

Premier rencontre avec Eddy Le Phare

This interview was conducted on Radio “Radyo Liberasyon” (February 5, 1996 in Boston). Host: Eddy Le Phare. Guest: Emmanuel W. Védrine. A weekly program on “Lèt ak Kilti” (Letters and Culture) with host Eddy Le Phare.

E. LE PHARE: On all issues under discussion, *reading* is something very important in the development of a society. It allows you to communicate, it shows your social ties in a more appropriate position. It also guides you to let others know what you think, what you’d like to communicate from where you are living. So, in this regard, we know that in the 80s many young men were forced to leave Haiti for one reason or another and ended up here, and many of them have taken the path of education. In the process, one of these men faced a problem in the field of teaching, a problem where young Haitians in the heart of this country don’t understand very well what they are being taught (whether it’s history, literature or math). This young man in the area of letters came to face a dilemma where he saw without delay, without counting on other people, that he was obliged to collaborate in the battle to bring some light, not only to the youngsters, but also to the activities he was doing. This young scholar, a native of our homeland, was also facing other problems. In order to realize this work, he was obliged to make a lot of effort. In this fashion, his head was never tired of thinking, thinking to see if he could bring about a resolution in the work he was doing in the community, first for the youngsters’ parents, and then with respect to the language vis-a-vis the schools where the youngsters are taught, to find some teaching materials to better accommodate them. This scholar has written many books grounded in this work and in the change of consciousness that

affected him. So, for both those who have and have not read him, he has written *Sezon sechrès Ayiti, Yon koudèy sou pwoblèm lekòl Ayiti, Ti istwa kreyòl: Short stories in Haitian Creole, Koze lanmou, Un stylo international*, and many other books. This young scholar we are talking about is a Bilingual teacher, translator, educator, and a Spanish teacher at the University of Rhode Island (U.S). He is also a Social Science teacher, and that's how we find him here at English High School. He also taught French and Spanish in the Boston Public Schools, as well as French and Spanish at St. Gregory High School in Boston. This young man has traveled far from his homeland, but his works have remained not only here with but have traveled on, back to Haiti. And he's the same young scholar who tells us

*“Pou mwen, pa gen lang ki pi bèl pase lòt
Paske nou chak pale lang pa nou.
Se yon zouti ki gen menm itilite
Kèlkeswa kote l fabrike”*

[For me, no language is more beautiful than any other
Because each of us speaks our own.
It is a tool that has the same use
No matter where it is made]

On behalf of “Lèt ak Kilti”, we'd like to welcome you, Védrine. How are you doing?

E. W. VÉDRINE: Well, it's a pleasure for me to return to “Radyo Liberasyon.” This is my second visit. The first one was by invitation of my colleague, Yvon Lamour, in November of 1995. I greet everyone, especially all the fans of “Lèt ak Kilti.”

E. LE PHARE: Well, as you've heard, throughout much of the work you've done, the first question I'd like to ask you before getting into your books is that we know the difficulty; it's very difficult here in the area of teaching, working in bilingual education. Can you tell us first what struck you in your teaching or made that change in you that you took to working so hard on the Kreyòl language?

E. W. VÉDRINE: I began teaching in 1986 as a Functional Teacher's Aid in the Haitian Bilingual Program. From those first moments, I could began observing what was lacking in the Haitian Bilingual Program in Boston. In 1987, I got a contract as a Teacher of Social Science, and began confronting a series of problems such as finding texts in Kreyòl to serve bilingual students, because all the books were written in English. There wasn't a single in Kreyòl for the students. At that time, I began making some translations. I was teaching American History and World History at that time. So, that's how I began this work.

E. LE PHARE: Since these efforts, we see that you've published many pieces of work. Unfortunately, many young people here, as well as many other people are not yet familiar with your work. How do you feel about the reading public's response? What has their reaction to this work been?

E. W. VÉDRINE: Well, I can say I am more known at the school level; many teachers in the Haitian Bilingual Program know me. I also know that the media is doing a good job in calling me in for interviews on radio and television programs. I think it's a good job the media is doing in trying to know who is doing what in the community. In this way, gradually, more and

more people in the community are getting to know my work, as well as the work of other Haitian authors working in the same vein.

E. LE PHARE: Well, I am not going to ask you many questions, because it will interest people to get a taste of some of your written work. So, from what I have read in your work... one of the first books that's very interesting to me, and I don't know why... I see a work you've done. I want to talk about *Sezon sechrès Ayiti* ("Season of Drought in Haiti"). In this novel, we can see a lot of import. If we were to look to literature, we'd rarely find people who talk about the peasants' position. In *Sezon sechrès Ayiti*, you've worked this all out; you make one of the characters a hero, a hero who leads us, as I see it, to Jacques Roumain's novel, *Gouverneurs de la rosée* ("Masters of the Dew"). You are giving us a philosophy, in which you create another world, but a world made at the same level, especially if we are speaking about the guy you portray as a hero, an important character in the life of the peasants. You show him as a symbol, a symbol that helps every single peasant about to lose hope. You even get to a point where you put them at an ideology form (level of thinking) about life here in the 20th century, where Jacques Roumain was talking about "spring water." You, you talk about "water pump". Can you explain this love for work that you've realized in *Sezon sechrès Ayiti*?

E. W. VÉDRINE: First, *Sezon sechrès Ayiti* (Season of drought in Haiti) is a peasants' novel. I am always proud to say I am a peasant, because I was born in the countryside. I have a peasant's culture; I live the sufferings of the peasants. I also worked with them. So, there are many things I have experienced along with the peasants. It was a pleasure for me to publish a

peasants' novel to show their sufferings in Haiti, why they are leaving the country to affront hardships in the *bateys** in the Dominican Republic. Up to now, there are still many of our peasants who are dying in the Dominican Republic. They are mistreated like dogs; they are shot and their bodies left in the streets, and many other things are done to them. So, I can retrace the history of their problem back to 1991, when president Aristide had just come to power, when many Haitians were repatriated to Haiti. There are many problems, many things you can analyze in this novel that are real in a historical sense. There are other problems I mention, such as cutting down trees to make charcoal, erosion, why they are leaving the country. There is the drought at the level of irrigation. We know that peasants like to work, but they don't have water to irrigate the land. You can see Mèsidye as a hero who returned from the Dominican Republic; he was cutting sugar cane there. He was repatriated to Haiti; he is reorganizing peasants in each village to see how they can afford a water pump to help themselves. That's an example of community work that we Haitians can try to accomplish without waiting for a government to implement a series of measures for us. We also know that the peasants have a sense of togetherness among themselves. They work in *konbit**; so, it's this idea I want to revive, and also to value and appreciate them, because Haitian peasants are always looked down on. It is this type of work that I try to do in *Sezon sechrès Ayiti*.

E. LE PHARE: This book is very interesting, and there is a lot that can be said about it. There is another work you've done. On the issue of conscientization with the peasants, many people always consider a peasant as a human being who is not capable, who is unable to think, unable to

judge; nevertheless, Dyelifèt (one of the characters) is a man who gives advice. You show that the men come to realize that just as companies in the Dominican Republic produce sugar cane, there is also the possibility that this can be done in Haiti, and you show a comparison between things we had at home at a certain time. You honor some presidents who worked hard; you show Estimé, when there was coffee under his administration. At the same time, you jump to Jean-Claude (Duvalier) where all the rails were stolen. Does this philosophy have a political character, or was it real behavior that led you to do it?

E. W. VÉDRINE: For people who have read this novel already, or for the superficial critic, it is a historical novel. A novel is a work of fiction, but there are always realities in it. *Sezon sechrès Ayiti* is a historical novel; everything you read in the novel has some truth, some truth behind it, things that really happened in Haiti. It is a very politicized novel. When thinking about it, you can analyze many things that are related to the political situation of Haiti.

E. LE PHARE: Well, I think the time is very short; we can't focus only on novels, because that is not all that you've written. Let's touch on some other points. If we take a look at *Yon koudèy sou pwoblèm lekòl Ayiti* ("A look at the problems of schools in Haiti"), the first thing that I find in this book while reading it is that I learn and I appreciate the work people are doing writing in Kreyòl, what they are doing in bilingual education here. But my first question, despite the book's objective focus on reality, is the Kreyòl issue, the French language, the Kreyòl language here, and what I would like to ask is, this development, is it a development that you have gone through

that relies upon an analysis to make people become conscious, or is it a presentation you are making, not only where we can discover the living reality inside the community, about bilingual issues, or are you touching at the same time the consciousness of some teachers inside the system who always remain backward, who don't want to help, so that this reality really develops within the context of the bilingual task you are undertaking here?

E. W. VÉDRINE: The work I've done in *Yon koudèy sou pwoblèm lekòl Ayiti*, as I am a teacher who began teaching in the U.S. in a Haitian Bilingual Program, leads me to the conclusion that in order to understand the problems of the Boston Haitian Bilingual Program, you must also be able to understand the problems of education in Haiti. In this sense, I have gone back to analyze some of the problems of schools in Haiti. There are so many problems: that is why I limit myself to calling this book *Yon koudèy sou pwoblèm lekòl Ayiti*. This means there are also a lot of problems a person could analyze in the problems of schools in Haiti. It is in this sense that I turn back to Haiti so as to really understand, or at least to show readers and other teachers the problems and their sources, so that they can find that the problems of the students they are teaching as they present themselves in class; so, we must also be able to analyze the source of the problem in schools in Haiti. Therefore, I discuss the language issue to bring clarification to the issue of French and Kreyòl. We know that often in Haiti, under the 30-year dictatorship, educators in Haiti didn't ever speak the truth about school problems. They talked about French and Kreyòl to avoid showing that it was politics that causes all the problems. Myself, as a linguist, I always take my position, although few problems exist at the linguistic level alone, but the real problem of education, when I analyze it, is

one that has a political character. Language is just a medium; you may use any language to educate, or to use in education. So, the real problem is not really one between French and Kreyòl, the way many educators in Haiti portray it in order to avoid talking about the political reality. I have my position on that and, at the same time, as a linguist and as a Haitian writer who cares about the Haitian reality, I have a responsibility to work for the advancement of the Kreyòl language so that it should be used 100% in education in Haiti and in the Diaspora throughout all Haitian Bilingual Programs. I believe in the work I am doing, and I stand firmly behind what I am doing. On the language issue in the Bilingual Program, we must not forget the negative attitude of some Haitian teachers against the Kreyòl language. That is another problem we can analyze also, how some teachers always think of using the French language with the student. Thus, they don't see the use of the Kreyòl language as a medium to enable transition within and through the bilingual program. The negative attitude of the teachers toward Kreyòl must change. It is an important point to see the necessity to use the child's native language. Not only that, the Boston Public Schools recognizes Kreyòl as the official language of the Haitian students in the Bilingual Program.

E. LE PHARE: Well, I think we must work a lot on this issue, because many people, many young students talk about this problem. I think people who are in education and literature should recognize that geniuses don't just pop into existence—they must work for it. Before concluding, I should let the people know that Védrine has also written many poems and that is why today—maybe he didn't know—I am going to ask him what he felt, and how far your philosophy gets because in the books, you don't really focus on

access to life, but there is a piece you have in one of the poetry books that I make a parallel with. Maybe, through this segment I am taking, you will tell us where the philosophy in it came from. The book I am referring to, for people who want to hear the title, is *Un stylo international* (An international pen), where we see Védrine talking about a poem entitled “L’oiseau et le printemps.”

L’OISEAU ET LE PRINTEMPS

(THE BIRD AND SPRING)

*Mon bon oiseau, je sens
Que tu commences a respirer l’air
d’un printemps.
Oh! Toi qui a expérimenté des moments
lugubres;
Tu n’est pas loin de cette saison
Dont tu rêves constamment.
Oh! Mon oiseau préféré,
Bientôt tu vas être libéré
Toi qui voles sur cette terre
Pour apporter un morceau de rameau
A tes freres,
Ne t’en fais pas des bombes
Qui tombent
Ni de l’orage qui gronde
Enfermé dans cette cage par les chasseurs,
Je comprends bien tes douleurs.
Bientôt, tu vas être libéré
Pour voler
Où tu veux.*

My good bird, I feel
That you have started breathing
a Spring air.
You who experienced dark
moments
You’re not far from this season
That you dream of constantly.
Oh! My favorite bird,
Soon you’ll be free
You who flies on this land
To bring a piece of a branch
To your brother
Don’t worry about bombs
Being dropped
Nor thunder roaming
Locked in this cage by hunters,
I really understand your pains
Soon you’ll be free
To fly
Where you want to)

If we look again, you come up with another poem that we can establish a parallel with, where you talk about “Trente ans emprisonné” (Thirty years imprisoned).

<i>Trente ans emprisonné</i>	(Thirty years imprisoned)
<i>Abraham dit: c'est assez</i>	Enough is enough.
<i>Frères, ne soyez pas découragés</i>	Brothers, don't get discouraged
<i>Car votre heure a sonné</i>	Because your time is up
<i>Pour briser ces chaînes qui vous liaient</i>	To break these chains that tied you
<i>Partout</i>	everywhere.
<i>Oh! Combien vous souffrez!</i>	Oh! How much you've suffered!
<i>Combien vous luttez!</i>	How much you've fought!
<i>Ne soyez pas désespérés</i>	Don't get discouraged
<i>Car l'heure de la délivrance a sonné,</i>	'Cause the hour of deliverance has
	struck,
<i>Votre prière a été exaucée:</i>	Your prayer has been heard:
<i>Sortir de ce cachot</i>	Get out of this jail
<i>Si chaud.</i>	So hot)

Are you making a comparison between light and hope for democracy, or you have another philosophical theme that allows you to talk like this? I chose two of these poems that please me, because they have a strong message. Why is it you present them that way?

E. W. VÉDRINE: Well, when you look at poetry, a poet can use many metaphors and images to get a serious idea across, and these poems have a political character that deals with the 30-year dictatorship. They were written around 1985, when the people started rebelling; they began breathing a democratic atmosphere. The themes in these poems have to do with all that was happening at the end of 1985; the people rebelled, they said it was enough for them. They began breathing air to get out of this jail in Haiti.

E. LE PHARE: Well, on behalf of “Lèt ak Kilti” today, we’ve received this young countryman, scholar, educator, writer, translator, and teacher who has been giving us a little taste, a glimpse on the work he has done, and that deserves respect. We know that very well when we speak; the only language all of us can understand best is the language in which we are communicating today, and it is important for many of us to begin making greater efforts not only to read the language, but also to appreciate it. And we would like to congratulate Védrine. He is a writer who is making our language known to others, giving it a boost, as well as more dignity and respect. He is someone who is making it known that this language is a language like any other.

(end)

**batey*: labor camp (of Haitian cane-cutters in Dominican Republic)

**konbit*: a group of people helping one another

(Translation: Emmanuel W. Védrine; Editing: Leor Alcalay)