

THE POETIC LEGACY OF DANIEL THALY

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Daniel Thaly was born in Dominica in 1879. His mother was from the Bellot family in Dominica and his father came from Martinique, where the family settled. Daniel Thaly grew up in Saint Pierre, the city annihilated by the catastrophic eruption of Mount Pelée in 1902. After attending high school in Saint-Pierre, he studied medicine in Toulouse, and returned to Dominica in 1905. He is remembered there first as a poet, and also as a physician, ornithologist and museum curator. Between 1900 and 1932, he published eight major volumes of poetry. He died in Dominica in 1950.

In his lifetime, Daniel Thaly (1879-1950) saw his literary fortunes undergo a remarkable reversal, on a scale and with a suddenness that few writers experience. His poetry, cast in the neo-Parnassian mould, soared in popularity in France and the West Indies during the first two decades of the twentieth century, but met with growing resistance and outright repudiation from the 1930s onward. Even before the Negritude movement had fully gained momentum, demand was rising for an unfettered Caribbean literary identity, free of the literary canons and enshrined conventions of traditional French verse. A new generation of students in the French Antilles identified closely with the revolutionary aesthetics of the Surrealist movement as being more attuned to their own struggle for political and artistic autonomy. They were determined to reject the influence of Orientalist and imperialist discourse in the neo-classical poetics of the French regionalist school, and the production of nostalgic, exotic imagery figuring a compliant, languorous Caribbean other, packaged for a French reading public. Their anger found a convenient target in the person of Daniel Thaly, who, as a member of the mulatto bourgeoisie, was seen not only as a poet whose work exemplified regionalism, but as a member of a class that looked to the colonizer for its inspiration, turning its back on its own history and identity as part of an oppressed and marginalized island population.

The present study addresses the question of Daniel Thaly's poetic legacy, and attempts to take a course out of favor with a majority of critics and scholars of modern Francophone poetry, that of presenting a reassessment of Thaly's place in French and Francophone letters through a retelling of his literary destiny, and to account for his rise and fall from literary and cultural prominence. In this endeavor, I have been

preceded by a Martinican author and editor of note, Auguste Joyau. A contemporary and friend of Thaly, he was prevailed upon by Thaly's family to write the preface to a largely forgotten anthology of Thaly's poetry in 1975, *Poèmes choisis*, in which he outlines some of the issues surrounding the critical reception of Thaly's works. At the time, Joyau's remarks fell on deaf ears, and Thaly's name has continued to languish in disrepute until the present day. Twenty-five years after the death of the poet, this small volume of his verse was published by Casterman press. This was not the grand edition of the 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade' which since 1931 has consecrated the achievements of dozens of great French writers, publishing their complete works: Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, or Saint-John Perse, Thaly's contemporary, to name but a few. Nor was his work published by Gallimard, Grasset or Seuil, the three most prestigious French publishing houses. Thaly's poetry was published outside France by a Belgian press specializing in comic books and children's literature. At the time, Casterman, which disappeared as an independent printing house before the end of the twentieth century, was reaching out to a more mature audience in order to expand its base. The volume itself was prepared not by scholars of Thaly's work, but by his nephew Michel, who identifies himself as being neither a poet nor a writer. He was assisted in this task by his cousin René Legros, a former director of the bank, Crédit Martiniquais. René was responsible for the selection of representative poems, and chose them from seven of the eight volumes of poetry, published between 1900 and 1932, that make up Thaly's corpus. The volume entitled *L'Île et le voyage, petite odyssée d'un poète lointain*, published in 1923, is not represented. These details do not of necessity diminish the worth of the volume, but do reflect the extent to which Thaly's poetry had ceased to elicit lively interest from any quarter other than the close circle of his family and former friends. Today he is thought of, when he is thought of at all, as a deservedly forgotten Caribbean poet of the neo-Parnassian school. What makes the 1975 volume, *Poèmes choisis*, centrally important to the study of Daniel Thaly is that it constitutes the entirety of Thaly's legacy for practical purposes. His works are out of print and are difficult to obtain from sources other than the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

The *Poèmes choisis* is of particular scholarly interest because Michel invited Auguste Joyau, a contemporary and friend of Thaly, to write the preface to the volume, a preface which recounts the fate of Thaly's reputation for the reader. Joyau presents a sympathetic but generally impartial depiction of Thaly's fate. He does, however, begin by vigorously condemning the intellectually dishonest practice of diminishing the reputation of an author without having read his work fully, or even at all, and indicates that such is the case for many of Thaly's detractors, a practice that still continues today. It may be assumed that extraordinary circumstances are required to lead to an author being treated as a scapegoat for an entire literary movement, to the point where respected and responsible critics do not even consider wasting their time in reading his

work before debasing his literary currency. A number of articles dealing with the *Négritude*, *Antillanité* and *Créolité* movements engage in a perfunctory and sometimes intemperate dismissal of regionalist poetry, before turning to the aesthetics and ideology of later literary movements, and this calls for an understanding of the social, ideological, and cultural dynamics that brought about indignation and impatience with Daniel Thaly's poetry.

The roller-coaster of the poet's swift rise to the heights of popular adulation and sudden plunge to the depths of literary ignominy, is a tale not only of evolving aesthetic tastes and the transience of fame, but of class struggle, racial emancipation, and the abrupt decline in influence of colonial ideology in the social and intellectual ferment of the 'Entre-deux-guerres'. Thaly's rise from obscurity is generally ascribed to the enthusiastic reception of his third volume of poetry in 1911: *Le Jardin des Tropiques*, published by the Éditions de Beffroi. This regional press and subsequently that of the Paris-based review 'La Phalange' welcomed his neo-Parnassian poetry with exotic overtones, and he found there a welcome from a group of poets inspired by the then dominant literary models. His poetry, cast in the mould of that of Leconte de Lisle and his disciple Hérédia, to whom Thaly is more frequently compared, both because of the similarities between their work, and also their West Indian origins, quickly found favor in Paris as well as in the Caribbean.

One poem in particular had great appeal for both audiences, and was instrumental in making Daniel Thaly a household name. Dedicated to the celebrated tragedian Caroline Eugénie Segond-Weber (1867-1945), who recited it at the Comédie-Française in Paris, 'L'Île lointaine' became a staple in the primary school curriculum in Martinique, and is still remembered by generations of schoolchildren who learned by rote this paean of praise to their island origins well into the 1960s, reciting the opening line: "Je suis née dans une île amoureuse du vent" (Thaly, 1911: 103-105). Although the island in question is, in point of fact, Dominica, the poem lends itself to appropriation by any of the Windward Islands, and particular, the neighboring island of Martinique. As Lennox Honychurch remarks in his website entry on Daniel Thaly in 'A to Z of Dominica Heritage, Thaly's poetry went unremarked in Dominica itself: "because all of his works remain in French and since he studied and worked in Martinique, and we do not care, that French department has claimed him as their own" (Honychurch, forthcoming: Thaly, Daniel).

Appropriated and then discarded by Martinique and metropolitan France, Thaly's poetry underwent a precipitate decline in popularity after 1932, the year in which Thaly's last volume of poetry appeared, *Héliotrope ou Les amants inconnus*, published by a conservative press, Le Divan. The work was judged a failure on two fronts, in both subject matter and style, although it may safely be assumed that there exists a strong relationship between the dismissal of the former's social and political relevance and the perceived quality of the poetic inspiration at work in the volume. In

June of the same year a new French West Indian literary-political review appeared, published in Paris. It was only to be published on one occasion, and was quickly suppressed as too politically radical for its day. Its name, 'Légitime Défense' (the legal term in French for Self-Defense), has come to represent a fundamental change in Caribbean attitudes toward life and letters.

The journal was penned by Martinican students, including Etienne Léro, René Ménénil, and Jules Monnerot fils, and adopted Marxist theory, Freudian analysis, and Surrealist principles in its attempt to revolutionize Caribbean writing, infusing it with issues of class and race. A scathing critique of the mulatto bourgeoisie in Étienne Léro's article: 'Misère d'une poésie' targeted Daniel Thaly among others, accusing him of servile imitation on the one hand: "Une indigestion d'esprit français et d'humanités classiques nous a valu ces bavards et l'eau sédative de leur poésie" (Léro, 1979: 11) and a neglect of the sufferings of the black population on the other:

"Un des pontifes de cette poésie de classe, M. Daniel Thaly, a célébré la mort des Caraïbes (ce qui nous est indifférent, puisque ceux-ci ont été exterminés jusqu'au dernier), mais il a tué la révolte de l'esclave arraché à son sol et à sa famille.

Pauvres sujets, mais non moins pauvres moyens politiques." (Léro, 1979: 10)

The passing remark about the Carib Indians reveals the ruthlessly uncompromising polemics of Léro's argument. Thaly's prominence and in particular the institutionalized success marked by the integration of his most celebrated poem into the primary school curriculum in Martinique offered compelling reason for his selection as a convenient target. In the eyes of the younger generation of student artists, intellectual activists, and future political leaders, the poem represented a saccharine vision of the island incompatible with the harsh realities of oppression that they urgently wished to address, and dislodging the poet from his seat of eminence was the tactic required to dispel the image of the Caribbean island as an earthly paradise: "Où l'air a des senteurs de sucre et de vanille."

By the dawn of World War II, the Negritude movement was well established. The term was coined by Aimé Césaire, in a poem published in *L'étudiant noir*, a Parisian journal he co-founded in 1935, and was artistically embodied in his 1939 work: *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. In 1937 Césaire had married Suzanne Roussi, who would later take up cudgels on his behalf in a Martinican journal she co-founded with him, with Astride Maugée, and with one of the originators of *Légitime Défense*, René Ménénil, whose communist and surrealist sympathies, now more in keeping with the intellectual temper of the times, no longer branded him a dangerous revolutionary. The journal, *Tropiques*, (1941-45) became an outlet for Suzanne Césaire's literary creations and a platform for her political pronouncements. Described by one literary journalist as "at once poetic and jarring, visceral and inspirational" (Westmoreland Bouchard, 2009), Suzanne Césaire's essays unhesitatingly targeted the regionalist

poets. The most searing attacks on their legacy will come in her 1942 article for the journal: 'Misère d'une poésie. John-Antoine Nau,' in which she takes aim at the work of John-Antoine Nau, born in San Francisco with the name Eugène Léon Édouard Torquet, a symbolist poet and a visitor to Martinique, where he spent a year with his wife around 1890 in the course of a peripatetic existence, punctuated by literary creations, primarily in the form of poetry and novels. Suzanne Césaire describes Nau's work in terms of the "doudou", the stereotypical image of the languidly alluring mulatto woman perennially clothed in the traditional garb of the madras, whose femininity was served up as an exotic testimonial to the smiling face of sun-drenched slavery:

"Des pâmoisons, des nuances, du style, des mots, de l'âme, du bleu, des ors, du rose. C'est gentil, C'est léché. De la littérature? Oui. Littérature de hamac. Littérature de sucre et de vanille. Tourisme littéraire. Guide bleu et C.G.T. Poésie, non pas. [...] nous décrétons la mort de la littérature doudou. Et zut à l'hibiscus, à la frangipane, aux bougainvilliers. La poésie martiniquaise sera cannibale ou ne sera pas." (Césaire, 1942: 50)

Thaly's work does not even gain mention in Suzanne Césaire's caustic assessment of regionalist poetry, yet her appropriation of the title of Léro's article, coupled with her use of the terms "sugar and vanilla" and "hammock" to describe this literature, targets Thaly and his celebrated poem in ways instantly recognizable to her audience:

Je suis né dans une île amoureuse du vent
Où l'air a des senteurs de sucre et de vanille
Et que berce au soleil du Tropicque mouvant
Le flot tiède et bleu de la mer des Antilles

Henceforth, Thaly's poetry will be tagged as doudouist for posterity, and he himself depicted, in a cruel irony, as a white Creole French elitist. Had he been white and thus able to marry the woman he loved, his personal life would have taken a far happier turn. By this time, it was more expedient to label Thaly as white, uninterested in the fate of the Caribbean people, and rooted in the Olympian frame of nineteenth-century metrical convention. While he did remain attached to the classical verse form of the twelve syllable classical Alexandrine, despite having experimented briefly with blank verse, the subject of his poems included not just the death of the last Caribs, a subject rejected by Léro, but also a denunciation of the slave trade through a depiction of victims of that trade, and of the abject living conditions aboard ship. His poems similarly offer poignant descriptions of the aftermath of the Mount Pelée eruption on May 8, 1902, and the carnage in the city of Saint Pierre, where he had attended school, and spent his childhood as an orphan, in a suburb named, by an ill-fated coincidence, 'Le Parnasse'. Thaly writes from a Caribbean perspective, in step with the rhythms of life in the tropics, yet the face of John-Antoine Nau was to become the cannibalistic decal applied to Thaly's visage, assimilating him literally to the image of the "bon

décalque d'homme pâle” in Léro’s by now legendary denunciation of the complicit mulatto poet in *Légitime Défense*. Léro’s damning words were to resonate with the poets of the Negritude movement down the decades. As late as 1973, Léon-Gontran Damas, in an interview with Valentin Mudimbe, was to praise Léro, restating the same sentiment: “Prenez la poésie, c’est grâce à des hommes comme Léro que la poésie de décalcomanie va prendre fin” (Mudimbe, 1973).

Thaly’s popularity had abruptly plummeted after Léro’s attacks in 1932. The effect of his abrupt fall from literary grace apparently had a devastating effect upon him personally, and the politics of personal destruction may well have been a major factor in his nervous breakdown in 1937. He is depicted in later life as a shadow of his former self, compellingly embodied in the mournful presence of the poet Chrysostomé that haunts the pages of Phyllis Shand Allfrey’s tale in her eponymous collection of short stories: *It Falls into Place*. The most telling image is revealed in the story by Lady Chanterel. It is that of a solitary figure who habitually arrived at her house at dinner time, not to eat, but to gaze silently out of the window at the now empty hammock of the narrator’s Aunt Caroline. For the narrator, this is the moment when the scales fall from her eyes and things fall into place, as she recalls the enticingly flirtatious presence of her free-spirited aunt, and the refrain of her demand to the authors who surrounded her that she be put into a story or poem: “At last I understood the long strain of Chrysostomé’s nostalgia for France and his friends, and his dramatic attempts to civilize nature.” (Allfrey, 2004: 125)

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Denied the intimate space of shared affection, Thaly also saw his reputation consumed by the fickle fires of popularity. But a yet worse posthumous fate lay in store for him, as falling out of favor was just the prelude to being publicly paraded as a failed poet. The scene is rehearsed in the fictional work of one of the chief exponents of the Creolité movement, Raphaël Confiant. In his first French-language novel *Le Nègre et l’Amiral*, published by Grasset in 1988, Confiant offers a satirical portrait of André Breton and Aimé Césaire, and takes up cudgels on Thaly’s behalf, claiming that the accusation against him does not hold water: “On reproche à Osman Duquesnay ou à Daniel Thaly d’être de médiocres épigones des symbolistes ou des Parnassiens mais, mon bon ami, nous n’avons fait qu’imiter dans ce pays” (Confiant, 1988: 100). The word ‘médiocre’ gives away Confiant’s perfidious game. In the next breath the speaker, a fictional Martinican, will compare Thaly to Césaire, this time in damning terms. “La seule chose qui différencie Césaire de Thaly, c’est que le premier s’est montré littérairement supérieur au maître blanc, tandis que le second lui a été inférieur.” (Confiant, 1988: 100)

The stinging critique of inferiority is a two-edged sword and its potential for visiting poetic justice on the wielder should not be overlooked. In an article entitled ‘Patrick Chamoiseau and the Limits of the Aesthetics of Resistance’, Stella Vincenot asserts that Patrick Chamoiseau, a collaborator with Confiant and Jean Bernabé on the

manifesto of the Créolité movement, *Éloge de la Créolité*, has undertaken a failed attempt to free the Martinican imagination from French influence, and has succeeded only in achieving the opposite goal: “Ultimately, instead of asserting a national identity and inserting Martinique more fully within the Caribbean Region, the literary strategies of Chamoiseau reinforce ties with France” (Vincenot-Dash, 2009: 73). She further maintains that there exists a striking parallel between his failure and that of French Regionalism in the early twentieth century, in that both achieved a measure of literary diversity without securing the right to political self-determination.

Keeping score is a trivial pursuit at best, and, as Joyau remarked in his preface, there is nothing inherently unusual in the repudiation of literary predecessors in order to herald the dawn of a new age. The human cost is more daunting and difficult to tally, and if we were to accept Vincenot’s argument and conclude that Thaly merely fell victim to a cycle of violence perpetuated by literary innovation, unaccompanied by any measure of progress in the French Antilles, then his story would indeed be a bleak one. But perhaps Allfrey had it right, poetry is not cricket, and at the end of the day, poetry is what remains to be cherished:

“But what did I care. Long after the cricket score was forgotten, Chrysostomé’s beautiful melancholic poems would be read, somewhere in the world, and the mystery of his sorrow would be talked of at sunset with friends. I muttered loud enough for the sportsmen to hear: ‘Never mind whether he was a Frenchman or a Britisher, a coloured man or a white man – he was a great poet, who died unloved, and he will always be one of us’.” (Allfrey, 2004: 126)

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Daniel Thaly’s poetic legacy has long foundered on the shoals of ideologically motivated repudiation, but in the final analysis his poetry will speak for itself, to those who would listen attentively and care deeply enough to differentiate between the impassive veneer of classical form, and a passionate involvement in the life of the emotions, the fortunes of others, and the rhythms of the natural world. Unloved though Daniel Thaly was in his lifetime, his poetic legacy and place in posterity may yet prove as secure as Allfrey predicts it will be.

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