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Man And Nature

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ABSTRACT

An important area of Senghor's verse, which has not received any serious critical consideration among critics, centers on Man and Nature. The reason for this critical neglect is hard to fathom, especially, considering the fact that everything we have discussed about Senghor's poetics -- including Negritude, womanhood, the dead ancestors, the African topographical landscape, etc -- revolves around man and nature. By Man, I mean human beings; by Nature, I mean every other thing created by God. Senghor's poetic art benefits from each of these sources which we shall discuss here below.

I

Senghor's celebration of mankind enhances the vistas of his work and personality. Furthermore, through this celebratory mode his verse offers the ardent reader and the general audience certain moral virtues which otherwise would have been impossible to achieve. His verse employs dialogue, praise, satire, and other poetic and rhetorical strategies but, as always, there is no doubt -- as evidenced by his simplicity and piety and by his spirit of reconciliation -- that he writes in order to make his society better.[1]

Several of Senghor's poems, including “Taga for Mbaye Dyob,” “To the American Negro Soldiers,” and “Black Woman,” display various insights and sensibilities about human nature. Furthermore, most of the characters he depicts in these poems are men of goodwill and good moral sense, qualities which, according to Aristotle, would endear a speaker/writer to his audience.
In the poem, “Taga for Mbaye Dyob,” Senghor projects a personality of immense physical, moral, and spiritual virtues:

Mbaye Dyob! I will speak your name and your honour.
Dyob! I will hoist your name to the high mast of the ship
returning, ring your name like the bell that sounds
victory
I will sing your name Dyobene! You who called me master
and Warned me with your fervour in the winter evenings
around the red stove that made us cold.
Dyob! You cannot trace back your ancestry and bring order
Into black history, your forefathers are not sung by the
voice of the tama.
You who have never killed a rabbit, who when to ground
under the bombs of the great vultures
Dyob! You who are not captain or airman or trooper, not
even in the baggage train,
But a second-class private in the Fourth Regiment of the
Senegal Rifles
Dyob! I will celebrate your white honour.
The girls of Gandyo! Will make you a triumphal arch with
their curved arms of silver and of red gold
Make you a path of glory with their precious cloths from
the river of the South.
Then they will cradle your steps, their voices will mingle
with the waves of the sea.
Then they will sing 'You have faced more than death, more
than the tank and the planes that defy all magic.
You have faced hunger, you have faced cold, and the
humiliation of captivity
'O bravely, you have been the footstool of griots and clowns
' You have put new nails in your cross so as not to desert
your companions
'Not to break the unspoken part
'Not to leave your load to your comrades, whose backs bend
at each new start
'Whose arms grow weak each evening when there is one
less hand to shake

'And the face grows darker lit by one less look, the eyes
Sunken, reflecting one less smile'
'Dyob! from Ngabu to the Walo, from Ngalam to the sea
will rise the songs of the amber virgins
'Let them be accompanied by strings of the kora, let them be
accompanied by the waves and the winds
Dyob! I speak your name and your honour.[2]

Senghor here in the above passage employs an elegiac tone to eulogize the heroism, charisma, and courage of a lowly Senegalese soldier, that is, Mbaye Dyob, who died and was buried with shame and humiliation without receiving any medal of honor during the Second World War. But underneath this specter of shame and ignominy there emerges Dyob's remarkable qualities which Senghor adroitly celebrates.

The high esteem in which Dyob is held by the poet is suggested by the following images and metaphors: "I will speak your name and your honour," "I will hoist your name to the high mast of the ship," "I will sing your name Dyobene" (WAV, p.74). The repetitive employment of the phrase, "speak your name and your honour," in both the opening and the concluding lines of the poem suggests the superlative encomium which Senghor lavishes on the addressee.

In truth, the addressee's sterling qualities are spectacular: physically, he is the embodiment of endurance ("You have faced hungers, you have faced cold, and the humiliation of captivity;" he is courageous ("o bravely, you have been the footstool of griots and clowns); and he possesses candor and integrity ("You have put new nails in your cross so as not to desert/your companions" (WAV, p. 75).

The poem's narrative structure would have been boring and monotonous without the effective employment of several literary devices, including: repetition (e.g., "I will sing," "I will celebrate"); exclamation (e.g., "o bravely"); irony (e.g., "I will celebrate your white honour"); and exaggeration (e.g., "You have faced more than death, more than the tanks and the planes that defy all magic").

The entire poem consists of one stanza of forty-five lines. The lyric is couched in a dialogue mode, with the addressee -- Mbaye Dyop, a dead spiritual phenomenon - - fully foreshadowed in the background, while the poet-speaker takes command and completely furnishes the audience with every information, past and present, about the addressee against a backdrop of contemporary realities. All this endows the poem with variables, ironies, and complexities, yet its narrative structure enjoys a remarkable note of urgency, intensity, and poise.

The next poem, "To the American Negro Soldiers," is also an elegy written in memory of those who fought gallantly throughout the war but were, through no innate fault of theirs, denied recognition and the honor they duly deserved. In fact, many of them were discriminated

against on the basis of their skin color while others suffered various indignities including physical and psychological abuse ("your prison of sand-coloured uniforms; "you under that calabash helmet with no plume," "your iron/horses that drink but do not eat" and "your closed faces" (BAV, p. 76).

But here comes the reverse: In the opinion of Senghor however, these dead soldiers symbolize all that is good and noble in the world (they are the "messengers of God's … mercy, breath of Spring after winter," "You bring the springtime of Peace, hope, at the end of waiting," and "You bring the sun," BAV, p. 77).

It is this element of contrast which Senghor brings into the poem's narrative structure that makes the lyric remarkable and memorable. The poem recalls Ezra Pound's *Hugh* Selwyn *Mauberley* where the soldiers who had fought during the war returned to soon discover that they were not only mistreated but were misled into going to war:

> some quick to arm,
> some for adventure,
> some from fear of weakness
> some from fear of censure
> some for love of slaughter, in imagination,
> learning later
> some in fear, learning love of slaughter:
> Died some, pro patria
> non "dulce" non "et décor
>
> walked eye-deep in hell
> believing in old men's lies, then unbelieving
> came home, home to a lie
> home to many deceits,
> home to old lies and new infamy
> usury age-old and age-thick
> and liars in public places.[3]

In the *Mauberley* sequence, Pound is the spokesman for those eulogized, just as Senghor is the spokesman for those he celebrates. In the Senghor poem, however, the elegiac tone of sadness is elevated to that of joy in the poem's last line "I greet you as the messengers of peace." Through this statement, Senghor enunciates a moral principle,

that is, that the death of these men should be viewed, not as an occasion for sorrow, but as one of celebration and merriment, for the courage and accomplishment of the human spirit, the human ethos.

The first part of Senghor's tribute to the Negro American soldiers presents images of exasperation, despair, and disappointment (e.g., "the barbaric clumsiness of monsters," "the roar of the cascades of the Congo," and "the salt taste of tears and the irritant smell of blood") while the concluding half presents a picture of hope, affirmation, and regeneration (e.g., "night fills with a sweetness of milk, the blue fields of the sky covered with flowers, softly the silence sings"). That Senghor is able to illuminate his poetics with this stylistic mode of contrast and divergence is a masterstroke. It also highlights the fact that, for him -- especially in human relationships -- goodness must overcome evil, and virtue must supplant vice.

If we turn now to the poem "Black Woman," which Senghor celebrates as an object of humanity, we soon discover the reasons behind her celebration. The word, "Blackness," both as symbol and as an object of skin color, has always been viewed with suspicion, skepticism, and apprehension, especially in the Western world where it is associated with "bad luck" or other evil phenomenon. It is for this reason that Senghor and his contemporaries of the Negritude mode -- particularly Aime Cesaire and Leon Damas -- decided to debunk the vicious myth of blackness so the Black man can find his place in the sun.

Consequently the concept of "black is beautiful" was propagated and it immediately gained currency world-wide. Poems, essays, pamphlets, and books extolling the virtues of blackness were written copiously, especially by writers and authors of black and colored extraction. Further, the celebration of Black womanhood became synonymous with the celebration of Black manhood, particularly because they are of the same species. The poem, "Black Woman," may be said to have its genesis from this long historical background:

Naked woman, black woman
Clothed with your colour which is life, with your form
which is beauty!

In your shadow I have grown up; gentleness of
your hands was laid over my eyes.
And now, high up on the sun-baked pass, at the heart of
summer the heart of noon, I come upon you my
Promised land,
And your beauty strikes me to the heart like the flash of
an eagle

Naked woman, dark woman
Firm fleshed ripe fruit, somber raptures of black wine,
mouth making lyrical my mouth
Savannah stretching to clear horizons, savannah
shuddering beneath the East Wind's eager caresses
Carved tom-tom, taut tom-tom, muttering under the
conqueror's fingers
Your solemn contralto voice is the spiritual song of the
Beloved.
Naked woman, dark woman
Oil that no breath ruffles, calm oil on the athletes
flanks, on the flanks of the Princess of Mali
Gazelle limbed in Paradise, pearls are stars on the night
of your skin
Under the shadow of your hair, my care is lightened by
the neighbouring suns of your eyes.
Naked woman, black woman,
I sing your beauty that passes, the farm that I fix in the
Eternal,
Before jealous Fate turn you to ashes to feed the
roots of life (MAV, pp. 96-97).

This lyric is the classic Senghorian poem for all that it embodies. The Black woman has all the beauty, grace, and charm in the world. In her youth and innocence she is "the springtime of Peace, hope at the end of winter;" in her maturity she exudes ripeness like "wine" or fruit that is ready for drinking or consumption.

The symbolism of her "blackness, which is life," and her essential "character, which is beauty," are all synthesized into one. She is tough and strong. In her physical make-up, she embodies the five senses: touch ("the gentleness of your hands"), smell ("sombre ruptures of black wine), taste ("Firm-fleshed ripe fruit… mouth making lyrical my

mouth"), hearing (the East Wind's eager caresses") and sight ("the glinting of red gold").

And she encapsulates the four natural elements: air ("savannah shuddering beneath"), water ("your watered skin"), earth ("my Promised Land") and fire ("turn you to ashes to feed the roots of life"). Senghor's appreciation of human values and virtues, as well as his handling of his subject matter, are so comprehensive and remarkable that one recalls Arnold's philosophical dictum about "the best that has been said and thought of in the world."

II

God is the highest element of nature. In Him radiates every authority over all things created both in the heavens and on earth. He is the ultimate giver of life and, if it pleases Him, the taker of that life also. All things, including the winds, the oceans, the rivers, the mountains, the birds, the insects and other elements and phenomena obey His absolute command. Senghor knows and understands all this, hence he celebrates Him profusely in his verse.

For example, in the poem "Paris in the Snow" where he witnesses man's inhumanity to man on a large scale, he invokes God philosophically: "Lord, you visited Paris on the day of your birth/Because it had become paltry and bad."

And in "New York," where people are lacking in morality and spirituality, he warns them strongly: "But it is enough to open the eyes to the rainbow of April/and the ears, above all the ears, to God who out of the/laugh of a saxophone created the heaven and the earth in six days" (MPA, p. 58).

Even in his moments of crisis or personal struggles regarding his faith and where he stands in his relationship with God, as in the following poem which, on the surface is addressed to a lady who would not return the protagonist's love, but at bottom is a solemn supplication to God for His beneficence, Senghor's Christian piety is not in doubt:

I have spun a song soft as a murmur of doves at noon
To the shrill notes of my four-stringed Khalam.
I have woven you a song and you did not hear me.
I have offered you wild flowers with scents as strange as a
sorcerer's eyes
I have offered you my wild flowers. Will you let them wither,
Finding distraction in the mayflies dancing?[4]

Next is the concept of motherhood as an object of nature. How often do we hear the aphorism "mother nature." In the African archetypal pantheon, motherhood is synonymous with nature and creation. It is the nexus of the family upon which everyone -- father, son, daughter etc -- must depend for sustenance and for various other services. Senghor understands all this, hence in the lyric, "On the Appeal from the Race of Sheba II," he invokes the spirit of motherhood in the opening line: "Bless you, Mother."[5]

Thereafter he goes on to describe his helpless condition in a manner reminiscent of a baby seeking the comfort zones of motherhood:

My head resting on the lap of my nurse Nga Nga the
poetess
My head humming with the war-like gallop of the
dyoung-dyoungs, the gallop of my pure thoroughbred
blood
My head singing with the distant plaintive melodies of
Koumba the orphan (WAV, p. 98).

It must be emphasized, however, that Senghor also extols the virtues of fatherhood; for example, in the poem "Ndesse," he pleads with his mother to educate him on the set of values which his ancestors symbolize: "Tell me the pride of my fathers.

Furthermore, Senghor also discusses other natural phenomena, as we shall discover in the poem "The Hurricane:"

Everything round me torn out by the hurricane
And out of me torn by the hurricane leaves and idle words.
Whirlwinds of passion hiss in silence

But peace upon the day windstorm, upon the flight of the rains

You, Wind, fiery and pure Wind, fair-weather Wind,
burn every flower every empty thought
When the sands fall back on the dunes of the heart.
Servant, be suddenly still as a statue, children still at
your games and your ivory laughter.
You, your voice be consumed with your body, the
perfume of your flesh be dried
By that flame which illumines my night , like a column,
like a palm.
Set my lips ablaze with blood, O Spirit, breathe on the
strings of my kora
That my song may rise up, pure as the gold of Galam
(WAV, p. 95).

This lyric is one of the few poems of Senghor's which does not conclude with a full stop, which, by implication, suggests the fact that there is no limitation to nature's continuum. Its upward territorial movement knows no barriers; it encapsulates everything and anything that crosses its path, with no limitation as to space and time.

However, the wind is projected as the "servant" of God
which must listen to the voice of the Master ("servant, be suddenly still as a statue"). Despite the wind's ferocity and immense power ("You, Wind, fiery and pure wind"), its apparent invincibility will be tested by the inimitable forces of nature ("You, your voice be consumed with your body/the perfume of your flesh be dried" (WAV, p. 95).

There is a philosophical didacticism to the poem. Much like Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" and David Rubadiri's "An African Thunderstorm," the principle which the poem partly enunciates is that everything in nature that promotes violence and destruction, must itself ultimately end up in chaos and destruction. The hurricane, with all its violence and rapaciousness (suggested by "torn out," "hiss," "burn" and "consumed") ultimately meets its own nemesis, that is, self-destruction.

Professor D. I. Nwoga has rightly pointed out the fact that the poem offers the poet an aesthetic outlet for "inspiration to be a good, effective poet."[6] More than that, the lyric is personified ("You, Wind, fiery and

pure Wind, fair-weather Wind"). Here in this line alone, the wind is mentioned thrice, with all three capitalized which, I think, elevates the status of the wind to that of a deity. Further investigation will reveal the fact that the poem is constructed on irony: the killer (like Donne's poem "Death") ends up killing itself after destroying everything else in nature.

A further look into Senghor's verse will show how he exploits another element of nature, that is, the land, to illuminate and illustrate his discourse. The landscape is an important natural phenomenon which cannot be ignored under any circumstance. The reasons for this are obvious: It is used for
building houses, shelters, or other human habitats; it is the foundation for agriculture, hunting, fishing, and livestock; it is the bedrock on which every created object derives its sustenance for survival; it embodies the village, the city, the country, the continent including, that is, all the places where Senghor has lived in physically and imaginatively -- Africa, Europe, the United States, and elsewhere.

Senghor's lyrics which extol the virtues of the landscape as an object of nature, include "I Will Pronounce Your Name," where he reminisces on the "Princess of Elissa, banished from Futa on the fateful day;" "Be Not Amazed," where he recalls the "restless earth;" and "You Held the Black Face," where he laments patriotically: "When shall I see my land again? / I shall mourn my home again."

Others are: "Visit," where he observes "the procession of the dead in the village on the horizon of the shallow sea;" and "Long, Long, Have You Held," where he asks rhetorically: "When shall I see again my country, the pure horizon of your face? /... I shall be full of regret for my homeland and the rain from your eyes on the thirsty savannah."

Furthermore, Senghor's frequent allusions and references to objects and sources which benefit from the natural landscape, including the "ricefield," the "solitary fig tree," the "Kingdom of Sine," the "chimneys," the "observatory," the "banks of Gambia or Saloum," the "birds," the "sheters" and "trenches," the "distant South," the "tempestuous night," the "blood of chickens or goats," the "naked feet of dancers," the "fabulous masks," the "Khalam or the tama," and the "threats of ancient deities" amply suggest his affection and familiarity with the universe of the physical landscape.

The pertinent question we might like to ask now is, what do we gain from a study of Senghor's poetic world of man and nature? First, Senghor believes that the universe of man and nature is vast, eclectic, fluid, complex, and comprehensive. Secondly, he treats his subject matter with alluring passion and sensitivity. And he employs diverse poetic and rhetorical strategies including, that is, repetition, comparison and contrast, and irony both to illustrate and illuminate his argument. Furthermore, in order to enrich the provenance of his poetic art, he employs images and metaphors which recall or echo the verse of other great poets, including Donne, Shelley, and Pound. Finally, Senghor believes that God is head and the Creator of the universe, and upon Him depends human salvation and the *summun bonum*.

Notes

1. As Clive Wake correctly observes, Senghor "used his poetic talent to further the political cause of his people." See "The Political and Cultural Revolution," in *Protest and Conflict in African Literature*, edited by Cosmo Pieterse and Donald Munro (London and Ibadan: Heinemann, 1978), p. 45.

2. Leopold Sedar Senghor, "Taga for Mbaye Dyob," in *A Book of African Verse*, compiled and edited by John Reed and Clive Wake (London and Ibadan: Heinemann, 1978), pp. 74-76. Further quotations from this edition will be included parenthetically in the text as BAV, followed by the page number(s).

3. See Ezra Pound, "*Hugh Selwyn Mauberley,"* part II, in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry,* edited by Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair (New York: W.W. Norton, Inc., 1973), pp. 345-346.

4. See Leopold Sedar Senghor, "I have spun a song soft as a murmur of dove at noon," *Poems of Black Africa*, edited by Wole Soyinka (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1975), p.171. Further citation from this edition will be abbreviated parenthetically in the text as PBA, followed by the page number(s).

5. In the poem, "Ndesse," Senghor mentions the word "Mother" six times, both to convey his respect for her, as well as his love for her. See "Ndesse" in BAV, pp. 73-74.

6. See Donatus Ibe Nwoga, *West African* Verse: *An Anthology* (Edinburgh: Longman, 1976), p. 222. Further quotations from this edition will be included parenthetically in the text as WAV, followed by the page number(s).

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