Haiti, Charles Moravia, and Woodrow Wilson

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Born in Jacmel, Charles Moravia (1875–1938) was a Haitian poet, playwright, translator, and diplomat. In 1919, four years into the first US occupation of Haiti (1915–34), Moravia served as a diplomatic envoy to Washington, DC. Presented here in translation is Charles Moravia’s poem “La vision du Président Wilson,” which was written in October 1918 and was featured on the front page of the 4 November 1918 edition of *Le Matin*.¹ Nearly a century later, Moravia’s writing has never appeared in English translation, even though he was a contributing member to the fin-de-siècle writers’ collective *La Ronde* and played a major role in Haitian centennial commemorations with his play *La Crête-à-Pierrot* in 1907.² Similar to his theatrical and poetic works, “President Wilson’s Vision” explores themes of justice, the annals of history, and a call to arms against governmental impunity. Writing as a Haitian poet at the end of World War I, Moravia propelled the Caribbean into global discussions of restitution following the Great War and championed the cause of the most marginal victims of the European conflict. The poem sheds light on Woodrow Wilson’s paternalistic interventions into Latin American and Caribbean affairs, particularly the occupation of Haiti, and his reluctance to do so in Europe. In the final eight lines of the poem, Nemesis acts in the name of the law and justice, demanding President Wilson act, to serve as more than a mediator in the aftermath of the Great War.³ In writing this poem and publishing it on the front page of one of Haiti’s major daily newspapers, Moravia used poetry to thrust Haiti into a global discussion of justice and reparations.

President Wilson’s Vision

“If you break faith with us who die . . .”

When Wilson had received the German response,
Saying, “We accept all of your demands,”
He enclosed himself, all alone, serious and silent,
In order to question his soul before God.
He felt that the world awaited his word
And that the Universe weighed on his shoulders.
Long he meditated, bowing to his destiny
To have something to say to humankind.
Now, a veil soon covering his eyes,
Suddenly it seemed to him as though all the light
Disappeared, and here before him stood
A radiant angel, her body shining bright.
In one hand, she brandished a shield, in the other,
A sword; she had the gaze of an apostle,
And her resounding voice, said here:
"How are you going to respond to this news?
Have you thought about consulting . . ."—"I am thinking,"
Interrupted Wilson, "about consulting France,
England as well as our other Allies . . ."
"But, Wilson, you must also consult . . ."
"The soldiers on the front lines? I've thought about that, too,"
Said the Man,
"And I will consult Foch and Haig, Díaz just as Pershing."
"But this is still not enough, Wilson.
You must consult Lincoln and Washington,
All of the dead leaders who made your country great,
Before responding to the German's note.
And even this is still not enough! Have you
Tried to, in a brief conversation, speak
With Lord Kitchener, interrogating his soul
Still reddening in rage at the edge of a blade?
The martyrs nodding in their eternal sleep, have you
Sought their point of view? Have you taken the advice
Of Miss Edith Cavell, and the many nurses
Who not even the Red Cross could protect, and the mothers
Mourning the loss of their sons? Have you heard the cry
Of the child servants in Saint-Mihiel and in Château-Thierry?
Have you thought about the virgins and widows,
Crushed under the immense weight of their heavy hearts?
When you looked up, crying into the air,
What have Garros, Roosevelt, and Guynemer said to you?
Have you consulted the raped women,
The churches brought to ashes and the cities laid to waste?
What have Arras, Cambrai, Reims and Louvain told you?
What have Verdun, Péronne and Saint-Quentin replied?
While Cathedrals crumble piece by piece,
Have you asked those dying as they labor for breath?
Alas, have you summoned the victims!
What did the Goatas and the Berthas do in Paris?
And the little girls whose severed hands
Will no longer be able to rock their dolls to sleep
And who, raising their little handless arms to the sky,
Implore the Good Lord to punish the Germans?
Have you heard the dead in Belgium,
Those, the first struck by tragic war,
Fallen at the forts in Liège and in other battles?
What did Chapman tell you, he who refused to wait on,
The call of his nation, flying above death?
And the thousands of martyrs of piracy,
Of the Lusitania, of the Sussex, and all those
Who died screaming vengeance toward the heavens?
And your soldiers, drowned before combat,
What do they tell you? The Emperor wants to debate
Peace; he extends his hand, the infamous Keyser!
But look as the dead pull themselves out of the Yser,
Those from Champagne and from Somme,
So numerous that we cannot even guess the sum,
Those from Serbia and Montenegro,
The Russians, the Romanians who died like heroes,
The Canadian and Australian soldiers,
The English and Italian soldiers,
The French, dead before Reims and Verdun, and those
—Nameless heroes, but glorious, once and for all—
Who, breaking the desperate Teuton assaults,
Twice saved the World on the banks of the Marne?
How are you going to respond to that note?
Will you shake the bloody hand of Attila,
And add a shameful page to History?
Will you frustrate the law of the fruit of victory?
And to hasten the return of peace one day,
Will you save the Huns from atoning for their heinous crime?
The hour is grave and tragic! O Wilson, take care!
The honest Washington is here watching you,
And Lincoln, anxiously waiting for you to speak!
The dead and the living of the Allied Forces
Shiver as much as Grant trembles in his tomb!
The words that fall from your lips must
Be what they would have said, those who no longer have a voice!”

And Wilson cried out: “I see them, I see them!
O dead legions, heroic victims,
I would have never known to find words as sublime
If I must speak to the Keyser for you.
My weak voice would not have enough ire.
From the Vosges to the sea, on the front lines,
To tell him, offering their enflamed mouths,
Each Howitzer, each mortar, each cannon,
Will spit thousands of ‘no’s’ in his face!”

Then the angel, joyfully, said spreading his wings,
Before returning to the heavens above:
“T am the one who punishes crimes,
The one who never pities the wicked.
I am the one, O Wilson, who wants to be avenged,
I am the Law, I am Justice outraged,
I topple kings as they sit on their thrones,
I break tyrants, my name is Nemesis!”

—Charles Moravia
New York, 14 October 1918

La vision du Président Wilson

“If you break with us who die . . .”

Quand Wilson eut reçu la réponse allemande,
Disant : « Nous accédons à toutes vos demandes »,
Il s’enferma tout seul, grave et silencieux,
Afin d’interroger son âme devant Dieu.
Il sentit que le monde attendait sa parole
Et que tout l’Univers pesait sur son épaule.
Il méditait longtemps, courbé sous son destin
D’avoir à dire un mot qu’attend le genre humain.
Or, un voile bientôt tombant sur sa paupière,
Il lui sembla soudain que toutes les lumières
S’éteignaient, et voici, devant lui se dressant,
Un ange radieux, au corps éblouissant.
D’une main, il tenait un bouclier de l’autre,
Une épée ; il avait le regard d’un apôtre,
Et sa voix résonnant, voici comme il parla :
« Qu’allez-vous donc répondre à cette note-là ?
Est-ce que vous pensez à consulter . . . , — « Je pense,
Interrompit Wilson, à consulter la France,
L’Angleterre ainsi que nos autres Alliés . . . »
« Mais il faut que surtout, Wilson, vous consultiez . . . »
« Les soldats sur le front ? J’y pense aussi, dit l’Homme,
et je consulterai Foch et Haig, Diaz comme
Pershing. » — « Mais ce n’est pas assez encore, Wilson ;
Vous devez consulter Lincoln et Washington,
Tous les grands morts par qui votre patrie est grande,
Avant que de répondre à la note allemande.
Et ce n’est pas assez, cependant ! Avez-vous
Essayé d’obtenir un instant d’interview
Avec Lord Kitchener, interrogeant son âme
Qui rugit de colère encore sous lame ?
Avez-vous, des martyrs secouant le sommeil,
Demandé leur avis ? Avez-vous pris conseil
De Miss Edith Cavell, et de tant d’infirmières
Que n’a pu protéger la Croix Rouge, et des mères
Qui pleurent sur leurs fils ? Entendez-vous le cri
Des boys de Saint-Mihiel et de Château-Thierry ?
Avez-vous pris l’avis des vierges et des veuves
Au cœur broyé, mourant du poids de leurs épreuves ?
Quand vous avec levé les yeux, criant dans l’air,
Que vous ont dit Garros, Roosevelt, Guynemer ?
Avez-vous consulté les femmes violées,
Les églises en cendre et les villes brûlées ?
Que vous ont dit Arras, Cambrai, Reims et Louvain ?
Qu’ont répondu Verdun, Péronne et Saint-Quentin ?
Tandis que par morceaux tombent les Cathédrales,
Avez-vous des mourants interrogé les râles ?
Avez-vous convoqué les victimes, hélas !
Que firent dans Paris les Gothas et Berthas ?
Et les fillettes dont les menottes coupées
Ne pourront plus bercer le sommeil des poupées
Et qui, levant au ciel leurs petits bras sans mains,
Implorent le Bon Dieu de punir les Germain ?
Avez-vous entendu les morts de la Belgique,
Eux, les premiers frappés par la guerre tragique,
Tombés aux forts de Liège et dans d’autres combats ?
Que vous a dit Chapman, lui qui n’attendit pas,
Pour survoler la mort, l’appel de sa patrie ?
Et les mille martyrs de la Piraterie,
Du Lusitania, du Sussex, et tous ceux
Qui sont morts en criant vengeance vers les cieux ?
Et vos soldats noyés avant que de combattre,
Que vous disent-ils donc ? L’Empereur veut débattre
La paix, il tend la main, l’infâme Kayser !
Mais voyez se lever tous les monts de l’Yser,
Tous ceux de la Champagne et tous ceux de la Somme,
Si nombreux qu’on ne peut en établir la somme,
Tous ceux de la Serbie et du Monténégro,
Les Russes, les Roumains qui sont morts en héros,
Tous ceux du Canada, tous ceux de l’Australie,
Tous ceux de l’Angleterre et ceux de l’Italie,
Ces Français morts devant Reims et Verdun, et ceux
— Héros sans noms, mais tous à jamais glorieux —
Qui, brisent les assauts du Teuton qui s’acharne,
Par deux fois ont sauvé le Monde sur la Marne ?
Qu’allez-vous donc répondre à cette note-là ?
Serrerez-vous la main sanglante d’Attila,
Et mettant une page affreuse dans l’histoire,
Frustrerez-vous le Droit de la victoire ?
Et pour hâter un jour le retour la paix,
Sauverez-vous les Huns d’expier leurs forfaits ?
L’heure est grave et tragique ! O Wilson, prenez garde !
L’intègre Washington est là qui vous regarde,
Et Lincoln, anxieux, attend que vous parliez !
Les morts et les vivants des pays alliés
Frissonnent tant que Grant en frémit dans sa tombe !
Il faut donc que le mot qui de vos lèvres tombe
Soit ce qu’ils auraient dit, eux qui n’ont plus de voix ! »
Et Wilson s’écria : « Je les vois, je les vois !
O légions de morts, héroïques victimes,
Je ne saurais trouver de mots assez sublimes
S’il faut au Kayser que je parle pour vous.
Ma faible voix n’aurait pas assez de courroux.
Des Vosges à la mer, sur le front des armées,
Pour lui répondre, ouvrant leurs gueules enflammées,
Chaque obusier, chaque mortier, chaque canon,
Cacheront à sa face un millier de Non ! »

Alors, l’ange, joyeux, dit en ouvrant ses ailes,
Avant de remonter aux cimes éternelles :
« Je suis celle par qui le Crime est châtié,
Et qui pour les méchants n’eut jamais de pitié.
Je suis celle, ô Wilson, qui veut être vengée,
Je suis le Droit, je suis la Justice outragée,
Je renverse les rois sur trônes assis,
Je brise tyrans, mon nom est Némésis ! »

—Charles Moravia
New York, le 14 octobre 1918

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1 Le Matin (1907–2013) was one of the major Haitian newspapers during the twentieth century, founded and directed by Clément Magloire. Certain issues of Le Matin are available online at the Digital Library of the Caribbean (DLoC). I would like to thank Yvonne Boyer and Jim Toplon at Vanderbilt University Libraries, Paul...
Losch and Hope Molinelli at the Smathers Library at the University of Florida, and the interlibrary loan staff at the McKeldin Library at the University of Maryland, College Park, for helping me acquire and track down the original source for “La vision du Président Wilson.” I would also like to thank Matthew Davidson, Jocelyn S. Franklin, Kelly Baker Josephs, Siobhan Marie Meï, and Vanessa K. Valdés for their feedback on this translation.

2 For more on La Crête-à-Pierrot and Moravia’s use of history, see Erin Zavitz, “Revolutionary Memories: Celebrating and Commemorating the Haitian Revolution” (PhD diss., University of Florida, 2015), 288–95.


4 This is a translation of the version that was sent to me by the Interlibrary Loan staff at the McKeldin Library at the University of Maryland, College Park, drawn from the holdings of the Biblioteca Antonio Pigliaru at the Università di Sassari in Sassari, Italy. The original in Le Matin does not feature an epigraph.

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