M. Blérald, Marc Lony & Kathleen Gyssels (eds.)


Antonella Emina (ed.)


In the past decade, research on Léon-Gontran Damas has enjoyed a resurgence of considerable depth. With the arrival of these two new volumes, analysis of his work and life is flourishing. Considering the gaps in knowledge that readers have had to contend with in order to reach a reading of this often-overlooked writer that makes any sense, they represent both introductions for initiates and enriching compendiums for enthusiasts.

For readers new to Damas, I recommend beginning with *Léon-Gontran Damas: poète, écrivain patrimonial et postcolonial.* It is not less critical than Antonella Emina’s book, but it does require less initial knowledge. It is the product of two 2012 colloquia, one in Cayenne and one in Paris. The objectives are to render homage to Damas on his centenary and to offer research that advances knowledge about him. The first part includes the lyrics to “Hommage à Léon-Gontran,” written in 1978 by Élie Stephenson for the musical group Les Neg’ Marrons, and a brief note by Serge Patient about the value of starting to read Damas’s œuvre with *Pigments.* It is followed by Gisèle Bourquin’s personal memories of Damas. These introductory materials provide insight into Damas’s relationships with colleagues and students, and his legacy in this context.

The second part offers a wealth of musical and lyrical analyses of the poetry in *Pigments* and *Black-Label,* and constitutes a desperately needed resource for those beginning to study Damas. It also represents a good starting point for investigating Damas’s musicality and the techniques he used to facilitate the performance of his poetry. Essays by Nicolas Darbon and Gérald Désert show how Damas’s musical syncopations reverse expectations of genre and ideology in the French canon.

The third part addresses humanism, a previously underexplored aspect of Damas studies. Marielle Ledy writes about his communication of the human condition, arguing that “Damas symbolise la crise identitaire d’un créole qui tente de se définir en tant que tel” (p. 145). Monique Blérald carries this idea of displacement further by comparing Damas to a troubadour and knight (pp. 148–49). Damas can thus be seen in this section as a perpetually changing figure who defies the expectations of a normative and stable Frenchness, and as someone who suffers from a lack of belonging.
The fourth part concludes with perspectives on what it means to call Damas a postcolonial thinker, exploring the full sense of being against colonialism in the hope of moving beyond it. Essays by Alexander Dickow, Kathleen Gyssels, and others illustrate the historical context of Damas the inter- and postwar writer and politician, in order to explain how and why the purpose of his writing was to “continuer d'être contre” (Dickow, p. 229).

*Léon-Gontran Damas: Cent ans en noir et blanc* represents an intimate encounter with literary criticism on Damas, and seeks more nuanced articulations of his work, particularly in prose, and an investigation of Damas the person, the author, and the politician. The first section offers an homage to Damas on his centenary. Daniel Maximin presents a biographical and poetic portrait of him as a peripatetic figure, representing him as fully engaged with, yet haunted by, colonial experience. Above all, it affirms a generous, feeling, and committed author who also donned a sardonic character in both his life and his writing. Femi Ojo-Ade shares his memory of Damas as an external examiner for his doctoral thesis on René Maran, recalling that, based on the comments he received, he thought he would fail (p. 27). Damas's acerbic role-playing apparently relaxed after the examination, but the example serves to remind us that Damas's character was influenced by his voluntary exile, both socially and geographically. He did not die in Cayenne or Paris, but in Washington DC (in contrast to Léopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire, who both had state funerals). Maryse Condé recollects the impression that Damas's poetry left on her students, underscoring his universality; one of her students was inspired to compare Damas's angst to the despair of the jazz singer Billie Holiday (p. 52).

The second section analyzes Damas's poetry. Ojo-Ade revisits his treatment of *Pigments*, relating Damas's marquee poems to his life and work; Kathleen Gyssels aptly conveys the erasure of gender and identity that *Black-Label* expresses; and Isabella Maria Zoppi turns to Damas’s translations of Langston Hughes in order to understand that Damas was not only translating, but also rewriting Hughes for a Francophone audience. Ojo-Ade rethinks “Hoquet” and other poems in *Pigments* to show that the overarching hegemony in racism cannot be ignored or reimagined through a simulacra of multiculturalism, whereas Gyssels pinpoints Damas's personal expressions of the tragedy of colonialism, and still even so, Zoppi contends that when Damas rewrites Hughes through his translation, he elevates Hughes's language. Through these contributions we see Damas as both a singular and universal figure in Francophone writing.

The third section contains an analysis of the significant role of language and symbolism in the author's works, especially in *Veillées noires*, Damas's collection of Guyanese folktales. Marie-Christine Hazaël-Massieux examines the use of Guyanese Creole in *Pigments, Veillées noires*, and *Black-Label*; Marco
Modensi and Jacques Chevrier discuss the broader thematic significance of *Veillées noires* for Damas, and for his interpretation of oral tradition; and Lilian Pestre d'Almeida’s essay on his edited anthologies *Poètes d’expression française* and *La nouvelle somme de la poésie du monde noir* considers how they figure in his interest for representing comparative experiences—whether colonial or neocolonial.

Criticism in the fourth section tempers the homage with the contributors’ views on the way Damas perceived himself within the colonized world. For example, Emmanuel Lézy argues that *Retour de Guyane* and its companion texts, the “écrits journalistiques,” are problematic because they ignore Amerindian genocide, and because they focus exclusively on the French *département* of Guyane and its incomplete colonization, without including consideration of British or Dutch Guiana. Antonella Emina studies exoticism across Damas’s corpus through an enumeration of the uses of *ici* and *là*, and the contexts in which these terms are used, teasing out the way they contribute to a postcolonial analysis of the literature.

The question that I would ask is: from where does Damas speak, personally, socially, culturally, and as a writer? I ask this as a way of suggesting an appropriate point of departure for future studies on Damas. If it can be affirmed that this author figures significantly in the postcolonial canon because of his consistent denunciation of French empire, then in Gysels’s words, “*Quels héritiers, quels héritages*?”—what is Damas’s postcolonial legacy in comparison to, say, that of Aimé Césaire or Édouard Glissant? Césaire plainly acknowledged his influence, but Glissant only mentions Damas a handful of times in relation to other writers. It is certainly an opportune time to research Léon-Gontran Damas, as scholarship is evolving rapidly. These new volumes will no doubt encourage stimulating interventions, further enriching knowledge of the first published Négritude writer.

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