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Obituary

Bon voyage, Monsieur Glissant!

“Only the road knows the secret.”

– The Ripening

Now where has he gone, the ripe old man who, once, as a child, descending the rounded swell of green hills, ventured down to the sea and out to the world, taking with him the voice of the wind, the roar of the sea and the blood of the land?

Where is the cry transformed (once “shatter of glass in the voice”) (“Un champ d’îles” in *Les Indes*, 9)¹, now that his lips are closed, marking the boundary of secrets not to be told?

From Day One, he had thought deeply about the “cry”, about how to metamorphose the agony of history, in the body, in the land, in the world. As a poet, he urged that our cry be: not sterile complaint, not a blockage at the auction block, uttered with the trash of sugarcane in our throats, but “a voice in harmony with the rhythm of the world”; a voice self-freed from the restrictions of the envelope of the individual skin, “welcoming the world through the pores”, “exiting the abyss alive” whilst intoning a song (*Le Discours Antillais*, 19). This new birth into the New World of *Our America*, portended, maybe, so many other strivings (of humans beings edifying, with dreams and sweat, and notwithstanding fears, a world of inclusion and fraternity).

There have been so many births; so many mornings. On the first day – for him, for his island – (was it 1788, the year of a great uprising of the enslaved in Martinique, underscored in his novel, *Le Quatrième Siècle* as a kind of mythic origin, or was it 1928, the year of his birth?), he went forth. He went with great haste. Like one cast without preparation into an abrupt encounter with the bewildering, chaotic, disparate oppositions of modernity; a violent entry into history summed up in the statement: “We were not born. We were shipped.” It evokes the economic and psychic dimensions of “unspeakable suffering” and tenacious hope, as well as the combativeness of “the half of the world emerging from the night” of “non-history” and “separation”. It foregrounds violent expulsion and a mission almost impossible: the summons to produce instantly, in the midst of gross inequities and trauma, states, literatures, knowledges that other civilizations had centuries or even millennia to do.

With the bounce of a child, the vigour of youth, the frenzy of a lover, he went; growing along the path, going down from the hills, from *the cathedral of the night*, courageous and afraid, testing with his feet the cut of the stone, the suck of humus and the lay of the land. Surveying, knowing, sounding... Meanwhile, in the hills, the charcoal pits nursed their smothered fires, and the source wound its way to the sea.

And when, over days and years of descent, his step slowed and his thought deepened, there was still the flame of love and possession in his eyes, from near or far. He had found in the collective heart of the island (Martinique, Guadeloupe, Haiti, Jamaica... for his discourse was Antillean, and Pan-American, and universal) a centre in the self that was not self-centredness, but new balance; new middle-strength. In the eye of the hurricane, he perceived a prophecy and a telescope looking out into the world.

Large as life, he embraced it. Knew it intimately, from the inside out; linked hands with the hidden life of the world and welcomed diversity. *Relation!*, he said, and *Co-naissance!* These were among the first mantras coined by the philosopher and poet, set forth in his *L'Intention Poétique*. But this was yet to come.

He went, stepping across the sea from whence he had come originally, a long time ago. Coming and going, he was a man of journeys, born of the sea and the ship and the belly of the land; he brought the island to the world and the world to the island. He challenged, on the way, during his journey, our insularities, great and small, urging: *Relation!* He defied our ivory towers by his call to knowledge as togetherness, as reciprocity, as fertile meetings of minds and spirits and of the unknown. *Co-naissance*: knowing is being born together (again) he said.

His *Relation* was neither levelling nor a blithe illusion of easy synthesis, but an encounter and union of individuals on intersecting journeys, in the exploration of their spaces and times, and of themselves, of their loves, of their land and their world. This he will evoke metaphorically in *The Ripening* (104) as:

Four journeys. Four directions.

To the east, Thael and Garin going down the river, but they are in search of the sea.

To the north, Valérie, drawn to the mountains; Pablo is keeping an eye on her (he is not sure why).

To the south, Margarita and Gilles question each other.

Four furrows in the surrounding confusion. [...] The four points of the compass, bristling with energy, suddenly exploding into life. Four separate movements, but unleashed from a single subterranean source [...].

What was his name? Glissant? Senglis? His true-true name, he knew, was lost never to be recovered: lost to mockery; lost at sea, lost among the bones scattered on the floor of the Atlantic like a submerged archipelago of cries. He frowned at such uncertainty; bristled with derision, then broke into the miracle of a smile: a man by any name is still a man if he dares to rise. And speak. And name himself.

What child was this? He spoke before anyone knew, almost from the beginning, a discourse to the Ancestor Ocean, but initially only when alone, for his time had not yet come to be heard and sent on errands and recognized as a helpful lad. And, during his first secret colloquia, the wind was constantly blowing (now calling, now sougning) and the seas crashing and moaning and laughing, too, maybe, with “waves like open doors” (“Le Livre des offrandes” in *Les Indes*, 50).

But first the journey within, that so many did not make, and died shipwrecked on dry land.

The child walks through the green sea of the cane fields. A place of memory: there is so much buried there, too; so much besides sweetness, but sweetness too, in the furtive union of separated lovers. Meanwhile, several furrows down, a woman is raped; and further along the blood of man, cruelly whipped, seeps into the soil. Not far off (this is a small Caribbean island), a woman gives birth on this same native earth. This: an erased page of the story of the islands, and of the mainland. A page this child must write and write again, in various ways (in novels like *La Lézarde (The Ripening)*, *Le Quatrième Siècle (The Fourth Century)* or in essays such as *Le Discours Antillais (The Antillean Discourse)* or *L'Intention Poétique (The Poetic Intention)*, *Philosophie de la Relation (Philosophy of Relation)*), giving voice to the noises in the blood and inventing a pathway in the very midst of *opacity* and *chaos*. Until we know. Until we all know, even those things we had forgotten.

A man now, but growing still, he asked us and himself many questions. Questions about our lost names, the naming of our lands, questions about History and the Ancestors, about what could be recovered and what had to be reinvented. He measured and named things. He entered and prospected, from within the buried selves of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and Slavery in the Americas, the fire of the land, the burn of the wounds and the possibility of healing and links, asking rhetorically:

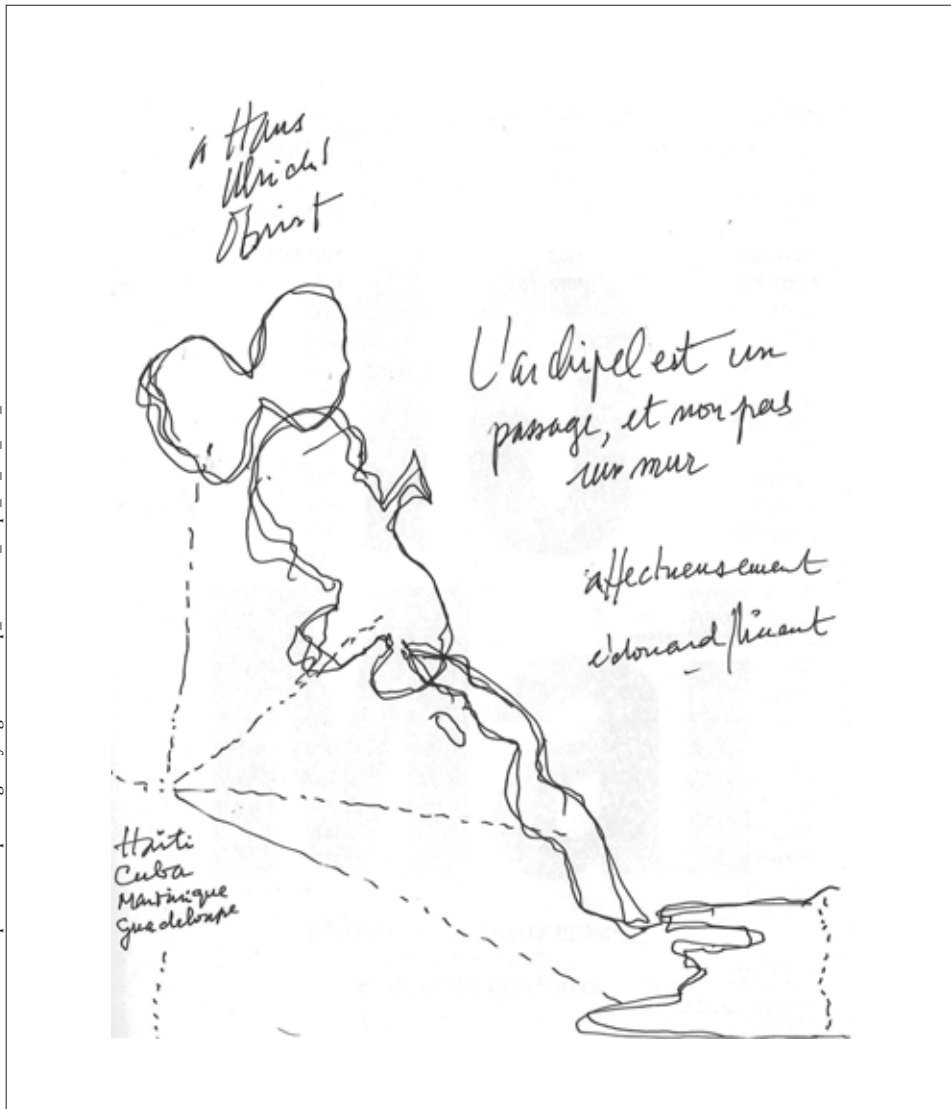
“But who is it that returns to the cleft of the hill and digs?”

The prospector, “There, in front of the hut”, so he claimed was “an old man who knows nothing about ‘poetry’”, but whose “bewildered eyes, search the space of the world” (*L'Intention Poétique*, 8).²

This old man (another?) was not perfect, but he was conscious of his purpose:

“Everything in my body was born in order not to forget the ones who left too quickly, the things done well – done, the land you turn over so you can dig out knowledge” (*The Fourth Century*, 240).

These words of the Ancestor in the *Fourth Century* capture much of the spirit of the task Monsieur Glissant (21 September 1928 – 3 February 2011) set himself and something of the flavour of the creolized language in which he sought to do it. He reinvented through fiction, philosophy, poetry and drama (eight novels, nine volumes of poetry,



various essays and works of literary criticism, the odd play) links of the broken chain of filiation in the Caribbean, pathways into the re-membering of African origin and racial intermingling. This work amounted to approaching history in another way, not as a hegemonic abstraction, but as humans lives lived and experienced, suppressed behind an adequate mask of dates. His writing of creolization explored the resulting psychic trauma and the alienation but moreover emphasized the forging of new and dynamic processes of identity, rife with pain and nostalgia, creativity and beauty. His “philosophy of history” fuelled powerful and positive imaginations of another world constructed by pulling down the walls of isolation, immunity and abstract othering.

A first-class writer, among the most eminent in the Caribbean, the Americas and the Francophone world, much of his work, of Nobel Prize standard, has been published in English. In all his works, Monsieur Glissant was first and foremost a poet, a great magician of the flesh made word. In the dense metaphorical prose of his novels, in his philosophical essays, he remained thus, and is consequently not a popular but rather a superbly penetrating and unforgettable writer.

“Because the sea is the future... always open... allow[ing] you to come and go” (*The Ripening*, 100), the old man, with youth shining in his eyes, stands ready, on the last lip of land, between the two seas, (calm Caribbean and wild Atlantic). And when at last he arcs his body for the dive, the hills and the winds salute him; the trees, rooted and aerial, wave sinuous arms in greeting: “Bon voyage, Monsieur Glissant!”

Notes

1. “cet éclat de vitres dans la voix” (*Les Indes*, 9); my translation, here and elsewhere, unless otherwise noted.
2. “Qui revient pourtant sur la déclive du morne, et fouille? Il y là, devant la case, un vieil homme qui ne sait rien de la ‘poésie’ et dont la voix seule *s’oppose*. [...] J’ai vu ses yeux, j’ai vu ses yeux égarés chercher l’espace du monde.” (*L’Intention Poétique*, 8).

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