
Senghor: Poet of Night

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The *Elegies*, launched “like leopard over a snare” in Senghor’s last major volume, *Nocturnes* (1961),¹ form a discrete group of poems united by their energy, impetuous movement, and choice of imagery. These qualities set them apart as the last important addition to his poetic output. They are also among his most intimate poems, laying bare his disquiet at the very moment when his major ambitions were fulfilled. He had established himself as the leading African poet of the day; Senegal was free of French rule and he was its first, undisputed President, combining political with intellectual authority in a unique manner. His only rival on the continent in these respects might have been Julius Nyerere of Tanzania.

The opening poem, “Élégie de Minuit” (Elegy to Midnight) is swept along by its initial impulse and its sumptuous imagery, giving the reader scarcely a pause for breath during its initial assault:

Été splendide
Été, qui nourris le Poète du lait de ta lumière
Moi qui poussais comme blé de Printemps, qui m’enivrais de la
verdeur de l’eau, du ruissellement vert dans l’or du Temps
Ah !
Plus ne peux supporter ta lumière, ta lumière des lampes, ta
lumière atomique qui désintègre tout mon être
Plus ne peux supporter la lumière de minuit. La splendeur des
honneurs est comme un Sahara
Un vide immense, sans erg ni hamada sans herbe, sans un batte-
ment de cils, sans un battement de coeur.

Summer splendid
Summer, who suckles the poet with the milk of
your light

I who thrust like the young wheat in Spring, who intoxicate myself
with the greenness of waters, with the green rustling in the gold of
Time

Ah! I can no longer stand your light, the light of lamps, your
atomic light which shatters all my being

Can no longer stand the light of midnight. The splendor of hon-
ors is like a Sahara

A huge void without dune or stony plateau without grasses, with-
out flutter of eyelid, without thump of the heart. (*Poèmes* 196)

The poet moves effortlessly from the brilliant light of summer to the light of lamps to the light of midnight, then, by implication, to the harsh pitiless light of the Sahara in which he has been plunged by his Presidential honors. The paradoxes that juxtapose all these different lights in a few lines are an attempt to explore every image through its apparent reversal. And to the sleepless poet-President, the light of midnight is as intolerable as the glare of summer or of lamps. The next lines of the elegy move us to the heart of that insomnia:

Donc vingt-quatre heures sur vingt-quatre, et les yeux grands
ouverts comme le Père Cloarec

Crucifié sur la pierre par les païens de Joal adorateurs des
Serpents.

Dans mes yeux le phare portugais qui tourne, oui vingt-quatre
heures sur vingt-quatre

Une mécanique précise et sans répit, jusqu'à la fin des temps.

Thus twenty-four hours on twenty-four, and the eyes wide open
like those of Father Cloarec

Crucified on the stones by the pagans of Joal worshippers of
Snakes.

In my eyes the Portuguese lighthouse which turns, yes twenty-four
hours on twenty-four

A precise and ceaseless mechanism, until the end of time.
(*Poèmes* 196)

Now it is the upright poet himself who is rotating in the midst of his books with their hundred eyes; and now the "light of midnight" acquires a less paradoxical meaning. The sleepless eye resents every trace of light, and in particular the ever-returning beam of the lighthouse. Senghor now elaborates the lighthouse image with extraordinary rapidity; suddenly it is he who, instead of emitting light like the lighthouse, is receiving it from those shelves that hold the instruments of his fame and of his torment:

Je bondis de mon lit, un léopard sur le garrot, coup de Simoun
soudain qui ensable ma gorge.

—Ah ! si seulement m'écrouler dans la fiente et le sang, dans le
néant.

Je tourne en rond parmi mes livres, qui me regardent du fond de
leurs yeux

Six mille lampes qui brûlent vingt-quatre heures sur vingt-quatre.

I leap from my bed, leopard over a snare, sudden blast of the
Simoun that chokes me with sand:

—Ah! If I could only sink myself in the dung and the blood, in
nothingness.

I circle around amid my books, which gaze upon me from the
depths of their eyes

Six thousand lights which burn twenty-four hours in twenty-four.
(*Poèmes* 196-97)

So far the poet has been the passive recipient of all these assaults of light, insomnia, and the lonely anguish of high office. By a stroke as sudden as that of the Simoun, he is now transformed into the athlete who springs into the wrestling-ring, the warrior, the spokesman of his people and his race. This switch, from one line to the next, is an instance of the speed with which Senghor unfolds the design of the poem:

Je suis debout, lucide étrangement lucide

Et je suis beau, comme le coureur de cent mètres, comme l'étalon

noir en rut de Mauritanie.
 Je charrie dans mon sang un fleuve de semences à féconder toutes
 les plaines de Byzance
 Et les collines, les collines austères
 Je suis l'Amant et la locomotive au piston bien huilé.

I am erect, lucid strangely lucid
 And I am handsome, like the hundred-metres sprinter, like the
 black Mauritanian stallion in rut.
 I carry in my blood the stream of seeds to fertilize all the plains of
 Byzantium
 I am the Lover and the locomotive with well-oiled piston.
 (*Poèmes* 197)

Insomnia and the weariness of office are suddenly forgotten; the poet rejoices not only in being lucid and vertical as any lighthouse but in being the champion selected by talent from among all his people.. And with this realization it is he who gives forth light to all, instead of suffering its assault. Power, not of limb but of the word, has chosen him to lead. But this discovery is followed by another transition, as Senghor turns aside from his main theme to praise the peach-like charms of his new wife. This passage marks a weakening of the poem's impulse and direction, but these are swiftly recovered when he exclaims: "Plus ne peux m'apaiser la musique d'amour" 'the music of love can no longer calm me' (*Poèmes* 197). The poem again becomes intensely personal and self-absorbed. The poet summons all his strength to combat the anguish which assaults him and which love is unable to resist. One has to honor the poet at the height of of his literary and political powers who can thus expose his moments of weakness and despair:

—Douceur du poignard en plein coeur, jusqu'à la garde
 Comme un remords. Je ne suis pas sûr de mourir.
 Et si c'était cela l'Enfer, l'absence de sommeil ce désert du Poète
 Cette douleur de vivre, ce mourir de ne pas mourir
 L'angoisse des ténèbres, cette passion de mort et de lumière
 Comme les phalènes la nuit sur les lampes-tempêtes, dans l'horrible
 pourrissement des forêts vierges.

Sweetness of a dagger straight in the heart, right up to the hilt
 Like remorse. I am not certain of death.
 And if this were Hell, the absence of sleep the desert of the Poet
 This grief of living, this death of not dying.
 The anguish of darkness, this passion for death and for light
 Like moths at night against the storm-lantern, amid the horrid
 rotting of virgin forests. (*Poèmes* 197)

These expressions of solitary anguish have extraordinary force. Even death is vainly longed for in the line "this death of not dying." The poet who fled the disturbance of light upon his eyeballs now hurls himself against it like a moth. Love failing him, he has nowhere to turn but to God,

who controls both light and dark. This appeal brings yet another abrupt change of direction:

Seigneur de la lumière et des ténèbres
 Toi seigneur du Cosmos, fais que je repose sous Joal-l'Ombreuse
 Que je renaisse au Royaume d'enfance bruissant de rêves
 Que je sois le berger de ma bergère par les tanns de Dylôr où
 fleurissent les Morts
 Que j'éclate en applaudissements quand entrent dans le cercle
 Téning-Ndyaré et Tyagoum-Ndyaré
 Que je danse comme l'Athlète au tamtam des Morts de l'année.
 Ce n'est qu'une prière. Vous savez ma patience paysanne.

Lord of the light and of the dark
 Thou lord of the Cosmos, let me repose beneath Joal-of-the
 Shadows
 That I may be reborn to the Kingdom of Childhood rustling with
 dreams
 That I may be shepherd to my shepherdess among the sea-flats of
 Dylôr where the Dead flourish
 That I may explode in applause when Téning-Ndyaré and
 Tyagoum-Ndyaré enter the circle
 That I may dance like the Athlete to the drums for the Dead of
 the year.
 This only a prayer. You know my peasant's patience. (*Poèmes* 197-98)

Nostalgia now comes to his rescue, filling the poem with images from his earlier poetry. Night is no longer the threatening destroyer of his repose, the harbinger of all his disquiet, but a gentle darkness full of reassuring presences. It is the night of "Nuit de Sine" (Night of Sine), written some twenty years earlier in Paris, when the exiled poet longed to "respire[r] l'odeur de nos morts . . . avant de descendre . . . dans les hautes profondeurs du sommeil" 'to breathe again the odor of our Dead . . . before descending . . . into the lofty depths of sleep' (*Poèmes* 139). Now that the poet has recovered his bearings, plunging himself into that atmosphere alive with protective spirits so often invoked in *Chants d'ombre* (1945), sleep does come to him at last, in the closing lines of the elegy:

Viendra la lumière de l'aube.
 Je dormirai du sommeil de la mort qui nourrit le Poète
 Je dormirai à l'aube, ma poupée rose dans les bras
 Ma poupée aux yeux vert et or
 The light of dawn will come
 I will sleep the sleep of death that nourishes the Poet
 I will sleep at dawn, my pink doll in my arms
 My doll with green, gold eyes . . . (*Poèmes* 198)

The poet has already found solace in images from the Kingdom of Childhood, from "Joal of the Shadows" with its memories of the wrestling-circle, storytelling, drumming, and dancing. But it is not there that he

finally comes to rest. The closing lines return us to the ambiguity that runs through both the poem and the poet's life. Among the most sensuous and influential of his early poems was "Femme noire," with its opening exclamation:

Femme nue, femme noire
 Vêtue de ta couleur qui est vie, de ta forme qui est beauté ! . . .
 Fruit mûr à la chair ferme, sombres extases du vin noir, bouche
 qui fais lyrique ma bouche . . .
 Naked woman, black woman
 Clothed in your color which is life, in your form which is beauty! . . .
 Ripe fruit of firm flesh, sombre ecstasies of black wine, mouth
 which makes my mouth lyrical . . . (*Poèmes* 14)

This was not only the most famous but the earliest passionate praise for the beauty of black womanhood, in an epoch when it was still commonly despised. And Senghor followed it soon afterwards with a whole volume in the same vein, *Chants pour Naëtt* (1949), poems of praise and love addressed to his first wife, Ginette Eboué, daughter of Félix Eboué, the Martinican black who became Governor-General of French Equatorial Africa just before the Second World War. His appointment was, incidentally, crucial to the Allied cause in Africa. While all its other French governors in Africa scuttled into the embrace of Vichy, with its openly racist and Fascist policies, Eboué declared for de Gaulle in 1940, providing a bridgehead from which Free French troops later advanced through Fort Lamy (Niamey) in Chad into Southern Libya, to meet the Axis forces at the famous battle of Bir Hacheim, and thence on to Paris. It was thus a marriage of great political as well as sexual significance, a signal that Senghor practiced what he preached where women were concerned, that the passionate appreciation of black beauty expressed in his poems was not a mere gesture. And it aligned him with the most important black leader of an earlier generation, hailing from the same island as Senghor's friend Aimé Césaire.

But the marriage was not destined to last. Senghor's later marriage to a white Norman lady obliged him to reissue his love poems with the less committed title *Chants pour Signares*, a Portuguese dialect word for "Senhora," together with his *Nocturnes* in 1961. Nothing could be done about "Femme nue, femme noire," however; it had already passed into all the anthologies, including his own. His witness had become immortal, a badge for every black woman to bear with pride. If "Signares" was ambiguous in its application, Senghor compounded this ambiguity by his decision to move to Normandy, not to "Joal l'Ombreuse," after his resignation as Senegalese President. Unlike virtually all other ex-presidents in Africa, he would have been most welcome to remain in his native land, having distinguished it by his presence and having abandoned power voluntarily.

The biggest ambiguity of all is that he is rocked into slumber after his night of anguish by clutching his "pink doll," irresistibly reminding all his readers of the famous cry by one of the co-founders of the Négritude movement, Léon Damas, "Donnez-moi mes poupées Noires" "Give me my

black dolls,' a notable protest against the kind of assimilation to which both poets had been exposed throughout their youth.

The next poem in the series, "Élégie des circoncis" (Elegy to the Circumcised) provides some relief from the intimacy of the poet's tormented elegy to minight, though rehandling much of its imagery. It opens with an invocation of night itself, a night in which the death of the old self is not only possible but desired:

Nuit d'enfance, Nuit bleue Nuit blonde ô Lune !
 Combien de fois t'ai-je invoquée ô Nuit ! Pleurant au bord des routes
 Au bord des douleurs de mon âge d'homme ? Solitude ! et c'est
 les dunes alentour.
 Or c'était nuit d'enfance extrême, dense comme la poix.

Night of childhood, blue Night blond Night oh Moon!
 How often have I invoked you, weeping at the edges of the roads
 At the edge of the sorrows of my man's age? Solitude, and dunes
 all around me.

Now it was the extreme night of childhood, dense as pitch. (*Poèmes* 198-99)

By the fourth line Senghor has already identified the night he is invoking—the night of his initiation—and that already lends it a collective character. It was the night when he shared an experience of terror, disintegration, and rebirth with a whole age-group. Remembering it in the solitude that often assailed him in his adult years of exile and responsibility holds out the hope of re-experiencing that night when they all shed their childhood along with their foreskins and the blood of ordeal. For them, unlike the anguished poet of "Elegy to Midnight," death is not only possible but is ardently desired. The life of childhood must be shed so that the newborn man may emerge. The association of death with the darkness of night is thus appropriate, because the initiate will be reborn along with the day—the first day of his new existence. The initiate must: "mourir à la beauté du chant—toutes choses dérivent au fil de la mort" 'die at the beauty of the songs—all things turn aside at the thread of death' (*Poèmes* 199). Here Senghor, although the son of Christian parents, sings completely as one of the initiates. Even if he was never actually initiated, which seems probable, given the hostility of the missionaries to all such "savage rituals," the ceremony can still serve him as a metaphor for the rite of passage from childhood that we must all undergo. The disintegration of language itself during this crucial night of transition is fully apt for the poet's purposes. For language itself must die, to be reborn with the new self, and here the poet is fully identified with everything the ritual celebrates: "Ah! mourir à l'enfance, que meure le poème se désintègre la syntaxe, que s'abiment tous les mots qui ne sont pas essentiels" 'Ah! death to childhood, let the poem die and syntax disintegrate, that all non-essential words may perish' (*Poèmes* 199). And he is equally identified with the elegy's splendid conclusion, where the Phoenix is evoked to soar above everything the poem has shattered, from the life of childhood to all the old associations of night and

dawn. For henceforth, all these meanings must be renewed:

Le poème est oiseau-serpente, les noces de l'ombre et de la
lumière à l'aube
Il monte Phénix ! Il chante les ailes déployées, sur le carnage des
paroles.

The poem is serpent-bird, the wedding of shadow and the light of
dawn

Phoenix mounts! He sings with wings displayed, above the car-
nage of words. (Poèmes 200)

This elegy has a unity of tone and movement that contrasts with the constant shifts of tone and mood in its predecessor. It is driven by a single impulse, fully shared by the poet and all the initiates. It achieves instantly the fellowship for which he seemed to seek in vain in "Elegy to Midnight." Consequently, it is one of his most stimulating poems, and shows him still at the very height of his powers.

In the next poem, "Élégie des Saudades" (Elegy to the Saudades), the poet's concern shifts again entirely to the personal, to concerns that are his own. It can be seen as a reverie upon his surname of Senghor, with its echoes of the Portuguese title "Senhor." *Saudades* is also a Portuguese word for nostalgia, hence not really translatable without losing its special quality. But nostalgia for what, exactly? This question lies at the heart of the poem and is first posed in its opening line, repeated at its close: "J'écoute au fond de moi le chant à voix d'ombre des *saudades*" 'I hear in the depths of my being the dark voice singing of *saudades*' (Poèmes 201). The poet then asks himself what is this voice; whence and from what epoch does it arise:

Est-ce la voix ancienne, la goutte de sang portugais qui remonte
du fond des âges?

Mon nom qui remonte à sa source?

Goutte de sang ou bien *Senhor*, le sobriquet qu'un capitaine donna
autrefois à un brave laptot?

Is it the ancient voice, the drop of Portuguese blood which goes
back to the depths of time?

My name which goes back to its origins?

Drop of blood or just *Senhor*, nickname that a captain once gave to
good soldier-lad? (Poèmes 201)

The second part of the line is already a throwaway; perhaps the name is no more than a tidbit casually thrown to an ancestor who gave faithful service? Nevertheless, Senghor is not yet prepared to give up the fantasy of some link with the pioneering captains from Lisbon who first cruised the coast. It is while deviling in the library at the ancient Portuguese University of Coimbra that the poet suddenly discovered what might be considered romantic in his name, with its hints of ancient adventure: "C'était au siècle de l'honneur. / La bataille était belle, le sang vermeil la peur absent" 'It was in the century of honor. / The battle was splendid, the blood ruddy all fear absent' (Poèmes 202). But, after all, it might be no more than that

casual nickname that links him with these events, and it was all so long ago. More important than seeking to reconcile his two supposed bloodstreams, as Derek Walcott, “divided to the vein,” sought to do in “A Far Cry from Africa” (*In a Green Night* 18) or Nicolás Guillén in his “Ballad of My Two Ancestors” (*Élégies et chansons cubaines* 15), is to assert his control over his own identity. Through his mastery of the word, he can remake himself in any image he pleases, and it is this realization that resolves the question first raised by the poem. This realization is more important than poking into the darkness of an unknowable past:

—Je meurs et renais comme je veux. Mon amour est miracle . . .
Mon sang portugais s’est perdu dans la mer de ma Nègritude.

—I die and am reborn as I choose. My love is miracle . . .
My Portuguese blood is lost in the sea of my Nègritude.

The darkness of this poem, its “night,” is not that of ever-living breathing presences, but that of an irrecoverable past. And its dawn is the realization of the powers of renewal bestowed upon the once puny poet. This a gift greater than any ancestor, of whatever color, could bestow. It comes to him, as Kofi Awoonor might say, directly from the God of Songs. Senghor returns to this theme in the following poem, “Élégie des Eaux” (Elegy of the Waters). Here he introduces a whole new vocabulary of images, revolving around rain and drought, snow and manna, the waters of purity and those turbid waters purified by the poet’s voice alone, for “Le poème fait transparentes toutes choses rythmées” ‘The poet purifies everything through rhythm’ (*Poèmes* 206).

Though the waters of the Third Day invoked by the poet’s voice fell everywhere, from New York to Ndyongolâr, from the Sahara to the Middle West, the poet pauses to remind us of God’s odd choice of minstrel:

Seigneur, vous m’avez fait Maître-de-langue
Moi le fils du traitant qui suis né gris et si chétif
Et ma mère m’a nommé l’Impudent, tant j’offensais la beauté du jour.
Vous m’avez accordé puissance de parole en votre justice inégale

Lord, you have made me Master-of-Language
I the tax-collector’s son who was born so grey and so puny
And my mother named me the Impudent, so much did I offend
the beauty of the day.
You have accorded me the power of the word in your unequal justice. (*Poèmes* 206)

When Senghor here calls for rain upon the Earth, he does so not as a national or even as an African leader, but as one with a truly global perspective. The benediction of the waters must fall upon and unite all peoples. This can be seen as part of a general expansion of his vision throughout the first four elegies: the first was rooted in the poet’s insomnia and self-doubt, rooted too by the master image of the ever-rotating lighthouse. The “Elegy to the Circumcised” extended his concerns to an age-group, a generation of men, while the “Elegy of the *Saudades*” brought

in the dimensions of history and heredity, of exploration and colonial subjection. In “Elegy of the Waters,” the poet is still the center of attention, but now seems to have transcended his personal concerns. He is now the dispenser of waters to heal, console, and unite all peoples. The imagery of night and light returns for the last time, but now only to be finally resolved: *Que la nuit se résolve en son contraire, que la mort renaisse*

Vie, comme un diamant d’aurore
 Comme le Circoncis quand, dévoilée la nuit, se lève le Mâle, Soleil !
 Let night be resolved in its opposite, let death be reborn
 Life, like a diamond of dawn
 Like the Circumcised when, with night unveiled, uprises the male
 Sun! (*Poèmes* 206)

The *Elegies* form not only Senghor’s last major poetic utterance, but are at the same time curiously intimate and curiously triumphant.

NOTE

1. The *Élégies* are printed in *Poèmes* 167-213. All translations are mine.

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