"Une phare pour quel port?": The Dilemma of Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo, Colonized Poet

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Introducing Rabearivelo

In a piece for the newspaper *Ny Fandrosoam-Baovao* in August of 1931, the poet Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo asserted: "'It is not the *rhythm* (better the *rrra* of a drum) nor the rhyme (better to listen to its echoes from afar) that make *true poetry*, but the language…the sadness and the joy that it awakens in the reader's ears'" (Riffard 2022, 208).

The guidance that Rabearivelo provides here for assessing a text's poetic value, written about halfway through his writerly career, conflicts with many claims that have accumulated about the writer over the past century. Rabearivelo is well-acknowledged as a skillful writer and a significant figure in modern Malagasy literature. But, to many of Rabearivelo's readers, his poetic focus rests on form. As interest in his work grew after he was deemed Madagascar's national poet in 1960, critics acknowledged that he was heavily influenced by—and highly imitative of—*fin de siècle* French writers (Reed and Wake 1975, xiii).

Scholars also regard Rabearivelo as an apolitical poet, one who was wholly consumed by his foreign interests, personal problems, and pursuit of the "high road to literary fame" (Adejunmobi 1995, 52).

Although Rabearivelo's personal life was fraught, and he was captivated by the literary scene abroad and his own writerly reputation, he was nevertheless invested in the wellbeing of his home. There has been extensive commentary on his poetic form and dialogue with French writers. However, his political activism, particularly in regards to Madagascar's *Vy Vato Sakelika* (VVS) nationalist movement, has gone largely unconsidered. "On the one hand," Claire Riffard explains, "he was close to French-speaking poets and officials such as Pierre Camo and Paul Étienne. But he also had contacts with nationalist leaders, such as Jean Ralaimongo" (2022, 73).

This investigation was initiated after an encounter with a collection of Rabearivelo's sonnets from 1925. The poems were never published, but some were found—specifically, five sonnets on three typescript pages—in his papers, held together by a paper clip (Figures 1A–3A). The organization of the manuscripts justified the series's editors in stating that it seemed "Rabearivelo himself had thought of grouping them together" (Resztak 2014).

Serge Meitinger, a head editor of the archival project that compiled two volumes of Rabearivelo's complete works, claims that the unpublished sonnets demonstrate "the birth of a voice." "These poems are enough," Meitinger continues, "to illustrate the shift of a young poet who finally breaks away from convention and innovates" ("Quelques sonnets"). Scholars largely divide Rabaerivelo's work into two sections; as Jeannine Rambeloson-Rapiera explains, "the first still imbued with romantic influences, and the second more liberated, more creative" (1992, 9). His early work is perceived as clearly imitative of nineteenth-century French poetry, and his later texts take on an individualism that embraces free verse poetic forms, indicative of the Malagasy vernacular tradition.

In his presentation of the collection, Meitinger emphasizes that the focus sonnets show a moment in Rabearivelo's opus where he departs from his "Baudelairean and Mallarméan" influences ("Quelques sonnets"). In many ways, the sonnets do signify a transformation. But Meitinger's claims solely emphasize the nature of the sonnets' styles, stating that their slight "dislocation[s]" and breaks from tradition display a movement away from past traditionalism. Here, Meitinger emphasizes, is where Rabearivelo establishes his form.

This is true, in part. But, for many reasons—such as Rabearivelo only having written one out of the eight creative works published during his life in 1925—these sonnets do not fully reflect the birth of his poetic voice (if such a thing could). (Adejunmobi 1995, 111). This point may be conceded easily, but the study to follow proves an arguably more contentious point regarding the sonnets. Past what has been expressed by Meitinger, these five sonnets represent a simultaneous growth of two of Rabearivelo's interests. Firstly, the poems point toward his interest in poetic form, conventionality, and the foreign literary conversation. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the collection demonstrates his growing focus on Madagascar's colonial state.

This is the moment in Rabearivelo's writerly career where his passions are yet to be stifled by the onslaught of woes he is to face through to the end of his life. The five sonnets represent a time when he is intent on bringing nationalistic messages into the French form; in the collection, he devises a way for Malagasy activism and French formalism to share the poetic medium.

This essay invokes historical and literary context to prove Rabearivelo's two central concerns. Rather than solely analyzing the sonnets themselves, I focus on the moment (i.e., the early to mid-1920s) in his life and career, present evidence of his political interests, and conclude with an explication of the sonnets' underlying, socially minded messages.

By considering the two pulls at play in the brief unpublished collection, Rabearivelo's readers can gain an enriched understanding of his work as a whole. His attempts to define himself during this period and in the sonnets, both as a knowledgeable French poet and an attuned Malagasy social commentator, are clear here. But, in the same way readers of his work today struggle to situate him among early-twentieth century French and Malgasy writers, and within the broader genres of African and postcolonial literatures, he himself remained lost. This study explores his varied interests at the time; it rejects the view that Rabearivelo was apolitical and only incorporated nationalist themes in his work to bolster local readership. Instead, I claim that, as an artist in his early twenties, in a home recently colonized by a country whose literature he loved, Rabearivelo was continuously confused. The confusion solidified in these five sonnets followed him throughout his career, and ultimately played a part in his untimely death by suicide in 1937 (Wake 1965, 177).

Situating the Sonnets

Before arriving at the focus poems, written at the end of 1925, we will first look toward Rabearivelo's life leading up to the moment. Which year between 1901 and 1904 the poet was born is a debated point; what is certain is that he came into the world during a strife political moment. He was born less than a decade after France's 1895 colonization of Madagascar, when soldiers took control of his hometown, Antananarivo, and deemed it their colony's capital. France ended the reign of the last Malagasy queen and, as Moradewun Adejunmobi describes, the "colonial administrators became the new leaders of the land" (1995, 11).

Rabearivelo's life was denoted by difficulty in the first two decades of the twentieth century. With esteemed Malagasy heritage on his maternal side, Rabearivelo grew up to be an "unapologetic royalist" (Adejunmobi 1995, 38). He perceived himself as naturally superior because of his intelligence and ancestry and, consequently, resented his

social standing. As John Reed and Clive Wake illustrate, "poverty followed the poet through his short life" (1975, xiii).

As a young man, Rabearivelo worked in a variety of editorial and publishing clerk positions that coincided with his literary interests, but he mostly developed these passions during personal library research (Wake 1965, 177). Through self-guided education, Rabearivelo acquired a taste for foreign literature and mastery of the French language. Despite an ever-increasing desire to study in France, clear in letters that demonstrate his concern with French literary events, he never left the country. In fact, Rabearivelo spent "his entire life in and around" Antananarivo (Adejunmobi 1995; 143, 11).

Amidst these arduous circumstances, further difficulties appeared in the young writer's life in the early 1920s. During regular visits to opium clubs, Rabearivelo began what was to become a lifelong drug addiction (Adejunmobi 1995, 34). He also encountered misfortune in his relationships. His romantic life was unstable throughout the start of the decade and, in 1924, his daughter disappeared (Cheymol 2024, 28). As his mental state worsened, he resolved to alter his birth name, "Joseph," by adding "Jean." In his journal, referencing the time in 1924 when he started a bookkeeper position, he wrote: "'I found the name of the venerable and legendary cuckold I was saddled with too poor and above all quite ridiculous. After hesitating for a moment, I added to it, rejecting everything else'" (Riffard 2022, 104).

Rabearivelo used pseudonyms, most often "Amance Valmond," until his addition of Jean; evidently, the writer was preparing himself for a transformation. Until this point, he tested the waters as a public voice. He published only one work in his own name prior to 1923, when he became a contributor to *18° Latitude sud*, a journal organized by the French poet Pierre Camo. It was not until 1924—during great personal turmoil for the writer, as he altered his given name and sought out avenues for foreign travel, a year prior to the 1925 shift this study

defines—that he published his first volume of poetry (Adejunmobi 1995, 52).

La Coupe de Cendres ("The Cup of Ashes"), Rabearivelo's first collection, begins the previously defined early period in his work. Critics perceive the collection as both adhering to traditional forms, imitated by the work of Symbolist poets, and laying the groundwork for the development of the individual voice Meitinger describes (Reed and Wake 1975, xvi). The volume is divided into two sections, the first composed of twelve French verses, and the second containing four translations of poems from Malagasy into French. Though the volume has an unbalanced weight of foreign and local forms, it is wrongly accepted that he was solely concentrated on French writers at the time. As will be seen in this essay's following section, and in the five focus sonnets, his interests were divided between Madagascar and France. Moradewun Adejunmobi, referencing a postscript at the end of the original version of *La Coupe de Cendres*, explains that it "informs the reader that Rabearivelo was working on several other collections of poetry, but also on an anthology of Malagasy poets, a Hova dictionary, and a study of some French poets" (Adejunmobi 1995, 55).

Yet John Reed and Clive Wake, notable scholars of African literature, determine that, in Rabearivelo's early poetry, "the Malagasy elements seem always inside the elaborate personal utterance of a poet whose commitment to Latinity is complete. It is impossible to feel that Rabearivelo addressed himself to his own people or that he took it upon himself as a conscious poetic task to interpret the Malagasy soul to the French-speaking world outside" (1975, xvii). As evidenced by the postscript alone, Rabearivelo was not only concerned with Malagasy poetry, but wanted to participate in sharing his nation's expansive history and knowledge. He did not maintain a complete "commitment to Latinity," but developed a new interest and a recently acquired language alongside Malagasy literary knowledge, garnered throughout his life.

Rabearivelo's first published poem from 1915 was in Malagasy (Adejunmobi 1995, 15). He furthered his literary career from 1920-1922 with the Malagasy language during the publication of a serial novel, *Ilay fitiavana mpandresy*, in a local literary review, *Vakio Ity* (Riffard 2012). He continued developing his Malagasy literary voice in 1923, while publishing short stories and serials in *Vakio Ity* and *Le Journal de Madagascar franco-malgache*. This was all before his first French contributions in Camo's *18° Latitude sud*.

Many critics acknowledge Rabearivelo's interest in Malagasy literature, but claim that he was removed from Madagascar's present political state. As Adejunmobi claims, "if ever there was a time and means of redemption for the Malagasy, it lay in a return to the past, to the time of aristocracy." She goes on to emphasize that "he remained decidedly aloof from direct political activity" (1995, 38). But this easily painted portrait—of a man with royal Malagasy heritage and a fervent passion for European poetry, one who rejected nationalist views, felt trapped in his homeland, and sensed that an escape from Antananarivo for Paris would be a saving grace—is incorrect. To fully examine the internal wrestling visible in his collection of sonnets from 1925, readers must understand that Rabearivelo aligned with nationalist views.

Rabearivelo's Politics

It would have been difficult for Rabearivelo, with his rapidly developing literary career and troubled personal life, to be fully involved in Malagasy social concerns. But he was certainly engaged with them, and did not shy from aligning himself with *Vy Vato Sakelika* (VVS). VVS—a nationalist anti-colonial movement founded in 1913, after Madagascar's colonization—maintained a diverse membership. Many members were notable cultural figures, actors, writers, and artists. The majority of these well-known leaders were exiled or imprisoned by colonial authorities by 1920. Claire Riffard explains that, once the ban was lifted and VVS members returned to society, "Malagasy literature experienced a resurgence." The breadth of texts in the Malagasy language blossomed,

and, in 1923, the notable literary review *Journal de Madagascar franco-malgache* was founded (Riffard 2022, 73–75).

In the same year, Rabearivelo expressed in his journal that, following the return of these VVS members, it became "possible to breathe again, and that a new dawn for Madagascar's literature was underway" (Riffard 2022, 77). Further evidence of his passion for the VVS movement is seen in a January 1925 Antananarivo news column, where he emphasized his anger regarding the judicial treatment of many VVS activists. He maintained an indisputable interest in the movement's broad successes, as well as the struggles of its individual members (Riffard 2022, 101).

Nevertheless, a range of criticism argues that his turn to European poetic forms during the mid-1920s displays how, as Reed and Wake claim, "he found the humiliations of his status in colonial society hard to bear" (1975, xiii). But their assertions about his humiliation were ineffectual, and arguably nonexistent. Rabearivelo brandished his Malagasy heritage and proudly associated himself with anti-colonial activism.

His nationalist sentiments are not solely evident in his personal or journalistic writing. Rabearivelo's first full novel, *L'Aube rouge,* was never published during his lifetime, but today serves as a crucial reminder of his mindset as a colonized writer. The complete manuscript of *L'Aube rouge,* written in July of 1925, is presented by Meitinger as showing that, to Rabearivelo, the book was "his true Malagasy novel of the French conquest" (2015). The text tracks the movement of French forces into Madagascar from the perspective of his country's royal family. Rabearivelo's invocation of French emphasizes the hybridity of his perspective, as he shows the experience of the colonized through the colonizer's voice. Riffard explains that his decision to write in "the language of the other as well as in his own is not insignificant at a time when bilingualism frightened both the colonial authorities and the figures of nationalism" (2022, 154).

Though the plot and form of *L'Aube rouge* reflect Rabearivelo's intention to undermine colonial leaders, this aim is clearest before the story begins (Figure 4A). In his dedication to the novel, his expressed appreciation for the book *Batouala* and its author, René Maran, likely shocked local readers. Maran's 1921 text was banned from all French colonies for its revolutionary themes and explicit preface, which blatantly criticized France's colonial abuses (Adejunmobi 1995, 143).

Rabearivelo's appreciation for Maran, who was forced to resign from the French colonial administration after his novel's publication, cemented some of Rabearivelo's anti-colonial sentiments. Adejunmobi explains, "He [chooses] to identify himself with this manifestly 'subversive' text in his own narrative practice, and he thereby suggests the perspective that he is likely to adopt in his narrative" (1995, 144).

A Closer Literary Look

Rabearivelo's political attitude is established in both *L'Aube rouge* and the sonnets in question. Months prior to writing the poems which reflect the clear convergence of two contradictory strands of his mentality, Rabearivelo wrote a novel in which he calls upon another. Batouala's influence on *L'Aube rouge* pulls Rabearivelo into the literary voice of the colonized, one that critiques France's imperialistic invasions and encourages insurrection among the oppressed.

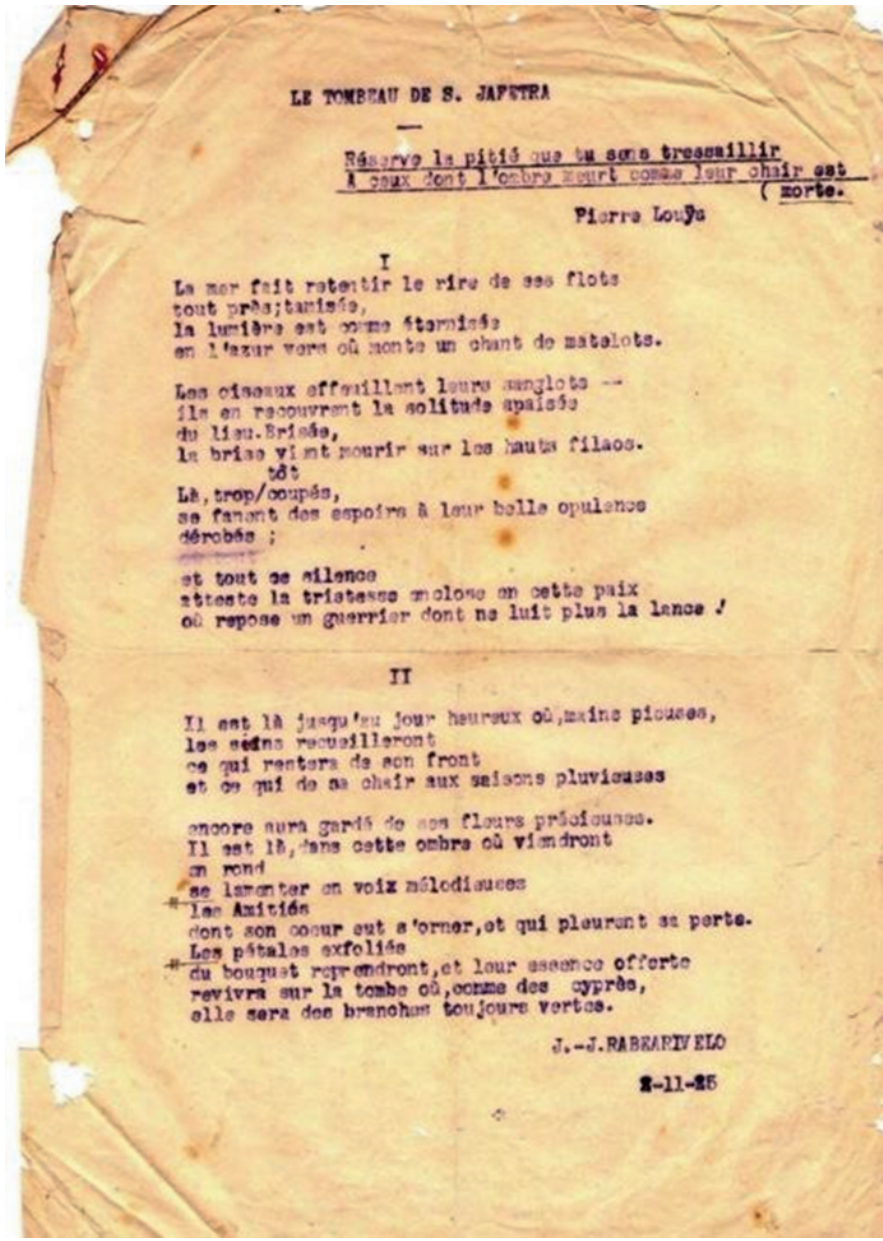
L'Aube rouge's dedication proves the point that, in 1925, Rabearivelo valued rebellion and decolonization. This claim becomes clearer with another name referenced in the dedication to *L'Aube rouge*: Samuel Jafetra, a Malagasy photographer and key leader of the VVS movement. After Jafetra's 1925 death, Rabearivelo became distraught (Riffard 2022, 42). In his dedication, Rabearivelo writes that he saw "the birth of the French sun" but "was not blinded." (Figures 4A-B). Jafetra had been exiled by the French colonial administration but, after his return, held writerly salons twice a week. Riffard explains that these meetings provided Rabearivelo with the "cultural urbanity" he had

desired, but had been formerly unable to acquire in Antananarivo (2022, 124–126). They developed a close friendship and, upon Jafetra's death, Rabearivelo eulogized at his funeral.

Rabearivelo's friendship with Jafetra, as well as the eulogy and dedication in Jafetra's honor, point to Rabearivelo's scattered mindset in 1925. Through their friendship, Rabearivelo simultaneously found the artistic community he had imagined only in Paris, as well as a means for expressing and developing his nationalist beliefs. The divided nature of his mindset at the time becomes clearest as we turn to the first two unpublished sonnets in focus: "Le tombeau de Jafetra," parts I and II (Figures 1A–C).

According to Rabearivelo's dated manuscript, the poems were written in November of 1925. A quotation that precedes the sonnets by Pierre Louÿs, one of Rabearivelo's esteemed French poets, reads: "Reserve the pity that you feel flinching / For those whose shadow dies as their flesh dies" (Figure 1B). Odes to Jafetra, Rabearivelo implies here, are not meant to revive him, as he already lives on in his legacy.

Interestingly, the two poems do not wholly focus on the fallen leader. In the first, which is also first in the larger five-sonnet collection, he instead points toward the internal strife he faces as a result of Jafetra's death. "Nearby," Rabearivelo says, "sifted / the light is as if eternal / in the blue sky towards which a seaman's cat climbs" (Figure 1B). Motifs present throughout the collection appear in these two lines; he maintains a continual emphasis on perpetual reaching, the sea, and eternity.



LE TOMBEAU DE S. JAFETRA

—

Réserve la pitié que tu sens tressaillir
A ceux dont l'ombre meurt comme leur chair est
(morte.

Pierre Louÿs

I

La mer fait retentir le rire de ses flots
tout près;tamisés,
la lumière est comme étamisée
en l'azur vers où monte un chant de matelots.

Les oiseaux effeuillent leurs sanglots —
ils en recouvrent la solitude apaisée
du lieu.Brisée,
la brise vient mourir sur les hauts filaos.
tôt
Là,trop/coupés,
se fanent des espoirs à leur belle opulence
dérobée ;

et tout ce silence
atteste la tristesse enclose en cette paix
où repose un guerrier dont ne luit plus la lance !

II

Il est là jusqu'au jour heureux où,mains pieuses,
les siens recueilleront
ce qui restera de son front
et ce qui de sa chair aux saisons pluvieuses

encore aura gardé de son fleurs précieuses.
Il est là,dans cette ombre où viendront
en rond
se lamenter en voix mélodieuses
les Amitiés
dont son coeur eut s'orner,et qui pleurent sa perte.
Les pétales exfoliés
du bouquet reprendront,et leur essence offerte
revivra sur la tombe où,comme des cyprès,
elle sera des branches toujours vertes.

J.-J.RABEARIVELO

2-11-25

Figure 1A. Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo, "'Le tombeau de Jafetra' (I and II)." November 1925. Located at Fonds Rabearivelo, Institut Français, Antananarivo, Madagascar. Image sourced from https://eman-archives.org/francophone/items/show/64.

"Reserve the pity that you feel flinching
For those whose shadow dies as their flesh dies."
- Pierre Louÿs

I

The sea resounds with the laughter of its waves
nearby; sifted,
the light is as if eternal
in the blue sky towards which a seaman's cat climbs.

The scissors tear away their sobs –
they recover the peaceful solitude
of the binder. Brisáe.
the breeze dies on the high casuarina trees.
early
There, too,
fade hopes of their beautiful opulence
backdoor;
and all this silence
attests to the sadness enclosed in this peace
where rests a warrior whose spear no longer shines!

Figure 1B. Translation of "'Le tombeau de Jafetra' (I)."

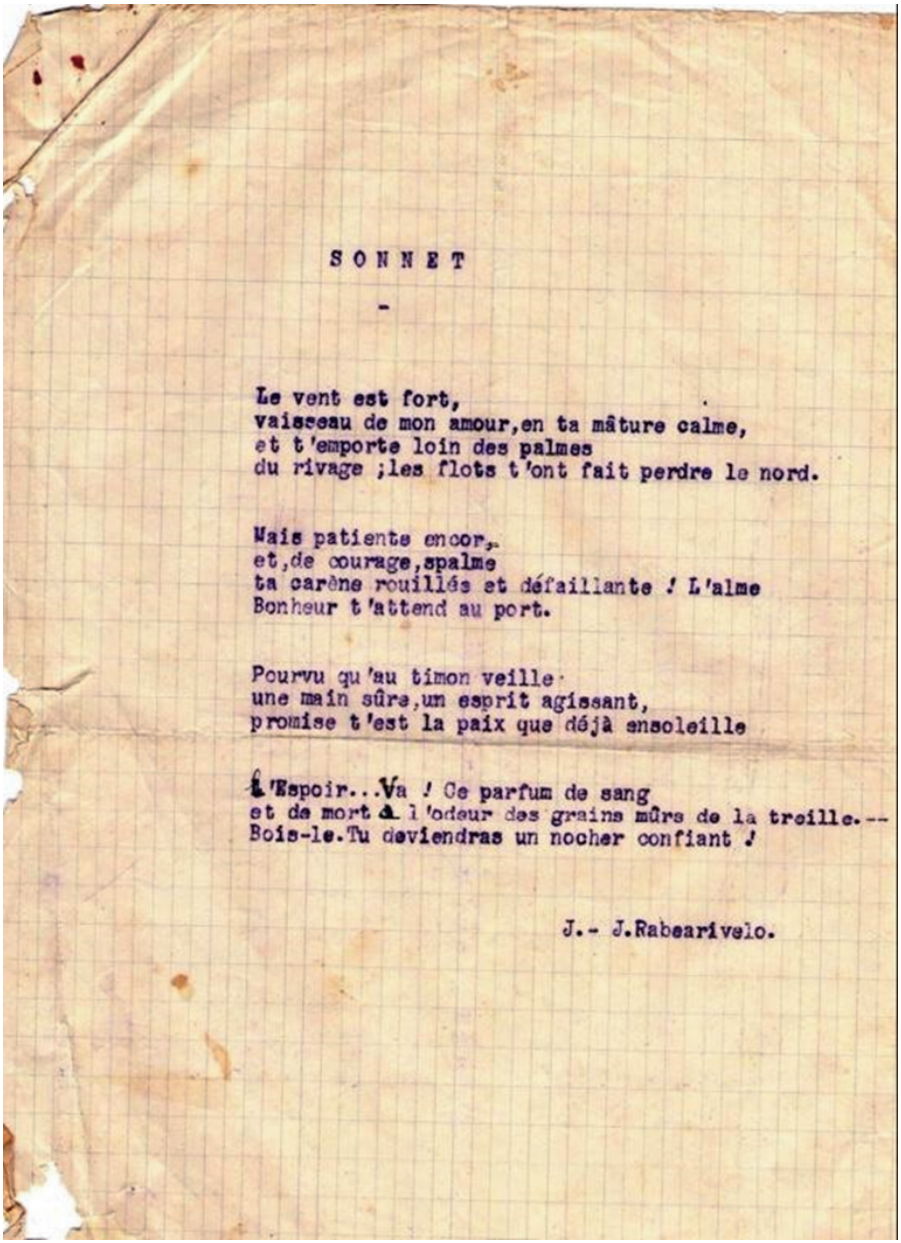
II

He is there until the happy day when, pious hands,
the breasts will collect
what comes from his forehead
and what is flesh in the rainy seasons

will still have kept its precious flowers.
He is there, in this shadow where they will come
in a circle
to lament in melodious voices
Friendships
with which his heart was adorned, and who mourn his loss.
The exfoliated petals
of the bouquet will resume, and their essence offered
will live again on the grave where, like cypresses,
it will be evergreen branches.

J.-J. Rabearivelo
2-11-25

Figure 1C. Translation of "'Le tombeau de Jafetra' (II)."



SONNET

-

Le vent est fort,
vaisseau de mon amour,en ta mâture calme,
et t'emporte loin des palmes
du rivage ;les flots t'ont fait perdre le nord.

Mais patients encor,
et,de courage,spalme
ta carène rouillés et défaillante ! L'alme
Bonheur t'attend au port.

Pourvu qu'au timon veille
une main sûre,un esprit agissant,
promise t'est la paix que déjà ensoleille

L'Espoir...Va ! Ce parfum de sang
et de mort à l'odeur des grains mûrs de la treille.--
Bois-le.Tu deviendras un nocher confiant !

J.- J.Rabearivelo.

Figure 2A. Rabearivelo, "Le vent est fort." 1925. Located at Fonds Rabearivelo, Institut Français, Antananarivo, Madagascar. Image sourced from https://eman-archives.org/francophone/items/show/64

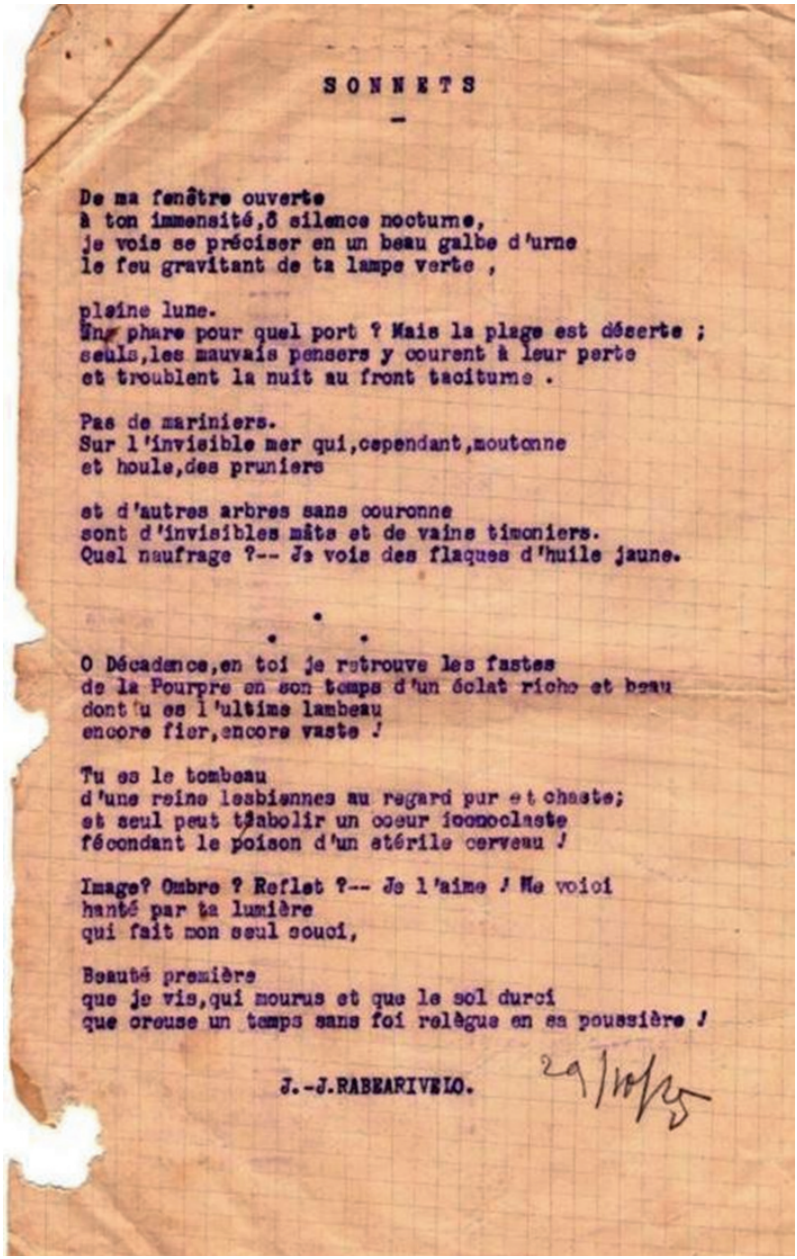
The wind is a strong
vessel of my love, in your calm mast,
and take you far from the palms
from the shore; the waves have made you lose your direction.

But still be patient,
and, of courage, palm
your hull is rusty and failing! love it
Happiness awaits you at the port.

Provided that the tiller watches
a sure hand, an active mind,
promised to you is the peace that is already sunny

Hope…Go! This scent of blood
and death to the smell of the ripe grapes of the vine.---
Drink it. You will become a confident boatman!

Figure 2B. Translation of "Le vent est fort."



SONNETS

De ma fenêtre ouverte
à ton immensité,ô silence nocturne,
je vois se préciser en un beau galbe d'urne
le feu gravitant de ta lampe verte ,

pleine lune.
Un phare pour quel port ? Mais la plage est déserte ;
seuls,les mauvais pensers y courent à leur perte
et troublent la nuit au front taciturne .

Pas de mariniers.
Sur l'invisible mer qui,cependant,moutonne
et houle,des pruniers

et d'autres arbres sans couronne
sont d'invisibles mâts et de vains timoniers.
Quel naufrage ?-- Je vois des flaques d'huile jaune.

•
• •

O Décadence,en toi je retrouve les fastes
de la Pourpre en son temps d'un éclat riche et beau
dont tu es l'ultime lambeau
encore fier,encore vaste !

Tu es le tombeau
d'une reine lesbiennes au regard pur et chaste;
et seul peut t'abolir un coeur iconoclaste
fécondant le poison d'un stérile cerveau !

Image? Ombre ? Reflet ?-- Je l'aime ! Me voici
hanté par ta lumière
qui fait mon seul souci,

Beauté premières
que je vis,qui mourus et que le sol durci
que creuse un temps sans foi relègue en sa poussière !

J.-J.RABEARIVELO.

29/10/25

Figure 3A. Rabearivelo, "De ma fenêtre ouverte" and "O Décadence." October 1925. Located at Fonds Rabearivelo, Institut Français, Antananarivo, Madagascar. Image sourced from https://eman-archives.org/francophone/items/show/64.

from my open window
to your immensity, o nocturnal silence,
I see the beautiful curve of an urn taking shape
the gravitating fire of your green lamp,

full moon.
A lighthouse for which port? But the beach is deserted
souls, bad thoughts run to their ruin
and disturb the night with its taciturn front.

No sailors
On the invisible sea which, however, rolls
and swell, plum trees

and other crownless trees
are invisible mates and vain helmsman.
What shipwreck?---I see puddles of yellow oil.

Figure 3C. Translation of "O Décadence."

O Decadence, in you I find the splendor
of the Purple in its time of a rich and beautiful shine
of which you are the final shred
still proud, still vast!

You are the tomb
of a lesbian queen with a pure and chaste look;
and only an iconoclastic heart can be abolished
fertilizing the poison of a sterile brain!

Picture? Shadow? Reflection?---I love it! Here I am
haunted by your light
which is my only worry,

Beauty premiere
that I live, who die and the ground hardens
what hollows a time without faith relegated to its dust!

Figure 3C. Translation of "O Décadence."

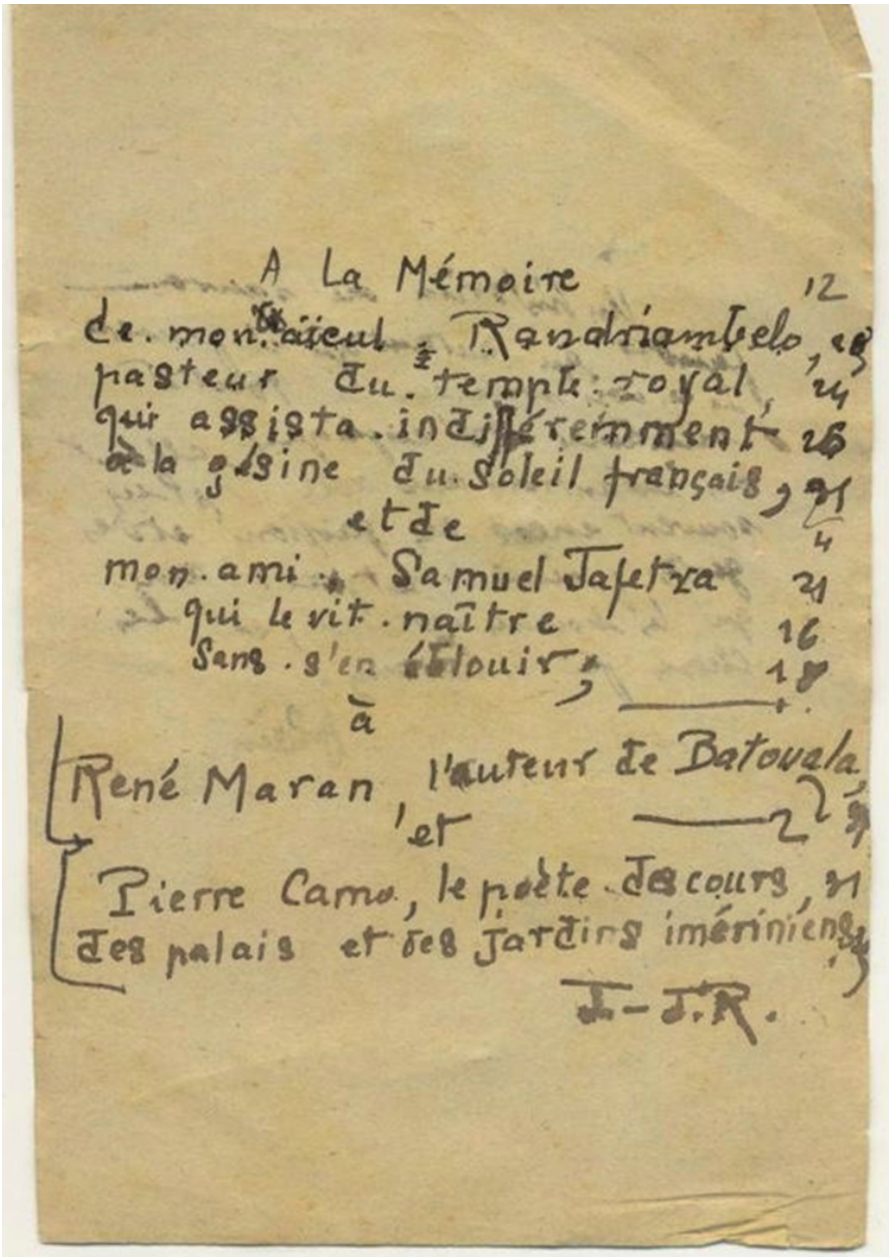


Figure 4A. Rabearivelo, dedication to "L'Aube rouge." July 1925. Located at Fonds Rabearivelo, Institut Français, Antananarivo, Madagascar. Image sourced from https://eman-archives.org/francophone/collections/show/31.

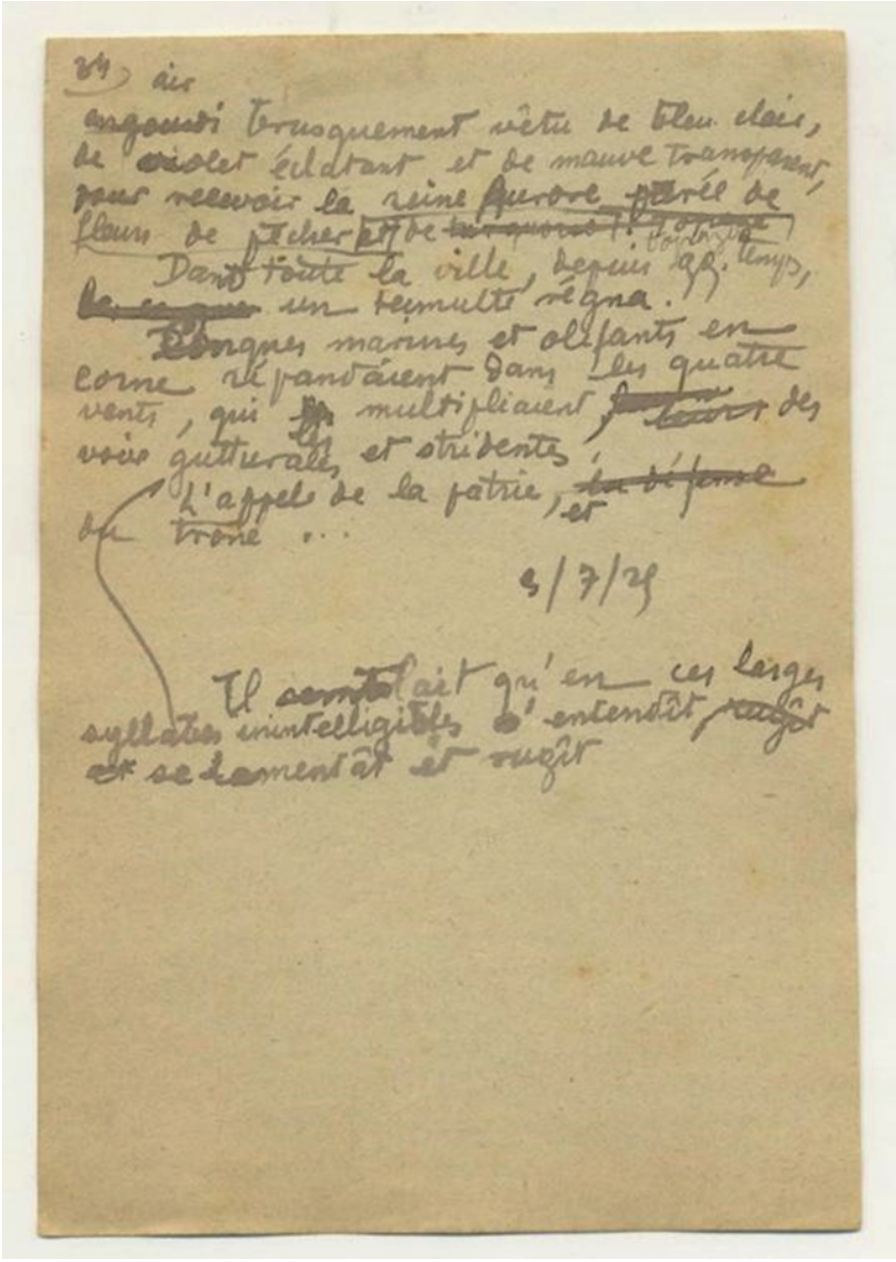


Figure 5A. Rabearivelo, page 34 of "L'Aube rouge." July 1925. Located at Fonds Rabearivelo, Institut Français, Antananarivo, Madagascar. Image sourced from https://eman-archives.org/francophone/collections/show/31.

To The Memory
of my grandfather Randriambelo
Pastor at the Royal Church
who attended
the birth of the French sun
and of
my friend Samuel Jafetra
who saw it born but was not blinded
to
René Maran, the author of Batouala
and
Pierre Camo, the poet of courts
of palaces and Merina gardens.

Figure 4B. Translation of Rabearivelo's dedication to "L'Aube rouge."

Rabearivelo continues, in part I, to indirectly express his pain: "the breeze dies on the high casuarina trees. / early / There, too, / fade hopes of their beautiful opulence." He implies that something uniquely Malagasy in nature—much like the casuarina trees—has faded and died, along with Jafetra. It is not until the final lines of the poem when Rabearivelo is clear: "all this silence / attests to the sadness enclosed in this peace / where rests a warrior whose spear no longer shines!" (Figure 1B). The quiet peace Rabearivelo describes gives reason to his ambiguity; literary frivolity, he implies, only "attests to the sadness" hidden within.

Part I of "Le tombeau" demonstrates the internal strife that is evident throughout the sonnets. Rabearivelo debated over what to concentrate on as a young writer; he was captivated by the French literary scene, but his nationalist associations prove that he simultaneously resented the same country's administration for colonizing his home. Upon Jafetra's death, who had played a crucial role in helping Rabearivelo mediate these two parts of himself, the poet was lost.

That struggle underlies the entire collection. Much of Rabearivelo's poetry is known for its heightened emotion and tangible depression. His sadness is certainly evident in these five sonnets, but it comes from an abnormally emotionless attitude, lacking in his typical passion. In "De ma fenêtre ouvert," he describes the night as maintaining a "taciturn front" as "bad souls run to their ruin" across a deserted shore, before an invisible sea (Figure 3B). Everything is denoted by emptiness and instability; describing another scene on the sea in "Le vent est fort," Rabearivelo imagines a sailor who has lost his direction due to fierce wind and waves, but nevertheless stays steady because of their "calm mast." But, by the end of the sonnet, Rabearivelo portrays the sailor drinking from a vine's grapes, which emanate a "scent of blood / and death" (Figure 2B).

Throughout the five poems, there remains a continual distance between the writer and the perplexing scenes he paints. By placing "Le tombeau" at the onset of the brief collection, Rabearivelo ensures that his readers have Jafetra in mind throughout their experience with the sonnets. They are likely to remain as bewildered as Rabearivelo, and, consequently, as depressed, during their journey.

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Rabearivelo's friend, the French poet Robert Boudry, said that he often lamented the question of politics in his writing. "Ah!" Rabearivelo would exclaim, "The man of the public. Should the poet be such a man?" (Adejunmobi 1995, 38). This question followed him throughout his

career. His central struggle—competing passions for French poetry and Malagasy nationalism, for secularism and activism—is clearest in his early work. Arguably, the dilemma is most evident in the moment in focus: in late 1925, following the death of Jafetra, Rabearivelo's dear friend who had helped him cope with this poignant dissonance.

By examining the poems that came out of this moment, we gain a new understanding of his work to reconcile artistic ambitions with his engagement in Madagascar's colonized condition. Far from being solely absorbed in French formalism, Rabearivelo longed for a space for Malagasy identity within the global poetic conversation. This desire, and the way that his failure to fulfill it contributed to his fatal depression, should attract contemporary attention from Rabearivelo's readers. His unique struggle can help us understand the universal tensions between art and identity that imbue literary conversations today.

Note

The French–English translations referenced throughout this essay are seen in Figures 1-4B, 1C, and 3C. The original French from Rabearivelo's manuscripts is contained in Figures 1–4A. I translated with a mind for comprehension, seeking to present the works' central meanings with minimal concern for Rabearivelo's stylistic intentions. This method has resulted in an imperfect presentation of the poems. Nevertheless, I hope readers will be understanding of my aims and patient with this elementary foray into the mindset of a young Malagasy poet at the onset of his all-too-brief career.

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