

Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo's Poetic Art

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Born in Antananarivo in 1903, Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo was an illegitimate child who, through self-study and rigorous discipline, acquired the French language with which he received his formal education. He was highly associated with several literary circles and translated widely in both French and his native Malagasy oral corpus.

I

Although Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo “left behind him seven volumes of poetry” and produced verse that embodies a wide range of themes and architectonics, unfortunately however, not much critical attention -- if any -- has been paid to his work. Ulli Beier painfully remarks:

His work has been much less boosted than that of some other French-speaking poets (he has been almost ignored by translators, so far), presumably because his writing does not seem to fit into the now fashionable *negritude* movement.¹

It should also be noted that, unlike many of his contemporaries whose poems focus on the themes of Western colonialism, Negritude, Apartheid, and the celebration of Africa's socio-cultural traditions, Rabearivelo's subject matter embodies the universal themes of art, nature, death, and individual human struggles and self-survival.

Rabearivelo discusses the theme of art in his work. The artist is the voice of reason, the promoter and the symbol of truth. Despite the isolation and the wanton state of deprivation, persecution, and other indignities which the artist must confront in his vocation, he has the professional responsibility to stand tall and defend the righteous and the integrity of art.

Furthermore, in a world increasingly ripped apart by violence, distortion, and political inanity, it is the voice of art, that is, poetry that can bring peace and restore order and sanity in the body politic. Rabearivelo is aware of the fact that injustice permeates the socio-cultural and political space, but he does not romanticize nor explicitly condemn it as most of his contemporaries would do; rather, he simply documents or records it with sensitivity and with a sense of responsibility so that his audience can appreciate or learn from it.

The poem, "Cactus," demonstrates Rabearivelo's careful treatment of the role and place of art. The cactus is a symbol of resilience and turgidity, as well as the struggle which the artist must confront almost on a daily basis. Whether in art, politics, business, religion or other professions, the poet is enjoined to make tough choices. He goes out to do so in a voice and tone that is rigorous, authentic and bold. As the cactus remains solid and strong in a dying, deciduous terrain, so does the artist maintain his sense of equilibrium against a backdrop of the challenges of life. Further, he is, as Shakespeare reminds us, the one who looks "forwards" and "backwards" in a unique mood and tone that is truly unmistakable.

Richard O. Priebe and Thomas A. Hale expatiate on the provenance of the artist and his obligation to society:

We would like to remind him that he is, or should be, our spokesman. When we suffer from any manner of physical deprivation, we expect him to train his spotlight on our distress. When we lapse into more degeneracy, let him probe the social causes and expose them. When we are oppressed, exploited and dehumanized, by our oppressive regime, let him stand on the hilltops and shout the message of our suffering².

The permanence or, if you will, the immortality of art, is also suggested through the symbolism of the cactus. The fact that all things in the desert landscape die or wither away, while the cactus alone survives, suggests the invincibility of art, especially poetry.

The symbolism of the poetic art is also highlighted in the lyric “Three daybreaks”, where the poet speaks of “The craftsman on her own unnoticed grave/sets up this monument of light”. The metaphor “this monument of light” alludes to the poetic legacy which, as Shakespeare reminds us, is one of the three ways through which humans can attain immortality.

Earlier in the poem Rabearivelo writes that the artist “holds a torch in hands,” a direct allusion to the truth, the voice of reason, the temporal and eternal miracles -- indeed the whole range of energetic vistas which poetry or the poetic imagination propagates and perpetuates.

Perhaps nowhere is the theme of poetic art better illustrated than in the piece “The black glassmaker whose countless eyeballs none has ever seen”. Furthermore, the poetic vision, the technical range which the artist projects in his endless labors are vast and enormous.

A thousand particles of glass
fall from his hands
but rebound towards his brow
shattered by the mountains
where the winds are born.

And you are witness of his daily suffering
and of his endless task;
you watch his thunder-riddled agony
until the battlements of the East re-echo
the conches of the sea--
but you pity him no more
and do not even remember that his sufferings begin again
each time the sun capsizes³.

The images, “countless eyeballs,” “clothed in pearls of glass,” the “seven skies on his head,” the “thousand particles of glass,” the “daily suffering,” the “endless task,” the “thunder-riddled agony,” the “sufferings,”-- all this collective suggests not only the nature of the ordeals of the artist but the nature of his artistic planet as well.

The poem is built on irony and paradox: irony in the sense that the black glassmaker, who, as the symbolism of blackness connotes, is an individual who is unrecognized -- even sometimes despised -- but yet highly talented and gifted; paradox in the sense that this black human species is surrounded by flashes of brightness, mirrors, and reflexes which the glass that he works on continually projects.

The symbolism of the glass is interesting: for example, its particles illuminate and penetrate the artistic universe; they also suggest the vast and arduous responsibilities of the artist, and collectively they constitute the ideogram which creates and nourishes the creative process.

Finally, the professional art of glassmaking, like the artistic imagination, involves the entire human essence -- especially the "eyeballs," the "hands," the "head," the "brow," and all of the tears and "sufferings" which the industry requires. Similarly, the creative art is a marvelous complex of ideas, facts, as well as the involvement of mind and body. Herein lies the connective between the two industries.

II

The theme of nature is discussed in the "Cactus." Rabearivelo is conscious of the fact that the universe of nature is eclectic and diverse. Consequently in this poem, we find virtually all elements of the natural universe: the "flowers," the "spring," the "sky," the "forests," the "rocks," the "goats," the "stone," the "lepers," and the "child." The universe of nature, as Rabearivelo also makes explicit, is governed by ineluctable forces, that is to say, "Fate" and above all, "God" (lines 32 and 34).

Rabearivelo also discusses nature in the lyric, "Pomegranate":

The rays of the new-born sun
search under the branches
the breast of the ripe pomegranate
and bit it till it bleeds.
Discreet and shuddering kiss
hard and scalding embrace.
Soon the pure thrust
will draw purple blood.

Its taste will be sweeter,
because it was pregnant with desire
And with fearful love

And scented blossoms--
Pregnant by the lover sun.
(SAP, p. 48)

The world of nature consists of love and love-making. This is the idea which is projected in the above poem. Consequently, images of ecstasy, sensuality, love, pregnancy, blood-letting and delivery permeate the poem. Furthermore, images that arouse the emotions-- e.g., the “breast,” “Discreet and shuddering kiss,” “purple blood,” “fearful love,” and “scented blossoms”-- are carefully employed to complement the universe of love and nature.

Three principle images dominate the poem, and they are the vehicle through which the poet illustrates his theme: the sun, or the male species which gives vital force to the plant; the plant which is the female object and on whom the sun makes love; and the pomegranate, the fruit of love. Collectively these images translate into important symbols of amatory and conjugal relationships.

Unlike the traditional form of love-making, between man and woman, in this poem the poet personalizes the sun with its diametrical antithetical characteristics, at times “Discreet,” at other times biting hard enough “till it bleeds.” The other two objects in the love triangle, the plant, and the pomegranate, are equally personalized, apparently in order to give depth and scope to the poem’s narrative structure.

Also interesting is how Rabearivelo, through the use of specific natural objects and phenomena, appeals to our sense of taste: “its taste will be sweeter/because it was pregnant with desire” (lines 9-10); touch: the “scalding embrace” (line 6); sight: the “rays of the new-born sun/search under the branches” (lines 1-2); and hearing: the “Discreet and shuddering kiss’ (line 5).

The scene of nature discussed in the two-stanza lyric, “She,” echoes the image of the evanescent mammy-water whose natural presence is felt in flashes of the wind and the waves, appearing and disappearing in a mode and manner reminiscent of Christopher Okigbo’s “Water Maid”

She
whose eyes are prisms of sleep
and whose lids are heavy with dreams
she whose feet are planted in the sea

and whose shiny hands appear
full of corals and blocks of shining salt.

She will put them in little heaps beside a misty gulf
and sell them to naked sailors
whose tongues have been cut out,
until the rain begins to fall.
Then she will disappear
and we shall only see
her hair spread by the wind
like a bunch of seaweed unraveling,
and perhaps some tasteless grains of salt.
(MAP, pp. 160-161)

In the above poem, the “She” is presented from two different levels: as the great mass of water which harbors several small and big objects, just as the earth is the abode of elegant, gracious, phenomenal objects whose “eyes” are a source of charm and “dreams,” and whose nakedness and yearnings are memorable. Rabearivelo never discusses individual human beings, but the nature of their general characteristics. As Ulli Beier correctly observes:

The poet hardly even figures in his
poems, certainly in his good poems.
In fact human beings rarely occur.
... Where human images occur they
never describe individuals, but rather
cosmic, semi-divine beings...⁴

For Rabearivelo, the images of the sea and those of the earth-- it may be argued-- complement one another. All contribute to the natural phenomenon of the entire world order.

III

To Rabearivelo, death is a universal phenomenon which all living things must submit to; it cannot be dismissed with a wave of the hand. Consequently the theme of death recurs again and again in his verse. In such poems like “What invisible rat,” “Three daybreaks,” and “The hide of the black cow is stretched,” Rabearivelo discusses the theme of death from various perspectives.

The lyric, “What invisible rat,” I believe, is a biographical poem, that is, a premonition of the poet’s own eventual demise:

‘Whose is that sixpence
that rolls over the green table?’
‘Ah!’ one of them will add,
‘our friend has lost everything
and killed himself!’

And all will snigger
and, staggering, will fall.
The mood will no longer be there:
the rat will have carried her into his hole.
(MAP, p. 159)

True, Rabearivelo committed suicide as a result of his inability to realize his life-long ambition of traveling to France despite numerous attempts. The reference, “our friend,” alludes to the poet himself, while the expression “killed himself,” is a metaphor for the self-murder which he himself committed out of frustration and exasperation.

The last lines of the passage quoted above is a didactic and philosophical statement not only about the inevitability of death, but also about the fact that no-one -- however strong and mighty -- can escape the fierce and penetrating arrows of death. The fact that the inanimate “moon” will “no longer be there,” and the fact that the activities of death will encompass “all” who “will fall,” clearly suggests the total, overwhelming, and annihilating force of death.

The “invisible rat” is a metaphor for death. The fact that it is an invisible object suggests not only death’s hideous and penetration ways, but its mysterious, sneaky, and elusive phenomenon. The universality of death and how it will eventually crush everything that crosses its path is suggested by the word “all.”

The reference to the “sixpence that rolls over the green table” alludes to the quest for materialism, the sense of existentialism which contemporary society is wrestling with. For Rabearivelo, it is an illusion because it will ultimately be swallowed up by the ferocious power of the omnipotent death. The “hole” which the “rat” will push humanity into is the grave to which all dead objects are ultimately consigned.

Finally, for the poet, the process of death embodies various characteristics including a “snigger,” a “staggering” and a “fall.” When death strikes, no one can escape the *nunc dimitis*, as it will engulf all “those who have drunk all night/and those who have abandoned their cards.”

In the poem, “The hide of the black cow is stretched,” the death motif is discussed through three principal images: through the word “stretched,” which is mentioned four times; through the word “dead,” which is employed thrice; and through the employment of a series of verbs which suggest death, especially “killed,” “chased,” and “sculptured.”

The repeated employment of the word “stretched” connotes the fact that the stretching of the cow’s skin was rather overdone to the point of death. As a poetic metaphor, the word “stretched” illustrates the fact that, anything in life which is overdone, can lead to serious consequences.

The impact of the word “dead” is better understood in the context of how and where it appears in the text:

But who has killed the black cow,
dead without having owed, dead without having reared,
dead without having once been chased
over that prairie flowered with stars?
(MAP, p. 160)

The above-quoted lines suggest the death of an innocent cow which did not live long till maturity, which was not “chased” for any wrong-doing, nor was it old enough to begin to “roar”. There is consolation, though: the death of the black cow is not the end of its life, as its offspring -- the “new-born calf” -- will succeed its parent with bright colors of “white” and “pink” and with re-newed vigor.

In the “Three daybreaks” Rabearivelo discusses the phenomenon of death from several variables. Divided into three stanzas, all three describe various transformations which, collectively, may be regarded as an aspect of death.

The first stanza considers death from the point of view of the “dawn” which, much like the hunter, goes into the forest to “poach” for game. The second stanza illustrates the phenomenon of death from the perspective of the “cock” which announces the coming of a new day. Stanza three views the phenomenon of death from the perspective of the heavenly stars which appear and disappear in the “crucible of time.”

All of the principal images employed in the poem -- that is, the “dawn,” the “cock,” and the “stars,” are personified in order to animate as well as reinforce the poet’s argument. In the tenth line of the third stanza, he speaks of the “craftsman on her own unnoticed grave”-- a philosophical statement about how we, as humans, are generally oblivious or left in the dark, as to how, when, or where we shall end up and be buried. The conceit embodied in the imagery of death, which defies human understanding, makes the lyric one of Rabearivelo’s most memorable and remarkable poems.

In the poem “All Seasons,” Rabearivelo discusses the theme of death from a new level of understanding when he declares that all living things shall witness the shock and shudder of extinction:

All seasons have been abolished
in those unexplored zones
that occupy half of the world
and adorn it with unknown flowers
of no climate
Pushed by ephemeral blood of plants
in an entanglement of gloomy lianas
all movement of living branches is strangled.
Confusion of birds that have become strangers
and cannot recognize their nest
they strike their bright wings
against sombre rocks
which is neither hot nor cold
like the skin of those
who rest
far from life and death.⁵

The above poem is suffused with prophetic and declamatory statements. For instance, the poem’s opening line, “All seasons have been abolished,” recalls the philosophical truism that all things in life shall change; the expression “those unexplored zones/that occupy half of the world” alludes to the areas of the universe that are yet to be discovered or understood by humanity.

What we gain from Rabearivelo’s poetry includes the fact that, unlike some of his contemporaries who dwell on European colonialism, slavery, Negritude, and the

Apartheid policy, his chief concerns are with nature, art, death, and man's place in the universal cosmos. Furthermore, he explores the antimonies of human existence (i.e., its beauty, ugliness, and diversity) and employs ambiguity, irony, and metaphysical imagery to illuminate his work.

Notes

1. Ulli Beier, *Introduction to African Literature: An Anthology of Critical Writing* (Burnt Mill, Harlow, Essex, UK: Longman Group, 1979), p. 99.
2. Richard O. Priebe and Thomas A Hale, *Artist and Audience: African Literature as a Shared Experience* (Washington, D.C: African Literature Association, 1977), see "Introduction".
3. Jean Joseph Rabearivelo, "The Black glassmaker," *The Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry*, ed. Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 161. Subsequent citations from this anthology will be included parenthetically in the text as MAP, followed by the page number(s).
4. Ulli Beier, "Rabearivelo," in *Introduction to African Literature: An Anthology of Critical Writing*, "Introduction" (un-numbered)
5. See Ulli Beier, *Introduction to Literature: An Anthology of Critical Writing*, p. 104.

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