

## **Entering the Forest of Initiation: The Obstacles**

The very first step in the process of initiation – that is, the decision to venture into the sacred forest, into the unknown world – reflects a preliminary effort to face life in its fullness. For the neophyte leaves behind, at the edge of the forest, all those who comforted and validated him, who sustained him in the vicissitudes of life. He forsakes the well-being and security provided by his family, friends and community. He moves away from the group watching him from afar and enters a forbidding and disturbing world where the spirits hold sway, and where he will have to undergo a whole series of unpredictable trials. Moreover, his commitment is irreversible: the neophyte knows that he cannot turn back, for it would be unthinkable to run away. So that in venturing forth he is totally defenceless, without any avenue of escape, and above all without any mirror from which he might gain a semblance of reassurance by gazing upon his own reflection. Narcissus is not an archetypal figure in traditional African culture.

The main focus of the initiatory process, from the very beginning, is precisely to bring to light man's essential frailty. The tribulations facing the neophyte will make him acutely and painfully aware of his own weakness in the fear and anguish of the nights, in the suffocating heat of the days deep in the heart of the forest, which is emblematic of the world and of life's uncertainties. Challenged by a hostile environment, he will learn the first lesson of survival: the necessity to gain control over suffering so as not to be overcome by it.

Furthermore, he will come to understand the positive aspect of suffering, its ability to strengthen character. This approach to knowledge through personal experience is one of the characteristic features of education in the African tradition, where "knowledge is less a dogma than a set of ideas that one lives by, a *praxis*".<sup>1</sup>

In Africa, man is expected to confront life, whatever it may bring, and initiation teaches the neophyte a fundamental law of nature: the human being's resilience arises mainly from the dialectics of will-power and suffering.

A striking example of this fundamental relationship is found in the initiation rites of the Akambas. In their culture, "the physical pain which the children are encouraged to endure is the beginning of training them for the difficulties and sufferings of later life. Endurance of physical and emotional pain is a great virtue among Akamba people, as indeed it is among other Africans, since life in Africa is surrounded by much pain from one source or another."<sup>2</sup>

Senghor's poetic vocation closely reflects this initiatory process. In his early writings (*Shadow Songs*), the poet shows his firm resolve to enter the White world which he first watched at a distance from his "glass tower", since (as he wrote) "I fear the crowd of my fellows with such faces of stone". A world where his validity is questioned, for in it (he adds) "my dreams turn to ashes. / All my dreams, blood running freely down the streets / And mixing with blood from the butcher shops."<sup>3</sup> The very rhythm of the stanzas conveys a sense of anguish and breathlessness, for the long lines permit neither break nor rest. All the words and images lead to the cruel ugliness of "the butcher shops" where they seem to be engulfed.

However, Senghor expresses his determination through a verb form indicative of deliberate choice:

**Let me leave this tower so dangerously secure  
And descend to the streets, joining my brothers  
Who have blue eyes and hard hands.**

With full awareness and no illusions, he takes the difficult path prepared by historical circumstances. For nearly four centuries arrogant Europeans had mutilated Africa. After reducing the continent to slavery, they still remained dominant in the 1930s through a colonialism that even denied the existence of an African civilization, which was thus prevented from asserting itself, and therefore from flourishing and gaining acceptance among the great movements of contemporary thinking. The White world was blind and deaf, and

its paternalism and racism conspired to build insuperable walls of prejudice held together by a semblance of logic. Black Africans were thus isolated and segregated, and many of them were broken in striving to overcome these obstacles.

Smugly self-assured in its deep-rooted superiority complex, the West was quite unable to be receptive to Black values. In order to avoid being totally annihilated, the only course of action open to Africans was therefore to enter the White world, to draw from the source of empowering knowledge. It was up to them to break through the walls ... However, "imagine that one day you wake up and find you are Black and colonized, black and naked, feeling the 'shock of being seen' by the white man, caught in his corrosive gaze. Between 1925 and 1935, those Black students knew that for three hundred years Europe had taught their forebears – whether mere 'subjects', or citizens after 1848 – that they were insignificant. It was held that they had no heritage, had not really thought, *built* or painted anything, and even their songs remained unrecognized. They were nothing, caught deep in a pit of absolute despair. For how could anything be brought forth from a void?"<sup>4</sup>

Now Senghor was one of those who refused to accept such an outrageous humiliation. Like many young African intellectuals, he pursued his higher education in France and became immersed in Western culture. "I swore," he wrote, "to steal from Europe the instruments of its superiority: its machines, of course, but mainly the spirit behind them, by which I mean *discursive reasoning*."<sup>5</sup> In the process, he experienced daily a particularly painful inner conflict, arising from the tension between his Black identity and the knowledge he was acquiring from Europe, for his Western learning negated the essence of his African values. It was the cruellest of predicaments, since man needs to fulfil harmoniously both his potential for existential wholeness and his thirst for knowledge.

Senghor's resolve was irrevocable: he left his "glass tower", the private place where he lived isolated in the warm familiarity of his thoughts, memories and ancestors. It was a "dangerously secure" haven, for the glass panes let him see the outside world only from above and afar, without allowing the slightest contact, so that the surrounding reality appeared to him *in vitro*, as it were, and became a silent and remote display. The walls protected but at the same time secluded him, afforded a view while denying him a direct knowledge of what he saw, since they kept him apart and shut out all sound. From aloft, the poet could but contemplate the stillness of "roofs and hilltops in the mist [...] sombre naked chimneys", all things confined by his gaze within the limits of their own image.

Implicit throughout *Shadow Songs*, this commitment is echoed rhythmically in the related themes of departure, journey and alienation. Separation is ringed with shadows treated in counterpoint: these are the auras of anguish, remembrance, regret and pain necessarily linked to the letting-go involved in any departure. But life force and curiosity prevail: "My soul wants to conquer the infinite world and spread its wings ..."<sup>6</sup>

One of Senghor's first poems, probably written during the same period as *In Memoriam*, though published separately, expresses the power and violence of these emotions, the overwhelming intensity of this drive:

Comrade,  
I want to tear off my black skin  
And have it follow me,  
I want to cross your harsh border,  
Your jeering arrows.

Comrade,  
I want to plunge further than your scratched  
Sunburnt skin and hands,  
Right down to your heart, down to your sensitive  
Entrails.<sup>7</sup>

Senghor's determination to break down barriers, to overthrow the walls that keep human beings apart is a vital impulse, a virtual obsession: the strength and urgency of his dedication to this self-imposed task reflect his originality as a thinker and a statesman. This overriding concern informs, justifies and drives all the workings of his mind. It relates to a fundamental question raised by him as far back as 1939:

The point is to know "what may be the purpose of man". Is the answer to be found exclusively within himself? [...] Or is Man truly human only when he achieves a degree of self-transcendence so as to find fulfilment beyond the ego, and even beyond Man? Indeed, the point is, as Maritain emphasized (and in this he followed Scheler), "to concentrate the world in man" and to "broaden man's reach to fit the dimensions of the world".<sup>8</sup>

This philosophy of *Being* is the wellspring of a will to be fully present and involved in the world, an attitude which underpins Senghor's poetry, giving it impetus, rhythm and power.

As a Black man, he leaves his tower and ventures forth to meet the White world. He takes along his African presences, his thoughts, memories and ancestors. He goes forth toward the Whites, and calls them his brothers, so that his initiatory quest starts with a call for human fraternity. He journeys toward the depths, seeking a common denominator of *Being*, beyond historical and cultural distinctions.

Senghor searches for mutual understanding and harmony between civilizations whose differences must be turned into a source of enrichment for man.

Upon entering the dark, alien and disturbing forest of the West, however, the poet experiences a feeling of deep anguish, for he is denied the dialogue he is seeking with White men. All around him, every avenue seems closed. He is overwhelmed by the twin vision of a disfigured Africa and a dehumanized Western world, both the result of colonialism and neo-colonialism, war and racism. These civilizations are antagonistic and appear mutually exclusive, as though their survival depended on it ...

A visionary poet, Senghor is deeply troubled by this mutilation of man and by the sight of cultures defensively immobilized by their mutual blindness and senseless struggle.

## 1 The Mutilation of Man

Senghor makes us share the Odyssey involved in his efforts to discover and understand the West: "...as I advanced, I felt that this 'white world', which I had been prevailed upon to enter, was a hard world, where striving, method and organization counted above all else."<sup>9</sup>

At first, as a Black man he was caught in the trap of a society he was anxious to decipher though it shut him out. His dreams and ambitions were trampled underfoot, his perceptions invalidated, his appeals ignored, his efforts impeded. Everything which should have led him to greater fulfilment – his need to interact and communicate, his eagerness to participate – was impaired. This tragic sense of alienation was gradually reflected in his poetry.

A first reading of *Shadow Songs*, the earliest of his poetic works, unveils a preoccupation with essentially lyrical and personal themes. He sings of his solitude as an African arriving in France: imprisoned in his black skin, he finds himself in a vacuum, he evokes rejection and silence from a white world petrified by prejudice. In *Black Hosts*, a second collection of poems, his inspiration widens: the poet's attention is no longer centred on his own plight. He now looks beyond his personal experience and shares the sufferings of his

people through a collective awareness reflecting mainly racial brotherhood and affective osmosis. These *Black Hosts* are the Senegalese infantrymen "sacrificed to the manifold 'gods' worshipped by man to mask his selfishness, greed, lust for power, [...] stupidity".<sup>10</sup> *Ethiopiennes*, the third of Senghor's poetic works, expresses the ultimate alienation. It is no longer simply a matter of the Black man's solitude or of the contempt directed at him. Instead, the rejection of Black African thinking becomes the main focus of his concern. He senses the degree to which African cultural values are endangered by Europe's blindness and deafness: eyes convey no message, words awaken no echo, impulses are paralysed.

As we draw closer to the heart of Senghor's poetry in the depth of his imagery, we perceive more clearly another level of meaning: by successive stages, the poet gradually identifies the alienating tribulations faced by African expatriates with the ordeals that belong to the human condition and are encountered by all men. Beyond the tragedy of a race, we then perceive the drama of a world which has forsaken the essential values of Life and is now drifting aimlessly ...

This new reading allows us to follow the progression of Senghor's thinking: it grows deeper and wider, so that his lyric and very personal inspiration leads to a collective, political, then epic poetry. Finally, transcending all artificial boundaries, Senghor paints a tragic fresco of modern History, restores a human dimension in events, and leads us under the spur of anguish to seek the significance of life in the depths of consciousness. In this search, we recognize that his process of poetic creation parallels the various steps of initiation, which "should be seen as a slow transformation of the individual, a gradual shift from the outer to the inner world; this conversion allows man to become fully aware of his humanity".<sup>11</sup>

Initiation starts with a challenge to the neophyte's self-identity. Left to his own devices in an inhospitable environment of hostile presences, he plunges into a solitude where nothing familiar meets his gaze and where he feels deeply the lack of communication with other human beings.

### **A Gaze Unacknowledged**

It is obvious that our eyes operate selectively. They do so quite unconsciously, in a manner indicative of our emotional state. In a happy mood, we notice things which escape our attention when we are downcast, or if we see the

same things, they are perceived differently. Every visual image is emotionally charged and reflects a tension between the observer and the world. Every gaze is a call or a response.

In the realm of poetry, perceptions are unimpeded, since they remain free from the constraints of logical reasoning, the need to adapt and the requirements of efficiency. Poetry therefore allows words to become the "ideal image" so aptly defined by Bachelard: "It should captivate us through all our senses and lead us beyond the most clearly involved meaning. This is the secret of the correlations or resonances which beckon us to a multiple or metaphorical life."<sup>12</sup>

Bachelard's analysis is reminiscent of Senghor's comments on the semantics of Black African languages: "... one must always bear in mind that (in these languages) words are heavy with analogical images, that they are *signs* just as they carry *meanings*, and are therefore the nexus of correlations between the physical universe and the moral universe."<sup>13</sup>

And language unquestionably lends structure to our thinking. Now the languages of Black Africa are "essentially concrete. In them, words are always *pregnant* with images, for their root keeps its concrete value."<sup>14</sup> Upon hearing them, one spontaneously conjures up a concrete image calling first and foremost on the sense of sight. But the perception does not simply focus on the appearance of the object. It also searches for the meaning beyond the sign. It seeks an image opening the way to a "participative knowledge", involving synesthesia as well as an expansion of being.

It is therefore appropriate to emphasize the paramount significance of Senghor's specific choice of words, for his works illustrate the poetics of the African way of *seeing* the world. It is as an African that he moulds the French language in his poetry: "All French words," he said, "can be abused or turned around to light the flame of metaphor. One need only take out of the usual context even the most 'intellectual' of words, by studying their derivation, to bare them to the brilliant light of symbolism."<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, it should be realized that a poem written in French by a Black African is perceived very differently from one composed by a Frenchman. Words are never articulated innocently: either they have been inflated with all the vigour of African symbolics, and then they convey much more than their immediate meaning (this is the case of terms such as hand, blood, oil, ancestors, etc.), or they are mere signs which restrict thinking so that it leads only to a univocal understanding basically alien to the African approach, but there are no

neutral, indifferent words. In any case, whether they evoke multiform presences or deny them, an ongoing and complex interaction is initiated between words and human perception. As soon as they are spoken or written, words become live and active forces.

These stylistic considerations help us understand how Senghor sees the Western world, how he reacts to people and places belonging to that world.

Initially, and we find this most striking, there is a certain confrontation and mutual rejection, a certain blindness. Scrutiny from either side brings no response ... In this respect, physical geography is particularly significant: the cityscape fragments described by Senghor bear witness to the latent antagonism he experiences. For the Western world shows him *frozen images* leaving no scope to the flight of his imagination. They disconcert the poet and shut out his gaze, so that it cannot reach below the surface. These static images interrupt the rhythm of his verse and emphasize the theme of solitude in a world without interchange, focus or resonance.

Thus, Senghor notices architectural details of a building's exterior features giving no hint of what may lie within: "sombre, naked chimneys [...]", "roofs", "high towers, pride of man", "buildings of cement and steel". As for the dwellings, he sees only "the icy walls and the brightly lit / Apartments that sterilize every seed on the ancestors' masks / And even the memories of love".<sup>16</sup> These dwellings leave him with a sense of total bereavement, for they even obliterate his past.

In "To New York",<sup>17</sup> he feels drowned "and full of despair at the [bottom] of skyscraper streets / Raising my owl eyes at the eclipse of the sun". Overwhelmed by materiality, by the missing horizon, he is surrounded, or rather hemmed in, by visions of verticality and brutal power. He stares at "skyscrapers defying storms with their steel shoulders / And weathered skin of stone". Such a scene, where architectural harshness confronts the unleashed forces of nature, produces a feeling of suffocation: neither air nor wind can reach man in his concrete well, and "all birds of the air / Fall suddenly dead under the high, sooty terraces".

Just as an environment incompatible with life dooms birds – a metaphor for flight, movement, freedom, dreams of the elsewhere – so it inhibits man's immersion in the world.

Two different materials essentially dominate these descriptions: stone and metal. Both connote hardness and coldness. Metal also suggests hostility and cruelty; and it appears significant that Senghor refers to metal in connection

with the European imprint on Africa: in his poem entitled "All Day Long", he describes how "the long and narrow rails / This iron will upon the listless sands",<sup>18</sup> brutally force together two totally dissimilar substances. By their weight, density and strength, the specially shaped bars of steel (an iron alloy with a specific admixture of carbon) lock the imagination onto the representation of the object (the rails), whereas the sands, whose particles are easily swept away by the wind, are typical features of African landscapes – particularly in the central region of the Sahel – which they shape into small hills as changeable as life itself, as vibrant as the colours of those dunes glowing in the sun then turning pale in the moonlight. The sensuous languor Senghor feels in the sands endows them with a new quality of femininity, and this draws on the archetype of the earth-mother, which alters the picture we carry in our minds. Numerous analogical images then emerge and, providing they fit the primary image of the association between sands and rail, inevitably converge toward the repellent vision of a rape. In "Shaka", the same image recurs with "the lands [...] under the gridwork of iron rails".<sup>19</sup> The term "gridwork" makes one think of prison: this sacred land, which has witnessed so many forms of worship, is now caught in an iron yoke, whose image suggests a desecration of Africa's agrarian traditions.

Another outrage to the African land is perpetrated by the white hands which "tore down the black forest to build a railroad".<sup>20</sup> The contrast between the lush vitality of the African forests, their teeming plant and animal life, their heady fragrance and warm mist on the one hand, and on the other the ghastly, grey, dry and cracked dreariness of the railway ties emphasizes the same antithesis between technology – expressed by univocal words that stifle the soul and destroy man's dreams – and the abundance and countless forms of life found in nature.

In contradistinction, Senghor views European landscapes as cluttered with objects that cut short any poetic vision by reason of either their literal meaning or their context: constricting one's breath and smothering inspiration, they spell profanation and death. Indeed, in this impressionistic look at the Western world, Senghor views things whose meaning is exhausted once they have been named. These are words devoid of ambivalence or poetic shadow, allowing no imaginative transposition: they impede creative impulse and choke the poem's vitality, for each of these words is set in a rigid mould shaped by the immediate perception. Instead of leading to flights of fancy or opening communication, they enforce the stubborn silence of a figure pointing to a dead end. Senghor scatters such words throughout his poems, so that

they drop heavily amid the shimmering images summoned forth by his typically African openness and receptivity. Listing a few of them is enough to make one's gorge rise at the thought of such a gory, violent and deadly world: butcher shops, gunshots, trenches filled with rotting corpses, latrine duty, blood-stained spittle, barbed-wire entanglements, etc. He also uses insensitive words reflecting purely quantifiable concerns (office technology, nylon legs, artificial hearts and hygienic loving, taxes, rulers, T-squares, compasses and sextants).

At first sight, such are the offerings of the Western society where he seeks to gain admittance; Senghor's gaze slides impotently along a wall of predominance and contempt. Such visions bring no understanding and lead nowhere; they cause him deep anguish.

There is also a certain negative quality, however, in Senghor's way of looking at the West, a certain rejection on his part. There are many aspects he refuses to see. And what escapes him in this alien environment is deeply revealing of his own emotional state. In particular, he very seldom mentions nature, which is most surprising in a poet such as Senghor, who is fond of saying that he is a peasant at heart. In "Porte dorée",<sup>21</sup> it is true, he chose to live "between City and country, / Where the City opens on the first breath of rivers and woods", but he immediately adds that he misses the rooftops nestled among the trees, a landscape haunted by memories of "Joal-of-the-Shades", on which he dwells nostalgically. And to feel regret implies a helpless acceptance of the loss.

Indeed, nature seems to elude him, hidden by mist, snow ("white death"), or "the city's dirty fog". In the Luxembourg gardens, where he seeks to break out of his solitude, he finds only absence and emptiness.

One may wonder whether he ever found and celebrated his youth while in Europe. If he did, why is there no poem suggesting a happy immersion in a Western setting? The first stanza of "Portrait"<sup>22</sup> does give an impression of contentment ("... the land's virgin scents, / The smiling façades in the sun, / And the grey mildness of roofs / In sweet Touraine"), even though, except for the sensual complicity implied by the fragrance of the land, the poet's gaze is warded off by the façades and roofs which hide from him the intimacy of homes and villages and leave him as a stranger, an outsider. And these landscapes do not attract him, despite the gentle charm of European spring-time which "still does not know / Winter has sharpened my stubborn rancour". To Senghor, winter means solitude and bitter cold:

I am alone in the plains  
And in the night  
With trees curled up from the cold  
[...]  
I am the solitude of telegraph poles  
Along deserted  
Roads.<sup>23</sup>

In Europe, he suffered from the winter in all seasons: "Spring rained its icy water on all my unleashed desires / [...] Now in the heart of July, I am blinder than Winter is at the pole."<sup>24</sup>

It is mainly in the poems written before 1948 (i.e. *Shadow Songs*, *Black Hosts* and *Selected Poems*) that we find these references to climate and scenery, although they also occur in "To New York", published as part of *Ethiopiennes* in 1958; the reappearance of such geographical descriptions may be ascribed to the shock of discovering the great American metropolis and its skyscrapers.

To Senghor, a hard and cold Western landscape seems to have moulded the White man's attitudes. Indeed, a picture of Western man gradually emerges, one identified to a certain extent with the setting in which he lives. This illustrates one of Senghor's key ideas, arising from a basic African postulate, a belief that the world is essentially relational and that man is wholly dependent on his natural environment. As early as 1959 he wrote: "In the long run, the *environment* exerts a profound influence. First of all, it shapes the economy, then society, and finally it causes physical and psychological mutations which become hereditary."<sup>25</sup> Eighteen years later, he took the same approach to define the White man: "Originally confined by darkness and bitter cold, exposed to a hostile nature, the White European has become a predatory and combative creature, seeking material possessions and stability."<sup>26</sup>

Coming upon the scene in the very first poem of *Shadow Songs* ("In Memoriam"), these Whites show "faces of stone" that are remote, silent and inscrutable, for their features lack the mobility that would allow a response to the gaze of others and would prompt a dialogue. Their eyes are cold blue, and they have "hard hands". Now hands express the sensuous and dreamlike nature of the sense of touch, but on a deeper level they are also indicative of the quality of human relations: through their gestures, they convey feelings. And Senghor remembers these hands:

The white hands firing the rifles [...]  
The white hands that once whipped slaves, and that whipped you,  
The powdery white hands that slapped me,  
The snowy white hands that slapped you,  
The firm hands that led me to loneliness and to hate.<sup>27</sup>

This stereotypical White man reminds us of the traditional African statuettes of European settlers in their braided uniform, wearing an oversize pith helmet; as means of expression, they carry a rifle, revolver and riding crop; and their hands are too large and stiff, as though the woodcarver's inspiration had run out.

In the epic poem entitled "Shaka", dedicated to the Bantu martyrs of South Africa, the portrait of this White man is even harsher. The tone seems strongly influenced by Senghor's militant opposition to the French policy of assimilation. Under political and economic pressure from organizations such as the Committee of the French Empire, established by large business firms active in the colonies, the National Assembly adopted the draft of a new constitution, approved by referendum on 13 October 1946, and based on the principle that "French sovereignty would be maintained".<sup>28</sup> (It should be noted that General de Gaulle, during a speech delivered in Epinal on 24 September 1946, voiced his total disagreement with the proposed constitutional changes; he had resigned from the Presidency on 20 January 1946.)

In an interview given to the newspaper *Gavroche* on 8 August 1946, Senghor made his position clear. He "assured the Whites of our unshakable will to gain independence", and added that "we stand ready, if it were necessary as a last resort, to conquer our freedom by all necessary means, even violent ones".<sup>29</sup>

It was during this time of great tension that Senghor wrote "Shaka", and the poem's forceful tone should therefore not come as a surprise. In describing Europeans, he spoke of their "white [epidermis]." Epidermis! Such a word normally appears in a context of descriptive anatomy, suggesting the analytical attitude of a dissector and carrying an aura of corpse-like coldness. The distasteful term appears startling in a poem, and one would prefer to have it replaced by "white skin", which comes furtively to mind as a defence against the approach Senghor wants to force on us. The wording seems particularly derogatory since in all the poet's works, this is the one and only instance when it appears, whereas "skin" occurs frequently. The deliberate choice is important, for "skin" suggests a gentle touch, a caress, vibrant warmth and

life, while "epidermis" has none of these connotations. To say that the latter covers the body of a White man is to emphasize everything that he lacks. Moreover, his eyes are pale, hence blank and dull, without the depth which only colour and its many shadings can provide. Lastly, "bare words" issue from the White man's "thin mouth": the stinginess thus implied reduces speech to the merely functional, suggesting precision and efficiency, insensitivity and coldness, traits heightened by the striking contrast offered by the African girl Nolivé, described in exuberant and jubilant terms rich in images and sensory associations: "[...] words sweet as a water spring, [...] lips of an adder, [...] the intoxicating milk of her mouth." Antithetic juxtapositions are stylistic devices often used by Senghor to stimulate our thinking.

Though History marches on and an updated reading of Senghor's poetry may soften somewhat the picture of White men as colonialists or racists, we continue to be obsessed by this figure, which somehow remains with us like a covert but constant and dangerous presence. Indeed, beyond colonialism and neo-colonialism, the prototype is alive and well in our societies: it defines a good many of our contemporaries under the hold of some ideology which robs them of the ability to feel and give human warmth, to share Life. In the last stanza of "The Absent Woman", which shows a quasi-biblical cadence, Senghor denounces them in scathing terms:

**May eyes and ears and head count for nothing  
if they don't take root  
In the breast and deeper, right down in the belly.<sup>30</sup>**

The poet is deeply wounded and disoriented when his eager gaze is met with only rejection by Western society. He can no longer see clearly nor be seen, hear nor be heard, sense nor be sensed: "my eyes have become old before their time – / In the silence and the odourless, colourless fog."<sup>31</sup>

Like an obsession, the need to emerge from isolation and communicate with the West echoes throughout all his early poems. He repeatedly calls out, as an African, hoping to be heard and answered ... But his voice is ignored.

### **The Absence of Communication**

Yet the style and form of Senghor's poems are essentially those of a dialogue: like an itinerant storyteller, he seeks a response from his audience. He cries out, questions and challenges the reader. Frequent use of the imperative and optative moods provides an emotional charge which prompts us to join him in very personal reflections.

This strong urge to initiate a dialogue is voiced in the questioning that seems to be an important feature of Senghor's thinking. It is a major stimulus to his inspiration, which arises from a persistent search for participation and communion. His poems – each one a quest for meaning, an exploration of the mystery underlying all things and beings – are sprinkled with question marks (we have counted no less than 222!).

Senghor questions Europe so as to understand a world that rejects him, one where he feels a stranger. He is determined to overcome rejection, however. The struggle is gruelling, and his questions provide a strong beat in each poem's emotional rhythm. Striking for their straightforward approach, they recur like sharp arrows attempting to tear through the surrounding darkness. The tempo accelerates until the poetic impulse is cut short by a question mark which ends any further thinking. The rest of the poem brings no hint of an answer. This sudden rhythmic drop in mood is generally followed by the leisurely pace of a monologue in search of meaning in the depths of the human spirit.

These questions are never merely incidental, never asides dropped by the author in the process of writing. Wherever they may occur in the poem, they have the nervous energy of someone seeking to batter in a door. But even when the questions multiply insistently (as in "Thiaroye" and "Prayer to the Masks", among other poems), they remain ineffective, for the question mark acts as a soundproof barrier, and the Poet's words drown in the silence: "Wôï! Hear my blind voice, deaf-mute spirits of the night."<sup>32</sup>

Yet there should be no difficulty in hearing these forceful questions, sometimes planted like shards of repressed anger suddenly bursting into the very heart of a poem. Harshly they interrupt the slow and modulated rhythm of the descriptions. They reflect the exasperation felt by the Poet, unable to make his African voice heard:

**Must I shout louder? Tell me, can you hear me?<sup>33</sup>**

However it may be worded, the question fails to break through. It is drowned out, swallowed by the wave of the following lines. The lack of a reply, as well as the unfinished and unfinishable thought, force the reader to acknowledge his inability, which he shares with the poet, to find a way in which Africa might ensure that it be heard by Europe.

In the thick enveloping silence, Africa's voice rings out, loud and clear:

**Bless you, Mother!**

I hear your voice as I surrender to the cunning silence of this European night  
[...]<sup>34</sup>

What a contrast between African volubility and European reticence! For not only does Europe refuse to answer, it hardly speaks at all. Its voice is heard in only two poems ("To the Guélowar" and "Shaka").

The first of these two was written in the Amiens camp in September 1940. A prisoner of war among countless others, Senghor feels intensely the degradation of man, of the "drooping bodies without hope, / Beasts with clipped claws, soldiers without weapons, naked men". A massed humanity parked there, awaiting transfer, left in ignorance of its fate, abandoned to "the cruelty of civilized men". In the general collapse, "statesmen [pro]claimed the magnanimity of hyenas", and their voice now reaches us. For our benefit, Senghor repeats their words, and is careful to put them in quotation marks:

[*"It is not a question of black men! It is not about mankind! No! Not when Europe is at stake."*]<sup>35</sup>

We would have wished to hear words matching the poem's title (the very name of "Guélowar", a noble descendant of the Manding conquerors, brings to mind the heroic epic of the Malian empire), words worthy also of the historic event which had just taken place (General de Gaulle's radio broadcast from London on 18 June 1940, calling for a continuation of the struggle). With all the subtle irony of an African storyteller letting his more perceptive listeners read between the lines to catch the implied sarcasm, Senghor shows us the inherent insensitivity of a comment reflecting the prevailing mood of defeat and humiliation. Distressing words, for they reflect a loss of humanity and fundamental values (dignity, honour, courage) in favour of an abstract entity. For what does Europe mean without the human beings composing it?

In "Shaka"<sup>36</sup>, we hear the "White voice from Overseas", faceless and nameless, cold and hard as the words it speaks: "... O Shaka, you can't hear the cooing doves, / Nothing but the sharp blade of my voice / Cutting through your seven hearts."

As an African, Shaka recognizes it:

Ah, there are you are, White Voice. Biased voice, sleepy voice.  
You are the voice of the strong against the weak,  
The conscience of the conquerors from Overseas.

At first, the White voice and Shaka's African voice ring out, far apart, two monologues against the background of funeral drums. Only after the White voice falls silent does the lively beat of the drums of love allow all of Africa to be heard, speaking with one voice, singing of its heroes, personified by Shaka, its tradition, represented by the leader of the chorus, and its people, by the chorus itself.

In other poems, Senghor lets us feel the White man's haunting presence, as implied by the unusual stylistic device of a nameless pronoun used to designate him. In "Prayer to the Masks", for instance, the Whites burst onto the scene and are referred to simply as "they", without any prior introduction, a presence clearly projected from the depths of the poet's consciousness, so that the writing reflects his traumatic experiences: "They call us men of cotton, coffee and oil, / They call us men of death."<sup>37</sup>

Senghor seeks in vain to capture and personalize the Western world. In this connection, he often uses the French indefinite pronoun "on", which is active but neutral, nonspecific in human terms: it has neither eyes, nor ears, nor features. It recurs repeatedly, for instance, in the wartime poems of *Black Hosts*: "They promise ('*ON promet*') five hundred thousand of your children the glory / Of future deaths and thank them ('*ON les remercie*') in advance, future [obscure] dead,"<sup>38</sup>... "they set up ('*ON installe*') cannons, ... they dig ('*ON creuse*') trenches,"<sup>39</sup>... "he has been given ('*ON lui a donné*') a servant's clothes."<sup>40</sup>

There can be no dialogue with this relentless "on". The distance separating a real person and an anonymous being is painfully emphasized by the impossibility of any bond between an individual who sees, feels, suffers and endures – the "I" of the poet, the "he" of the volunteer, the "we" of the Senegalese infantrymen – and the indeterminate "on", which appears only with a verb connoting action.

This brings us back to one of Senghor's key ideas, the opposition between a civilization based on *facts*, that of the Western world, and one based on participation and feeling, that of Africa. The distinction is something he frequently returns to, for it involves, in his view, a major obstacle to the fulfilment of man's potential. In the course of a lecture given in December 1971 to students at the University of Abidjan, Senghor said: "I sense your

confusion when faced with the present world, which is American, Russian, Chinese, or simply European – but hardly African! Especially since this cold world is armoured with logic, bristling with machines, concerned as it is with *efficiency* above all else, with quantity."<sup>41</sup>

Senghor thus makes us share in a first stage of initiation, comparable in every respect with that of the adolescent entering the sacred forest, a place haunted by countless invisible powers challenging him. Similarly, an African arriving in a Western country is soon made to feel unwelcome: he is looked at askance, he is not listened to, nor is he treated with easy familiarity. He encounters the fearful European night. Blind and deaf to the Blacks, Europe addresses them in fleshless, dehumanized and impoverished words. No sooner uttered, they return to the silence from which they came. Like all obstacles to communication, they are appalling.

In the depths of his heart, the neophyte calls on his mother to protect him and help him to keep up his spirits; in much the same way, Senghor, through a kind of life-sustaining reflex, calls on his Mother, his Africa:

Here I am before you, Mother, a soldier with naked sleeves,  
And I am dressed in foreign words, where your eyes  
See only a bunch of twigs and tatters.  
If I could speak to you, Mother! But you'd hear  
Only my prattle and not understand...<sup>42</sup>

A stranger on two counts, to the Western world where he lives, but also to his African identity, the poet seems to wage a single combat to escape alienation. Some of the stylistic devices he chooses betray his inability to overcome the obstacles, to see through the screens. These devices involve essentially the simultaneous use of incompatible approaches and images. For instance, in the "Liminary Poem" of *Black Hosts* – written in 1940 from a draft which might have been entitled "To Each His Own Hero" – one can picture and hear side by side the African poet chanting in praise of the courageous Senegalese soldiers and the French poets continuing to sing of "the artificial flowers of Montparnasse nights [...], indifferent barges [...], the distinguished despair of tuberculous poets [...], the dreams of hobos under elegant white bridges ...".<sup>43</sup> The contrast between Africa and the West also emerges in "Camp 1940", with its theme of prison and freedom, in "Letter to a Prisoner", which considers both brotherhood and solitude, and in "To New York", dwelling on appearance and being.

Another dimension gradually comes to light, however. The personal experience of an African facing a hostile world turns out to be prototypical of a deeper and more fundamental drama: that of two opposing cultures brought to a standstill. The poet's voice then becomes the voice of Africa, and he takes upon himself the role of *dyali*, of African bard.

## 2 Civilizations at a Standstill

Between Africa and the Western world, a wall of misunderstanding has arisen, a wall cemented and buttressed over the centuries by an accumulation of preconceptions, by a mutual unwillingness to hear and see what the other civilization stands for. In the face of this truly unacceptable predicament, Senghor has consistently fought to overcome every form of stubborn prejudice distorting Black African civilization, or even denying its very existence. In one of his speeches, delivered on 18 September 1946 before the French National Assembly, he expressed his views in strong terms:

... the supporters of local citizenship, who are at the same time the opponents of so-called "colonial" representation in Parliament, raise against us arguments of a cultural nature and speak, as has been done in committee, of "cannibals" and "primitives", of "anarchy" and "barbarism". I regret that the would-be defenders of *civilization* show such incivility toward their colleagues from overseas. I regret particularly that their scorn stems from so much ignorance.<sup>44</sup>

A refusal to hear what an essentially oral civilization has to say is obviously tantamount to a denial of that civilization's existence. And indeed, the encounter between Africa and the West started with a monumental misconception, a rejection of Africa's history.

For untold thousands of years, Africa lived as a continent apart. True, successive waves of invasions, mostly Arab, drove back the Black populations from East to West and from North to South. Empires came and went; in many instances, Moslem invaders imposed their religion, through conviction or force of arms, but there was never anything like the European religious wars, which triggered large migrations and were thus one of the factors behind the opening of Europe's age of exploration and overseas conquest (another being the rapid growth of trade in the entire Mediterranean, an easily navigable sea where shipping reached a high stage of development). Black Africans had no reason to leave their continent, ringed by a fearsome surf that makes it hazardous to launch a boat. Besides, why should they have wanted to settle

elsewhere, since the population was relatively sparse and the need to hold an overwhelming vegetation in check had led to the establishment of community-centred societies and to the growth of anthropocentric religions?

It may well be that one cannot really understand the African environment without personally experiencing the climate, the aridity and silence of the Sahel, where there is no protective shade, where no mirage allows illusion, where man cannot cheat because he has to face his own limitations, to recognize and accept his true self, to show himself as he is ... There is also the suffocating heat of the tropical forest, teeming with a hidden, alarmingly exuberant life, where everything seems to feed on everything else, where man cannot evade the laws of nature. This is a nature so vital, so generous, that stakes planted as fencing take root and sprout leaves. But it is also an untameable nature, broiling under "this light so primitively pure in the savanna and along the edge of the forest, where civilizations were born; a stark and revealing light, bringing out what really matters, as the essence of things, in a violent climate, both stimulating and chastening".<sup>45</sup>

It would seem that Western man, setting foot on the African continent, failed to take into account these parameters of life which have shaped Black African culture. He simply compared that culture with his own. Finding no common denominator between them, he rejected the African civilization purely and simply. This grievous error of judgment was to colour all subsequent interrelations within Eurafrica: Europeans confused economic power with civilization, and concluded that Africa was a backward continent waiting to be civilized and, from their viewpoint, ready to be exploited.

Senghor's poetry stems from a painful personal experience, that of racism, which caused him to be held at arm's length, "beyond the void made around [his] skin",<sup>46</sup> and made him aware of the historical misunderstanding that blocked communication. This explains the capital importance he ascribes to History, which brings together the poet and the statesman in him. In writing to Mohamed Aziza, he emphasized the significance of this discipline:

In my view, therefore, History has a specific human meaning. As a statesman, I have tried to contribute to the fulfilment of History, by leading Africa in general, and *Homo niger* in particular, back to their proper place, as consumers of course, but mostly as creators.<sup>47</sup>

Senghor denies none of the past, and brings it to light in all its stark cruelty and human absurdity (slavery, racism, war, or scientism, for instance, are grist for his mill), but he maintains that the past cannot be allowed to jeopardize

the future. Man, he holds, has no right to let past events dictate his conduct, as though the consequences of those events were inescapable. Senghor rejects historical determinism, a doctrine which would have caused him, in Fanon's footsteps, to surrender to hatred, seek revenge, and join in class and racial struggles.

Just as the sufferings and humiliations inflicted on the neophyte during initiation are to be endured without bitterness, and instead should be accepted and even welcomed as experiences releasing new energy, so should past sufferings and injustices lead to a new life, and not to despondency.

Senghor's poetic commitment is conducive to a firm resolve to undo what History has wrought and to reassert man's opportunity for free choice, for it is essential to avoid being governed or imprisoned by the weight of the past. This idea, which emerges repeatedly throughout his writings, underlies an actual philosophy of History: far from being a logical concatenation of fated events, History must be continuously created by man, who should have the courage to direct and modify the historical process.

Senghor suggests that man venture forth in search of the *Grail of Negritude*, offered to mankind as a way of salvation, for Africa has kept the secret of a humanism forgotten by a Western world thrown off course by turmoil and by the technological revolution.

This concern underlies all Senghor's writings, and is certainly one of his major themes. Its essence is encapsulated in a few lines so powerful and pithy that in their sweep they release a flood of living and timeless images. One senses the poet's obsession with apocalyptic visions of a world bent on self-destruction:

... The Prophets standing on the mountains  
Foretold them, terrifying sharks of the sky  
Without wings or heart, but edged with open eyes.

These lines from "Princess, your letter"<sup>48</sup> appear Biblical in structure, but in content they follow the idiom of the traditional African palaver, for they express "the Black man's radiant symbolism, in which all the senses – responding to countless sounds, fragrances, tastes, feelings, shapes, colours, and motions – resonate mysteriously and conjure up an abundance of analogical images".<sup>49</sup> In this instance, the images turn allegorical: we are faced with the monsters of modern times. They are "without wings" – which is to say they cannot take flight toward the realm of imagination and transcendence – and "without heart", thus incapable of emotion. They make no attempt to see and

understand the world. Their wide-open eyes remain sightless, but spit out an all-consuming fire, a striking metaphor for all the forces which together shape modern History ... and also take part in the degradation of Man!

Further on, Senghor lists the “yellow fire” of cupidity, the “red fire” of murderous violence, and the “white fire” of technology. The three stanzas describe the successive transformations of the monsters, in three essential visions. They each contain the gist and substance of Senghor’s view of the contemporary world. They are the origin of his inspiration, the source of his emotion, and bring us to the very centre of his thinking. They are therefore particularly significant, which justifies the detailed analysis we shall devote to them.

The stanzas connect us with the totality of Senghor’s works, and at the same time recapitulate them all, through their exceptional conciseness. The extraordinarily dynamic quality of the images they carry makes them three foci concentrating the energy of the existential angst pervading the entire œuvre. They fully reveal the poetic vision of his political thinking. They allow us to share his perceptions and lead us to the living springs of his inspiration, where he reinterprets modern History, and more specifically the three crucial stages which, in his view, mark the decline of the human spirit: colonization, the great Western wars of the twentieth century, and the current age of Science triumphant.

### **First Phase: COLONIZATION**

*It was the year of Discovery. They spat yellow fire  
From their eyes. And river waters ran with gold and sweat.  
And the [colonizing countries] were filled to bursting.  
Naked men were made slaves, and parents  
Sold their children for one gold coin.*

In these lines, a few key words bring us a sense of the history of colonization. Senghor gives a thumbnail sketch of the White adventurers who sought gold and slaves. Their sightless eyes are deeply disturbing, for they can only “spit”, spewing forth all the foulness, contempt and violence immediately implied by the verb. Knowing how much Senghor reads in the human gaze – so expressive of intent, expectation, and readiness to communicate – we cannot fail to be troubled by a “yellow fire” connoting two equally destructive states of mind: cupidity stimulated by the lure of gold is the driving image, but a cold devitalized heat is also suggested, along with a smell of sulfur and death.

Africa's response to this European aggression is striking: "river waters ran with gold and sweat." To the image of fruitfulness and life evoked by water, particularly for an African, is added the generosity of the verb (to run) implying an uninterrupted flow. Around these words, a manifold vision suddenly develops, one of Africa exploited, exhausted, drained of its resources. Though quite specific, the words chosen by Senghor allow the imagination to soar, for they carry a wealth of analogical images scattered throughout the poet's writings.

In its African connotations, gold is frequently referred to by Senghor: a symbol of purity, beauty, warmth, light and vitality, wealth and nobility, it becomes a powerful allegory designating fullness of being, a happy congruence between the poet's gaze and the object he is looking at. In a few instances, he has in mind the precious metal itself (the gold of Galam, Bure or Bundu), but in general he uses the word to express the many impressions – received, experienced, and shared – evoked by "gold", impressions emphasized by the harmonic resonance of the French term ("*or*"), which is all at once brilliant, caressing and voluptuous, for the sound originates deep in the throat and spreads around the object. Gold is precious for what it signifies, and Africa is personified by the Ethiopian woman "wild as raw gold / Untainted as gold ...".<sup>50</sup>

To the colonizer, however, its value is purely monetary, and the greed it inspires knows no bounds. The same cupidity makes him eager to possess the two sources of wealth discovered in Africa, gold and slaves ... To mention both in the same breath is to acknowledge no difference between the metal and humanity, to ignore man's soul. To equate them means to quantify both and dehumanize man while granting priority to gold, since it is mentioned first. This attitude, the logical result of analytical thinking, leads us to adopt the mindset of a trader. The identification is most distasteful to us, however, and we are loath to accept it.

Furthermore, to mention "sweat" in the abstract is to neutralize its meaning, reporting a physiological fact unrelated to any human feelings. Yet we cannot discard this particular word, so heavy with meaning. As soon as it has been uttered, it echoes and amplifies the lines of many other poems. It calls forth a whole series of related presences which make us experience the emotional context of Senghor's poetic outlook. The word "sweat" becomes a metaphor conjuring up the countless sufferings and humiliations of Africa "drained of all her sons / Auctioned off for less than herrings",<sup>51</sup> of a people subject to the

slave trade and to forced labour, "since black sweat is fertilizer",<sup>52</sup> while "diplomats [...] tomorrow [will] trade in black flesh".<sup>53</sup>

The twin topics of gold and sweat – mere commodities to Europe, but emblematic of all the glory and pain of Africa – suggest a fundamental theme, that of a historical misunderstanding fraught with grave consequences for the future of man. This misunderstanding led to a tragic and wrongheaded pattern of behaviour by the Western nations: in their dealings with Africa, they have allowed trade to take precedence over the spirit, they have resorted to quantitative rather than qualitative thinking. The market forces of supply and demand have structured social relationships, which necessarily implies indifference to human values. For how can commercial interests be served, if altruistic considerations intrude?

Africa has been heartlessly sacrificed, but has the West anything to offer in return, by way of compensation? This unexpressed and possibly inexpressible question weighs heavily on Senghor's outlook and perceptions. For whoever exalts solely profit and treats labour simply as a financial factor is driven to enslave man, confuse wealth and culture, and conclude that the economically developed countries are the only civilized countries.

The lines we have quoted from "Princess, your letter" ("It was the year of Discovery ...") bring into focus the very essence of colonialism, fully illustrated by the archetypal images of gold and sweat. They evidence Senghor's political thinking and sense of commitment as he considers this traumatic period in Africa's history.

One is reminded of the bitterness he expressed in a speech delivered before the French National Assembly on 21 March 1946:

It is high time to discard the simplistic idea that Black African civilizations are primitive [...]. I shall simply quote the well-known words of one of the greatest Africanists: "The notion of Black barbarity is a European invention which held sway in Europe until the end of the nineteenth century!" It is sad to note that the idea is still prevalent among many of our fellow countrymen.<sup>54</sup>

In his poems, Senghor rejects this derogatory and inane view, and spotlights the many faces of the barbarity of colonialism: "White Europe" has disfigured Africa: "...for four centuries of enlightenment / She has thrown her spit and her baying watchdogs on my lands."<sup>55</sup>

Africa was controlled by the boards of directors "who govern the colony's governors".<sup>56</sup>

Africa was humiliated. Its forms of worship and traditions were held up to ridicule: "And they have burned intangible forests like hunting grounds, / Dragging our Ancestors and spirits by their peaceful beards. / And they have turned their mystery into a Sunday entertainment / For the sleepwalking bourgeois." Its social structure was destroyed: they "turned Askias into guerilla fighters, / My princes into sergeants, my house servants into 'boys', / My peasants into wage earners, and my people / Into a race of the working class."<sup>57</sup>

Africa was alienated, body and soul: "You decline the rose, I am told, / And accept the Gauls as your Ancestors."<sup>58</sup> Elsewhere, he stresses the loss of identity: "And this other exile, much harder on my heart, / Is the tearing apart of one self from the other, / From my mother's tongue, from the Ancestral skull, / From the tom-tom of my soul..."<sup>59</sup> Worse still, when Black men seek their reflection in White eyes, they do not recognize themselves, for in those eyes they are reified into "human raw materials"<sup>60</sup>. Africans are often valued as commodities: they are viewed as "men of cotton, coffee and oil";<sup>61</sup> they are "workers at twenty cents an hour",<sup>62</sup> and they are deemed marketable, since their "*banania* grins" are advertised on "all the walls of France".<sup>63</sup>

All these images scattered throughout his poems are the poetic counterpoint, so to speak, to the political writings in *Liberté II*. For Senghor's attacks on Western mercantilism in Africa appear in both his political speeches and his poems. There is no difference between the White Voice in "Shaka" and the *New York Herald* article quoted by him in another speech to the French National Assembly on 9 July 1949:

The *New York Herald*, an American newspaper, suggests that "Africa be made into an experimental centre for world development". Elsewhere in the same article, I read that "the native population may be considered a source of essential unskilled labour. Thanks to modern equipment and machinery, and a plentiful work force, it will be possible to raise production to amazing high levels."<sup>64</sup>

Nothing seemed to have changed since the days of slavery: Africa continued to be viewed simply in terms of an economic potential awaiting development. One may well wonder, however, on what basis Europe tried to justify its

superiority complex. Through what mental aberration did Europeans seek to impose their values on Africa, assumed to be totally devoid of culture? Senghor repeatedly drew attention to this basic misapprehension, which poisoned and completely distorted relations between the two continents.

In his view, Europe's major and most disturbing contribution was Reason, seen as the power of discursive thinking, sufficient by itself to lead man to knowledge and action. To Senghor, "*the worst colonialism is the dictatorship of European reason and technology*". And he added: "I have in mind total and totalitarian Europe, which is not limited on the East by the Oder-Neisse line."<sup>65</sup>

## **Second Phase: THE ERA OF REASON**

The fact that Africa did not benefit from the Age of Enlightenment is, in itself, highly indicative of a strange cultural block. Although the 1789 Revolution proclaimed liberty, equality, and fraternity, slavery was not abolished in the French colonies until 27 February 1848, thanks to the efforts of Tocqueville and Victor Schoelcher. It should be remembered that England ended the slave trade in its colonies in 1807, the first country to do so. And in 1808 the United States prohibited the importation of slaves to its territory: for want of customers, the slave trade died out by itself.

As for Europe, it has had great difficulty in adjusting to the euphoria generated by the rationalistic doctrines developed on the basis of Aristotelian and Cartesian thinking. Reason appeared as the one and only avenue to knowledge and understanding of reality. Scientific discoveries and their practical applications to technology only confirmed the belief in an intelligible world ruled by physical laws accessible to logical reasoning if man sets his mind to it. Thirst for knowledge led to a systematic search for rational explanations making it possible to translate all phenomena – be they physical, chemical, economic, political, simply social, or purely psychological – into laws, formulas and models.

Though on the one hand the human mind has considerably widened its field of knowledge, on the other hand it has abandoned an alternate way of relating to the world, rejecting as totally unreliable approaches based on intuition or feeling and deriding the whole realm of faith, which in this view reflects a state of ignorance soon to be overcome. The frantic search for a purely intellectual knowledge – rational, logical, and precise – has led the West to lose interest in human beings in favour of an abstract concept of Man, a concept underlying various doctrines that claim to provide a firm foundation for the

establishment of more perfect societies. These supposedly scientific doctrines have spawned fanatical movements seeking to rule and reshape the world, for in the eyes of zealots ideas outweigh facts and prevail against human nature. Based on direct action, on the exact sciences, on wealth and power, our societies channel man's abilities in a most inappropriate manner: not only have they largely discarded Greek and Latin humanities, but all too often they confine the mind in the wordless and rigid mould of mathematics and impose a rationalism reflected in uncompromising and sectarian dogmas.

It is surely the height of ineptitude to confuse rationality and reality to such an extent that, during the colonial era, African children were taught, in all seriousness, to consider the Gauls as their ancestors. Yet this was the strictly logical outcome of assimilation, an abstract principle viewed as the ultimate basis for colonial policy. Further instances of ineptitude abound in the dogmas underlying racism, Communism, scientism, and many other "isms".

Senghor, a professor and an *agrégé* in literature, was highly critical of the atrophied and atrophying intellectualism of Western education. He deplored "the arid plains of your books", which "are white like boredom, / Like misery, like death".<sup>1</sup> These books try to confine and limit the poet, who struggles against their influence: "I turn around among my books watching me with their deep eyes, / Six thousand lamps burning twenty-four hours a day."<sup>2</sup> And their eyes are but lamps, their light is but electric. The lines are a desperate echo of the cry of distress uttered in "Spring Song": "And my blood screams in anguish, [in the abandonment of] my [too] heavy head / [Surrendered] to electrical currents."<sup>3</sup>

Several Western thinkers, it should be noted, have criticized rationalism, either indirectly like Henri Bergson – who, in an age of scientism, persistently defended metaphysics – or more directly like Robert Aron, who considers that the Western world is paying dearly for its "sin of idolatry, the sin of believing human reason could dispense with God in the organization and transformation of the world [...], a grievous metaphysical transgression which has led to all the other sins and produced all the perversions of our time. Perversions in the area of individual life, where man everywhere betrays his existence in favour of technical and rational processes, in collective life, where human communities give up their autonomy in favour of administrative and government regulations, and in spiritual life, where anything not reducible to formal logic and strict determinism appears inconceivable."<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps because he had the dual privilege of being both an African imbued with his own culture and an adopted Frenchman immersed in Western rationality, Senghor stressed more strongly than anyone else, in our estimation, the urgency of denouncing unbridled Reason, which is leading mankind to self-destruction:

**And then it was the year of Reason. They spat red fire  
From their eyes. And hate sprouted in the necks of men  
Like knotted ganglions, and soldiers were bathed in bloody mud.  
Executioners and scientists were decorated;  
They had found a way to kill men twice.<sup>5</sup>**

These powerfully realistic lines are unambiguous, and so compelling that they preclude any evasion of their message. Marked by the violence of the colours and rituals they describe, they are structured around a few key words (hatred, blood, soldiers, executioners) introduced without any qualifier or context which might have restricted their impact by providing greater specificity. These key words command attention through their wide-ranging connotations and stark eloquence, which matches the tone of many present-day accounts of traumatic experiences.

Senghor paints a situation where the powers of death have become manifestations of life: hatred acquires a frightening vitality, a parasitic energy which takes shape, develops and thrives; stealthy and implacable, it debases man, turning him into a monster. Hatred takes on a kind of demented strength which leads to a sacrilegious death, for blood, traditionally sacred as the sap of life, is linked with mud, a viscous, disgusting, decayed and foul-smelling organic residue. Now blood, a focus of African symbolism, is one of Senghor's major themes, a key word recurring no less than 132 times in his poems. The fullest symbolic significance therefore attaches to its use, for blood "connects the human person on the one hand with the Cosmos and on the other with the community that person belongs to, by proclaiming directly, in the eyes of each member of the community, his ultimate identity".<sup>6</sup> On the deepest level, blood is "linked with the mystery of life",<sup>7</sup> which explains its resonance. The mystique of blood evokes life in all its forms: fruitfulness, vitality, courage, brotherhood and ethnic solidarity, among others. Zahan has emphasized that "the fascination exerted by blood on Africans is deeply spiritualistic, for blood is the vehicle for the life of the body, it holds the active force of its carriers, it is an awesome vital element, and wasting it inconsiderately is heavy with consequences".<sup>8</sup> Whereas blood is an invitation to seek the deeper meaning of

existence, in these lines it is linked with *mud* and *soldiers*, which in this instance have exclusively death-related connotations.

Such wording implies a degradation of man, but also a contempt for and desecration of life. Senghor delves more deeply into the dynamics of the tragedy being enacted all over the world. It is true that the unleashing of hatred causes man to destroy life through the violence of his deeds, and therefore to despise it; on the other hand a hatred so intense as to become sacrilegious necessarily feeds on contempt, for every man has a deep need to justify his own actions, in order to make them more efficient and to consolidate his power. The chain of hatred-contempt-hatred therefore becomes a new mode of human interrelations. This destructive process is eloquently illustrated by Senghor's powerful metaphor: "... and the soldiers bathed in bloody mud". Unavoidable consequence and necessary adjuvant, contempt becomes a mechanism essential to the fuelling of hatred. To a certain extent, it can even be said that contempt is the triumph of hatred. It lifts all constraints, since to despise someone is to deny him and his values, and therefore to vindicate anything one might do against him. Moreover, contempt justifies hatred. And both feelings imprison man, they thwart any attempt at self-affirmation, so that his ability to think constructively is distorted and destroyed.

This particularly insistent and emphatic poem rings out loudly, even in the silence of inaudible cries of suffering and revolt, even in the cruelty of the punctuation, which abruptly ends the vision, preventing any evasion. Finally, the melodic composition of the lines – with the rhythmic effect of the repetitive *and*, giving the text a peculiarly dynamic quality – suggests the beginning of a perpetual movement and accompanies the alternation of mutually reinforcing emotions of hatred and contempt.

The whole vision resonates with the totality of Senghor's works, in which countless images call upon the two major themes of war and oppression, whose voices are heard as manifold variations of a single overriding concern, that of the death of Man.

Indeed, an outburst of hatred, reflected in the waves of killing they unleash, is produced by the Western world's wars, as they are described by Senghor, particularly in *Black Hosts*, which brings together the poems inspired by a uniquely dramatic and turbulent period of history, the years between 1935 and 1945, the time of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, the Spanish civil war, the Popular Front in France, and the Second World War.

In a 1967 letter to Renée Tillot, however, the poet wrote: "The collected

poems in *Black Hosts* are those I like the least, probably because they were topical and because my impressions did not have the time to be sublimated or, first of all, to deepen." But what he perceives as a weakness strikes us on the contrary as a most valuable testimony, for these poems express Senghor's genuine reaction to events simultaneously experienced and shared, and they therefore reveal his ambivalent or polyvalent responses.

Senghor's response is twofold, in the sense that it takes place on two distinct levels: first, an objective description of Europe at war; and second, an African perception of the tragedy. The latter seeks to dilute the intolerable reality, or more precisely it distills Senghorian humanism as an antidote to Western barbarity. For Senghor rejects historical fatality. He invites us to question and review our own perception of episodes hitherto experienced and accepted as logical consequences of an imposed ideology or as an unavoidable concatenation of circumstances to be resignedly endured.

Yet these two outlooks coexist in Senghor's poems. They never blend or even influence one another, which seems to emphasize the fact that the two civilizations they typify do not really communicate, that they are totally cut off from each other.

Such appears to be the basic message of "Mediterranean",<sup>74</sup> a poem with the twin themes of African brotherhood and the fratricidal Spanish civil war. The contrast between the two is striking: the meeting of two Africans on the deck of a ship becomes a true celebration of life. The presence of each one is clearly indicated by the insistent use of the possessive forms (*your* hand, *my* hand, *your* face, *your* eyes, *your* race, *your* smooth brow, *your* name, *my* name) and by the dialogue, in which the "I" and the "you" join in the discovery of the fraternal "we". Finally, in the tradition of African storytellers, "Mediterranean" is structured like a song of praise. It opens and ends with the naming of the brother: "And again I say your name, Dyallo!" This vocative evidences a validation of existence, of the worth of one's fellow man. In contrast, the vision of the Spanish civil war, inserted at the heart of such a paean to brotherhood, appears all the more jarring, unexpected, and distressing. In every respect, the apocalyptic vision is a reversed picture of the joyful celebration. In a riot of images and a sacrilegious cacophony, the dominant note is one of mindless hatred fed by an inhuman lust for power; the aggressor remains distant and anonymous, hidden and protected behind the steel armour of the warships bombing Almeria. The attacker indulges his insane destructiveness without even seeing those he kills, so that he loses all sense of responsibility and escapes the anguish of remorse. There is nothing for him to think or say;

he simply sets the machine in motion and it does its work. The machine destroys blindly and efficiently, "spattering brains and blood / On black walls ...". The victims are children; they too are anonymous, and it could hardly be otherwise. There is no longer any emotional link with these slaughtered children, these blood brothers.

The word "child" suggests love, vulnerability, and above all the unlimited trust of a developing human being, but here this image is shattered; the horrifying description of children's heads bursting open becomes literally unbearable. Yet the poet does not spare us this heartbreaking vision, for he is anxious to complete his harrowing account of this civil war and to emphasize above all else its essential inhumanity.

As for the Second World War, mankind's "New Great Joke", its barbarous cruelty is conveyed by various words bringing the din of battle, the echo of carnage and destruction to the very heart of Senghor's poems: cannon, cannonade, cannon ball, bullet, bomb, cartridge belt, machine gun, line of steel and fire, tank, air squadron, etc. These clamorous and clumsy words impair the poetic idiom, overwhelm the mind, and create a mood of bleak dejection.

Curiously enough, this vocabulary of war and weaponry is interspersed with words evocative of Africa. These punctuate the anguish of the neophyte in the sacred forest: a storm, the cry of the jackals in a moonless night, feline meowing, a distant roar, the trumpeting of elephants, a hurricane, all of them forces of Nature, hostile to man, but among which he must learn to live. To an African, the very words suggest the harrowing trial of the first night spent without shelter in the middle of the sacred forest. To a youth facing initiation, however, the dread he will have to overcome arises from the forest's silent presences and alarming sounds, which obviously symbolize the numinous powers. The process is therefore literally a vital experience during which both the body and the mind face the most fundamental of all challenges: the young man is called upon to establish and defend his identity in a world of threatening forces totally beyond his control. This is the African approach to metaphysics.

In contradistinction, powers of death – a whole range of weapons invented by man to kill his fellows – face the European. These powers endow the various machines of war with something approaching a brutish and mindless kind of life: "four-engined eagles, ... lions of bombs with such powerful leaps, ... the monstrous feet of tanks, ... the tremulous whinny of your iron horses, ... tigers [streaking] across the sky, more supple than eels, /And flatter than a blade ...". Developed by man for use against man, these instruments of destruction

inevitably lead to a certain loss of faith in the very notion of humanism. In the thunderous and insane roar of war, no word is spoken, communication becomes impossible. Finally, anguish no longer fosters a growth of the spirit, since in this maelstrom hatred is the underlying reality.

Beyond the din and chaos, however, there always remains in Senghor's writings a contrapuntal note of sanity: "The voice of Africa hovers over the rage of long cannons, / The voice of your heart and blood, listen to it / Under your delirious head and your cries. / [...] Listen to her blue voice in the air washed of hate, / [...] She says your kiss is stronger than hate and death."<sup>75</sup> This blessed voice interrupts the fury, brings a moment of silence, and allows reflection. The poet's forlorn voice answers like an echo, a dirge celebrating the heroic "Senegalese Soldiers, my black brothers with warm hands under ice and death."<sup>76</sup> They were "landed on this European soil, [...] and left for sale [to death]."<sup>77</sup> And yet,

**Not a bit of hate in your hateless soul, no guile  
In your guileless soul.  
O black Martyrs, immortal race, let me say the words  
That forgive.<sup>78</sup>**

The confrontation between Europe and Africa recurs in "Camp 1940". While a prisoner of war, Senghor gives a dual description of the camp. To an African, it looks like "a [vast] village", a phrase which needs to be spoken slowly if one is to do justice to its sensuous sonority. It stimulates inspiration and respiration, mobilizes images and memories, suddenly brings back the past, and bridges space and time. The major role of the village in African society is well known, and Senghor, more than any other writer, has stressed his "rootedness in the Serer soil". To quote him further: "More than half of my poems were inspired by two districts, those of Joal, where I was born, and Fimla, near Djilor, where I spent my childhood until the age of seven."<sup>79</sup> In many of his writings, one senses a kind of overlay, one image superimposed on another, memories of Joal colouring the text, attempting to transmute the unpalatable reality.

The "village" is highly evocative, for it places man in a warm and human environment, that of his childhood, family roots and cultural traditions, reminding him of the responsibilities he was taught toward his group. These responsibilities are the stuff of daily life in the village, with its palavers and constant face-to-face encounters. The very sound heightens the gentleness and tenderness of the image.

The whole concept of village clearly fascinates Senghor, and this leads us to wonder about its resonance within us and to inquire whether, in the final analysis, one of the main facets of the Western world's dramatic socio-cultural predicament might not be precisely that the West has lost the sense of connectedness and security provided by a village. It seems that man cannot easily experience the fullness of life in the anonymity and loneliness of a teeming megalopolis, where he falls under the influence of prevailing behaviour patterns and artificial ideologies, and where the lure of money frequently becomes irresistible.

The word "village" occurs four times in "Camp 1940",<sup>80</sup> as though reflecting a vital need to breathe more deeply, to conjure up something other than the dreariness of a stalag, to bring a human element into an inhuman situation. This word rises from the text like a cry for help, but though it tries repeatedly to break through, each time it is caught, crushed and smothered by the overwhelming context, defaced by the conceptual and visual cruelty of the accompanying modifiers: "a village of mud ..., a village crucified", surrounded by barbed wire, under the threatening tyranny of sentinels and machine guns.

In this description, the village is distorted; it has become a prison camp, emblematic of a European continent in the process of self-destruction, a continent engulfed in war and violence, speaking the language of bitterness and death. The air is unbreathable: there are "pestilential ditches. / Hatred and hunger ferment there in the torpor of a deadly summer".

Senghor, in these poems, sets side by side, without ever suggesting any areas of overlap, the images of hatred and death of Europe at war and other images expressing an African zest for life. These words sparkle with symbols and metaphors which disclose their hidden and secret life.

These contrasting descriptions leave between them a void – the silence of what remains unsaid – as though the poet's isolated cries of emotion, anguish and revolt could not break through the verbal envelope of the successive visions of Europe and Africa, could not combine to form a dialogue, or as though the words Senghor wanted to utter were smothered in the thick insulating silence of blank spaces within the poem, thus leaving no room for communication. The silence evidences the deafness and blindness of a self-worshipping Western world. It is the very symbol of contempt, more devastating than hatred, since it rejects the other without even trying to understand him, without allowing him to resist, to answer, to defend and justify his idiosyncrasies and his own values. He is ignored and trampled upon.

The "hungry mob of bullies and torturers" mentioned in "Prayer of Peace", written in 1945, reappears in the 1969 "Elegy for Martin Luther King", where Senghor draws together, in one long cry of revolt, all the images of violence and death, of hatred and contempt studded throughout the history of human relations:

I say these are not the times of torture, garroting, barrelling, dogs,  
And quicklime, of crushed peppers and melted lard, the plunder,  
Sling, and intrigues, buttocks exposed to the wind and fire,  
No longer the bullwhip, powder up the ass, castration,  
Amputation or crucifixion. You are skinned delicately,  
Your heart slowly and relentlessly burned.  
It is the postcolonial war rotten with sores, pity abolished  
The code of honour and war where the Superpowers napalm you  
Through third parties who are relatives. In the hell of petroleum,  
There are two and a half million wet corpses and not one satisfying  
Flame to consume them all ...<sup>81</sup>

What an appalling succession of horrors; the staccato rhythm of the first lines and the sadism reflected in these openly perpetrated crimes are followed by the slower cadence of the subsequent sentences, matching the scale of the anonymous slaughter. Chemists first discovered a way to jellyfy gasoline with sodium or aluminum palmitate, then napalm was developed and its use systematized, so that it has become an efficient and highly regarded weapon of choice. Of course, whoever actually drops napalm bombs on a population is not the person issuing the order; the latter is not the manufacturer of the bomb; and the inventor is someone else again ... Modern technology has radically altered the conditions of war. As for individual responsibility, it is diluted and blurred through a widespread refusal of accountability.

All these displays of hatred and oppression bring us inevitably back to "Princess, your letter" with the allegory of sharks spitting out red fire. Senghor does not allow our imagination to evade the pain of these images through a kind of aesthetic sublimation. He makes escape doubly impossible by adding to this allegory a final statement, which seems an unavoidable conclusion to the preceding lines, although the ironic tone could have made us wish, here again, that sarcasm and paradox were intended. Such is not the case, however. The remark is factual and made in dead earnest, to be taken quite literally, cold and dry as the journalistic style in which it is couched:

**Executioners and scientists were decorated;  
They had found a way to kill men twice.**

Lumping together executioners and scientists suggests a similarity – with minor variations due to different occupational requirements – in their way of exploiting and manipulating human beings. In either case, the results are the same: man is killed twice, body and soul.

Furthermore, the very identification of those held up to opprobrium plays a catalytic role in enhancing to the utmost the power of the various images. It brings together in a kind of malevolent fellowship soldiers, executioners and scientists, all clearly recognized as the villains of the piece, for they all have a hand in the destruction of man. These three groups trigger our emotions most effectively, for their presence in a poem is so incongruous that they strain to break away, so to speak. No sooner are they mentioned than their full significance causes the words to burst forth from the text, for it is in our daily life that they command the greatest attention. Through a whole tissue of presences and echoes woven around them, they make us experience deeply various events played out before us day after day, month after month and year after year, like as many films of horror; events constantly described in the newspapers or in the reports of organizations such as the International Red Cross or Amnesty International.

Though written in 1956, this powerful poem could not be more timely. It can now be read on a new level, which gives the lines a truly prophetic quality and makes us wonder whether soldiers, executioners and scientists might not be in the process of shaping mankind's history ... Are they not the "heroes" of modern times, held by a faceless and soulless society to be worthy of recognition and reward? Indeed, executioners and scientists are still being decorated to this day, provided that their activities comply with whatever ideology may be in fashion at the moment.

Senghor forces us to take a long hard look at the times in which we live, when various brands of fanaticism have followed the logic of their doctrines to an absolute extreme, to a point of insane rationality.

Man's concern for man vanishes, the focus shifts to Reason, and Utility becomes the sole criterion. A harsh, shadowless and cruel light is cast on all things:

The Male-Noon is the time of Spirits, when all form  
Gets rid of its flesh, like trees in Europe under the winter sun.  
See, the bones are abstract, they obey only the measures  
Of the ruler, the compass, the sextant.  
Like sand, life slips freely from man's fingers,  
And snowflakes imprison the water's life.<sup>82</sup>

This passage is reminiscent of two lines in Paul Valéry's "The Marine Cemetery"<sup>83</sup>: "This perfect Noon, pacifying with fire / The sea, the sea, the ever-renewing sea!"

Yet the parallel suggested by the key word "Noon", which both poems have in common, can in no way lead to the conclusion that, in this instance, Senghor imitated Valéry's lyrical approach. On the contrary, the marked contrast emerging from the comparison emphasizes the basic differences between the world views of the two poets and allows Senghor to establish implicitly how alien his own poetic sensitivity is to the self-absorbed world of feelings and images which delighted Valéry and still fascinates Western man. In this respect, the following lines from "The Marine Cemetery" are most illuminating:

Where bitterness is sweet and spirit clear,  
And drunk with the absence of life, life is vast.

Here in this earth the hidden dead are free,  
The earth rewarms, dries up their mystery;  
While Noon above, motionless absolute Noon,  
Broods on itself, in itself, and not on them ...

This rather dry and overly cerebral way of looking at the world is totally at odds with Senghor's own outlook: "Ah! No longer can I tolerate your light, the lamplight, / Your atomic light that disintegrates my entire being."<sup>84</sup> From the connecting word "light", which occurs three times, a series of ascending shifts takes place and leads us from the text to what might be called the "metatext", from a personal emotion to an obsessive and universal anguish gripping Senghor, an anguish caused by the dreadful prospect of the death of Man, overwhelmed and even enslaved by an all-powerful technology!

### Third Phase: THE AGE OF TECHNOLOGY

It will be a year of Technology. They will spit white fire  
From their eyes. Mysterious attractions and repulsions  
Will cause the elements to separate and come together.  
Animal blood and plant sap will be turned to whey.  
White [...] will become yellow, yellow [will become] white,  
and [all will be] sterile.

Upon reading this third part of "Princess, your letter ...", one is immediately struck by the absence of man.

But the poet tells us that the powers of this age "will spit white fire". While red fire connotes an insane frenzy of violence and blood, white fire signals a return to primeval chaos, a defeat of knowledge and understanding; co-operation and joint efforts will be a thing of the past. Disorder and randomness will reign supreme. The forces of nature will completely escape our control. Discordance and exclusion will spread everywhere.

The "blood" and "sap" of life will become a colourless, insipid and odourless liquid without nutritive value or life principle. Lastly the egg, that ultimate symbol of fertility, will itself be overtaken by the general chaos.

This is an apocalyptic picture of the end of a world ruled by rampant technology, that of nuclear fission. This vision echoes a nightmare which haunts us all, though we attempt to bury it deep in our unconscious, whence it is released by a poem written some thirty years ago but more timely with every passing day. And nuclear capability has become *the* determining factor in international power relationships. It brings about crises and resolves them. It is *the* ultimate power, that of the reigning Technology.

Impelled by a compulsion to seek maximum economic power and by the ideological demands of artificial rationalistic constructs, men of both East and West have reached the very edge of the abyss by successive stages with cumulative results. Faced with the very real threat of self-destruction, man is gripped by anguish and has lost his bearings. Yet – and this is surely the height of paradox – fear, hatred and mistrust conspire and continue to rule the world, promoting the manufacture and sale of weapons of mass destruction ...

Possibly because it was not involved in the mushrooming industrial revolution, Africa did not have the same opportunity as the West to embrace technology indiscriminately and to be governed by it. Since it is only now

leaping right into the age of technology, Africa enjoys the tremendous advantage of being in a position to evaluate technological advances in the light of the changes in human behaviour they brought about in the Western world, and also in relation to traditional African values which have remained operative in daily life throughout this period.

In our view, Africa has kept unimpaired its ability to judge clearly and freely. This fortunate state of affairs is unquestionably due to the fact that the successive waves of scientism and atheism which swept over the Western world in the nineteenth century and the early part of the present century failed to reach Africa. During that whole time, the continent lived in relative cultural isolation, harbouring a precious humanistic heritage which must now be offered to the world so as to help ward off Armageddon. One can but hope most ardently that Africa will not yield blindly to the siren call of technology nor to the contagion of materialistic ideologies forcefully advocated by other nations ... Africa must make its own voice heard.

How can this critical message be conveyed? All Senghor's writings are impassioned endeavours to spread his advice and warnings far and wide.

When first discovering the West and its culture, he encountered a wall of invalidating silence and deafness, he met with countless instances of rejection. The humiliation was deeply painful, for he had remained undiminished in his humanity and felt an imperious need to be fully present to and in the world. He was anxious to be seen and heard, just as he was determined to learn, to know and to share. But he was constantly rebuffed and experienced a total lack of understanding.

In Senghor's works, as we have seen – if we allow his words full latitude to express the depth and profusion of their life through the free play of analogy, if we surrender to the catalytic power of images and metaphors – we are able to enter into the spirit of his first poetic movement, which focuses on awareness of the obstacles encountered. The magic of Senghor's style reveals the many hurdles in the arduous paths of initiation to life in an ominous world.

On this level of reading, the African is symbolic of Man, of every human being who rejects historical determinism and, for a meaningful life, needs to have faith in man.

Senghor refuses to be walled in, but cannot escape the many forms of existential angst which assail him. These apocalyptic visions and images of destruction portend a descent into hell.