

**SAINT-JOHN PERSE**

French literature offers few examples of writers whose life and work were as deeply consonant as those of Alexis Leger, the diplomat, and Saint-John Perse, the poet: “And the poet’s writing follows the record” (*Winds*, III: 6).

The professional life of this Antillean-born Creole took him to France, China and America. As cabinet director for Foreign Minister Aristide Briand and later as Secretary General of Foreign Affairs, Leger worked at the center of a tumultuous era, in a place where crises were international. Given his varied responsibilities, background, travels and interlocutors, Leger the diplomat was inevitably linked to Saint-John Perse, since the poet, by his very nature, is “with us, on the causeway of men of his time”<sup>(315)</sup>.

His life and poetry took as beginning and end points the world itself, conceived as an ardent site where kings, prophets, warriors and adventurers interact with wind, rain, stone, and sea. We encounter human beings who have the most diverse origins and rites, inventions, conquests and dramas. They are heroic in their solitary destinies, “standing on every slab”<sup>(703)</sup>, refusing to waver or compromise. The diplomat observed many cultures that had been preserved and blessed by poem and song. Against this background he created his own poetry to the earth, time and humanity. He celebrated myths, conquests, natural forces and colors because his poetry is about life: about Man and especially about Woman, whom he saw as the intermediary between men and the world. Saint-John Perse perceived silence at the heart of Man and saw Woman as the “abode open to the eternal”<sup>(701)</sup>.

The diplomat discovered and experienced earth, time and people; the poet gave them life by singing about them in a language of his invention... until the diplomat became, like the poet, “the guilty conscience of his time”<sup>(13)</sup>. At that moment, he saw the fault line that could never be filled but only bridged: “But what is it then, O! what is it that in everything is suddenly wanting?...”<sup>(159)</sup>

Dominique de Villepin

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## Chronology

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Through this booklet and exhibit you will discover or rediscover the remarkable lives of Alexis Leger, the diplomat, and Saint-John Perse, his poetic alter ego. You will be invited to reflect about this remarkable man in his two separate and successful careers. Today we tend to combine the names into a single person, but Alexis Leger himself always distinguished clearly between his two roles, and wrote most of his poetry after his diplomatic role had ended. His poems were written during three distinct periods: the first, before and soon after his service in China; the second, during his exile in the United States, beginning in 1940; and the third, after 1958, when he divided his time between America and France.

The dual careers need not make us feel schizophrenic.

Instead, we can benefit from both as they are thoughtfully presented in this exhibit: the diplomatic life of Alexis Leger and the poetry of Saint-John Perse.

Henriette Levillain's elegant and informed text explores them in more depth, so I shall simply offer a few remarks to guide your exploration.

Alexis Leger's long life (from 1887 to 1975) coincides with a dramatic period in history. Walking through the exhibit transports us to France during two international conflicts and a tormented inter-war period, as the country interacted with other nations and coped with economic crises, political upheavals and unsuccessful peace negotiations, including the ones in which Leger himself participated. It was also an explosive time in science, literature and art. This is the backdrop for Leger's meteoric diplomatic career, whose apogee was his position as Secretary General of the Quai d'Orsay from 1933 to 1940. It is also the context for his powerful and original poetry.

Leger was surrounded by exceptional friends and admirers.

In France, they ranged from poet-playwright-diplomat Paul Claudel to President François Mitterrand and included Georges Braque, Joan Miró and Darius Milhaud. Elsewhere, T. S. Eliot, Archibald MacLeish, Dag Hammarskjöld, Franklin Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy were just a few of the figures in his circle. In our own time, President Jacques Chirac, Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin and European Central Bank President Jean-Claude Trichet all share an admiration for Saint-John Perse.

In this exhibit, you will also discover Saint-John Perse's lively curiosity for the rare phenomena of nature – flowers, birds and oceans, among myriad topics outside his professional duties. I myself possess several letters in which Saint-John Perse asked me to find an American plant or flower, or simply some detail about them.

And his curiosity was endless. I will never forget a summer when I visited Alexis Leger and his wonderful wife, Dorothy. One evening, he asked if I was game to rise early and keep him company. Of course, I responded. Ah, he said, but it will be very early: around 3 a.m. Why, I asked? To watch the Ali-Frazier boxing match on television, live from the Philippines. Thanks to his unlimited curiosity, I was thus able to witness a historic match... and in what company!

Looking at the photos helps us understand the many accounts of Saint-John Perse's "piercing" eyes and demeanor.

He kept his distance while at the same time charming more than one man (and woman) with his magic.

Don't miss Leger's correspondence. His words and almost calligraphic handwriting combine humanity and majesty.

Recently, I found a book he inscribed to my parents in the 1940s during his American exile. He wrote very simply but with so much weight: “To A et Y with whom I have lived my most French hours...”

This is another personal note, related to poetry. I remember a phrase of Alexis Leger’s which struck me at the time.

He said he preferred to write poetry in French rather than English. Ambiguity is essential, he explained, and is more difficult to achieve in the English language which has so many more words than French.

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I encourage you, most of all, to be transported by the mystery of Saint-John Perse’s poetic images. I am confident you will come away with a new appreciation of the world around us.

Very great thanks to all who contributed to this exhibit.

First to Yves Mabin, head of the writing and media division at the Foreign Ministry, who welcomed the project and carried it to such a successful conclusion; to Adpf at the Quai d’Orsay; its director, François Neuville, and especially to Jean de Collongue et Nicolas Peccoud; to Henriette Levillain for her wonderful text; to the whole team at the Cité du Livre in Aix-en-Provence, skillfully directed by Gilles Éboli; to the Saint-John Perse Foundation at the Cité du Livre, directed by Béatrice Coignet with her dedicated colleagues Arlette Ventre and Corinne Cleac’h-Chesnot. I thank all members of the Association of the Friends of Saint-John Perse whose mission is to preserve the poet’s memory and work.

Finally, warmest thanks to Carol Rigolot for the translation into English of this booklet, a Herculean effort accomplished with grace, in a short time, and amidst all her other responsibilities.

We extend deep gratitude to the Dormoy family, descendants of Alexis Leger's mother, as well as to the Saint-John Perse Foundation which represents the heirs of Saint-John Perse. They have energetically spread his work, while attentively preserving the authenticity of his memory.

*Yves-André Istel*

Chairman of the Saint-John Perse Foundation

Shortly before his death in 1975, Saint-John Perse and his American wife, Dorothy Leger, gave their papers to the city of Aix-en-Provence. A Foundation was created to conserve this rich patrimony, to make Saint-John Perse's work better known and to welcome writers, artists and scholars whose work relates to the world encompassed in his writings. Manuscripts of Perse's texts along with letters, photographs, personal objects and art works allow us to enter into the universe of a great twentieth-century poet. The Saint-John Perse Foundation publishes two journals: Les Cahiers Saint-John Perse in its Gallimard collection "Les Cahiers NRF" and Souffle de Perse, the journal of the Association of the Friends of the Saint-John Perse Foundation. The non-profit foundation is funded by the city of Aix-en-Provence, the ministry of Culture and Communication, regional divisions of Cultural Affairs and of the National Center for the Book, the Regional Council of Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, the General Council of the Bouches-du-Rhône, the Foundation of France, the Association of Friends of the Saint-John Perse Foundation, and a number of friends and foundations.

## The Legend of the Ancestors

Palms...!

In those days they bathed you in water-of-green-leaves;  
and the water was of green sun too; and your mother's  
maids, tall glistening girls, moved their warm legs  
near you who trembled...

(I speak of a high condition, in those days, among  
the dresses, in the dominion of revolving lights.)

Palms: and the sweetness  
of an aging of roots...! the earth  
in those days longed to be deafer, and deeper the sky where  
trees too tall, weary of an obscure design,  
knotted an inextricable pact...

(I dreamed this dream, in esteem: a safe sojourn among  
the enthusiastic linens.)

And the high  
curved roots celebrated  
the departure of prodigious roads, the invention  
of vaultings and of naves  
and the light in those days, fecund in purer feats,  
inaugurated the white kingdom where I led, perhaps,  
a body without a shadow...

(I speak of a high condition of old, among men and  
their daughters, who chewed a certain leaf.)

In those days, men's mouths  
were more grave, women's arms moved more slowly;  
in those days, feeding like us on roots, great silent beasts  
were ennobled;  
and longer over darker shadow eyelids were lifted...  
(I dreamed this dream, it has consumed us without relics.)

“To Celebrate a Childhood”

Praises, O. C.

p. 21, 23

<sup>1</sup> Saint-John Perse, *Œuvres complètes*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, NRF Gallimard [1972], 1982, IX, XI. The poet composed virtually all of the critical apparatus of this edition and oversaw the entire publication process. These first lines, which are closer to a golden legend than to a civic identity, are a good example of his revisionary work. The poet's family name is actually Léger, with an accent. Saint-Leger Leger is his first pseudonym, chosen in 1911 for *Praises*. We have respected the poet's preference and written Leger without an accent.

{ • 1887 • Marie-René Alexis Saint-Leger Leger is born in Guadeloupe, the only son in a family of five children. }  
{ • 1899 • The family moves back to France after more than two centuries on the islands. }<sup>1</sup>

These are the first entries in the biography that opens the Pléiade edition of Saint-John Perse's Complete Works. The eighty-year-old poet wrote them himself. If we read them literally, they appear laconic and impersonal, devoid of any emotion. A few pages later there is a similarly terse account of the destruction of the plantation or Habitation where he spent childhood vacations:

{ • 1964 • News of a major hurricane which devastated Guadeloupe; one of two very old family plantations, La Joséphine, on the heights of Matouba, was destroyed. } (Op. cit., xxxiv)

Let us not be fooled! Behind these impassive descriptions lies the reality that leaving Guadeloupe was an irreparable loss for the twelve-year-old Alexis, an exile with no possible return. Even if he did not realize it, this trauma was the genesis of his poetic vocation.

What is the weight of twelve short years, we might wonder, in the life of someone who lived to be eighty-eight, occupied important diplomatic positions between the world wars and then experienced the double humiliation of exile and loss of citizenship, only to win that most prestigious honor, the Nobel Prize? Such a question ignores the fact that for poets, value is not measured in years or official recognition but in imaginary capital. Psychologists have shown that the symbolic structure of the unconscious is formed by age

twelve. Although Saint-John Perse was determined not to be nostalgic, his poetry owes much of its magical power to the legacy inherited from his Antillean ancestors.

When the young Alexis Leger left his tropical island for the city of Pau, in the foothills of the Pyrenees mountains, his imagination was already shaped. Memories of Guadeloupe were later nourished by conversations with his mother, who spoke Creole and remained attached to an idealized memory of the Antilles, filtered by distance. Gradually, the island became a place of legendary origins: the origins of the Leger ancestors, all of whom were imagined as noble and adventurous, and the origins of the island itself, which the exiled child saw as a perfect circle, the archetype of happiness: “That ‘O’, which is the very shape of an island, don’t you find it everywhere in Gauguin?”<sup>2</sup>

Let us begin with the family legend. The Legers shared the plight of many white Creole families of the 1880s. The decline of the sugar market had led to social unrest; factory owners were seizing control of the economy and a black bourgeoisie was gaining political power. The more lucid families understood that colonialism was waning. They also feared that a whole way of life would disappear with their departure. Many began retracing their family trees and writing memoirs, especially as they grew older. It was not in Saint-John Perse’s nature to write a memoir – he considered the genre too intimate – but genealogy, on the other hand, seemed like a more neutral enterprise, so at the age of 80, he set with great care to composing and commenting on his double lineage – Leger and Dormoy – with an eye toward using this genealogy in the preamble to the Pléiade edition of his works. If you think genealogy and poetry are incompatible, you are right. Saint-John Perse’s

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Alexis Leger to Gabriel Frizeau, February 27, 1909, in *St.-John Perse Letters*, ed. and trans. Arthur J. Knodel, Bollingen LXXXVII: 2, Princeton UPress, 1979, 156.

<sup>3</sup>Bernadette and  
Philippe Rossignol,  
Ascendance antillaise  
de Saint-John Perse,  
2, October 1982,  
Centre de généalogie et  
d'histoire des îles  
d'Amérique,  
30 rue Boissière,  
75016 Paris.

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exploration had more to do with imagination and dreams than with scientific rigor, as we now realize by comparing it with the accurate genealogy of his family that specialists have recently traced.<sup>3</sup>

Saint-John Perse's version, with its tales of noble names, perilous exploits and miraculous rescues, has all the characteristics of legend. We do well to revel in it without expecting precise biographical information. The poet relates suspiciously similar elements on both sides of his lineage: landed nobility, ancient roots (in Burgundy or Provence), coats of arms, poetic names, adventurous second-born sons setting off for the islands, guillotines barely escaped, noble names camouflaged during the French revolution, prestigious ancestors and alliances. According to this fanciful genealogy the poet's maternal grandfather, Paul Dormoy, descended from a d'Ormois of Burgundy who settled in the Antilles in 1750. His son and grandson founded maritime companies, miraculously escaped shipwrecks and received protection from an African tribe, all while fighting non-stop against British aggressors. One ancestor is said to have charmed Chateaubriand with his scintillating conversation. The poet sought to connect through his maternal lineage with a long line of Creole planters and high officials for whom the family plantation was the equivalent of a castle – a social space as well as a source of income.

In this imaginative genealogy, the paternal branch is equally illustrious, with even more fantastic names. A halo surrounds the supposedly ancient Burgundian family name, Léger Saint-Léger, with its repetition of sounds. The name was said to have been transformed to Saint-Leger Leger (without accents) when descendents arrived in the Antilles.

The poet's paternal grandmother had an equally poetic past: a melodic name, Castellane de Caille (quail), supposedly dating back to the 12th century and later shortened to Caille. This branch of the family also had a panoply of stories: adventures in the islands in 1768, nobles escaping the guillotine and becoming planters in Guadeloupe and Martinique, a brilliant marriage to the daughter of the Count of Leyritz and finally, in 1824, the purchase of a law practice in Pointe-à-Pitre.

As with all legend, this story is neither wholly true nor altogether false. It is a selective, aggrandizing reconstruction around selected facts. When we compare it with the official family tree, researched by the genealogists mentioned earlier, we see revealing omissions and divergences. The archives go back only five generations, so it is difficult to confirm Perse's belief in the age-old origins of his different lineages, but we do find grandfather Leger, with no relation to the haloed name of Saint-Leger Leger. Born in Paris, he became a lawyer and left unwillingly for the islands, probably after going bankrupt in the wake of his marriage to a young woman from the Cochon Durozoir family (cochon means pig). Her mother had the picturesque name of Travers, which means sideways.

The so-called colonial roots of the paternal ancestors actually begin with two maternal great grandfathers purchasing plantations on Basse-Terre, Guadeloupe, in the early 19th century, not before. In fact, there are relatively few plantation owners in the family, compared with lawyers and merchants. The secretive poet does not tell us that his Travers ancestor sold groceries and candy in Paris at the beginning of the 19th century. During that same period another Leger led a comfortable life as a Parisian furrier.

All in all, the Leger family followed the itinerary of Balzac's bourgeoisie: its fortunes waxed and waned on the islands; it rose socially by acquiring plantations and assuming administrative functions but did not thereby earn coats of arms or titles of nobility. The poet summarily censures the all-too-bourgeois names of Cochon-Durozoir and Travers, which were powerless to inspire dreams.

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Why would Saint-John Perse spend so much time rewriting a past that was not at all dishonorable? Was it petty snobbism or poetic imagination? Considering the abundance of genealogical reverie in his poetry, the latter seems plausible. Nor is it surprising that a poet would delight in fantastic etymologies and onomastics, prefer plantations and maritime adventures to commerce, and relate history as a series of exceptional accomplishments by memorable, strong-willed individuals.

## The Princely Legend

*For you will return to us, presence! with the first wind of the evening,  
In your substance and in your flesh and in your weight of sea, O clay! in your colour  
of stable stone and of dolmen, O Sea! – among begotten men and their countries  
of robur oaks, you, Sea of force and of furrows, Sea with the scent of female entrails  
and of phosphorus, in the great cracking whips of rape! Sea seized in the fire  
of your finest acts, O mind!... (When the Barbarians are at Court for a very brief stay,  
does union with the daughters of serfs exalt to such a height the tumult of the blood?...)*

*“Guide me, pleasure, on the ways of every sea; in the flurrying of every breeze where  
the instant is alerted, like a bird clothed in the clothing of wings... I go, I go a way  
of wings, where sadness itself is no more than wing. The fair land of birth has to be  
reconquered, the fair land of the King that he has not seen since childhood,  
and its defence is in my song. Command, O ffer, the action, and again this grace  
of a love which places in our hands only the swords of joy!...”*

*And who are you then, O Sages, to reprove us, O Sages? If the fortune of the sea nourishes  
again, in its season, a great poem beyond reason, will you refuse me access to it?  
Land of my seigniory, there may I enter, having no shame at my pleasure...  
“Ah! let a Scribe approach, and I will dictate to him...” And who, then, born of man,  
would stand without offence, beside my joy?*

*— Those who, by birth, hold their knowing above knowledge.*

Seamarks

p. 379, 381

<sup>4</sup>See illustration 2,  
bottom.

For reasons that remain mysterious, Saint-John Perse never wanted to return to Guadeloupe, but his native island forever haunted his life and poems. It is no accident that the poet's first pseudonym, Saint-Leger Leger, echoes the name of the tiny island – Saint-Leger-les-Feuilles – which belonged to the family and where he claimed to have been born, although it is more likely that his mother preferred to give birth at home in Pointe-à-Pitre. It is no more accidental that his second pseudonym, Saint-John Perse, evokes, among other references, the small island of Saint-John in the British Antilles. By a kind of reciprocal consecration, the poet brings together his name and his island.

During Perse's American exile, from 1940 to 1957, he escaped the torrid Washington summers by sailing along the Atlantic coast. Winter vacations took him to Florida's tropical vegetation. He also visited Georgia plantations in search of traces of ancestors who emigrated in the 18th century, stayed on private islands, and studied the migration of phaetons and frigate birds he had seen in his childhood. Yet he never returned to his island, even though he sailed nearby on several occasions. Perhaps he sensed that everything had changed since his departure, both in the landscape and the culture. Devastating hurricanes had destroyed his favorite plantation, *La Joséphine*,<sup>4</sup> on the breezy heights of the Matouba. Above all, the social fabric had been totally destroyed. The adolescent Leger left a colonial society, founded on individual relations and the exchange of services, a society without racial hatred or class conflict. At *La Joséphine*, as in the beautiful long-porched house at Bois-Debout, he was the prince of a realm that was cosmopolitan, hierarchical and matriarchal. As Leger later related to Pierre Guerre, a small court of women gathered

around him: his grandmother Dormoy, widowed in 1890, his beautiful mother, his four sisters and numerous black and mestizo servants. A photograph of the period, now at the Saint-John Perse museum in Pointe-à-Pitre, captures a family reunion at La Joséphine. Against a backdrop of mangroves and mountains, Alexis proudly poses in the first row, straight as a rod in a sailor's costume and huge straw hat, surrounded by women: his mother, his three sisters (the fourth had died very young) and his imposing grandmothers. His father's slim silhouette stands in the last row. The presence of these dynamic, loving women, counterbalancing the men in the background, contributed to the happiness Leger associated with the island.

Abruptly dispossessed, the young adolescent of Pau evoked his departure in the refrain of *To Celebrate a Childhood*:

{I speak of a high condition, in those days, among  
the dresses, in the dominion of revolving lights.}<sup>(21)</sup>

Everything in that realm, from the contours of the island and hems of women's dresses to the swirling light, formed a circle around him. The emotion expressed in this refrain is all the stronger because of the discreet parentheses.

Expelled from his island kingdom, the poet sought to keep its image intact. He undoubtedly wished to believe that the same social roles continued to prevail, but he also understood the risk that he might no longer recognize his home. So instead of going back in person, he entrusted to poetry the task of finding his island, through oblique, cryptic formulations. That is clear in the first collection, *Praises*. Now we know it is also true of the other poems.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See Renée Ventresque, *Les Antilles de Saint-John Perse*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1993.

Writing was Saint-John Perse's way of expressing the dream that inhabited his whole life, of prolonging his princely status. As he wrote many years later in *Seamarks*:

{The fair land of birth has to be reconquered, the fair land of the King that he has not seen since childhood, and its defence is in my song.}<sup>(381)</sup>

## Praises: The Secret of Happiness

*I loved a horse – who was he? – he looked me straight  
in the face, under his forelock.*

*The quivering holes of his nostrils were two beautiful  
things to see – with that quivering hole that  
swells over each eye.*

*When he had run, he sweated: which means to shine!  
– and under my child’s knees I pressed moons  
on his flanks...*

*I loved a horse – who was he? – and sometimes  
(for animals know better the forces that praise us)  
Snorting, he would lift to his gods a head of bronze  
covered with a petiole of veins.*

“Praises, II,” p. 35

*Be a man with calm eyes who laughs,  
who silently laughs under the calm wing  
of his eyebrow, perfection of flight (and from  
the immobile rim of the lashes he turns back to  
the things he has seen, borrowing the paths  
of the fraudulent sea... and from the immobile  
rim of the lashes*

*more than one promise has he made us of islands,  
as one who says to someone younger: “You will see!”  
And it is he who treats with the master of the ship).*

“Praises, III,” p. 37

Saint-John Perse is among the rare poets for whom happiness was a virtue. Conversely, he saw sadness as a malady. In *Anabasis* he is adamant about attacking melancholia:

{If a man shall cherish his sorrow – let him be brought to light! and I say, let him be slain, otherwise / there will be an uprising.}(109)

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Arriving in Pau, the poet considered himself an exile. He knew he had lost his paradise but he also knew he possessed an inalienable capital and he sought tenaciously to find the key to his lost happiness. Poetry alone could provide it. The challenge was to recover joy without sliding into weepy nostalgia for the past or denigrating the present. From the time he began writing *Pictures for Crusoe* at age 17, Leger knew he could not imitate the tone of Lamartine's lamentations or Baudelaire's sarcastic revolt. He needed to invent a new voice for exile poetry.

*Praises* is a collection of four poems: "Pictures for Crusoe" (1904), "To Celebrate a Childhood" (1907), "Written on the Door" (1908) and "Praises" (1909). It can be read as the poet's progressive conquest of his personal voice. *Pictures for Crusoe* depicts the elderly sailor, exiled in a dark, sooty city (perhaps London or Bordeaux), lamenting his lost island where dawn was so beautiful that it slaked his thirst:

{It is the sour taste of green fruit in the dawn that you drink: the air, milky and spiced with the salt of the trade winds...}(61)

This detour to a decrepit old man could not solve the problem. It could produce "pictures," like the ones people hang above

their beds as souvenirs of a wonderful trip, but they remain external, attached to the past, as dusty as the goatskin parasol in the title of one of the Pictures for Crusoe, which is relegated to the attic. They do not illuminate the present. Crusoe tries without success to “resuscitate the lost splendour”<sup>(69)</sup>.

By contrast, something miraculous happens in *To Celebrate a Childhood*. Here, the narrator, who now speaks in the first person, navigates between past and present without rupture or discontinuity. Sometimes he evokes his past on the island, as if the words and actions of childhood were still taking place: “I weep, how I weep in the hollow of gentle hands...”<sup>(27)</sup>. Sometimes the present (the speaker’s time) projects backward toward the past and erases the distance:

“I remember the tears...”<sup>(27)</sup>, “but I shall remember...”<sup>(29)</sup>.

Time is stretched until all chronological markers are blurred.

How are we to interpret the speaker’s declaration:

“Someone is calling. I’ll go... I speak in esteem”<sup>(25)</sup>?

With the future tense of his imperious declaration “I’ll go” is he repeating words spoken on his island or is he making a commitment in the present moment?

Then there is the double exclamation that punctuates the poem: “O! I have cause to praise!”<sup>(29)</sup> Is this the child’s enchantment as he contemplates the good and beautiful things around him? Is it the young writer who is saying these celebratory words? Or is this a way of bringing the child’s spontaneous happiness into our time, thus fusing past and present into a single moment?

Once the present is infused with the past, once the past has been brought toward the present, the now is protected from time’s damage. Exile ceases to be a rupture.

*In Celebration of Childhood* is written in the imperfect, continuous tense. Observing his house, the poet remarks:

{And the House endured under the plumed trees.}(33)

The verb “endured” works against the crumbling of memory and of the house, which is childhood itself.

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What happened between *Pictures for Crusoe* and *To Celebrate a Childhood* to make the island suddenly emerge as a living presence rather than a lost country viewed through tears? The young poet had come to realize what poets alone understand: that happiness does not reside in things, not even in Bois Debut. It is not in lush vegetation, friendly fauna or the tender solicitude of a female entourage. Happiness resides in words, rhythms and sounds, in the endless expressivity of language. Only language, in all its forms, can capture the depth of childhood sensations.

Specific words from the Caribbean such as *maringouins*, *catalpas*, *icaquiers*, *sirop de batterie*, *abutilons*, and *l’herbe-à-Madame Lalie* evoke a unique, irreplaceable reality. But however familiar these names might be for a young man raised in the Antilles, Leger knew the French public would see them as exotic, so he quickly banished them from his writing. The determination to avoid the romantic clichés of exotic literature led him to excise some words from the revised version of *Pictures for Crusoe* and to translate others into descriptive expressions. The *icaquiers* became “the fleshy mangroves”<sup>(59)</sup>, the *catalpa* became “the hollow fruit”<sup>(63)</sup>, the *anolis timides* became “the gentle creatures”<sup>(63)</sup>, the *raisinier*, “the dead tree”<sup>(59)</sup>. When, in spite of it all, he kept *abutilons* or other technical words, he followed them with a description from a botanical dictionary:

{the yellow-spotted-black-purple-at-the-base flowers  
that are used for the diarrhoea of horned animals...}(37)

Most often, as in the examples above, he replaced the Antillean name with a generic term, “thing” or “animal,” since his ultimate goal was not to pronounce a particular name or convey a specific Antillean object but to recover the power of the creator’s word:

{Naming each thing, I proclaimed that it was great,  
naming each beast, that it was beautiful and good}<sup>(23)</sup>

Saint-John Perse’s uniqueness, perhaps even his genius, resides in his sacrificing the immediate gratification of Antillean vocabulary and escaping from a postcard picturesque that the French public would identify with the conservative white Creole mentality. The young Caribbean writers of the 1970s respected him for this and counted him an ancestor, despite everything that separated him from black and mestizo writers.

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Bestowing names is totally different from doing philology. Happiness, as we noted, does not reside in the particularity of specific things but in the way a magician of language reconstructs a universe filled with life. Such a universe is animated by a current so vigorous that it brings to life past and present happiness. Praises has this kind of vitality. From one poem to the next, things come to life through descriptions: the odor of dead wood is “avid”<sup>(43)</sup>; the ooze is “sumptuous”<sup>(63)</sup>; the little sister’s mahogany coffin “smells good”<sup>(23)</sup>; and “shade and light in those days were more nearly the same thing”<sup>(25)</sup>. Beginning with *To Celebrate a Childhood*, the young poet constructs a linguistic apparatus (which he would spend his life perfecting) to reinvent a universe of relationships among all living things. He wanted to convince himself that in his childhood things were linked

to one other, just as they had been during that mythical golden age of humanity, that once-upon-a-time which is the setting of his poems: “Palms...! In those days they bathed you in water-of-green-leaves...”<sup>(23)</sup>

32

Beginning with *To Celebrate a Childhood*, the poet constructs a universe before our eyes as if it were a single woven sentence, in other words, a text. He favors continuity over definitive stops and therefore punctuates his poetry with suspension marks, commas, parentheses, dashes and exclamation points. For syntax he prefers coordination (and ... and) and parataxis: “It is so calm and then so warm, / so continuous too.”<sup>(39)</sup> His grammar plays with time – the past and the narrator’s present – such that it stretches into one long present. Words respond to each other through internal rhymes, repetitions, and surprising rhythms which create the impression of a long incantation that is almost impossible to translate since it relies so much on harmonies of sound and meaning.

{Childhood, my love! it is morning, it is  
gentle things that implore, like the hatred of singing,  
gentle as the shame that trembles on the lips of things  
said in profile,  
O gentle, and imploring, like the voice of the male  
at its gentlest when willing to bend his harsh soul  
towards someone who bends...}<sup>(41)</sup>

## The Dilemma of Anabasis (1924)

I have built myself, with honour and dignity have I built myself  
on three great seasons, and it promises well, the soil whereon I have  
established my Law.

Beautiful are bright weapons in the morning and behind us the sea is fair.  
Given over to our horses this seedless earth  
delivers to us this incorruptible sky. The Sun is unmentioned but  
his power is amongst us  
and the sea at morning like a presumption of the mind.

Power, you sang as we march in darkness... At the pure ideof day  
what know we of our dream, older than ourselves?

Yet one more year among you! Master of the Grain, Master of the Salt,  
and the commonwealth on an even beam!

33

I shall not hail the people of another shore. I shall not trace the great  
boroughs of towns on the slopes with powder or coral. But I have the idea  
of living among you.

Glory at the threshold of the tents, and my strength among you,  
and the idea pure as salt holds its assize in the light time.

\*

... So I haunted the City of your dreams, and I established in the desolate  
markets the pure commerce of my soul, among you  
invisible and insistent as a fire of thorns in the gale.

Power, you sang on our roads of splendour...

"In the delight of salt the mind shakes its tumult of spears..."

With salt shall I revive the dead mouths of desire!

Him who has not praised thirst and drunk the water of the sands  
from a sallet

I trust him little in the commerce of the soul..."

(And the Sun is unmentioned but his power is amongst us.)

Men, creatures of dust and folk of divers devices, people of business  
and of leisure, men from the marches and those from beyond,  
O men of little weight in the memory of these lands; people  
from the valleys and the uplands and the highest slopes of this world  
to the ultimate reach of our shores; Seers of signs and seeds,  
and confessors of the western winds, followers of trails  
and of seasons, breakers of camp in the little dawn wind, seekers  
of watercourses over the wrinkled rind of the world, O seekers,  
O finders of reasons to be up and be gone,  
you traffic not in a salt more strong than this, when at morning with  
omen of kingdoms and omen of dead waters swung high over  
the smokes of the world, the drums of exile waken on the marches  
Eternity yawning on the sands.

\*

... In a comely robe among you. For another year among you.

"My glory is upon the seas, my strength is amongst you!"

To our destiny promised this breath of other shores, and there beyond  
the seeds of time, the splendour of an age at its height on the beam  
of the scales..."

Calculations hung on the flocs of salt! there at the sensitive point  
on my brow where the poem is formed, I inscribe this chant  
of all a people, the most rapt god-drunken,  
drawing to our dockyards eternal keels!

After passing the competitive Quai d'Orsay examination, Alexis Leger entered the diplomatic service and was posted, at his request, to Peking (now Beijing) where he served from 1916 to 1921 as secretary to the French legation. The biographical entries to the *Pléiade* volume offer strangely few mentions of this work. The only diplomatic event recorded is the short-lived restoration of the Manchu dynasty in July 1917 when the young diplomat was entrusted with escorting President Li's family to safety at the French legation. He obviously found the adventure amusing and relished in relating it to Minister Alexandre Conty. In a delightful account, somewhat ironically entitled "A Respectful Report," Leger relates Madame Li's reluctance to go with him, contrasted with the concubines' impatience to pile themselves and their illegitimate children into the limousines. He describes the alternation between polite tea-time conversation and tenacious discussion, the haste, disorder and semblance of protocol, all accompanied by a din of crows and cicadas. Leger had always been fascinated by names and would later give himself the most remarkable pseudonym in all of literary history, but on this particular occasion, he playfully signed his name Lei Hi-Ngai, the Chinese transposition of Leger.<sup>6</sup>

While the biography says little about Leger's diplomatic life in China, it is full of other details about his stay: training his horse, which he named Allan; traveling to the provinces, Manchuria and Outer Mongolia; encountering Sinologues, and, above all, staying in a small, abandoned Taoist temple, perched on a hill overlooking the caravan routes, a day's horseback ride from Peking. According to the biography, he wrote *Anabasis* in this temple. (O. C. XVIII).

It is important to remember that the future Saint-John Perse had not yet chosen between a serious diplomatic career,

which risks stifling literary talent, and poetry, which requires silence and solitude. This dilemma between action and contemplation, leadership and desert walks provides the tension of *Anabasis*, whose narrator alternates between the sedentary and the nomadic. Sometimes he is a tribal chief and city father, but in his first person narrative he wavers between rejoicing in public life and anxiously awaiting the fruits of creativity and solitary dreaming.

Founding texts are filled with illustrious ancestors and public figures, leading their people across the desert, creating cities and constitutions. The narrator of *Anabasis* does not specifically allude to them, but he echoes the great themes of the Hebrew Scriptures: salt and thirst in the desert, the pain of exile, the value of fresh water and coriander. He evokes the dazzling beauty of the Milky Way or of “our scented girls clad in a breath of silk webs”<sup>(119)</sup>. When the clamors of glory subside, on the morning after the festivals, silence returns and he is filled with a secret desire to withdraw from power, transform himself into a Stranger and listen to the voices of the world:

{“At the sound of great waters on march over the earth,  
all the salt of the earth shudders in dream. And sudden,  
ah sudden, what would these voices with us?”}<sup>(127)</sup>

When Leger returned to Paris the dilemma was paradoxically resolved in favor of a diplomatic career. From the time Aristide Briand first noticed him in 1921 at the Washington conference on arms limitation and the Far East, until the ill-fated day in June 1940 when he was dismissed by Paul Reynaud, Leger devoted his energies to the Quai d’Orsay and stopped writing poetry, at least officially.

The name was not chosen because of any kind  
of affinities, memories or allusions.  
It does not mean or suggest anything intellectual.  
Devoid of all rational associations, it was  
freely welcomed as it mysteriously imposed itself  
on the poet's mind, for reasons even he does  
not understand, as in ancient onomastics:  
with its long and short, strong or silent syllables,  
its hard or sibilant consonants, obeying the secret  
laws that govern all poetic creation.

“Biographie”

note, O.C.

p. 1094

Saint-John Perse's grandiose name is one of his many singular features. How many insoluble enigmas reside in these three syllables! There is no chance the poet will enlighten us. His footnote in the Pléiade volume suggests that all efforts at elucidation are useless: "The name was not chosen because of any kind of affinities, memories or allusions. It does not mean or suggest anything intellectual. Devoid of all rational associations, it was freely welcomed as it mysteriously imposed itself on the poet's mind, for reasons even he does not understand, as in ancient onomastics: with its long and short, strong or silent syllables, its hard or sibilant consonants, obeying the secret laws that govern all poetic creation."<sup>7</sup>

Like all denials, this one merely provoked incredulity. How could the name not mean anything? not refer to anything? Commentators from the most plausible to the most outlandish delighted in trying to decode the secret message. In the absence of any definitive interpretation, here is a sampling of the most credible.

Which Saint John? The author of the fourth Gospel and the Apocalypse, John of the Cross, or another Saint John? If so, which one? Or does the name refer to the island in the British Antilles, mentioned earlier, in which case the poet is detouring to the childhood island he stubbornly refused to mention. But why would the poet adopt an English name after claiming the French language as his only country? Is the choice compatible with his fear that his pen name might appear foreign, a fear that prompted him to abbreviate it to St. J. Perse after his exile to the United States? What does the name Perse refer to? "It has nothing to do with the Latin poet Persius," said the poet dryly to those who thought they had found a key. Could it perhaps refer to Persians? No evidence, textual or other, supports this interpretation.

All these insoluble enigmas frustrate readers who are discouraged by mystery but they enchant those who love onomastic reverie. While we cannot settle on a single meaning, we can still be mesmerized by the ancient charm of the three-part rhythm, Saint-John Perse, which echoes the poet's first pseudonym, Saint-Leger Leger (the number three being a sacred symbol). We can be charmed by the subtle orchestration of sounds, the clashes of sibilants and dentals, nasals and silent "e."

## The Fervent Disciple of Aristide Briand at the Quai d'Orsay (1921-1931) 41

... Now, it had been such a long time that I had nursed a taste for this poem, mingling in my daily talk all that alliance, afar, of a great flash of sea – as on the edge of the forest, between the leaves of black lacquer, the swift layer of blue and of rocksalt sky: vivid scale, among the meshes of a great fish taken by the gills!

And who then could have surprised me in my secret purpose? guarded by smile and courtesy; speaking, speaking the tongue of an alien among men of my blood – in the corner perhaps of a Public Garden, or else by the grilles, pointed with gold, of some Chancellery; the face perhaps in profile and the gaze far off, between my phrases, on some bird singing its lay over the roof of the Harbour-master.

For it had been such a long time that I had nursed a taste for this poem, and with such a smile did I keep my devotion to it: all invaded, all invested, all menaced by the great poem, as by the milk of madrepores: at its flood, docile, as at the midnight quest, in a very slow heaving of the great waters of dream, when the pulsations of the open sea pull gently on the hawsers and on the cables.

Seamarks, p. 369, 371

Of violence on earth there is given to us in such large measure... O you, man of France, will you not see to it that I hear, under the human season, among the cries of the martins and all the Ursuline bells, rising through the gold chaff and the powder of your Kings a laughter of washerwomen in the cobbled alleyways?

Poem to a Foreign Lady, p. 215, 217

Leger's first encounter with Briand in 1921 was decisive. At first glance, the two men had little in common. Leger was 34, reserved; he stood straight like a horseback rider, had a tendency to adopt poses and fancied sporty British chic. Briand, 60, was short and stocky. His eyes still sparkled but he was already worn out. He walked slowly, hunched over, with a cigarette dangling from his mouth. His baggy suits were always wrinkled. Yet, during the ten years of their collaboration, the two men were perfectly attuned. They both loved the sea and periodic escapes from public life. They shared an admiration for the power of words and rhetoric. Above all, they had total faith in international organizations to bring about the difficult reconstruction of peace. Briand, who opposed all recourse to war, has often been described as an indefatigable pilgrim of peace. He was convinced there would not be another opportunity to renew dialogue and reintegrate Germany into the chorus of European nations. This conviction shaped his policy across the seven years of a seemingly-permanent tenure as Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Alexis Leger evolved and thrived in the Briand culture of negotiation and alliances. The culmination of this policy, the day of glory for Briand and his team, was the signing of the Kellogg-Briand pact in 1928, two years after Germany was admitted to the League of Nations. The pact was quickly ratified by 52 countries. Leger, his chief of staff, later wrote in the *Pléiade* biography: "The conception, drafting and preliminary implementation of the pact were left entirely to the initiative of the chief of staff." The comment illustrates that great men are rarely known for their modesty, but Leger deserves credit for having been a respectful, loyal collaborator, sincerely convinced of the responsibility

and moral authority of international institutions during the interwar crises, certain of France's greatness. The minister's romantic rhetoric from the podium of the League of Nations only reinforced Leger's loyalty to Briand's ambitious political project. At an international commemoration of Aristide Briand held in New York in March 1942, Leger offered a moving tribute where he applied his poetic insight to the acclaimed rhetoric of the apostle of peace: "No one knew better than he how to use the resources of the unconscious without ever losing control. To remain attuned to his unpredictable audiences, he never allowed himself to prepare in advance."<sup>IBID., 607</sup>

A man stricken with such solitude, let him go and  
 hang up in the sanctuary the mask and baton  
 of command!  
 I raised sponge and gall to the wounds of an old tree  
 laden with the chains of the earth.  
 "Once, once I had a taste for living far from men,  
 but now the Rains..."

"Rains VI," p.185

## The Secretary General of the Quai d'Orsay in the Turmoil of June 1940 45

"Innumerable are our paths and our dwellings uncertain. He drinks of divinity whose lip is of clay.  
 You, washers of the dead in the mother-waters of morning – and it is earth still among the thorns  
 of war – wash too the faces of the living; wash, O Rains! the sorrowful faces of the violent,  
 the gentle faces of the violent... for their paths are narrow and their dwellings uncertain.

"Wash, O Rains! a stone place for the strong. At the great tables shall they sit, beneath the eaves  
 of their strength, those whom the wine of men has not made drunk, those whom the taste of tears and  
 of dream has not defiled, those who care nothing for their name in the bone trumpets... at the great  
 tables shall they sit, beneath the eaves of their strength, in a stone place for the strong.

"Wash doubt and prudence from the path of action, wash doubt and modesty from the field of vision.  
 Wash, O Rains! the film from the eye of the upright man, from the eye of the right-thinking  
 man; wash the film from the eye of the man of good taste, from the eye of the man of good form;  
 the film from the man of merit, the film from the man of talent; wash the scales from the eye  
 of the Great Master and of the Patron of the Arts, from the eye of the just man and of the man  
 of standing... from the eye of the men well qualified by prudence and modesty.

"Wash, wash benevolence from the heart of the great Intercessors, seemliness from the forehead of the great  
 Educators, and defilement of speech from the public lips. Wash, O Rains! the hand of the Judge  
 and of the Provost, the hand of the midwife and of the layer-out, the hand licked by the sick and  
 the blind, and the iron hand on the foreheads of men, dreaming still of reins and whip...  
 with the assent of the great Intercessors, of the great Educators.

"Wash, wash the peoples' history from the tall tables of memory: the great official annals, the great  
 Chronicles of the Clergy, the bulletins of the Academies... Wash bulls and charters, and  
 the Memorials of the Third Estate; Covenants, Pacts of Alliance and the great Acts of Federation;  
 wash, wash, O Rains! all the vellums and parchments, coloured like the walls of asylums and  
 Lazar-houses, coloured like fossil ivory and old mules' teeth... Wash, wash, O Rains! the tall tables  
 of memory.

"O Rains! wash from the heart of man the most beautiful sayings of man: the most beautiful sentence,  
 the most beautiful sequence; the well-turned phrase, the noble page. Wash, wash, from  
 the hearts of men their taste for roundelays and for elegies; their taste for villanelles and rondeaux;  
 their great felicities of expression; wash Attic salt and euphuist honey, wash, wash,  
 the bedding of dream and the litter of knowledge: from the heart of the man who makes no refusals,  
 from the heart of the man who has no disgusts, wash, wash, O Rains! the most beautiful gifts  
 of man... from the hearts of the men most gifted for the great works of reason."

"Rains VII," p. 189, 191

From 1933 to 1940 Alexis Leger held the prestigious title of Secretary General of the Quai d'Orsay. His long tenure contrasts with the instability of the period, in which there were 16 successive governments and 12 ministers of Foreign Affairs. One result of Leger's remarkable longevity was to consolidate his authority in the minds of British and American allies. Another contrary effect was for French politicians to blame him, at least in part, for the failure of diplomatic resistance to Nazi provocation. Obviously, the Briand legacy was a heavy one to carry in 1933. It is difficult to know, as historian J.-B. Duroselle has written, "if what Briand wanted in the 1920s was still justified in the 1930s." Facts suggest that the idea of international solidarity and pacts could not stand up to the imperialist violence committed by nationalist ideologies that cynically broke the rules of diplomacy. Alexis Leger was nevertheless convinced, even after the Germano-Soviet pact, that the Soviet Union controlled the future of the peace treaties that emerged from World War I. There is not space here for a detailed account of the case against Leger, but it is true that the critique is serious. While he had friends, notably in the press, his diplomatic enemies prepared a virulent and surprisingly undiplomatic dossier against him. Beginning with Paul Reynaud, diplomats launched a vendetta that combined vehemence, caricature and calumny. The one book that provides a more or less favorable judgment about Leger is Jean Baillon's edited volume on the French diplomatic corps which takes into account his long tenure and the resentment it provoked.

With hindsight we have to ask to what extent the negative judgments were not colored by perceptions of Leger as a Guadeloupean from a modest family who had not fought in World War I because he was head of his household,

who was befriended by Briand and Berthelot even though he had spent only a short time in Asia, who occupied an envied position in the central administration even though he had no other foreign experience, and who maintained an enigmatic independence from the political intrigues around him.

To be fair, we should judge the Secretary General in the context of the era that followed the Munich accord. French diplomacy, reeling from the violence unleashed by a dictatorship, was divided into rival clans of doves vs. hawks. As a worthy disciple of Briand, Leger was among those who preferred diplomatic action (via Russia or Italy) over military conflict. After Munich, he gradually evolved from pacifism to belligerence but was not able to sway a Minister caught up in factional divisions, political attacks and pernicious behind-the-scenes manipulation.

On May 19, 1940, Leger was summarily fired. Officially, it was Foreign Minister Paul Reynaud who made the decision, one day before a government shuffle in which he himself would be reassigned to the War Ministry. Unofficially, it was Reynaud's influential mistress, Madame de Portes, who obtained Leger's dismissal. According to Étienne de Crouy-Chanel, she ran to the Élysée palace in person to deliver the decree. Leger confided to his private secretary Raymond Boyer de Sainte-Suzanne, "If they make me leave, I'll be the one who gets the good deal, not they," to which Sainte-Suzanne added this perceptive comment: "What was he thinking about? Rest? His sparkling, half-closed eyes suggested something other than vacation."<sup>8</sup>

## The First Four Poems of the American Exile

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Doors open on the sands, doors open on exile,  
 The keys with the lighthouse keepers, and sun spread-eagled on the threshold stone:  
 Leave me, dear host, your house of glass on the sands...  
 Summer, all gypsum, whets its lance-heads in our wounds,  
 I have chosen a place glaring and null as the bone-heap of the seasons,  
 And, on all the shores of the world, the ghost of the god in smoke abandons his bed of asbestos.  
 The spasms of lightning are for the delight of Princes in Taurida.

Dedicated to no shores, imparted to no pages, the pure beginnings of this song ...  
 Others in temples seize on the painted altar horns:  
 My fame is on the sands! my fame is on the sands! ... and it is no error, O Peregrine,  
 To desire the barest place for assembling on the wastes of exile a great poem born of nothing,  
     a great poem made from nothing...  
 Whistle, O slings about the world, sing, O conches on the waters!  
 I have built upon the abyss and the spindrift and the sand-smoke. I shall lie down in cistern  
     and hollow vessel,  
 In all stale and empty places where lies the taste of greatness.

“Exile I,” p.147, 149

“... There has always been this clamour, there has always been this splendour,  
 And like a great feat of arms on the march across the world, like a census of peoples in exodus,  
     like a foundation of empires in praetorian tumult, ah! like an animation of lips over  
     the birth of great Books,  
 This huge muffled thing loose in the world, and suddenly growing huger like drunkenness...

“...There has always been this clamour, there has always been this grandeur,  
 This thing wandering about the world, this high trance about the world, and on all the shores  
     of the world, by the same breath uttered, the same wave uttering  
 One long phrase without pause forever unintelligible...

“...There has always been this clamour, there has always been this furor,  
 And this tall surf at the pitch of passion, always, at the peak of desire, the same gull on the wing,  
     the same gull under way, rallying with spread wings the stanzas of exile, and on all the shores  
     of the world, by the same breath uttered, the same measureless lamentation  
 Pursuing across the sands my Numidian soul...”

“Exile III,” p.151

<sup>9</sup> See illustration

17.

<sup>10</sup> See illustration

16.

50

During the first months of exile, Leger probably assumed that with the help of his influential allies he would soon return to power. Since he was not a man to be satisfied with consolation prizes, he categorically refused Reynaud's invitation to be ambassador to Washington. Not wanting to give the impression of evading responsibility, he asked for a leave of absence and departed for England on June 16. After meeting with Churchill and other British authorities to discuss ways to continue the struggle, he left for the United States.

A photograph, taken soon after Leger's arrival in New York, shows him with his back to the camera, head bowed and a somber air, contemplating the skyscrapers.<sup>9</sup> His hope of returning to France evaporated when the Vichy government revoked his citizenship, removed him from the Legion of Honor, confiscated his possessions and allowed the Gestapo to ransack his Paris apartment.<sup>10</sup> Added to these humiliations was the anguish of not knowing the fate of his relatives, left behind in occupied France. Yet Leger remained discreet about the turmoil of those early days of exile in order to bequeath to posterity a carefully constructed, albeit reconstructed persona. In the *Pléiade* biography he relates details of that period in a tone as laconic as the one he used to relate his departure from Guadeloupe. There are expressions of gratitude for the hospitality of his new American friends, and a single but poignant confession in a letter to Archibald MacLeish, who had arranged for Leger to have a modest position as literary advisor to the Library of Congress in Washington: "To tell the truth, I had just plunged into one of those abysses of solitude and silence from which one can scarcely emerge because one simply loses all notion of time."

In this period a prodigious shift occurred and poetry reclaimed its rights. During the summer of 1941 Leger wrote *Exile* (the first of four poems, in a collection of the same title) on Long Beach Island, New Jersey, in a house that belonged to his generous friends Katherine and Francis Biddle. He dedicated the poem to Archibald MacLeish who, in a gesture of a poetic fraternity, had arranged the living conditions that made it possible for Saint-John Perse's voice to be heard again. The poem begins with a wholehearted embrace of exile, in its radical nudity: "I have chosen a place glaring and null as the bone-heap of the seasons."<sup>(147)</sup> The present tense, the legal vocabulary, and the first-person narrator all affirm the uncontested authority of the poetic word. Who is the subject speaking with such power? Surely not Alexis Leger, the dismissed diplomat. In fact, very few allusions allow us to link the *Exile* poems (*Exile*, *Rains*, *Snows*, *Poem to a Foreign Lady*) to the unhappy events of the diplomat's life or even to the tragic situation of his country. The subject who calls himself successively "Stranger," "precarious host," and "the Prodigal" is none other than the secret double of the diplomat, the poet Saint-John Perse, who is constructing his identity before our eyes. The poet has no intention of holding on to the past, in the romantic tradition of weeping over ruins. Instead, he is determined to seize the present moment and invent a language that can capture the rhythm, song and secret seduction of the cosmic elements. The waves and sand dunes of *Exile* link all the exiles of legend and history: "I shall resume my Numidian flight, skirting the inalienable sea..."<sup>(169)</sup>

In the next poem, *Rains*, memory is purified by a violent tropical rainstorm (like one the poet observed in Georgia):

{Wash, wash from the hearts of men their taste  
for roundelays and for elegies; their taste for villanelles  
and rondeaux; their great felicities of expression.}<sup>(191)</sup>

Snows, inspired by watching a snowstorm from a New York hotel room, is a long reverie about the refreshing purity of the elemental earth and the savor of archaic languages. The fourth poem of the collection, which is the most urban and autobiographical, does not reveal the name of its heroine, the poet's beautiful mistress, Lilita Abreu. In this Poem to a Foreign Lady, set in Georgetown, Saint-John evokes the din of cicadas and "all this noise of rushing waters the night of the New World makes,"<sup>(215)</sup> poignant melodies that echo the inner song of the Foreign Lady. Language possesses a magical power to link human beings to the cosmic elements and, even more, to transform the world. The poet rediscovers this power and gradually rediscovers life:

{And it is already the third year that at your shut door, /  
like a nest of Sibyls, the abyss gives birth to its wonders:  
fireflies!}<sup>(219)</sup>

**Winds, 1945**

*These were very great winds over all the faces of this world,  
Very great winds rejoicing over the world, having neither eyrie nor resting-place,  
Having neither care nor caution, and leaving us, in their wake,  
Men of straw in the year of straw... Ah, yes, very great winds  
over all the faces of the living!*

Winds, p.227

The first verse of a Saint-John Perse poem is one of the most original moments of his poetry but also one of the most difficult. It alludes to a previous history, the secret gestation of the poem which remains invisible to readers. The opening verse is not only difficult but essential, to judge by the many drafts of manuscripts and by the poet's repeated insistence that publishers choose specific typefaces for these verses: large Roman font to distinguish the first words of a text from the rest (often in italics), and a very large font for the first letter, as in medieval manuscripts.

Beginnings are important and enigmatic because the poet is not satisfied with merely stating a poem's themes, as one typically does in discursive rhetoric. Instead, he sets in motion the process that will allow the poem's secret to unfold and its specific desire to be fulfilled. In the first section of *Winds* the announced theme is the fierce invasion of wind and its destructive power. The political context of the poem, written in the United States, establishes an equation between the irruption of unleashed wind and the international turmoil of the time. But the strongest emotional charge comes from the intersection of an external phenomenon – wind – and an internal phenomenon – desire – from the overlap of collective history with a personal story. The onslaught of a hurricane coupled with the arrival of spiritual energy engenders the song: “O thou, desire, who art about to sing...? And does not my whole page itself already rustle...”<sup>(229)</sup>

This verse is an announcement that the poem will not describe wind's power over things; it will show how wind can become an active force in the poem, how, in all its guises, from tropical hurricanes to refreshing breezes, wind can be a metaphor for poetic language, which has its own similarly varied registers.

Poetry sometimes uses violence – exclamations, apostrophes, insults, invectives and irony – to sweep away all the things that consort with death: real and symbolic walls, shelters and temples (i: 3), asceticism and the veneration of knowledge (ii: 2); the lure of the South which provokes nostalgia for the poet’s Antillean childhood (ii: 3-5); memories of loss and grief (iii: 5); the cult of Western civilization with its parsimonious wisdom and bourgeois habits (iv: 5). The most stunning moments of the poem are when the hurricane suddenly ceases and its din gives way to murmurs. Silence and calm return and the poet joyfully unites with a new world, purified of the seeds of death:

55

{O freshness in the night when dawn transformed  
herself into a winged girl; at the highest peak of peril,  
at the highest point  
Of leaves and fronds!... “Promise, enchant me unto  
forgetfulness of the dream of being born...”  
And as one who has reprimanded Kings, I shall listen to  
the authority of the dream mounting within me.} (237, 239)

What makes *Winds* memorable is the dramatic alternation between wrath and kindness, harshness and tenderness. Like a biblical prophet, the poet refuses all concessions to authority, all complacency toward secular doctrines. In that sense, he resembles Joseph with the Pharaoh or John the Baptist with Herod. Although agnostic, he believes in the supernatural virtues of poetry. Who knows, after all, whether Saint-John Perse saw dreams as coming from the gods, from the magical power of language or from magnetic fields that linked him to the cosmos?

## Sweep away the books: Winds, I:4

All to be done again. All to be told again. And the scything glance to be swept across all man's heritage.

A man came who laughed at the Librarians' stone galleries. — Basilica of the Tome!... A man on the sardonix stairs, beneath the prerogatives of bronze and alabaster. Man of little renown. Who was he, who was he not?

And the walls are of agate where the lamps gain lustre, the man, bare-headed, with smooth hands, in the yellow marble quarries — where the tomes are in the seraglio, where the tomes are in their niches, like stuffed animals under wrappings, long ago, in their jars within the closed rooms of great Temples — the tomes, innumerable and sad, in high cretaceous strata carrying credence and sediment through the ascent of time...

And the walls are of agate where the lamps take lustre. Tall walls polished by silence and by science, and by the night of the lamps. Silence and silent rituals. Priests and priesthood. Serapeum!

At what rites of green Spring must we cleanse this finger, soiled with the dust of archives — in this bloom of age, in all this powder of dead Queens and flamens — as though from deposits of holy cities, cities of white pottery, dead from too much attrition, too much moon?

Ha! let all this loess be aired out! Ha! let all this delusion be aired out. Fraud and sterility of altars...

The tomes, innumerable and sad, on their pale chalk edges...

And what is all this talc again to my finger of bone, talc of wear and wisdom, and all that dusty touch of scholarship? like powder and dust of pollen at the season's end, spores and sporules of lichens, a crumbling of wings of the Pieridae, of flaking volvas of the lactaries... all things scaling off toward nothingness, deposits of the depths over their faeces, slime and dregs at the very bottom of silt — ashes and scales of the spirit.

Ha! all this tepid odour of lye and fomentation under glass... of white earth of sepulchres, of white fuller's earth and heath-mould for old Victorian greenhouses... all that stale exhalation of kelp-ash and shell-marl, of white pulp of copra, and of seaweed's thalli drying under the gray felt of great herbariums,

Ha! all that taste of asylum and casbah, and that bloom of age over the stone mouldings — fraud and sterility of altars, decay of coral coasts, and, far away, the sudden infection of the vast lifts of limestone at the perfidies of the ecliptic...

Let us be gone! be gone! Cry of the living!

An enigmatic man appears in the fourth canto of *Winds I*: “A man came who laughed at the Librarians’ stone galleries – Basilica of the Tome!...”<sup>(239)</sup> He is nameless or, worse still, of “little renown.” Does he even have an identity? “Who was he, who was he not?”<sup>(239)</sup> But he has a voice and character traits and lives in a place that reminds us of a sanctuary: “the man bareheaded, with smooth hands, in the yellow marble quarries”<sup>(239)</sup>. This space of marble, bronze and alabaster, where agate walls reflect lamplight, where books sleep, silence and science reign, is a library suspiciously like the Library of Congress in Washington. The pale, quiet, learned man reading there is suspiciously like Alexis Leger, the literary advisor, whose function has “little renown.” The library is both a temple of knowledge and a dusty archival sediment. That same reader commits the most sacreligious act imaginable in such a place: he laughs. His laughter, like the mother’s in Jean Genet’s *Screens*, not only denounces sterile books but also calls us to life. The verse ends with “Cry of the living!”<sup>(241)</sup>

The sterility of books is a perennial theme of literary inspiration, dating back to Rimbaud, Gide and the Surrealists. Saint-John Perse merely highlights the incompatibility between books and sensual intoxication. Library books, piously arranged on shelves or niches, compartmentalize reality; archives and manuscripts freeze specific moments in the history of humanity. Saint-John Perse, by contrast, like the early 20th century Vitalist poets, viewed movement as the principle of life. Like them, he sought to capture in language the continuous movement hidden beneath an apparently fragmented reality. It was Saint-John Perse’s supreme originality to carry his denunciation to such a paroxysm that he ultimately suffocated himself and his reader.

This is the principle of homeopathy: accumulated images of blandness and whiteness, wear and dessication, cause an unbearable malaise. As if by a spontaneous hygienic reaction, the poet closes Winds by demanding breath and breadth: “Let us be gone! be gone! Cry of the living!”<sup>(241)</sup> Saint-John Perse’s poetry is decidedly not for stuffy esthetes!

*strong and very beautiful works, which are all strength and will and which are all beauty –*

K

**The Long Desire of the Sea Poem: Seamarks, 1957**

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*great seditious works, great licentious works, open to every audacity of man, and which will recreate for us the desire  
to live the part of man, in his own measure, at the greatest stride of man on the stone.*

“Strophe”

Seamarks,

p.411

Anabasis ended with a narrator thinking wistfully about the sea: “And my thought is not heedless of the navigator.”<sup>(141)</sup> The nomadic chief, busy conquering and founding cities, had little time for the sea but he secretly longed for it. Two decades later, at the beginning of Saint-John Perse’s American exile, the sea returns in *Rains*, but only metaphorically. Tropical storms mime the sea; they have the same ebb and flow, the same foamy effervescence, the same way of washing and stripping horizontal layers of soil. When the Pacific ocean suddenly appears on the horizon of *Winds*, it seems initially like a positive response to the narrator’s earlier “renunciation” of the human condition. But the flat, deserted Pacific, mirroring the surface of a desert, quickly provokes an overwhelming, almost suicidal anguish: “And the capsules of death explode in his mouth...”<sup>(333)</sup>

After *Praises*, the poet stopped alluding to the “faultless vase of the sea,”<sup>(63)</sup> to avoid falling into nostalgic exoticism. When the sea reappeared in *Vents* was it merely an invitation to dissolve into nothingness? *Seamarks* marks a triumphal solution to this dilemma. Here, the ocean is no longer simply a dream on the horizon. The poet abandons the indirect language of metaphor to present the sea, in person, as a living substance that is both delectable and aggressive. At times, the poem immerses us in an element as tangy as salt and as sweet as milk, reminiscent of the sea in *Exile*: “Wisdom in the foam, O plagues of the mind in the crepitation of salt and the milk of quicklime!”<sup>(149)</sup>

At other times, the poem invokes the Sea, with a capital S, through sections recited by a series of protagonists with sacred functions: the Master of Stars and Navigation, Patricians, Tragedians, the Poet and, finally, the Lovers.

{“O Sea which swells in our dreams as in endless  
disparagement and in sacred malignancy, O you who  
weigh on our great childhood walls and our terraces like  
an obscene tumour and like a divine malady!”} (425)

We are immediately aware of the sea’s sensual beauty. We also come to understand the link between the sea and being, the sea as being. Saint-John Perse was fascinated by the sea’s perpetual movement, permanent but always changing. It represented the metaphysical principle – whether existence, god or Spirit. Poetry’s mission, he believed, was to reveal this principle in human beings and the cosmos:

63

{“See to it that one evening we remember all those proud  
and real things which were consumed there,  
and which came to us from the sea, and which came to us  
from elsewhere,

Among all illicit things and those which pass  
understanding...”} (427)

Before Seamarcs, Saint-John Perse prudently relegated the sea to the background, lest it be confused with his lost past. In this poem it becomes a full-fledged character. Every evocation of the sea connects it to the Caribbean. At the same time the sea becomes the interlocutor of a drama modeled after the ancient Greek rite of Dionysus. This grand conception inflects both the architecture and the lyric mode of the poem; it allows the poet to step outside himself and explore human destiny: “.. Now, it had been such a long time that I had nursed a taste for this poem, mingling in my daily talk all that alliance, afar, of a great flash of sea” (369)

## **The Ancient Ritual of Seamarks**

*With all her lease of monsters and men,  
and all her breed of immortal fables, joining  
with her masses of slaves and helots  
her tall bastards of the Gods and her large  
daughters of Stallions – a crowd in haste  
rising on the tiers of History and all moving  
in a body towards the arena, with the first  
chill of the evening and the smell of seaweed,  
Recitation marching towards the Author  
and towards the painted mouth of his mask.*

“Invocation”

Seamarks

p.375

Through high-ranking intermediaries, the poet orchestrates a procession toward the sea. Its route and cadence derive from the ritual march of triumphal odes or epinicians that took place at the beginning of ancient Greek festivals. Like those early processions, this one also begins a ceremony based on Dionysian dithyrambs, which were the origins of Greek tragedy. The architecture of the poem mirrors the divisions of ancient drama. Prologue, episode, chorus and exodos are called, respectively, “Invocation,” “Strophe,” “Chorus,” and “Dedication.” In *Seamarks* as in Greek dithyramb, the poet delegates power to the chorus or choruses immediately after the Invocation and they play the major role. The overall structure of *Seamarks* is only progressively apparent, but that hardly matters since the poet has established, from the beginning, the cultural (ancient Greek) and religious (the ritual of tragedy) frameworks that place his individual desire into a sacred tradition. By renewing an ancient myth, he avoids the Surrealists’ tempting and risky practice of wandering without structure.

The Invocation corresponds to the initial phrase of the sacrifice. In antiquity, preliminary rituals conferred a sacred quality on all elements of the ceremony – sacrificer and victim, site and instruments – and made them worthy to participate. This is also the role of the first six cantos of *Seamarks*. The poet, “man of the sea,” prepares to honor the Sea. He assumes his priestly role by renewing the ritual procession around the altar and elevating language to sacred speech with a spiritual vocabulary, incantatory rhythm, echoes and repetitions:

{And I, bowing in your honour in a bow not too low,  
 Shall exhaust the reverence and balancing of the body;  
 And the smoke of pleasure once more will encircle  
     the head of the fervent  
 And the delight of the well-chosen word once more  
     beget the grace of a smile...} (369)

The poet exceeds the goals of ancient Greek prologues. As we learn in the Invocation, his poem will not be unilateral but collaborative, an exchange in which poet and sea learn to be both passive and active, to give and receive, to love and be loved. “The Sea, borne in us”<sup>(367)</sup> is also the Sea bearing us. To the degree the rite is efficacious, human beings will learn to go beyond boundaries, to liberate themselves from encumbrances and memory, to look within themselves and stretch their spirits to the dimensions of the sea. They fill themselves with sea, “to the satiety of breath and peroration of breath”<sup>(367)</sup>. The sea reciprocates by rising from its bed, furnishing energy and legends:

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{And it is the Sea that came to us on the stone steps of the drama: With her Princes, her Regents, her Messengers clothed in pomp and metal, her great Actors their eyes gouged out and her Prophets chained together, her women Magicians stamping on wooden clogs...}<sup>(373)</sup>

### *Strophe*

In ancient sacrifice, the strophe is the center of the drama; indeed it is the drama. This is where the victims or objects are sacrificed. Every strophe of Seemarks is articulated around a rupture in which the chorus plays the dual role of sacrificer and victim. For the Tragedians and Patricians, the rupture is consummated in the offering of accessories which are purely decorative: masks and thyrsi, “those sculptured panellings of cedar or thuja,”<sup>(417)</sup> “our dazzling stones and our night jewels.”<sup>(419)</sup>

In the case of the lovers, the woman offers two gifts. One is the fruit of her body: “Fruits of woman, O my love, are more than fruits of the sea: from me not painted nor adorned, receive an earnest of the Sea Summer...”<sup>(455)</sup> Woman’s other gift is symbolized by roses and a boat:

“you are to me a vessel bearing roses. You break the chain of offerings on the water”<sup>(459)</sup>. The woman lies in the position her lover dictates, subjugated as if she were an animal in a pen, and ultimately spread open at the place of the “the ritual incision heightened with the red mark”<sup>(467)</sup>.

To channel and control violence, the modern sacrifice, like its ancient predecessor, scrupulously follows a detailed protocol. The site, for example, is not just anywhere but a place consecrated and reserved for sacrifice.

Otherwise immolation would be murder. The setting is a traditional amphitheater (except for Canto IX). The sea, its ritual space, is raised to the level of an orchestra; water constitutes the “altar.” The escarpments serve as tiers; the ledges or iron ramps form semicircles. The lovers, protective of their privacy, leave the public amphitheater and withdraw to “closed chambers,”<sup>(513)</sup> an ideal space separated from ordinary ones. The lovers’ chamber is dominated by a cedar bed, like Ulysses’, and everything is elevated. The house itself “sails like a trireme”<sup>(489)</sup> on top of a wave that “rises and is made woman”<sup>(481)</sup>. The sacrifice at the center of each canto specifically rejects the provocative sensuality and ambiguous seductions of land, which are suspect to the poet:

{Ah! may a broader movement of things to their shore,  
of all things to their shore as into other hands,  
alienate from us at last the ancient Sorceress: the Earth,  
her tawny acorns, the heavy Circean braids, and  
the red evening moving in the pupils of tamed eyes!}<sup>(391)</sup>

It is important to note that, while the poet looks outward to the sea, he always keeps one foot on land. The real space of

the drama is not the boundless, bottomless sea but the “altar” of sea. It is the amphitheater, enclosed in the semicircular walls of the coastline. In both cases, it is a place where sea and land meet harmoniously, where, on the metaphysical level of the poem, individuals remain human even as they transcend humanity. We have, in some sense, a modern translation of the neologism Dante created in Paradise I: *trasumanar*, meaning to pass beyond the human.

#### *The Chorus*

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The Chorus, consisting of wise voices who enter after the Invocation, sings in acclamation. Like ancient choruses, it addresses a “recitation” consisting of conjurings, praises and exclamations to the authority figure. This final part of the sacrifice is called thanksgiving. It is a delicate moment in the ritual and must not be omitted if one wants the god to continue his blessings. After this collective recitation, the poet, descendent of the ancient chorus leader, becomes the new leader.

#### *Dedication*

This last part, replacing the *exodos* of a drama or the end of a sacrificial ritual, is brief but essential. It accomplishes two difficult tasks. One is to accompany the celebrants out of the magic circle and reintegrate them into the secular world. The other is to establish a continuity between the two universes that were briefly united in the moment of the offering. More specifically, the dedication allows the poet to move from night and dawn to noontime, from the time of action to that of contemplation, from the time of tides to the high, calm sea. After achieving this fullness of being, the poet is finally released from his mission:

{The bird, vast as its circle, sees man free of his shadow,  
at the limit of his weal.} (575)

## **“Narrow are the Vessels” or the Dialogue of Love: Seemarks IX**

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*... Narrow are the vessels, narrow our couch.  
Immense the expanse of waters, wider our empire  
In the closed chambers of desire.*

*Summer enters, coming from the sea. To the sea only shall we say  
What strangers we were at the festivities of the City, and what star rising  
from undersea festivities,  
Hung one evening, over our couch, on the scent of the gods.*

*In vain the surrounding land traces for us its narrow confines. One same wave  
throughout the world, one same wave since Troy  
Rolls its haunch towards us. On a far-off open sea this gust was long ago impressed...  
And the clamour one evening was loud in the chambers: death itself, blowing its  
conchs, could not have been heard!  
The vessels shall you love, O lovers, and the sea high in the chambers!  
The land one evening mourns its gods, and man hunts rust-red badgers;  
cities wear down, women dream... May it always be at our door  
That immense dawn called sea – elite of wings and levying of weapons; love and sea  
of the same bed, love and sea in the same bed.*

“Narrow are the Vessels”

P-45I, 453

On first reading, it is possible to misunderstand Canto IX. Structured like a dialogue with parallel construction and echoing themes and sounds, it reminds us of the lovers' songs of Pharaonic Egypt or the Cantic of Canticles. There are certainly similarities between "Narrow are the Vessels" and these great dialogues of love (the same sensuality in a more Atlantic spirit), but Canto IX is fully meaningful only in the context of the eight preceding ones. It is their triumphant conclusion.

Rather than a self-contained lyric dialogue between two lovers, this is one episode in a vast circular choreography. Its focus, the sea, is not a passive spectator to the drama unfolding in the high room; it is the source from which the lovers drink. The sea is not a simple metaphor; it is a force of attraction, associating itself in the lovers' union, generously giving them its salt and space. Through its rhythm of wind and tides, it sets the cadence of the poem and its relation to weather and time.

The poet's brilliant originality is to make the lovemaking reenact the sea. And since the sea possesses all the properties of divinity, the lovers' desire to achieve immortality through love becomes an image of divine transcendence:

{ "O Sea raised against death! How much love is marching through the world to an encounter with your horde! One single wave on its lever!..." }<sub>(473)</sub>

{ "Death, dazzling and vain, goes, with the step of mimes, to honour other beds. And the alien Sea, seeded with foam, engenders far off on other shores its parade chargers..." }

"These tears, my Love, were not tears of a mortal woman." }<sub>(475)</sub>

The erotic act of canto IX resembles the offertory rituals of earlier cantos, but differs in the weight it gives to the different parts. Here, the preamble is shorter and the conclusion much longer for the simple reason that the lovers are engaged from the beginning in a religious act, an act that links them to a force greater than they are: the Sea, with a capital S. In this episode, sensuality has deeper origins than mere instinct. Conversely, spiritual transports are incarnated in the body. If the woman is sweet “to the man’s nostrils,”<sup>(497)</sup> she is also “sweet in the talons of the mind”<sup>(497)</sup>. The lovers do not start off in the deprived state described by the Patricians: “our books read, our dreams closed, was that all there was?”<sup>(417)</sup> Nor are they in the corrupt state recognized by the Tragedians. They are removed from the contradictory temptations of the earth. The body of the woman is already holy:

{what is this body itself, save image and form of the ship?  
nacelle and hull, and votive vessel, even to its median  
opening}<sup>(457)</sup>

The conclusion of this Canto is long because of the rules that weigh upon lovers. Do they withdraw from the public sphere and the “festivities of the City,”<sup>(451)</sup> lock themselves in their room and pass for foreigners because they realize how many ancestral taboos govern sexual relations? Or do they engage in forbidden acts precisely to capture these excesses, choosing a narrow bed and a closed room to circumscribe the immensity of the sea? Do they withdraw to preserve their secret kinship with the sea: “To the sea only shall we say [...]”<sup>(451)</sup>?

Because the lovers’ room lies outside ordinary space, because summer stands outside normal time, lovemaking

runs a double risk. The first is that it might seem less exceptional. This is represented by the woman's anguish when the Magician leads the crowd into her room. The opposite risk is to elevate lovemaking to a level of holiness incompatible with ordinary life. This is suggested by the lover who veers toward the open sea as he falls asleep: "Who then in you always becomes estranged, with the daylight? And your abode, where is it?"<sup>(509)</sup> These dual risks impel the poet to pay special attention to the closing rituals.

*“Fear not,” says History, taking off her mask of violence and raising her hand in the conciliatory gesture of the Asiatic Divinity at the climax of Her dance of destruction. “Fear not, neither doubt – for doubt is impotent and fear servile. Listen, rather, to the rhythm that I, the renewer of all things, impose upon the great theme which mankind is forever engaged in composing. It is not true that life can abjure life: nothing that lives is born of nothingness, or to nothingness is wed. But nothing, either, can preserve its form and measure against the ceaseless flux of Being. The tragedy is not in the metamorphosis as such. The real drama of this century lies in the growing estrangement between the temporal and the untemporal man. Is man, enlightened on one side, to sink into darkness on the other? A forced growth in a community without communion, what would that be but a false maturity?...”*

*It is for the poet, in his wholeness, to bear witness to the twofold vocation of man: to hold up before the spirit a mirror more sensitive to his spiritual possibilities; to evoke, in our own century, a vision of the human condition more worthy of man as he was created; to connect ever more closely the collective soul to the currents of spiritual energy in the world. In these days of nuclear energy, can the earthenware lamp of the poet still suffice?*

*— Yes, if its clay remind us of our own.*

*And it is enough for the poet to be the guilty conscience of his time.*

Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech  
 Stockholm, December 10, 1960  
 On Poetry, p. 11, 13

<sup>11</sup> See illustrations 18 and 19.  
<sup>12</sup> Saint-John Perse (Alexis Leger), Dag Hammarskjöld, *Correspondance (1955-61)*, éd. Marie-Noëlle Little, Cahiers Saint-John Perse 11, Gallimard, 1993, p. 147.

On September 1, 1944, Alexis Leger was reinstated as French Ambassador-at-Large. At the Liberation, all his rights were restored. Yet he did not immediately return to France, and declined prestigious positions, including Minister of Foreign Affairs, which French president Vincent Auriol offered him in 1947. He remained in the United States until 1958, and despite the objective facts, persisted in calling this period an exile (a word that secretly confirmed his status as poet). Officially he attributed his decision to his dismay over post-war France. He believed the country to be in “chaos” because of General de Gaulle, and on the verge of “collapse.” France’s recourse to de Gaulle in 1958 confirmed Leger’s belief that democratic institutions had fallen into disarray. We remember the disdain that prompted him to refuse de Gaulle’s overtures from London in 1940. Twenty years later, this disdain became an outright, systematic critique.<sup>11</sup> In keeping with his democratic convictions, Leger continued to believe that a military ruler would inevitably place personal power above the Constitution. His letters during the next ten years, especially to Dag Hammarskjöld, are punctuated with references to the plight of “poor France,” led by a “Monarch” whom he also called “the French Autocrat.” In Leger’s view, France was living under a monarchy; what it considered “constitutional” was really just a concession from the ruler. He saw the 1958 election that elected de Gaulle as a take-it-or-leave-it vote about one person and the immediate usefulness of one formula.<sup>12</sup>

Faithful to his convictions, Leger refused any recognition from the French government, with the exception of the Grand Prix National des Lettres Françaises, which he reluctantly accepted from Culture Minister André Malraux.

Dag Hammarskjöld reassured Leger that among all honors this was the one he could and should accept without betraying his principles.<sup>13</sup>

While refusing some honors, Saint-John Perse showed remarkable determination and strategy in seeking the Nobel Prize. His abundant correspondence with Dag Hammarskjöld between 1955 and 1961 deals largely with the campaign for the Nobel Prize led by the Secretary General of the United Nations in his capacity as a member of the Swedish Academy. Ever since *Anabasis*, when Saint-John Perse stopped evoking his native Guadeloupe, he judged that his poetry had a universal vocation. He wanted his poems to be known internationally and he paid special attention to their translation. He believed the Nobel Prize was a fitting recognition of his grand, universal conception of poetry.

The acceptance speech in Stockholm on a cold December day in 1960 is a homage to Poetry by a grand master of eloquence. It achieves an elevated tone through words, grammar and syntax, and gives praise with exclamations and superlatives.<sup>14</sup> On an occasion like that one, we do not expect secrets or personal confessions. The event was about poetry “which rarely receives public homage”<sup>(5)</sup> and about poets in general, going back to our earliest ancestors: “A poet already dwelt within the cave man”<sup>(9)</sup>.

In the Nobel speech, as elsewhere, Saint-John Perse affirms that the poet is not a person but a function, a high function, comparable perhaps to that of Secretary General of the Quai d’Orsay. The diplomat Alexis Leger represented his government and sought to be acknowledged as its delegate. The poet Saint-John Perse was committed to representing Being to the people of his time: “Thus, by his full adhesion

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>14</sup> The speech, entitled *On Poetry*, has a special value in Saint-John Perse’s work, since it is the only *ars poetica* he ever composed. W.S. Auden’s translation appears in the volume of *Collected Poems*, pp. 5-13.

to what is, the poet serves as our liaison to the permanence and unity of Being. And his lesson is optimism.”<sup>(446)</sup>  
Poets perform their role in the belief that a single kind of reality permeates things and people, that “one law of harmony governs the whole world of things”<sup>(11)</sup>.  
Poets succeed to the extent that they can awaken others to the spiritual energy that is shared by all humanity.

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Saint-John Perse wrote his last great poem, *Chronique*, when he was 72. His goal was to rejuvenate and energize things, to create links among beings and inspire wonder at the vivacity of words and nature. To accomplish this dream of alliance, he gave special poetic weight to conjunctions:

{And the red stallion of evening neighs in the red clays.  
And our dream is on the heights.

Ascension timed by the rising of stars, born of the sea...

And it is not of that sea that we dream this evening.} (579)

1887

**Marie René Alexis Leger is born in Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe, son of Amédée Leger, an attorney, and Françoise Renée Dormoy, descendant of plantation owners. Alexis spends childhood vacations at two plantations or habitations on Basse-Terre, La Joséphine and Bois-Debout.**

1899 A crisis in the sugar cane industry causes serious political and economic problems in Guadeloupe. Amédée Leger decides to move the family to France. Parents and four children (Alexis and three sisters) settle in Pau where Alexis enters seventh grade.

1902 Leger meets the poet Francis Jammes, nicknamed “the swan of Orthez.” They share a common nostalgia for their Guadeloupean origins (Jammes’ grandfather was buried in Goyave) and a common admiration for Virgil’s *Georgics*. Jammes reads Leger’s first manuscripts and introduces him to Gabriel Frizeau who initiates him into art.

1906 Later Leger will meet Paul Claudel and André Gide.  
After completing his military service, Leger plunges into the study of philosophy and law. He translates Pindar. At Frizeau’s home, he meets Jacques Rivière.

1907 Amédée Leger dies suddenly, leaving the family in straitened circumstances. Alexis becomes responsible for his mother and sisters. When Jacques Rivière asks about a literary future, Leger replies firmly that “there is nothing to expect from [him] literarily.”

But he has already written most of the poems that figure in his collection, *Praises*. “Images for Crusoe” is published in the NRF in August 1909. Leger respects music director Édouard Brunel; he reviews concerts in the *Pau Gazette*, and admires the popular neo-classical music of the Schola Cantorum.

1911 *Praises* is published by the Éditions de la NRF under the signature Saintleger Leger. The volume contains “Written on the Door”; “To Celebrate a Childhood,” “Recitation in Praise of a Queen” (all three previously published in the NRF in 1910), and “Praises,” a poem in 18 cantos.

1912 The family moves to Paris. On the advice of Claudel, Leger chooses a diplomatic career rather than “the free life of a colonist in a new country,” which he had initially envisaged

1914 Leger passes the examination for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>15</sup> R. Boyer de Sainte-Suzanne, *Une politique étrangère, Le Quai d'Orsay et Saint-John Perse à l'épreuve d'un regard* (1938-40), ed. Henriette and Philippe Levillain, Paris, Viviane Hamy, 2000, 333 p.

- 1915 He is assigned to the diplomatic press corps, founded by Philippe Berthelot, director of political affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- 1916 At his request, Leger is posted to Peking (Beijing) as third, and later as second secretary at the French legation. He begins writing *Anabasis* while staying in a Taoist temple an hour's horseback ride from Peking.
- 1920 He travels across the Gobi desert with Sinologue Gustave-Charles Toussaint and visits Outer Mongolia. After applying unsuccessfully for a posting as political advisor to the Chinese government, he asks to be reassigned to Paris and returns to France via Japan and America.
- 1921 In Washington, as a policy expert at the international conference on arms limitation and the Far East, he comes to the attention of Prime Minister Aristide Briand, who hires and quickly promotes him through the ranks. In a brilliant career in the central administration, Leger serves successively as assistant director and then director of political and commercial affairs, chief of staff for the minister, and finally Secretary General of the Quai d'Orsay, from 1933 to 1940, succeeding Philippe Berthelot. This position, which some view as an undeserved privilege, will earn him many enemies.
- 1924 *Anabasis* is published by the NRF. Amitié du Prince appears in the first issue of *Commerce*, a journal founded by Princess Bassiano. Leger chooses a second, permanent pseudonym: Saint-John Perse. Beyond its enigmatic allusions the name is meant to separate poet and diplomat. Until 1940 the diplomat dominates. There are no new publications, only translations of *Anabasis* by eminent foreign poets, T. S. Eliot, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Ion Pillat.
- 1940 In May the Germans arrive in Paris. Panic engulfs the Foreign Affairs Ministry which has already been weakened after the Munich accords by backstage intrigue, ministerial resignations and infighting between hawks and doves. On the evening of June 18, Prime Minister Paul Reynaud demands that President Albert Lebrun fire Leger. A strange atmosphere reigns in the ministry "where everyone knowingly uses and betrays everyone else at the first possible occasion."<sup>15</sup> Leger refuses the ambassadorship to Washington and goes into exile in the United States, stopping in London, where he meets Winston Churchill.
- In October the Vichy government strips him of his French citizenship and removes him from the Legion of Honor. Soon after arriving in America, Leger meets Archibald MacLeish, poet and director of the Library of Congress, who creates a position for him as literary consultant. Leger refuses all other paid positions and talks to friends about extreme solitude, silence and retirement.
- Thanks to Francis and Katherine Biddle he meets President Roosevelt whom he counsels about the situation in France. While staying at the Biddles' summer home on Long Beach Island, New Jersey, he writes "Exil." He settles in Georgetown, not far from Lilita Abreu, with whom he had had a liaison in Paris and to whom "Poem to a Foreign Lady" is discreetly dedicated. Representatives of Free France ask for Leger's backing which he declines to give. At the same time, he warns Americans about the Vichy government.
- 1941

- 1942 "Exil" is published in *Poetry* and in the *Cahiers du Sud* (Marseilles). Gallimard publishes a clandestine edition of 15 copies signed S.J.P.  
 General de Gaulle invites Leger to "confer" with him in London. Leger promptly replies that he "would be available only for diplomatic functions." This polite response masks his extreme mistrust of de Gaulle because of the general's military position. Leger will renew the refusal on several occasions. Summers, he stays at Beatrice Chanler's home on Seven Hundred Acre Island, off the coast of Maine. Sailing becomes a rite of summer for this excellent navigator.
- 1943 "Poem to a Foreign Lady" is published in the first issue of *Hémisphères*. Lilita reads it as "a gift before the break-up?"
- 1944 In October "Rains" appears in Roger Caillois' journal *Les Lettres françaises* (Buenos Aires).  
 "Snows" appears in issue 13 of *Les Lettres françaises*. The four American works are published the same year under the title *Four Poems 1941-44*, by the Éditions des Lettres françaises, Buenos Aires, with a preface by Archibald MacLeish, written in close collaboration with Saint-John Perse. Leger is reinstated as Ambassador-at-Large.
- 1945 After a trip out west, Leger becomes fascinated with geology, flora and fauna. The long poem *Winds*, written on Seven Hundred Acre Island during the summer of 1945, relates the westward journey of a traveler whose story symbolizes all of history.
- 1946 *Winds* is published by Gallimard.  
 Leger is subsidized by a generous grant from the Bollingen Foundation, created by Mary Mellon. In return, Bollingen has first call on the English translations of his works.
- 1947 Leger declines the position of Minister of Foreign Affairs, offered by President Vincent Auriol. He will refuse all other proposals to return to French political life, and will continue to call himself an exile until 1958.
- 1948 The first fragment of a poem dedicated to the sea, entitled "Poem," is published through the intermediary of Jean Paulhan in the *Cahiers de la Pléiade*. This will become canto VIII of the *Strophe of Seamarks*. Different sections of the long poem will continue to be published in journals until 1957.

- 1957 *Seamarks* is published by Gallimard. With an Invocation, nine strophes, a Chorus and Dedication, the poem links the sea to a celebration of love.
- 1958 Beginning in May 1957, Leger spends summer and fall on the Riviera, in Giens, in a home called *Les Vignaux*, purchased for him by Mina Curtiss, an American scholar and benefactor.
- 1959 Leger marries Dorothy Milburn Russell in Washington. In the Biography of the *Pléiade* edition he notes with a certain snobbery that she is “from an American family with old British roots.” He is 70 but still handsome and athletic.
- 1960 *Chronique* is published by Gallimard. “Great age, behold us...”
- 1962 Saint-John Perse receives the Nobel Prize for Literature. His acceptance speech is published as *On Poetry*. The art publisher “Au Vent d’Arles” publishes the first edition of *Birds*, a poem by Saint-John Perse with lithographs by Georges Braque.
- 1963 Between 1963 and 1967 Leger takes an annual Mediterranean cruise on a friend’s yacht, jotting notes during his travels. Although he requested that his unpublished papers be destroyed at his death, one notebook miraculously survived. It records his 1967 trip around the Aeolian islands and was published in the “*Cahiers Saint-John Perse*” 8-9, Gallimard, 1987.
- 1969 A short poem “Sung by One Who Was There,” described by the poet as a homage to his wife, “Diane Saint-Leger Leger,” is published in the NRF.
- 1972 Gallimard publishes the *Pléiade* volume of Saint-John Perse’s complete works, edited entirely by the poet.
- 1973 The NRF publishes a short poem, “Nocturne.”
- 1974 The NRF publishes another short poem, entitled “Drouth,” which relates the progressive drought of poetic inspiration and ends with the ferociously ironic exclamation: “Ape of God, have done with your deceit!”<sup>(687)</sup>
- 1975** **At his death, Saint-John Perse is buried in the small seaside cemetery in Giens.**

**A Complete works**

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This volume, published during Saint-John Perse’s lifetime, was written and edited entirely by the poet. He carefully selected the letters, the literary and political documents, speeches and tributes. He assembled the bibliography, wrote the biography and composed all the commentaries about his genealogy, his pseudonym and the context of his poems.

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