier* famously contains word coinages, such as nègritude, that take their peculiar shape from Latin morphology. One of these Latinate neologisms that has posed an enigma for most readers of the poem is the compound *mortiférés*, which is used to describe the spiritual abjection of the Martinican people in the following passage (§42):

Ce qui est à moi, ces quelques milliers de **mortiférés**
 qui tourment en rond dans laalebasse d'une île

What I call my own: these few thousand **mortally wounded**
 who go round and round in the calabash of an island

The freshly coined lexeme, *mortiférés*, which I have rendered in English as 'mortally wounded', models the grammatical morphology of a French plural passive participle functioning as a noun. What has Césaire done? He has ingeniously transformed the Latin epithet, *mortifer* (signifying, 'death-bringing') to create a brand new French derivative. The most probable source that inspired his coinage is the recurrence of the compound adjective, *mortifer*, in two related passages in Book 6 of the *De Rerum Natura*.²⁰

The first occurrence of the word purports to offer a general explanation of the origin of epidemics and/or pandemics in terms of the Epicurean atomic theory:

nunc ratio quae sit morbus, aut unde repente
mortiferam possit **cladem** conflare coorta
 morbida vis hominum generi pecudumque catervis,
 expediam. (Lucr. 6.1090–93)

Now I will explain the nature of diseases, and from
 what place the force of disease can suddenly gather
 together, and blow together a storm of **death-dealing disaster**
 for mankind and for flocks and herds.

The Latin author's *mortiferam ... cladem* ('death-dealing disaster') finds its distinct echo in Césaire's neologism, *mortiférés* – an etymological sound-play that interlinks the broader motif of the death of a culture with the specific 'disaster' (*clades*) of the enslavement of the West African peoples in the New World.²¹ The adjective, *mortifer*, is repeated a few lines later in the Lucretius passage with specific reference to re-narration of the plague at Athens:

haec ratio quondam morborum et **mortifer aestus**
 finibus in Cecropis funestos reddidit agro
 vastavitque vias, exhaustis civibus urbem. (Lucr. 6.1138–40)

Such a cause of disease and **death-bringing current**
 once in the realms of Cecrops poisoned the countryside,
 made the roads a desert, and drained the city of men.

²⁰ My original proposal regarding the Latin source of Césaire's erudite coinage was first published in the Introduction to *Journal of a Homecoming* (Davis [2017] 13). It is worth noting that participles so formed in Latin are normally based on the supine, which in the case of this verb, *fero*, would have taken the form *latum*.

²¹ An alternative Latin source for Césaire's coinage *mortiférés* is Caesar's *Gallie Wars* – the most commonly read text in the French lycée curriculum –, where the adjective *mortifer* is employed in more than one instance to describe a fatal wound (*vulnus mortiferum*) suffered by a soldier in battle. However, given the salient thematic intertextual connection between the *De Rerum Natura* and the *Cahier*, Lucretius is the more probable source of inspiration for the coinage.

I have earlier remarked on Commager's insight into the ethical subtext underlying the Lucretian account of the iconic plague at Athens. A closely connected facet of his remodelling of Thucydides' narrative is his interweaving of the subject of *religio* and its negative repercussions on human's perception of their fate. This prominently placed re-articulation of a seminal Epicurean preoccupation occurs, significantly enough, towards the end of the final book of the *De Rerum Natura*:

omnia denique sancta deum delubra repleat
 corporibus mors exanimis onerataque passim
 cuncta cadaveribus caelestum templa manebant,
 hospitibus loca quae complebant aedituentes.
**nec iam religio divom nec numina magni
 pendebantur enim: praesens dolor exsuperabat.** (Lucr. 6.1272–7)

Moreover, death had filled all the sanctuaries of the gods
 with lifeless bodies, all the temples of the celestials
 everywhere remained burdened with corpses – all places
 that the sacristans had crowded with guests. **For indeed
 now neither the worship of the gods [*religio divom*]
 nor their power was much regarded: the present grief
 was too great.**

While Lucretius displays immense pathos in the lugubrious depiction of the temples of the gods piled high with corpses, there is at the same time a measure of irony in the remark that the cult of the gods (*religio divom*) was no longer accorded great value by the Athenians. In the poet's lurid portrayal of the emotional impact of the plague among the suffering populace we discern the shadow of the Epicurean doctrine regarding the basic futility of religious worship in the face of unavoidable and widespread mortality. Stark fear and extreme perturbation on the part of moribund mortals – the very emotions that are antithetical to the core Epicurean ideal of *ataraxia* ('mental tranquillity') – are manifested starkly in the Athenians' reaction to the endemic, as it rapidly decimates the citizen body.

The cataclysmic ending of the *De Rerum Natura* is therefore a graphic embodiment of humans' fear of death as they confront the implications of the blatant absence of the gods – an embodiment that serves to underscore a central doctrine of the Epicurean system. There could be no more effective rhetorical means of driving home the message of the school regarding the god's indifference to human affairs – a message disseminated in the very first of the collection of 'Principal Doctrines' ascribed to the founder:

τὸ μακάριον καὶ ἀφθαρτὸν οὔτε αὐτὸ πράγματα ἔχει
 οὔτε ἄλλω παρέχει, ὥστε οὔτε ὀργαῖς οὔτε χάρισι συνέχεται

what is blessed and indestructible [sc. the divine] has no troubles itself, nor does it give trouble to anyone, so that it is not affected by feelings of anger or gratitude.²²

The closing scene of the *De Rerum Natura*, though utterly horrifying in its graphic portrayal of the plague, is by no means as nihilistic and enigmatic as it has often been made to appear on a superficial reading, for the author makes it crystal clear at several junctures throughout the poem that the potential triumph of man over the fear of death – even in the midst of a catastrophic pandemic – is one of the chief benefits that Epicurus had bestowed on oppressed humanity.²³ As the founder himself is reputed to have accepted his own imminent demise with courage and equanimity despite suffering agonizing pain, so too does the speaking subject of the *Cahier* arrive at a moment of supreme confidence in coming to terms with the dismal plague that symbolizes the historical trauma of the black people of the Antilles (§132–3):

Tenez je ne suis plus qu'un homme
 aucune dégradation, aucun crachat ne le conturbe,
 je ne suis plus qu'un homme qui accepte
 n'ayant plus de colère (il n'a plus dans le
 coeur que de l'amour immense et qui brûle)

J'accepte . . . j'accepte . . . entièrement, sans réserve . . .
**ma race qu'aucune ablution d'hysope et de lys mêlés
 ne pourrait purifier**
 ma race rongée de macules
 ma race raisin mûr pour pieds ivres
 ma reine de crachats et de lèpres
 ma reine de fouets et de **scrofules**
ma reine de squasmes et de chloasmes

Hear me: I am just a human being, unperturbed by any
 humiliation, by any disgusting spit, I am just a human
 being who accepts, who has relinquished anger (in my
 heart there is only love, immense, ablaze)

I accept . . . I accept . . . entirely, without reserve . . .
**my race that no ablution of hyssop blended with lilies
 could ever cleanse**

²² *KD* 1. The translation is from Inwood and Gerson (1994) 32.

²³ The plague description that rounds off the *De Rerum Natura* is, in my opinion, intended to dramatize a historical paradigm of the fear of death writ large and the total indifference of the gods to the suffering of mortals – hence a vivid example of an implicit Q.E.D in clinching the poem's central argument.

my race ravaged with pox
my race, ripened grape for drunken feet to crush
my queen of spit, of leprosy
my queen of whips, of **scrofulas**
my queen of squamas, of chloasmas

This climactic and moving articulation of Césaire's gesture towards reconciliation with the colonizer on the basis of his own inner enlightenment contains a subtle dialectical fusion of rejection and acceptance. On the one hand, the speaker repeats his strictures against the abuse of religion by the European master in his repudiation of Christian rituals of cleansing via the condensed imagery of the phrase 'no ablution of hyssop blended with lilies'; on the other hand, he declares his "acceptance" of the grim reality of the cultural degeneration of an ex-slave populace as depicted in the trope of the plague ('my queen of whips, of scrofulas').²⁴ The gendered personification of the island and its inhabitants in this passage (here as 'queen of scrofulas') is a figure of speech that Césaire unfolds in several other poems in his lyric corpus.²⁵

In a typical rhetorical ploy the speaker's reiteration of his notional 'acceptance' in this pivotal passage, though striking a pose of humility, is also meant to be taken with a grain of salt. Césaire's sardonic tone does not, of course, imply his forgiveness of the slave master, let alone his acquiescence in the subjugation of his race, but rather his awareness that the sole antidote he can administer for the painful disease suffered by the Martinican people is to re-awaken in them their repressed resources of courage and resilience in the face of disaster.

As we have noted earlier, it is a paramount aspect of the Lucretian account of the plague that the gods, in accordance with the Epicureans' radical conception, notoriously do not come to the rescue of human beings during the course of misfortunes great or small. Their absence from the scene of the plague is conspicuous even as mounting piles of human corpses clog the approaches to the temples and the sacred precincts. Epicurean natural philosophy imagined the abodes of the gods to be located in the distant *intermundia* ('spaces among worlds'), where their denizens enjoy an existence devoid of all pain and anxiety. Their ontological privilege allows them to sustain a state of blissful tranquillity (*ataraxia*) for all eternity. In the words of Lucretius (1.44–9):

omnis enim per se divom natura necessest
immortali aevo summa cum pace fruatur
semota a nostris rebus seuinctaque longe;
nam privata dolore omni, privata periclis,
ipsa suis pollens opibus, nil indiga nostri,
nec bene promeritis capitur neque tangitur ira

for the very nature of divinity must necessarily enjoy immortal
life in the deepest peace, far removed and separated from
our affairs; for without any pain, without danger, itself mighty

²⁴ The allegorization of the Martinican cultural space as 'queen' also finds a parallel in certain ancient Roman Imperial propaganda vehicles – as evidenced in coins, for example – that represent conquered provincial people assimilated into the Empire in the form of female figures.

²⁵ E.g. in the poems 'Magique' and 'Dit d'Errance', on which see the annotations in Davis (1984) 30–36, 102–12.

in its own resources, needing us not at all, **it is neither
propitiated with services nor touched by wrath**

The serene indifference of the divine beings to human affairs of any kind, but especially to the pain and suffering of mortals, is a motif that recurs at several points in the argument of the *Journal*. Two brief examples will suffice to convey the tone of Césaire's incorporation of the idea of a detached divinity. The first occurs in §51 in the context of his repudiation of a European intellectual universe governed by the principles of Cartesian logic, in which the speaking subject casually proclaims the disinterested state of mind of the gods at the climax of a series of brusque paradoxes:

Et vous savez le reste

Que 2 et 2 font 5
que la forêt miaule
que l'arbre tire les marrons du feu
que le ciel se lisse la barbe
et caetera et caetera . . .

And you know the rest:
That 2 plus 2 equals 5
that the forest meows
that the tree draws maroons from the fire
that the sky strokes its beard
et cetera et cetera . . .

The celestial region in this image is personified as a god (*le ciel*) who solemnly strokes his beard in silent disengagement from all earthly concerns. The personification of the divine being as a male god with a beard insinuates a caricature of the Christian iconography and accentuates the speaker's subversive stance concerning the futility of established trust in the beneficent institutions of the European master.

In the second of our two illustrative texts, the argument centres on the envisaged disappearance of the compliant black in post-emancipation Atlantic societies, the stereotype of the Uncle Tom in the US social imaginary, whom Césaire refers to as representative of the 'le vieux nègritude' ('the old negritude') (§159–60):

C'était un très bon nègre.
Et on lui jetait des pierres, des bouts de ferraille, des tessons
de bouteille, mais ni ces pierres, ni cette ferraille, ni ces
bouteilles . . .
O quiètes années de Dieu sur cette motte terraquée!

He was a very good negro.
And they pelted him with stones, bits of old iron, broken glass bottles; but neither those stones, nor
this old iron, nor these broken glass bottles . . .

O calm years of God upon this lump of earth and water!

The phrase 'calm years of God', like the gesture of Heaven stroking his beard, conjures up the cool indifference of the divine order to the mundane outrages perpetrated in the grim annals of man's inhumanity to man. At the same time, the 'calmness' attributed to the detached father-figure ironically subtends the idea of Epicurean tranquillity that subverts the vaunted belief system promulgated by the colonizer.

Césaire's inflection of the Epicurean/Lucretian critique of *religio* as a source of misfortune and perverted piety contains a double indictment of Christian proselytism in the context of the so-called 'civilizing mission' ('la mission civilisatrice') of the hegemonic European powers. As he was by no means the first to observe, the Christianization agenda went hand in hand with the denigration of the traditional African religious systems through the polemic of large-scale demonization. By recasting the various pantheons of the oppressed African 'others' as so many bands of devils operating within the Christian mythological framework, the French colonialists sought to subsume the 'pagan' religious beliefs and practices under the self-serving label of primitive 'animism' (the supposed worship of objects in the natural world).²⁶ A relatively early instance of the motif of demonized African religious practices occupies three short stanzas of the *Cahier* that read like a mock confession made under duress (§58–9):

je déclare mes crimes et qu'il n'y a rien à dire pour ma défense.
Dances. Idoles. Relaps. Moi aussi.

J'ai assassiné Dieu de ma paresse de mes paroles de mes gestes de mes chansons obscènes

J'ai porté des plumes de perroquet des dépouilles de chat musqué
J'ai lassé la patience des missionnaires

insultés les bienfaiteurs de l'humanité.
Défié Tyr. Défié Sidon.
Adoré le Zambèze.
L'étendue de ma perversité me confond!

I confess my crimes and declare there is nothing I can
plead in my defense.
Dances. Idols. Relapses. I also.

I have done in God with my laziness with my words with my gestures with my obscene songs

I have worn parrot feathers musk-cat skins
I have worn down the patience of missionaries

²⁶ In the long run, the demonized African religions were never thoroughly rooted out in the Antilles. In some cases they were forced to survive underground, while in others they were to a greater or lesser degree subtly fused with the saints of Catholic worship by a process described in the anthropological literature as 'syncretism' (cf. the Afro-Caribbean cults of Vodun in Haiti and Santería in Cuba, on which see the synoptic rudimentary treatment by Bastide 1996).

insulted the benefactors of humanity
Defied Tyre. Defied Sidon.
Worshipped the Zambesi.
The sheer scale of my perversity confounds me!

The sarcasm manifested in this pseudo-confession is matched in a slightly later passage in which the speaker assumes the mask of a rebellious Satan in order to subvert the regime of cultural repression (§70):

Alors voilà le grand défi et l'**impulsion**
sataniques et l'insolente
dérive nostalgique de lunes rousses,
de feux verts, de fièvres jaunes!

Here comes the great challenge
demonic impetus, insubordinate
nostalgic drift of red moons,
of green fires, of yellow fevers!

The rebellion that the poetic persona is here invoking finds historical resonance in the heroic resistance to plantation slavery on the part of the insurgent masses in the campaigns of Toussaint L'Ouverture and his black commanders, such as Dessalines and Christophe, against the army sent by Napoleon to Saint Domingue in an abortive attempt to restore slavery in the French Antilles. 'Green fires' evoke those set by the militant insurgents in the sugar-cane-fields, and 'yellow fever' outbreaks refer to those endemics that historically decimated the French troops under Napoleon's general Le Clerc and contributed to the ultimate defeat of the French armies. The 'demonic impetus', then, is not confined in scope to the defiant words of the individual speaker, but connotes a visionary re-emergence of the communal aggressive spirit that once inspired the slave rebellions of the late eighteenth century.²⁷

Elsewhere in the poem Césaire calls attention to a different response to cultural demonization in which the submissive, as opposed to the rebellious, slave internalizes the devil identity in the very negative terms inculcated by the missionizing master: (§156):

Et voici ceux qui ne se consolent point **de n'être pas faits**
à la ressemblance de Dieu mais du diable, ceux qui considèrent
que l'on est nègre comme commis de seconde classe: en attendant
mieux et avec possibilité de monter plus haut; ceux qui battent la
chamade devant soi-même, ceux qui vivent dans un cul de basse fosse de soi-même

And there are those who are in no way consoled **for having been**

²⁷ Césaire published a short monograph on the career and historical significance of Toussaint L'Ouverture (Césaire 1968). The black general also makes an appearance in the text of the *Cahier*, where his imprisonment and death are poignantly described (see *Journey*, §§ 44 and 45).

made in the image not of God but of the devil, and those who think that to be black is to be a subaltern clerk: meanwhile they wait for something better and a chance for promotion; those who sound the drumbeat of surrender in their own faces; those who live in the black hole of the dungeon of their innermost selves.

In Césaire's didactic discourse, what matters most for the eventual success of the project of decolonization lies in the discarding of the toxic self-image that has been embedded in the psyche of subordinated blacks.

In the grandiose imaginary envisaging the total transformation of the colonial system, Césaire's poem enacts a prophetic vision that is manifested as cataclysmic violence, conveyed in metaphors of unleashed elemental forces in nature. Césaire's favourite trope for violent transformation of the socio-political order that recurs throughout his literary corpus is the volcanic eruption. As is commonly observed in this regard, the catastrophic eruption of Mt. Pelée in 1902, which buried the entire city of Saint Pierre, Martinique, in its lava outflow, functions as a central icon of the destruction of the colonial order. Césaire himself has repeatedly referred to his poetry in interviews as figuratively volcanic in its tone and impact.

In the Lucretian account of the origin of volcanic activity that is given in Book 6, Mt. Etna in Sicily is chosen as the major paradigm. In his explication of the phenomenon of volcanism the poet is at pains to make the point that the catastrophes of the Etnean variety are cosmic in their atomic genesis and spatial extension (see vv. 639–45). Lucretius then goes on to develop an analogy between the movement of atoms ('seeds' in his lexicon) that cause volcanic eruptions and those that cause plagues:

numquis enim nostrum miratur, siquis in artus
 accepit calido febrim fervore coortam
 aut alium quemvis morbi per membra dolorem?
 obturgescit enim subito pes, arripit acer
 saepe dolor dentes, oculos invadit in ipsos
 existit **sacer ignis** et urit corpore serpens
 quamcumque arripuit partim, repitque per artus,
nimirum quia sunt multarum semina rerum,
 et satis haec tellus morbi caelumque mali fert,
 unde queat vis immensi prorescere morbi.
 sic igitur toti caelo terraeque putandumst
 ex infinito satis omnia suppeditare,
 unde repente queat tellus concussa moveri
 perque mare ac terras rapidus percurrere turbo,
 ignis abundare Aetnaeus, flammescere caelum;
 (Lucr. 6.655–69)

For is there any of us who feels wonder, if someone has got into his limbs a fever that gathers with burning heat, or any other pain from disease throughout his body?

For the foot suddenly swells, a sharp aching often seizes the teeth, or invades the eyes themselves, **the accursed fire** appears creeping over the body and burning each part it takes hold on, and crawls over the limbs, **assuredly because there are seeds of many things**, and this earth and sky produce enough noxious disease that from it may grow forth an immeasurable quantity of disease. In this way therefore we must believe that a supply of all things is brought up from the infinite to the whole heaven and earth, enough to enable the earth on a sudden to quake and move, the swift whirlwind to scour over land and sea, Etna's fires to overflow, the heaven to burst in a blaze;

The onset of the plague is here described in the language of an internal blazing sensation, the so-called 'accursed fire' (*sacer ignis*), which the ancient Greeks referred to as *erysipelas*.²⁸ It is by no means fortuitous that the Martinican bard employs the transliterated Greek lexeme, *erysipelas*, in one of several passages in which he is credited with harnessing the elemental powers of nature in the service of violent revolution (§72):

Des mots? Quand nous manions des quartiers de monde, quand nous épousons des continents en délire, quand nous forçons de fumantes portes, des mots, ah oui, des mots! mais des mots de sang frais, des mots qui sont des raz-de-marée et **des érysipèles** et des paludismes et des laves et des feux de brousse, et des flambées de chair, et des flambées de villes ...

Words? When we handle whole regions of the globe, when we marry continents in delirium, when we force open smoking doors? words, ah yes, words! but fresh-blooded words, words that are tsunamis and **erysipelas** malarial fevers and lava flows and brush fires, and burnings of flesh, and burnings of cities ...

The ancient Greek word, *erysipelas*, that Césaire loosely transliterates into French as a plural formation, *érysipèles*, is extremely rare, being attested chiefly in Greek medical treatises such as the Hippocratic corpus and Galen. Its very rarity testifies to the intertextual connection with Lucretius, since it appears in the form of a gloss in standard editions of the *De Rerum Natura*, which explain it as the equivalent of the Latin term, *sacer ignis* ('accursed fire').²⁹ Though Césaire's transliteration of this esoteric Greek word is imprecise (the second syllable in the Greek is the letter upsilon), it presents salient confirmation of the fact that he is thereby alluding to the two Lucretian references to the accursed fire (*sacer ignis*) that occur in Book 6 of the *De Rerum Natura*.³⁰

²⁸ The Césairean transliteration, *érysipèles*, is, whether by design or error, inexact.

²⁹ It is highly probable that Césaire would have been familiar with the erudite annotations of the phrase *sacer ignis* to be found in the Budé edition of the *De rerum natura* by the renowned French philologist Alfred Ernout, whose gloss that reads, in part: 'C'est l'érysipèle gangreneux'; he documents it by a citation of Isidore of Seville (*Orig.* 4.8.4): *erysipelas est quem Latini sacrum ignem appellant...* (Ernout 1924). The authoritative English editions of Bailey (1947) and Rouse/Smith (1982) also repeat the traditional identification of *sacer ignis* with *erysipelas*.

³⁰ See lines 6.660 and 1164.

The last item in the catalogue of natural disasters, 'burning cities' ('des flambées de villes'), recalls the 'flaming ramparts of the world' (*flammanitia moenia mundi*), which is a recurrent phrase in the *De Rerum Natura* used to describe the victory of Epicurus over the entrenched barriers of false belief and *religio*. The extravagant central claim of the *Cahier* passage is that a poet's words have the magical power to unleash an arsenal of natural disasters for the purpose of overwhelming and destroying the colonial order. To fulfil this ambitious goal, he reverses the roles of victim and perpetrator, with the result that phenomena like the plague or a volcanic eruption become the potent instruments, figuratively speaking, of a people no longer passive and inert but, on the contrary, proactive in the struggle to bring about a revolutionary transformation of society. The figure of the city in flames is, at bottom, self-reflexive, in so far as the verbal arsenal is unleashed in the progress of the poem and erupts on the page before the eyes and ears of the reader.

The spectacular portrayal by Lucretius of a triumphant philosopher/hero or his mouthpiece, the/poet/magician, who has trampled *religio* beneath his feet and ascends to the higher realms, having left behind the 'flaming ramparts of the world', may create the false impression that the founder and his school were antagonistic to all forms of worship of supra-human deities. It is important to reiterate, however, that in practice, no less than in theory, the Epicureans did not deny the existence of the gods; rather, in their peculiar angle of conception, the gods, though remote and detached, were considered worthy of emulation by virtue of their tranquil, anxiety-free state of being. For this basic reason, the followers of the Epicurean adherents did not refrain from participation in the cults of the traditional pantheon – albeit with the crucial qualification that the worshipper should approach the shrines of the gods fortified by a true understanding of the nature of the divine beings.

The *De Rerum Natura* provides clear evidence of a worshipful attitude towards a personified Nature (*Natura*) on the part of the philosopher-poet. Already in the hymnal prelude to the poem, the goddess Venus, who is lauded as a source of pleasure (*voluptas*), is rapturously invoked in hymnal style as a beneficent figure (*alma Venus*, 'nurturing Venus'), who functions as a virtual fertility-goddess of the traditional type that was widespread in the ancient Mediterranean and some adjacent Near Eastern cultures. Césaire also nurtured a beneficent vision of a maternal Nature as an alternative to conventional Christian *religio*. For both authors, as articulated in the Césairean text and the Lucretian intertext, true piety resides in devotion, not to the conventional pantheon, but to a revealed truth that is deeply rooted in a secular philosophy.

Within the discursive universe of the *De Rerum Natura*, cognitive enlightenment, as we have noted earlier, is the essential therapeutic agent that cures the sick mind and thereby makes it possible for mortals to live a life devoid of pain and psychic turbulence. In the Lucretian account of cognitive illumination, as we have seen, the awesome force of the founder's intellect is the key factor in dispelling the mental terror to which mankind as a whole is subject – a point driven home in the poem's first of several encomia to Epicurus, where he asserts in a vigorous line marked by a trenchant alliteration: *ergo vivida vis animi pervicit* ('therefore the lively power of his mind prevailed'; 1.72).

In Césaire's *Journey* the pivotal moment of illumination that follows a long process of self-examination and thoughtful scrutiny of the dismal history of the Black Atlantic is signalled in the most emphatic terms (§109):

Tiède petit matin de chaleurs et de peurs ancestrales
par-dessus bord mes richesses pérégrines
par-dessus bord mes faussetés authentiques

Mais quel étrange orgueil tout soudain m'illumine?

Foreday morning warm with inherited heat and fears
I toss overboard my alien wealth

I toss overboard my authentic self-deceptions

But what strange pride illumines me all of a sudden?

The strange pride that illumines the poet is the outcome of his honest self-searching during the dialectical trajectory of the *Cahier*. In a moment of intellectual epiphany he is able to stand up and openly condemn the violence perpetrated on African peoples. In the robust imagery of the passage the poet performs a speech act in which the infamous historical event in which a slave-trader tossed aboard some of his human cargo to secure his insurance payment on his property is upended: what is tossed overboard, instead, by the enlightened speaker, are the self-deceptions that have been ingrained in the minds of the enslaved.³¹

This scenario of sublime transcendence of abject bondage reaches its grand finale in the penultimate stanza of the *Cahier*, in which the poet-speaker, addressing a prayer, first to the power of a strong wind and then to the dove of peace, envisions his ascension to the sky to join the stars in the empyrean (§173):

lie-moi de tes vastes bras à l'argile lumineuse
lie ma noire vibration au nombril même du monde
lie-moi, lie-moi fraternité âpre
puis, m'étranglant de ton lasso d'étoiles
monte, Colombe

bind me with your vast arms to the luminous clay
bind my black vibration to the very navel of the world
bind, o bind me, bitter fraternity,
then lassoing me with your noose of stars
ascend, Dove

The speaker's appeal to be transported to the empyrean, I submit, is modelled, in part, on the motif of the intellectual hero of the *De Rerum Natura* who is imagined as joining the immortal divinities in the Epicurean *intermundia* ('spaces among worlds'). In the Lucretian model the god-like exaltation of the liberating hero is shared by all enlightened mortals, as is unambiguously patent in the metaphorical formulation:

quare **religio** pedibus subiecta vicissim
obteritur, **nos exaequat victoria caelo** (Lucr. 1.78–9)

therefore **religio** is now in her turn cast down and trampled
underfoot, while **we by the victory are exalted high as heaven**

³¹ For a probing theoretical analysis of the notorious incident, see Baucom (2005).

In the Césairean adaptation of the ascension motif, it is equally clear that the speaker incudes the enlightened Martinican populace in his climactic vision, since he has, at an earlier pivotal stage in the poem, identified himself as embodying his compatriots and sharing their abjection.³²

I conclude this discussion of shared motifs, imagery and thought between Lucretius and Césaire with an analysis of the very last word of the *Cahier*, which has come to be regarded by critics as an interpretive crux. In the spirit of A.E. Housman, I will propose a solution to this philological enigma.

The *Cahier* famously ends with a cryptic neologism, *verrition*, a substantive modified by the epithet, *immobile* (§174):

monte lécheur de ciel
et le grand trou noir où je voulais me noyer l'autre lune
c'est là que je veux pêcher maintenant la langue maléfique de la nuit en
son **immobile verrition!**

ascend to lick the sky
and the great black hole wherein I longed to drown myself the other moon
that's where I now long to fish out the night's malicious tongue in its **sweeping stillness!**

The primary intertexts for Césaire's inspired coinage are, I propose, several Lucretian passages employing the Latin verb *verro* ('sweep') that vividly describe the effect of a violent storm at sea:

summa etiam cum **vis violenti per mare venti**
induperatorem classis super aequora **verrit**
cum validis pariter legionibus atque elephantis (Lucr. 5.1226–8)

also when **the extreme violence of a strong wind**
at sea sweeps the commander of a fleet over the
surface of the ocean along with his powerful legions
and elephants

Here, as well as in two other passages, Lucretius deploys the same Latin verb, *verro* (in its connotation, 'sweep')³³, to convey the 'violent force of a strong wind' (*vis violenti ... venti*) that clears the surface of the ocean of all ships in its path.³⁴ Césaire's novel abstract noun, *verrition*, is ostensibly formed from the present stem of the verb *verro*. In this passage from Lucretius the discursive context of the Latin verb is the poet's listing of severe meteorological phenomena of the kind that ignorant mortals mistakenly attribute to the action of malevolent gods. In the section of the exposition immediately preceding the description Lucretius expostulates loudly on the self-imposed misery that humans suffer owing to false beliefs concocted by *religio*:

³² See §99: 'Cette ville, ma face de boue' ('This town, my face of mud').

³³ See *OLD* under *verro* (2).

³⁴ Cf. the phrase *verrentes aequora venti*, which occurs at *De Rerum Natura* 5.266 and 5.388.

O genus infelix humanum, **talia divis**
cum tribuit facta atque iras adiunxit acerbas!
quantos tum gemitus ipsi sibi, quantaque nobis
volnera, quas lacrimas peperere minoribu' nostris! (Lucr. 5.1194–7)

O unhappy race of mankind, **to ascribe such doings**
to the gods, and to attribute to them bitter wrath as well!
What groans did they then create for themselves, what
wounds for us, what tears for generations to come!

It is striking to observe that the image of 'sweeping' is also foreshadowed at a crucial juncture in the *Cahier* in the context of the poet's newly recovered sense of invigoration (§155):

et mes yeux **balayent** mes kilomètres carrés de terre paternelle
and my eyes **sweep over** the square kilometers of my paternal earth

The concomitant suggestion of an act of cleansing in the French verb, *balayer*, is also foreshadowed in the extended emblem of the slave ship that becomes the scene of an imagined resurrection in the course of the Middle Passage, where the vessel is accorded the epithet *lustrale* ('lustral'), which is cognate with the Latin word *lustrum*, referring to a ritual period of cleansing (§167):

et **le navire lustrale** s'avancer impavide sur les eaux écroulées
and **the lustral vessel** advances without fear over the whelming flood

The ritual act of 'lustration' – ironically annexed from the sphere of ancient Roman *religio* – rounds off the poem's thematic programme of cleansing the mind of the colonized from the self-destructive social identities that it has been obliged to assume. In the poem's imaginary the figurative confluence of strong wind and ritual cleansing is saliently represented in the cathartic finale and, most conspicuously, in its ultimate word, the neologism *verrition*, which succinctly summarizes the performance trajectory of the entire *Cahier*.³⁵

The textual inter-relations we have established between Césaire's *Journal of a Homecoming* and Lucretius' didactic poem *On the Nature of Things* have facilitated our decipherment of the riddle posed by the closing line of the *Cahier*, which, by its very position, highlights an invented vocable, combined with a modifying adjective, to form a striking oxymoron: *immobile verrition* ('lustral stillness' in my English rendition). A philological gloss on the word *verrition* provides me with a fitting platform from which to make a few closing remarks on Césaire's postcolonial reception of the *De Rerum Natura*.

³⁵ The cathartic metaphor of the grand finale also acquires the status of an oxymoron, whereby the noun *verrition* is conjoined with the epithet *immobile*.

My interpretative method in this essay has been to treat allusions to the Latin treatise as a portal for exploring the substructure of ideas on which the *Cahier* is built. To recapitulate our main argument: Césaire's poetic dialogue with the Latin disciple of Epicurus focusses on the corrosive association between received religious affiliation, on the one hand, and the trope of a diseased human condition, on the other. For Lucretius the liberation of abject humanity is accomplished by their overcoming the fear of death and futile reliance on divine intervention; for Césaire the liberation of an oppressed sector of abject humanity – the colonized black ex-slave population of Martinique – functions in the poem's grand finale as a metonym for the liberation of human beings as a whole. For both philosophical poets the freedom of the mind from the bondage of ignorance is equivalent to the elevation of human beings to the ontological status of the divine.

Our literary inquiry into Césaire's recasting of central radical ideas and tropes he encountered in the *De Rerum Natura* may help to shed light on the vexed political question of the ideology that shaped his leadership in the day-to-day arena of government in post-colonial Martinique. The heated scholarly controversy revolves around the notion of 'anti-assimilation', which had been adopted as the battle-cry of the French students in Paris in the very crucible of the Negritude movement. Césaire has been roundly criticized by progressive thinkers for having espoused the 'assimilation' of former French colonies in the Antilles into a centralized system of governance known by the official term of 'departmentalization', whereby overseas territories, such as Martinique and Guadeloupe, were fully incorporated into the French nation.³⁶ Our analysis conducted from a literary perspective suggests that the binary opposition, as it is often conceived, between assimilationist and anti-assimilationist rhetoric needs to be qualified as reductionist, if not simplistic.

As a coda to this lecture, I would like to offer further documentation of Césaire's appropriation and remodelling of tropes and patterns of thought that he encountered in the *De Rerum Natura*. An illuminating instance of such a re-purposing of a Lucretian topos occurs beyond the boundaries of the text of the *Cahier*. In the course of a press conference that Césaire gave on the occasion of his decision not to run for re-election as deputy to the French National Assembly, Césaire is said to have quoted a line from Lucretius that I have reproduced in bold as the final passage illustrating this paper:

sic rerum saepe novatur
semper, et inter se mortales mutua vivunt:
augescunt aliae gentes, aliae minuuntur,
inque brevi spatio mutantur saecula animantum
et quasi cursores vitae lampada tradunt. (Lucr. 2.75–9)

Thus the sum of things is ever being renewed,
and mortal creatures live dependent one upon
another. Some species increase, others diminish.
and in a short space the generations of living creatures
are changed **and, like runners, pass on the torch of life.**

³⁶ See Véron (2021) 287–93 for the most authoritative and thoroughly documented account of Césaire's leading role in the legislative process – including his 'reconfiguration' of the idea of 'assimilation'.

Césaire gave as his principal reason for declining to run for re-election on the eve of his eightieth birthday his unwillingness to perpetuate a 'gerontocracy'. The Lucretian metaphor he cited in the original Latin refers to the ancient Greek athletic event of the relay torch-race.³⁷ As a Caribbean scholar working in the field of Classics and Comparative literature who recently retired at the advanced age of 80, I am happy to conclude this lecture by echoing, in my turn, the shared trope of 'passing the torch' in the pursuit of reception studies of the Classics in post-colonial literature to a younger generation of Latinists.

³⁷ My source for the biographical anecdote regarding Césaire's citation of Lucretius' verse is Toumson and Henry-Valmore (1993) 213. On the ancient Greek torch-race see the commentary of Bailey (1947) ad loc.

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Cover drawing of a Baobab tree by Ermina Osob.
– The Baobab tree occurs as an emblem of negritude in Césaire's poetry