Initiation is a complex ritual teaching intended to resolve the primal and agonizing conflict between man’s lust for life and his certainty of death. Throughout human existence, fear, anguish and suffering ceaselessly feed or even intensify this conflict. From the moment when the need to live responsibly brings to an end the carefree years of childhood, it is therefore imperative to make adolescents aware of the tribulations lying ahead and enable them to deal with the many challenges they will inevitably face.

Such is the purpose of the frequently very painful initiatory tests the neophytes are required to undergo. These must be willingly accepted: “It is important to master one’s nerves: to rise in the middle of the night, to perform gruelling labour, to exercise one’s memory, skill or ability, to remain unwashed and to eat coarse food are as many daily tests. It is also necessary to learn absolute submissiveness to all orders received, to accept the masters’ decisions even if these are unfair or absurd, and not to protest against insults, offenses or physical blows.”

In the case of the Malian tribe of the Bambaras, for instance, there are eight degrees of initiation, and each of these starts with a series of tests growing more difficult with the level of knowledge involved. “Control over the fear of death is acquired, during initiation to the Kore (one of the last stages), through the most realistic practice of suffering and discipline over the body. Neophytes undergo the most stressful torments: they are beaten, burnt, pricked, smothered, and all this must be endured cheerfully, in the most complete impassivity.”
The rites of passage become fruitful for the youths capable of turning their negative impact into positive life values. To achieve this result, each one must reach deep down within himself to mobilize his inner strength – but the night of initiation has already made him realize the extent of his frailty and powerlessness as an individual. He is therefore forced to seek support outside himself: gathering together all the recollections scattered in his memory, he then summons all the presences that have hitherto brought him solace. And his mind returns to the recent past, to the Kingdom of Childhood he has just left: he thinks of his family, his village, his clan. He knows that they anxiously await news of the outcome of his initiation. He is also aware that the eyes of his elders and his companions are upon him and that his behaviour is being closely scrutinized by them. He cannot possibly disappoint them, nor allow suffering or fear to get the better of him.

These tribulations bring him to a consciousness of the invisible but very real bonds linking him to his circle of relatives and friends. Though this awareness may not yet be fully clear, he realizes that it is essential to him, if he is to build up his courage. This membership in an identifying group also becomes the earliest expression of his social responsibility.

As we have seen, these are the same anxieties which assail Senghor in the European night: nightmares, feelings of isolation and disgust, sickness of mind and spirit are experienced in an agony of distress, because he has lost his bearings and is alienated from himself and from others. This weight and density of silence, emptiness, absence and absurdity made the “enlisted” man surrender to the seductive temptation of suicide. And the poet himself felt discouragement coming over him when he exclaimed: “Ah! If I could just collapse in the dung and blood, in the void.” Senghor makes us experience physically – through all our senses – his own feeling of aversion and bewilderment, for the combination of blood and dung is overpowering. An image cruelly set between the awesome power of despair, deep enough to suggest giving up the struggle, and the ultimate fascination of the void. In this line, all the fears of the European night, scattered in so many of Senghor’s poems, come together in a final expression of alienation felt as an obliterating death, a bottomless abyss. But the poet will not allow himself to be mesmerized by “the agony of shadows, this passion / For death and light like moths on hurricane lamps at night, / In the horrible rotting of virgin forests”.

He needs a breath of fresh air, and must find a way out of this nightmarish vision. The poet then averts his gaze from his immediate surroundings, from everything that assails him, and turns back again to his past, to the Kingdom
of Childhood ... At this stage of initiation, however, he is no longer in search of a refuge, but seeks the invisible forces that have built this Kingdom, forces which he must now recapture in order to continue his initiatory progression along the roads of Europe. Around the night-time anguish darkening his poems, we hear the murmur of entreaties to the invisible powers.

The alternation of prayers, some more typically African and others more specifically Christian (since in the African tradition the supplicant appeals to mediators rather than to the Creator himself), reveals the two religious dimensions of Senghor’s thinking:

- Prayers to the ancestors and invocations to kinship or bloodlines are a search for the depths of his Negritude. They seek to draw on all the spiritual attainments of his forebears and incorporate them into his own life, to develop this precious heritage even further, and offer it to the world now coming into being. These appeals are rooted in African ontology, which views man as the centre of a relational universe.

- Prayers to God seek protection and strength to face and solve the contradictions of life, to withstand the long stretches of suffering on the road man travels in his search for fullness of being. They are therefore more existential in nature than the previous category of prayers, and reach their fullest expression in relation to the Christological incarnation.

In Shadow Songs, we find a direct prayer to the Ancestors: Senghor calls upon them in order to recapture their familiar presence, in spite of the strangeness of his surroundings, where he finds "no dead to honour in any cemetery". His invocation is as insistent and trusting as the traditional propitiatory rites. It expresses a deep respect for his ancestors and acknowledges his allegiance to them. We are a link between generations, between what has been and what will be, so that it is incumbent on us, before entering into any new commitment or contemplating any action, to make sure that the future we have set our sights on is faithful to and in harmony with our personal and collective past. It is imperative not to break the continuous flow of life we have received from our ancestors, a living heritage we are in duty bound to enrich and pass on to the following generations, in faithfulness to our blood and race. Such is the African code of honour (the ngou of the Serer; the congruence between the pulaagu and the pulaagal of the Peuls, i.e., the desirable conformity between one’s values and one’s life).

These are very intense moments, when the poet searches in his innermost self to find the breath of his ancestors, in “In Memoriam”:
O Forefathers! You who have always refused to die,
Who knew how to resist Death from the Sine to the Seine,
And now in the fragile veins of my indomitable blood,
Guard my dreams ...

Or in “Night in Sine”: “Let me breathe the odour of our Dead, let me gather / And speak with their living voices.” Or again in “The Message”: “And the spirits watched over my breath.”

A closer reading of *Shadow Songs* brings to light a ternary structure: around the primary rhythm (fear of the unknown) are woven the alternating themes of withdrawal to a safe haven (the path of involution, which we have already discussed) and of a call to transcend present limitations in order to recapture a black identity.

In “Return of the Prodigal Son”, the three themes (anguish, involution and transcendence) come together in the all-embracing expression of a fervent act of faith in and submission to African values. Senghor celebrates his return home after a long absence: “On my hunger, the dust of sixteen years of wandering / And the uncertainty of Europe’s many roads / And the noise of sprawling cities, and towns lashed by the waves / Of a thousand passions in my head.” Led by his heart, he undertakes a pilgrimage to the setting of the Kingdom of Childhood:

And my heart once again on the threshold of stone under the portal of honour...
And my heart once again on the tomb where he has piously laid his ancient lineage to rest
[...]
And my heart once again on the steps of the high house.

To follow one’s heart step by step on the traces of the past ... the simple symbolism of this image suggests complete consistency and harmony between past and present. Senghor’s commitment goes hand in hand with an attitude of quiet submissiveness: “I lay on the ground at your feet in the dust of my respect, / At your feet, Ancestors who are present, who proudly dominate / The great room of your masks defying Time.” Henceforth, as suggested by the use of the present indicative verb form, he is one with his forefathers.

This final poem in *Shadow Songs* concludes a first movement which serves as a prologue to the initiatory teaching: the acknowledgment of an inability to build one’s life without calling on the invisible presences surrounding and supporting us, and giving our lives meaning.
In the following groups of poems, the link to his ancestors is so well established and so fully experienced that Senghor no longer invokes them, since they are part of him. Their influence is constantly stressed, however, through references to his blood, which he repeatedly extols. Indeed, song of praise and blood become one, for together they express the presence of Africa through his ancestors, the values of Negritude through his culture, and the reality of his mixed blood (Serer, Peul and Portuguese):

Listen to distant Africa's message and the song of your blood!

[...] The voice of Africa...
The voice of your heart and blood, listen to it
Under your delirious head and your cries.10

The faithfulness of triggering memories embodies a multitude of values based on the indissoluble links between the visible and the invisible. This continuity of life, beyond individual transitoriness, and the duty for every man first to gather and then promote the experience and wisdom of past generations (before adding to them through his own life and passing on this heightened quality of being to future generations) are in fact the essence of traditional African religions: “They achieve this purpose by drawing on the strength or power latent in every man, which can be harnessed through the irreplaceable teaching provided by a thorough initiation,”11 as Honorat Aguessy stressed in his address at the 1972 symposium held in Paris on “African religions as a source of values of civilization”.

Deeply attached as he is to this traditional spirituality, which sacralizes all the interchangeable forms of life, both visible and invisible, Senghor views Christianity as the fullest expression of a religious thinking that, being based on the mystery of the Christ God's Incarnation, effectively extends and fulfills African metaphysics. He sees very close links between Christian and African mystical concepts. His poetic inspiration, whose animistic background is in such harmony with the Christological nature of his poems, bears witness to this conviction.

Along with invocations to the Ancestors, we therefore also find direct prayers to God. A reflection of Senghor's Catholic faith, they are scattered throughout his poems.12

As for the Western world, faced with individual fears of both living and dying, the more it loses its spiritual bearings, the more it attempts, with an increasing sense of desperation, to find protection in a closed system of logic that seeks to provide explanation and justification. Senghor, in contrast,
faithful to the African initiatory process, emphasizes the paramount importance of “surreality”, a realm lying outside and beyond the usual workings of our cognitive and speculative mind. He holds that only the paths of the irrational and of faith can allow us to sense the invisible but fundamental links connecting man with the world and with God, so that we may recognize the full dimensions of life.

Senghor would lead us toward a “magical world more real than the visible one. A surreal world moved by invisible forces which govern the universe, and whose specific nature is that, through a kind of sympathy, they are harmoniously linked both to each other and to visible things or appearances.”

These interacting trials and reflections gradually make man realize the absolute necessity of faithfulness to life. The language of our body (its resistance or submissiveness) must teach us to become attuned to our spiritual needs. Instead of seeing pain and fear as obstacles to the unfolding of our life, we should integrate them into the process of living and recognize them as opportunities to develop our courage and willpower, and thereby to bring about the victory of the forces of life over the powers of destruction.

Two complementary movements in the life process therefore emerge: an inalienable presence, Negritude, and a transcendent consonance between African traditions and Christology.

1 Negritude

The focus on Negritude highlights a dichotomy in Senghor’s writings.

- In his prose (Libertés and Poésie de l’action), he is the initiator who, in politics, philosophy and literature, brings the contemporary world to an awareness of the initiatory paths;
- In his verse, he is the initiate who has lived through the necessary stages of transformation, all the way from traditional African to universal man.

Following in Senghor’s footsteps, let us therefore delve into the heart of his œuvre, so as to capture his twofold message: the initiatory writings (the teaching of Negritude) and the poetic writings (the actual experience of Negritude).

Initiatory Writings

Senghor’s initiatory teaching is forcefully expressed in “Song of the Initiate”, published in 1947 in the first issue of Présence africaine and later reprinted as part of Nocturnes, which appeared in 1961.
This is a fundamental poem that both establishes and illuminates Senghor's thinking and activity. The timing of the original publication and of the reprint cannot but strike us as highly significant.

In 1947, as a member of the French Chamber of Deputies, just two years after the end of World War II, Senghor became a political activist and started fighting against colonialism and for national self-determination.

And 1961 saw the dawn of independence. Faced with the dangers of nepotism and neo-colonialism, the poet-president again felt the need to anchor the African identity and soul in Africa's rich cultural heritage.

The fact that this poem was published twice reflects its special importance in Senghor's eyes. Delineating clearly the priorities and direction of his action, it serves as a real proclamation of his faith in Africa and is a "Pilgrimage along the migratory roads, a voyage to ancestral sources".

After the uneasiness caused by "the mists of my memory ..., the silence ..., my befuddled memory", penetrated by the "ebony flute ..., the ivory gong", the poet settles into the landscape of the Kingdom of his childhood, a traditional setting "under the peace of a mahogany tree". He falls under the spell of this landscape that turns into a woman, though it may be the woman who turns into a vision of his Africa, an embodiment of Negritude, which all his heightened senses intensely long for. He listens, sniffs the air ("the odour of herds and wild honey"), hears ("the hummingbirds ..., the kingfishers"), sees (the "Sun of her smile ..., the indigo grass of her lips ..., her eyes ...”). It is a moment of ecstasy, of perfect communion:

... her lashes rustle rhythmically in the clear air
And I hear the hour, O delights! rising to the white centre
Of the sky draped with flags.

Many poets go no further, extending and ending their reverie in the mingled enjoyment of their lyricism and of all their senses. But this contemplative state fails to satisfy Senghor for long. To him, it is but a stage where he can rest, slake his thirst and taste the richness of the manifold analogical images he has created. Indeed, how could one hear the warbling of birds without marvelling at the contrast between the delicacy of their feathers and the loudness of their song, or being struck by wonder at this balance of perfection and frailty? How could one fail to respond to the mystery of this life force constantly displayed before us? To put it differently, how can we separate physical impressions from intellectual perceptions and metaphysical
intuitions? All of these come together in Senghor’s inspiration and give power to his writing: “I must rise to pursue my pure passion.”

Among all the difficulties on his path, beyond the conflicts and pitfalls, the sacrifices, the suffering and the dead, the poet sees, hears and senses life ever bursting forth and renewed:

_Beyond the putrid swamp of entrails lies the freedom_  
_Of the plains, a savanna as black as I, a fire of Death_  
_That prepares the rebirth, a rebirth of Feeling and Spirit._

Initiation ends: “the rising sun” vanquishes the night, “the red Lion’s head ... in surreal Majesty” carries out the ritual murder which allows the poet “to be reborn in the revelation of Beauty”, since every initiation is death and rebirth.

“Elegy of the Circumcised”, also published as part of Nocturnes, extends and continues, as it were, the “Song of the Initiate”.

In Africa, to be circumcised means to enter manhood and face life with its responsibilities. It also means a sudden awareness of death (“I had to die to the beauty of the song – all things drift / Along the thread of death”), and a willingness to accept one’s own death (“Let us die and dance elbow to elbow ... and let the rhythm / Chase away the agony that grabs us by the throat”).

It is, moreover, a remarkably concise lesson of life, an expression of African faith rooted in a universal spirituality where all religious impulses and intuitions converge: “Life keeps death away.” This belief gives birth to a series of insistent demands expressed in the following lines: “Let ... all the unimportant words [vanish]. / The rhythm’s weight is sufficient, no need for cement words / To build the city of tomorrow on rock.” Through its purity and conciseness of expression, this approach to poetics parallels Senghor’s philosophy of life, a search for the essence of being, as revealed by bare and unadorned words, stripped of their usual connotative accretions which limit, distort or blur the impact of the primal significance. The living Word creates rhythmic presences, and these quicken man’s thinking:

... nights throbbing  
With presences and with eyelids, full of wings and breaths  
And living silence, now tell me how many times  
Have I cried for you in the bloom of my age.

The words of allegiance concluding the poem are the initiatory fulfilment.
hinted at in "Return of the Prodigal Son". They convey the dynamic pattern of Senghorian thinking:

Master of the Initiates, I know I need your knowledge to understand
The cipher of things, to be aware of my duties as a father and lam arque,
To measure exactly the scope of my responsibilities, to distribute
The harvest without forgetting any worker or orphan.

Through these two poems, "Song of the Initiate" and "Elegy of the Circumcised", we therefore discover the pattern of a teaching allowing us, like Ariadne's thread, to follow the initiatory path in the poet's footsteps, a path he calls Negritude.

Each degree of initiation includes a phase focusing "more specifically on the body ..., the structure of the world, the organization of the group (its myths, its laws)

It would indeed be difficult even to mention his name without linking it to Negritude. Ever since the thirties, when with Aimé Césaire and Léon Damas he founded the movement to defend and promote "all the black world's cultural values, as they are expressed in the life, institutions and achievements of the Blacks", Senghor remained its most faithful champion. All his writings show that Negritude is to him a permanent and cardinal reference point. He has developed and enriched the concept several times, and in La Poesie de l'action has provided an illuminating definition that highlights the African dimensions of his thinking:

Negritude ... is a certain dialectic framework or, better still, a symbiosis between mind and soul, spirit and matter, man and woman, etc.

Symbiosis, communion, participation and new birth in increased awareness: these are among the key words found repeatedly in Senghorian writings. By confronting them with the basic characteristics of African civilization, we perceive how deeply they have penetrated and faithfully nourished Senghor's thinking.

Let us start with the fundamental assumption of African philosophy, the belief in a relational universe where the visible and the invisible connote and echo one another: there is no discontinuity between the two realms, as the Kenyan John Mbiti emphasized in African Religions and Philosophy: "There is no formal distinction ... between the spiritual and the material areas of life." The Malian Amadou Hampaté Ba expresses the same conviction in his analysis of
the traditional African religions: in them, “the conception of the World is based on the fundamental unity of all things. The All is in every fragment, just as every fragment is in the All. This existential conjunction links all beings and makes them interdependent, at all levels of the Cosmos, visible and invisible, sentient and insensitive. This same law has a major consequence: everything is alive, and the visible forms are but the material manifestation of the living and subtle forces inhabiting them.”

The African view of the world is based on spiritual monism: in this view, matter is not inert, and Creation is seen as a vast array of forces having as a cause primal Energy, the “incratc supreme Force”, in other words God, “called Maa Nala by the Bambaras, Guend or Dunndari by the Peuls, Amma by the Dogons, Wunnam by the Mossis, Yerkoy by the Sonhrais, etc. In every case, this force is one and invisible.” Consequently, “for all traditional religions, the Universe created by the supreme Force bathes in a sacred environment”.

The same faith informs Senghor's thinking. Of the African, he writes:

Like the others, even more than the others, he makes the usual distinctions between a stone and a plant, a plant and an animal, an animal and man, but ... the accidents, the appearances differentiating these 'kingdoms' merely express the different modes of one single reality. This reality is Being, in the ontological sense of the word, a force of nature. For the African, therefore, what Europeans call matter is but a system of signs reflecting the one and only reality in the universe: Being, which is spirit or force. The entire universe thus appears to us as an infinitely small and at the same time infinitely large network of forces emanating from God and returning to God, considered as the Force of forces.

We must now look at the cosmogonic myths in order to define the way in which this Force reveals itself, so that it may be perceived by man.

Beyond the anecdotal details of the accounts peculiar to the various African ethnic groups, Senghor sees a basic narrative common to all:

God was bored with all the confined, unexpressed, dormant and essentially dead potentialities within himself. And God opened his mouth. He spoke at length, and his word was harmonious and rhythmic. And all these potentialities and possibilities expressed by God’s word then existed and were called upon to live: to express God in their turn, by directing toward God the forces issuing from God.

Judeo-Christian and African cosmogonies both attribute Creation to the
Word uttered by God. In this shared belief, God spoke, and the Word took root in the world, was embodied or incarnated in the things God brought into being as he named them, thus turning chaos into the cosmos.

However, the two theories diverge significantly after the creation of man. In the Biblical religions, the emphasis is on original sin and Paradise lost. Man has forfeited the primal harmony he had enjoyed; henceforth, through God’s curse, man is condemned to live in a hostile Creation: “Cursed is the earth in thy work; with labour and toil shalt thou eat thereof all the days of thy life ... In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread.”

Man’s relationship with nature reflects a bitter struggle as he recognizes his helplessness in the face of suffering and the failure of his efforts to recapture the lost Paradise. Judeo-Christian thinking is deeply imbued with this dualism. Beyond submissiveness and acknowledgment of guilt, less and less willingly accepted in an age of rapidly expanding knowledge, man seeks to escape from this predicament by translating his inadequacy into extreme forms of grandiose revolt (such as deification of his own achievements or of scientific progress) or of utter despair and surrender, which can lead to nihilism or to a self-destructive cult of the absurd, or again to a belief in total randomness. In most cases Judeo-Christians, deeply aware of their plight, maintain an aggressive and exploitative attitude toward nature, which they seek to dominate. They do not really live in harmony with a Universe which frustrates the human thirst for understanding. It may well be that the current sense of dissatisfaction and uneasiness so palpable in the West reflects an insistent attempt to endow the word of man with a God-like creative omnipotence ... which is conducive to a string of bitter disappointments.

In contradistinction, African thinking continues to rest on a twofold religious assumption. First on the nature of man: “He is the synthesis of all creatures of heaven and earth, and embodies the elements of everything created before him. Moreover, owing to the infused spark of divine power, he is capable of conversing with Maa Nala, with God, which makes him the Keeper of creation.”

And secondly, on the myth of Creation, initiated by God’s Word, the Source of Life. Now this breath, since it comes from God, escapes temporality and therefore still remains fully active. It is the spiritual force suffusing all things, granted that “the God-permeated African universe assumes God as its fecundating energy”.

Such is the basis of African ontology: the life-creating and life-sustaining quality of the word, which operates on two levels.
On the elementary level, there is what we will call the word of the depths: an
indistinct, diffuse and pervasive murmur whose source cannot be pinpointed,
reaching man as an expression of the mystery of the universe. This word
reveals without defining: it is the realm of symbols, the source of a dynamic
relationship between Man and the Universe. A fruitful word, seeking expres­
sion through human thought, which it awakens and stimulates, in a search for
meaning. But symbols merely suggest and question; it is up to man to
discover their significance, to give form and substance to this word, to bring
it into awareness.

Then there is the level of the spoken word, through which man gives voice to
"the Word of the World" in extending the process of Creation.

Just as notes scattered haphazardly throughout many sheets of partition
would have little meaning or life (though potentially carrying countless
melodies), and only the composer's genius can bring them together in musical
phrases forming a symphony (lifting the notes from fetal inertia, as it were, to
full actuality), human utterance is the vital factor through which man alone,
of all creatures, brings together what is separate, uncovers underlying correla­
tions and makes them communicable. For the word has a vitalizing effect,
brings things into being by promoting their significance, by making them
operative. It carries a life-giving power, and is a vital force acting as an
essential mediator to stimulate existence.

Such are the basic principles of African metaphysics. Their importance cannot
be emphasized too strongly, for they open the way to an inner understanding
of the African Word, the expression of a civilization in which, as Maurice
Houis has noted, man remains "in touch with nature, through a dialogue that
is sometimes infra-conceptual, but always takes place in the resonance of
symbols".

This African view of the world is faithfully summarized by Senghor:
"One might say, in a word, that the universe is a dictionary, a tissue of
metaphors, a huge network – warp and woof – of signifier and signi­
fied threads, but one in which connections reflecting participation and
communion act in both directions between signs, and also from sign to
meaning and inversely. To an African ..., not only everything that exists
– every form and colour, every sound and odour, indeed every move­
ment, and even rest and silence – is a sign, but every sign has a mean­
ing."

Through this description, Senghor gives us the key to enter his poetic work,
replete with symbols, contrasts, metaphors and questions, and by the same
token, he allows us to discover the foundations of African philosophy. His
view of the world reflects a quasi-organic symbiosis between man and the
elements: “the Black mind ... slips into the arteries of things and feels their
shape to reach the living heart of reality”.29

Man therefore finds himself in a paradoxical situation, since he is both inside
creation — as part of it, and consequently a receiver of existence — and also
outside or beyond it, since he has been granted “a spark of divine power”,
which makes him a continuator of creation, a transmitter of existence.
Senghor faithfully follows this African tradition and assigns to speech, to the
uttered word, a fundamentally creative role:

The spoken word is the quintessential manifestation of the Life Force, of
being in all its fullness ... In a living creature, speech is the animate and
animating breath of anyone who prays; it possesses a magical property,
fulfills the law of participation, and through its intrinsic quality creates
whatever it names.30

Consequently, “to speak is to gather the vital force or being of a creature, in
its preliminary form, so as to extend it by giving it shape, i.e., existence”.31

Senghor’s writing follows the same plan, that of the spoken word creating
presences. Both his poems, meant to be read aloud like the tales of an African
storyteller, to the accompaniment of musical instruments, and his various
essays (mainly speeches, like the four volumes of Liberté, and conversations,
for instance La Poesie de l’action) are in the form of dialogues, questions or
challenges. The entire œuvre places the reader or listener at the very centre of
the discourse. When Senghor speaks, there can be no silent spectators.

This short analysis shows that Senghor’s thinking is absolutely true to the
basic features of traditional African civilization. This applies particularly to his
poems.

Poetic Expression: Negritude in Practice

In his poems, Senghor the dyali (or troubadour) carries out what he, as
initiator, has taught in his prose writings.

Indeed, his poetry reflects perfectly the basic initiatory teaching of
cosmomorphism, “the understanding of the world as a complex of signifiers, as a
living language, as a tissue of divine messages to be interpreted”.32 These are
verbal forms never frozen into set formulas, but keeping the flexibility and
mobility of a constantly evolving state of being, of events driven along in the flow of life.

Besides, one should never forget the two-pronged assumption which is the conceptual cornerstone of the African universe, and therefore of Senghor’s poetic vision:

- **Unity:** This universe is “seamless”. From “God to the grain of sand, by way of Man”, everything is connected and fed by the vital Force, a creative and hierarchical force “flowing from God, the ultimate and absolutely independent Force”, and “this world of forces is a system of communicating vessels”, hence its constant changes. Nothing remains the same.

- **Instability of beings:** “Since the same force moves the entire universe, part of this force can, by virtue of specific psycho-physiological laws, shift to another state or modality, changing its density, weight, shape, colour or rhythm, or even moving from one being to another. The main thing is that there be a correspondence or congruity, so that an analogy may come into play.”

It is imperative to abandon the illusion of autonomy, see oneself realistically and in the proper perspective, take one’s place without reservation in the world and live its laws, participate in the great cosmic movement, and enter the flow of this vital force leading to a new birth in increased awareness, in pursuit of fullness of being, and in a search for the absolute Being, for God. Such is life’s journey for those who have undergone initiation, “a real symbolic and mystical architecture, never fully revealed even to initiates. It takes form spontaneously thanks to converging individual efforts, in the path of knowledge, with the help of a Master’s advice and charisma.”

Such is also the poetic process suggested by Senghor, who maintains that the mission of art is “to make us go beyond the appearances of beings and things so as to probe their deeper reality and identify with their truth. It is to replace our factual and fragmentary vision with a cosmic or total view of the universe, to integrate our world into the universe ... Our cosmic sense, which can enable us to live happily, must be nourished and developed through works of art.”

This definition of the purpose of art is fundamental and goes to the very heart of Senghorian thinking, which seeks to bring out the full cosmic dimensions of human life. This aim shows that Senghor never loses sight of the lessons drawn from the kingdom of his childhood: in this “animistic society, material facts, and more particularly ‘social facts, are not mere things’ (Jules Monnerot). Hidden behind them, there are forces governing and animating
these appearances, giving them colour and rhythm, life and meaning. It is precisely this significance that forces itself on our awareness and arouses our emotions. More accurately still, emotion is this sudden awareness of the fullness of being.”

The structure of Senghor’s poetic works rests on these very foundations. Indeed, he asks us to follow him in his undertaking, which is “to give back to Poetry the function it performed in times long past, a function it still serves in civilizations not dependent on machines. The idea is to place Poetry organically at the very root and heart of life, and foremost to let Poetry shape desire, in the depths of Man’s cosmic sense. On this solid rock, poets will rebuild the world.”

These guidelines immediately come to light. Senghor’s is a poetry deeply wedded to life and fed by desire.

**An Incarnate Poetry**

Poetry needs to be embodied in the flesh, so to speak, since it is, like love, a language of total communication and communion. It calls on all the perceptive resources through which man is rooted in the world, and both discovers and senses the manifold significance of everything he names.

This explains the major role of the human body in Senghor’s writing, which is hardly surprising, since “in Africa even more than elsewhere ... the body remains the main instrument by which the sacred is revealed in its immanent dimension”. The body is present in all his poems, either directly when specifically referred to, or indirectly through its sensory messages. In either case, the body commands attention as a power activating the senses and allowing a close and full communion between what the poet describes and what he experiences. And the poetic idiom then expresses a deep commitment, in which every facet of his being is involved.

This idiom is at times a search for complementarity (woman, mother) and at times a vehicle for otherness.

The most frequent presence is that of the female body, which becomes a true language through the descriptive quality of the words chosen by Senghor. Those that recur most often are the mouth, the lips, the breasts, the hips, the thighs, the womb and the loins. They connote intimacy or sensuality, suggest knowledge and express sharing. These words become powerful images bursting all semantic limitations under the inner thrust of countless echoes combining and shifting within the context, to which they impart warmth and vigour.
Doubly compelling and evocative words, since on the one hand they bring into the text a gaze fastened on a carnal presence, and on the other the poet heightens their effectiveness by linking them with another series of words, equally concrete and sensual, but with a totally different focus, so that the combination startles the reader and causes him both to look within himself and to question the image forming before his eyes, in a riot of spontaneous associations calling on the language of the senses, which is precisely the means of communication chosen by Senghor.

Many examples of this can be found: "the milky dawn of your mouth", "your lips, sun of the eternal summer", "your lips, my salt, my sun, my fresh air and my snow", "words soft as a woman's breast", "the subtle music of her hips", and also "the young nubile girl with the sweet belly n'deissane! / With a rump like a hill and breasts like palm fruits", or "I will climb back up the sweet belly / Of dunes and the gleaming thighs of the day"...

For woman's body, in Senghor's poetry, is a language with many voices: it expresses desire and love, the longing for complementarity, possession and plenitude, reverence for beauty and for fruitfulness. It conjures up all the aspects of the life force, so that woman would seem to be his favourite ideogram to represent the initiatory quest in poetic terms, since he sees her "surrendering herself to the cosmic force, / To the Love that rouses the singing worlds".41

Through an unexpected combination of words, a private landscape, both surprising and seductive, then begins to unfold. It informs the senses, stimulates their participative power, their capacity for a direct and sensitive discovery of an inner world, without calling on discursive reasoning, which would only interrupt the dynamics of the process. From an initial confusion gradually resolving into a multiplicity of fluid images, a wealth of resonating impressions next emerges through free association, impressions released by the quiver of emotional responses. Finally, the interplay of diverse sensory stimuli (colours and sounds, for instance) gives rise to a real dialectic interchange, involving mutual connotations and reactions between images, so that they overlap or combine, somewhat like the shifting patterns in a kaleidoscope, into figures as changeable as life itself. The poet leads the reader into this magical world where man is not only a participant, but also a revealer and a creator through the written or spoken word, the organizer of a realm which he alone can bring into focus. Senghor conveys the inexpressible through these earthy images, because he has the ability to impart their meaning without restricting their range of significance or allowing them to be
fully defined. One cannot but be deeply moved by the richness of these analogical images.

The portrait of a woman, when Senghor starts to sketch it, quickly moves beyond the painter’s palette: the words called upon are too potent to be simply descriptive. Their evocative power both expresses and arouses admiration, yearning and desire. Hence the emergence of a primary rhythm suggesting dialogue and pursuit, an alternating movement between subject and object. This rhythm then heightens poetic expression and introduces new patterns, in which the depth and multiplicity of clashing images usher in fresh analogies and symbols: the Poet’s emotions and thinking merge and seek to tap the elusive inner life animating man as well as the universe.

All this shows to what extent Woman, in Senghor’s writings, is endowed with fundamental poetic and cosmic significance. She is pre-eminently the source of inspiration and life, for she symbolizes — by virtue of the sensual complementarity expected of her by the poet — the search for the lost unity of being. She therefore lends herself to endless transformations: she is ideally the confluence where desire and the senses come together. In other words, to man she is the ever-renewed dream of a vital impulse seeking fulfilment. Like a dream, however, she remains elusive and fleeting, for the desire she inspires arises again and again, just as the quest for life is always the search for an ever-greater fullness of being.

Hence the intense emotional response to woman’s presence in Senghor’s poetry, a response releasing a profusion of rhythmic images. Conversely, any poem reflecting a poetic impulse brings forth a feminine presence and utterance, for in and through this presence the poet seeks the wholeness of his life. Senghor therefore draws from the wondrous springs of femininity, from the body he sees and hears, a language speaking with a thousand voices which proclaim his love for Africa, his devotion to Negritude, his initiatory quest.

In “Night in Sine”, for instance, a poem of immersion in the African sources, he writes: “Hear the deep pulse of Africa in the mist of lost villages.” It is a living picture, written in the verbal tense of the intemporal present, a picture of a place where the living commune with their ancestors and with each other. And Woman is the one who leads the poet to the heart of traditional Africa. She is the initiator, the high priestess, who allows him to find Negritude. At the beginning of the poem, he calls upon her: “Woman, place your soothing hands upon my brow, / Your hands softer than fur.” This touch calls forth presences which share the warm and comforting intimacy of her gesture. The poet is personally involved here, when he describes “the closeness of sour and
sweet smells” and writes “Let us listen ... Let me hear ... Let me breathe.” In the same way, he is unconstrained with the Woman: “My head upon your breast ...” The pictures of Woman and of Africa thus merge into the mood of warm and sensual intimacy of this night in Sine — a night belonging to the kingdom of his childhood, a night in the depth of Africa.

“And now at the height of Summer and Noon”, which is to say in the shadeless light of awareness — far from dreams or the safety of memories — it is once again the “black woman” who expresses his absolute attachment to the values of his Africa and his Negritude: “[Nude] woman, black woman / Dressed in your colour that is life, in your form that is beauty!” She is the African landscape:

Savanna of clear horizons, savanna quivering to the fervent caress
Of the East Wind, sculptured tom-tom, stretched drumskin
Moaning under the hands of the conqueror...
... oil soothing the thighs
Of athletes and the thighs of the princes of Mali,
Gazelle with celestial limbs...

Even more than a sensual presence, she is the bearer of messages: “Promised Land ... Mouth that gives music to my mouth ... Your deep contralto voice is the spiritual song of the Beloved ... Delight of the mind’s riddles.” And the poet joins her: in her and through her, he feels both his love (“your beauty strikes my heart like an eagle’s lightning flash”) and the torment of exile (“In the shade of your hair, my despair / Lightens in the close suns of your eyes”).

In “To the music of Koras and Balaphon”, a hymn to Negritude, we again find the African night, so dear to his heart: it is the thrill of love, an intense search for joint sensation and possession, a yearning to overcome the distance separating us from our dreams. This night is woman, through its attributes and through the poet’s eyes:

African night, my black night, mystical and clear,
Dark and brilliant, you are at one with the earth;
You are Earth and the harmonious hills.
O classic Beauty with no harsh angles, but supple, slender elegance!
O classic face! From the arched brow under a forest of fragrances
And wide slanting eyes down to the gracious bay of chin
And the impudent thrust of twin hills! O tender curved melodic face!
O my Lioness, my black Beauty, my dark night, my black Woman, my Nude!
Ah! so many times have you made my heart beat
Like an untamed leopard in its narrow cage.44

The words “African night, my black night” reflect the harmony sought by the poet between the African night and his own night. The intimacy he yearns for becomes woman. And immediately, his loving and all-seeing gaze suggests the many dimensions of his quest through a wealth of qualifiers (mystical, clear, dark, brilliant, harmonious, supple, slender, classic, forest of fragrances, impudent, melodic), and the face of the beloved takes shape (arched brow, wide slanting eyes, gracious bay of chin), beautiful as the mystic plenitude of a tribal mask. But there is also “the impudent thrust of twin hills,” which gives the picture a decidedly carnal quality. Sensuality and spirituality thus stand out together as two complementary and inseparable movements of life. They come together in the Poet’s emotion through the exclamatory cadence: throughout these lines, the “O” sounds are exhaled in increasingly insistent waves, fed by the strongly possessive mood of the adjectives (O my Lioness, my black Beauty, my dark night, my black Woman, my Nude!) and by the emphatic capitalization which implies reverence and gives absolute meaning to each word.

A sudden break and sharp change in tone are then introduced by the “Ah!”, which takes away the poet’s breath and makes his “heart beat”.

Mention of the heart brings a marked shift, and in the following lines night, which reduces everything to its essentials, is revealed as the soul of Senghor’s Africa:

Night that frees me from reason, from salons, from sophistries,
From pirouettes and pretexts, calculated hates, humanized slaughters,
Night that dissolves all my contradictions, every contradiction
In the primal unity of your negritude ...

Indeed, this African night has all the attributes (sensual delight, mystical depth and cosmic mystery) of Woman and of Negritude.

The concepts of Woman as Night and Negritude as Night dissolve and recombine in many of Senghor’s poems, in the depths of the African night that “drowns all appearances, night of truth accessible only through an inner light, an inner fire”.45

In “Spring Song”,46 the themes of Woman and Negritude merge. The poet
seems to draw closer to his dreams in the fervent hope of rebirth brought by springtime.

The poet's "I" senses (I see, I breathe) a first presence (your kiss, your eyes, your hills, your nostrils, your mouth, your lips) conveying a lesson of life in the symmetry of the lines whose images echo one another from afar: "The voice of your heart and blood, listen to it / Under your delirious head and your cries ... She says your kiss is stronger than hate and death."

The kiss is a response to the voice of the heart and blood, while the head (connoting reason) and the cries lead only to hatred and death, and the repetitive pattern gives these lines a harsh rhythm.

The lesson continues with images of fruitfulness (harvests, a bud swelling in the sun, expanding), of beauty (summer night, rose colour), of harmony (calm, sweet), and the voice turns into a song.

In "Shaka", Nolivé's body is described in earth terms rooted in tactile sensations (colour of palm oil, plume, otter, snow, boa), in fragrances (ripe rice fields, acacia hills) or in references to cosmic realities (starry eyes, pulse of night), so that Shaka's emotions reflect a joint passion for Nolivé, Woman, Earth and Sky.

These various examples show the major role of Woman as poetic language. She responds to the call of the senses, and in turn awakens desire, thus establishing an inner rhythm that is also a sensual dialogue between subject and object.

At this point, the true significance of sensuality should be emphasized. In sensuality, what "animates the African arts, and indeed all the values of Negritude, is essentially the movement that carries the me toward the You, the communion between the subject and the object in the fulfilment of being through complementarity. Far from standing in the way of spirituality, sensuality provides it with the necessary roots. Sensuality is love." Aware as Senghor is of Western misconceptions, this is a point he frequently returns to: "Above all, let us not be afraid of African sensuality. All spirituality involves a rootedness in and a sublimation of sensuality. European and American eroticism is but a morbid distortion."

This connection is highlighted by the quasi-mystical response emerging in the poem entitled "Black Mask". The gaze resting on the face of Koumba Tam, Serer goddess of Beauty, is like a caress or a prayer. The sensual emotion carried by some of the images ("the fever of her hair... / The delicate crescent of lips, one darker and slightly heavy - where is the smile of the knowing
woman?”) blends with an almost religious respect for the mystery of woman: “... the curved brow / Eyelids closed ... / The patina of cheeks, the line of chin / Sing in silent harmony”.

In “Song for Signare”, we find the same gaze running lightly over the face of the princess and expressing the thrill of love:

You have stripped the pink grace from the flamingo and the sinuous Elegance from the svelte woman. Your eyes have assumed the look Of the Eternal in the face of statues, but it floats around Your mask, clear wing of the sea gull, and it is a haunting smile, A leitmotiv of your melodious face. Your smile, a diamond Patiently cut by master jewellers, poses a Riddle for me More subtle than those exchanged among the confederated Princes.51

The beloved woman, with her melodious face, becomes a poem. Hence the feeling of fulfilment and harmony arising from this blessed moment when the poet’s inspiration coincides perfectly with the object, when love is silently revealed in its ineffable and mysterious essence.

In Senghor’s writings, Woman is a presence inseparable from the life force, from the play of the senses, the flow of sentiments and of inspiration. In his view, she “is, more than Man, sensitive to the mysterious currents of life and of the cosmos, more accessible to joy and suffering”.52 So that, as soon as she appears at the heart of a poem, analogical images, symbols and metaphors multiply, prompted by emotion.

At the other emotional pole is the Mother, embodying fulfilment and rootedness. She gives refuge, brings repose and calms anxiety.

In the Black Hosts sequence, for instance, the following invocation rings out:

Mother, speak to me. My tongue slips On our sonorous, hard words: You know how to make them sweet and soft As you did once before for your dear son.53

She becomes the guardian spirit of the Kingdom of Childhood and personifies traditional Africa:

Bless you, Mother! Recognize your son from his authentic gaze, Which is his heart and his lineage.54
However, there is also a certain bodily language reflecting otherness rather than complementarity.

First we find the **brow**, which Senghor mentions with all the respect inspired by a feature both secret and sacred, since it protects the mystery within each of us. Senghor’s gaze resting on the brow remains distant: no invasive qualifiers are used, there is only the expression of a restrained but deeply felt admiration for the uniqueness of every being. Thus he notices the height of a brow, an arched brow (a measure of beauty in African aesthetics), a smooth brow, a proud brow, etc.

As for the head, in Senghor’s writings it essentially connotes the intrusion of the world (“... my head opened up to winds and plunderers from the north”55), the cultural side of Thinking, of Ideation, with the attendant danger of aridity and even greater risk of cutting man off from his senses. The word itself is harsh and dry, unfavourable to poetic inspiration. To Senghor, the head stands for abstraction and alienation:

... My head is a putrid swamp  
Where I mould monotonous bricks ...56

On the other hand, he is very partial to the word “face”, which sounds so tender, soft and even indefinite. Senghor focuses on the face whenever he seeks the presence and knowledge of the other, however different the latter may be. He speaks of his “fellows with such faces of stone”57 because he wants to meet them and make them human again. The word reflects his trust in man, beyond all appearances, and he longs “to drink from the urn of a new face”.58

Finally, the sense organs are prominent in Senghor’s poetic vocabulary. Foremost are the **hands**. Whoever has lived in Africa knows the importance of the exchange expressed by a handclasp. Through this initial contact, an African forms a first opinion, intuitively sensing the personality of whoever he meets. We in the West have largely lost, and more’s the pity, the meaning of this form of greeting: it has become mechanical and perfunctory, almost divorced from the body, and in any case from the heart and mind.

Hands are mentioned countless times in Senghor’s poems. Some remain anonymous, and exist only through the gestures they perform. In their way, they convey a certain History of relations between Whites and Africans ... They reflect the impact and heavy weight of impersonal deeds. Others, on the contrary, are identified: preceded by a possessive qualifier, they are clearly
related to the body ("my hand found your hand", "her hand in my hand"). They are frequently described by their vital warmth, by the many expressions they seek or inspire: "their warm hands", "Her trade-wind hands that cure fevers", "your hands of oil," etc. They are so closely linked with the senses as to become a full-fledged language: "Hands [sonorous] as waves upon the shore", and "[tornadoes, cool hands] on the brow / Of virgin forests".

In the poem entitled "Nurse Emma Payelleville", the hands and eyes enter into a dialogue with "the sensual sweetness of black bodies" and paint a remarkable portrait of brotherly love and compassion.

Eloquent in Senghor’s writings are the eyes, where one can glimpse the soul’s secrets coming to the surface in the spontaneity of a glance. But the connection is a fleeting one, and the insight is immediately reflected in analogical images: a child "whose eyes gleam like two swords", warriors "hurling their lightning-streaked eyes", the executioner "with eyes straight and cold as daggers", the Woman with "misty doelike eyes", her "sparkling blue eyes of joy".

Similarly subtle images arise from the voice, which is the true vibration of the soul: the sensitivity of the speaker meets that of the listener. It is never neutral. Senghor listens intensely to this inner melody externalized in words. At times the voice plays a solo part, as in a concerto, reflecting the splendour and loneliness of an inner world ("solemn anxiety-filled voice", "a slow deep voice, the distant buzz of bronze!").

To touch and hearing, Senghor adds the sense of smell. The scents of the earth are words through which nature enters into a dialogue with the poet: "Offering me the land’s virgin scents", "I can smell the flowery park ... / I see the scent of roses", "the scent of mangoes and the feminine aroma of guavas / Rise to the nape of my neck like palm wine on a stormy night".

The exhilaration of sharing in the fruitful, fragrant and joyous exuberance of nature fires his imagination, and his language merges with that of the world. Together they become "the fragrant flowers of conversation".

All these exhalations arise from the words and open the way to poetic emotion: a longing to breathe in and capture all the perfumes and fragrances, to hold that which is by essence as intangible, elusive and inexhaustible as life itself, or as the mysterious Other, or again as poetic inspiration or love ... In some of the poems, the breathlessness of the rhythm expresses this tantalizing search for the Absolute, which never ceases to fascinate us.

In "I’m Reading Mirrors", for instance:
I follow your scent as the saluki does the sand antelope,  
Inhaling your wild odours, your raucous voice, and deep, throaty  
Laughter that chokes me, and the rhythm gets more hurried,  
Panting, and the song merges other voices with my voice  
In the death knell of your beauty.  

The world offers all these scents, colours, scenes of contrasting light and shadow, as well as an infinite variety of landscapes, often with a feminizing quality. And the poet responds, body, soul and heart, with verbs connoting that he received these gifts (feel, listen, hear, see, breathe and touch occur most frequently), and he sometimes weaves them together in the same lines, thus emphasizing his harmonious relationship with nature:

I hear the dawn breeze ...
I hear the sun’s song ...
I feel Naëtt like a breath of air and her memory stirring my naked neck in spite of myself, and my complicit blood whispers in my veins.
Listen to the ... rustle of storks ...
Listen to spring’s message ...
Listen to distant Africa’s message and the song of your blood!
I hear the April sap singing in your veins.

Senghor’s poetic world is irrigated with all the vital fluids (blood, milk, semen and sap). He likes to join them in analogical images: “pagan sap / That rises and prances and dances”.  

This omnipresence of the body makes Senghorian poetry a language of blood and flesh rooted in the power of the word and shows how fully we belong to the relational universe thus revealed. For the body promotes a new birth in increased awareness of the world. Through the body, all our senses are mobilized to draw out the manifold meanings of everything to which we give a name. And the senses are the very roots of being, for they cause us to live at the heart of the elements from which we draw sustenance.

Moreover, the senses act as antennae allowing man to discover the inner reality of beings and things. Through the senses, we contemplate, question, touch and feel the object, penetrating it in depth so as to achieve an intimate and loving union in which possession becomes a metaphor, for the poet, like a lover, both lives and dreams what he loves.

This communion of the senses and matter is what we shall call Senghor’s language of the body. It expresses uninterrupted links between man and the
universe, bringing about a close integration, a symbiosis of sap and blood, a
unifying and vital movement. The analogical images and symbols Senghor
borrows in this connection reflect the African style and composition of his
poems, since he thus follows the semantics of African languages, in which
"words are naturally surrounded by a halo of sap and blood".

Being uniquely open and highly susceptible to the universal force of desire,
the body is indeed a cosmic link.

**Poetry of Desire**

Poetry takes flesh "in desire, in the depths of Man's cosmic sense".67

Desire is defined by what it seeks and not by its limitations. It is the source of
being's basic energy: a creative power, it is an essential component of our
understanding of the world. For desire, in the original meaning of the term, is
not tied to an objective, but constitutes the very flow of life, the animating
force which pervades the universe and makes itself felt at every level of
creation (tactism and tropism, instincts, universal attraction). It is a being's
tension toward its own fulfilment.

Moved by a desire to participate ever more fully in the world where he is
immersed, man utters the Word. Now, to name something is to give existence
to whatever is named, which necessarily induces *e-motion* in the speaker, for he
is drawn into a relationship, a dialogue with a presence he causes to rise from
the depths. He expresses and interprets this presence.

Giving shape to a presence, without distorting or reducing the rich complexi-
ity of being, brings to the surface a profusion of concomitant meanings. These
become the source of analogical images that spread around the word like a
fan, creating their own rhythm both by their interplay and by the sonority of
the words and the amplitude of the emotion which turns into speech and with
increasing vigour seeks coincidence or union between subject and object.

"Congo" seems to illustrate admirably this dynamic process in Senghorian
poetics: "It is an ode to the glory, majesty and fruitfulness of Africa. It is a
patchwork of images whose only unifying factor is the fervour of the poet
recreating through art ... the familiar world of desires."68

The poem,69 infinitely engaging through the power and vitality of the meta-
phors in which the lines are steeped, reflects the poet's feverish determination
to capture all the faces of the Congo, a metaphor of Africa, of life:

- She is a fruitful and beautiful woman, "Congo, lying on your bed of
  forests, queen of subdued Africa, / May the mountain phalluses hold high

100
your [flag] / ... Mother of all creatures that draw breath ... / ... mother of floods, wet nurse to harvests.”

- She is also the poet’s mistress, “For you are woman by my head, by my tongue / You are woman by my belly / ... My Sαd, my lover with ardent thighs and long, calm / Water-lily arms.”

- Furthermore, she is his soul and inspiration: “... Precious woman of ouzougou, / Body of incorruptible oil and skin like the diamantine night. / Calm Goddess with the slack smile on the dizzying surge of your blood.”

- Finally, she is his sensual quest: “Then I can be the splendid bole and the twenty-six cubit leap / In the trade wind, be the pirogue’s glide / On the smooth thrust of your belly.” The poet surrenders submissively to the waters of the Congo. This leads to rapture, emotion sated with possession – a union of subject and object, of man and the elements.

The poem ends in ecstasy: “And death on the crest of jubilation, at the irresistible call / Of the abyss.” A line Senghor comments upon in a letter to Papa Gueye N’Diaye: “A reference to the joy – I do not say the pleasure – derived from love and poetic creation. The height of joy – I was going to say the excess – is likened to death, which is at the same time a rebirth.”70

Indeed, “… the pirogue is reborn in the water lilies of spume / The gentle bamboos floating in the world’s clear morning.”

This poem does not seem to end, for the peacefulness of the last lines brings one back to the beginning (“Congo, lying in your bed of forests …”) – a rhythm reborn from its own death, it is also the force of desire, answering the power of the earth forces: the fulfilment of this desire is the joy of union, a delight that will fade like a shadow, for it can never be complete or perfect. The desire reflecting the love of life nevertheless endlessly renews the movement.

The vitality of desire breaks out in “Princess, your letter”: Lilanga’s dance is Africa’s, and this dance is all rhythm, a rhythm that is the language of men and of the Earth, and desire is the rhythm of this language:

Lilanga, her feet are two reptiles, her hands massaging
Pestles that sound the rhythm of men tilling the soil.
And from the earth rise the rhythm, sap and sweat,
Wave and scent of the damp ground that shakes
The [statuesque] legs, thighs open to the secret,
That flows over the buttocks, hollows the loins,
Stretches the belly, throat, and hills, prows of drums.”71
A boisterous poem in which alliteration, syncopation, breaks in rhythm, harshness of consonants and appositions ("... the rhythm, sap and sweat, / Wave and scent ...") give the lines a dynamic quality, link the images together and form a three-level poetic composition in which dance is a song of fruitfulness and love, a hymn to the earth and harvest, and reflects the union of Woman and Earth. The high priestess of this celebration is Lilanga. The two first sounds in her name (Li-lan) are light and airy; they are irresistibly attracted to the last syllable (ga), which acts as a musical counterpart, stops the ascending movement, and roughly brings Lilanga down to earth.

There is thus a constant transmutation of the emerging images. They are to be seen, heard, felt and tasted, but should also be taken in their full human richness. No aspect of personality remains outside Senghor's poetry, either beyond its scope or below its field of vision. Which is to say how much this poetry expresses communion, expansion of being, a deep cosmic breathing. It is demanding and even bewildering through the great abundance of its rhythms and images. A poetry of connectedness, of movement, of a longing to experience fully the relational universe revealed through the mutations and transformations of images. Above all, it reflects the vital force, the lust for life, as well as an intuitive understanding of the world, a penetrating gaze "which, through or behind transitory or particular appearances, perceives the structure of the object in its relationship with other beings and with God".72

In Senghor's writing, sensuality is indeed vigorous, but it gives his words the resonance and intensity of the deepest poetry. In this connection, it is appropriate to quote Bachelard, who analysed at some length the difference in "density which distinguishes superficial poetry from deep poetry":

This density ... is experienced when one shifts from sensible values to sensual values ... Only sensual values provide "correspondences". Sensible values give but translations. Because the correspondence of sensations (highly intellectual concepts) has been posited, which involves a confusion between the realms of the sensible and the sensual, a truly dynamic study of poetic emotion is precluded.73

Senghor asserts that "The Spirit germinates under the groin, in the matrix of desire / The sex is one antenna among many where flashing messages are exchanged,"74 and rebukes whoever is shocked by this stand: "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."75 These images must be allowed the freedom to reflect African symbolics: the idiom "expresses ... man in his fullness. It places man back in the cosmic environment. In turn, the Cosmos regains its place in the mystery of Life. At the centre of the Cosmos, man, by virtue of
his twofold participation (both punctual and axial), recapitulates creation, interiorizes it in his own destiny, and makes it a dialectic ladder leading to fulfilment in God.  

As we have seen, in Senghor's writings the senses include all man's abilities to experience, discover and know the world. The poet rejects the idea that intelligence is nothing more than "the whole of the intellectual functions having conceptual and rational knowledge as their purpose" (according to the definition of the Petit Robert, a well-known French dictionary), for this form of "intelligence" constantly produces stubborn and narrow-minded pedants: the world is full of them, and their countless conflicting theories and doctrines truly boggle the mind.

Senghor's emotion, akin to the sense of the sacred which the ancient Greeks called thambos, is by no means a skin-deep and mawkish sentimentality, as his critics disparagingly suggest. The derivation of the word reveals its fundamental meaning: e-movere. Emotion is indeed the demanding movement by which we are drawn out of ourselves and our habitual mindset to meet our fellow-man and strive really to understand him. Not from our own selfish viewpoint or for our own personal advantage, but in an earnest effort to seek a rebirth in this absolute openness to the other. The purity of this effort stems from the self-discipline which it requires, from a willingness to die to the self in order to find a new life in the other, to know him from within, to become the other. We are thus led to the discovery of an underlying reality, of another world hidden behind the one so familiar to us. Senghor's life choices are obviously guided to a considerable degree by spiritual concerns: intelligence informed by spirituality is in fact the essence of what we may call Senghorian intuition.

To be sure, discursive reasoning is a prominent part of Senghor's thinking, whose logical framework becomes obvious in the light of its dialectic structure. In his view, however, this discursive reasoning, far from having absolute merit, is simply a tool in the attainment of knowledge.

As for the relational world which gives meaning to emotion, the same cosmic participation reflected in Senghor's poetry is also expressed by the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore:

I feel that all the stars shine in me.
The world breaks into my life like a flood.
The flowers blossom in my body.
All the youthfulness of land and water smokes like an incense
in my heart, and the breath of all things plays on my thoughts as on a flute."

There is a strong poetic resonance between Tagore and Senghor, whatever their differences in initial approach. For both, poetry is a hymn to the love of life.

The full significance and scope of Senghor’s poetic idiom can be understood only in the light of traditional (i.e., religious) African statuary. It should be remembered that “the body is itself a symbol, but one aware of the reality it expresses at the centre of the cosmos ... The religious value of African symbolics would strike us as most uncertain, and indeed questionable, without this ‘sacramental’ dimension embodied in the human soma, a dimension that puts the drama of existence back where it belongs: in the destiny of man as a concrete reality, and not in the evasion of exteriority, in the flight of concepts and images.”

The necessary combination of sensuality and imagination is in no case an end in itself. Desire is its stimulus, but never ceases to carry our thinking further toward what we have already called Absolute Being, or God. Senghor himself makes the point clear in a letter to Hubert de Leusse:

Poetry, like love, must be embodied in the most naked and quivering flesh, but only to transcend it. An unembodied love is not love, but it must become spiritual in order to be human. One must move beyond the body, and see the beauty of the soul, to be ready to sacrifice everything, and even one’s body, to the soul. Then one reaches the summit, or the centre, as Teilhard de Chardin calls it: “It is then, truly, the centre-to-centre union of soul to soul, in the joy of beauty, which is to say of truth, embraced at last.”

This quick survey of the initiatory nature of Senghor’s poetics shows that his universe knows no boundary whatsoever: open to every wind that blows, it is an ongoing creation, infinitely surpassing human limitations. The Senghorian universe unceasingly beckons us to ever more distant shores. Endlessly renewed by exploration, it always suggests more than is revealed, and makes us long to follow the rhythms of the world. These rhythms appear reminiscent of the mesmerizing songs of the mythical mermaids who cast a spell over sailors and poets seeking new worlds to discover, and lure them on to death and rebirth in the depths of the sea, of the forest, of life.

The Word draws its power from the sacred, but this truth has been essentially forgotten in much of the world. To what extent is this due to the printing press, churning out more and more information and disinformation and
allowing anyone to say absolutely anything, without the risk of being imme-
mediately taken to task? Or to technology in all its scientific and ideological
forms, since it seeks only terminological precision and suitability to a certain
pattern of thinking? Or again to our philosophies without metaphysics and
our religions without God? These questions, and probably many others,
necessarily come to mind, at a time when we are puzzled and perplexed by
the major importance Africans ascribe to the uttered word, and more specifi-
cally to the creative potential involved in the giving of a name. Why have we
in the West become unable or unwilling to protect this precious heritage of
speech?

The works of Senghor bring us an opportunity to rediscover these riches.
However, Western readers must make the necessary effort to overcome their
cultural reflexes, to break the shell of their vocabulary, shaped and distorted
by concepts that smother the life of words and limit the ability to think freely.
Though admittedly carnal, the Senghorian idiom, far from giving sensuality a
free rein, implies an absolute duty not to disown any of our cognitive powers
– we must indeed live with our whole body, but also at the same time with all
our soul, so that these elements mesh and work smoothly together.

Besides, sensual ecstasy seeking fullness of being is but one of the faces of
Senghor’s poetry. The other, emerging with equal forcefulness, is that of
suffering and death. These two aspects, far from being dialectical opposites, as
one might have assumed at first blush, turn out to be complementary and
harmoniously integrated in his poetics. The warp and woof of existence, they
are in Senghor’s view inseparable, to anyone seeking without reservation or
evasion to meet the demands of a full presence to the world. Above all, man
must fully recognize the transcendental significance that belongs uniquely to
suffering and death, a dimension only they can reveal. We reach here the
greatest depths of Senghor’s thinking, from which we discover the dialectics
of life and death at the heart of his creativity. From this core, the primary
themes of his writing develop and amplify. Their fullest expression is found in
Major Elegies, which are also the focus where initiator and initiate become one.
This unity is based on a synthesis carried out deep within himself between
African initiatory tradition and Christology.

2 African Tradition and Christology

In Senghor’s writings, African tradition and Christology seem to be comple-
mentary degrees of one single vital truth bringing together all Senghorian
themes around two fundamental structures: a meditation on the links be-
tween life and death, and a reflection on life values.
They are, in Senghor’s view, the paths leading to the discovery of the Kingdom of Childhood, to be understood as a continuous self-creation, in the search for harmony and fullness of being.

**Meditation on the Links Between Life and Death**

So far, our survey of Senghor’s works has focused essentially on the various presences rooted in the senses, and in history and historical events.

To be more specific, in the first two parts of this essay we considered mainly the alienating impact of the sufferings brought on Africa by the blustering intrusions of the West, carelessly trampling the land and civilization underfoot. Held at arm’s length and diminished in countless ways, prevented from carrying out their life dreams, counted for nothing, dazed by fear, wounded and invalidated by the hatred surrounding them, Africans existed in a kind of vacuum. We also looked at various efforts to respond to the forces of racism, prejudice, arrogant dogmatism and raw nationalism, and to the wars brought on by these forces. In the process, we saw that Senghor’s poems, bringing back the memory of a long and particularly painful period in history, highlight the distressingly uncertain future of a world where similar relationships, defined by power and contempt, it not hatred, seem to be taken for granted. Africans were pilloried, just as Christ had been, and now it is Man who bears the brunt of persecution.

Since he has personally experienced in his own flesh the misfortunes of Africa, Senghor is able to present the world with the response of an African and a Christian to the cutting words of ideologues of every stripe.

Of course, Senghor has not been immune to the temptations inherent in suffering – which if given into can become utterly destructive, and if rejected in a spirit of revolt can smother its victim in hatred, violence or despair, three other forms of self-destruction. But he never succumbed, since in the times of greatest trial he drew strength from the core of his Christian faith and of the traditional cultural values of his Africa. And he is determined to let the world hear the unifying voice of Christ and Africa, a voice which must not be drowned in the uproar of the modern world.

In his *Dialogue sur la poésie francophone*, Senghor offers an analogy between Christ’s sufferings and those of Africa: “For five centuries, like Christ, Africa [has been] crucified by the slave trade and colonialism, but [has found] redemption through its sufferings, redeeming the world, undergoing rebirth to bring its contribution to the development of a pan-human civilization.”

This analogy suggests two lines of thought or attitudes.
The first, more specifically African, involves a rejection of the idea that the sufferings endured by Africans might be without significance or value. This refusal is rooted in the African tradition, according to which nothing is useless: every gesture, action or word has a lasting impact. Underlying the signs, there is a wealth of meanings waiting to be brought out. Moreover, in the initiatory teaching the trial of suffering has a life value relating to the awareness of a certain death to the self. Suffering should not be evaluated on the basis of feelings in the body or mind. Beyond mere sensations, one should seek to acquire the human riches gained only through suffering: these riches are essentially self-mastery informed with courage, will power and trust in Life. Only then does man receive additional life force in order to progress toward “the spiritual Mastery conferred by initiation, an inner life, an indestructible link between Man and the Absolute, a contact with Eternity, a way of approaching God the Creator”.81

The other approach is more specifically Christological: by comparing the torments suffered by Africans to those of Christ, Senghor seeks to emphasize the riches of African spirituality. Africa was not destroyed by suffering because it carried in its heart a precious secret of survival, which it now offers to the world.

In Christ’s footsteps, Senghor bids us follow the African stations of the Cross. These start in Shadow Songs, his first collection, with the poem entitled “The Message”:

Go to Mbissel in Fa’oy. Say your prayers
In each shrine along the Great Way.
Go back along the Royal Road and contemplate
This way of the cross and of glory.82

From these royal shrines, surviving witnesses to the past, and still respectful of ancestor worship, Africa, with the advent of colonization, embarked on its own stations of the Cross.

The parallel with Christ’s passion is striking: “Then did they spit in His face and buffered Him. And others struck His face with the palms of their hands ...” (Mt 26, 67). And the Africans experienced “the hands that whipped, ... slapped,” and the long marches down the centuries, to the rhythm of broken chants, “... all the tears ..., all the black sweat watering fields of cane and cotton.” “And they disciplined them / With whips ...”

Christ suffered humiliations and jeers: “... bowing the knee before Him, they mocked Him, saying: Hail, King of the Jews” (Mt 27, 29), words later
written over His head on the Cross. Similarly, the African hears “words of scornful praise” and longs to “tear the banania grins from all the walls of France”.

Senghor also likened the sufferings of Christ to those of the Senegalese prisoners of war (“Oh, you who added more nails to your cross / To remain with your companions and to keep your promise ...”) and to his own (“Ah! this dull sleep / Irritating each side and the back like crucifixion wounds”).

Now the calvary of modern times comes into focus:

... above the Old and New Worlds,
Crucified Africa,
And her right arm stretches over my land
And her left side shades America
And her heart is precious Haiti, Haiti who dared
Proclaim Man before the Tyrant.

The word “hatred” does appear occasionally in his poems, but the temptation is immediately rejected: “And now the serpent of hatred rears its head in my heart, / The serpent I thought was dead ... / Kill it, Lord, for I must continue on my journey ...” One must avoid becoming mired in “the slimy hatreds ... oozing out of the swamp mud”. Therefore “let the cockles of hate / Not encumber their unparalysed gait”. Senghor proposes a way of life, by setting the powers of life and Love against hatred, which is the power of death.

And forgiveness is the poet’s answer to the “tempests and hatreds” that are one of the faces of the West:

Lord God, forgive white Europe! ...
For You must forgive ...
For You must forget ...
... I know that many of Your missionaries have blessed
Weapons of violence and traded in banker’s gold,
But traitors and fools have always existed.

“Lord” and “traitors”, brought together in this stanza, conjure up all the Judas figures of modern times, while “forgive” and “fools” suggest Christ’s own words: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Lk 23, 34).

This willingness to move beyond a sense of grievance over historical wrongs, this refusal to enter a vicious circle of misdeeds and resentment, this forgive-
ness given in the face of evil are a triumph of Man and of the spirit introduced by the Stations of the Cross ... Indeed, to forgive is an act of courage and will implying self-mastery, if not a certain death to the self in favour of a greater awareness of life values. The poet invokes Christ as a model to be followed, while also calling on his deeply felt Negritude: “Night that frees me from ... calculated hates.”

By highlighting his poems with words and sayings suggestive of Christ’s Passion, Senghor gives a religious dimension to the saga of Africa. The tribulations and death of Africans, like those of Christ, put Life in an intemporal perspective. This calvary is reflected here and there throughout his poems, bringing us to the heart of his meditation on Life and Death.

In Senghor’s view, anguish, suffering and death, far from connoting helplessness and annihilation, are successive steps in an inevitable and continuous transmutation of being. This Senghorian message is offered in two stages:

• the first involves a symbolic approach, followed in the earlier poems;
• the second is more explicit and reaches its fullest expression in the Major Elegies, where the grief and mourning experienced by the poet bring the meditation to its greatest depth.

Two images, the season of hivernage and the black host, illustrate the symbolic approach.

Hivernage is the time of preparation for the vernal renewal. In the cycle of seasons, it serves as a metaphor allowing us to share the anguish, suffering and apparent death of nature, when the landscape is engulfed in the greyness and humidity of the warm rains, in the thickness of the sticky air, oppressive and depressing, in the smell of rotting plants, in the viscous mud, in the swarms of insatiable insects, in the crawling mass of cunning and venomous vermin hidden in the swamps, bogs and mud, in the unhealthy exuberance of tropical vines that cling and smother, leaving no breathing space.

Senghor describes “the bitter panic of yellow leaves” and “the horrible rotting of virgin forests”. In his body and soul, the poet shares in these mutations: “... clouds of torpor weigh upon my chest / Where crakes and underbrush grow.” He goes on to picture

... these swamp flies, mosquitoes, and fevers,
These winter deliriums in hivernage ...
This spongy rot of the heart that drains your energy
With endless suction ...

109
With the same breath, these presences give rhythm to the seasons and to man's existence. They form a certain mental landscape, and the poet experiences its anxieties, sufferings and absences.

These sufferings are as fruitful, however, as hivernage itself. They are unavoidable gateways, the harbingers of a renewed life, which will be all the more abundant if the loam left behind by the sufferings is rich and the seeds are plentiful. In turn, these trials lead to transcendence: "the pink rose laurel [...] is growing on the ashes." The future harvest will be a rebirth for the dead who have given meaning to their sacrifice. Hence the "Prayer to the Senegalese Soldiers" offering their bodies:

So that they can grow thickly above us, these children,  
The young ones for whom we are father providers,  
Let us form at their feet the humus of dense rotting leaves ...  
Let them grow thick in endless plains ...

The second symbol directly suggests transcendence in relation to the human condition, completion of the initiatory cycle, in other words, fulfilment of man in God: this image is the Black Host, a Christic symbol of the redeeming victim.

[... Africa became a Black Host  
So that man's hope might live.]

Africa offers itself as a Mystical Body, but here the "Black Hosts" are the Senegalese soldiers. They gave up body and life to save France, and France has now forgotten them: "But you, my dark brothers, no one calls your names." And yet, how and why could their sufferings and the sacrifice of their life not be remembered? These "Dead stretched out in water as far as / The northern and eastern fields" have lost their identity, their family and their roots. Yet here they are, all brought back to life together, as one body, by the poet's voice; here they are, offered to mankind, as a spiritual and fraternal nourishment.

A similar sacrificial and redeeming death features prominently and repeatedly in traditional African culture, and first in the accounts of Creation. A good example is one of the myths analysed in African Death by L.V Thomas, who observes that their "themes, ... without a doubt, echo Christian dogma; and yet, these are specifically African myths". For instance, in the culture of the Gabonese Fang, the primordial being, Mebeghe, begat once and for all Nzamé, who sacrificed himself in order to create the world: "he dismembered himself
... and his blood became the fire in the Forge which brought forth all the beings of the Earth and the Universe ...; he then came back to life and survives as Father of mankind." L V Thomas points out that "the flow of blood in his self-sacrifice symbolizes the release of creative energy, and above all it is the offering of this blood which, in return, endowed him with divine power. This power is infinite, ever renewed like the fire in the forge."94

In his poems, Senghor draws on the symbolism of life-renewing blood, particularly in "Thiaroye", who personifies the Senegalese soldiers, and in "Elegy for Aynina Fall", hero of Negritude and leader of the African railway workers' union, who was murdered during a riot, and whose name conjures up his struggle against the misdeeds of colonialism:

... He has shed his blood that fertilizes
The soil of Africa. He has redeemed our sins.
He has given up his life completely for THE UNITY OF BLACK PEOPLES.
Aynina Fall is dead. Aynina Fall lives again among us95

Senghor celebrates the continuation of life beyond death. He refuses to accept absurdity and nothingness, supreme insults not only to all creatures, but also to their Creator. One of the foundations of African ontology is that everything has a meaning, which man is called upon to seek. Death itself is highly significant. No life can or should be sacrificed for nothing. The Senegalese soldiers were sacrificed, and Senghor presents them as sacrificial hosts: they must become a lesson for the survivors, their devotion must be recognized as a source of renewal, their blood must lead to a rewriting of History and a change in its direction, to a return to spirituality, connoted by the Hosts.

Four verbs (to speak, think, pray and feel) are used most frequently by Senghor to express the links between the living and the dead, to make the latter's presence active and fruitful. Only in the "apocalyptic plain" do the "dead men rot like sterile seeds",96 because they are buried in silence, emptiness and oblivion.

Here again, there is a remarkable eclectism in Senghor's thinking, in the way he brings together the Catholic dogma of the communion of saints and the African tradition of ancestor worship. Among the Bantu, for instance, in Central Africa, at his death "man may have lost all power, but has become a font of wisdom. He thus helps to establish the rule which nourishes and inspires the society of the living."97

This faith is shared by all traditional African religions, since death releases a vital force which the living worship and seek to tap.
Among the *Major Elegies*, however, only the four great poems of mourning written for Martin Luther King, Jean-Marie, Georges Pompidou and Philippe Maguilen Senghor reach the dimensions of a fully experienced and fully expressed funereal meditation. The poet is overcome with grief; his voice, choking and breaking, becomes, lives and shares the soul-searing death, to which it remains linked. Nevertheless, it revives upon discovering in this death an eternity of being. For love denies death, faith renews life, and absence becomes a surreal presence, more real than the former reality, since it is a fulfilled, unalterable and essential presence carrying its own immortality:

Sing, I say, of the diamond born from the ashes of Death.98

Each of these elegies has the wide scope of an oratorio. Declaiming the sorrowful recitative, in which events and sufferings weave a mournful lament, the poet’s voice cries out in anguish with ultimate questions that pierce the heart. There is no human answer to death. One simply has to live through, then somehow leave behind, the wrenching pain and bereavement felt at the loss of one whose voice will never be heard again, whose face has been gazed upon for the last time, whose bodily presence is cruelly missed. One has to reach beyond temporality and transcend death by rediscovering the meaning of life.

Indeed, an essential feature of African philosophy is this concept of death as rebirth, whose ritual is repeated, with certain variations, at each stage of initiation, so as to familiarize the neophyte with dimensions of life generally overlooked in the midst of our everyday concerns. The young men “are put through tests intended to symbolize their death. As a matter of fact, their social isolation during initiation helps to maintain ... this atmosphere of abandonment, separation and solitude typifying the world of the dead.” Then, “fifteen days after the symbolic death, ‘resurrection’ takes place, a rite closely following the pattern of birth (sprinkling, anointing, washing, insufflation and beating).” The neophytes are given a new name, since they are re-born to life, a life marked with a series of other initiatory stages they will have to undergo throughout their existence, stages whose ultimate purpose is “to unite man with the invisible”.99 From one stage to the next, initiation leads a postulant to a succession of deaths to the self, which will free him from the shackles of individualism. In Mali, this upward progression ends in the eighth and last stage of the *Koré*, the Bambara initiation. Upon entering “the abode of the Karaw, the initiate reaches identity with the divinity and achieves ‘unity’. This perfect similarity is illustrated by the emblem of the Karaw class, made up of one or several small boards representing God in the form of a hand, but also interpreted as a face. This is meant to express the ‘association
between the initiate and God', reflecting the 'hand and face', 'doing and saying' and 'action and speech' dualities, which are all facets of the same state of being.”

In the elegies of mourning, through tears of blood Senghor seeks the meeting of life and death in self-transcendence, in a movement toward the One, the Immutable. This explains the meaning of the following lines, published in 1958 as part of *Ethiopiques*:

I do not know what age it was, I always confuse present and past
As I mingle Death and Life - a tender bridge joins them.

This thought, left isolated and undeveloped among Other Songs, seemed somewhat startling when it was written, particularly since it was never fleshed out in that series of poems nor in subsequent ones. And yet it was clearly a fundamental idea, emerging from the depths of the poet's psyche. Only now can it be fully understood, in the living context of *Major Elegies*. This “tender bridge” is all at once restraint, acceptance, conciliation of the soul seeking a way toward transcendence, which is to say toward harmonious development. The path of life, made irreversible by death, involves spiritualization rather than discontinuity.

The Elegies for Martin Luther King, Jean-Marie and Georges Pompidou would seem to form a triptych. In the first of them, the Blacks stretch out a hand to the Whites, thus breaking the chain of violence unremittingly forged by racists of every stripe.

In “Elegy for Jean-Marie”, the Whites respond, overcoming the distance separating them from the Blacks and stamping out prejudice.

“Elegy for Georges Pompidou” bears witness to the friendship between Blacks and Whites.

These deaths give meaning to all three lives. They bring reconciling answers to a number of questions left unsettled in the poet's earlier writings.

Through a long recitative in “Elegy for Martin Luther King”, Senghor relives the traumatic events of 4 April 1968. It was Holy Week, and the African American minister Martin Luther King was marching and preaching for racial brotherhood. He was murdered in Memphis, Tennessee, on the balcony of his hotel, while speaking words of peace. In this poem, Senghor brings out both the strength and vulnerability of a man who, sustained by his determination to reach out to others like a brother and inspired by the
presence of Christ in his own life, faces the hostility of a violence-prone world which he seeks to transform through his language of peace.

The poet describes grey landscapes, heavy with threats and anguish, somehow foreshadowing the tragedy. To picture the disturbances plaguing our times, he uses clashing pairs of antithetical terms ("all power is dust and all force a weakness") that reflect a dual semantic opposition (power-dust and force-weakness, but also power-weakness and force-dust) and thereby emphasize the similarity of power with force and weakness with dust. Highly unstable images arise from these provocatively connected nouns joining and separating under the impulse of words now attracting and now repulsing one another, not unlike the social stresses faced by men of good will. The constantly shifting verbal combinations fascinate our mind and imagination; they reveal the poet's thinking, in which sadness and violence come to grips.

Though fragile, brotherhood prevails over brute force. Through his death, the martyred preacher bequeaths to the world his message, capitalized by Senghor: "MARTIN LUTHER KING, THE KING OF PEACE."

The poet's grief over the death of a friend is reflected in the confusion of images (the void, the monster, the labyrinth of caves, I trembled) and of the final avowal ("I am mourning Martin Luther King"). Everything in this tragedy affects him deeply. He experiences it in all the fibres of his being and expresses it in words involving his flesh, senses and blood: "I remember ... I looked around and saw ... I saw ... I saw again ... And I felt in the marrow of my bones voices and tears come down, ha! A blood deposit of four hundred years."

In a long and slow recital, Senghor describes Martin Luther King's suffering and death. They resonate with the echoes of the Passion and death of Christ.

Like Peter in relation to Jesus, did Africa not remain silent and absent in Martin Luther King's march and death? On the other hand, did the West not receive the message of brotherhood for which Martin Luther King, like Christ, gave his life?

Around Christ who is going to die, there is "a great multitude with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the ancients of the people". And around Martin Luther King, there is a squalid and shady underworld: "a house of prostitution, profanation and perdition ... tomcats and pimps ... a Remington rifle ... James Earl aims and hits the mark".

Somewhat in the manner of a medieval mystery-play, the "Elegy for Martin Luther King" immortalizes the epic of a disciple of Christ who was also the
champion of fraternal Negritude. The poem ends as a hymn of resurrection, with the cry “Rise Up, Negritude”. Indeed, Negritude is alive, like the example of Martin Luther King’s life, which has deeply altered American attitudes and ways of thinking.

In “Elegy for Martin Luther King”, as we have said, the Blacks stretch out a hand to the Whites. In “Elegy for Jean-Marie”, it is the white man who takes the initiative in meeting the black man and sharing his knowledge with him. In both cases, the poet shows us heralds of a new age, models for a renewal of history.

Senghor dedicates “Elegy for Jean-Marie” to the French technical assistants whose role is similar to that of volunteers in the American Peace Corps. Jean-Marie, the son of a family friend, was one of those assistants, and Senghor grieves over his death: “... we all have cried for him ... we all have kept vigil, Whites and Blacks”. Senghor is deeply affected:

Here I am again drunk and empty before the blank page,
Like my mouth always under the weight of my heart
When gobs of tears and blood rush against the barrier of my teeth.

This death has the poignant beauty of a song suddenly broken as it is being heard and felt, shared and loved by one and all. Yet the vitality of the memories reflected in the song prevails, for haunting presences are left forever in Senghor’s heart. He would never forget the manifold images of a life cut short in the process of fulfilling his own dream repeatedly expressed in so many of his poems, the dream of cultural crossbreeding, of “rediscovered unity”, of a dynamic link between idea and action, ear and heart, sign and meaning:

You made man one in the image of the one God.
You made yourself a black man, Jean-Marie, among blacks.
You brought gentleness to the Gentiles, and honour to honourable and sensitive men...
You shared with us your golden knowledge, leaving nothing
For yourself to mock and dominate us.

Through these words, Senghor gives the world all the hope and trust inherent in the message that was the substance of Jean-Marie’s life:

I bless you, Jean-Marie, I bless the battalions of your companions
In the communion of men, souls, nations, confessions.
This new face is what Africa had long been waiting for. A face needed to redeem fully the past prejudice of men who seemed to have neither ears to hear nor eyes to see, an arrogant prejudice echoing in many of Senghor’s earlier poems, and particularly in “Letter to a Prisoner”, which is the very reverse of this Elegy.

The aim of both Martin Luther King and Jean-Marie was to break down racial barriers and share, in a spirit of brotherhood, all their spiritual and intellectual riches. Theirs was a total commitment, and they gave everything so that this message might be heard.

How could one possibly allow this priceless humanistic heritage to go unclaimed or fail to hand on the torch? This implicit question is suggested by the admiration Senghor feels and inspires for the two heroes who are forerunners of the New Man, since they transcended death through their faith and life, which remain operative in the poet’s thinking and in his way of looking at the world.

In “Elegy for Georges Pompidou”, black man and white man have met, they understand and love one another, and their friendship leaves no distance between them. Nothing can destroy this amity, least of all death: “I think of you, my beloved brother,” the poet writes in the last stanza. Senghor, then President of Senegal, was in China on an official visit when he heard of his friend’s death, and forthwith composed this elegy. Its deeply moving spontaneity reflects his utter sense of loss. The gates of a Sun-like Friendship between the two men are felt and seen to have been wide open. No shadow or reservation in this true brotherliness, a model of humanism expressed with an impulsiveness coming straight from the heart. The poem’s cadence derives its power from an epic inspiration driven by deep emotion. The weight of grief is obvious, and the style shows a breathless and rapid rhythm imparted by an alternation of the “I” and “you” pronouns, which call, seek and find one another, merging in the “we” and “our” forms that accompany words connoting action and continuation beyond death. But the potency and richness of the lines stem mainly from a few key words around which the “I” and the “you” swirl in anguished but stubborn revolution.

In the first stanza, the Friend’s gaze triggers a dialogue that seems at first to be silent, but is in fact terribly loud: “But now your gaze nibbles me at night like termites.” Nothing can stop the call, and the “you” grows aggressive, imploring and insistent, drowning out the “I”: 
Your gaze pursued me, speechless, as far as the spring wind.
Pursued me while I ascended along the Great Wall,
Contemplated the splendour of the Ming...
... and I chatted ...

In the middle of the second stanza, the poet's admission rings out, and around it develops an even more demanding exchange: "I needed you, needed to see you: the call of a dream." Presence ("to see you") and mystery ("a dream") are links woven by friendship and express throughout these lines the scope of the attachment:

He needs a friend who will keep him company
Just to feel his shoulder in the trench,
And the rhythmic heat of his breath.
Without which all speech is useless.

For speech must be rooted in the body, in order to quicken the words we use and to allow real communication, which is infinitely more than mere verbal contrivance. This throws a new light on Senghorian poetics: since belief in transcendence overcomes the alienating quality of death, man can experience the presence of dead or absent beings, to the extent that he is able, through the power of speech, to feel, hear and see them in his own flesh and through his own senses. The poet speaks of a "dream", but he actually sees his friend:

You [fell] out of bed and very pale you rattled sweetly,
Speechless. In vain you searched for the eyes of blue sky, your joy,
That you had hidden so tenderly. I felt you now in the distance
Of the beyond. I saw you on the other riverbank and at certain
Moments, high, so high in the ether I had trouble following you.
Suddenly, you came back to joke about your "illness", as they say.

Every word affirms the poet's presence at his Friend's bedside: he watches him, shares his suffering, follows his ebbing life, accompanies him in death. It was a dream, but the magic of words turns it into a live reality and the lines are suffused with intense feeling. The stark realism of the words (fell out of bed, rattled) contrasts sharply with the description of the eyes, which seem to merge with the universe (blue sky) by leaving behind all traces of worldly hyperbole (your joy ... hidden).

Such a friendship defies death, allowing a transcendence of mortality. It carries an intimation of survival, of continued presence, mystical since freed from the limitations of individual existence; a presence permitting a sensible
and physical communion through the vital link maintained by the emotional power of the spoken and written word.

**Reflection on Life Values**

Senghor's meditation on the relationship between life and death focuses in particular on the bridge between them. To him, this bridge is love, the unfailing life force, the very essence of our being.

Now in Senghor's thinking, love and intercommunion are inseparable movements. Hence, two complementary imperatives arise: cross-culturalism and love, which is communion, a reconciling harmony.

**Cross-culturalism**

Senghor's poetic idiom involves a real cultural crossbreeding. For it brings together from many cultures countless expressions, all of which, however, draw on the sources of a similar reflection on *being* and its dynamics.

The many influences reflected in his writing are readily acknowledged by Senghor: "Though I have been required to read a great deal through my profession, and now do so for my own pleasure, it remains that, among the French, the poet Paul Claudel is the one who has most delighted me, and therefore influenced me. If only in his verse form, which I finally adopted." But he immediately adds: "you imitate only those you resemble". In fact, his enthusiasm for Claudel stems mainly from the discovery of an identical definition for both African and Claudelian images: a shared re-birth in greater awareness and knowledge, "an aggregate of signs completely defining an object through their mutual relationship".

Claudel's *Five Great Odes* illustrate this poetic affinity, in three major respects.

- Creative utterance: "Thus, poet, when you speak, in a delectable enumeration, / Giving to each thing its name, /[...] you partake in its existence!" (*The Muses.*)

- Role of the senses: "... the spirit of life and the great pneumatic breath [...] / I sense, I scent out, I unravel, I track down, I discover by instinct / How the thing is done! ..." (*The Spirit and the Water.*)

- The relational universe: "I shall sing [...] / A great poem where man is at last beyond secondary things, reconciled to eternal powers ..." (*The Muse who is Grace.*)
It should not be forgotten, however, that Claudel and Senghor share the Bible as a common source of inspiration.

Moreover, Bergson's thinking and that of Teilhard de Chardin, both familiar to Claudel, gave a firm foundation to what until then had been only tentative in Senghor's mind, though it had grown out of his childhood experience.

The discovery of Bergson during the thirties, when Senghor was a student at the Sorbonne, made a deep impression on him, and he frequently referred to "the Revolution of 1889, because that was the year of the Essay on the immediate data of awareness ... 1889 was essentially a cultural revolution, if there ever was one. Indeed, never before had discursive reasoning been rejected so completely ... Beyond the senses, this stand rehabilitated intuition and sentiment, emotion and imagination." 108

As for Teilhard de Chardin's theories, involving a continuity in the world, from alpha to omega, to convergence and ultimate union in God, they could but confirm Senghor's faith in African ontology.

But there were also other influences, among them that of the German ethnologist Leo Frobenius. Senghor wrote that he was, "for the early champions of Negritude, ... truly a leaven for the discovery, awakening and strengthening of the Black Man's 'dormant energies'... He spoke to us ... of the nature, value and future of African civilization. The French translations of his books, History of African Civilization and The Destiny of Civilizations, were among the bibles of an entire generation of black students ... [Frobenius] gave us back our truth, our dignity," in particular by defining African civilization as "a civilization of meaning ..., of reality ..., of intuitive reasoning." 109

In addition, the education he received at the Sorbonne's Ethnology Institute and Ecole pratique des Hautes Etudes unquestionably had a considerable impact on Senghor's thinking. He gained a clear awareness of African thought processes and of the position rightfully belonging to Black civilization among the nations of the world. Paul Rivet's anthropology course, which he took in 1938, proved invaluable to him, because Rivet "had the gift of finding black blood and influence in all kinds of places. I owe him several cardinal concepts. He taught that all the great civilizations of history have been the result of biological and cultural cross-fertilization among the three races, the white, yellow and black races." 110

Another important influence on Senghor was Plato, whose works he reread in 1940–1942 as a prisoner of war in Germany. They confirmed him in the belief that "the 'miracle' of Greek civilization was not that of the Indo-
European spirit, but rather of the biological crossbreeding between Prehellenic and Hellenic population strains, and above all the miracle of cultural cross-fertilization. It is after all the Greeks, from Homer to Strabo, who spoke most highly of the 'Ethiopians', that is to say the blacks. This discovery, made once again as I faced the Nazis, helped me to transform my life, to move progressively toward the theory of cultural cross-fertilization as a civilizing ideal.¹¹¹

This brief survey does not by any means exhaust the list of the many converging intellectual currents which inspired Senghor. There was for instance Victor Hugo’s poetic phrasing, at once stately and sensitive, and Goethe’s “restrained romanticism” and connectedness to the earth. And he was moved by Marx’s utopian vision of a brotherly society where men would freely pursue the most humanistic of all activities, which is “to create works of beauty for the happiness of mankind”.

All these contributions played a part in the development of an intellect deeply rooted in African soil, but open to Western sources, currents, influences and cultural exchanges. Nevertheless, the warm glow of Senghor’s writing is due essentially to the radiance of the African or Ethiopian sun, and the “Elegy for the Queen of Sheba” is typical in this respect.

On the other hand, Senghor was literally fascinated by the musicality of some poems he particularly admired, and specifically by their highly effective synergy of sentiment, imagery and melodic quality of the words. So much so that these lines recur, with hardly any modifications, in his own verse. They become an open door allowing an aesthetic interchange between Africa and Europe, and initiate a dialogue, or rather a choral in which several voices join in the same celebration of an “elemental” poetry. Senghor has written: “I confess to being an ‘auditory’ type. What strikes and delights me first, in a poem, is its sensual quality: the rhythm of the verse, and its music.”¹¹²

When he first read it in 1944, Saint-John Perse’s poem entitled “Exile” overwhelmed Senghor, and echoes are perceptible here and there in his own poetry, for instance in “The Absent Woman”:

My glory is to charm the Absent Woman’s Spell ...
Every vain thing under the [winnow], every vanity in the wind
And the smell of slaughters ...

Which immediately reminds one of these intensely musical lines in “Exile”:¹¹⁴
My fame is on the sands! My fame is on the sands! [...] 
Ah! All is vain in the winnowing of memory! All insane among the fifes of exile!...

The same stylistic devices are used (anaphora, alliteration, choice of words), but they carry the imagination in totally different directions: toward the insubstantial or abstract in Saint-John Perse's case and the carnal in that of Senghor (charms, smell, slaughters). Besides, the French alliterations bring about a sharp phonic and semantic break.

In the second "Song for Signare", the rhythm and inspiration of the following lines are reminiscent of Joachim du Bellay:

... When will I see my country again,
The pure horizon of your face? When will I sit again
At the table of your dark breasts? ...
I shall see other skies and other eyes,
I shall drink at the springs of other mouths ...
I shall sleep sheltered ... under roofs
Of other heads of hair. But each year ...
I shall miss my homeland and the rain from your eyes ...

Even though Senghor describes a feminine landscape, the similarity to "Regrets" is striking:

I miss the woods and the golden fields,
The vineyards, gardens and verdant meadows.
When, alas, shall I see again the smoking chimneys
Of my small village?

The subject of Senghor's paper for his degree in literature was Exoticism in Baudelaire's Writings, so that occasional echoes of this quality in his own works are hardly surprising. We have already compared Ndèssé or "Blues" and "Spleen", but these echoes are also found in "Songs for Signare":

And we will be bathed, my love, in African presence.
Furniture from Guinea and the Congo, serious and polished,
Sombre and serene. Pure and primordial masks ...
... Seats of honour for family guests, ...
... Wild scents, thick mats
Of silence, shady cushions for leisure, the noise of a well of peace.
Your face has the beauty of ancient times! Bring out
The pagnes perfumed with the music of the past...

This unabashed pastiche may have something to do with Senghor’s wish to emphasize the subtle attractions of an Africa too often unappreciated by the West. Aware that “L’invitation au voyage” is one of the best-known and most-quoted poems in _Flowers of Evil_, Senghor transposed it in an African mode.

Finally, here and there at the heart of a poem, a door to a different world is opened by a word, an expression or a sentence:

- the mystical world of St. Theresa of Avila, whose “I die from not dying” is mirrored in Senghor’s “The Absent Woman” (“... and I die from not dying / And I die from living with an empty heart”) and “Elegy of Midnight” (“... this pain of living, this dying / From not being able to die”);  

- the poetic world of Paul Valéry’s “The Young Goddess Fate” is echoed, again in “The Absent Woman” (“Greetings to the Present Woman ... / I become the Serpent-Dove benumbed with the delight of her bite”) and also in “Elegy of the Circumcised” (“The poem is a snake-bird, the dawn marriage of shadow and light”).

Conversely, Senghor noted the cross-fertilization so beneficial to Rimbaud, a point which, to our knowledge, has received scant attention from critics and scholars, who seem to disregard his claim to be black. Yet, as Senghor points out:

... when he proclaimed in _A Season in Hell_ that he was a “nègre”, the poet consciously referred to the essential values of Negritude: to “instinct”, which is the intuition of Africans, and more precisely to their power of symbolic imagination. This is suggested by expressions such as “the colour of vowels”, “the form and movement of each consonant”, “instinctive rhythms”, and “a poetic idiom accessible ... to all the senses”. Rimbaud does not separate thinking from action, spirit from the soul, nor the latter from the body.

Again, how could one doubt the major role of synesthesia in African languages, which “are as much for the eyes as for the ears”, as Rivarol put it. It is a fact that in all civilizations of orality, language is mnemo-melodic.

Cultural cross-fertilization always involves a letting go of the self, a giving up of familiar and comfortable intellectual patterns. It assumes a certain curiosity and an acceptance of and respect for the differences in others. It is pre-eminentely the art of giving and receiving. Resting on brotherhood, it flourishes in and through love.
Love

Whereas “Hell is the absence of any gaze”, Senghor describes Paradise, or supreme happiness, as “a heaven / Full of love where one lives twice in a single lifetime, / An eternity where one lives to love and for love.”

Love is the fundamental movement allowing man to carry out his role in the world. It should inform every human action. In Senghor’s view, this is the basis on which love of life should be expressed. The implied aesthetic view of the world, consonant with traditional African ethics, may be summarized in a single imperative: “To contribute to the establishment of harmony in the universe.” Senghor’s partiality to Claudel and Teilhard de Chardin stems largely from the attitude he shares with them in this essential area.

Senghor is fond of quoting Claudel’s aesthetic approach as reflected in this dictum: “Ne impedias musicam. Do not hinder the music. Behave so that your actions and most secret thoughts not only do not interfere with the harmony of which you are a part, but promote and achieve it around them.”

And in a letter to Mohamed Aziza, Senghor praised Teilhard de Chardin’s views on the subject: “I refer you to the admirable pages Fr. Teilhard de Chardin has written on the human couple and on love. In love, he tells us, the whole point, for each of these two beings, is to respond to the call from the Other, to tune into the Other, to identify with the Other, to become lost in the Other, and by so doing to assimilate the being of the Other. This is how two beings complement one another, through a process of mutual enrichment and development”.

“This is what I try to express in my poems,” Senghor concluded.

Reading through Senghor’s poetic works once again, we remain struck by the power of his language of love to reconcile and heal, to inspire harmonious cooperation and overcome distrust and differences.

Starting with Shadow Songs, this language of love challenges the white world, seeking a dialogue. It rejects the disorder and ugliness of racism, but knows how to forgive. It disarms hostility by offering eloquent and exuberant African poems such as “Black Woman”, “Black Mask”, and “Prayer to the Masks”. It reveals and celebrates the beauty of humble gestures, as in “Nurse Emma Payelleville”. And we are reminded of Senghor’s words to Mohamed Aziza: “In every man I admire what is positive and true, good and beautiful.”
In *Black Hosts*, the language of love gives back life and dignity to the Senegalese soldiers buried in anonymity and oblivion. And the last poem is a “Prayer for Peace”.

As for *Ethiopiques*, written and published at a time of impassioned political debate and of the final struggle for the independence of African countries, we see in them a vibrant hymn to Negritude. The opening poem, “Man and Beast”, shows a marked initiatory quality: it describes the various stages of man’s gradual emergence, from swamps and mud to pristine lake: “And the lake blooms with water lilies, dawn of divine laughter.”

All the disturbances and hatreds are metaphorically portrayed: “Tsetse flies and gnats, toads and snakes / Poisonous spiders and spiked lizards”, “scorpions ... and chameleons ... / The monkeys’ laughter”, political lies and acts of treachery. All this must disappear, making way for the hope and beauty of renewal, for the Independence of Africa, for the return of “The Absent Woman”, who is the Ethiopian, the Queen of Sheba, Negritude, the African soul:

> Then softly, the women told me of the Absent Woman,  
> They sang so sweetly in the dark the song of the Absent Woman  
> As if cradling a baby in its dark skin,  
> And then the [flame-trees] announced the return of the Queen of Sheba.  
> From afar the Good News was announced ...

The manner in which Senghor has transformed the historical figure of Shaka also seems meaningful. Shaka was a bloodthirsty Zulu conqueror, whose exploits have been chronicled by Mafolo, but Senghor makes him a hero of Negritude. Nowhere does he explain the liberties he has taken in this respect. One may wonder whether the recasting of this character might not be a way of pointing out the desirable evolution of History (as in “Man and Beast”). The hero Senghor brings back to life is reborn with twentieth-century concerns, among others the need to return African civilization to its proper place and to resolve the dialectics of culture and politics, by emphasizing the love of his own people:

> It is not hatred to love one’s people.  
> I said there is no peace under arms, no peace under oppression,  
> No brotherhood without equality. I wanted all men to be brothers.

Two poems of love, “Letters to the Princess” and “Other Songs”, conclude
Ethiopiques. These poems show the poet's love for Colette Hubert, who was soon to become his wife. The influence of this love would spread far beyond them both, for the lines foreshadow the full union not only of two beings, but also of two cultures, of two continents:

The heaven of your spirit, the highland of your presence,
The blue night of your heart are to me
Celebrations of Initiation. You are my universe.132

Senghor is now fully at peace with himself: his heart and his thinking are in harmony. His later poetic writings (Nocturnes in 1961, Letters in the season of Hivernage in 1974, and Major Elegies in 1979) bear witness to this new-found congruence. His initiatory quest has fulfilled its dual purpose:

- Through the achievement of Independence: the long-awaited Queen of Sheba will reclaim her Africa. Senghor becomes President of Senegal.
- Through the fullness of an interracial love in his own life: the poet's marriage to Colette Hubert, his Norman wife.

Love has become a presence. The themes now converge around the Queen of Sheba and the beloved woman.

The Queen of Sheba

In the Poems, she is the personification of the African soul, as shown in the major elegy written for her, which immediately provides a fresh insight into this whole portion of the Senghorian œuvre.

The Poems now appear, in this new light, as a hymn of love relating Senghor's long and finally successful search for the Queen of Sheba, and the many connotations of femininity thus take on their full significance.

In Shadow Songs, before being found, she is but a dream ("Black Woman"), a sigh ("Black Mask"), a call ("The Message"). The poet longs for the sources of his history, whose waters he has tasted as a child:

My childhood ... is as old as the world,
And I am as young as the ever-young dawn of the world.
The women poets of the shrine suckled me,
And the King's griots sang to me in the Kord's high tones
The true legend of my race.133
He travels up the stream of time, through the centuries. By stages, he seeks his Ancestors to find the "deep pulse of Africa", the Elissa Elders, the last king of Sine, Koumba Ndofène Diouf, the princes of Mali and the mother of Sira-Badral, who founded the kingdom of Sine. He journeys back across the desert and reaches Ethiopia, the sacred land he believes to be the cradle of the black race. There he finds the Ethiopian Woman, the original manifestation of the Queen of Sheba. In a long psalm-like poem, "At the Call of the Race of Sheba", he celebrates his ancestry:

Bless you, Mother!
Recognize your son from his authentic gaze,
Which is his heart and his lineage.¹³⁴

"Spring Song", written in 1944, voices the hope that France will recognize Africa, in accordance with the commitments made by the Provisional French Government:

Listen to distant Africa's message and the song of your blood!¹³⁵

The poet announces the return of "The Absent Woman", whose heralds are "Shaka" and "Aynina Fall", while Senghor acts as dyali, or bard.

The path is full of pitfalls, delays and tribulations, but the poetic message, guided by the songs of love and faith, grows increasingly insistent:

She forces me across the thickets of Time without ever letting up.
My black blood pursues me through the throng ...¹³⁶

From then on, the Queen of Sheba appears constantly in the poems. Thanks to Independence, she is the soul of Africa finally going home.

Her return is the occasion for a great celebration, which becomes the blissful conclusion of the "Elegy for the Queen of Sheba", a conclusion he pondered at considerable length. "It was in my mind for about five years,"¹³⁷ he said, adding: "I wanted ... to commemorate the Afro-Semitic biological and cultural cross-fertilization. At the same time, I wanted the Queen of Sheba to symbolize black Africa, Love and Poetry." Adopting the views of Professor Martiny, the anthropologist, Senghor felt it was "the black Woman who carried out this cross-fertilization, and therefore produced the Mediterranean miracle". He placed his Africa back at the heart of the Mediterranean civilization, and by the same token restored Africans to their proper place in the history of human thought.
This elegy is also the culmination and conclusion of his love. Senghor has received the Queen of Sheba’s message:

... You uttered a word: may I turn around
On my heels toward you, toward myself, my source,
My dream of love in the childhood garden ...
... I need to sing of your beauty
To appease the anguish, and toward the hill enter
The Childhood Kingdom to keep my Promise to Sira-Badral.

This is the betrothal, followed by the union of the poet to the Queen of Sheba, the Voice of Negritude, “Singing the song that moves me to the root of my being”. In concluding the poem, Senghor chooses initiatory terms which place his entire quest in a traditional context (“You are my sacred wood”), while connoting the Judeo-Christian cross-fertilization (“my temple and tabernacle, ... my palm tree”).

The elegy ends in poetic creation: “Then I create the poem: the new world in the paschal joy!”

In 1954, Senghor wrote in the postface to *Ethiopiques*: “Poetry must not die. For what would then happen to the World’s hope?” Now the Queen of Sheba, returning to the place that is rightfully hers among the nations of the world, can henceforth make her song heard: “Musical and harmonic movement, ... her Amazon bravery, her slender silken tongue, / Her skill at making riddles ...” Then, “Farewell, cold and dry winter!”

All the themes and demands of Senghorian poetics find their fullest expression in these lines.

In *Shadow Songs*, Black Soukeina and White Isabelle personified “these two competing worlds ... [which] I would unite in my warm hand once again”, the poet wrote. Now his wish is fulfilled, as his marriage to Colette Hubert carries out the dream of interracial love: “And my country of salt and yours of snow sing in unison.”

**The Beloved Woman**

Infinitely beguiling, emblematic of affection and complementarity, woman plays a primary role in Senghor’s writings and life. This is willingly acknowledged by him: “When I was a young professor, I would say, entirely without cynicism: ‘Two things interest me, books and Women.’ And also: ‘Without
Woman, life would not be worth living. The capitalization indicates the feeling of worship Woman inspires in him.

The beloved woman, the poet’s wife, brings harmony and reconciliation into his heart and writings:

You reveal to me the faces of my brothers the white men.

The Letters in the Season of Hivernage show the alchemy of a love whose secrets are all the images found throughout these poems, images we must reassemble over and over again in different ways to discover every time a different and wondrous vision of the beloved Woman’s Kingdom, which is a face of the Kingdom of Childhood. In this connection, one of Claudel’s comments comes to mind: “When a poet cuts some of his poems into pieces and scatters them here and there, the result is a kind of dispersion of meaning ... [which leads to] the search for harmony in a soluble language.”

In these finely textured Letters in a Season of Hivernage, the “I” and “you” pronouns are closely interwoven: “I think you and live the living you.” Senghor emphasizes the merger of “I” and “you” in the living experience of a single awareness. To “think someone” or “live someone” is to reflect the osmosis of love. When he writes “I think of you and for you”, or “Your sunny eyes endlessly arouse the sap of my blood”, Senghor suggests what he expresses more directly elsewhere: “And you, Sopé, are my double, the double of my double”, for

... through black spaces blooming with stars, through walls,
Chains, blood, through masks and death
We have a telephone direct to the heart:
The code known only to us.

“Known only to us”, since this harmony and plenitude are the result of a long journey, of self-discipline and an understanding of the other which cannot be taught, but is experienced in the mystery of a surreal reality. Yet Senghor’s way of looking at beings and things makes it possible to glimpse a few facets of this kingdom of the beloved woman alive in his innermost self, a reality he is in touch with through all his senses. It is a Kingdom of Love, a landscape redolent of heady, clinging fragrances, obstinate like an insistent yet elusive presence, intermingled with a few subtle, delicate and vaporous scents: there are the feminine aroma of guavas, the perfume of wild jasmine, the proud roses, the oleander releasing its last fragrance, the lemon-scented tamarinds, a blue letter sweeter than hyssop, the gold scent of jujube trees, “your per-
fume”, “your letter flowering with September roses”. And finally: “Your scent always your scent, more exalting than the smell / Of lilies lifting from the bush ... / Your fragrant neck guides me, your scent aroused by Africa ...”

The favourite animals of this Kingdom are winged like the imagination in its impulse and freedom, in its flight toward the beloved Woman. The poems show the fairy-tale bluebird, the blue thrush, the blue flycatcher, the touraco “as huge as your mirage”, the Halcyon Senegalensis, the crowned cranes, swans, dragonflies, nightingales, Barbary gonoleks, and above all the harmony between white seagulls and black ducks. Capturing the poet’s attention in a special way, “White butterflies with black bodies, embroidered in black”, symbolize cross-fertilization.

In this Kingdom, the poet discovers an unprecedented fullness of being. He experiences the poetry of the senses (I live, I sniff, I feel, I see), as well as the harmony of depths and spaces, the loving union of man and the elements: “The sea and your smile [...] shine like opals in the morning.” There is the tenderness of the human gaze and the sensuous responsiveness of everything the poet beholds:

Come, the night drips on the white terraces, and you  
Will come again. The moon caresses the sea with its light  
From transparent ashes. In the distance the stars rest  
On the abyss of the seaside night and the island stretches  
Like a Milky Way.

This landscape of scents, birds, familiar sounds and dreams offers a glimpse and a hint of the Kingdom of Childhood, which is love and poetry: “Light, music, fragrances, without which meaning / I would not exist. / No promises: I am your joy as you are my being.” “Oh, to sing of the light from your large, calm eyes / ... my beauty, to sing of your eyes, your scent.”

These Letters are the very heart of a major song of love, foreshadowed by “Letters to the Princess” and continuing in “Elegy of the Trade Winds”. The breath of inspiration reveals the mystery of a fundamental harmony voiced in 1953: “Your voice, your eyes that gave birth to me each day”. Senghor expresses the same love, celebrating with undiminished tenderness the features of the beloved when her beauty has started to lose its bloom:

I love your young wrinkles, those shadows that your September smile  
Colours an old pink, those commissure flowers of your eyes  
And mouth. Your eyes and smile ...
In “Elegy of the Trade Wind”, the poet’s inspiration retains the freshness of a love ever renewed, and expresses the fullest harmony:

Night came while I awaited the flood ...
... I will be beneath your eyes, and the smile of your Trade Wind eyes will blow upon my fever, your green-gold eyes Like your country, so cool in the June solstice. But where are you, eyes of my eyes, my blond woman, My Norman woman, my conqueror?  

Such a love endows Senghor’s thinking with an even greater ability to overcome life’s inevitable anxieties and tribulations. In his frame of reference, these are absence, solitude, time slipping away, lack of fulfilment, nightmares blurring vision, obscuring and distorting the landscape: “In shadows and swamps, at the bottom of the poto-poto of anguish / And impasse, in the rolling stream of my dead dreams ...”

But “those huge eyes, like fortresses against death”, give the poet a new lease on life:

Only you, your presence, can save my hope. You, my present tense, my indicative, my imperfect, You, my perfect, not your letters, but your sunny lips Of eternal summer.

Light and shadow, heat and cold are never far apart in Senghorian thematics: they express both sides of life as the poet experiences it. In August 1986, while in Cérizy, he confided to us that unalloyed “happiness is too much to expect. It is always accompanied by a certain touch of misfortune.”

The finest of Senghor’s poems, showing him most clearly as the Great Initiate, a man who has learned all the lessons of Life and experienced its most bitter moments, may well be the “Elegy for Philippe Maguilen Senghor”, his son, “flower of our union”, who died accidentally at the age of twenty.

The poet draws us along with him into a pit of grief, and at the same time carries us to the heights of a transcendence that cannot assuage his sorrow, but does allow him to experience simultaneously the two extremes of death and eternity, brought together in a deep African and Christian faith.

In the first stanza, from the mists of time, the supplications of King David ring out, echoing Psalm 6, which expresses the very essence of suffering:

In “Elegy of the Trade Wind”, the poet’s inspiration retains the freshness of a love ever renewed, and expresses the fullest harmony:
I have laboured in my groanings, every night I will wash my bed: 
I will water my couch with my tears. My eye is troubled through indignation. 

Senghor gives a similar account of grief:

The days marched by in gloomy boubous, and night-days were sleepless. 
The women weepers have exhausted the well of their tears 
Without numbing our rebellious pain.

At the bottom of this abyss, however, the collective “we” — rather than the isolated “I” — anchors Senghor deeply in a commitment to pursue Life even beyond Death: “... we have searched / The old house for a foundation for our hope / And the park that keeps the footsteps, games, and joys of generations.”

The second stanza brings the poet’s thoughts back to the moment frozen in time, planted in his memory like a sword: “... It was the seventh of June, at Pentecost ... suddenly a ring from the white telephone ... white lightning.”

Again, his wife is there, and he cries out in anguish: “You were all in white, haloed and pink, my Norman woman / Under your airy sunbonnet ... / And suddenly like a willowy flower you fell into my arms.”

In the third stanza, words of denial alternate painfully with an awareness of the inevitable:

And I said “No!” to the doctor. “My son isn’t dead. He can’t be.”
No, No! ...
No! you are not a jealous god ...

The past indicative then repeatedly expresses submissiveness and acceptance, in a new wave of grief: “He was spring to our autumn of decline. His smile was dawn, ... / He was life and his mother’s reason to live ...”

Once again the poet’s eyes rest on his wife: “... O terrifying God of Abraham! / And you have crucified his mother on a tree of embers and ice. / ... But she stood up again, we all stood up, having faith in faith.”

And now the light of transcendence shines down on the poem:

So let Your will be done. On the day of Resurrection may our child 
Rise in the dawning sun, in the transfiguration of his beauty!

The fourth stanza is a long description of the funeral procession: “... all along the streets in tears ... / The pious youth carrying him in their hearts ... / But
the studious women students know the only dead that live / Are those whose names are sung.”

The African and Christian views of death come together in Senghor’s writings. In the African tradition, the deceased must be accompanied on their journey to the beyond, for “the dead undertakes a real initiatory voyage when he proceeds toward God and his ancestors”. Songs and prayers frequently refer to this journey of the dead. An example is provided by the incantations of the Mbalas, in Zaire:

You who are already on the way,
Show others how to reach the realm of the God of the dead...
Yes, here he is! He is arriving:
He is on the way,
Prepare an abode for him,
And also for us,
For we will come to join him.162

In the same spirit, Senghor describes the journey, and his use of the future tense reflects hope: “When the day of Love has come ... / To the right hand of the living Christ ... / Among the singing black Seraphim ... / And you will accompany them ... / You will root ... / Will come forward gently ... / You will let loose the faint cry of pain and joy, / The same cry of paradise, which is happiness.”

The poem ends with words that reveal an accepted suffering turning into a source of expectation, hope and transcendence, in a presence ever renewed as the seasons follow one another: “O may September return and its tenderness ... / I leave the Labyrinth, thinking of you and the September farewell ... / When I hear rising toward heaven: Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus!”

Even in the cruelest suffering, Senghor remains true to a way of life, a firm determination to fulfil his destiny by seeing in every tribulation an opportunity for self-transcendence.

This initiatory path reflects an absolute faithfulness to life, in spite of all the trials and injuries involved. “For to live is to survive, which means to call on all one’s resources, to bend all one’s energies, in a collective and daily effort, to the task of moving beyond one’s limitations and persevering in one’s being.”163

Senghor had started with an act of faith, the publication in 1947 of “Song of the Initiate”, in the first issue of Présence africaine. He struggled through all
the intermediate initiatory stages of suffering, death and rebirth. Finally, in his *Major Elegies*, he shows Man reaching his fullest stature and demonstrates human fulfilment in a spirit of both presence and transcendence.