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THE HEMORRHAGE OF TIME
IN TCHICAYA'S LE MAUVAIS SANG

By

B.M. Ibitokun

*Pousse ta chanson-Mauvais sang-comment vivre
l'ordure à fleur de l'âme, être à chair regret¹*

*Heave your song-Bad Blood-how then to
survive the soul bloomed with shit, the
backward-longing flesh (WR)*

With these two lines, Tchicaya's poetry takes off; Le Mauvais sang (Caractères 1955) being his first collection of poems ever published. From the onset, the poet clearly states what he is about. The strong disyllabic imperative "pousse" (note the initial plosive sound "p") addressed to the second fretting self intimates that the song to be sung and heard is going to be a threnody suffused with irony, humor and indignation. The rhetorical question that follows sheds lights on the reason of the fidgeting. The poet can no longer live in contradictions; "comment vivre...être à chair regret." It seems as if the poet's being has been historically warped and vitiated -- historically, I affirm, and not ontologically as Clive Wake has curiously and unfortunately maintained.² Tchicaya's "Mauvais sang" has nothing to do with congenital inferiority. It is not heredity either or any related confusing notions that seek to mythologize the genesis of the black man's condition. "Mauvais" is best explained, and objectively, too, in a historical perspective. Slavery, colonialism and their attendant evils are historical truths that provoke in Tchicaya a "Mauvais sang." Metonymically, he is that "Mauvais sang." Crucial though they may be to his poetry, slavery and colonialism have always remained in the background. It is their attendant psychic warping or dehydration that seems to appeal more to the poet. We could say that his poetry is not a "poésie de situations" but really a "poésie d'effet." The tense dramatization of his anguish lends a note of sublimity, spontaneity and pathos to his insular voice. And this is what my essay is out to explore.

Prominent among his internal conflicts are the feelings of regret. The contact of the black man and the white man is a historic tragedy. It is not a meeting of two friends who open

themselves out to each other, but of just two incompatible people, one is young, uncouth, generous and benevolent:

*...j'étais encore enfant
Bras croisés, tête douce, inclinée, bonne, atone³*

*(...I was still an infant
Folding my arms, bowing my tender, kind, weak head)*

the other is experienced and crafty. In a humorous, ironic poem, the poet anathemizes that past, rejecting as deceptive, artificial and venomous all the values he had taken from Europe:

Merci

*Le thé était bon oui
Le tête-à-tête aussi
Dieu il faut que je parte*

*N'ai-je rien oublié
Je pars émerveillé
Oh! merci pour la tarte...*

Merci...⁴

(Thanks

*The tea was good indeed
So was our tete-a-tete
God, I must be off*

*Did I forget anything
Flabbergasted I'm going
Oh! thanks for the pie*

Thanks)

The pangs of regret are the more intense as the poet realizes that his intelligence had been played upon. His childlike (or childish) innocence and submissiveness had made his acculturatio processes easy. The notes of regret, self-defeat and opprobrium are punctuated by the biting ironic "Merci..." And the deliberately ambiguous word, "émerveillé" (flabbergasted) registers his feelings of self-mockery, bitterness, astonishment and deception and not of admiration or elation. If the past cannot be recalled and undone, can it be totally forgotten? Occasionally, the poet makes genuine efforts to forget it and deal warily with the present and the future.

*Demain nous serons sages
Tu me crois, dis? Demain*

*Nous aurons un destin
neuf au fond d'un voyage*

*Oui oui nous marcherons
Et dans tes mains si belles
Je mettrai fier fidèle
Ma joie: nous chanterons⁵*

(Tomorrow we'll be good
you believe me, don't you? Tomorrow
we will have a brand new
Destiny at the end of a journey

Yes Yes we'll march
And in your hands so beautiful
Proud faithful I shall put
My joy: we'll sing (SA)

But, where is that tomorrow that can obliterate the mea culpa of the past and change us? The poet is skeptical: "Tu me crois, dis?" He is also deliberately ambiguous: "destin/neuf"--"neuf" could be pleasant or unpleasant. The repetition of "Oui oui" (graced with a ludicrous shaking of the head), and of the future suffix marker..."erons" is comic and suggestive of the hollowness and futility of the attempt. And even, the expressions "belles," "fier," "fidèle" and "joie," despite their glaringly appealing connotations might, after all, be highlighting ironically the poet's cynicism for a meliorist future. He is, therefore, talking with his tongue in his cheeks. But his mind is soon jerked back to the past:

...L'arbre griffe

*La plaie qu'on lave au courant, de l'eau
Les songes plongent, pris en défaut
Mais le chant se recrée sur l'esquif⁶*

(...The tree claws

The wound that's being washed in the stress
The dreams dive in cut unawares
But the song is heard again on the skiff)

For the poet, the ritual of forgetfulness is tasking when the wound of the past on the black psyche is still purulent. This historic past then becomes a kind of leitmotif for Tchicaya's anguish. It explains every mood. So strong is its impact on the present that it seems to fuse with it. In other words, this past now turns out to be the continuous present:

*Quelle est donc cette plainte
Qui n'est jamais flétrie
Qui n'est jamais meurtrie
Dis quelle est cette crainte*

(What is therefore this pang
Which never subsides
Which never ebbs
Say, what is this fright.)

It is not easy to rid oneself of self in the same way
rids oneself of a disease. The past is part of man and either
consciously or unconsciously it shapes his being. It is himself
an inseparable part of his being. The lament to reject one's
past thus becomes timeless and ineffectual.

*Pleure vive l'outrage*⁸

(Weep long live the outrage)

Interestingly enough the poet does not lay the whole
of the tragic past at the white man's feet alone. He himself
shares in the mea culpa. Callous, irresponsible, hollow, thought-
less and easily won over with gold, the black man sold out, at
a very cheap price, Africa to Europe who raped and soiled her
purity and exploited her procreational, socioeconomic strength and
resourcefulness:

*Le joueur de manille
Pour deux sous de vétille
A donné au sergent
Sa fille Bell' Hélène*⁹

(The Manille player
For a give-away price
Sold to the sergeant
His daughter the Prett' Helen)

The classical Helen known for her superlative beauty and youth-
fulness, a symbol of Hellenic genius, and for whose recovery
fought and lost most of her soldiers, is now, in the African
text, almost given out as a dash. The idiocy and strangeness
of the deal are brought to the forefront by the juxtaposition of
"sergent" and "Bell' Hélène." One is known for his brutality,
canine sensuality, sadism and Zombism; the other, for her ten-
derness, love and modesty. It is a shame that Africa--"lilas bl
"Bell' Hélène"--should be vitiated by Europe--"draps sales,"
"sergent." Africa now has become the mixture of the two:

*Draps sales lilas blanc
Le linge de famille*¹⁰

(Dirty clothes white lilac
House linen)

It is more than tragedy to note that the ominous, coercive wedding took place when the daughter was still uncouth and yet in her teens.

*Demain j'aurai vingt ans*¹¹

(Tomorrow I shall be out of my teens)

"Le linge de famille" which is the resultant mélange of the two incompatible beings now defines the new African self. And identification with it, with black or blackness, becomes shameful and apologetic.

*J'hésite de crier le seul mot que je traîne
calvaire lancinant sur ma lèvre butée!*¹²

(I hesitate to say loud the only name I trail along
lacerating calvary on my forbidden lips)

With the continuous spectral presence of the past in the poet's present, he is reduced to a lonely figure. Loving without being loved, he becomes a pariah, thrust to the off-side of life and enmeshed in soul-dehydrating reveries and melancholy. It could not be otherwise. In the poem "Entendu dans le vent," the prognostics of an invisible voice (an oracle?) are full of cynicism, despair, savagery, bloodshed, and forlornness. The voice is at a game of cards. Its timbre is metallic, humorous and matter of fact.

*Un deux, trois, un as de pique, un valet de coeur:
Mauvais! un long voyage...où vous serez pendu
Vous mourez dans un lit avec plein de vertus
Une chance: signe, solatre à gauche...un malheur:*

*Je revois des champs noirs où se vautre un viveur
Etrange, étrange, et pourquoi ce bélier cornu*

*Un, deux, vous mourez donc: trois, et d'un mal
au coeur!*¹³

(One, two, three, an ace of spades, a Jack
Bad luck! a long journey...in which you shall be
hanged
You shall die on a bed rich in virtues
A luck: Solar sign on the left...mishap

Again I can discern from black fields a Don Juan

sprawling on the ground
Strange, strange and why this horned ram
One, two, you shall, therefore, die: three, with
a bleeding heart)

The vistas of mishaps and horrors ahead are so unique in the poet's case that the voice is baffled. To the voice, this kind of destiny raises eyebrows and it cannot help expressing its surprise, asking:

...ah ça c'est
fort!

*Monsieur je voudrais voir comment sont vos viscères!*¹⁴

(...ah that, that's
Serious!

Gentleman please could I see your viscera!)

The need to see the poet's physiological make-up is a costly joke. The voice wants to see how the whole body of the poet is writhing in the anguish of ill-luck. Or more importantly, in a kind of satiric humor, by looking at his build, it wants to meta-physicize or mythologize as some do the genesis and nature of his ill-luck. With a rare, commendable "dépassement de soi," the poet takes up his destiny of which he is now proud. He covers himself up with a mask of humor in order not to give way to despair and nihilism. Life must continue, however sad it is, or however sad people make it appear to him. His pattern of life has nothing 'really' defeatist unless his own thinking makes it so.

*dans mon destin cassé je porte des cadavres
hideux...voici le bal il faut aimer...pourtant!*¹⁵

(In my broken destiny I carry spectres
hideous...that's your jig you can't but like it...
anyway.)

The poet, in self-derision, characteristic of Verlaine, has now understood that to live well, he has to trivialize the tragic events of life that come his way. Humor is his best psychological arm for the restoration and maintenance of his mental equilibrium in a society or a world that has gone sour to his being. And isn't the white man who has turned it sour as Franz Fanon succinctly puts it?

*C'est le Blanc qui crée le Nègre!*¹⁶

Humor is going to be the therapeutics besides his humor, there are also his songs which have the same effect. In fact, he

cannot resist the strong flow of his songs:

*Je suis noir fils solaire à main le chant dement*¹⁷

(Mad song in hand black I am sun's son) (WR)

And it is by singing his songs that he shows his protest and resistance and a full determination that he will not give up to the enemy. Lyrical and existentialist, the poet is not an absurdist, despite his "destin cassé." He is a hero of epical dimensions:

*Comme seul l'oiseau au plus fort des tragédies
Je chante pour n'être pas vaincu à la fin*¹⁸

(Like a lonely bird in the hub of tragedies
I sing so as not to be vanquished in the end)

What a masculine therapeutic Negritude! True to his haecceitas, the poet-bird sings; hic-et-nunc, he could not have done something different. In his wild ecstatic singing, he does not understand why he should be alone. Marginalized, left in the lurch, in the darkness, thrown out of the banquet and feeling giddy as the result of excessive thinking about his ominous, singular fate, he puts God to task.

Il pleut mon Dieu il pleut...

...

*Je me sens centenaire et plaide ce faux crime
que je n'ai pas commis j'ai lu la loi pénale*

*Le ciel même est cassant devant mon ombre astrale
J'ai repris la palette des pleurs pour ma rime
Je suis nouveau à tout et le ciel se deprime*

*J'ai froid mon Dieu dehors il fait si frais si frais*¹⁹

(My God the rain now...

...

I feel a hundred and plead the crime
I did not do [I know what the law is]

The sky is crushing for my astral shadow
Back to my palette of tears for making verse
I am new to the world the sky comes pressing down
My God I am cold it is so cold outside) (WR)

In this poem, the emotions of outrage, self-pity, self-justification and vitriolic humor are fused. What are his crimes? Is his fate the heritage of Adam's and Eve's sin? Why is his singularly

destructive? He is definitely being separated from others--
"dehors il fait si frais si frais." God's partiality is here
cleverly intimated. And in a deliberately profanatory analogy,
he too is the human Christ perpetually being nailed to the cross.

*Christ trahi voici ma croix humaine de bois*²⁰

(Oh betrayed Christ behold my human wooden cross)

And even his whole race is composed of suffering Christs in time
and space; it is the universalist black scapegoatism that is
here underlined:

*Le Christ se servit d'une croix de bois pour
usurper contre le temps le destin d'un peuple
plus concret que tous les couteaux tirés du
crime*²¹

(Christ used a wooden cross to usurp against time
the destiny of a people more concrete than all the
drawn knives of crime) (WR)

His songs of outrage soon become in later poems an open insult
on Christ. Africans and he as poet do out-Christ Christ by taking
sides only with the suffering humanity whereas Christ has always
championed the cause of the top-ladder humanity.

*Que tu es sale Christ d'être avec les bourgeois*²²

(Christ how dirty you're by mixing with the bourgeois)

But, despite Christ's treachery, the bleakness of his own
destiny and the soul-numbing predictions of the voices from the
wind, the poet still seems a glimmer of hope ahead. Waxing im-
patient to slough off the bastardized being that he is now,
either in Africa or in Paris where he is still residing, he is
awaiting very anxiously a good morrow, a new, good destiny:

*M'etonne
le jour qui tarde
les paysages trop gris
ma forme qui déserte
la bûche qui fume
mon destin qui ne vient
m'etonne*²³

(Surprising
the dawn that drags his feet
the landscapes that are too grey
my form that deserts
the log that smokes away

my destiny that fails to come
surprises me

It is not waiting for Godot, although the waiting may take some time. And this is, presumably, his cause of anxiety. A new destiny will come. And so, it finally comes in sight in "Espérance O savanes." The new destiny is accompanied by the rising sun which shines on the "savanes"--Africa--bringing along light, energy, warmth and a sense of rejuvenated being. The Christ-like and anti-Christ poet, the "Mauvais sang"²⁴, the "hurleur"²⁵ who was asked, "quel poison écartèle ton sang,"²⁶ and whose passion was "coincée dans l'écluse du temps" has now regained his composure. His dream has now materialized. It is the dawn of a new era:

*Il monte il vient un songe du fond des étangs
Géant du chaos le rêve est ressuscité²⁸*

(Rising coming a dream from the depths of pools
Giant of chaos the dream is resurrected)

"Ressuscité" is the keyword, evocative of the rising sun or the rising Christ from the sepulchre. The new being is elated because it does not lack a sense of direction any longer. The poet is no longer the club-footed one²⁹, "la mouette la morte"³⁰ whose heaven is "vitriolé," whose threnody is about the beast which

*...a gangrené la terre qui craquelle;
et des feux dans les vents se dandinaient burlesques³¹*

(...gangrened the creviced-soil
And in the whirlwind fires swayed comically)

He is now a bird with gorgeous feathers, full of life and vitality:

Paradisier déploie au vent tes plumes belles³²

(Paradisiacal bird to the zephyr unfurl your
beautiful feathers)

The simple evocation of that bird spontaneously brings to mind Christ's resurrection and ascension the idea of Heaven, its joy and harmony, ceremonies, festivities, dance and song. Here again, the poet is Christ who, after his ordeal, is reborn to a new hope. The process of self-apprehension, self-retrieval and and self-reappraisal is complete. The journey from

*Je serai la mouette, la morte par déveine
Un grand gibet levé remise pour les peines
m'emporte haut et fier en habits festonnés³³*

(I'll be the seagull dead by misadventure
A great gallow raised remission of sentence
hoists me up high fine in fancy clothes) (WR)

and *J'hésite de crier le seul mot que je traîne*³⁴

to *Paradisier déploie au vent tes plumes belles*³⁵

is Odyssean. In the Catholic liturgy, it starts on Good Friday; "gibet," passing through the Holy Saturday to end on Easter Sunday and more gloriously on the Ascension Day, "Paradisier." It is a great ritual and a lot of the psychic strains of the Christ-poet have gone into it. The poet, the black man or even man in general have their dark phases of life, their "destin fichu,"³⁶ "destin cassé,"³⁷ "destin écorché,"³⁸ and their Good Friday but definitely beyond these:

*Croix du sud dans la nuit terrestre irradie*³⁹

(Cross of the South in the sullen night radiates)

The dialectical keywords here again are "nuit" and "irradie," suggestive of darkness and light; despair and hope; gloom and sprightliness, etc. In this particular vision of life, we cannot help comparing Tchicaya to Paul Eluard in that famous line of the latter:

*Au fond, du chagrin, une fenêtre, ouverte, une
fenêtre éclairée*⁴⁰

(At the end of grief, a window open, a window
light-flooded)

Tchicaya's "nuit terrestre" finds its echo in Eluard's "chagrin" and his light-giving "Croix" corresponds to the socialist French poet's "fenêtre ouverte...éclairée." The image of the luminous Cross and the sun is particularly suitable to express the luminosity and vitality of the future perceived in the darkness of the past and present. More than ever, the poet will be up to his task.

Now he is going to pitch force against force. Nobody else will decide for him or destroy him:

Il ne faut plus dormir je sonne les réveils

*Au coin d'un ciel o charognard temps malmeneur
Tu n'auras pas ma carcasse je sors vainqueur
Ma prunelle est d'acier mon rire est de fer*

*J'ai disloqué les vents puisqu'il faut qu'on m'entende*⁴¹

(No more sleep I sound the alarms
In the nook of a sky oh vulture time ill-user
you won't have me I'll come out victorious
My eye pupil is metal my laughter iron

I unhooded winds because ears must hear me)

The expression, "Tu n'auras pas" is a forceful negative that hails in a note of optimism and self-assurance. And the present indicative "sors" underscores the same feeling, adding to it immediacy and Spartan determination. The idea of "d'acier" and "de fer" (iron) suggests that he is no longer a prey or a carrion for the vulture-charognard--the oppressor. His new being, molded from the crusts of history is now tough, unbending and impregnable. Gone are the days when he was behaving like a child and now his emotionally charged songs will be unleashed--note the force of "disloqué"--to make, not unlike Shelley, his inner life known to the world. "Vents" here might suggest both his songs and their impetuous broadcasting apparatus.

But this new being--"Je suis le Bronze..."⁴²--cannot regain the purity of the primal self. It is an ontologically irreducible process. Therefore, all lamentations for rebushing, to go back to our primal being--*Cahier d'un retour*--are garbed in hypocrisy, farce, self-deceit, artistic gimmick and shallow mythopoesis. Unlike most of the other African writers and especially the early Negritude writers, the poet does accept "le Bronze" but not before the ritual of self-reappraisal in the context of the dynamics of human history. He soon affirms humorously and realistically when parodying Pascal:

*Rien n'est pur qui écarte le mélange de tout
dirai-je que la vraie pureté se fout de toute pureté... 43*

(Nothing is pure which resists the mixing
of things I mean that real purity abhors all purity... (GM)

But, from time to time, the spectral past, thrust deep in his subconscious, rebelliously resurfaces--and who has ever succeeded in chaining his own?--in an interior monologue, turns to gail his joy of the moment.

*Ça y est ce sont bien les tracteurs qui
s'engueulent sur ma savane*

*Non c'est mon sang dans mes veines!
Quel mauvais sang! 44*

(That's it they are of course tractors grumbling
across my savanna

No it is my blood in my veins
A bad blood it is! (WR)

And does it mean that this new being, le Bronze, is just a contraption? The poet is not yet at ease with himself. It is this hemorrhage of time--the constant flow of the past into the present and the present into the future or into the past, etc.--that generates tensions in Tchicaya's psyche. It explains the thematic repetitions and the cluster of solar, elemental, animal and vegetative images in his poetry. It is also in this respect that this poetry has a universal dimension; for is not our present being an alloy of disparate selves and a product of the past, present and future?

*Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable⁴⁵*

And like Tchicaya, have we no throes while trying to recover a "being which is not there"?

*What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation⁴⁶*

Notes

To respond faithfully to Tchicaya's true poetic vision and intensity, I am using the original version for the analysis. The translated version follows closely. Clive Wake's and John Reed's translations are represented by WR, Gerald Moore's by GM and Sangodore Akanji (pseudonym for Beier) by SA. WR's translations can be found in African French Verse, Heinemann, 1972; GM's in Tchicaya U Tam'si Selected Poems, Heinemann, 1972 and SA's from Mbari Press, Ibadan, Nigeria, 1964. Poems rendered in English from Le Mauvais Sang by these translators are very few, only three, so most of the translations were done by myself.

I am rejecting as too mild and treacherous to Tchicaya's emotional intensity GM's translation of "Que tu es sale Christ, d'etre avec les bourgeois" and the choice of "Bad" for "Mauvais" by WR is, in my opinion, very baffling and unfortunate.

Because not all the poems have titles, I am using pages to refer to each. And the edition used for my study is Le Mauvais Sang suivi de Feu de Brousse et A triche-coeur, J.P.O. Honfleur, Paris, 1970.

1. Tchicaya U Tam'si, Le Mauvais Sang, p. 11.
2. Clive Wake, "Tchicaya U Tam'si," A Celebration of Black and African Writing, Bruce King and Kolawole Ogungbesan (eds.), ABUP and OUP, Nigeria, 1978, p. 126.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
16. Cited by Claire Cléa in her Introduction to Tchicaya U Tam'si Arc Musical précédé de Epitomé, P.J.O. 1970, p. 6.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
22. Tchicaya U Tam'si Epitomé, edition as in Note 16, p. 62.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
28. As in Note 2, p. 125.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
39. Paul Eluard, "Le Phénix."
40. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
42. Tchicaya U Tam'si, op. cit., p. 32.
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
45. T.S. Eliot, The Complete Poems and Plays, Faber and Faber, 1969, "Four Quartets," "Burnt Norton," p. 171.
46. *Ibid.*