



**HAL**  
open science

# The Dialectic of the Mediterranean and the Caribbean in the Work of Édouard Glissant

Franck Collin

► **To cite this version:**

Franck Collin. The Dialectic of the Mediterranean and the Caribbean in the Work of Édouard Glissant. Édouard Glissant, *Radiance and Obscurity*, In press. halshs-03168864

**HAL Id: halshs-03168864**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03168864>**

Submitted on 14 Mar 2021

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## The Dialectic of the Mediterranean and the Caribbean in the Work of Édouard Glissant

Version anglaise légèrement différente de l'article en français (2018)  
à destination de l'édition américaine du livre  
*Édouard Glissant, Radiance and Obscurity*, à paraître en 2020.

---

The Mediterranean and the Caribbean are frequently opposed as different geographical zones and distinct insular regions with contrasting cultures. One of the most important writers of the French Caribbean, Édouard Glissant, whose work reflects deeply on colonialism, slavery, and racism, has formulated an influential concept of *Antillanité*, or Caribbeanness, that has frequent recourse to this opposition. He uses it to emphasize what he conceives as a line of demarcation between a sea of brilliant explosion outward (*l'éclat*) and a sea of inward oriented concentration (*l'obscur*). One of the several passages in which he discusses this distinction appears in a conversation collected in the volume, *Interviews in Baton Rouge* (*Entretiens à Baton Rouge*; italics and bold are those of the authors<sup>1</sup>):

---

<sup>1</sup> Works of Édouard Glissant

*Poétique de la Relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990); *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1997). Abbreviated *PR*.

*Le discours antillais* (Paris: Seuil, 1981); partially translated into English by J. Michael Dash, *Caribbean Discourse* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989). Abbreviated *DA*.

*Poétique de la Relation chez Segalen et Saint-John Perse*, Conférence à la Fondation Perse, [Fondationsaintjohnperse.fr/Souffle/Souffle\\_2\\_Glissant.pdf](http://fondationsaintjohnperse.fr/Souffle/Souffle_2_Glissant.pdf), 18/05/1990b. Abbreviated *PRSP*.

*Introduction à une Poétique du Divers* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996). Abbreviated *IPD*.

*Traité de Tout-Monde, Poétique IV* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

*Sartorius: Le Roman de Batoutos* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).

*Ormerod* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003).

*Les Entretiens de Baton Rouge*, with Alexandre Leupin (Paris: Gallimard, 2008).

*L'Intrahabitable Beauté du Monde* (Paris: Éditions Galaade/Institut du Tout-Monde, 2009).

*La Terre le Feu l'Eau et les Vents: Une Anthologie de la Poésie du Tout-Monde* (Paris: Éditions Galaade/Institut de Tout-Monde, 2010).

*Les Indes: poèmes de l'une et l'autre terre* (Paris: Éditions Falaize, 1956).

*La Lézarde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958)

*Le Sel Noir* (Paris: Seuil, 1960). Abbreviated *SN*.

*Le Quatrième Siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1964; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Paris: Gallimard, 1990).

*L'Intention Poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1969. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. *Poétique II*. Gallimard, 1997). Abbreviated *IP*.

I will speak now of *the opposition between the Mediterranean and the Caribbean Sea*. I think that the Mediterranean, because of its historical grandeur, is a *concentrating sea*. It is not by accident that the greatest monotheistic religions have been born in its hills and valleys and in the deserts that surround its shores. It is a sea *centered on the One*, which sustains around it the multiplicity of the diverse, but tragically tilts it towards this unity. It is the sea of the fundamental abyss, of the interior chasm that determines all philosophies of the One. I think that the places where the sea does not concentrate, but instead diffracts, where the movement of *bursting* is great, where the wind breathes through everywhere and in all directions and naturally so, are conducive to the future of a philosophy of naturalized diversity, to *an aesthetic of detour*. That is the Caribbean Archipelago.”

*Je parlerai maintenant de l'opposition entre la Méditerranée et la mer Caraïbe. Je crois que la Méditerranée, c'est sa grandeur historique, est une mer qui concentre. Ce n'est pas par hasard que les plus grandes religions monothéistes sont nées sur les collines, dans les villes et dans les déserts qui entourent ses rives. C'est une mer centrée sur l'Un, qui entretient autour d'elle la multiplicité du divers, et l'incline tragiquement vers cette unité. C'est la mer du gouffre fondamental, de l'abîme intérieur qui détermine toutes les philosophies de l'Un. Je crois que les lieux où la mer ne concentre pas, mais diffracte au contraire, où le mouvement d'éclatement est très grand, où le vent souffle de partout et dans tous les sens et comme naturellement, sont propices à l'avènement d'une philosophie du divers naturalisé. À une esthétique du détour. Ainsi en est-il de l'Archipel caraïbe. (EBR, 106-107)*

Two archipelagos are clearly marked here: the Mediterranean “concentrates” cultures into a self-referential denseness and is the space of philosophies of the One, of History writ large, while the Caribbean “diffracts,” welcoming the explosion of diversity and opening the way to multiple histories that have yet to come. In this dialectic of insular spaces, Glissant is aiming to remove the Caribbean from any dependence—historical, philosophical, or ethical—upon an ancient conquering Europe. In this respect, his dialectic may be approached as a rhetoric of differentiation that magnifies a dividing line in order to underscore more emphatically the particularities of each space. If we approach it in this way, we can appreciate both the pertinence of the contrast, but also certain simplifications that come with it. For Glissant exaggerates the classical age of the Mediterranean—its philosophies of the One—and thereby masks its textured brilliance, in order to effect a recalibration of the region with respect to Caribbean cultures. In fact, the dialectic of “*l'éclat et l'obscur*” (radiance and obscurity) arguably works against the grain of a key Glissantian notion that has circulated widely in recent literary and cultural theory:

Relation. As he sets out to demonstrate in *Poetics of Relation* (*Poétique de la Relation*), his best known work, Relation describes a way of living that is receptive to the intermixing of cultures in a networked world that is not only rapidly accelerating, but whose expanses and extensions are unforeseeable, indeterminate, and not bound by concepts of filiation and logical consequence. Breaking away from allegiances to national independence, Glissant seeks to invest Relation with connotations of encounter, translation, interdependence, or, as he puts it, “giving-on-and-with” (“*donner-avec*”) rather than “grasping” (“*com-prendre*”) (PR, 144; 158). The tenor of his term is optimistic rather than tragic, and its iconic sign is the open boat, exposed and vulnerable, but also in communication with a world that beckons. What we will be exploring in this essay is the question of whether Glissant’s Mediterranean-Caribbean dialectic reinscribes the very divisions he seeks to overcome in developing a poetics of Relation.

In the first section of the paper, we will examine the various critical elements of Glissant’s opposition in order to unfold the new perspectives it affords as well as the biases it perpetuates. In the process, we will be asking why a poet-philosopher who addresses the dawning of the Mediterranean says very little about Homer. In the second section, we will move to an examination of the *Odyssey*, demonstrating some of the ways in which a poetics of Relation is operational in an early founding text. We will conclude with remarks about how a revision of Glissant’s dialectic, which puts the Mediterranean and the Caribbean in Relation (in his sense) rather than in opposition (a stance from which he usually departs), can help us understand the possibilities and limits of modern epic.

### *A Rhetoric of Differentiation*

The Mediterranean in question in the extract from *Interviews in Baton Rouge* quoted above reveals that Glissant is evoking less a historical than a conceptualized region, shaped in such a way as to render it more adaptable to a rhetoric of differentiation. If, geographically, the Greek Cyclades describe a circle (*kyklos*) to which they owe their name, while the Lesser Antilles are extended in the form of an arc, the “*archipel arqué*” that Aimé Césaire so movingly evokes in *Journal of a Return to the Native Land* (*Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*),<sup>2</sup> one can remark that these metaphors, which emphasize contracting and diffracting, are easily reversible: the

---

<sup>2</sup> Césaire, *Cahier*, Strophe 42. “What I call my own: these few thousand mortally wounded who go round and round in the calabash of an island and what is mine also this archipelago bowed as though in strenuous desire for self-denial, a maternal anxiety, you might say, to protect the exceedingly delicate, slender thread that separates one America from the other.” (“*Ce qui est à moi, ces quelques milliers de mortiférés qui tournent en rond dans la calebasse d’une île et ce qui est à moi aussi, l’archipel arqué comme le désir inquiet de se nier, on dirait une anxiété maternelle pour protéger la ténuité plus délicate qui sépare l’une de l’autre Amérique.*”

Mediterranean islands, beyond the Cyclades, are extremely scattered, especially if one takes into account the Ionian islands in the Adriatic, while the Caribbean islands may in several respects be considered as countries with their own spheres of influence. But it is not the configuration of islands that calls our attention. It is rather the way in which Glissant's representation of them reflects what he conceives to be their historical, philosophical, ontological, and archipelagic modes of thought. Upon these, he builds an argument—an indictment—against occidental values that emanates from the notion of the root, *la racine*.

The first perspective he brings to his inquiry may be described as *historicizing* rather than historical. He seeks to define his project not by repeating an ancient, received History in any detail, since this is the product of empire and colonization, but to trace the broad lines of a Mediterranean *of the past*. In doing so, he gestures allusively to ancient History in order to designate the Mediterranean basin as the foundation of occidental culture, the space in which Europe recognizes its own origins. It is in this basin, Glissant contends, that we find the cradle of monotheistic religions, which conceived of a single god (*monos*) and which were “born in the hills” (“*nées sur les collines*”), a significant formulation that attaches them to continental thought (to “*les villes*” and “*les déserts*”). In speaking about the Mediterranean as “the sea of the fundamental abyss, of the interior chasm” (“*la mer du gouffre fondamental, de l’abîme intérieur*”), represented by philosophies of the One that seek to bridge the divide, he is referring to the early Greek philosophers without naming them. Although they were Ionians and seadwellers, they had the same unifying aspirations as the monotheists. When he asserts, therefore, that the Mediterranean obsession is to unify, Glissant is not advancing a debatable proposition, but implicitly positing, at the root of the occident, a dogmatic and colonising bent toward religions and philosophies of the Other, as well as a political instinct to conquer. As we will see, this view contradicts what he says elsewhere about ancient epic. But for now, let us focus on his remarks in the interview by way of introducing nuances that he does not himself offer.

For one thing, if the ancients had a concentric conception of Mediterranean space, it was because for them it constituted the heart of their known world. The ocean beyond the Pillars of Hercules did not lead to another land; the Scythian north was extremely cold; the African south was unbearably hot.<sup>3</sup> But if the Mediterranean was a “concentrated” space, it also marked the intersection of multiple cultures, as the influential work of Fernand Braudel has amply borne out, as have recent studies by such scholars as Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, who

---

<sup>3</sup> Franck Collin, “Loca incognita : *Espaces marginaux et fantasmés de l’imaginaire latin*,” in *L’Espace dans l’Antiquité: Utilisation, fonction et représentation* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2015), 185-210.

have written a revisionary account of Braudel.<sup>4</sup> The cultures of the Mediterranean have always brimmed with complex exchanges at the linguistic, religious, and commercial levels. There were certainly hegemonic enterprises: the Greeks colonized the Black Sea and southern Italy; Athens created the imperialist Delian League; the Romans built their empire at the periphery of the Mediterranean basin. But to contend that such domination conditioned the development of other peoples around a single culture is to ignore the resistances and hybridizations that were generated in every epoch and that often fractured the supremacy of the presumptive powers. For another thing, Greek and Roman culture were never unified within themselves. A Greek from Sicily or from Sparta was not the same as a Greek from Athens. So, too, the right of Roman citizenship was only slowly transferred to annexed areas, beginning with the Italian peninsula itself. Moreover, Romanization never prevented complex processes of intermixing and syncretism. We need only turn to North Africa for obvious examples: Apuleius (124-170 CE), Tertullian (155-240 CE), and Augustine (354-430 CE), to name only the most famous ancient writers from this region, developed rich mosaics of thought that drew on multiple influences from widely different sources.

A second perspective that Glissant brings to his project concerns “the *philosophies* of the One.” At the dawn of occidental philosophy, he suggests, we find a tendency to embrace totality and to make it rest upon a determining principle. A “prin-ciple,” by definition, is an object of thought that is “taken at/as the beginning” (*primum ceptum*). The Greek word for it is *archē*. In such a concept, we find the quest of classical metaphysics. But even before the large-scale philosophical inquiries of Plato and Aristotle in the fourth century BCE, the Presocratics searched for a first principle around which the inexhaustible variety of the sensible could be constructed. For Heraclitus, to take one example, fire is the material element that he assimilates to the *logos*, which gathers and expands the world we perceive in its apparent contradictions, a movement that humans are urged to ponder, though most lack the capacity to understand it: “When you have listened, not to me, but to the *logos*, it is wise to agree that all things are one” (“οὐκ ἔμοῦ, ἀλλὰ τοῦ λόγου ἀκούσαντος, ὁμολογεῖν σοφόν ἐστὶν ἐν πάντα εἶναι,” DK 50). Multiplicity, which obscures everything apprehended by the senses, has, says Heraclitus, an articulation, an order (the basic sense of *logos*), which allows us to reduce it to its unity as a producer of contraries, and thus to think of it in its wholeness. Idealist philosophies—

---

<sup>4</sup> Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean in the Age of Philippe II*. 3 vols. (1949; trans. Sian Reynolds. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972 and 1973); and Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000).

pythagoreanism, eleaticism, platonism<sup>5</sup>—merely dematerialize this first principle and define this One as transcendent over the senses and bound up with absolute Being, which does not permit a total representation. Even Aristotelianism, often understood as a realist philosophy,<sup>6</sup> does not escape the pyramidal cosmology of the sensible when it places the first mover, which is the ultimate cause of movement in the universe, above natural things (*meta-physika*).<sup>7</sup> Classical forms of metaphysics constructed their views of the world on rational systems that relied upon a primary foundation, which extended to the totality of phenomena via principles of identity and causality, or, as Glissant says, identity and filiation. Submitting all representations, of the sensible as well as of the intelligible, to a hegemonic system, these philosophies erected a closure that prevented them from thinking about true alterity and that imposed upon the Other a violence that they justified by a “necessary” adherence to their conception of the One: everything Other was thus consigned, in effect, to obscurity.<sup>8</sup> It is within such a framework that Glissant opposes “root identity,” an occidental notion, to “rhizomatic identity,” a concept he borrows from Deleuze and Guattari and that becomes intertwined with his treatment of “creolization,” to which we will later turn. European thought and artistic expression have themselves attempted to combat the orientation toward “radical rootedness,” or *radicité*, and the baroque marks the most extreme form of “rerouting,” or *détournement*, the most effective way of reintroducing what is alive and mutating into classical systems that were judged to be excessively rigid:

Baroque art was a reaction against the rationalist pretense of penetrating the mysteries of the known with one uniform and conclusive move. [...] Baroque art mustered bypasses, proliferation, spatial redundancy, anything that flouted the alleged unicity of the thing known,

---

<sup>5</sup> See the Pythagorean Philolaos, cited by Aristotle in *Metaphysics* (986a19, 1080b31), with respect to the “Monad [which is] the originary unity from which derives the series of numbers”; similarly, Plato’s *Parmenides* (137c-157b), notably, the second of the three hypotheses about Being (142e-155e): “The One is, it is being, it is thus multiple and contains all contraries, but it is knowable and one may speak of it: this One, which is pure multiplicity, since it is the One that is, assumes a communication between the Idea of the One and the idea of being.”

<sup>6</sup> See *Metaphysics* 4.15, 1021a, on the four concrete modes of unity: indivisible substance, common matter, similar genre, same forms or properties.

<sup>7</sup> *Physics* 7.1, 241b; and *Metaphysics* 12.7, 1072b.

<sup>8</sup> “*Cette action est progressive et s’exerce dans une opacité, pour la raison que la violence liée à la filiation (l’exclusion absolue de l’Autre) ne peut être affrontée de face, ni d’un seul tenant. Un tel affrontement eût foudroyé la communauté d’un trop-plein de connaissance, d’une sorte de court-circuit de la conscience. Les guerres et les conquêtes sont les occasions qui masquent pour la communauté la violence de cette exclusion de l’Autre. Mais ce qu’on supporte vaillamment dans des conflits dont on a calculé ou improvisé le prétexte, devient insupportable dans la méditation sacrée de la racine*” (PR, 65). DK, frag. 8, 3-6.

and the knowing of it, anything exalting quantity infinitely resumed and totality infinitely ongoing. (PR, 77-78)

*L'art baroque fut une réaction contre la prétention rationaliste à pénétrer d'un mouvement uniforme et décisif les arcanes du connu. [...] L'art baroque fait appel au contournement, à la prolifération, à la redondance d'espace, à ce qui bafoue l'unicité prétendue d'un connu et d'un connaissant, à ce qui exalte la quantité reprise infiniment, la totalité à l'infini recommencée.* (PR, 91-92).

One recognizes in Glissant's recourse to the baroque a Hegelian way of taking hold of history, that is, of translating into it, in broad outline, the movements of *Geist*, or Spirit. Hegel, phenomenologist that he is, and seeking to draw more closely to the living movement of things, uses History as a dynamic embodiment of *Geist*, which is not unlike Heraclitus' use of the concept of *Logos* as the embodiment of Being. In this way, he remains deeply embedded in idealist philosophy, which he completes, in a sense. We come to an interesting juncture. One might well ask if Glissant, in employing the arms of the adversary—the thought that seeks to unify—remains bound in the framework he denounces, most notably, in the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave. Why not evoke post-Hegelian thought instead of the baroque, which is a counter movement to the (neo-) classical, in conceptualizing Relation? Why not appeal to all the modern forms of critique, which in Europe, and beyond, have clearly been deconstructive? Glissant will do so from time to time, as he does in borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari to create the idea of the Baroque. But by stopping at the ancient Mediterranean, we often find him insisting upon Europe as an entity that has already been, that is closed in upon itself, and that is always, irremediably, the dominator.

The *ontological* perspective within which the classical metaphysics of the One has effectively confiscated Being must be completely rethought in a non-hegemonic manner, or in Glissantian terms, from the perspective of Relation. Being must no longer be thought, as in Parmenides,<sup>9</sup> in accordance with the principle of identity, in the modality of the One, to the exclusion of the Other, but in the modality of the Multiple, or what Glissant calls “*le Chaos-monde*,” the world of resonating things that cannot be systematized. Similarly, *l'obscur* must be rethought along the lines of what he refers to as “opacity,” or *l'opacité*, the right not to be understood, since the logic of clarity, supported by rational discourse, hasn't ceased relegating

---

<sup>9</sup> DK, frag. 8, 3-6: “Being is not engendered and is imperishable, / universal, immobile et without end. / It has not been and it will not be; it is now entire, one, continuous.” See Plato, *Parmenides*, 137-142, and *Republic*, Book 6: the One is exterior to the sensible and archetypal world.

to the margins, or into oblivion, what does not pass through its beams. Transparency is part of the prison of systematic thought. Here one is reminded of the ascent to the sun in the allegory of the cave (*Republic* 7) and of the person who wishes to be divested of the obstacles of the sensible world and the life of the body in order to approach more nearly the unity of Being in its plenitude. This way of thinking about Being is an ontotheology, of which monotheisms, particularly in the occidental Middle Ages, availed themselves in order to sanction their conception of a single, sovereign God. It is implicitly this that Glissant challenges. For him, there is no surreal realm or place beyond that is more luminous than what we experience and that governs the immanent world. The deconstructive thought initiated by Nietzsche is built on the idea that what has been abandoned in the darkness and forgotten has a density, a thickness, a profundity, that is more interesting than the light<sup>10</sup>:

The world is deep  
Deeper still than day thought.

*Die Welt ist tief,  
Und tiefer als der Tag gedacht. (Thus Spoke Zarathoustra)*<sup>11</sup>

Nietzsche makes use of Heraclitus, known in antiquity as “the Obscure” (*skoteinos*), to take account of the opaque, of movement and instability, not for the pleasure of complicating things, but because metaphysical thought has falsified the capturing of the “real.” Instead of Unity, Nietzsche prefers eternity (*Ewigkeit*), the density of a time that repeats itself and that nothing can measure. Similarly, for Glissant, (Caribbean) opacity must be opposed to (Mediterranean) brilliance, and time must be delivered to a density that is other than the History already written. Thus opacity for him takes on a political dimension: its aim is to restore to African peoples whose history as been erased and plundered a “being” compromised, lost, but always trembling with possibility. What these peoples have irreparably lost in the abyss is precisely the “unity” of their origins. Such is the condition of those deported into Caribbean space via the Middle Passage.

Against the *hypostasis* of the Neoplatonic Plotinus,<sup>12</sup> which refers to one *substance*, the one that supports from below (*hypo-*) the entire architecture of the intelligible and the material,

<sup>10</sup> For example, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Part One, “The Prejudices of the Philosophers”; and *The Twilight of the Gods*, Chapter 4, “The Four Great Errors.”

<sup>11</sup> *Thus Spoke Zarathoustra*, 4, “The Song of Drunkenness.”

<sup>12</sup> In *Enneads*, 6.1.8, Plotinus distinguishes three hypostases : “the First One”; “the Multiple One”; and “the One and the Multiple.”

Glissant places *extasis*, which issues from a battle: “The extasis of the One comes loose in a militant unity” (“*L’extase de l’Un se dénoue dans la militante unité,*” *L’intention poétique*, 14-15). Extasis (*ek-stasis*) bypasses all connection with an *underlying* (*hypo-*) essence by *escaping from* (*ek-*) subjugation to the structure of the One, in other words, by moving beyond such subjugation in giving itself over to multiplied Diversity, doing battle, in a “militant” action that recalls the *polemos* of Heraclitus, in order to become another “unity,” that which encompasses empirical and historical diversity.<sup>13</sup> Glissant’s *extasis* recalls Heidegger’s use of the concept of “existence/*ek-sistence*,” which comes to manifest the Openness (*Öffnung*) of Being (*Sein*) to beings (*Seiendes*) out of an unqualifiable “unity.” Whereas the author of *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*) speaks of “fundamental ontology” in order to distinguish it from classical ontology, Glissant valorizes onticity—the belonging of beings to being, or factual, real existence—against ontology.

This deconstructive move on Glissant’s part is nonetheless problematic—from the perspective of the ontic because, claiming to think being without reference to Being, he falls back on a preconception of classical metaphysics, which is to reify being in giving it all the characteristics of Being.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, even as he moves beyond classical metaphysics, Glissant remains nonetheless affiliated with it, and more than rhetorically, since he relies on Hegelian dialectic, quite systematically, in advancing his argument on Caribbean space.

The recourse to an *archipelagic* perspective is the means by which the author of *La Lézarde* (1958), an early novel that won him the Prix Goncourt, attempted to distinguish himself from systematic thought, the kind of thought that excludes thought of the Other. System—the very idea of it—is for him the cause of the routes that the Occident has taken, and it depends upon the concepts of filiation, generalization, violence in the service of power, and thus war and colonization.<sup>15</sup> These concepts are at the heart of continental thought, which seeks to extend itself to all neighboring territory in the effort to annex it. Thus the islands of Greece, although they compose an archipelago, remain deeply anchored, in Glissant’s view, in a territorializing form of thought. Against it, he places archipelagic (Caribbean) thought, which he defines in this way:

---

<sup>13</sup> One of the meanings of *stasis* in Greek is “uprising, revolt, revolution,” and *ek-stasis* signifies “a mental distraction.”

<sup>14</sup> We cannot discuss this point at length here, but the difference may be seen already in Heidegger’s objection to Sartre’s existentialism (see *Lettre sur l’humanisme*), and it differentiates the position of Jean-Luc Nancy from that of Glissant. See Hiddleston 2012, 153-156.

<sup>15</sup> Glissant, *Introduction à une Poétique du Divers*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996: “[*La pensée de système*] a organisé, étudié, projeté, ces répercussions lentes et insensibles entre les langues – a prévu et mis en perspective idéologique le mouvement du monde qu’elle régentait légitimement. [...] cette pensée de système a failli à prendre en compte le non système généralisé des cultures du monde,” 34.

Franck Collin, Michelle Zerba  
The Dialectic of the Mediterranean and the Caribbean in the Work of Édouard Glissant

Another form of thought, more intuitive, more fragile, more threatened, but more attuned to the *chaos-monde* and its unpredictabilities, is developing, buttressed, you might say, against the conquests of the human sciences, but derived from a **vision of the poetic and of the world's imaginary**.

*Une autre forme de pensée, plus intuitive, plus fragile, menacée, mais accordée au chaos-monde et à ses imprévus, se développe, arc-boutée peut-être aux conquêtes des sciences humaines mais dérivée dans une **vision du poétique et de l'imaginaire du monde**. (IPD, 34)*

Fragmented and poetically suggestive like the Antillean islands that compose it, archipelagic thought alone explores the unforeseeable, instead of fabricating a future according to tendentious cartographical expectations and reducing everything to them. Its function is, above all, a matter of weakening the legitimacy that orders the connection between atavistic (European) cultures and composite (creole) cultures, always acknowledging the first, while allowing their differences and their mutual strangeness to stand. In the face of discontinuous imaginary worlds, one will be engaged less in a search for points in common, with the reductions such a search entails, than in the apposition of cultures in their specificities, with their zones of opacity and incomprehensibility. Opacity is not obscurity: "It is what cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence" ("*Il est le non-réductible, qui est la plus vivace des garanties de participation et de confluence*" (PR, 191; 205-206). Thus opacity in archipelagic thought will no longer be a difficulty that obstructs understanding, if we take understanding to be a way of grasping the whole of cultures, because cultures will no longer weave hierarchies between themselves with a view toward regularizing difference. It will instead be the living out of Relation, that is, the avoidance of legitimation by the law of filiation and the opening up of respectful, non-dominant connections between cultures.<sup>16</sup>

If this philosophy of Relation is fundamental to Glissant, one could also say that it is hardly new, but rather draws upon the work of such anthropologists as Claude Lévi-Strauss and such cultural theorists as André Malraux, for whom the modern age emerges as a new period in human history for relating past and present cultures.<sup>17</sup> Numerous other thinkers in late twentieth

---

<sup>16</sup> See Clément Mbom, "Édouard Glissant, de l'opacité à la relation," in *Poétiques d'Édouard Glissant*, ed. Jacques Chevrier (Paris: PUPS, 2005): "*La communauté de la totalité-terre, pour engendrer une forme de légitimité n'a pas besoin d'ordre mythologique, ontologique ou génétique mais d'une légitimité relationnelle,*" 252.

<sup>17</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Mythologies*, 1-3 (1964-1971); and Malraux, *Le Musée Imaginaire* (1947).

and early twenty-first-century comparative literature and culture have articulated views close to Glissant's.<sup>18</sup> In this diversity, his contribution has been to introduce the opposition of creolization and occidentalism, or, in the terms we have been using in this essay, the Caribbean and the Mediterranean. Creolization is not, in his view, aligned with a new culture (that would be *créolité*, "creolity"), but with an improvisational form of living in a continuous movement of exchange and Relation:

Creolizations bring into Relation, but not to universalize; the principles of creoleness regress toward negritudes, ideas of Frenchness, of Latinness, all generalizing concepts—more or less innocently." (PR, 89)

*Les créolisations introduisent à la Relation, mais ce n'est pas pour universaliser; la 'créolité' dans son principe, régresserait vers des négritudes, des francités, des latinités, toutes généralisantes—plus ou moins innocemment.*" (PR, 103)

In being pluridimensional, always both centrifugal and centripetal, because of being permanently turned toward the self while remaining open to its surroundings and the waters that connect it with a "*totalité-terre*," a "*Tout-Monde*," the archipelagic thought of the Caribbean embodies the spirit of Relation and a respect for opacity. Rather than imposing the real, it delivers it; its chief characteristic is unpredictability, the possibilities of dynamic life and of the random. In this respect, the totality that Relation brings about in its activity of cultural exchange replaces claims to the universal and immerses peoples in a globalism no one can escape.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, Mediterranean space appears to Glissant as a collection of cultures that is also a graveyard, an abyss, of European, atavistic, inegalitarian, and bygone forms of life that are inhuman in their exercise of hegemonic power and contempt for other peoples.

Attuning oneself to globalism thus leads to a change in the mode of thought, which no longer rests upon a universalizing logic or monolingualism of the sort that *koinē* English imposes, but upon creativity. This mode of thought must become inventive, imaginative, poetic in the basic sense of the word, that is, capable of "making" (from the Greek *poiein*). It must restore the link that Plato broke between philosophy and poetry.<sup>20</sup> Glissant's bypassing of science and of

---

<sup>18</sup> For a fuller treatment of Glissant and postcolonial theory, see Celia Britton, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> IPD: "*J'appelle chaos-monde... le choc, l'intrication, les répulsions, les attirances, les connivences, les oppositions entre les cultures des peuples dans la totalité – monde contemporaine... il s'agit du mélange culturel, qui n'est pas un simple melting pot par lequel la totalité-monde se trouve aujourd'hui réalisée,*" 30.

<sup>20</sup> Plato, *Republic* 10, 607b: "There is an ancient difference (*palaia diaphora*) between philosophy and the art of poetry."

metaphysics resonates with Nietzsche, who seeks to incorporate poetics into a relational activity that is cognitively open. Similarly, he sees in the exercise of translating morality, not the reduction of a foreign language to the norms of the language into which it is being translated, but the putting-into-Relation of two “original” texts, which protect the opacity of their own culture, whose richness invites comparative study.

One may nonetheless ask: doesn't Glissant's rhetoric of the Mediterranean, based as it is upon a dialectic that is, to say the least, mechanical (closed sea, continent, the One, monotheism), privilege the geographical dimension of the sea at the expense of a more historical reflection upon it? Clearly, if this rhetoric does not privilege space over time, it masks, not only the modern Mediterranean, which is considerably different than the ancient, but also the diversity of pre-classical Greece. That is what we see in Glissant's failure to take account of Homer.

*Wandering and the Epic: the Eclipse of Homer in Glissant*

If Glissant frequently cites Homer, one is struck by the allusive and elliptical way he handles him. In *Le discours antillais (Caribbean Discourse)*,<sup>21</sup> and more extensively in *Poetics of Relation*, he remarks that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are books of exile and wandering (*l'exil et errance*) that manifest “a desire to go against the root” (“*un desir de contrevenir à la racine,*” *PR*, 15-16; 27-28). But they are also books about “the birth of collective consciousness” (“*la naissance à la conscience collective,*” *PR*, 16; 28) that are filled with enough unrest as to enable the individual to engage with them, “whenever he becomes the issue” (“*chaque fois qu'il devient à lui-même problème,*” *PR*, 15; 28). These founding texts are not ordered according to the triumph of the absolute: the victory of the Greeks in the *Iliad* occurs as a result of deceit (the construction of the wooden horse), Odysseus upon returning is recognized only by his dog (identity rests in the most random of relations), and all epic characters are marked by an ineluctable fatalism. Epics therefore “bear the germ of the exact opposite of what they so loudly proclaim” (“*portent en germe l'exact contraire de leurs turbulentes réclamations,*” *PR*, 15; 27-28). They present the near failure of community, the threatening difficulties of wandering, and the detours that risk crushing the entire collective enterprise. In a summary statement, Glissant observes,

---

<sup>21</sup> *Le discours antillais* has been partially translated by J. Michael Dash under the title *Caribbean Discourse* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989). Because the English text is not complete, we have used the French text for citations and provided our own translation from the French.

These books [along with the Old Testament, Icelandic sagas, and *Chansons de Geste*] were the beginning of something entirely different from massive, dogmatic and totalitarian certainty (despite the religious uses to which they would be put). These are books of *errance*, going beyond the pursuits and triumphs of rootedness required by the evolution of history. (PR, 16)

*Ces livres fondent tout autre chose qu'une certitude massive, dogmatique ou totalitaire (hormis l'usage religieux qu'on en fera): ce sont des livres d'errance, par-delà les recherches ou les triomphes de l'enracinement que le mouvement de l'histoire exige.* (PR, 28)

Extrapolating from these remarks, Glissant refers back to his own earlier works, *Poetic Intention (L'Intention Poétique)* and *Le discours antillais*, explaining how he began to wonder

if we did not still need such founding works today, ones that would use a similar dialectics of rerouting, asserting, for example, political strength but, simultaneously, the rhizome of a multiple relationship with the Other. (PR, 16)

*si de telles oeuvres fondatrices ne nous seraient pas, aujourd'hui encore, nécessaires, qui s'appuieraient sur une pareille dialectique du détournement: affirmant par exemple la rigueur politique, mais à même le rhizome du rapport multiple à l'Autre.* (PR, 28)

There is certainly enough here to show that Glissant could have developed a poetics of relation out of ancient epic, and especially the *Odyssey*, but he does not do so. In his last anthology, *La terre, le feu, l'eau, et les vents*, the *Odyssey* is indexed, but Homer is not (251).<sup>22</sup> The only passages mentioned concern Telemachus' arrival in Pylos at the court of Menelaus and Helen (*Odyssey*, 3.1-11); the first is cited because of its reference to the rising sun, that is, its circumstantial character, while the second focuses on Odysseus making a bed of leaves on which to sleep after leaving the island of Calypso and being washed ashore on the land of the Phaeacians (*Odyssey*, 5.474-493).<sup>23</sup> Notably, it is a shipwrecked Odysseus who is referenced, not an Odysseus who is wily and capable of striking out after near annihilation. The *Odyssey*, then, surfaces in the work of Glissant, but he also allows it to slip back into the sea of the One when he conceptualizes the Mediterranean. In what follows, we will demonstrate how the *Odyssey* may and should be read as a poem of relation and why Glissant “forgets” the epic.

---

<sup>22</sup> *La terre le feu l'eau et les vents : Un anthologie de la poésie du Tout-monde* (Paris: Éditions Galaade/Institut du Tout-monde, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> We have provided the details of the reference to these two passages of the *Odyssey*. The presentation of them in Glissant's text leaves they impression that they follow one another, which they do not.

The *Odyssey* appears on the scene of writing as an explosion, a burst, a work that emerges from darkness. But this epic of wandering had a long history of wandering itself before it was committed to writing sometime in the eighth century BCE. It is the product of a long oral tradition that was circuitous, diffuse, and full of detours—a tradition prior to the division of orient and occident, east and west, which extends back to the Near East and the Mesopotamian epic of *Gilgamesh* in the third millennium BCE.<sup>24</sup> This journey, always moving and rerouting “away from the root,” has imparted to the word *odyssey* the modern sense it bears in many languages of a journey of discovery fraught with challenges. Such tales, at the moment they are constituted, precede the formation of city-states (*poleis*) and nations, because they cannot predict the future that lies ahead of them. They embrace detours and challenge the idea of identity itself since identity has not yet taken shape. Similarly, the *Odyssey* does not value, as one might think, the simple idea of return, or *nostos*, but rather the difficulty or impossibility of a return to the One, to the Same. It is surprising that Glissant does not choose this Homeric account of struggle to defend, in the face of philosophies of the One, this other point of view, which is also Mediterranean.

It is possible to turn to the arguments of Glissant himself to conceptualize ancient epic as *errance* in the sense of “living Relation,” *Relation vivante*.<sup>25</sup> Numerous critics have shown that epic was not constructed programmatically, but as the product of often random processes that unfolded over deep time in a journey constructed around relation—between bards, the regions in which they traveled, the social circumstances to which they adapted, and broader cultural contacts between different lands, facilitated by economic passages of commerce and trade.<sup>26</sup> In much the same way, Odysseus is in control neither of time nor his own return, his *nostos*. Here we may have recourse to two Greek ideas of time: on the one hand, *chronos*, which is time that can be measured or controlled within a set of variables and that is shared; on the other hand, *kairos*, which is time seen in terms of opportunity, the favorable moment one’s intelligence may seize upon to bring an activity or enterprise to an advantageous end or to escape from a situation that is harmful.<sup>27</sup> In the face of unforeseeable events, the subject sets out and wanders

---

<sup>24</sup> On connections between Greece, Homer, and the ancient Near East, see Walter Burkert, *Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis: Eastern Contexts of Greek Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 21-48; Bruce Louden, *Homer’s Odyssey and the Near East* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); and M.L. West, *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1997).

<sup>25</sup> In the English translation of *Poetics of Relation* by Betsy Wing, the word *errance* is translated as “errantry.”

<sup>26</sup> See, Egbert Bakker, *Pointing at the Past: From Formula to Performance in Homeric Poetics* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2006); also, Gregory Nagy, “Homeric Poetry and the Problems of Multiformality: the ‘Panathenaic Bottleneck,’” *Classical Philology* 96.2 (2001): 109-119.

<sup>27</sup> In a review of Alexandre Leupin, *Édouard Glissant, Philosophe* (Paris: Hermann, 2016), Loïc Céry uses the terms “*l’acme et le kairos*” to describe Leupin’s approach. See <https://mondesfrancophones.com/dossiers/edouard-glissant/lacme-et-le-kairos-edouard-glissant-philosophe-par-alexandre-leupin>. For a broad-ranging recent

in uncertainty. *Kairos* shoves him up against a wall and submerges him in an eruptive field where he must act. So, for example, when Odysseus and his companions approach the land of Circe, he exercises judgment in the face of *kairos*, organizing a reconnaissance mission and then following up with compensatory strategies when it produces an undesirable result: his men are turned into animals by a woman with the powers of a witch.

To manage the accidents of a life of wandering is to put into action a practical intelligence that has nothing to do with philosophies of the One. It is to engineer a ruse, and ruses, as we have seen, are connected with *mētis*, the cunning capacity to adapt oneself to fortuitous and accidental situations.<sup>28</sup> Odysseus, then, is *polytropos*, the man of many wiles, of resourcefulness, or he is *polymētis*, at once very wise and also wily. These traits introduce into the field of intelligence the qualities of craftiness, deceit, and lying, which are essential to survival in the turbulent world of the *Odyssey*. It is misleading to think of this art of escape from danger (from the Lotus Eaters, from the Laestrygonians, and so forth), which has so captivated audiences and which ceaselessly complicates the return of the hero to his native land, in terms of linear time. *Mētis* fragments Odysseus and disturbs a coherent sense of identity, by introducing uncertainty and, more consequentially, the curse that follows him throughout the epic, a result of his encounter with the Cyclops (*Odyssey* 9). In this well-known episode, the *mētis* of Odysseus, though it extricates him and his men from the cave of Polyphemus, turns back on itself: the man who cunningly claims he is “nobody” (*outis*, *mētis*) lets down his guard in a moment of indiscreet boasting, and discloses his name to the blinded giant, thereby endowing him with the power to curse, to cast “the evil eye,” which in turn makes him lose his entire crew before arriving back on Ithaca. One might say that in the effort to meet up with “the root” (his name, his genealogy, his patriarchal line), Odysseus is severed from it. Wandering does not, in this case, mobilize a way of knowing that facilitates *nostos*. Odysseus must respond in the moment to a sudden and ironic reversal of which he is the author. In attempting a rescue, he ironically becomes his own worst enemy. Foresight and hindsight are inextricably linked in the drama of return. The delays and postponements of the journey back to Ithaca interfere with the idea of the root by consistently alienating Odysseus from it.<sup>29</sup> Penelope and Telemachus are

---

treatment of *kairos*, see the essays in *Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory, and Praxis*, eds. Phillip Sipiora and James Baumlen (Albany: State University of New York, 2002), especially the Introduction.

<sup>28</sup> For a well known treatment of *mētis* in the *Odyssey* and in Greek culture, see Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Les Ruses de l'Intelligence: La Mētis des Grecs* (Paris: Flammarion, 1974); *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Harvester, 1978).

<sup>29</sup> On postponement and delay in the *Odyssey* and its recognition scenes, see Bernard Fenik, *Studies in the Odyssey. Hermes Einzelschriften 30* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1974), 5-104; Jenny Clay, *The Wrath of Athena: Gods and Men in the Odyssey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 25-34; and de Jong, Irene, *A Narratological Commentary on the Odyssey* (New York: Cambridge University, 2001), 170-72, 227-28.

no less caught up in this estrangement because the suitors undermine their status and put the “legitimate” son and the “legitimate” wife in danger of being assassinated in their own home.

Moreover, in the *chaos-mer*, *mētis* requires that Odysseus interweave himself (*se métisser*)<sup>30</sup> into circumstances and mingle with his environment, that he take part in situations more than he would otherwise want to because his safety depends on it. This predisposes him to look for help from different women (helpful men are almost absent in Odysseus’ journey), from the dominating and prophetic Circe (*Odyssey* 10) to the prisoner Calypso who conceals him (*Odyssey* 5) to the welcoming Nausicaa who receives Odysseus naked on the shores of Phaeacia and exercises her captivating charm (*Odyssey* 6).<sup>31</sup> The fidelity to the marital bond with Penelope, another manifestation of the root, is thus put in doubt by these wanderings, which are not simply passing fancies, since Odysseus in each case has the choice of remaining with the woman and making a life with her. In one case, that of Calypso, this means a chance to become immortal. If we shift our focus to the epic cycle—the collection of tales in dactylic hexameter that recount the fuller story of the Trojan War beyond what Homer relates<sup>32</sup>—we find rhizomatic variants of the story of Odysseus: in one instance, he has a son by Circe named Telegonus who, in a search for his father, mistakenly kills him. The Cretan tales offer evidence of a different Odysseus, one who hails from Crete and whose experiences are similar to, but not identical with, the Odysseus from Ithaca.<sup>33</sup> Even if we restrict ourselves to the *Odyssey*, however, *nostos* is not a return to the same or a restoration of equilibrium. The final two books of the epic pose a notorious crux.<sup>34</sup> Despite his *mētis*, which enables Odysseus to follow through with his revenge upon the suitors, there remains the problem of convincing Penelope that he is the Odysseus whom she once knew. His identity is complicated from the moment she sets eyes on him as a beggar in Book 18 of the epic, and the complexity thickens: first when she is present at the footwashing of Eurycleia and does not experience the recognition the old nurse does when she detects her master’s scar (Book 19); then when she sets the contest of the bow at the very

---

<sup>30</sup> The paronymy of *mētis* and *métisse* is fortuitous : μήτις / *mētis*, comes from the root \**ma*, “to think” (*mētiō*, “to have in mind,” *mimnēsko*, “to remember”; Latin *mens*, “mind”). *Métisse* comes from the Latin word *mixtus*, “mixed.”

<sup>31</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 1017-18, makes reference to two sons, Nausinoos and Nausithoos, as the offspring of the union between Odysseus and Calypso. Hyginus, *Fables*, 125.10, speaks of four sons of Odysseus and Circe : Telegonus, Agrios, Cassiphone, and Latinus. In the version reported by Apollodorus (see below), Telegonus kills Odysseus.

<sup>32</sup> See Malcolm Davies, *The Epic Cycle*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1989).

<sup>33</sup> See Gregory Nagy, “A Cretan Odyssey, Part One” *Critical Inquiries* (online journal) <https://classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu/a-cretan-odyssey-part-1/>; and Steve Reece, “The Cretan Odyssey: A Lie Truer Than True,” *American Journal of Philology* 115.2 (1994): 157-173.

<sup>34</sup> Among the critics who discuss this crux, see Thomas van Nortwick, *The Unknown Odysseus : Alternate Worlds in Homer’s Odyssey* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2010); and Pietro Pucci, *Odysseus Polytropos* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996.)

moment that all signs point to the imminent return of her husband (Book 21); and through Book 23, in which the recognition of husband and wife is protracted by Penelope's continuing hesitations in acknowledging that the man before her is Odysseus.<sup>35</sup> The return to the rootedness of the famous marital bed, which is grafted into the trunk of a tree, does not bring us to a happy ending. Book 24 stages a different return: the return of the suitors in the form of ghosts who haunt the living, looking for proper burial rites and arousing in their living relatives the demand for vengeance. It requires a *deus ex machina*, in the end, to restore order—an order we never see in the epic itself. In its many delays and reroutings away from the root, the *Odyssey* offers ample evidence of what Glissant discusses under the concept of Relation and non-filiation, although the tonalities in Homer's poem are more pessimistic than those we find in the work of the Caribbean writer.

We may turn to the meaning of the word *nostos* itself to see how it questions rather than resolves homecoming. The concentric character of identity for which Glissant argues with respect to Mediterranean space is here significantly contradicted. The postponements of the epic accumulate to the point of rendering impossible a return home, to one's "proper" self. Just after the visit to Aeolus in Book 10, Ithaca is in view, but Odysseus' crew, in opening the bag that the god gave him, unleashes the winds, and they are once more blown back to sea. The Indo-European *\*nes*, from which the Greek noun *nostos* comes (the verb *nosteō* means "to return"), has the general sense of "going" or "coming" (*neomai* means "to go through"), of "making one's way from one point to another," without a guarantee of success. This is precisely what the precarious journeys of Odysseus involve. In some cases, *nostos* has another ambiguity: it points to one who "passes from darkness into light" (*de l'obscur à l'éclat*), who survives the risk of death, which implies a passage through the abyss of the sea.<sup>36</sup> This dangerous chasm swallows all of Odysseus' companions, whose ships are wrecked, leaving the hero in the ambiguous position of being the sole miraculous survivor. Return is thus a form of being saved from near annihilation by sea, a chasm that entails a *katabasis*, like the one by land into Hades. In the Greek imaginary, the sea typically represents this disturbing duality, that of being a bridge—a "*pont*" (French) (*pontos*, Greek)—a passage between bodies of land, which could be

---

<sup>35</sup> For a fuller discussion of Penelope's delayed recognition, see Michelle Zerba, *Doubt and Skepticism in Antiquity and the Renaissance* (New York : Cambridge University Press, 2012), 85-110. In his poem, "Penelope's Despair" (1971), Yannis Ritsos shows Penelope to be disappointed in the return of her husband.

<sup>36</sup> For a discussion of the complexity of the term *nostos*, see Anna Bonifazi, "Inquiring into *Nostos* and Its Cognates," *American Journal of Philology* 130.4 (2009): 481-510; and Douglas Frame, *The Myth of Return in Early Greek Epic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).

fatal. Odysseus, the reluctant and cursed traveler, submits himself to the near certain death implied by the vengeance of Poseidon, and in the process does not emerge unscathed.

Thus the *Odyssey* is not a tale of homecoming that brings about a return to the One. It fluctuates in its centripetal and centrifugal movements, implicating the varied *nostoi* of the other Greek heroes of the Trojan War who have their own complicated journeys. The *Odyssey* is the only complete *nostos* tale that has come down to us in poetic form, but Greek tragedy gives us some idea of what other tales might have looked like: Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* reveals the ambiguity of the Mycenaean general's relationship to Cassandra and his death at the hands of his own wife and her lover, immediately upon returning home; Euripides' *Helen* presents us with a Menelaus who wanders seven years before landing on the island of Pharos, where he finds his wife, who never went to Troy, but whose divinely crafted double did, a plot twist that undermines the entire Homeric story of the expedition. Within the *Odyssey*, Odysseus tells four Cretan tales, including one to Penelope, and the Homeric narrator describes his words as "lies resembling the truth" (ψεύδεια . . . ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα, 19.203). In addition to these, one can point to other falsehoods, including the one he tells to Laertes in Book 24 after the threat of harm from the suitors has passed. These tales reveal admirable narrative skills, but they also have a pathological dimension, and the amount of commentary they have generated is a strong indicator that they constitute zones of opacity, which pull against, rather than in the direction of, *nostos*.<sup>37</sup>

In fact, Odysseus' attempt to reclaim his home is paradoxically bound up with his status as a guest within it. Violations of *xenia* continue, making him a both a stranger and a wanderer within his *oikos*. The multiple recognition scenes emphasize this, first with Telemachus his son (Book 16); then with Argos the dog (Book 17); then with Eurycleia the nurse (Book 19); then with Eumaeus and Philoitios, his herdsmen (Book 21); and finally with Penelope and Laertes (Book 24), who are ironically closest to him, but are the last to know.<sup>38</sup> While there is an element of suspense in the slow unfolding of these scenes, they also participate in a more general pattern within the narrative of concealing while revealing. *Nostos* is not a resolution but an ongoing set of challenges that defer and complicate identity. How can one accept the blood bath of the suitors in the home, especially when the townspeople of Ithaca arise in revolt against a criminal

---

<sup>37</sup> On truth and lying in Homer and archaic Greek literature, see Carol Dougherty, *The Raft of Odysseus: The Ethnographic Imagination of Homer's Odyssey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 38-78; and Louise Pratt, *Lying and Poetry from Homer to Pindar* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 1-98.

<sup>38</sup> See Sheila Murnaghan, *Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987) on the complexity of recognition scenes in the *Odyssey* and their implication in *xenia* and *mētis*. On the structure and function of recognition scenes, see Peter Gainsford, "Formal Analysis of Recognition Scenes in the *Odyssey*," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 123 (2003): 41-59.

king, while the ghosts of the dead hover in the city streets? What does one make of the clustering of Iliadic similes around Odysseus at a hearth that has become a battlefield? Why does the hero who is characterized as *polytropos* and *polymētis* become *ptoliporthos*—sacker of cities—as he lets arrows fly from his bow in the megaron?<sup>39</sup> This is not to mention the dilemma posed by the Second Nekyia in Book 24.<sup>40</sup> Or the requirement of the never pacified Poseidon, prophesized by Teiresias in Hades, that after Odysseus' arrival on Ithaca, he must travel once again, this time inland until he reaches a people who know nothing of the sea, and someone he meets will mistake the oar he is carrying for a winnowing fan, at which point Odysseus must stop and plant the thing in the earth, offering a sacrifice to Poseidon.<sup>41</sup> Why does Homer use this traditional story of the Sailor and the Oar, when the consequence of the inland journey, according to tradition, is that the seafarer resettles inland, the very opposite of what Teiresias says Odysseus will do, which is return to Ithaca and die peacefully? To sum up, the *Odyssey* does not move toward a unity that resolves the disturbances, which accumulate without end in its narrative. The center of the circle is never reached, and characters revolve around as they would around a dream that always moves out of reach.

*The Mediterranean-Caribbean Relation and the Possibility of Epic*

It is sufficiently clear how Glissant means to reinvest the role of epic and the possibilities for the Caribbean in founding its own epic, given the ways he tends to reduce the inventiveness of the Mediterranean, including the richness of Homer, in the name of the One. One wonders, on the basis of what he says, what Relation remains possible between the Caribbean and the Mediterranean? In the discussion that follows, we will examine this question, with reference to the poetry of Derek Walcott, whose view of the two seas is considerably different.

It is possible to turn to writing and orality for some ideas. If writing had, in early times, the function of preserving memory for the peoples of the Mediterranean, the hierarchy that Glissant thinks it imposed over time—most notably, the power it left to the conquerors to write History to their advantage—had a detrimental effect on oral cultures. For those dominated, writing perpetuated a state of exclusion from speech. This, says Glissant, is incompatible with archipelagic thought, which is “a non-systematic thought, inductive and interested in exploring the unpredictable in the world-totality, just as it grants writing to orality and orality to writing”

---

<sup>39</sup> See Bakker, *The Meaning of Meat*, 150-156.

<sup>40</sup> On this topic, see Charles Segal, *Singers, Heroes, and Gods in the Odyssey* (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1994), 108-109.

<sup>41</sup> See Christos Tsagalis, *The Oral Palimpsest : Exploring Intertextuality in the Homeric Epics. Hellenic Studies Series 29* (Washington, D.C. : Center for Hellenic Studies, 2008), Chapter 4.

(“*pensée non systématique, inductive, explorant l'imprévu de la totalité-monde et accordant l'écriture à l'oralité and l'oralité à l'écriture,*” IPD, 34).

To be immersed in this totality is to give a voice to cultures one has silenced, to overcome the closure that continues to reduce them to silence. Because orality today can easily be preserved or transmitted, it enables this transgressive reclamation, which is at the heart “of all theory of passage (from the Same to the Other, from writing to the oral.”). It comes to generate the “historiality”<sup>42</sup> of things forgotten, against the repetition of the Same. In this sense, it is, to use a Glissantian neologism, “unstoppable” (“*inarrêtable,*” PR, 86):

Another passage is taking place today against which we can do nothing. This is the passage from the written to the oral. I would not be far from believing that the written is the universalizing trace of the Same, whereas the oral would be the organized movement of the Other.

*Un autre passage a lieu aujourd'hui contre lequel nous ne pouvons rien. C'est le passage de l'écrit à l'oral. Je ne serai pas loin de croire que l'écrit est la trace universalisante du Même, là où l'oral serait le geste organisé du Divers. (DA, 330-331)*

Orality, resuming its rights, guarantees an expressive diversity. It has its own epic song whose lyricism is a depository of the soul of a people. This feature was no less essential to the movement of Homeric poetry. The *Iliad*, to take it by itself for a moment, is first of all an oral poem: one that bards, who improvised and sung to the accompaniment of the lyre, diffused from town to town, in a manner similar to the troubadours of the Middle Ages. According to Aristotle,<sup>43</sup> there were many epics that disappeared, and Homer, in the view of some critics, was not a living poet, but the name given to several poems, which were later compiled into the two epics that have come down to us under his name. Thus, the fact is that from the time they were committed to writing in the eighth century BCE, these two epics gradually stopped changing and being transformed, and it is only in the final state they reached probably in the sixth century BCE that the Greeks continued to refer to them for five centuries, and after them,

---

<sup>42</sup> Similarly for Heidegger, *Being and Time*, § 75, history must be addressed from the perspective of the questions of the historiality of *Dasein*: the historial is what arises from history (*Geschichte*), as it is tested by deployment, what is sent to us or is destined for us since the origin and conditions us for our own knowledge. History, for its part, in the sense of historical science, is oriented chiefly toward objectivation and the account of past facts, long reconstituted by the conquerors according to their own script.

<sup>43</sup> *Poetics*, 1448e: “We cannot mention any poet of this type [epic] by a pre-Homeric poet, though doubtless many composed them ...”

the Romans, although, while they went on reading, emulating, and adapting Homer, the text remained, to a certain extent, a living witness.<sup>44</sup>

Thus the *Iliad* formed less a “legitimation” than a “consolidation,” we might say, of the diverse spirit of a multi-faced people that possessed neither a unique nation nor a unique language. The Homeric epics bear traces of this intermixing: several dialects are spoken in them where they appear in predominantly Ionian and Aeolian forms; many city-states are represented in them, which reveal the highly diverse configuration of a people speaking languages that are close, but not identical.<sup>45</sup> One might refer, in this vein, to *métissage*, and perhaps to *créolisation*, since the people brought to life share little in common except this expedition against the eastern city of Troy, where Aeolian Greek is spoken. Here one does not find the expression of a “national” sentiment, but rather of a multi-ethnic, multilingual one, a space of Relation. This is quite different from *The Song of Roland*, which, despite the defeat of Roland at Roncevaux, celebrates little more, in the end, than the grandeur of the sovereign, Charlemagne, and the Christian faith. For its part, the *Iliad* celebrates not a state, but a diverse collective.

This is what interests Glissant in epic speech—not the narrative of war, but the efforts of a people to bring into existence its beliefs, its language, its imaginary. If the genre seems in our times anachronistic—the last modern epics might be Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Pound’s *Cantos*, Malraux’s *Man’s Hope*, and Walcott’s *Omeros*—it restores, in the diversity of its orality, the figuration of a totality, which is never a universality. As long as it remains living, dynamic, or in a condition of being actively rewritten, this speech manifests its characteristic traits, its “archipeleity,” in the face of a norm. One is surprised, nevertheless, that Glissant did not really compose a long epic of the Caribbean. His poem, *Le Quatrième Siècle* (1964), certainly evokes the slow transformation of the Antilles, from 1635 through the ordeal of slavery, and attempts to reappropriate by other genealogies a past hidden by Eurocentric historiography. The novel invents other histories, scattered ones, rather than founding a new one. *Sartorius* (1999) traces the history of the Batoutos, a people that emerged from central Africa, which owes its survival to its invisibility, as it were, before the persecutions of the Middle Passage. This “novel” of digenesis<sup>46</sup> carefully alternates between mythic tales and contemporaneous interventions, thus

---

<sup>44</sup> Nagy, “Homeric Poetry and the Problems of Multiformality.”

<sup>45</sup> On Greek dialects leading up to the time of Homer and instrumental in shaping epic language, see Gregory Nagy, “Observations on Greek Dialects in the Late Second Millennium BCE,” [http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hinc.essay:Nagy.Observations\\_on\\_Greek\\_Dialects.2011](http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hinc.essay:Nagy.Observations_on_Greek_Dialects.2011); also, Stephen Colvin, “Greek Dialects in the Archaic and Classical Ages,” in *A Companion to the Ancient Greek Language*, ed. Egbert Bakker (Hoboken : Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 200-212.

<sup>46</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Africultures* 22 (1999): 70. “J’explique ce que je nomme digenèse : c’est une origine qui n’est pas essentialiste. Elle ne vous donne pas le droit de propriété sur votre terre ou sur celle des autres. Les

establishing a distance from the epic material—as if the invisible earth rendered improbable the anchorage of epic or the wandering voice lost the identity of a people it had a mission to represent, or even refused it in a radical defiance of all identity. With the two other Antillean epics, it is a different matter. In Aimé Césaire’s *Journey of a Return to the Native Land*, Martinique remains the crucible of a legitimate appropriation, through which the poet measures a double horizon: he begins the poem on the Dalmatian coast while gazing at the island of Martinska and finding it resonates with a lost African identity.<sup>47</sup> In *Omeros*, far from dispelling the supposed demons of Homeric epic, Walcott both integrates and displaces them in order to found, not a new empire, but a relation to poverty and daily hardship. From a space of historical possibility, of which epic is the bearer, Glissant appears still to be waiting to speak, as he says in *Black Salt* (*Sel noir*)

The storyteller weighs his words unmeasured in the bright burst. He will sing, in his very solitude, of the earth, those who endure it. He offers what he says not to those it delights, whom it elates; but to bodies burned by time: thickets, peoples under duress, naked villages, the crowd on the shore. [...] History waiting. (*Black Salt*, “The First Day”)

*Le conteur mesure parole dans l'éclat démesurée. Il va, par solitude même, chanter la terre, ceux qui la souffrent. Il n'offre la parole à tels qui s'en enchantent, s'y exaltent ; mais aux corps brûlés par le temps : halliers, peuples contraints, villages nus, multitude du rivage. [...] L'Histoire, qui attend. (Sel noir, “Le Premier Jour”)*

The reason for this gap that does not get filled is the erasure of Africa as a native land to which one may return. Africa continues to be the land of the inaccessible origin because it has been devastated in the imagination, and the abyss of the Atlantic constitutes an unfathomable distance between it and the Caribbean. The voice in the poem “Africa” speaks of this absence:

“It is Africa, and it is not. For me it was a silent land. Listen. Everyone is dancing, in the just ways of his body and his voice, in honor of the eternal fire.” (*Black Salt*, “Africa”)

*C'est l'Afrique, et ce ne l'est pas. Elle me fut terre silencieuse. Écoutez. Chacun danse, dans la justice de son corps et de sa voix, en l'honneur de l'éternel feu. (Sel noir, “Afrique”)*

---

généses donnent le droit de conquérir. Quand on pense que votre terre vous a été donnée par Dieu, on pense automatiquement avoir le droit d'aller conquérir la terre de l'Autre.”

<sup>47</sup> Romuald Fonkoua, *Aimé Césaire* (Paris : Perrin, 2010), 56-60.

The fire that crackles also recreates the sacred (“in honor of the eternal fire,” “*en honneur de l'éternel feu*”), but it does not build anything else, since it devours in its flames the absence that never ceases to waste away. Perhaps we find here the difficulty that Glissant has in writing epic, if not in theorizing about it: orality fragments and falls away, in the process reproducing everywhere its loss, without coming to rest upon a foundation.

If there is a Caribbean “legitimacy,” its meaning for Glissant ought not be globalizing, nor should it come from conquest.<sup>48</sup> Caribbean unity remains in his view moving and open, a “submarine unity,” he says, citing the Barbadian historian Edward Kamau Braithwaite (“unity is submarine”).<sup>49</sup> The Middle Passage is here the key image, and with it the deportation of tortured Africans, weighed down by ball and chain and thrown into the sea:

It is in this way that we have learned, not Transcendence or the universal sublime. It took us awhile to know that. We are the roots of Relation, of submarine roots. (*DA*, 331).

Caribbean transversality is opposed to any form of transcendence. Its profundity is trans-oceanic, and it conveys an expanse of scale. It emanates from itself rather than being dependent on something else. Poetry alone allows access to its death, its abyss, and to the idea of death that underlies it. In transversality, we have the idea of a *katabasis* or descent that partially and fictively allows a return to the Lost:

The conjunctions of our histories [...] are made subterraneously. The profundity was not only the abyss of a neurosis but above all the space of multiple re-routings.

*Les conjunctions de nos histoires [...] se sont faites souterrainement. La profondeur n'était pas le seul abysse d'une névrose mais avant tout le lieu de cheminements multipliés.* (*DA*, 330)

But has this transversality not been characteristic of the Mediterranean, too, and does it not continue to be? With respect to the literary works that have survived and offered a partial idea of its history and its people, archaeology, since Heinrich Schliemann, has disrupted the arrested image of the ancient world and revealed other peoples, other histories, a multitudinous depth, both submarine and subterranean, that is considerably more complex than the unity of a marble

---

<sup>48</sup> It is worth noting that the Trojan War was not a war of “conquest.” It was a war among Greeks who sought not so much to guarantee filiation, but to defend the conjugal bond, which was an expression of Menelaus’ love for Helen—Menelaus who does not lead the expedition.

<sup>49</sup> *Discours antillais*, 330.

façade. This expanse of time, over millenia, should not be denied because of the relative smallness of the geographical space.

Though it is not a chasm as vast as that of the trans-oceanic Middle Passage, the Mediterranean was an “abyss” too—the word is Greek, *abyssos*—a deep, an *abîme*, where numerous horrors occurred and continue to occur. The Mediterranean has seen innumerable wars and deportations of prisoners who were made slaves. This is where, by sea, the Carthaginians in 241 BCE were reduced to nothing in naval battles with the Romans, and where, by land, in 146 BCE their city was razed to the ground by Scipio Aemilianus. This effectively brought to an end a brilliant culture, of which the destruction of the library at Carthage remains emblematic, but for one single volume, which, at the order of the Roman Senate, was spared—a treatise on agronomy by Magon that has been used for centuries a valuable documentary resource. There were also personal dramas that submarine searches have revealed. The exile of Ovid is an example of a transversality endured: torn from his life in Rome and conveyed to an outpost of Rome in Moesia, Ovid became familiar with a mixed population, comprised of Sarmatians, Getae, Dacians, and Besses, and over time, slowly lost his refined Latin. He spoke Getan and Sarmatian, and wrote a collection of works in the language of the Getae. His Roman “universality” gave way to fraternizing with the “barbarians” and developing a fellowship with people who previously bothered him.

That is not to mention people from every conceivable origin who were made to go to Rome or elsewhere, the majority of whom never asked for a thing, but were forcibly displaced, mixed, worn down, and made to live together involuntarily. All of them ended up in the same oblivion of History: we are ignorant of their ways of life, their languages, and the labor they were compelled to do. Without a doubt, they too creolized, in the sense that they created a way of speaking derived from rudimentary Latin whose traces may be found on the walls of Pompey. What should we say about the actual abyss of the Mediterranean today, formed by the many migrants who, at peril of their lives, embark upon the sea to find a way of life they presume to be better and who are pushed back or temporarily welcomed in precarious camps? Transversality is inscribed in Mediterranean *archipélagie*, in the passage it creates “in the middle of lands” (*media terra*), just as much as it is in Caribbean space.

To found the “historiality” of the peoples of the Caribbean who were effaced, is to recover the epic breath of orality and to use it in creating a story that can be told over time for those who suffered the Middle Passage and with it, an oral tradition:

Abandon the cry, forge the word. This does not mean renouncing the imaginary or subterranean forces, but arming for a new duration, anchored in the emergence of peoples.

*Quitter le cri, forger la parole. Ce n'est pas renoncer à l'imaginaire ni aux puissances souterraines, c'est armer une durée nouvelle, ancrée aux émergences des peuples. (DA, 28)*

To weaken the cry is to create it in a story that recounts this cry, that traces the existence of a community excluded from History. Can a collective exist without a tale that founds it as the premise of its own human journey? In the words of Jean-Pol Madou:

A shadow carried by destiny on the stammering of history, epic opens a world, establishes a language at the heart of which a national community gathers, founds a site, which must be recognized as historical. In effect, epic responds to the emergence of a national community, which, in delimiting a territory, finds there its own identity and the space of its destiny, to a state of a language still carrying the marks of its birth, to the genesis of a relationship with the Other, which, surging on the horizon, threatens the community just barely gathered.

*Ombre portée du destin sur l'histoire balbutiante, l'épos ouvre un monde, institue une langue au sein de laquelle se rassemble une communauté nationale, fonde un site qu'il faudrait qualifier d'historial. En effet, l'épopée répond à l'émergence d'une communauté nationale qui, se délimitant un territoire, y découvre son identité et l'espace de son destin, à un état de langue portant encore les marques de sa naissance, à la genèse d'un rapport à l'Autre qui, surgissant à l'horizon, menace la communauté à peine rassemblée.<sup>50</sup> (Madou 2005, 196)*

Epic provides an echo of buried historicity and enables it to found itself. This was the case of the *Iliad*, which bonded the cities from one end to the other of the Aegean Sea, without giving a particular right to one of them to conquer Troy and to establish its own domination. The encounter of diffuse and plurivocal “hellenisms” in a disseminated space was enough to give a historicity to it and to the questions it posed. It is different in the *chanson de geste* where Roland renders sacred, by his spilled blood, the right to a territory and the magnificence of the Holy Roman Empire of Charlemagne. If most epics seem incomplete—in the *Iliad* the funeral pyre consumes Hector; in the *Song of Roland* the angel Gabriel reminds the emperor that his task remains to be done; in *Man's Hope* the revolution does not reverse Francoism—it is

---

<sup>50</sup> Jean-Pol Madou, “L'Un et le Divers : comment repenser le lyrique, l'épique, le tragique, le politique,” in *Poétiques d'Édouard Glissant*, ed. Jacques Chevrier (PUPS, 2005), 196.

because their utterance opens to a future whose reach cannot be grasped and whose potentiality should not be foreclosed since it is yet to be written. Such are the vestiges that a Caribbean epic must recover all at once:

[...] these literatures do not have the time to develop harmoniously from the collective lyricism of Homer to the mordant scrutiny of Beckett. They must include all at once struggle, aggressiveness, belonging, lucidity, distrust of self, absolute love, contour of the landscapes, emptiness of the cities, surpassings, and confrontations. That is what I call our irruption into modernity.

*C'est que [nos] littératures n'ont pas le temps d'évoluer harmonieusement, du lyrisme collectif d'Homère aux dissections rèches de Beckett. Il leur faut tout assumer tout d'un coup, le combat, le militantisme, l'enracinement, la lucidité, la méfiance envers soi, l'absolu d'amour, la forme des paysages, le nu des villes, les dépassements et les entêtements. C'est ce que j'appelle notre irruption dans la modernité. (DA, p. 330)*

The histories of the Middle Passage push the peoples of the Caribbean into an unbelievable condensation of stories that testify to their presence in the world. For them, it is a matter of inferring a new worldliness of human exchanges against, for example, a single form of thought and the globalization of economic domination.

But in the case of Glissant, polymorphic writer that he is, what is the material realization of this epic writing? *Quatrième Siècle* and *Sartorius*, two novels of the human journey, pass as epics only with difficulty, even in the modern sense of the word. *India* and *Black Salt*, despite their obvious orientation, remain poems whose brevity reduces epic amplitude. Is there, in the work of Glissant, a kind of aporia, a felt difficulty in tracing his way between the “concentric” poetics of the Mediterranean of the past and the “diffracted” song of the Caribbean? His wish, in any case, to hand down an epic is not realized in the way it is in the work of Walcott who avoids a similar aporia. For him, Mediterranean culture is not concentrated around the One and ossified. It is reborn from the ashes in a productive way: it is a generative force, highly adaptable, and open to improvisation, as the virtuosity of *Omeros* reveals.<sup>51</sup> The Mediterranean in Walcott remains in conversation with the Caribbean, in relation, and the poet does not set in motion, with his title, a dichotomy between the two seas. He embraces them as sites crossed by

---

<sup>51</sup> Jean-Pol Madou, *Errance et épopée : Glissant Segalen Walcott* (Paris: Caen, 2016), 159: “*Toute l'épopée de Walcott dramatise les rapports de la littérature occidentale et de la culture créole et plus profondément ceux de l'Art et de l'Histoire, de l'Art et de la Nature.*”

castaways, rootless travelers, and metics, the latter a Greek word signifying a foreign resident of Athens who lacked the rights of citizens.<sup>52</sup> Glissant, by contrast, distances the seas from each other. Similarly, for Walcott, “*antillanité*” is founded upon the polyvalence of Caribbean identities, a creolization, which takes in all poetics, including those of Europe and the Mediterranean. The same holds true of Saint-John Perse whom Walcott sees as a point of encounter between anglophone and francophone poetry, the poet who, while renouncing a creole particularism, makes possible the emergence of a creole epic.<sup>53</sup> In spite of his great admiration for Perse, Glissant classifies him among the deserters of Antillean onticity who prefers to rally around universality:

The renunciation by Saint-John Perse of Antillean history is the consequence of his having obliterated creole intermixing in his work ... I am not speaking only of the literary borrowings in *Praises*, for which he is careful not to give the creole reference; [...] Saint-John Perse took no care to indicate his [poetic] sources, and perhaps he had no awareness of them. It is not from a methodological rejection [that they are missing], but from a will to articulate a total speech.

*Le renoncement de Saint-John Perse à l'histoire antillaise fait qu'il a oblitéré dans son œuvre le métissage créole... Je ne parle pas seulement des transferts littéraires dans Éloges dont il s'est bien gardé de donner la référence créole ; [...] Saint-John Perse n'a aucun souci de marquer ses sources [poétiques] et peut-être qu'il n'en a en lui-même aucune conscience. Ce n'est pas par rejet méthodologique, c'est par volonté de prononcer une parole totale.*<sup>54</sup>

Thus Perse, a *béké* property owner, a conservative white man, a mythomaniacal biographer remains, in Glissant's eyes, a highly indirect creole storyteller despite himself, by way of reminiscences of childhood, who nonetheless surrendered to his passion for the Mediterranean. But this passion in Perse, which others identify with his adoption of the Pindaric ode,<sup>55</sup> does it not serve to indicate the power of lyricism in putting diversity in relation, without containing it in a preconceived totality? For Walcott, Perse's speech dispossesses the author from his intentionality; it bypasses itself, because it is an authentic poetry for registering an imaginary that bears an Antillean consciousness. The poet from Saint Lucia never tired of showing what

<sup>52</sup> For a discussion, see Charles Pollard, *New World Modernisms : T.S. Eliot, Derek Walcott, and Kamau Braithwaite* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 42-43.

<sup>53</sup> Kathleen Gyssels, *Passes et impasses dans le comparatisme postcolonial caribéen : Cinq traverses* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010), 294-349.

<sup>54</sup> Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation chez Segalen et Saint-John Perse*, Conférence à la Fondation Perse, [Fondationsaintjohnperse.fr/Souffle/Souffle\\_2\\_Glissant.pdf](http://Fondationsaintjohnperse.fr/Souffle/Souffle_2_Glissant.pdf). The quotation is cited by Madou 2016, 185.

<sup>55</sup> See Henriette Levillain, *Le rituel poétique de Saint-John Perse* (Paris : Gallimard, 1977).

connects Perse's *Éloges* (*Praises*, 1911) to his later work, which even in the epic *Anabase* (*Anabasis*, 1924) opens the way broadly to Caribbeanness (1924).

A boy with weak eyes skims a flat stone across the flat water of an Aegean inlet, and that ordinary action with the scything elbow contains the skipping lines of the Iliad and the Odyssey, [...] and another [child] hears the rustling march of cabbage palms in a Caribbean sunrise, and from that sound, with its fragments of tribal myth, the compact expedition of Perse's epic is launched, centuries and archipelagos apart.

*Le jeune garçon à la vue basse fait ricocher un galet plat sur les eaux lisses de la mer Égée, et le mouvement banal de ses bras arrondis ramasse en une seule gerbe les vers bondissants de l'Iliade et de l'Odyssée, [...] un autre [enfant] encore entend le froissement rythmé des choux palmistes au lever du soleil aux Antilles, et c'est de ce son, des fragments du mythe tribal qu'il contient, que va naître la course pressée de l'épopée de Perse, à des siècles, à des archipels de distances. (Café Martinique, 107)*

For Glissant, then, Perse remains deeply a poet of Frenchness who sets out for the conquest of the universal, which launches him toward the infinity of possible lands, as if he were still colonizing the world, in the act of using the Verb to transcend.

The lack of any circle summing up the night around him is the first distinction between Saint-John Perse and the Antillean storyteller. There are no torches surrounding his words; there is only a hand stretched toward the horizon that rises up as ocean swells or high plateaus. (*PR*, 39)

*Ce qui distingue Saint-John Perse du conteur antillais, d'abord : qu'il n'y a pas autour de lui un cercle qui résume la nuit. Il n'y a pas de flambeaux à l'entour de cette parole, seulement la main tendue vers l'horizon, houle ou haut plateau. (PR, 51)*

The speech of Perse is not shrouded by night, it does not have the expected density that the Middle Pass has inscribed in the deportation of Africans, it does not have nocturnal ears encouraging him to speak, but it listens to itself, it burns for its own recognition. For Glissant, the difficulty of composing a long Caribbean epic is related to the absence at the center, to its loss of a home far away, to its rejection of the only shores of being it has, to its lack of reference to any kind of encompassing ontology. But this reversal often appears nostalgic for a being it seeks, and from its own loss, it extracts a critique of those poetics that dream of their encounter with new worlds. We might question whether the poetry of Perse showcases, through its lyrical luxury, a colonizing overview of places faraway, or a wonder inherent in the renewal of relation and its beauty. Arguably, such relation is what has captivated audiences of Homeric poetry

across the ages. It is what has motivated such modern Mediterranean poets as C.P. Cavafy, Odysseas Elytis, and Yannis Ritsos to converge in a scattered identity that does not obey the rule of the One.<sup>56</sup> The aporetic paradox of Glissant, by contrast with Walcott and others, is to have carried out extensively a philosophical dichotomizing of the Same and the Multiple, at the risk of not achieving the epic he desired, and of drying up his creative sources after 1993, the date of his last collection, *Les grands Chaos*.

In the dialectic he establishes between the Mediterranean and the Caribbean, Glissant appears as a binary thinker inclined toward dichotomies. In treating the Mediterranean as the founding space of ancient Europe, of its colonizing fantasies, and of its universalizing concepts, he seeks to delimit clearly a Caribbean particularity—who its victim was and who must be emancipated from it by thinking in the mode of a Relation that is both open and equal to all. This dialectic condemns Mediterranean thought, which, in its root, sought domination over other people.

As we have demonstrated, such a view is schematic and reductive. It depends upon an oversimplified understanding of the Mediterranean past, which places in the foreground the philosophies of the One, including those of Heraclitus and Parmenides, and passes silently over the considerably more complex case of Homer. It makes this oversimplified image into a synecdoche for the entire Mediterranean. In the same way, it neglects contemporary Europe, notably, its deconstruction of metaphysics, and the way its poets, from the end of the nineteenth century, have taken into account the relativism of all unifying thought (of all thought that is solely philosophical and rational). The impression left by Glissant remains political, as if he wanted to credit the Caribbean alone for having brought about this reversal, or for having borne it ontologically within itself.

In the end, one wonders what Relation gains in such a dialectic. By radically severing itself from a myth of origin, can Glissant's Caribbean really yield the possibility of a productive exchange? Walcott, as we have seen, prefers a reinvestment in atavistic cultures, a mixture of diffracted Caribbeans, a bypassing of old oppositions, in defining a culture of globalization. Without a connection to a reevaluated mythical home, Relation risks a globalization based on interchangeability.

Franck Collin, University of the Antilles  
Michelle Zerba, Louisiana State University

---

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, these poems by Cavafy: "In the Town of Osroene," "The Poseidonians," "Ithaca," and "The City."