Conclusion: Tradition and Universalism

This long search undertaken in Senghor's footsteps allows us to bring out the deeply humanistic cast of his thinking.

Senghor's poetry expresses his sense of commitment and tirelessly seeks values transcending a cultural polarization which stultifies thinking. In 1961, during a conversation with Armand Guibert, Senghor described his own experience:

... from a very early age, my inner life was torn between the call of my Ancestors and the pull of Europe, between the demands of Black African culture and the requirements of modern living. My poetry often reflects these conflicts, which are the crux of the poems I write.

Nevertheless, I have always sought to resolve such conflicts through a 'reconciling agreement'...

The balance you admire is an unstable one, difficult to maintain...

Indeed, this balance is often upset. It has to be not only re-established, but also improved.

I do not complain: the crises and efforts impel us forward and account for man's greatness.¹

Senghor never became resigned to having his life torn apart in this manner. From Shadow Songs to Major Elegies, we have witnessed the boldness of a mind always leaping far ahead, exploring new horizons and listening to other voices under the impulse of a rhythm reflecting above all else the dialectics of diverse
cultures. However, this rhythm is informed and directed by fundamental initiatory values which channel his efforts and bring a remarkable unity to his achievements as a poet, a thinker and a statesman. In Senghor we find the triumph of a harmonious personality for whom word and action are inseparable. His message is that we “must first be rooted in our native soil and culture, and only then, from that base, must assimilate, in ever-widening circles, all other civilizations and cultures”. Senghor then reaches the following conclusion:

... all of us – all continents, races, nations and civilizations – are embarked on the same destiny. It is not enough to say that, in this great adventure, we must of necessity stick together. We must do more, by cultivating our differences so that we may all benefit. Only in this fashion may we be saved ... by creating a third way, that of ‘reconciling agreement’, which alone can enhance our humanity and enrich our lives, within a Universal Civilization.

Senghor’s is a poetry of action, emphasizing the dynamics of being, and more specifically stressing such factors as the vital force, will power, the significance of suffering, the successive deaths and rebirths of the self, and our links to the cosmos. Light and shadow, harsh and gentle notes alternate as in a counterpoint of life and death, but the will to believe and hope is always present and dominant.

This poetry gives voice to a vigorous existential philosophy: its impact on the Western psyche should be considerable, for it brings a fresh inspiration to the many thinkers labouring under the constraints of a science without conscience, an ideology without humanism, a religion without God ... or under the weight of a debilitating discouragement described by Maurice Schumann in Angoisse et Certitude: “... a subtle and irreversible shift is revealed: I no longer fear my own death so much as what might be called the death of the world as Martin Heidegger viewed it, that is, the locus of meaning.”

To some extent, Senghor’s views parallel those of Erich Fromm who, in To Have or to Be, wrote that “our only hope lies in the energizing attraction of a new vision ..., [a] ‘utopian’ goal [...] more realistic than the ‘realism’ of today’s leaders. The realization of the new society and new Man is possible only if the old motivations of profit and power are replaced by new ones: being, sharing, understanding.”

Indeed, has not man, dazzled by his own genius, settled into a dominance where pride, vanity and ambition prevail over humanistic concerns? Has he
not lost his bearings in relation to Life, to his life? Is he still in touch with reality, with his reality?

These questions emerge repeatedly in Senghor's writings. He asserts that "the reality of a being, and even of a thing, ... is the nexus of relationships with the realities of other beings and other things ..." And, at a very early stage, he has forewarned us against the threat to human integrity raised by a misconception of freedom.

Freedom is not a state of being, but rather a process, a highly demanding progression wedded to life itself. It means self-knowledge and an absolute commitment to life, a love of life that knows no reservations or boundaries.

To gain self-knowledge, we must first travel backward in time, seeking our roots, for every man is the last link in a chain connecting him to his ancestors. From his forebears came the original sap, enriched over the generations through the life experiences and cultural accretions of successive descendants, down to the contemporary holder of this heritage; for he too, in a spirit of respect for the cultural past, will in turn be required to enrich and bequeath to his own issue both what he has received and what he has personally experienced.

In the words of a well-known African proverb, in order to continue flowing, a river must never be cut off from its source. This truth also applies to man, and Senghor proclaims it:

I myself was the grandfather of my grandfather,
I was his soul and his lineage...  

And it is a heavy responsibility, to preserve and pass on what has been a source of life, without either distorting or impairing the spirit or soul of this past, so actively present within man:

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...  

Yes, as a first step we must become conscious of the inheritance received from our Ancestors and our Culture. This heritage opens the way to a very special knowledge, that of underlying reality which, beyond the ephemerality of our existence, connects us with our permanence and immortality. Such a percep-
tion leads to a spirituality that outreaches our earthbound existence, revealing the dimensions of Life, and therefore of God, its Creator.

Moreover, a wider and truer freedom opens to man, one that enables him to look beyond his own temporal limitations and allows him to reach a more soundly based level of knowledge, one that takes into account much more than his actual experience. It avoids the shortsightedness of whoever lives only in the immediate, without a sense of proportion, without any points of reference beyond events.

This is why Senghor has always given precedence to culture over politics. In order to become free, man should not be led by events. On the contrary, he must start from his own culture and from those deeper values which cause him to love and respect Life. On the foundation of these essential values he must put events into proper perspective and give them only relative importance.

Culture is the wellspring of living waters which must continue to sustain Life through endless time and space. Though partly fed by tributaries born elsewhere, culture must keep the savour of its original waters, it must preserve its soul. “True freedom,” Senghor writes, “is integrity of the soul.” Man should look back in time, upstream from his own life, to find his cultural sources, in order to draw sustenance from them and view his own existence in relation to the ages. In doing so, man must take in hand the unfolding of his History: it is up to him to create it, to direct it constantly, to orient it amid events without being overcome or destroyed by them. Again, let us emphasize that Black African cultural values as defined by Senghor (that is, Negritude) have undergone a thorough sifting, and in the process have been freed from the negative weight of past tragedies and vicissitudes. For Senghor seeks to retain only the life-sustaining lessons of the past. He has not erased from his memory the image of “Africa crucified for four hundred years,” but Life must prevail over Death, and culture over events.

Such is the philosophical and political path travelled by Senghor: giving priority to culture, he rejected contempt, hatred and violence, whose negative effects are incalculable for the originator as well as the victim, since both lose the freedom to transcend their own limitations. Indeed, the past demands from the human spirit a capacity for transcendence. Through the power of the spirit and of faith, through spiritualization, through a distancing of emotions and through a supreme love of life, any death, any sacrifice, any injustice must undergo a transmutation leading to a greater fulfilment of the human potential. Senghor proclaims that there is no door that closes on Life:
The vast song of your blood will conquer machines and cannons,
Your throbbing words, the deceptions and lies:
Not a bit of hate in your hateless soul, no guile
In your guileless soul.
O black Martyrs, immortal race, let me say the words
That forgive."

Thus, Senghor offers an answer to man's anxiety concerning his future, a foreboding which pervades Western thinking at the deepest level and has been expressed by many of our contemporaries.

Eliane Amado Lévy-Valensi, for instance, notes that "from one concept to the next, there is a growing alienation from the original realities, from the exuberance of being, from the ceaseless outpouring of unforeseeable innovation which to Bergson is the very essence of life, whereas ideology seeks to confine the impetuous flow within rigid channels or to stem it with the last word in verbal or thermonuclear weaponry."  

And Jacques Ellul observes "this effort of the European intelligentsia to deconstruct man, to unravel personality, to dilute and weaken ..." He further stresses "the current peril, the tremendous risk we are running with the explosive spread of computers and robots ..., the danger of gradually reducing speech to this inhuman, external and object-oriented role, which indeed means that speech would become merely an instrument or adjunct of action. We would then lose our human specificity. Without what lies beyond words and what remains unsaid, speech would be nothing more than a utilitarian coded language."  

How could Poetry survive in such a world?

And how could we be surprised by the prime importance Senghor ascribes to Poetry? "... from the first poem which I did not consign to the fire, the symbolic image came to me along with the poem, and in this I was not unlike the African neophyte undergoing the first stage of his initiation."

Symbols, beyond the surface of words and images, open Senghor's poetry to the vision of a surreality accessible to those who resist the temptation to reduce the world to what they are capable of understanding; to those who accept to plunge into reality's depths, into the mystery of the universe, into the wonders of the inexpressible. These elude our immediate awareness and may be perceived only if we live in close communion with Nature. Rediscovery of the paths leading to a knowledge based on man's cosmic permeability
allows him to regain his true dimensions and to discover a freedom growing from the fullness of being.

This fundamental message, drawn from the African sources of Initiation, is offered by Senghor "to the world, as a cornerstone in the construction of a Universal Civilization".16
Notes

Abbreviations:

  - SS *Shadow Songs*
  - BH *Black Hosts*
  - Eth *Ethiopiques*
  - N *Nocturnes*
  - SP *Selected Poems*
  - LH *Letters in the Season of Hivernage*
  - ME *Major Elegies*
  - LP *Lost Poems*


L S Senghor: the Man and the Author

1 D, pp. 353–354.

2 This is the meaning we have in mind whenever we refer to man’s “senses”.

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Part One
Entering the Forest of Initiation: The Obstacles

1 L III, p. 307.
3 CP, SS, p. 3.
4 L I, p. 133.
5 L III, p. 216.
6 CP, SS, p. 30.
7 CP, SP, p. 162.
8 L I, p. 27.
9 PA, p. 53.
11 Dominique Zahan, *The Religions, Spirituality and Thought of Traditional Africa*.
12 Gaston Bachelard, *La Terre et les Réveries du repos*, p. 82.
13 L I, p. 332.
14 L I, p. 142.
16 CP, BH, p. 62.
17 CP, Eth, p. 87.
18 CP, SS, p. 6.
19 CP, Eth, p. 94.
20 CP, SS, p. 13.
21 CP, SS, pp. 3–4.
22 CP, SP, p. 159.
23 CP, SP, p. 158.
26 L III, p. 303.
27 CP, SS, p. 13.
29 L II, p. 18.
30 CP, Eth, p. 86.
31 CP, BH, p. 43.
32 CP, BH, p. 68.
33 CP, BH, p. 62.
34 CP, BH, p. 41.
35 CP, BH, p. 54.
36 CP, Eth, pp. 90 ff.
38 CP, BH, p. 46.
39 CP, BH, p. 48.
40 CP, BH, p. 49.
41 L III, p. 290.
42 CP, BH, p. 61.
43 CP, BH, p. 39.
44 L II, pp. 22–23.
45 L I, p. 25.
46 CP, BH, p. 62.
47 PA, pp. 336–337.
48 CP, Eth, p. 108.
49 D, p. 351.
50 CP, Eth, p. 85.
51 CP, BH, p. 55.
52 CP, CH, p. 70.
53 CP, SS, p. 13.
54 L II, p. 9.
55 CP, BH, p. 69.
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The Night of Initiation: The Many Forms of Existential Angst

1 CP, ME, p. 211.
2 CP, SS, p. 33.
3 CP, SS, p. 15.
4 CP, SP, p. 157.
5 CP, N, p. 128.
6 CP, Eth, p. 117.
7 CP, ME, p. 212.
8 CP, BH, p. 54.
9 CP, BH, p. 62.
10 CP, Eth, p. 116.
12 CP, N, p. 124.
13 CP, N, p. 137.
16 CP, SS, p. 18.
17 CP, SS, p. 25.
18 CP, LH, p. 181.
20 CP, BH, p. 57.
21 CP, BH, p. 40.
22 CP, SS, p. 16.
23 CP, BH, p. 41.
24 CP, SS, p. 30.
25 CP, SS, p. 28.
26 CP, BH, p. 43.
27 CP, BH, pp. 49–50.
28 CP, BH, p. 62.
29 CP, SS, p. 25.
31 CP, ME, p. 222.
33 L III, p. 131.
34 CP, SS, p. 22.
35 CP, SS, p. 29.
36 CP, N, pp. 140–142.
37 CP, LH, p. 172.
38 CP, Eth, p. 84.
39 CP, BH, pp. 49–50.
40 CP, ME, p. 214.
41 CP, ME, p. 191.
42 CP, N, p. 140.
43 CP, BH, p. 49.
44 L II, p. 106.
46 CP, N, p. 123.
47 L I, p. 137.
Part Three

The Initiatory Teaching: Presence and Transcendence

2. Dominique Zahan, *op. cit.*
5. *CP, SS*, p. 3.
6. *CP, SS*, p. 3.
22. *L III*, p. 73.
23  L III, p. 73.
24  Genesis 3, 17–19.
25  Colloque de Cotonou, p. 80.
26  Colloque de Cotonou, p. 401.
28  L III, pp. 222–223.
29  L I, p. 203.
30  L I, p. 209.
31  L III, p. 234.
33  L I, p. 264.
34  L III, p. 220.
35  L III, p. 367.
37  L II, pp. 187–188.
39  L I, p. 199.
41  CP, SS, p. 23.
42  CP, SS, p. 6.
43  CP, SS, pp. 8–9.
44  CP, SS, p. 24.
46  CP, BH, pp. 63–66.
48  L I, p. 310.
49  L III, p. 144.
50  CP, SS, pp. 9–10.
51  CP, N, p. 126.
52  L I, p. 117.
53  CP, BH, p. 61.
54  CP, BH, p. 45.
55  CP, BH, p. 42.
56  CP, N, p. 133.
57  CP, SS, p. 3.
58  CP, SS, p. 25.
59  Quoted (*hands*): CP, pp. 25, 72, 86, 100, 116, 147.
60  CP, SS, pp. 11–12.
61  Quoted (*eyes*): CP, pp. 17, 55, 129, 104, 136.
62  Quoted (*voice*): CP, pp. 108, 128.
63  Quoted (*smell*): CP, pp. 159, 180, 168, 80.

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64 CP, LH, p. 184.
65 CP, BH, pp. 63–64.
66 CP, SS, p. 21.
67 L I, p. 199.
68 Papa Gueye N'Diaye, op. cit., p. 17.
69 CP, Eth, pp. 76–78.
70 Papa Gueye N'Diaye, op. cit., p. 23.
71 CP, Eth, p. 109.
72 L III, p. 368.
73 Gaston Bachelard, Water and Dreams.
74 CP, N, p. 141.
75 CP, Eth, p. 86.
76 E. Mveng, L'Art d'Afrique noire, p. 75.
78 E. Mveng, op. cit., p. 73.
79 Hubert de Leusse, Des Poèmes aux Lettres d'Hivernage, pp. 94–95.
80 D, p. 361.
81 Raponda-Walker and R. Sillans, op. cit., p. 269.
82 CP, SS, p. 11.
83 CP, pp. 13, 23, 70, 39, 60, 84.
84 CP, BH, p. 69.
85 CP, pp. 70, 77, 52.
86 CP, BH, pp. 69–72.
87 CP, SS, p. 24.
88 CP, pp. 41, 141, 122.
89 CP, ME, p. 192.
90 CP, N, p. 151.
91 CP, BH, p. 52.
92 CP, BH, p. 46.
93 CP, BH, p. 47.
94 L.V. Thomas, La Mort africaine, pp. 24, 74, 25.
95 CP, N, p. 151.
96 CP, BH, p. 49.
97 L.V. Thomas, op. cit., p. 79.
98 CP, Eth, p. 86.
99 D. Zahan, op. cit.
100 D. Zahan, ibid.
101 CP, Eth, p. 115.
102 CP, ME, pp. 211–218.
104 CP, ME, pp. 223–228.
L III, p. 348.
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PA, pp. 84–85.
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CP, Eth, p. 86.
CP, N, p. 143.
D, p. 351.
Maurice Houis, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
CP, ME, p. 226.
L III, p. 356.
L III, p. 356.
PA, p. 152.
PA, p. 130.
CP, Eth, p. 76.
CP, Eth, pp. 75, 81.
CP, Eth, p. 84.
CP, Eth, p. 95.
CP, Eth, p. 105.
CP, SS, p. 19.
CP, BH, p. 45.
CP, BH, p. 64.
CP, N, pp. 133–134.
PA, pp. 152–153.
CP, ME, pp. 228–234.
CP, SS, p. 18.
CP, Eth, p. 105.
PA, p. 152.
Conclusion:

Tradition and Universalism

1  Armand Guibert, op. cit., pp. 143–144.
2  PA, p. 359.
3  PA, p. 360.
4  Maurice Schumann, Angoisse et Certitude, p. 15.
5  Eric Fromm, To Have or to Be, p. 186.
6  D, p. 366.
7  CP, SS, p. 20.
8  CP, SS, p. 3.
9  LI, p. 190.
10  CP, BH, p. 69.
11  CP, BH, p. 58.
12  Eliane Amado Lévy-Valensi, La pensée inconsciente, p. 277.
13  Jacques Ellul, Ce que je crois, pp. 14–15.
14  Ibid., pp. 41–42.
16  LI, p. 9.
Glossary

Some readers have complained about finding, in my poems, various African terms which they cannot “understand”.

May they forgive me. The main thing is to grasp what lies beyond or beneath reality rather than reality itself.

Besides, I write primarily for my own people. They know that a kora is not a harp, any more than a balaphon is a piano. Moreover, it is by reaching French-speaking Africans that I may best reach French and other readers, beyond the seas and across national borders.

Nevertheless, I do not seek exoticism for its own sake nor an easy way of sounding esoteric. I therefore felt it might be useful to provide a short explanation for some of the African terms used in this collection.

L S Senghor

[Of the 42 explanations provided in the full glossary, the following eleven refer to terms appearing in the present essay.]

balaphon (bala in Manding): a kind of xylophone.


dyáli (Manding): in West Africa, itinerant bard and storyteller.

Guélwar (or Guélowar): a Serer noun indicating a member of the nobility,
descending from the Manding conquerors.

_khakham_ (from the Wolof): a thorny tropical bramble.

_lamarque_: from the Serer root _lam_, expressing the idea of command or authority. Used by Senghor to indicate the head of the extended family.

_n’deissane_ (Wolof): “gracious!” An exclamation indicating either emotion or admiration.

_onzoungou_: a tropical tree; its wood is valued by cabinetmakers.

_poto-poto_: mud (in Wolof).

_signare_: a Senegalese word derived from the Portuguese _senhora_ (lady), it is used to designate a well-to-do mulatto woman.

_sopé_: dear, darling (from the Wolof verb _sopa_, to love or cherish).

_wot’!:_ an exclamation expressing surprise, indignation or admiration.
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II L S Senghor Bibliography

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Josiane Nespoulous-Neuville holds a master's degree in law from the University of Bordeaux, and a PhD in literature from the University of Maryland. She has taught at the University of Maryland and the University of Benin in Lomé (Togo), and has made a close study of the works of Léopold Senghor, statesman and writer.

In 1988 Dr Nespoulous-Neuville received from the Académie Française the prestigious Narcisse Michaut award for her essay From tradition to universalism, a discussion of the many sources of Senghor's poetic inspiration and the relevance of his thinking to some of the challenges facing our societies. This was swiftly followed by several other publications on Senghor's works, including 'How I became a Senghorian disciple' in Ethiopiques – a special issue for President Senghor's 90th birthday.

In this discussion of Senghor's poetry the reader gains access to the mind of a remarkable man who successfully challenged history and its prevalent prejudices and whose philosophy is imbued with a universal humanism.

Standing at the crossroads of two civilizations, Léopold Sédar Senghor views Africa today as unstable and deeply vulnerable, the whole continent in danger of losing its soul, its culture, while Western ideologies expand in a predatory manner, involving the suppression of alternative identities.

The contemporary world, driven by the Power of Science and Economics, which disregard Man's specific spiritual dimension, has become a cauldron of senseless violence. Faced with this formidable challenge, Senghor calls out with the utmost urgency to all men, in both Africa and the West:

HEED THE ANCESTRAL VOICES OF AFRICA!

These timeless voices reflect fundamental ethics, emphasize the Life force and focus primarily on being. In this traditional African view, man is called upon to develop and experience fully his intellectual, spiritual and sensual nature, in a quest of harmony with mankind, the cosmos and God.

Such is Senghor's basic message, drawn from the African initiatory teaching.