

## **Self-Actualization in Philosophy and African Literature: A comparative reading of Louis Lavelle and Tchicaya U Tam'si**

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The philosopher Louis Lavelle (1883-1951) is known as one of the forerunners of psychometaphysic and existentialism in France, and Tchicaya U Tam'si (1931-1988) as the leading figure of the second generation of the Negritude Movement. Some years ago when I interpreted a Tchicaya's short story entitled "Rémanence. Un dit", I came to believe that Tchicaya's process of revealing the Self amazingly followed Louis Lavelle's theory of the spiritual intimacy. To my view, the similarity between the Congolese poet, playwright and novelist's poetic and the French moralist was so important that I used Lavelle's title to interpret the short story. According to the framework designed by the Conference, I would like to investigate this cross-cultural area including African literature and metaphysic in the same scheme of mind.

In "Rémanence. Un dit", Tchicaya addresses the question of the origin of life. How did the Self of the narrator come to be what it is presently? In other words what is the secret history of Self? Thanks to its faculty of memory the "I" goes back up till to its pre-corporal and pre-conscious existence. It first discovers itself as being a soul that wandered through different stages of being, changing its status by dying, emerging from one life to another. Tchicaya read Nietzsche but, to my knowledge, never read L. Lavelle. However, some of his sentences in this short story are almost quotations of Lavelle's thought.

Louis Lavelle held the chair of philosophy at La Sorbonne and College de France, where he was replaced by the master of phenomenology Maurice Merleau-Ponty. He founded and co-directed with René Le Senne the publication series called "Philosophie de l'Esprit". Among his numerous works there are titles such as: *De l'intimité spirituelle*, *De l'être*, *Du Temps et de l'éternité*, *La Dialectique du monde sensible*, *La conscience de soi*, etc. *L'erreur de Narcisse* is based on the mythological character of Narcissus captivated by the beauty of his own body in the mirror of a fountain. Lavelle states that the inner self cannot be reached by a complaisant contemplation of the own body but by an active and conscious act of communion with the Being. In other words acknowledging the existence of the body is a preliminary step towards the discovery of the spiritual Self. The Self is essentially spiritual: "The sensitivity subjects me to the world; the activity subjects the world to me". (My translation)

Like Louis Lavelle, Plato, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre resorted to myths and literature as basic backgrounds for their philosophical systems. The challenging purpose is to re-construct Tchicaya's short story "Rémanence. Un dit" in terms of the lavellian self-actualization philosophy. Would it be on the other hand right to speak of a systematic theory by Tchicaya? So to say, how is an African philosophy based on creative literature conceivable?

## 1. Tchicaya and the discovery of Self<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1 *The tale of the discovery*

Tchicaya U Tam'si addresses the problem of existence, as it is reflected to his African consciousness and his imaginary. The reality of death is a daily human issue, how does the Being come to be, to exist? What would be the origin of sickness and death? How can one delay the fatal issue? That is what is called the existential "deadliness". Through these problems, Tchicaya links the daily tragic of Man to the complexity of his destiny.

The I-Narrator of "Rémanence. Un dit" tries to retrace by memory his pre-corporal and preconscious existence. As a soul that has wandered, known various existences, he remembers that he was an ogre, priest, and pagan brother of Grand Mongol of Samarcande. He would be guillotined if his murder had not had colic. He then became Comte of Zumba at he Court of Enrique, shipwrecked, escaped... Death sanctioned every change of status.

In his effort of memory, the narrator would like to "find again the significance of the sign that he has on the back of his hand". He remembers that he witnessed the martyr of a crucified; it occurred before coming out of the sea as a "polyp", i.e. just a mouth nourished with wrack.

Then he became a vendor of kauris, kola, pepper and sulphur on the coast near Louisiana. He died again in order to make bad-tempered people to regain life. Then he became a vendor of gold and asphalt; and entered another life. He discovered on a plain smelling sulphur horsemen without face, armed with javelins. He refused the kind of life. The wandering finally brought him to a garden where he discovers his entire body for the first time, but still without bones. His body does not move, but his will acts: he has just to speak and what he says happens.

But a maxim says: "Act and you will know hope and despair" (MS p. 34). As soon as he feels this sentiment, he is suddenly provided with a bone framework, like a sunny bird sent off from heaven to the spatial-temporal finiteness.

### 1.2 *A Myth of metempsychosis*

This short story relates an evolution that guides to the constitution of the whole body. It describes the life of the soul since the oldest times to the formation of the bones. Like a real labyrinth trace, which is untied by the "I-Narrator".

Tchicaya seek to address the question related to the origin of life. How did the self of the narrator come to be what it presently is? In other words what is the secret history of Self? There is a Self that does not stay, that disappears and this Self is seen through the visions and the remembering of another I-Narrator that identifies himself to the first one. This is an actual quest in the existential and successive mistake of a being that is at the same time one and multiple to which the narrator tries to adjust his "self". But, this time, the quest for identity goes the opposite way; it turns towards the past instead of towards the future. All this is in order to privilege the present time. According to Tchicaya's view, the process of identification is of the utmost importance in his poetic work.

1 KC MABANA 1998 : 247-249.

A trend represented by some critics linking this short story to the Negritude Movement sees in it the destiny of the whole Black Race. S. Agui sees in it an itinerary of the bad blood and the sum of the sufferance undergone by the Blacks. To me it is rather to be seen in a spiritualistic perspective. Beyond the present body exists a spiritual and non-materialistic reality that has a history or a spatial-temporal succession. The changes of life or of status have no impact over this reality. It is, in Lavelle's word, a being that seeks what it is in order to become it. Obviously the self differs from the consciousness that we have of it. Therefore, it is a metaphysical essence that was at the start of this adventure of the I-Narrator.

Until the final and total revelation is made, the I-Narrator is submitted to the heaviness of its physical body; it is passive, fragile. It is thanks to its powers of freedom and will that it can be self, i.e. be responsible for its destiny and acquire the capacity to act. From this linearly point of view, "Rémanence. Un dit" curiously corresponds to the scheme of the discovery of self in Louis Lavelle's *De l'Intimité spirituelle*.

## **2. Louis Lavelle's theory of Self actualisation**

The self-consciousness is the peak point of Lavelle's philosophy. There is identity between the knowing subject and the known object. The discovery of self, the knowledge that I have of myself, takes place when there is no distinction between subject and object. Therefore to know what is the self implies the act of consciousness, which forms the self as a being.

Self-actualisation is nothing but the discovery of the consciousness that is the being of self in that it creates it "by actualising it in a presence to itself"<sup>2</sup>. Lavelle notices that, in the consciousness, self is not alone although it is a same being. At an ontological level, the consciousness reveals in the self one observer and one observed, one who knows and one who is known<sup>3</sup>. The self is dubbed in the process. There is a kind of dialog, which constitutes the origin of self-being by its own act of freedom. Freedom actualises, under the command of the will, the self that is or was nothing but in suspense. Act and auto-creation is the couple that characterizes the consciousness.

If the being of the self is to be identified with the consciousness of it, that means that the self exists only by an act of which it is itself the author, and for which it is responsible. The itinerary of self is a retreat of self that gets down till to the bottom of its intimacy in order to retrieve its existence by its own activity. "My self is my own creation", would Lavelle say in an existentialist perspective. But self-actualisation is ambiguous: it calls on the self to be lonely but at the same time to communicate with the whole universe; it invites the self to passivity and to activity, to imperfection and to perfection in a spiritual presence. For it forms "a link between the body life and the spiritual life"<sup>4</sup>. In his book *La présence totale*, Lavelle

2 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

3 *Cf.* CS p. 5-; PT p. 53.

4 CS p. 5.

makes clear that «the life of self constantly opposes and reunifies it to itself»<sup>5</sup>. Consciousness therefore is an ambiguous dialog.

It seems useful to remind that self is not knowledgeable because it cannot exist for another consciousness but itself, in other words, because it is never an empirical data. It is somehow an awakening of a hidden life, which is to be reached by the consciousness-act to which it is identified. Like in the case of the Cartesian Cogito, the consciousness as a reflective analysis constitutes a re-acknowledgement and a re-appropriation of my possibilities whose my self would be the stone and the seed<sup>6</sup>. Self-actualisation indicates and implies a creative choice that can be both consensus and denial. Any act of consciousness evokes thus an act of freedom, which creates and actualises the possibilities. In other words, consciousness is a faculty of action and creation: “This secret being, which originates what we are, when we acknowledge it, is the same act which originates everything that exists. It is the supreme mystery and the supreme light”<sup>7</sup>.

To be conscious of self is to realise oneself by one’s own act, to choose among one’s possibilities that one seizes by the intellect and uses them in order to give to one self its own true being. The choice is an act of freedom because it is itself one of the possibilities that exist only by the self and are to be actualised in the same self. Hence it is necessary to get deeply down to the bottom of one’s intimacy to discover the whole range of unexplored and endless possibles, and freely choose one’s determination and action. Self consciousness always passes through the body, by an unauthentic seize of the “I” as an effect of an external cause before discovering itself as act-origin of self and of the whole universe. To be conscious of self is to detect and receive the dispositions and the status in which the self applies its creative choice. By the way, “the Self becomes anything else but what it has chosen”<sup>8</sup>.

A moral directive must accompany any consciousness: it must untie the self from any kind of self-pride, be guided by a sense of decency and awareness. My consciousness is my most secret, invisible intimacy, unattainable to any other consciousness, impenetrable where it penetrates all, and is supported by sincerity. “The characteristic of sincerity is to oblige myself to be myself, so to say, to be myself what I seek. It is a quest for my own essence”<sup>9</sup>.

Sincerity is the concretisation of my eternal aim, which is the quest for my essence or the “what am I”. Thus, haste, fear, habits, external appeals, taste of elegance or virtue alienate the self instead of legitimising it. To be sincere means to be conscious of self. One must be disinterested to seek the clear vision of one’s own being. Impassibility is the rule to overtake one’s Narcissus condition towards one’s authentic and superior self. For “the being that I

5 PT p. 54-55.

6 Cf. IS p. 203.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 79.

8 CS p. 11.

9 L. LAVELLE 1951, p. 13.

know in me is not my self, as soon as I know it, it is already another. Thus the consciousness is an act by which I always become superior to myself”<sup>10</sup>.

Once again the “Self” is mysterious. It is only seized as being accomplishing itself, as accomplishing itself, in an experience mixed with “anxiety, joy and hope”. It is never, it always becomes. It is always discovered by a new birth, fruit of our freedom that gives to the self its dignity. Nevertheless despite this long meditation on self, one remains surprised that the self is always provided with a power of acting and creating itself whereas it creates the universe. The self is in endless re-birth, overtaking anything that reduces it to a desire or a dream<sup>11</sup>. The lavellian self remains a question: who or what am I?

To close this section let us quote an excerpt from *De l’Acte*:

Je ne suis que par un acte que j’accomplis intérieurement, acte toujours à l’œuvre même quand je ne le fais pas mien, et qui, dès que j’y participe, est toujours juge de lui-même, et médiateur entre la connaissance et le vouloir: il est le cœur et le secret de la création<sup>12</sup>.

I am only thanks to an act that I interiorly accomplish, an act that is always at work even when I do not take it as mine, and that, once I participate in it, is judge of itself, and mediator between the knowledge and the will: it is the heart and the secret of creation.

### **3. From the body to the spirit: Tchicaya and Lavelle**

#### *3.1 Body, soul and spirit in the short story*

Referring to “body, soul and spirit”, Lavelle defines that “outside the matter, there is nothing but the spirit and its acts. The soul and its powers is between the spirit and the matter: it enlightens, through an act of the spirit, an important part of the matter that is our body, and as a result, the relationship of the material universe with the body”<sup>13</sup>. To me it seems that the I-Narrator of Tchicaya’s “Remanence” starts his journey through the different stages of being as a soul without a body. All the different works he does form its whole being.

The long journey towards being is full of choices, discontinuities, repetitions, and byways. The states of self-change are to be interpreted like different powers in progress until the entire body is formed. Amazing is the fact, that the self collects itself not by chance, but choices exclusively made by the self at different steps of its way to being. The most important discovery is the one of the maxim of wisdom: “Act and you will know hope and despair”; in other terms the consciousness of the body’s limits.

This maxim implies will, free choice, and adjustment to the reality of the universe. As soon as the I-Narrator becomes aware of hope and despair, the two opposite forces that divide the

10 CS p. 16.

11 CS p. 19.

12 LAVELLE 1946, p.12.

13 D.M.S. p. 41.

human world, it discovers its body, its entire body. There is a kind of rebirth, an instant openness to being. Simultaneously the maxim traces a limit to the freedom of the I-Narrator. In his imaginary Tchicaya recreates the myth of the being, by explaining the origin of the body and the moral values to which it is submitted.

The body discovered through this exercise of the mind is just a mediation pace towards the spiritual Ego. Tchicaya may not have sought this coincidence with Lavelle's scheme. If the body limits the self to its passive side, the self obviously becomes what it freely chooses to be; it is conquered by the operation of an activity, which is inseparable from the self itself. The choice is an inherent part of the essence of the self. So to say, the corporal step in the process of self-actualisation has to be overtaken by the spiritual step.

One can apply to Tchicaya's "Rémanence" other terms used by Lavelle to expose his philosophy of intimacy such as: inscription in the being, participation to being, actualisation of possibles, existentialism, exercise of freedom, power of will, activity, passivity, presence to the world or to self, etc. Lavelle sees in the discovery of the self-consciousness a metaphysical tragedy, a tragedy where the self awakens to the immense power of its will. Therefore, "to move the little finger" forms an act of a great significance because it is made consciously, responsibly, sincerely. Hence a moral dimension is necessary.

One would also ask if it is possible to conclude from these brief observations and similarities that Tchicaya is a philosopher.

### *3.2 Evaluation: Philosophy and literature*

My answer is no. Tchicaya is an intellectual not a philosopher, although he used to read Marx and Nietzsche, although he followed with interest the main trends of the Black movements. The only thing I would infer is that one can outline a system of thought, wisdom, and reflection or political philosophy out of his writings. There is a neither systematic nor theoretical nor analytic study, nor collection of principles conducted by Tchicaya beyond the practice of his writing. My attempt to adjust Lavelle's moral philosophy to the itinerary of Tchicaya's I-Narrator is a kind of make up, an intellectual exercise by me to link the various areas of my research. That is the weakness and maybe the strength of this paper.

Would it be on the other hand right to speak of a systematic theory by Tchicaya? So to say, how is an African philosophy based on creative literature conceivable?

Marcien Towa did vehemently criticize Léopold Senghor's Negritude in his books: *Léopold Sedar Senghor: Négritude ou servitude?* This issue can be very controversial or ambiguous. Thinking philosophically on an African or Caribbean writer's work does not mean that this writer is automatically a philosopher. The philosopher is the one who thinks, constructs concepts and systems on a way of behaving, acting, speaking, etc. A philosopher is somebody who is trained and masters the concepts of the area, but an improvised one. Fr Tempels' famous book *Bantu Philosophy* failed in that it attributed a Western concept of philosophy to a people that just lived according to its faith, beliefs, political experiences and social wisdom:

In face of experience we come to reasoned conclusions in accordance with our criteriology and ontology. The Bantu believe that they come to valid conclusions following theirs. We understand causality in terms of our static metaphysics, the Bantu in terms of their philosophy of force<sup>14</sup>.

This philosophy of force is nothing but a part of the Western metaphysics as an ethno-philosophical approach. The Bantu themselves are not aware of being philosophers. The Bantu wisdom or their way of viewing the universe is seen from the outside. This debate is still hot in many universities or philosophy schools of the African Continent.

### **Conclusion**

By basing this analysis of Tchicaya's "Rémanence. Un dit" on Lavelle's philosophy of the Ego, I came to roughly pose the problem of African philosophy usually conceived by fellow Africans as an undoubtedly right so that the question of its existence seems to be irrelevant.

Immanuel Kant would ask: How can an African Philosophy be possible? African philosophy must be constructed, practised by Africans especially provided with a philosophical training. There are already some movements worthy to be discussed about, such as African Personality, Pan-Africanism, African socialism, and Negritude. Names like N'Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Cheikh Anta Diop, Paulin Hountondji, Elungu Pene Elungu, Eboussy Boulaga, Okolo Okonda, John Mbiti, Mazrui, Mudimbe, etc. and some schools are well known in the world.

Books like Fr. J. Smet's *Histoire de la philosophie africaine Courants et problèmes*, Masolo's *African Philosophy in search of identity* and Ochieng's *African Philosophy: an Introduction*, provide a variety of its implementations, trends and problems.

African philosophy has to confirm its existence. The philosophers would aim at implementing African beliefs or wisdom, at rigorously exploring their languages, at methodically reading their narrative fictions or creative writings, in order to systematically outline the specificity of the African mind. They should transcend the slogan stage to attain a strict philosophical level of acceptance.

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