



Nostalgic Reminiscences

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The theme of the past and the present, or the now and then -- however we may like to re-phrase it -- is a dominant motif in Leopold Sedar Senghor's poetic art. Often and then in our life, we have moments of reflections or nostalgic reminiscences in which we compare and contrast in our mind situations or circumstances by looking into the past against a backdrop of our present life. Unfortunately, this theme of nostalgic reminiscences has not received adequate attention by the critics of African poetry. It is this subject matter that this essay discusses. We shall illustrate our discussion with pertinent examples.

I

The lyric, "In Memoriam,"¹ is a classic example of Senghor's verse which explores the theme of nostalgic reminiscences. Here the poet's mind radiates back and forth, between past and present like a glinting network of dreams and hallucinations. In this lyric Senghor thinks about the dead ancestors, and their apparently protective powers, as well as the two rivers, that is, the "banks of the Gambia or Saloum," the "Seine or Sine." The interplay between these geographical landmarks endows the poem with a tone of reminiscence, poise, and timelessness.

Senghor's reminiscences are varied and contrastive: For example, while for him the past is idyllic, inviting and welcoming (e.g., "Let me think of my dead"), the present or the here and now is harsh and severe (e.g., "From my tower of glass filled with pain"). Also as he looks out from the "observatory" in Paris, his mind goes back home to Senegal to visualize "the roofs which guard my dead," (MPA, pp. 47-48). The "solemn anniversary," "the roofs and hills, the "suburb," the "dream" and the "dead" -- all furnish the details of a happy but lost expectation and fulfillment.

Senghor's musings and recollections in this lyric recall Wordsworth's reflections in "Ode," where the older poet is looking back and forth between the past and present, and between the fleeting time and nature:

I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!
- But there's a Tree of many, one
A single Field which I have looked upon,
Both of them speak of something that is gone
The Pansy at my feet
Doth the same tale repeat.
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream²

The poem's title, "In Memoriam," sets the tone of Senghor's discourse. The poem is a recollection of -- or, if you will -- remembrances of what T.S. Eliot characterizes as "the pastness of the past," as measured against a backdrop of contemporary realities. Every great poet has had cause to write from his personal recollection regarding this mode of poetic discourse.²

A question pertinent to ask at his stage is: What inspired the composition of this poem? A second question is: How does Senghor further the development of the poem's rhetorical discourse? These questions (and their answers) are pertinent in order to understand and appreciate the poem's structural and thematic development. The answer to the questions is as follows:

Senghor's nostalgic reminiscences, as discussed in "In Memoriam," can be traced partly to some unfortunate incidents in his life. For example, he was an exile in Europe and elsewhere; he was also a prisoner of war, as well as a student who experienced racial discrimination and other indignities.⁴ All of these complexes constitute the background of the poem.

With reference to the second part, that is, how Senghor furthers the structural development of his discourse, we can say that he achieves this goal through the following: Through his employment of comparison and contrast. For example, the topsy-turvy setting of Paris that is presented in the poem (where the "liberal blood spills all along the streets / mixing with the blood of the butcheries") stands in sharp

contrast to the beauty and serenity of the “suburb” of Senghor's birthplace of Senegal. And he discusses appropriate topic or subject that would appeal to his reader or audience, such as the Sunday service worship.

Furthermore, Senghor demonstrates a friendly disposition toward those who might be tempted to harm him or do him wrong, such as his stretching his hands of fellowship to them (“To join my brothers with blue eyes / With hard hands”). Elsewhere in the poem, he prays for everyone's protection and safety (“Oh Dead, protect the roofs of Paris in the Sunday fog / The roofs which guard my dead” (MPA, pp. 47-48).

Moreover, Senghor's ethos in the poem is one of “goodwill,” “good sense” and “good moral character,” qualities which, according to Classical Rhetoric, would not only endear a writer/speaker to his hearers/listeners, but would enable him to carry his message to them more successfully.

II

Another poem which evolves from Senghor's nostalgic reminiscences is “Prayer for Peace II,” a historical piece which traces the travails of the Black man from the pre-colonial times to the modern period. The lyric's transition can be divided into three broad periods, namely, the pre-colonial times, the colonial period, and the modern era. In all of these phases, the pre-colonial period was the best for the Black man in every respect.

The pre-colonial period for Africa witnessed the development and growth of several great kingdoms and empires, including the Songhai (the period of the Askias), the Mali, and the Ghana empires. This period also experience the growth in trade and commerce, the development of close family ties, loyalty in the family household, and commitment to the indigenous lores and cultural traditions.

The period also witnessed the virtues and accomplishments of the ancient traditional culture, e.g., the household booming with numerous “servants” and “peasants,” “my sons” and “my princes” and “my disciples;” “the forest of my nights and the savannah of my days;” “the Ancestors and spirits;” and the “vast empires like daylights from the Horn of the West to the Eastern Horizons” (WAV, p.100).

Against the celestial and beautiful background of the idyllic past, we come to the dreary and dreadful period of the colonial era, which was characterized by insecurity and chaos, mass assassinations and killings, and the wanton destruction of lives, properties and cultural objects and artifacts. It is against this background that Senghor appropriately calls for the Lord's intervention. We shall, for illustrative purposes, cite what seems to me to be the poem's most relevant sections.

Lord, God, forgive white Europe.
It is true Lord, that for four enlightened centuries, she
has scattered the baying and slaver of her mastiffs
over my lands
And the Christians forsaking Thy light and the gentleness
of Thy heart

For thou must forgive those who have hunted my children like
wild elephants,
And broken them in with whips, have made them the
the black hands of those whose hands were white.
For Thou must forget those who exported tem millions
of my sons in the leper houses of their ships
Who killed two hundred million of them.
And have made for me a solitary old age in the forest
of my night and the savannah of my days.
Lord, the glasses of my eyes grow dim
And lo, the serpent of hatred raises its head in my heart,
that serpent I believed was dead. (WAV, p. 100-101)

It is the above background of massive and horrendous disasters and man's inhumanity to man that apparently provided the impetus for the poem's composition, which is appropriately titled “Prayer for Peace II.” The poem's title contributes to our understanding and appreciation of its theme.

Again, as in the previous poems discussed above, this lyric employs the device of comparison and contrast to deepen the impact of its message. For example, the pernicious effect of colonialism and neo-colonialism - - as illustrated in the poem -- is ameliorated by the Christian principle of

forgiveness, which is at the center of the poem's thematic paradigm.

Without the insight and understanding which the above principles and precepts have offered, the poem would have lacked structural depth and clout, and the poet's message would have been less convincing and animating. Furthermore, Senghor's frequent exhortation to the Lord, for His heavenly intervention, clearly establishes his ethos as trustworthy and believable.

Indeed, the lyric recalls the classical tripartite role of oratory, that is, "to teach" (*prodesse*); "to delight" (*delectare*); and "to move" (*move*).⁵ Senghor's humanistic injunction, "Lord, God, forgive white Europe/... Lord forgive them who turned the Askia into masquisards" is designed to teach a moral Christian doctrine. The metaphor, "their powder has crumbled," offers some modicum of delight; while the expression, "they have fired the intangible wood like hunting grounds / dragged the ancestors and spirits by their peaceable beards" should arouse the instant indignation of any ethical human being.

In retrospect, we can say that the sources from which Senghor draws for the clarification and illumination of his verse are varied and diverse: from the ethical perspective, where he exposes the hypocrisy and vice of the Western colonialists and neo-colonialists, in order perhaps to subject them to rebuke or reprobation; from the rhetorical perspective, where he endeavors to sway or educate his audience; and from the Christian or religious perspective, where he invokes the divine intervention as the ultimate source for resolving human problem.

III

The next poem we shall discuss, "A hand of light caressed my eyelids of darkness," also derives from Senghor's nostalgic reminiscence. But it is a nostalgic experience of a different kind: It is one of self-internalization and self-examination against a backdrop of his indigenous African cultural background:

A hand of light caressed my eyelids of darkness

And your smile rose like the sun on the mists drifting grey and
and cold over my Congo
My heart has echoed the virgin song of the dawn birds
As my blood kept time once to the white song of the sap in
the branches of my arms.
See, the bush flowers and the star in my hair and the band
round the forehead of the herdsman athlete.
I will take the flute; I will make a rhythm for the slow peace
of the herds
And all day sitting in the shade of your eyelashes, close to the
Fountain of Filma
I shall faithfully pasture the flaxen lowings of your herds.
For this morning a hand of light caressed my eyelids of
darkness
And all day long my heart has echoed the virgin song of the
birds⁶

This lyric, more than anything else, is a love poem addressed to a beloved whose affection the protagonist clearly seeks to have. The protagonist of the poem may be in a state of exile, or estrangement or it may be that his love for the woman is undergoing remarkable and inevitable challenges.

Or, it may be that the devil or some agent or ineluctable forces have put a damper on their love, a romance which apparently once enjoyed a remarkable conviviality. All these, however, are mere speculations. The truth is that the poet-protagonist's love for the addressee is strong and solid, as suggested, for example, by his inimitable praise of her "smile" and "your eyelashes."

The employment of the words, "grey" and "cold," in the poem's second and third lines respectively, is important and interesting. These words are traditional images employed to describe a tenuous or fast declining love relationship (in this case, not from the protagonist's side, but from his beloved). Also contributing to a better understanding of the poem is the metaphors, "my eyelids of darkness," which is mentioned in the first line of the poem and towards the end of the poem, to suggest the poet's ignorance or failure to discover early enough that their love has gone awry, or that he was betting on the wrong horse. Many poets have had this kind of challenge in their life. W.B. Yeats, for example, was

always reflecting on his abortive or futile love relationship with ladies, particularly Maud Gonne.⁷

The reference to “the herds,” “the Congo,” the “Fountain of Filma” clearly suggests the poem’s indigenous African cultural setting. With the employment of the epithet “my Congo” as the centrality or domain of his love, we easily recall Marvell’s “my vegetable love,” Waller’s “my heaven’s extremist sphere,” Okigbo’s “the armpit dazzle of a lioness” or other similar images which enhance and enlarge the poetic enterprise.

The poem contains other virtues: There is the use of repetition (e.g., “my eyelids,” “my hair,” “my heart”); there is the use of place names (e.g., “my Congo,” “the Fountain of Filma”); and there is the use of metaphor (e.g., the eyelids of darkness,” “the virgin song of the dawn-birds,” and “the white song of the sap in the branches of my arms”). Collectively, these strategies deepen the tone and tenor of the poem’s structural development while illuminating the impact of Senghor’s nostalgic reminiscences.

IV

The fourth poem we shall discuss, that is, “Prayer to Masks,”⁸ also derives from Senghor’s nostalgic recollections. But here the nostalgic experience takes on a mimetic perspective in the sense that Senghor is reflecting from a global, universal point of view.

The basic premise of the poem is that all humans -- black, white, “rectangular” or other -- are basically equal to one another and are the same in nature except of course the difference created by their skin color. Their essentiality, as human beings, is unique and unassailable.

Of course the dead, who are the principal objects eulogized and celebrated in the poem, deserve praise for their contribution to humanity. This is Senghor’s solemn prayer in the poem. Among other things, “they are the masks through whom the spirit breathes,” they “guard this place,” they “purify the air of eternity,” and they “cry here at the rebirth of the world / being the leaven that the white flour needs” (MAP, pp. 316-317).

Briefly stated, this poem is a homily, an honest prayer which developed from Senghor’s reminiscences. What gives it its significance is its universal appeal for peace and love, unity and reconciliation, for the sake of the human society. Its philosophical statement is assured and is unassailable. Its prayer, hopefully, would be answered, especially if we recognize the fact that we all live in a nebulous world of “masks.”

A final piece worthy of our consideration is the lyric, “Relentlessly She Drives Me”

Relentlessly she drives me through the thickets of Time.
My black blood hounds me through the crowd to the
clearing where white night sleeps.

Sometimes I turn round in the street and see again the
palm tree smiling under the breeze.
Her voice brushes me like the soft lisp of a wing
and I say
‘Yes it is Signare!’ I have seen the sun set in the blue eyes of
a fair negress.

At Sevres-Babylone or Balangar, amber and gongo, her scent was near
and spoke to me.

Yesterday in church at the Angelus, her eyes shone like
candles burnishing.

Her skin with bronze. My God, my God, why do you tear
my pagan senses shrieking out of me?

I cannot sing your plain chant that has no swing to it, I
cannot dance it.

Sometimes a cloud, a butterfly, raindrops on my boredom’s
Window-pane.

Relentlessly she drives me across the great spaces of Time.
My black blood hounds me, to the solitary heart of the
night.

This poem contains all the images and recollections characteristic of a great poem. The beauty and charm of womanhood, which Senghor celebrates here, is deep and profound (as suggested by the images, “Relentlessly she drives me,” “the blue eyes of a fair negress,” and “her eyes shone like candles burnishing.”)

Because the charm of womanhood is so overpowering, the poet can only appeal to God to deliver him from her irresistible beauty and charm. Senghor's nostalgic reminiscences here, he himself recalls, will dominate the reaches of Space and Time.

What conclusion can we draw from Senghor's theme of nostalgic reminiscences? Firstly, Senghor is a humanist whose aim is to promote the ultimate good and welfare of his society, the summum bonum. Secondly, he exhibits goodwill because he expects goodwill from his audience or readers; thirdly, he exploits various poetic and rhetorical devices -- including irony, repetition, comparison and contrast -- not only to elucidate and illuminate his discourse, but to bring his message pointedly home to his audience. Finally, Senghor's deep Christian piety, as reflected in his frequent invocation to the Lord to intervene in human affairs, is virtuous and admirable.

Notes

1. See Leopold Sedar Senghor, "In Memoriam," *Modern Poetry from Africa*, ed. Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1976), pp.47-48. Most further quotations from this edition will be included parenthetically in the text as MPA, followed by the page number(s).

2. William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," *The Norton Anthology*, Fifth Edition, Volume 2, edited M.H. Abrams (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986), p.210.

3. Milton's sonnet, "On His Blindness," as well as Shakespeare's sonnet, "When in Disgrace with Fortune," are noteworthy examples. J.P. Clark-Bekederemo's "Ivbie: A Song of Wrong," is another good example of this kind of lyric poetry.

4. Writing ruefully about the negative effects of European colonization of Africa and its impact on the common man, E.D. Morel notes: "In the process of imposing his political dominion over the African, the white man has carved broad and bloody avenues from one end of Africa to the other. ... For from the evils of the latter, scientifically applied and enforced, there is no escape for the African. Its destructive effects are not spasmodic: they are permanent. In its

permanence resides, its fatal consequences. It kills not the body merely, but the soul. It breaks the spirit. It attacks the African at every turn from every point of advantage. It wrecks his polity, uproots him from the land, invades his family life, destroys his natural pursuits and occupations, claims his energy, enslaves him in his own home." See E.D. Morel, *The Black Man's Burden* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969), pp.7-8.

5. In his book, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1958), p.150, M.H. Abrams cites Alexander Smith as differentiating between poetry and oratory as follows: "While the sole object of poetry is to transmit the feelings of the speaker or writer, that of eloquence is to convey the persuasion of some truth."

6. Leopold Sedar Senghor, "A hand of light caressed my eyelids of darkness," *Poems of Black Africa*, edited Wole Soyinka (Oxford and Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1975), p.269.

7. In his poem, "A Prayer for My Daughter," for example, he talks about "the great gloom that is in my mind." Later in the same poem, he elaborates: "My mind, because the minds that I have loved / The sort of beauty that I have approved / Prosper but little, has dried up of late." See W. Yeats, "A Prayer for My Daughter," *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, edited by Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1973), pp.132-133.

8. Leopold Sedar Senghor, "Prayer to Masks," *The Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry*, edited by Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1998), pp.316-317. Further citation from the volume will be abbreviated parenthetically in the text as MAP, followed by the page number(s).

9. See Leopold Sedar Senghor, "Relentlessly She Drives Me Through the Tickets of Time," *The Heritage of African Poetry*, edited Isidore Okpwho (Burnt Mill, Essex, England: Longman Group, Ltd., 1985), p.52

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