

Agostinho Neto: Pure Poetic Discourse and Mobilization Rhetoric

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A space where the dark is tempered by the light, despair by hope, the past by the future, the individual's ambitions by the collectivity's determinations: this is the essential provision of Agostinho Neto's poetry. Combat poetry? This would be a reductive, even condescending characterization, and would tend to minimize the stature of one of the twentieth century's most important African poets. It is a perilous term for a perilous genre—a term, among others, we *might* apply, but one that seems in any case ineluctably associated with Neto's name—as evidenced by Kesteloot (421–22) and Burness (89–103)—and one that therefore provokes us to see in him a nucleus around which critics have gathered other poets of this modern genre we call militant or guerilla poetry. Neto's importance in relationship to this genre, and his poetic gifts apart from it, therefore call for a mainstreaming of his literary contributions. "Protest poetry" might, however, more aptly describe his oeuvre; the term is certainly a somewhat better representation of his content than "guerilla poetry" or "poetry of combat" would allow. But whatever the word used to sum up that content, it is best to see contextually how this talented poet fuses his ideologies with his structures, and intertextually, how he avoids the diatribes, the invectives, and the stereotypically strident rhetoric of most guerilla poetry in a way scarcely imitated by his poetic "counterparts."¹

In his earliest poems, which Kesteloot likens to African melopoeia, Neto establishes the juxtapositions of dark versus light, of despair versus hope, of individual versus collectivity; and these oppositions, especially that of the self versus the group, will be the leitmotiv of his life's work, collected under the general title of *Sagrada Esperança*, or *Sacred Hope*. And however Marxist his readers find the theme of confraternity inherent in such poems as "Farewell at the

hour of parting” to be, the oversoul, the sparseness, the structural as well as the grammatical and syntactic fusions, all subvert any tendencies toward the doctrinaire that are potentially inherent in a bare ideological approach; and these traits consequently guarantee the poem’s esthetic success.

To his literal mother, to his spiritual mother Angola, and even Africa, Neto explains how he has become the leader, the symbol of hope:

I do not hope any longer
I am the one through whom hope is sifted . . .” (SE 35)

The lean stark lines announcing their message of communal hope become more and more stripped, until the poet structurally achieves a fusion of the one with the many, with the country and with the great matrix:

I am my Mother
hope we are
your sons
who’ve gone forth toward a life-feeding faith. (SE 85–86)

And ultimately, the “sou eu” (“I am”) is completely incorporated into the “somos nós” (“we are”), as departure becomes a collective action for the remedy of the present ills of the people:

We go forth in search of light
your sons Mother . . .
go in search of life. (SE 36)²

Thus, ideologically as well as structurally Neto realizes an identification with all who suffer through hunger, thirst, the ravages of drink, and political fear and humiliation. The first person singular, which, of course, always bore the concept of collectivity within it, is swallowed up by the first person plural. The goals of departure implicit in the lines just quoted are those of the many, lacking in self-interest or gain. Again, the idea of the common departure, with its vocabulary of resolution and its hope in the future, is reinforced by the abundant use of first person plural future verbs:

Amanhã
entoaremos hinos a liberdade
quando comemorarmos
a data da abolição desta escravatura. (*SE* 36)³

Like an ancient soothsayer, Neto predicts here—and with total accuracy—the birth of a nation, proclaiming that nationhood to be virtually inherent in the hope and the resolution of his compatriots, into whom he, poet, leader and even “soldier,” has melted and disappeared. Yet, the diction, though marking determination, is unmarred by tones of war.

When we turn to the poem “Reconquest” (“A reconquista,” *SE* 84–85), we find the same determination, the same linguistic expression of a spiritual solidarity, the same tension between the past (in both its negative and its positive ramifications) and a happier tomorrow—these tensions being again framed in future and cumulative imperative verb forms that structurally declare the imminence of revolution, announced in the smile of the Africans. (That smile, however, is implicitly misread as simple-minded acceptance by the haughty Portuguese.) “Come, Africa,” the poet exhorts repeatedly, “Come and plunge into our African past, the past of the *batuque*, the tom-toms; come and observe with clear eyes the façades of Christianity and democracy behind which our misery lurks, obfuscated; come, for

Ninguém nos fará calar
Ninguém nos poderá impedir
O sorriso dos nossos lábios não é agradecimento pela
morte
com que nos matam.

Vamos com toda a Humanidade
conquistar o nosso mundo e a nossa Paz.” (*SE* 85–86)⁴

In a memorable poem devoted to his friend Mussunda, Neto recovers these same themes of past suffering and ancient traditions brought into perspective by a not too distant future. Again he sees his role as that of a leader, but this time one whose poetic gifts and education would not alienate him. Rather, they would bring him, like a griot,

closer to the people. Thus, also present in this poem is the theme of confraternity, here represented by the “quality of friendship which is symbolic of the bond uniting all oppressed Angolans” (Burness 94).

The structures of this poem again reinforce the spiritual unity of the whole black people, bent upon fruitful revolution: “We are one,” says the poet to his friend (“Nós somos”). And the African past, brought into the ripe present, is effectively evoked by Neto’s use here of a phrase of Ki-mbundu, the traditional language of many Angolans, and indeed the language of the poet’s childhood (but one he later regretted not having mastered). Still the use of this language should not be viewed as a mere embellishment, for buried in the phrase we find the nucleus of the poem, housed in the word “Kalunga,”—a word which in some contexts means “death,” but which in this poem suggests (as in “Departure”) that Neto is the one in whom the hope and “destiny” of the people are enshrined (Hamilton 85).⁵

In addition to the tightness of Neto’s style and the fusions of his ideology to his syntax we must note his exceptional sense of imagery and symbol, which plays its part in the extraordinary success of his verse. Though many protest poets have an unfortunate tendency to fall into allegory and abstraction (as is the case with Morisseau-Leroy, to whom Kesteloot [421] somewhat casually compares Neto), the latter rescues his poems from these pitfalls by a skillful use of concrete diction and imagery, viewed by Senghor in his essay “Comme les lamantins vont boire à la source” to be as indispensable to the true African mentality as is rhythm. Indeed, for Senghor (*Poèmes* 158), image is but a manifestation of rhythm: “Mais le pouvoir de l’image analogique ne se libère que sous l’effet du rythme. Seul le rythme provoque le court-circuit poétique et transmue le cuivre en or, la parole en verbe” (“But the power of the analogical image is set free only under the influence of the rhythm. The rhythm alone produces the poetic short-circuit and transforms the copper into gold, mere speech into the ‘Word.’ ”). That Neto like Senghor understands the importance of rhythm, as well as of image, is clear in the following lines from his poem “Fogo e Ritmo”:

Campfires

dances

tomtoms

rhythm

Rhythm in light
 rhythm in color
 rhythm in sound
 rhythm in movement
 rhythm in bleeding cracks of unshod feet
 rhythm in nails ripped from the flesh
 but rhythm
 rhythm . . .⁶

Whether Neto adopts the lyric or the narrative mode, the image is ever present, together with this rhythm, galvanizing the public and the private, and joining them into a single organism. The bush path is equated with cruelty; similarly, the “African train” stands as a Western monstrosity, in juxtaposition to the recurring symbol of the pirogue, legitimate vehicle for the life journey of the Negritude poets. (Neto is not, however, a Negritude Orpheus of the stamp described by Jean-Paul Sartre in his preface to Senghor’s *Anthologie*.) Neto’s vocabulary, concrete and evocative, calls forth clear pictures—Angolan realities sensorily experienced—in the mind of the reader: houses made of pounded rusty tin, imbondeiro trees, cassava flour, forks and knives, marimbas, the elegant curve of the agile gazelle’s neck, the rattle of prison keys, the messenger drums of desire, the sound of chains, the songs of birds, odors, aromas, movement. (Upon occasion a fundamentally African animism lies beneath these images.) And while the rhythm and the persona change from poem to poem—from the market woman who laments her lot to the voice of the poet himself—the symbols of African life, of poverty, of deprivation, and of determination translate the tensions between inertia (symbolized by the bench in “Kinaxixi”) and action (shown by the replacement of the old locks on the doors, in answer to the repressive measures of the Portuguese regime against the Angolan’s “awakening consciousness”). In portraying these conditions Neto gives us far more realism than do most of his compatriots, and especially more than we find in the poetry of Mário António Fernandes de Oliveira (Andrade 61,63). (The latter’s association with Lisbon intellectuals has removed him somewhat from his native country, according to a note by Todrani/Joucla-Ruau in the French translation of Andrade’s anthology [101].)

There is a denseness in Neto’s lean verse. As previously stated, light and dark are constantly played off against one another. For

example, the poem “Noite” (SE 56) reflects the dark side of the poet’s mind, as well as the dark night of all Africans, plunged into spiritual and physical suffering. Nonetheless, this African night is already pushed back by comfortable bonfires and hurricane lamps, and, moreover, is about to be flooded with the electric charge, or the light of revolution, “the dawn-glow in men’s eyes” (“Poema” SE 97). The tragic diaspora, issuing from centuries of slave trade, cannot, of course, be overcome, but through fraternity the plight of the African, indeed of Blacks the world over, can be altered:

. . . tenho saudade . . .
De ti
homem disperso que sonhas
de mim!
De ti meu irmão
de mim
em busca de todas as Africas do mundo.
 (“Desfile de Sombras,” SE 62–63)⁷

This expression of solidarity should be analyzed. Often given the unjustified label of Marxist, Neto’s call for revolution is not simply a mobilization for struggle against bourgeois capitalism, though it is certainly that in part. Typical of the tensions inherent in his work, the call is one for return, also, to African collectivity, to African values. Moreover, Neto, though of course Marxist, is—in his poetry—unlike such a poet as Jacques Roumain, whose verse falls into prose-like cadences as it enumerates the beleaguered of the entire world (see, e.g., Senghor: *Anthologie* 117–18). While the identification of the black victim with victims of other kinds and other races is common to poetry of the African continuum, it seems to me that the concept of joining forces in sympathy with white peasants and laborers is virtually absent from Neto’s poetry. The crushing horrors and criminal atrocities that Neto observed during Salazar’s dictatorship and the suppressive treatment he himself received at home in Angola, in his house arrests in Cape Verde, as well as in Portugal where he was repeatedly held prisoner, would elicit a call for specific action against his own “house,” which was in drastic need of “troubling,” as the Bible puts it.⁸ Neto is, then, primarily concerned in his poetry with the local scene, and with the wretched condition of all his colonized

fellow-Africans; and the concern is so all-consuming as to obviate easy analogies with the far less oppressive conditions of the white factory workers of America.

That, of course, is not to deny Neto's strong anti-colonialist public stands: his first arrest in Portugal—in 1951—resulted from his attempts to collect signatures in support of the International World Peace Conference in Sweden; his second arrest came when he was a student in Portugal, at which time he joined the Portuguese progressives (which included the Portuguese Communist Party), to protest the exploitation of peasants in the Alentejo. Neto clearly had a sense of international class struggle, though he does not noticeably address this issue in his poems. And, poetically, concern for the white laborer or the destitute Appalachian could only attenuate and distract from the central issue of his poems, which is primarily the poverty and humiliation of the Angolan black people, whom Neto—like his compatriot, the Angolan poet Antonio Jacinto (in his “Monangamba” [Andrade 47 ff.])—portrays as burying their desperation in alcohol and inertia, an inertia that he finds must be overcome by aggressive fraternal action. Still, Neto's poetry is not regional: it is informed with cosmic vision and with universal charge.

The theme of consanguinity is not, however, limited in Neto to the African continent. Together with the other poets of the African continuum (such as Damas, Senghor, Césaire, Brière, Tenreiro), Neto celebrates the accomplishments of Blacks the world over. And like these other poets, he does not spare the United States for its role in the oppression of the black race (see Cook/Henderson 36–44; Pallister [“Outside . . .”]; Larrier; Cohen on pictures of the United States through foreign black writers.). This is especially noticeable in the two poems entitled “Apsiração” or “Aspiration” (*SE* 698) and “Confiança” or “Confidence” (*SE* 67). In “Confidence” the African persona speaks of the ocean that separated him from himself over the centuries, so that he had forgotten the hands that built the wondrous world, where, however, “John” was lynched, his brother whipped, his wife gagged, and his son kept in ignorance (*SE* 67). In the poem “Aspiration” Neto assumes the voice of the “world negro,” (as Teneiro, the lusophone poet of São Tomé puts it), the voice of one whose sorrowful song, accompanied by the doleful sound of the popular instruments he often plays, drifts over the regions where the crushed black populations are clustered:

Ever my mournful song
and my sorrow
in Congo in Georgia in Amazonas . . .

Ever my spirit
ever the *quissange*
the marimba
the guitar
the saxophone
ever my rhythms of orgiastic ritual. (*SE* 68)

The theme of the “world negro” is executed by Neto with his customary sparseness and tight allusiveness, reminiscent only of such masters as Damas, who practices this same economy in his most successful poems, such as “Bientôt,” in which he binds together themes of oppression, compassionate identification and brotherhood with near-miraculous condensation and a verbal energy, which, with its staccato rhythms, evokes the beat of a drum,—a trick well-known to Neto, too.

Very often we will note that in Neto’s poems the themes of fraternity and worldwide oppression or of aspiration are expressed without that militancy we observe in a Damas. In such a poem as “African Poetry,” for example, there is only the slightest trace of social criticism lurking almost imperceptibly in the background. We can say that the real motive of this poem is to delineate poetically the source of a truly “African” poetry, which, in fact, is conceived as a blood-tie coming through suffering, through a transcendental aspiration and through certain cultural bonds that African Blacks have in common. While Neto seeks here to identify the fraternal spring from which his poetry originates, the poem is not a call to revolution per se, nor is Neto expressing here a limited esthetic that requires the “African poet” to write “African poems” on “African themes.” Neto is talking here of sources, but this is not restrictive: To identify the spring from which a poetry wells is not, after all, to say that that spring will not ultimately flow into the ocean, that is to say into the body of world poetry. Roots and audience can be widely separated. Neruda, for example, far from the modernist climate—and despite his effusive style—approaches Neto in his quest for “pure poetry,” i.e., a poetry that draws its inspiration precisely from the “confused impurity of the

human condition," a poetry as "impure as the clothing we wear, or our bodies, soup-stained . . ." (Neruda 39). Indeed, a re-reading of Neto's "Poema" in relation to Neruda's *ars poetica* reveals a striking parallel between these two poets, as regards their poetic objectives. Neto evokes Neruda, because their Herderian poetic goals are very similar, and because both are poets of the third world; both are poets of the people. Neto's poetry, like Neruda's, is "a poet's dispensation to the world," a voiced concern for the down-trodden and the forgotten. One thinks of Whitman; one also thinks of the Mexican poet Octavio Paz who viewed poetry in his *Arco y la lira* as multifaceted and as "the voice of the people."

Too complex and too universal in application to be branded as merely "militant," or "regional," as might be the case with Jorge Rebelo, for example, Neto's early poetry will be combed in vain for such words as "combat," "war," "arms," or "guerilla." Rather, one will normally encounter broadly humanistic themes. Nonetheless, the burden of these poems must be viewed as containing a mobilization of sorts. In them we discern a frequent call to his compatriots that they bestir themselves, but never that they take arms. Is this cautious language the result of the hesitations of a physician, who protects life, rather than taking it? the sign of a Christian upbringing, as Gerald Moser has suggested to me? the understandably guarded rhetoric of one who knows his writings are being scrutinized by the colonial powers? all three? Obviously, the revolutionary ring is clearly present in such poems as "The Reconquest," (*A reconquista*, SE 84) or "Symphony" ("Sinfonia"), in which Neto speaks of the "glorious struggle of the people" (SE 64), as in "Greeting" ("Saudação," SE 72-73), in which he conveys the "message" of his identification with the fear and hunger of his African brothers, and tells them it is time to march, to shed their inertia and to move against the oppressor and his forced assimilation, including even his linguistic impositions.⁹ And, then, too, in the last poems of Neto, the lexicon does include such words as "luta," suggesting that he has finally given up his earlier caution, so that the Christian upbringing, if it had at first led him to express sentiments such as compassion, love, brotherhood, hope, and peace, seems to have lost ground. Nonetheless, in the "message" of hope that Neto intends to convey to his brothers (as is clear in the volume's title), we hear the voice of the political activist, the existential (committed) intellectual, and the socially oriented physician who,

over and over again, condemns, though with understanding, the use of alcohol as an opiate against seemingly insoluble conditions (see, for example, the poem "Kinaxixi," *SE* 74).

Neto's poetry is not violent. Neither is it a poetry that preaches passive acceptance of the status quo. It calls for a new order in which the beauties of the African tradition may be preserved. The new order must be one wherein Africa in all its positive forms must be reclaimed, and the miseries of colonial Africa ended once and for all. Neto is opposed to inaction and passivity; this is made clear in many poems. And he shares the view of Ezekiel Mphahlele, who construes an image of an Africa that glorifies ancestors and celebrates "purity" and "innocence" as the image of a continent lying in state. In Neto's poetics, non-violent diction might serve to expose and to decry oppression. But we must not forget, either, that the poems written before the outbreak of open warfare in Angola, if they make only veiled appeals to revolution, were, as I have said, under the scrutiny of Portuguese censorship. Neto manifestly believed that revolution *per se* couldn't be accomplished without violence. ("Havemos de voltar," for example, is a poem that implicitly if not explicitly calls his compatriots to arms.) And Neto's prison poems, written between 1955 and 1960, contain statements of militancy and resistance. These poems are revolutionary poems, not reformist, as were the earlier ones, and reflect poetically Neto's political conviction that armed struggle was the only means of bringing about Angola's independence. Neto's leadership role in the MPLA (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola) is important for an understanding of the man and his later poetry: this movement was predicated on the belief that armed struggle was the only means of bringing about political independence. Thus his early cultural discourse is to be viewed as a component of Angolan nationalism, and it, together with his esthetic/ideological perspective examined early on in this paper (a perspective that sees the intimist "I" and the collective "we" as related, as one; a perspective that embraces the concepts of macroethnicity I have just been discussing), are, as it were, preludes to the more combative expression that is to follow.

It is, then, incumbent upon Neto's critics to heuristically rivet the poet, the man of conscience, to the public figure, the revolutionary and the president of Angola. Was he a radical? As we have seen contextually, he would bring along into the present certain African traditions. But unlike certain of the Negritude poets, he would not embrace

a return to these traditions pure and simple. Nor is he, like his oppressors, eager for the extermination of a race. If we examine the underlying morality of Neto's language, we must conclude that this poet, forever reiterating the word "peace," tends for the most part to hold up to his Portuguese oppressors the word and not the sword. A certain modesty prevails, as well. Though he sees himself as a leader, he does not, even so, view himself as a "general." He sees himself as the "unknown soldier of mankind." A poetic or rhetorical stance? In reality he was a commander of the MPLA forces, and after 1975 was shown in an often reproduced photo with a machine gun in his hand. In this picture he appears as the archetypal poet-president-guerilla fighter. Poetically, however, he claims that if he is crowned with palm branches, this will not be for his skill as a military strategist, but rather for his tenacity as a foot-soldier and for the wounds he will receive as a common pawn. Glory, however, and victory, too, are viewed as the necessary outcome of this "luta continua," entered into as a sacred commitment and a sacred hope. In short, though Neto is certainly not the poet of conciliation we may perceive in Senghor (e.g., in "Kaya Magan") or in Bernard Dadié (e.g., in "Frère blanc"), he frequently reiterates that his mission is a quest for peace, within the context of a new-found dignity and freedom for the Black. This reading is especially inescapable in the poems "Bleeding and Germination" ("Sangrantes e germinantes," SE 86) and "Reconquest" ("A Reconquista," SE 84). That armed warfare may nonetheless be required to achieve this peace is only one of the many ironies that surround this body of poetry!

And yet another irony resides in the fact that while violence may be necessary to the acquisition of independence, it is the white man who gives the example in violence; violence is his forte, as is evidenced in the following lines from "A Birthday":

In the world
Korea bloodied at the hands of men
shootings in Greece and strikes in Italy
apartheid in Africa
and in atomic factories the bustle to kill
wholesale to kill more ever more humans

They cudgeling us
and preaching terror. (Um aniversário," SE 76-77)

In the voice of Angola, the poet-physician offers as an antidote to these destructive patterns a black African son, “formado em Medicina,” who will turn back disease, alcoholism, prostitution and pious passivity, all inappropriate “responses” to white oppression. In any event, Neto does not envision an emulation of the European white man who absurdly manufactures for the sake of destroying or “fabrica para destruir” (SE 94). The violent hands of the Whites beat on the skin of Africa-the-Drum, on the skin over the poet’s “stretched brain,” thus unleashing the rhythmical passion, but also the long pent-up humiliation and the ultimate determination of Africa to move “onward” (see “On the skin of the drum” or, “Na pele do tambor,” SE 88). It is also the *magalas* or Portuguese soldiers whose boots tread on the flesh of the Blacks; they, for their part, are “united in love” (Reconquest,” SE 84).

In sum, while on a political level Neto recognized with Frantz Fanon (*Toward the African Revolution*) that in order to wrest power from the colonials an armed struggle—and therefore violence—was an inevitability, this imperative is not so clearly outlined in Neto’s poetry. Here he stresses other aspects of the revolution identified by Fanon as the necessary—if not sufficient—conditions of the revolution: these include the unity and the effective solidarity we have previously identified. One should perhaps reiterate here that the lack of emphasis on violence observable in the published poems written between 1945 and 1955 was in part for safety’s sake, and that in the poems written between 1955 and 1960, the discourse, and with it the tone, tend to change.

Prior to this change in stance, Neto displays other thematic materials that reach beyond the narrow confines of “militant combat poetry,” and which I hinted at earlier. These include, in particular, his trained physician’s concern over the Angolans’ physical illnesses and over their ignorance vis-à-vis these illnesses. Even more than William Carlos Williams, Neto “followed the poor defeated body into the gulfs and grottos” of irremediable suffering. Neto has no program of collaboration between the medicine-man and the Western scientist. Rather, he is filled with compassion at the anxiety that pushes his compatriots to alcoholic desperation and to ineffective remedies for their illnesses. He is concerned for children sexually abused by the Whites, who then pay off the fathers.

As Neto shows in the lines quoted below from “Sábado nos musseques,” or “Saturday in the *musseques*” (SE 38–45), these poor

unfortunates consult the *ki-mbanda*, or traditional doctor (medicine-man)—even “quack” doctor, as it has been explained by Holness (although some may claim that Neto, despite his ambivalence and sometimes even outright rejection of some African institutions and practices would not have viewed the *ki-mbanda* as a “quack”); they seek the medicine-man’s help, for their jobs are endangered by their illness. The wives seek drugs from the fetishist to save their husbands. The mothers fear the death of their children, wasting away from pneumonia in their huts made of broken tins (the leftovers of the Portuguese colonials’ superior life style?), and so they consult the fortune-teller to settle the grave question that plagues their minds:

Ansiedade . . .

no homem

que consulta o kimbanda

para conservar o emprego

na mulher

que pede drogas ao feiticeiro

para conservar o marido

na mãe

que pergunta ao adivinho

se a filhinha se salvará

da pneumonia

na cubata

de velhas latas esburacadas. . . . (SE 42–43)¹⁰

Though other African poets are Western-trained physicians, one wonders if there is among them any other who expresses so tragically the far-reaching implications of his/her countrymen’s quasi-superstitious but inevitable measures for combating disease and its terror? One is struck by such passages as the above, for inasmuch as they reflect the special *regard du médecin*, so beautifully studied by Michel Foucault in his *Naissance de la clinique*, we have in them something quite unusual, quite in addition to and different from the concerns inherent in a Marxist call to arms. The physician speaks more than once in these poems. Thus we should not overlook, either, Neto’s ironic allusions to “medicines that kill,” in his “Mãos esculturais,” or “Sculptured Hands” (SE 94).

Leaving aside these highly developed thematic phenomena, organized around the subjects of brotherhood, world enslavement, diaspora, illness—and their dialectic antipodes hope and peace—, in the magistral poem “O verde das palmeiras de minha mocidade,” or “The Green of the Palms of My Youth” (*SE* 102 ff.) Neto treats fully the themes of religion and guilt. Partly a poem like those of Senghor that seek to recover the poet’s “royaume d’enfance,” partly a poem like Césaire’s *Cahier*, “The Green of the Palms . . .” traces the metaphysical evolution of the poet, his departure from his roots, and his ultimate return to the physical and spiritual site of his origins. While not renouncing the sub-stratum of permanent African belief systems, including the animist traditions embodied in the “metaphysical breath of sacred forests,” or in the “deified inspiration of the *xinguilamentos* and the fetishes,” the poet speaks of having been exposed to a Christianity imposed upon him with a missionary spirit so zealous that it has taught him the “Our Father” in his native tongue. Ironically, he has learned to utter a prayer in Ki-mbundu that does not petition forgiveness for his own sins, but, rather, simply entreats sins to flee:

Lengenu

O ituxi! O ituxi! (*SE* 103)

The sins of the Africans have their “paradox,” after all. For what is their occasion? Who is the true perpetrator, hiding behind his/her “façades of Christianity, democracy and equality,” as in “A Reconquista,” or “Reconquest” (*SE* 84)? (And as has often been said, what is the meaning of original sin to black Africans, who, in their view, were not involved in this primordial transgression?)

In the major movement of this poem (“The Green . . .”), following this passage in Ki-mbundu, Neto admits not to “sins” but to having been a traitor to his culture. His Western scientific training has caused him to turn against traditional values. In characteristically concrete language, the poet, reflecting on his experiences in Caxias prison, launches on a self-examination that leads him to recognize his error. He senses shame for his flight from youth and fertility, from verdure, from the certainty and the security of traditional tribal beliefs, as also from the “marimba, the quissange, and the drum,” which he had temporarily exchanged for the insecurity of Beethoven’s symphonies—the very epitome of Western culture—, and for “poems

that Mussunda cannot understand.”¹¹ But like Césaire’s departure, Neto’s “betrayal” is redeemed by his realization that he has left the “full granaries to the indecent hunger of (savage) animals,” i.e., the Portuguese. He, like Césaire, is overwhelmed by the desire for return, for recovery, and expiation through the assumption of the role of leader, of “kalunga,” or “savior.”

An aspect of this return includes, of course, the recovery of the history of the black Angolans, reflected in the poet’s history. The material surroundings and the material production of these Angolans, including their own language, Ki-mbundu, are viewed by Neto in many poems—but especially in “The Green of the Palms”—as the fundamental basis of their history, as the cultural load of which Marx spoke. In “The Green of the Palms of my Youth” the history of the black Angolans as well as the poet’s own archaeology of feeling (to use Bachelard’s words) are therefore brought into the present, not only in terms befitting the poet’s particular Marxism as tailored to his needs, but simultaneously with a lyricism so exquisite as to justify placing Neto in the mainstream of modern poetry:

Everything lives again
 this dramatic youth refound
 everything lives again in the breast
 made broad by eagerness,
 the breast bent with the force of truth
 and grounded in the imperishable

The greenness of the palms
 is beautiful. (*SE* 107)

And under the resignation, under the return described in the poem, the work of the chastened poet will no longer be incomprehensible to the people. Instead it will become, in the words of Kimoni (135), the “ethical support of the people,” as befits the political and social conditions that are the setting of the third world writer.¹²

Conclusion

As earlier stated, Lilyan Kesteloot, in her *Anthologie* (421), has linked the work of Agostinho Neto to Morisseau-Leroy’s

Kasamansa, labeling them both as “combat poetry.” But this is misleading. For although we might use the term “combat poetry” as a common metric to group together with Neto not only Morisseau-Leroy but also militant Marxists from Haiti, such as Jacques Roumain, Rodolphe Moïse, and René Depestre, all of whom have like Neto known the horrors of dictatorship, and all of whom have varying degrees of hatred for the capitalist system which so ravaged their country, we have seen in the foregoing discussion the difficulty the term offers when applied to Neto’s diction and thrust. Thus, the analogies between their work and Neto’s are ideological more than tonal or stylistic. Their geographical and socio-political frame of reference is, it goes without saying, different from that of Neto. It is, in fact, difficult to assert who might be the true “poetic heirs” of Neto, a poet who is unconcerned with his inner nature or individuality (Jahn 135, 143), and therefore with poetic glory. In fact, there is, in Neto, a convergence of the inner self and the outer reality. Though he did not attempt to write exclusively “African” poetry, his poetic achievement is, ironically, characterized by consummate *Angolitude* and *Africanitude*. On yet a different level, Neto’s poetry exhibits the ills of the third world, and of all humanity. It is the “musée vivant” of which Cheikh Anta Diop has spoken. The pain Neto details, once localized, is diffused and metastasized, the anguish shot over the nerve system of the entire universe. Regional, continental, universal. Morisseau-Leroy’s revolutionary logos, which strangles his poetic articulations, lies far from that of Neto, who eschews hyperbolic nihilism, prosaic assertions, and name-calling of the sort found in Morisseau-Leroy. The Angolan poet sees these as strategies that are not really compatible with revolution, in the purest sense of the word. Neto’s choices of discourse are light years away from those of Morisseau-Leroy, for the latter’s accusatory diatribes would be impossible in the world of Neto’s spare lyricism. And besides, Morisseau-Leroy’s poetry shows nothing of Neto’s subtlety of style, his elegant tempos, his bold original imagery, and his “pure” diction. (See Neto’s “Caminho do mato,” *SE* 46, for an example of this.) Neto’s algebra places harrowing reality squarely within the space of “pure” language. His is not the world of Morisseau-Leroy; his is not the revolutionary rhetoric found in the invectives of Rodolphe Moïse, whose poetry falls into an abstract, propagandistic, tract-like style; his is not the strident, unmetaphorical tone of Mozambique’s Jorge Rebelo, of the Frelimo movement (“Mother, I have a gun . . .”). Such poets fail beyond the

small revolutionary group they intend to muster. Neto's poetry is not of this ilk. Even so, its meanings hinge upon those Angolan realities of which we have been speaking here, and so there is no denying that for the proper understanding of the kind of African poetry Neto's is, moving as it does between the two mountains of rich allusion and bald statement, a modicum of the Lévy-Straussian or Barthesian sociocritical approach is definitely in order. In the best of all worlds, this approach, combined with a linguistic and stylistic analysis, should heighten, not lessen our appreciation of this gifted poet (and I hope here to have accomplished at least a preliminary analysis geared to those concerns).

In Neto we see not so much a "master of combat poetry," as Kesteloot would have it, but, rather, a "master poet." A "master poet" indeed, and one who does not aim to write "combat poems," but, in his own words, "solution poems." For he would rearrange the question mark made by Africa and Madagascar into "the straight line of affirmation" ("Poema," *SE* 97). In confirmation of this point, Russell Hamilton has said (101, 106, 112) that Neto never exhibits "black rage," and that he never forgets, even in the most doctrinal of his poems, that he is a poet. With Neto it is a question of Lukács' "intimate connection," the one between the artistic vision and his allegiance to an ideology that embraces a belief in the social development (Lukács 57). With this correct fusion of art and ideology, the author's ethic does not become an esthetic problem.

In view of his style, his concerns, and his ideology, Neto's work should, then, not be placed in the reductive category of "combat poetry." Like other important poet proponents of revolution, we must guard against classifying him as nothing but that. Nkosi correctly warns (163-64) against viewing lusophone African poetry as "'agitrop' or verse written for the occasion." Neto's criticism of white colonial oppression and of the dreadful physical and spiritual conditions of the black Angolans which he seeks to correct politically (as a soldier, as a leader, as a president), professionally (as a physician), and ideologically (as a poet) gives us the core meaning of his life's mission. Neto expresses this criticism in all three capacities with a resonant and rebellious outspokenness, but his socio-critical and political missions cannot be said to diminish the stature of his literary contribution, cast as it is in the purest of diction and fused inseparably to the ideologies it encompasses. Additionally, his criticism cannot be viewed by its mere presence as a less than desirable component of his

poetry. For all great poets criticize systems. Among the more militant poets of Africa and the Caribbean, Neto keeps company with the very greatest, those who are not only “masters of combat poetry” but major craftsmen, sensible of the need to fuse structure to ideology, to float the poem in a water of image and rhythm,—just as Senghor, among others, has driven home. In the words of Margaret Holness (*Sacred Hope* xlii), “Profoundly Angolan, profoundly African, Neto is profoundly internationalist. This is one of his most striking characteristics among African poets, making him a poet of international stature who speaks for oppressed peoples everywhere.” Neto’s poetic universe is that of Aimé Césaire, of René Depestre, of the undeservedly neglected Virgílio de Lemos and of Ibrahima Sall. For all of these are revolutionaries and poets, as well as poetic revolutionaries, fashioning a new voice to fit their morally obligatory call to action; a voice with which to announce the “good news” of a new social order in which the notion of white supremacy with its accompanying abuses will be crushed; a voice with which to declare a dialectic fraught with rebuke and tension, yet still open to dialogue. And like all these poets, Neto envisages an Angola, an Africa, in which the best of African traditions and values will be preserved. When white rule is brought down, the *batuque* will survive, but certainly not the *mussequê*. This is the very substance of Neto’s poetic discourse, of his sacred hope.

Notes

1. Extant translations of Neto’s work have largely violated these structures and have therefore imperiled Neto’s reputation among non-Portuguese readers. While I have cited the English and French translations in my bibliography, note that Neto’s poems have as well been translated into Italian, Serbo-Croat, Russian, Chinese, Spanish, German, Dutch, Romanian, and Vietnamese. My essay takes its quotations directly from the *Sagrada Esperança* of Neto, indicated by the abbreviation *SE* from which—unless otherwise noted in the text—I myself translate.

Neto was born on 17 September 1922 in Cachicane village in the region of Icolo e Bengo, about 60 km from Luanda, the son of a Protestant pastor. Both of his parents were teachers. He entered medical school at Coimbra in Portugal in 1947, became involved in political activities, and in 1951 was held in the Caxias Prison near Lisbon for the first time. Imprisoned many times after that, he published his first book of verse in 1955, became a physician in 1958, and in that same year married and became one of

the founders of the Anti-Colonial Movement (MAC). Returning to Angola in 1959, he became a leader of the MPLA inside Angola, where he practiced medicine among his people. In 1962 he was elected president of the MPLA, and, after Independence, became the president of Angola. (A mini history of Angola and full details of Neto's life can be found in Holness' introduction to her translation, *Sacred Hope*.)

2. As would be clear to any Africanist, Neto's themes of collective action and of collectivity as a greater force than individualism are as much African as they are Marxist. (See Senghor, *Lib. 1* 27–33)

The metaphor of the Mother and of Mother Africa (or of Woman as representing Africa) is extremely widespread in poetry of the African continuum. But note especially in the lusophone corpus Azevedo and Rebelo, e.g., in Andrade (14) and in Burness (51–52). We may assume that Neto was speaking of "Mother Africa" and not just "Mother" or "Mother Angola," not only because of the prevalence of this topos in the body of black African and Caribbean literature, but also because of his hope in Pan-Africanism, articulated in the poem "Bamako," written in 1954, just after he had attended a Pan-African conference in Bamako. Other poems in which it is a question of all Africa are "A reconquista" (*SE* 84–85); "Sangrantes e germinantes" (*SE* 86–87); "Na pele do tambor" (*SE* 88–89). Viriato da Cruz, another Angolan poet, develops the idea of a cosmic black mother, in a poem entitled "Mamã Negra," or "Black Mama" (Andrade 57–59).

3. Tomorrow

we will intone anthems to freedom
we will commemorate
the date of slavery's abolition.

4. No man will silence us

no man will be able to prevent us
The smile on our lips is not out of gratitude for the death
with which they kill us.

With all Humanity let us

lay claim to our world and to our Peace.

The Pan-African revolution affirmed in this poem strengthens the proposal the poet makes to his countrymen. Obviously a certain Marxism underlies the resolve he invites his countrymen to adopt. It is interesting to note that Burness (96) reads the last two lines as an instance of immediate future, for he translates: "We are going to . . ." However, Margaret Holness view the lines as containing a command, which I think would be proper, given the many direct imperatives used throughout the poem.

5. Neto's use of the Ki-mbundu language in various poems is scarcely "to create an

African ambiance" (Burness 101). Rather, these words appeal directly to the people, and therefore are functional in the poet's call to action. More profoundly still, lines in Ki-mbundu may reflect the poet's deepest linguistic substratum, and would therefore be the wellspring of his lyricism. This is true despite the fact that he did not master the Ki-mbundu language. (On the evocative use of African languages, see Senghor, "Ethiopiques," in *Poèmes* 156, 158.) Neto's passionate lyricism, supported by his clear language and his signs, is readily apparent; but it is also attested to by at least two competent critics (Hamilton 101; Burness 102).

6. It is of interest that Andrade's *Antologia* (39–40) contains this poem, entitled "Fogo e ritmo," though it is not found in *SE*. The French translation of Andrade's anthology includes this poem (110–11), as does Holness' translation of *SE* into English (24–25). Yet the poem is of prime importance, because on the one hand it expresses what Lukács called the demonic search for authentic values, while on the other hand it quite emphatically avoids the Marxist view of the African as having undergone a reification process, i.e., a separation from the natural rhythms and shapes of creation. Compare Neto's "Criar" (*SE* 122).

7. . . . I yearn . . .

For you
the scattered who dream
of me!

For you my brother
for myself
in search of all the Africas of the world.

8. The issues of *Présence Africaine* (38, 42/43) cited in the bibliography fully portray the Portuguese oppression of African peoples. Several issues of *Africa Today* have been devoted to the political climate during the liberation movements of Mozambique and Angola, while Boxer, too, provides important background on the question. For similar treatment of Mozambique intellectuals at the hands of the Portuguese see Hamilton (222).

9. Neto uses Ki-mbundu words simply because there is no Portuguese word to designate a given object or concept; but there is also beneath and beyond this the suggestion that the Portuguese language—the language of the oppressor—has created a gulf between the poet and his friend Mussunda, who cannot understand his poems, not just because of their content, but also because they are in Portuguese. These linguistic alienations are compounded by the black Angolans' lack of education which leaves them, ironically, in the dilemma of not even speaking Ki-mbundu well, as Neto suggests in the poem "Kinaxixi" (*SE* 74). (He himself suffered from this shortcoming.)

In speaking of his own earlier betrayal of his fellow Angolans, Neto links expatriation to linguistic alienation ("O verde das palmeiras," or "The Green of the Palms," *SE*

102). His frequent use of Ki-mbundu words in his poems is intended to underscore the inadequacies of the Portuguese language when it comes to conveying the totality of the black Angolan life style.

10. Anxiety . . .

in the man who consults the kimbanda
to keep his job

in the woman
who begs drugs of the fetishist
to keep her husband

in the mother
who asks the fortune-teller
if her little girl will recover
from pneumonia
in the hut
made of broken tin cans. (Holness 7–8)

11. Compare Kalungano's "Onde estou," in which the poet adjures his audience not to seek the same artistic experience in African music and poetry as one would in "the Gloria of Beethoven" (Andrade, *Antologia* 76).

12. Further on, Kimoni stresses that African art objects "are cultural objects which fill a social and religious role and carry with them a philosophical intention" (author's translation). This view of creativity and community is fundamentally African, so that a Marxist esthetic converges with and reinforces a similar one already in place.

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