Francisco José Tenreiro

Stops: Brazil, Portugal, São Tomé and Principe, Sweden, United Kingdom

(1921-1963)



Poet, essayist, and geographer, Francisco José Tenreiro was born on the island of São Tomé and died at the young age of 42 in Lisbon. The son of a Portuguese plantation administrator and a contract worker from São Tomé, he was sent to Portugal at the age of two under the care of a paternal aunt. He grew up, studied, earned academic qualifications, developed intellectual skills, and started a family in Portugal. He was a student of Orlando Ribeiro, who encouraged him to prepare his doctoral thesis on São Tomé, resulting in the book *A Ilha de S. Tomé* [*The Island of S. Tomé*] (1961), which remains an essential work for those studying the archipelago. As an employee of the Ministry of Overseas Territories, he participated in a course at Cambridge in the summer of 1950, and with a scholarship from the British Council, he studied at the London School of Economics and Political Science between 1954 and 1955. In 1955, he began teaching at the University of Lisbon, lecturing on Ethnology, Political and Economic Geography, and Colonial Geography. Between 1956 and 1958, Tenreiro made several trips to São Tomé as part of his research for his doctoral thesis. During this time, he also wrote his most nostalgic and evocative poems about the São Toméan universe.

Tenreiro is an intellectual whose literary and essayistic production should be a compulsory reference in any approach to the 20th-century African world within the Portuguese-speaking realm. Despite his European and Portuguese education, his work has never detached itself from the Black world, from Africa, and particularly from São Tomé and Príncipe. The African

Black world occupies a central place in his intellectual consciousness and, one might even say, in his ideological position. This does not mean that Tenreiro's writing can be strictly classified within a nationalist perspective, as with some of his contemporaries. Still, his awareness of the condition of the Black man is undeniable. When analysing Tenreiro's poetic journey, several critics highlight the fact that the poet is biologically and culturally mixed-race, using expressions like "alienation," "poetics of ambiguities" (Margarido 1980: 528 and 534), and "being uprooted" (Secco 2010: 203). However, this interpretation may not be very productive. Even though Tenreiro did not publicly, explicitly, and unequivocally associate his mixed-race identity with Negritude and the anti-colonial struggle, condemning Portuguese colonialism, and the lack of this political affirmation relates to his personal circumstances as a mixed-race São Toméan educated in Europe, it says little about his awareness of the colonial condition. Tenreiro may have grown up in Portugal, but this lack of lived experience in Africa did not translate into disinterest in the continent's history. On the contrary, he dedicated not only a significant portion of his academic and essayistic work to it but also, directly, or indirectly, his entire poetry. When we read his poems, there is no doubt about the political stance of the lyrical subject. Let's say that the anti-colonial action in Tenreiro is built from a cultural and less combative dimension. In this context, the issue of the diaspora imposes itself as a theme that cuts across his entire body of work.

The reading of the studies gathered by Inocência Mata in *Francisco José Tenreiro – As Múltiplas Faces de um Intelectual* [*Francisco José Tenreiro – The Multiple Faces of an Intellectual*] (2010) indicates that Tenreiro's poetic production can be generally divided into two groups. On the one hand, we have the poems from *Ilha de Nome Santo* [*The Island of a Holy Name*] (1942), a book considered a milestone in modern São Toméan literature where the intersection between neorealism themes and the idea of miscegenation is observed. On the other hand, we have poems where the influence of African American, Cuban, and Brazilian poets stands out, as well as the influence of Francophone Negritude. Given the range of dialogues it establishes and by invoking the concepts of diaspora and cultural diversity, Tenreiro's poetry can be considered a precursor to the anticolonial worldview inscribed in the works of various Afro-descendant/African-Portuguese creators, even in a very

different context (it's essential not to forget that Tenreiro lived during the Estado Novo regime where dissent was punished). The celebration of Negritude in Tenreiro's poetry is, above all, humanistic and transcends the geographic and temporal dimensions. Another very interesting aspect that demonstrates the potential for dialogue with other spaces and voices is the fact that Tenreiro was a profound connoisseur of African American literature, on which he published several essays: "Literatura negra norte-americana" ["North-American Black Literature"] (*Seara Nova*, 1944) and "Acerca do diálogo entre a Europa e a África Negra – Dados para a sua compreensão" ["Of the Dialogue between Europe and Black Africa – Elements for its understanding"] (*Estudos*, 1959). Indeed, the transnational dimension appears in both poetry and essays, clearly presupposing the assertion of multiple affiliations. According to Inocência Mata, Tenreiro was "an intellectual whose poetic and essayistic work is a compulsory reference (…) the personal history (…) marked by identity liminalities (cultural, geographical, and ethnic), could not make him a monocultural subject" (2010: 306-9).

Except for the poems that address the realities of São Tomé and Príncipe and convey an ambiguous celebration of miscegenation, the poetic voice of Tenreiro affiliates itself with a *brotherhood* that extends beyond the borders of the African continent, mapping deterritorialised feelings of belonging that promote a humanistic vision opposed to racism, the exploitation of the oppressed, and the material scarcity that leads to extreme poverty. According to Alfredo Margarido, Tenreiro's poetry is based on a *community of feelings*: "This community is no longer felt with the European coloniser but, above all, with the colonised African societies, with the Blacks rejected and vilified by Western societies" (1980: 128). In the poems "Negro de todo o mundo" ["Black from All Over the World"], "Epopeia" ["Epic"], and "Fragmentos de blues" ["Fragments of Blues"], the human wandering is articulated through various artistic and cultural spaces that interconnect: Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Assuming a collective voice, the poet expresses solidarity with all oppressed Blacks physically and/or mentally, in the present or in the past, praising Black political and artistic figures such as Toussaint-Louverture, Martin Luther King, Louis Armstrong, Langston Hughes, Nicolas Guillén, Aimé Césaire, and Léopold Senghor, among others. In these poems,

the diaspora appears both as a place of scattering, defeat, and suffering, and as a creative potentiality.

The mapping and recognition of the African diaspora in the Atlantic with the aim of denouncing centuries of slavery and regimes of segregation and racial separation that promote the dehumanisation of Black bodies are clearly evident in “Coração em África” [Heart in Africa], a poem included in the first anthology of the Negritude movement in Portuguese, *Caderno de Poesia Negra de Expressão Portuguesa* [*Notebook of Lusophone Black Poetry*], published in 1953, in partnership with Mário Pinto de Andrade, by Casa dos Estudantes do Império [House of the Students of the Empire]. In this long narrative poem, there is a shift from the national and continental to the global, encompassing history, oral traditions, the musicality of the African continent, the stories of the Black diaspora in America, elements of European art, and the aesthetics of neorealism and Negritude, giving rise to a literary work imbued with an impulse for transformation. It is not by chance that the poem concludes with the lyrical subject directly addressing its “crazy heart” to ask it to remain hopeful – the repetition of the expressions “in the hope of” and “let me believe” attests to this profound desire for change. In this way, the scattering of historical, geographical, and cultural elements in the poetic statement ultimately becomes a positive element against various injustices and oppressions. The lyrical subject places its desire for social justice in the future and aligns itself with many other artists of various geographical and aesthetic origins who shape and defend the same humanistic values, opposing intolerance and the exclusion of Black individuals: from poets like Guillén, Hughes, Diop, Senghor, Neruda, Namorado, to painters like Rivera, Picasso, Portinari, Pomar, and musicians like Armstrong. The wandering through Europe performed in the poem materialises as an experience marked by the longing for the beauty and warmth of African landscapes, and it is through the melancholy produced by these absences that the lyrical self apprehends the world around it. The dissent between body and heart allows the poet to identify the socio-economic problems existing in Europe and the rest of the world, a consequence of an idea of *progress* that enslaves through labour, deforming bodies. It also allows him to be sensitive to the daily struggles of those who do everything to overcome “the melancholies of the

unbalanced budget" and to empathise with the suffering of those who, on the other side of the Atlantic, fall victim to racial abuse. Line by line, the poet's voice constructs a mural, paying homage to an African American unfairly executed in the electric chair, denouncing the deformities, miseries, and economic deficiencies of all the exploited and marginalised, and imprinting the racism experienced firsthand to which the poet reacts with irony.

Therefore, in "Heart in Africa," the colonial perspective that observes Africa from Europe is decentralised, as the Black lyrical subject is in and thinks of Europe with and from a displacement imposed by their emotional and spiritual affiliation to Africa. This circumstance allows the poet to frame the European landscape and fit scenes from other spaces into it like a collage, resulting in the horizontal approximation between all these named places – all of them marked by poverty, war, and exclusion. In other words, the decentralisation of the point of view is revealed in the fact that the "paths" in Europe "travelled" by the poet include multiple spaces of the Black diaspora in the Americas. Thus, even though the lyrical self is physically in Europe and, momentarily, this space constitutes the centre from which it speaks, this centre is completely shattered, not only because it contains within itself various scenarios of economic scarcity and violence but also because Europe is just one of the several geocultural spaces that make up the backdrop of the poem. To conclude, it seems evident that this poem underlies the appreciation of Africanness and the concerns of Negritude invoked by the juxtaposition of voices of African and Afro-descendant artists. However, the poet's gaze is strongly committed to expanding and drawing a diasporic solidarity on a universal scale.

Quotations

"Heart in Africa" (1953)

Paths trodden in Europe
from the heart in Africa.

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Longing for red green yellow palm trees
strong tones from the cubist palette
that the sensual Sun painted on the landscape;
longing felt from the heart in Africa
while crossing these wheat fields without mouths
streets without joy with houses full of cavities
caused by the nearsighted shelling of Europe and America
of Europe trodden by me, Black, from the heart in Africa.
From the heart in Africa in the simple Sunday reading
of the newspapers singing in the still scalding voice of ink
and with the misery fingerprints of the newsboys from the cities, boulevards and downtowns of Europe
trodden by me Black and by you newsboy
singing, I was saying in his voice of letters, the melancholies of the unbalanced budget
of Benfica won against Sporting or not
or rather or perhaps it's that this time there will be war
so that purple flowers of peace may bloom
with velvet ribbons and pine coffins;
oh, the long pages of the world's newspaper
are blackened sheets of macabre blue
with Moorish patterns of knives and guernicas of bullfighters.
In three lines (heartfelt longings for Africa) –
Mac Gee42 citizen of America and democracy
Mac Gee Black citizen and of Negritude
Mac Gee Black citizen of America and the Black World
Mac Gee struck down by the heart hardened like an electric chair
(from the burned corpse of Mac Gee from his heart in Africa and ever alive
red flowers bloomed red flowers red flowers
and also blue and also green and also yellow
in the polychromatic range of the truth of the Black

of Mac Gee's innocence);
three lines in the newspaper like a false condolences card.
Paths trodden in Europe
with the heart in Africa.
With the heart in Africa with the raw sap cry of Guillén's poems
with the heart in Africa with the virile impetuosity of I too am America
with the heart in Africa with the trees reborn in every season in the beautiful poems by Diop
with the heart in Africa in the ancient rivers that the Black knew and in the mystery of Chaka-Senghor
with the heart in Africa with you friend Joaquim when in incendiary verses
you sang the distant Africa of the Congo of my longing of the Congo with the heart in Africa.
With the heart in Africa at noon of the day with the heart in Africa
with the Sun seated in the delights of the zenith
reducing to points the shadows of the blacks
lulling in the very heat of reverberation the mosquitoes of the nocturnal sting.
With the heart in Africa in sleepless nights listening to the magic eye of the radio
and the hoarseness, the feeling of Armstrong's disharmonies.
With the heart in Africa in all the gregarious or school poems that mock
and hum under the cabbage leaves of indifference
but have the beauty of children's wheels with bright kites
and games of white chicken goes to France
that sing the spirals of the breasts and thighs of black and mulatto women with eyes red like lit black coals.
With the heart in Africa, I tread these misty streets of the city
with the heart in Africa, and a be bop be rhythm on my lips
while around me, it whispers, look a negro (how nice), look a black (great), look a mulatto (whatever), look a brown one (ridiculous)
and I search on the closed horizon of the seaside
smell of distant sea breezes from distant sandy shores
with silhouettes of coconut trees whispering softly in the evening breeze.

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With the heart in Africa, with hands and feet awkward
and deformed like Portinari's paintings of the dockworkers of the sea
and the snotty boys addicted by the deep dark circles of hunger by
Pomar I contemplate the blackness of the world that surpasses the colour of the skin itself
of white, yellow, black, or striped men
and the heart saddens by the seaside of Europe
of Europe trodden by me with the heart in Africa.
and it cries quietly in the arrhythmia of a clock whose spring is about to snap
it sobs the indignation that made men slaves to men
women slaves to men children slaves to men blacks slaves to men yellow and white and white and yellow and black slaves always to men
and also those of whom no one speaks, and I, a Black, do not forget
like the Pueblos, the Xavantes, the Eskimos, the Ainu, I don't know
there are so many, and all slaves amongst themselves.
Cry, my heart, break, my heart, soften yourself, my heart,
all at once (oh feminine organ of man)
all at once so that I can think with you in Africa
hoping that next year the torrential monsoon will come
that will flood the fields dried up by the bitterness of shrapnel and fertilised by the lime of Taszilitzki's bones
hoping that the sun will impregnate the wheat spikes for the addicted children and will bring corn to the thatched huts of the last corner of the Earth
hand out wine and olive oil through the trade winds.
hoping that into the gaping entrails of an antipodal child
there will always be a tulip of milk or a cow of cheese to quench the thirst of existence.
Let me crazy heart
let me believe in the cry of hope launched by Rivera's vivid palette
and by the fresh cyclones of Neruda's odes;
let me believe that from Picasso's masculine despair doves will emerge
that like clouds will fly the skies of the world with the heart in Africa.

(*Coração em África*: 124-128)

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