

ÉDOUARD GLISSANT

Poetics of Relation



translated by Betsy Wing

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Translator's Introduction

Betsy Wing

"Jc bâtis a roches mon langage."
 (I build my language with rocks.)
 —Glissant, *L'Intention poétique*

The stumbling blocks of a translation frequently exist at its most productive points. Their usual first effect is frustration caused by obstinate resistance (on both sides), but, in their ever-renewed demand for conjecture, these apparent obstacles can allow us to escape the cramped, habitual postures of our own thought. This is the hoped-for reward of translators—whose first work is to be attentive, even hopeful readers—then, with as many premonitions of disaster as prospects of opening possibilities within their own languages, they must confront the task of making these new openings available to new readers.

All of Édouard Glissant's work, as a poet, novelist, playwright, or theoretician from the very beginning (*Les Indes* and *Soleil de la conscience* [1956], *La Lézarde* [1959]) has been concerned with exploring the possibilities of a language that would be fully Antillean. Such a language would be capable of writing the Antilles into history, generating a conception of time, finding a past and founding a future. It would escape the passivity associated with an imposed language of fixed forms (French) as well as the folklore traps of a language that

I

APPROACHES

One way ashore, a thousand channels

IMAGINARY



Thinking thought usually amounts to withdrawing into a dimensionless place in which the idea of thought alone persists. But thought in reality spaces itself out into the world. It informs the imaginary of peoples, their varied poetics, which it then transforms, meaning, in them its risk becomes realized.


Culture is the precaution of those who claim to think thought but who steer clear of its chaotic journey. Evolving cultures infer Relation, the overstepping that grounds their unity-diversity.

Thought draws the imaginary of the past: a knowledge becoming. One cannot stop it to assess it nor isolate it to transmit it. It is sharing one can never not retain, nor ever, in standing still, boast about.

The Open Boat

For the Africans who lived through the experience of deportation to the Americas,* confronting the unknown with neither preparation nor challenge was no doubt petrifying.

The first dark shadow was cast by being wrenched from their everyday, familiar land, away from protecting gods and a tutelary community. But that is nothing yet. Exile can be borne, even when it comes as a bolt from the blue. The second dark of night fell as tortures and the deterioration of person, the result of so many incredible Gehennas. Imagine two hundred human beings crammed into a space barely capable of containing a third of them. Imagine vomit, naked flesh, swarming lice, the dead slumped, the dying crouched. Imagine, if you can, the swirling red of mounting to the deck, the ramp they climbed, the black sun on the horizon, vertigo,

*The Slave Trade came through the cramped doorway of the slave ship, leaving a wake like that of crawling desert caravans. It might be drawn like this:  African countries to the East; the lands of America to the West. This creature is in the image of a fibril.

African languages became deterritorialized, thus contributing to creolization in the West. This is the most completely known confrontation between the powers of the written word and the impulses of orality. The only written thing on slave ships was the account book listing the exchange value of slaves. Within the ship's space the cry of those deported was stifled, as it would be in the realm of the Plantations. This confrontation still reverberates to this day.

this dizzying sky plastered to the waves. Over the course of more than two centuries, twenty, thirty million people deported. Worn down, in a debasement more eternal than apocalypse. But that is nothing yet.

What is terrifying partakes of the abyss, three times linked to the unknown. First, the time you fell into the belly of the boat. For, in your poetic vision, a boat has no belly; a boat does not swallow up, does not devour; a boat is steered by open skies. Yet, the belly of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a nonworld from which you cry out. This boat is a womb, a womb abyss. It generates the clamor of your protests; it also produces all the coming unanimity. Although you are alone in this suffering, you share in the unknown with others whom you have yet to know. This boat is your womb, a matrix, and yet it expels you. This boat: pregnant with as many dead as living under sentence of death.

The next abyss was the depths of the sea. Whenever a fleet of ships gave chase to slave ships, it was easiest just to lighten the boat by throwing cargo overboard, weighing it down with balls and chains. These underwater signposts mark the course between the Gold Coast and the Leeward Islands. Navigating the green splendor of the sea—whether in melancholic transatlantic crossings or glorious regattas or traditional races of *yoles* and *gommiers*—still brings to mind, coming to light like seaweed, these lowest depths, these deeps, with their punctuation of scarcely corroded balls and chains. In actual fact the abyss is a tautology: the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green.

But for these shores to take shape, even before they could be contemplated, before they were yet visible, what sufferings came from the unknown! Indeed, the most petrifying face of the abyss lies far ahead of the slave ship's bow, a pale murmur; you do not know if it is a storm cloud, rain or drizzle, or

smoke from a comforting fire. The banks of the river have vanished on both sides of the boat. What kind of river, then, has no middle? Is nothing there but straight ahead? Is this boat sailing into eternity toward the edges of a nonworld that no ancestor will haunt?

Paralleling this mass of water, the third metamorphosis of the abyss thus projects a reverse image of all that had been left behind, not to be regained for generations except—more and more threadbare—in the blue savannas of memory or imagination.

The asceticism of crossing this way the land-sea that, unknown to you, is the planet Earth, feeling a language vanish, the word of the gods vanish, and the sealed image of even the most everyday object, of even the most familiar animal, vanish. The evanescent taste of what you ate. The hounded scent of ochre earth and savannas.

“Je te salue, vieil Océan!” You still preserve on your crests the silent boat of our births, your chasms are our own unconscious, furrowed with fugitive memories. Then you lay out these new shores, where we hook our tar-streaked wounds, our reddened mouths and stifled outcries.

Experience of the abyss lies inside and outside the abyss. The torment of those who never escaped it: straight from the belly of the slave ship into the violet belly of the ocean depths they went. But their ordeal did not die; it quickened into this continuous/discontinuous thing: the panic of the new land, the haunting of the former land, finally the alliance with the imposed land, suffered and redeemed. The unconscious memory of the abyss served as the alluvium for these metamorphoses. The populations that then formed, despite having forgotten the chasm, despite being unable to imagine the passion of those who foundered there, nonetheless wove this sail (a veil). They did not use it to return to the Former Land

but rose up on this unexpected, dumbfounded land. They met the first inhabitants, who had also been deported by permanent havoc; or perhaps they only caught a whiff of the ravaged trail of these people. The land-beyond turned into land-in-itself. And this undreamt of sail, finally now spread, is watered by the white wind of the abyss. Thus, the absolute unknown, projected by the abyss and bearing into eternity the womb abyss and the infinite abyss, in the end became knowledge.

Not just a specific knowledge, appetite, suffering, and delight of one particular people, not only that, but knowledge of the Whole, greater from having been at the abyss and freeing knowledge of Relation within the Whole.

Just as the first uprooting was not marked by any defiance, in the same way the prescience and actual experience of Relation have nothing to do with vanity. Peoples who have been to the abyss do not brag of being chosen. They do not believe they are giving birth to any modern force. They live Relation and clear the way for it, to the extent that the oblivion of the abyss comes to them and that, consequently, their memory intensifies.

For though this experience made you, original victim floating toward the sea's abysses, an exception, it became something shared and made us, the descendants, one people among others. Peoples do not live on exception. Relation is not made up of things that are foreign but of shared knowledge. This experience of the abyss can now be said to be the best element of exchange.

For us, and without exception, and no matter how much distance we may keep, the abyss is also a projection of and a perspective into the unknown. Beyond its chasm we gamble on the unknown. We take sides in this game of the world. We hail a renewed Indies; we are for it. And for this Relation

made of storms and profound moments of peace in which we may honor our boats.

This is why we stay with poetry. And despite our consenting to all the indisputable technologies; despite seeing the political leap that must be managed, the horror of hunger and ignorance, torture and massacre to be conquered, the full load of knowledge to be tamed, the weight of every piece of machinery that we shall finally control, and the exhausting flashes as we pass from one era to another—from forest to city, from story to computer—at the bow there is still something we now share: this murmur, cloud or rain or peaceful smoke. We know ourselves as part and as crowd, in an unknown that does not terrify. We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone.

Errantry, Exile

Roots make the commonality of errantry¹ and exile, for in both instances roots are lacking. We must begin with that.²

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari criticized notions of the root and, even perhaps, notions of being rooted. The root is unique, a stock taking all upon itself and killing all around it. In opposition to this they propose the rhizome, an enmeshed root system, a network spreading either in the ground or in the air, with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently. The notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root. Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other.

These authors extol nomadism, which supposedly liberates Being, in contrast, perhaps, to a settled way of life, with its law based upon the intolerant root. Already Kant, at the beginning of *Critique of Pure Reason*, had seen similarities between skeptics and nomads, remarking also that, from time to time, "they break the social bond." He seems thus to establish correlations between, on the one hand, a settled way of life, truth, and society and, on the other, nomadism, skepticism, and anarchy. This parallel with Kant suggests that the rhizome concept appears interesting for its anticonformism, but one cannot infer from this that it is subversive or that rhizomatic thought has the capacity to overturn the

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order of the world—because, by so doing, one reverts to ideological claims presumably challenged by this thought.³

But is the nomad not overdetermined by the conditions of his existence? Rather than the enjoyment of freedom, is nomadism not a form of obedience to contingencies that are restrictive? Take, for example, circular nomadism: each time a portion of the territory is exhausted, the group moves around. Its function is to ensure the survival of the group by means of this circularity. This is the nomadism practiced by populations that move from one part of the forest to another, by the Arawak communities who navigated from island to island in the Caribbean, by hired laborers in their pilgrimage from farm to farm, by circus people in their peregrinations from village to village, all of whom are driven by some specific need to move, in which daring or aggression play no part. Circular nomadism is a not-intolerant form of an impossible settlement.

Contrast this with invading nomadism, that of the Huns, for example, or the Conquistadors, whose goal was to conquer lands by exterminating their occupants. Neither prudent nor circular nomadism, it spares no effort. It is an absolute forward projection: an arrowlike nomadism. But the descendants of the Huns, Vandals, or Visigoths, as indeed those of the Conquistadors, who established their clans, settled down bit by bit, melting into their conquests. Arrowlike nomadism is a devastating desire for settlement.*

Neither in arrowlike nomadism nor in circular nomadism are roots valid. Before it is won through conquest, what "holds" the invader is what lies ahead; moreover, one could almost say that being compelled to lead a settled way of life

* The idea that this devastation can turn history around in a positive manner (in relation to the decline of the Roman Empire, for example) and beget some fertile negative element does not concern us here. Generally speaking, what is meant is that arrowlike nomadism gives birth to new eras, whereas circular nomadism would be endogenous and without a future. This is a pure and simple legitimization of the act of conquest.

would constitute the real uprooting of a circular nomad. There is, furthermore, no pain of exile bearing down, nor is there the wanderlust of errantry growing keener. Relation to the earth is too immediate or too plundering to be linked with any preoccupation with identity—this claim to or consciousness of a lineage inscribed in a territory. Identity will be achieved when communities attempt to legitimate their right to possession of a territory through myth or the revealed word. Such an assertion can predate its actual accomplishment by quite some time. Thus, an often and long contested legitimacy will have multiple forms that later will delineate the afflicted or soothing dimensions of exile or errantry.

In Western antiquity a man in exile does not feel he is helpless or inferior, because he does not feel burdened with deprivation—of a nation that for him does not yet exist. It even seems, if one is to believe the biographies of numerous Greek thinkers including Plato and Aristotle, that some experience of voyaging and exile is considered necessary for a being's complete fulfillment. Plato was the first to attempt to base legitimacy not on community within territory (as it was before and would be later) but on the City in the rationality of its laws. This at a time when his city, Athens, was already threatened by a "final" deregulation.*

In this period identification is with a culture (conceived of as civilization), not yet with a nation.** The pre-Christian West along with pre-Columbian America, Africa of the time of the great conquerors, and the Asian kingdoms all shared this mode of seeing and feeling. The relay of actions exerted

*Platonic Dialogues take over the function of the Myth. The latter establishes the legitimacy of the possession of a territory based usually on the uninterrupted rigors of filiation. The Dialogue establishes the City's justice based on the revelation of a superior reason organizing rigorous successions of a political order.

**Through the entirely Western notion of civilization the experience of a society is summed up, in order to project it immediately into an evolution, most often an expansion as well. When one says civilization, the immediate implication is a will to civilize. This idea is linked to the passion to impose civilization on the Other.

by arrowlike nomadism and the settled way of life were first directed against generalization (the drive for an identifying universal as practiced by the Roman Empire). Thus, the particular resists a generalizing universal and soon begets specific and local senses of identity, in concentric circles (provinces then nations). The idea of civilization, bit by bit, helps hold together opposites, whose only former identity existed in their opposition to the Other.

During this period of invading nomads the passion for self-definition first appears in the guise of personal adventure. Along the route of their voyages conquerors established empires that collapsed at their death. Their capitals went where they went. "Rome is no longer in Rome, it is wherever I am." The root is not important. Movement is. The idea of errantry, still inhibited in the face of this mad reality, this too-functional nomadism, whose ends it could not know, does not yet make an appearance. Center and periphery are equivalent. Conquerors are the moving, transient root of their people.

The West, therefore, is where this movement becomes fixed and nations declare themselves in preparation for their repercussions in the world. This fixing, this declaration, this expansion, all require that the idea of the root gradually take on the intolerant sense that Deleuze and Guattari, no doubt, meant to challenge. The reason for our return to this episode in Western history is that it spread throughout the world. The model came in handy. Most of the nations that gained freedom from colonization have tended to form around an idea of power—the totalitarian drive of a single, unique root—rather than around a fundamental relationship with the Other. Culture's self-conception was dualistic, pitting citizen against barbarian. Nothing has ever more solidly opposed the thought of errantry than this period in human history when Western nations were established and then made their impact on the world.

At first this thought of errantry, bucking the current of nationalist expansion, was disguised "within" very personal-

ized adventures—just as the appearance of Western nations had been preceded by the ventures of empire builders. The errantry of a troubadour or that of Rimbaud is not yet a thorough, thick (opaque) experience of the world, but it is already an arrant, passionate desire to go against a root. The reality of exile during this period is felt as a (temporary) lack that primarily concerns, interestingly enough, language. Western nations were established on the basis of linguistic intransigence, and the exile readily admits that he suffers most from the impossibility of communicating in his language. The root is monolingual. For the troubadour and for Rimbaud errantry is a vocation only told via detour. The call of Relation is heard, but it is not yet a fully present experience.

However, and this is an immense paradox, the great founding books of communities, the Old Testament, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Chansons de Geste*, the *Islandic Sagas*, the *Aeneid*, or the African epics, were all books about exile and often about errantry. This epic literature is amazingly prophetic. It tells of the community, but, through relating the community's apparent failure or in any case its being surpassed, it tells of errantry as a temptation (the desire to go against the root) and, frequently, actually experienced. Within the collective books concerning the sacred and the notion of history lies the germ of the exact opposite of what they so loudly proclaim. When the very idea of territory becomes relative, nuances appear in the legitimacy of territorial possession. These are books about the birth of collective consciousness, but they also introduce the unrest and suspense that allow the individual to discover himself there, whenever he himself becomes the issue. The Greek victory in the *Iliad* depends on trickery; Ulysses returns from his *Odyssey* and is recognized only by his dog; the Old Testament David bears the stain of adultery and murder; the *Chanson de Roland* is the chronicle of a defeat; the characters in the *Sagas* are branded by an unstemmable fate, and so forth. These books are the begin-

ning of something entirely different from massive, dogmatic, and totalitarian certainty (despite the religious uses to which they will be put). These are books of errantry, going beyond the pursuits and triumphs of rootedness required by the evolution of history.

Some of these books are devoted entirely to the supreme errantry, as in the Egyptian Book of the Dead. The very book whose function is to consecrate an intransigent community is already a compromise, qualifying its triumph with revelatory wanderings.*

In both *L'Intention poétique* (*Poetic Intention*) and *Le Discours antillais* (*Caribbean Discourse*)—of which the present work is a reconstituted echo or a spiral retelling—I approached this dimension of epic literature. I began wondering if we did not still need such founding works today, ones that would use a similar dialectics of rerouting,⁴ asserting, for example, political strength but, simultaneously, the rhizome of a multiple relationship with the Other and basing every community's reasons for existence on a modern form of the sacred, which would be, all in all, a Poetics of Relation.**

This movement, therefore (one among others, equally important, in other parts of the world), has led from a primordial nomadism to the settled way of life of Western nations then to Discovery and Conquest, which achieved a final, almost mystical perfection in the Voyage.

In the course of this journey identity, at least as far as the Western peoples who made up the great majority of voyagers, discoverers, and conquerors were concerned, consolidates

*Hegel, in book 3 of his *Aesthetics*, shows how the founding works of communities appear spontaneously at the moment in which a still naive collective consciousness reassures itself about its own legitimacy, or, not to mince words: about its right to possess a land. In this sense Epic thought is close to that of Myth.

**The necessary surpassing of mythic and epic thought took place in the political reason organizing the City. Epic expression is obscure and unfathomable, one of the conditions of naïveté. Political discourse is obvious. Surpassing can be contradiction.

itself implicitly at first ("my root is the strongest") and then is explicitly exported as a value ("a person's worth is determined by his root").* The conquered or visited peoples are thus forced into a long and painful quest after an identity whose first task will be opposition to the denaturing process introduced by the conqueror. A tragic variation of a search for identity. For more than two centuries whole populations have had to assert their identity in opposition to the processes of identification or annihilation triggered by these invaders. Whereas the Western nation is first of all an "opposite,"** for colonized peoples identity will be primarily "opposed to"—that is, a limitation from the beginning. Decolonization will have done its real work when it goes beyond this limit.

The duality of self-perception (one is citizen or foreigner) has repercussions on one's idea of the Other (one is visitor or visited; one goes or stays; one conquers or is conquered). Thought of the Other cannot escape its own dualism until the time when differences become acknowledged. From that point on thought of the Other "comprehends"⁵ multiplicity, but mechanically and still taking the subtle hierarchies of a generalizing universal as its basis. Acknowledging differences does not compel one to be involved in the dialectics of their totality. One could get away with: "I can acknowledge your difference and continue to think it is harmful to you. I can think that my strength lies in the Voyage (I am making History) and that your difference is motionless and silent." Another step remains to be taken before one really enters the dialectic of totality. And, contrary to the mechanics of the Voyage, this dialectic turns out to be driven by the thought of errantry.

*That is, as we have said, essentially by his language.

**If the idea of civilization holds opposites together, a generalizing universal will be the principle of their action in the world, the principle that will allow them to realize conflicts of interest in a finalist conception of History. The first colonist, Christopher Columbus, did not voyage in the name of a country but of an idea.

Let us suppose that the quest for totality, starting from a nonuniversal context of histories of the West, has passed through the following stages:

- the thinking of territory and self (ontological, dual)
- the thinking of voyage and other (mechanical, multiple)
- the thinking of errantry and totality (relational, dialectical).

* We will agree that this thinking of errantry, this errant thought, silently emerges from the destructuring of compact national entities that yesterday were still triumphant and, at the same time, from difficult, uncertain births of new forms of identity that call to us.

In this context uprooting can work toward identity, and exile can be seen as beneficial, when these are experienced as a search for the Other (through circular nomadism) rather than as an expansion of territory (an arrowlike nomadism). Totality's imaginary allows the detours that lead away from anything totalitarian.

Errantry, therefore, does not proceed from renunciation nor from frustration regarding a supposedly deteriorated (deteriorialized) situation of origin; it is not a resolute act of rejection or an uncontrolled impulse of abandonment. Sometimes, by taking up the problems of the Other, it is possible to find oneself. Contemporary history provides several striking examples of this, among them Frantz Fanon, whose path led from Martinique to Algeria. That is very much the image of the rhizome, prompting the knowledge that identity is no longer completely within the root but also in Relation. Because the thought of errantry is also the thought of what is relative, the thing relayed as well as the thing related. The thought of errantry is a poetics, which always infers that at some moment it is told. The tale of errantry is the tale of Relation.

In contrast to arrowlike nomadism (discovery or conquest), in contrast to the situation of exile, errantry gives-on-and-with the negation of every pole and every metropolis, whether connected or not to a conqueror's voyaging act. We have repeatedly mentioned that the first thing exported by the conqueror was his language. Moreover, the great Western languages were supposedly vehicular languages, which often took the place of an actual metropolis. Relation, in contrast, is spoken multilingually. Going beyond the impositions of economic forces and cultural pressures, Relation rightfully opposes the totalitarianism of any monolingual intent.

At this point we seem to be far removed from the sufferings and preoccupations of those who must bear the world's injustice. Their errantry is, in effect, immobile. They have never experienced the melancholy and extroverted luxury of uprooting. They do not travel. But one of the constants of our world is that a knowledge of roots will be conveyed to them from within intuitions of Relation from now on. Traveling is no longer the locus of power but, rather, a pleasurable, if privileged, time. The ontological obsession with knowledge gives way here to the enjoyment of a relation; in its elementary and often caricatural form this is tourism. Those who stay behind thrill to this passion for the world shared by all. Or, indeed, they may suffer the torments of internal exile.

I would not describe the physical situation of those who suffer the oppression of an Other within their own country, such as the blacks in South Africa, as internal exile. Because the solution here is visible and the outcome determined; force alone can oppose this. Internal exile strikes individuals living where solutions concerning the relationship of a community to its surroundings are not, or at least not yet, consented to by this community as a whole. These solutions, precariously outlined as decisions, are still the prerogative of only a few, who, as a result, are marginalized. Internal exile is the voyage out of this enclosure. It is a motionless and exac-

erbat introduction to the thought of errantry. Most often it is diverted into partial, pleasurable compensations in which the individual is consumed. Internal exile tends toward material comfort, which cannot really distract from anguish.

Whereas exile may erode one's sense of identity, the thought of errantry—the thought of that which relates—usually reinforces this sense of identity. It seems possible, at least to one observer, that the persecuted errantry, the wandering of the Jews, may have reinforced their sense of identity far more than their present settling in the land of Palestine. Being exiled Jews turned into a vocation of errantry, their point of reference an ideal land whose power may, in fact, have been undermined by concrete land (a territory), chosen and conquered. This, however, is mere conjecture. Because, while one can communicate through errantry's imaginary vision, the experiences of exiles are incommunicable.

The thought of errantry is not apolitical nor is it inconsistent with the will to identity, which is, after all, nothing other than the search for a freedom within particular surroundings. If it is at variance with territorial intolerance, or the predatory effects of the unique root (which makes processes of identification so difficult today), this is because, in the poetics of Relation, one who is errant (who is no longer traveler, discoverer, or conqueror) strives to know the totality of the world yet already knows he will never accomplish this—and knows that is precisely where the threatened beauty of the world resides.

Errant, he challenges and discards the universal—this generalizing edict that summarized the world as something obvious and transparent, claiming for it one presupposed sense and one destiny. He plunges into the opacities of that part of the world to which he has access. Generalization is totalitarian: from the world it chooses one side of the reports, one set of ideas, which it sets apart from others and tries to impose by

exporting as a model. The thinking of errantry conceives of totality but willingly renounces any claims to sum it up or to possess it.

The founding books have taught us that the sacred dimension consists always of going deeper into the mystery of the root, shaded with variations of errantry. In reality errant thinking is the postulation of an unyielding and unfading sacred. We remember that Plato, who understood the power of Myth, had hoped to banish the poets, those who force obscurity, far from the Republic. He distrusted the fathomless word. Are we not returning here, in the unforeseeable meanders of Relation, to this abyssal word? Nowhere is it stated that now, in this thought of errantry, humanity will not succeed in transmuting Myth's opacities (which were formerly the occasion for setting roots) and the diffracted insights of political philosophy, thereby reconciling Homer and Plato, Hegel and the African griot.

But we need to figure out whether or not there are other succulencies of Relation in other parts of the world (and already at work in an underground manner) that will suddenly open up other avenues and soon help to correct whatever simplifying, ethnocentric exclusions may have arisen from such a perspective.

*

As far as literature is concerned (without my having to establish a pantheon, an isolation these works would refuse), there are two contemporary bodies of work, it seems to me, in which errantry and Relation are at play.

Faulkner's work, somehow theological. This writing is about digging up roots in the South—an obvious place to do so in the United States. But the root begins to act like a rhi-zome; there is no basis for certainty; the relation is tragic. Because of this dispute over source, the sacred—but henceforth unspeakable—enigma of the root's location, Faulkner's

world represents one of the thrilling moments in the modern poetics of Relation. At one time I regretted that such a world had not gone farther, spreading its vision into the Caribbean and Latin America. But, perhaps, this was a reaction of unconscious frustration on the part of one who felt excluded.

And Saint-John Perse's erratic work, in search of that which moves, of that which goes—in the absolute sense.⁶ A work leading to totality—to the out-and-out exaltation of a universal that becomes exhausted from being said too much.

Poetics

In the nineteenth century, after the Spanish language had expanded into South America and the Portuguese language into Brazil, the French and English languages successfully accompanied the widespread expansion of their own respective cultures around the world. Other Western languages, German, Italian, or Russian, for example, despite some limited attempts at colonization, were not driven by this propensity for self-exportation that nearly always generates a sort of vocation for the universal. As for non-Western languages, Quechua, Swahili, Hindi, or Chinese, they remain endogenous and nonproliferating; their poetics do not yet hint at involvement in the evolution of world histories.

Our aim here is to advance the notion that, within the limited framework of one language—French—competing to discover the world and dominate it, literary production is partly determined by this discovery, which also transforms numerous aspects of its poetics; but that there persists, at least as far as French is concerned, a stubborn resistance to any attempt at clarifying the matter. Everything just goes along as if, at the moment it entered into the poetics of worldwide Relation, ready to replace the former hegemony, collective thought working within the language chose to cover up its expressive relationship with the other, rather than admit any participation that would not be one of preeminence.

With generally good results literary theoreticians have been content to define the poetics deemed responsible for

III

PATHS

Out loud, to mark the split

CREOLIZATIONS



Creolization, one of the ways of forming a complex mix—and not merely a linguistic result—is only exemplified by its processes and certainly not by the “contents” on which these operate. This is where we depart from the concept of creoleness. Though this notion covers (no more and no less) that which accounts for creolizations, it goes on to propose two further extensions. The first opens onto a broader ethnocultural realm, from the Antilles to the Indian Ocean. But variations of this sort do not seem to be determining factors, because the speed with which they change in Relation is so great. The second is an attempt to get at Being. But that would constitute a step backward in comparison with how creolizations can function. We propose neither humanity’s Being nor its models. We are not prompted solely by the defining of our identities but by their relation to everything possible as well—the mutual mutations generated by this interplay of relations. 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.

Dictate, Decree

Baroque derangement and the guarantee provided by scientific rigor: just yesterday these were the counterpoises of our movement (our *balan*, our surge, our momentum) toward *totalité-monde*.¹

But the baroque no longer constitutes a derangement, since it has turned into a "natural" expression of whatever scatters and comes together. The age of classicisms (of deepening an internal unity, raised to the dimensions of a universal itself postulated) is past, no doubt, for all cultures. It remains to make the network of their convergences work, or to untangle it. It remains to study those cultures that have not had time, before coming into planetary contact (or conflict), to realize "their own" classicism. Are their powers not impeded as they come to the meeting? Then again, what shall we say about composite cultures, whose composition did not result from a union of "norms" but, rather, was built in the margins with all kinds of materials that by their very nature were exceptions to the patience of the rule, to be thrust headlong into the world by necessity, oppression, anguish, greed, or an appetite for adventure?

The baroque is the favored speech of these cultures, even if henceforth it belongs to all. We call it baroque, because we know that confluences always partake of marginality, that classicisms partake of intolerance, and that, for us, the substitute for the hidden violence of these intolerant exclusions is the manifest and integrating violence of contaminations.

Note that *métissage* exists in places where categories making their essences distinct were formerly in opposition. The more *métissage* became realized, the more the idea of it faded. As the baroque became naturalized in the world, it tended to become a commonplace, a generality (which is not the same as a generalization), of a new regime. Because it proliferated rather than deepened a norm, it is unable to consent to "classicism." There is no culture rightfully impeded in the baroque; none imposes its tradition, even if there are some that export their generalizing products everywhere.

How can continuity (which is "desirable") be practiced in this incessant turnover? How can the stabilizing action of former classicisms be replaced? And with what?

At first our only recourse in the matter seemed to be the positivity of scientific method. This, for example, was the method adopted for the defense and promotion of languages, corresponding to the ambition of linguistics to set itself up as a science. A profitable pretense: despite its failure to be confirmed, it provided the basis for a system and gathered together its scattered materials. But science had ceased having any desire to obtain this sort of guarantee, having, meanwhile, ventured not outside the positive but beyond positivism. It had come face to face with the baroque and understood that the work of the latter deserved cognizance.

The most recent developments of science invite us, therefore, to venture in our quest beyond the laws laid down by its philosophies. For a long time we have divined both order and disorder in the world and projected these as measure and excess. But every poetics led us to believe something that, of course, is not wrong: that excessiveness of order and a measured disorder exist as well. The only discernible stabilities in Relation have to do with the interdependence of the cycles operative there, how their corresponding patterns of movement are in tune. In Relation analytic thought is led to construct unities whose interdependent variances jointly

piece together the interactive totality. These unities are not models but revealing *echos-monde*. Thought makes music.

William Faulkner's work, Bob Marley's song, the theories of Benoit Mandelbrot, are all *echos-monde*. Wilfredo Lam's painting (flowing together) or that of Roberto Matta (tearing apart); the architecture of Chicago and just as easily the shantytowns of Rio or Caracas; Ezra Pound's *Cantos* but also the marching of schoolchildren in Soweto are *echos-monde*.

Finnegan's Wake was an *écho-monde* that was prophetic and consequently absolute (without admission into the real).

Antonin Artaud's words constitute an *écho-monde* outside of the world.

Whatever, coming from a tradition, enters into Relation; whatever, defending a tradition, justifies Relation; whatever, having left behind or refuted every tradition, provides the basis for another full-sense to Relation; whatever, born of Relation, contradicts and embodies it. Anglo-American pidgin (something, therefore, spoken neither by the English nor by the Americans) is a negative *écho-monde*, whose concrete force weaves the folds of Relation and neutralizes its subsistence.

The Creole language is a fragile and revealing *écho-monde*, born of a reality of relation and limited within this reality by its dependence.

Spoken languages, without exception, have become *echos-monde*, whose lack we are only just beginning to feel each time one is wiped out by this circularity in evolution.

Echos-monde are not exacerbations that result directly from the convulsive conditions of Relation. They are at work in the matter of the world; they prophesy or illuminate it, divert it or conversely gain strength within it.

In order to cope with or express confluences, every individual, every community, forms its own *echos-monde*, imagined from power or vainglory, from suffering or impatience. Each individual makes this sort of music and each community as

well. As does the totality composed of individuals and communities.

Echos-monde thus allow us to sense and cite the cultures of peoples in the turbulent confluence whose globality organizes our *chaos-monde*. They pattern its constituent (not conclusive) elements and its expressions.

What we earlier remarked in Saint-John Perse as an aesthetics of the universe ("narration of the universe"), we now describe in a different manner. It is an aesthetics of the *chaos-monde*.

The *chaos-monde* is only disorder if one assumes there to be an order whose full force poetics is not prepared to reveal (poetics is not a science). The ambition of poetics, rather, is to safeguard the energy of this order. The aesthetics of the universe assumed preestablished norms; the aesthetics of *chaos-monde* is the impassioned illustration and refutation of these. Chaos is not devoid of norms, but these neither constitute a goal nor govern a method there.

Chaos-monde is neither fusion nor confusion: it acknowledges neither the uniform blend—a ravenous integration—nor muddled nothingness. Chaos is not "chaotic."

But its hidden order does not presuppose hierarchies or pre-cellencies—neither of chosen languages nor of prince-nations. The *chaos-monde* is not a mechanism; it has no keys.

The aesthetics of the *chaos-monde* (what we were thus calling the aesthetics of the universe but cleared of a priori values) embraces all the elements and forms of expression of this totality within us; it is totality's act and its fluidity, totality's reflection and agent in motion.

The baroque is the not-established outcome of this motion.

Relation is that which simultaneously realizes and expresses this motion. It is the *chaos-monde* relating (to itself).

The poetics of Relation (which is, therefore, part of the aesthetics of the *chaos-monde*) senses, assumes, opens, gathers,

scatters, continues, and transforms the thought of these elements, these forms, and this motion.

Destructure these facts, declare them void, replace them, reinvent their music: totality's imagination is inexhaustible and always, in every form, wholly legitimate—that is, free of all legitimacy.

An equilibrium and ability to endure are revived through *echos-monde*. Individuals and communities go beyond vain-glory or suffering, power or impatience, together—however imperceptibly. The important thing is that such a process represents an optimum. Its results are unpredictable, but the beginnings of the capacity to endure are detectible, coming where formerly there were classicisms. It is no longer through deepening a tradition but through the tendency of all traditions to enter into relation that this is achieved. Baroque serve to relay classicisms. Techniques of relation are gradually substituted for techniques of the absolute, which frequently were techniques of self-absolution. The arts of expanse relate (dilate) the arts of depth.

These are the forms we must use to contemplate the evolution of the Creole language: viewing it as a propagation of the dialects that compose it, each extending toward the other; but being aware also that this language can disappear, or un-appear if you will, in one place or another.

We agree that the extinction of any language at all impoverishes everyone. And even more so, if that is possible, when a composite language like Creole is in question, for this would be an instant setback for the processes of bringing-into-relation. But how many languages, dialects, or idioms will have vanished, eroded by the implacable consensus among powers between profits and controls, before human communities learn to preserve together their diversities. The threat of this disappearance is one of the facts to be incorporated, as we earlier remarked, into the field of descriptive linguistics.

Not every disappearance, however, is equivalent. The fact that French-Ontarians are gradually ceasing to speak French will not cause the latter to vanish from the world panorama. Creole is not in the same situation because its elision in one single region would make the areas of its survival even more scarce. But establishing that these differences exist in no way attenuates both the human drama unleashed each time it happens and the extent of impoverishment then inflicted upon the *chaos-monde*.

We are not going to save one language or another here or there, while letting others perish. The floodtide of extinction, unstoppable in its power of contagion, will win out. It will leave a residue that is not one victorious language, or several, but one or more desolate codes that will take a long time to reconstitute the organic and unpredictable liveliness of a language. Linguistic multiplicity protects ways of speaking, from the most extensive to the most fragile. It is in the name of this total multiplicity and in function of it, rather than of any selective pseudo-solidarities, that each language must be defended.

An idiom like Creole, one so rapidly constituted in so fluid a field of relations, cannot be analyzed the way, for example, it was done for Indo-European languages that aggregated slowly around their roots. We need to know why this Creole language was the only one to appear, why it took the same forms in both the Caribbean basin and the Indian Ocean, and why solely in countries colonized by the French; whereas the other languages of this colonization process, English and Spanish, remained inflexible as far as the colonized populations were concerned, their only concessions being pidgins or other dialects that were derived.*

*Another language of the region that would be an exception to this statistical rule is Papiamentu, which has a Spanish lexical basis in countries (Curaçao) that are no longer Spanish. It seems that, in this same region of the Americas, more and more linguistic microzones are being discovered in which Creoles, pidgins, and patois become undifferentiated.

One possible response—in any case, the one I venture—is that the French language, which we think of as so intent on universality, was, of course, not like this at the time of the conquest of the Americas, having perhaps not yet achieved its normative unity. Breton and Norman dialects, the ones used in Santo Domingo and the other islands, were less coercively centripetal and thus able to enter into the composition of a new language. English and Spanish were already perhaps more “classic,” and lent themselves less to this first amalgam from which a language could have sprung. Of course, the “unified” French language also spread throughout these territories with no language. The Creole compromise (metaphorical and synthesizing), favored by Plantation structure, was the result of both the uprooting of African languages and the deviance of French provincial idioms. The origins of this compromise are already a marginality. It did, indeed, name another reality, another mentality; but its actual poetics—or construction—was what was deviant in relation to any supposed classicism.

Traditional linguistics, when applied to such a case, seeks first and foremost (and counter to what the history of the language would indicate) to “classify” this language. That is—and it is perfectly understandable—it attempts to endow it with a body of rules and specifically stated standards ensuring its ability to endure. But, though fixing usage and transcription are both indispensable, there still remains a need to devise (given marginality as a component of the language) systems of variables, such as I earlier discussed, that would be distinguished from a mere allocation of variants among the dialects—of Haiti, Guadeloupe, or Guiana, etc.—of this Creole language. We would have a whole range of choices within each dialect. Wherever etymology or phonetics faltered (and, doubtless, etymology would be of less use in the matter) one should let poetics take its course, that is, follow intuition about both the history of the language and its development in the margins. In other words, the alleged scientific character can lapse into scholarly illusion, can conceal its strategem

for "staying put." The standard of such a language formation would be fluent. One could never legitimately have decreed it.

The decisive element, as far as fixing language is concerned, is the rule of usage; those who forge words frequently come up against it. And, in turn, this rule depends to a large extent on the practical functioning of the language. But, in the environment we have outlined (combining *échos-monde* and prevalent baroque), one could assume that the true basis for an ability to endure is that the rule of usage have both momentum and diffraction.

One can imagine language diasporas that would change so rapidly within themselves and with such feedback, so many turnarounds of norms (deviations and back and forth) that their fixity would lie in that change. Their ability to endure would not be accessible through deepening but through the shimmer of variety. It would be a fluid equilibrium. This linguistic sparkle, so far removed from the mechanics of sabirs and codes, is still inconceivable for us, but only because we are paralyzed to this day by monolingual prejudice ("my language is my root").

The normative decree, edict and instrument of this prejudice, prides itself, then, on the outmoded "guarantees" of scientific positivism and tries to administer the evolution of threatened languages, such as Creole, by attempting to "furnish" such a guarantee to the principle of identity (of permanence) that language implies. But it is not simply because the Creole language is a component of my identity that I am worried about its possible disappearance; it is because the language would also be missing from the radiant sparkle, the fluid equilibrium, and the ability to endure in disorder of the *chaos-monde*. The way that I defend it must take this into account.

Normative decrees have ceased to be the authoritative rule as far as vehicular languages are concerned. English and Span-

ish, the most massive of these, and seemingly the best entrenched in a sort of continental nature, met on the territory of the United States (Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, the immigrants in Florida). It may well be that their massiveness has become fissured, that alongside the variances proliferating Anglo-American, lucky contaminations from the Spanish will occur, and vice versa. This process will no doubt move more quickly than any analysis one will be able to make of it.

Contemporary arguments over whether or not to simplify the spelling of the French language demonstrate how many contaminations have occurred there. These proposals are a counter-decree, as futile as the purism they oppose is inoperative. Though the language must change in the world, and its plurality must be confirmed, only dictions will bring this about—not some authoritative edict.

We can only follow from afar the experimentation feeling its way along in all the elsewhere that we dream of.* Is the Chinese language absorbing the Latin alphabet? How is the actual status of languages changing in the Soviet Union? Is Quechuan beginning to make its escape from silence? And in Europe are the Scandinavian languages starting to open up to the world? Are forms of creolization silently at work, and where? Will Swahili and Fulani share the written domain with other languages in Africa? Are regional dialects in France fading away? How quickly? Will ideograms, pictograms, and other forms of writing show up in this panorama? Do translations already allow perceptible correspondences between

*It is not essential to note that archipelagic agglomerations of language have formed everywhere. Either according to "roots" or families: Indo-European languages, Latin languages, etc. Or according to their characteristic techniques of relation: composite languages, Creole languages, etc. Or according to both dimensions at once: vehicular languages and their pidgins, all languages and their dialects, etc. It is dangerous for the world's poetic diversity merely to link each of these agglomerations to some politically self-interested project. What is important is to track down the constants both within the agglomerations and within the majority of their confluences: Is there a hidden order to contacts among languages?

language systems? And how many minorities are there struggling within diglossia, like the numerous French-speaking Creole blacks in southwestern Louisiana? Or the thirty thousand Inuits on Baffin Island? Lists of this sort are not innocent; they accustom the mind to apprehending problems in a circular manner and to hatching solutions interdependently. Relating realms of knowledge (questions and solutions) with one another cannot be categorized as either a discipline or a science but, rather, as an imaginary construct of reality that permits us to escape the pointillistic probability approach without lapsing into abusive generalization.

The pronouncement of decrees in any case (issuing edicts that constrict the future of the language) does not set you free from collective anxieties. Game shows on television, organized in every country equipped to do so, spotlight the destabilization of languages in a spectacular manner. These games are the same everywhere. One must reconstitute words whose letters are either hidden or given in no order. Meaning has little importance, and there have been cases in which contestants have appeared on the shows after having learned whole sections of dictionary. So one disjoins a language, taking into account, in short, only its skeleton (if one can speak of the lexicon as a mere skeleton) to which one clings.

The amusing character of these exercises, which fall within the province of true performance, links them with another sort of contest that is organized in France on a very large scale and whose purpose is a much more elitist practice: dictation. The dictation is diction doing its best. In it, of course, it is a matter of conquering the difficulties of French syntax and grammar, which, as everyone knows, are not simple.

Thus, a learning exercise, whose success depended on its repetition day after day (we all remember the fateful dictation period in primary school), has turned into a show. Where we had to learn, now we have to win. To prove there

are people, beginning with the winners of these sparring matches, who still are interested in the subtleties—even the most specious—of the language and who more often than not master these.

These games seem to me a nostalgic exercise not devoid of a strong tinge of collective anxiety.

Dictating, decreeing: both activities (in their secret complicity: a decree affixes laws to us, a dictation is from an edict now essential) attempt to form a dam against what makes languages fragile—contaminations, slovenliness, barbarism.

But what you would call barbarism is the inexhaustible motion of the scintillations of languages, heaving dross and inventions, dominations and accords, deathly silences and irrepressible explosions, along with them. These languages combine, vary, clash, so rapidly that the lengthy training of earlier times is no longer worth much. Decreeing will have to use dialects, devise systems of variables. Dictation, if it exists, will have to transform itself into an exercise in creation, with no obligation or penalty. Faults of syntax are, for the moment, less decisive than faults of relation (though they may be symptoms among others of the latter) and will take less time to correct. On the other hand, let's admit to taking a very personal pleasure in these rules when they improve the quality of our expression. The only merit to correctness of language lies in what this language says in the world: even correctness is variable.

Baroque naturalities and the forms of *chaos-monde* have a (desirable) ability to endure that a priori reasoning will not unearth. It will not precede their work, the movement of engagement (ascendency and surprise) from which, simultaneously, their matter and their full-sense arise. No topology results from the *échos-monde*. But, on the other hand, the baroque is not just passion and mystery, nor does the guarantee of scientific rigor lapse in every instance into a dogma secure in the positive. Baroque naturality, if it exists, has a

structure or at least an order, and we have to invent a knowledge that would not serve to guarantee its norm in advance but would follow excessively along to keep up with the measurable quantity of its vertiginous variances.

To Build the Tower

“Live in seclusion or open up to the other”: this was supposedly the only alternative for any population demanding the right to speak its own language. It is how inherited premises of centuries-old domination were given legitimacy. Either you speak a language that is “universal,” or on its way to being so, and participate in the life of the world; or else you retreat into your particular idiom—quite unfit for sharing—in which case you cut yourself off from the world to wallow alone and sterile in your so-called identity.

However, as populations became liberated from legal (if not actual) dependencies, the view emerged that it is the language of a community that controls the main vector of its cultural identity, which in turn determines the conditions of the community’s development. This viewpoint has been considered suspect and, more often than not, pernicious. During this same period all developmental processes became reduced to one exclusive type of perfection, that is, technological. Hence the puzzle: What is it that you are demanding when a language, one single language, would provide you with the key to progress?

Nations could have only one linguistic or cultural future—either this seclusion within a restrictive particularity or, conversely, dilution within a generalizing universal. This is a formidable construction, and the “oral genius” of peoples of the world urges us to burst our way out of it. The words of griots and storytellers washed up on the edges of large cities, and

eroded by second-rate forms of progress, still endure. Gradually, the governments of poor countries are coming to understand that there is no single, transcendent, and enforceable model for development.

In this explosion of incredible diversity, linguistic relations have become marked by creations springing from the friction between languages, by the give-and-take of sudden innovation (for example, initiatory street languages in southern countries), and by masses of generally accepted notions as well as passive prejudices.

The assumption that was, perhaps, most crucial concerned the hierarchical division into written and oral languages. The latter were crude, unsuited to conceptualization and the acquisition of learning, incapable of guaranteeing the transmission of knowledge. The former were civilizing and allowed man to transcend his natural state, inscribing him both in permanence and in evolution.

It is true that literacy is a matter of utmost urgency in the world and that, lacking other appropriate materials, this is usually accomplished in what are called communication, or vehicular, languages. But we have come to realize that all literal literacy needs to be buttressed by a cultural literacy that opens up possibilities and allows the revival of autonomous creative forces from within, and hence "inside," the language under consideration. Development thus has linguistic stakes, with consequences that can be neither codified nor predicted.

Relationships between languages that were supposedly transcendent because written and others long kept at a level referred to, with a hint of condescension, as "oral"—these relationships I described of suddenness, unplanned adaptation, or systematic apprenticeship—have been made even more complex by both political and economic oppression.

The relationship of domination, consequently, is the most blatant, gaining strength in technological expansion and generalizing a neutral uniformity. Dominated languages are thus

pigeonholed as folklore or technical irresponsibility. At this point a universal language, such as Esperanto, no matter how well thought out, is not the remedy. For any language that does not create, that does not hoe its own tuff, subtracts accordingly from the nongeneralizing universal.

The relationship of fascination has become, of course, less and less virulent, but it drove intellectual elites of "developing countries" to the reverent usage of a language of prestige that has only served them as self-improvement.

Relationships of multiplicity or contagion exist wherever mixtures explode into momentary flashes of creation, especially in the languages of young people. Purists grow indignant, and poets of Relation marvel at them. Linguistic borrowings are only injurious when they turn passive because they sanction some domination.

Relationships of polite subservience or mockery come about when frequent contact with tourist enclaves plays a substantial role, along with daily practices of subordination or domestic service. This tendency to promote the appearance of pidgins is swept aside by the politics of national education, when these are well conceived and carried to completion.

Relationships of tangency are by far the most insidious, appearing whenever there are composite languages, languages of compromise between two or more idioms—for example, the Creoles of francophone regions in the Americas or the Indian Ocean. Then the erosion of the new language must be forestalled, as it is eaten away from within through the mere weight of one of its components, which, meanwhile, becomes reinforced as an agent of domination.

Relationships of subversion exist when an entire community encourages some new and frequently antiestablishment usage of a language. English-speaking Caribbeans and blacks in the United States are two convincing examples in their use of the English language, as are the Quebecois in their appropriation of French.

Relationships of intolerance are seen, for example, in the teaching of a communication language. The language is

established once and for all in its (original) history and regarded as uncompromising toward those formidable contagions to which speakers or creators from elsewhere are likely to subject it. An "atavistic fluidity" in exercising a language is deemed indispensable to its perfection, resulting in the opinion that theories concerning its learning and teaching can only be developed in the "country of origin."

Oppositions between the written and the oral do not date from the recent past alone; they have long exercised their divisions within a given language voice [*langue*], Arabic for example, in which two separate orders of language use [*langage*]¹ for the community are designated: one learned and the other popular.

This is the case for monolingual countries with "internal" problems, in which these two usages—oral and written—introduce ruptures (through social discrimination, which deploys the rules of language usage). Other internal problems are linked, sometimes to the erosion of regional dialects inscribed within the language, sometimes to the difficulty of transcribing this language. This example provides a glimpse of the inexhaustible variety of linguistic situations—something far more unsettling than the number of spoken languages in the world.

Monolingual countries with "external" problems would be those in which a national language, the main form of communication, is threatened on an economic and cultural level by a foreign language.

In bilingual countries with internal problems there are two languages of wide communication that confront each other; each one is assumed by one portion of the community, which is destabilized in consequence.

In diglot countries one communication language tends to dominate or restrict one or several "mother tongues," vernaculars or composite languages whose tradition is oral—sometimes to the point of extinction. The tasks of fixing and transposing these languages then becomes critical. As schol-

ars take responsibility for them and everyone uses them, these languages will doubtless reinforce compromise solutions that will spread gradually according to systems of variables. One can expect the same urgent situation to apply to languages whose writing is not phonetic, even when vigorously backed by national unanimity.

In multilingual countries with no apparent problems there is a federative principle that tempers the relations among the languages in usage, which are usually vehicular.

There are some multilingual countries, on the other hand, in which the great number of mother tongues makes choice difficult, when it comes to deciding which is the official or national language.

All these situations intersect; they add up and thwart one another and go far beyond any conflict solely between the oral and the written. They are astounding indicators of the relations among peoples and cultures. Their complexity prohibits any summary or reductive evaluation concerning the strategies to be implemented. In global relations languages work, of course, in obedience to laws of economic and political domination but elude, nonetheless, any harsh and rigid long-term forecast.

This same complexity is what allows us to come out of seclusion. We stop believing that we are alone in the sufferings of our expression. We discover that it is the same for any number of other communities.* From that point on the idea grows that speaking one's language and opening up to the language of the other no longer form the basis for an alternative. "I speak to you in your language voice, and it is in my language use that I understand you." Creating in any given language thus assumes that one be inhabited by the impossi-

*To our astonishment we also discover people comfortably established within the placid body of their language, who cannot even comprehend that somewhere someone might experience an agony of language and who will tell you flat out, as they have in the United States, "That is not a problem."

ble desire for all the languages in the world. Totality calls out to us. Every work of literature today is inspired by it.²

The fact remains, nonetheless, that, when a people speaks its language or languages, it is above all free to produce through them at every level—free, that is, to make its relationship to the world concrete and visible for itself and for others.

The defense of languages assuring Diversity is thus inseparable from restabilizing relations among communities. How is it possible to come out of seclusion if only two or three languages continue to monopolize the irrefutable powers of technology and their manipulation, which are imposed as the sole path to salvation and energized by their actual effects? This dominant behavior blocks the flowering of imaginations, forbids one to be inspired by them, and confines the general mentality within the limits of a bias for technology as the only effective approach. The long-term remedy for such losses is to spell out over and over again the notion of an ethnotechnique, by means of which choices of development would be adapted to the real needs of a community and to the protected landscape of its surroundings. Nor is it certain that this will succeed, its prospects being very chancy; but it is urgent that we take this route. The promotion of languages is the first axiom of this ethnotechnique. And we know that, in the area of understanding, poetry—watch out for it!—has always been the consummate ethnotechnique. The defense of languages can come through poetry (also).

Moreover, the tendency of all cultures to meet in a single, identical perspective laid out by radio and television unleashes yet unimagined possibilities for sharing and equality. It is not a sure thing that languages with an oral tradition would start with a disadvantage in this encounter. Perhaps more supple and adaptable, they would lend themselves to change, all the more if the only other languages are those with a written tradition, which have become stiffened and

fixed over the centuries. Not long ago I learned of a project in which a Japanese computer company was investing considerable sums of money on a theoretical study of several African oral languages. Its intention was to explore the capacity of these languages to generate a new computer language and to provide broad-based support for new systems. The primary goal of this research was, of course, to capture a potential market in the twenty-first century, and it was motivated by competition from Anglo-American companies. Still, it should be noted how the most self-interested technology was thereby sanctioning not the (actual) liberation of the languages of orality, of course, but already their right to be recognized.

On the other side of the bitter struggles against domination and for the liberation of the imagination, there opens up a multiply dispersed zone in which we are gripped by vertigo. But this is not the vertigo preceding apocalypse and Babel's fall. It is the shiver of a beginning, confronted with extreme possibility. It is possible to build the Tower—in every language.

Transparency and Opacity

There still exist centers of domination, but it is generally acknowledged that there are no exclusive, lofty realms of learning or metropolises of knowledge left standing. Henceforward, this knowledge, composed of abstract generality and linked to the spirit of conquest and discovery, has the presence of human cultures in their solid materiality superimposed upon it. And knowledge, or at least the epistemology we produce for ourselves from it, has been changed by this. Its transparency, in fact, its legitimacy is no longer based on a Right.

Transparency no longer seems like the bottom of the mirror in which Western humanity reflected the world in its own image. There is opacity now at the bottom of the mirror, a whole alluvium deposited by populations, silt that is fertile but, in actual fact, indistinct and unexplored even today, denied or insulted more often than not, and with an insistent presence that we are incapable of not experiencing.

The recent history of the French language corresponds (and responds) to this trend. Because it lacks an anchor in areas of concrete and undisguised domination—the Anglo-American model—for some time now certain people have apparently pledged the French language to establishing a sort of semiconceptual dominance. It would thus maintain its transparency and contain the increasing opacity of the world within the limits of a well-phrased classicism, thereby perpetuating a lukewarm humanism, both colorless and reassuring.

All languages have to be defended, and therefore French (the language in which I create and, consequently, would not like to see stereotyped) must also be defended—against this sort of maladroit rearguard mission. Whether it is vehicular or not, a language that does not risk the disturbances arising from contact among cultures, and not ardently involved in the reflections generated by an equal relation with other languages, seems to me doomed to real impoverishment. It is true that the leveling effect of Anglo-American is a persistent threat for everyone and that this language, in turn, risks being transformed into a technical salesman's Esperanto, a perfunctory containerization of expression (neither Faulkner's nor Hopkins's language but not the language of London pubs or Bronx warehouses either). It is also true that the actual situation is that languages lacking the support of economic power and the competitive politics that convey this are slowly disappearing. The result is that the languages of the world, from the most prestigious to the humblest, have ended up backing the same demand, though general opinion has not yet caught up. They demand a change in ways of thinking, a break with the fatal trend to annihilate idioms, and they would grant to every language, whether powerful or not, vehicular or not, the space and means to hold its own within the total accord. It would be more beautiful to live in a symphony of languages than in some reduced universal monolingualism—neutral and standardized. There is one thing we can be sure of: a lingua franca (humanistic French, Anglo-American sabir, or Esperanto code) is always apoetical.

In the indeterminate context of the French-speaking communities we lump together as *la francophonie*, it was, therefore, an apparently simple notion to regard the French language as the a priori bearer of values that could help remedy the anarchistic tendencies of the various cultures that are, completely or partially, a product of its expression. *La francophonie* would be less what it claimed to be, an interdependent gathering of cultural convergences, than a sort of pre-

ventive medicine against cultural disintegrations and diffusions that were considered unfortunate. This is one way, at least, to analyze the discourse of a number of its early proponents.

According to this way of thinking, for example, the French language has always been inseparable from a pursuit of the dignity of mankind, insofar as man is conceived of as an irreducible entity. From this one could infer that French would thus make possible the lessening of certain angry resentments that are limiting and that have allegedly been observed in quests for identity currently taking place in the world. In a collective quest for identity—somehow now labeled the quest for ethnicity—sterile extremes would exist in which man, as an individual, would risk disappearing. Because the French language vouches for the dignity of the individual, the use of it would limit any such excesses on the part of the collectivity. In other words, this language would have a humanizing function supposedly inseparable from its very nature, which would serve as protection against the rash actions of an excessive collectivization of identity. In the present conceptual debate the French language, the language of the Rights of Man, would provide useful protection against excesses set in motion by the presuppositions of any proclamation of the Rights of Peoples. *La francophonie* would provide that transcendence by giving the correct version of humanism.

Another characteristic of the language would lie in its literary dedication to clarity, a mission that has led to its reputation for a pleasing rationality, which is, in fact, the guarantee of a legitimate pleasure to be had in the manipulation of a unity composed of consecutive, noncontradictory, concise statements.

The "essential" nature of literary language would preexist any of the felicitous or infelicitous accidents of its real, diversified cultural usages. (This literary mission repeats certain tactical approaches: the defense of languages is said to

be inscribed in the nature of the French language as defined here; it is a plural *francophonie*, or, as regards the Antilles and Indian Ocean, the speaking of Creole within a French-speaking population.) Looked at this way, French would represent not just what is common in various ways to the linguistic practice of the populations constituting francophone culture, it would also, in literature, or perhaps even in absolute terms, be what is given in advance. From this it takes no time to reach the conclusion that there is a "right" way to use the language. And the natural result will be scales of value to appraise usage in the French-speaking realm.* Language would reveal the differing degrees in this hierarchical organization.**

Neither its humanizing function, however (the famous universality of French as the bearer of humanism), nor its concordant predestination to be clear (its pleasurable rationality) stand up to examination. Languages have no mission. This is, however, the sort of learnedly dealt nonsense we have to struggle eternally against in a discourse depriving populations of cultural identity. An attentive observer will notice that such windbags are anxiously intent on confining themselves to the false transparency of a world they used to run; they do not want to enter into the penetrable opacity of a world in which one exists, or agrees to exist, with and among others. In the history of the language the claim that the conciseness of French is consecutive and noncontradictory is the veil obscuring and justifying this refusal. This is, in fact, a rearguard mission.

*Already a distinction is made between *la francophonie* of the north, the French spoken in France, Switzerland, Belgium, or Quebec; and *la francophonie* of the south, everything else.

**Specialists in francophone literatures do not always resist "comparing" the writers from these countries. This objectifying practice negates with one stroke the organic unity of our literatures for the benefit of the appreciation of the critic, who would never dare apply such methods to the French literary corpus.

Just as there is a right way to use the language, there would be a "correct" way to teach it. This notion has repercussions not just on the idea one has of the language but on the idea one forms of its relationship with other languages. Consequently, there are also repercussions on the theoretical apparatus set in place by disciplines pertaining to language usage, whether these are used to analyze languages or to translate from one to the other or to make learning a language possible.

If, however, we look at literary texts, which after all best delineate the image of a language, if not its function, and if we analyze how such texts are affected by language learning or translation (these being the two fundamental mechanisms of relational practice), ideas of transparency and opacity quite naturally present themselves as the critical approach.

The literary text plays the contradictory role of a producer of opacity.

Because the writer, entering the dense mass of his writings, renounces an absolute, his poetic intention, full of self-evidence and sublimity. Writing's relation to that absolute is relative; that is, it actually renders it opaque by realizing it in language. The text passes from a dreamed-of transparency to the opacity produced in words.

Because the written text opposes anything that might lead a reader to formulate the author's intention differently. At the same time he can only guess at the shape of this intention. The reader goes, or rather tries to go back, from the produced opacity to the transparency that he read into it.

Literary textual practice thus represents an opposition between two opacities: the irreducible opacity of the text, even when it is a matter of the most harmless sonnet, and the always evolving opacity of the author or a reader. Sometimes the latter becomes literally conscious of this opposition, in which case he describes the text as "difficult."

Both learning a language and translation have in common

the attempt to give "some transparency" back to a text. That is, they strive to bridge two series of opacities: in the case of language learning these would be the text and the novice reader confronting it, for whom any text is supposedly difficult. In the case of translation the transparency must provide a passage from a risky text to what is possible for another text.

Preferably, the literary works one chooses for learning a language are those best corresponding to what is assumed to be the pattern of the language, not the "easiest" works but ones supposedly having the least threatening opacity. This was true of texts by Albert Camus given to foreign students in France during the 1960s—a revealing instance of fundamental misinterpretation, since Camus's work only gave the appearance of being clear and straightforward. Language learning, whose main axiom was clarity, skipped right over the situational crisis that events in Algeria had formed in Camus and the echoes of this in the tight, feverish, and restrained structure of the style he had adopted to both confide and withdraw at the same time.

When it is a question of using a language, therefore, we must analyze the "situational competence" (to use an expression of Patrick Charaudeau's) of this language. Charaudeau showed how the preliminary stages of language learning consist of bringing the student to a state of "situational competence" in relation to the subject of the text he is tackling. Extending this notion from language learning to usage, I think that there is a global situational competence that the learner as well as the speaker or author needs to be aware of and that it concerns not a given text but the language itself: its situation within Relation, its precursors and its conceivable future.¹

So we must reevaluate vehicular languages, that is, the Western languages, which have spread practically everywhere in the world. Communities that are too "dense" to be considered as the linguistic margins of their languages'

countries of origin have adopted them in their diffusion. The United States is not considered peripheral to Great Britain (and neither is Australia or Canada); nor is Brazil peripheral in relation to Portugal nor Argentina nor Mexico in relation to Spain. Among these vehicular languages only French seems to have spread everywhere without really concentrating anywhere. French-speaking Belgium and Quebec are threatened, the Maghreb becomes more and more Arabic, the African states and francophone countries in the Caribbean do not carry sufficient weight, at least in political and economic terms. Moreover, as French spread, it simultaneously strengthened the illusion that its place of origin remained (even today) the privileged womb and promoted the belief that this language had some kind of universal value that had nothing whatsoever to do with the areas into which it had actually spread. Consequently, the situational competence of the language became overvalued and at the same time "upheld" in its place of origin. A generalizing universal is always ethnocentric. This movement, which is centripetal, is the opposite of the elementary, brutal expansion of Anglo-American, which doesn't bother itself with values or worry much about the future of the English language, as long as the sabir obtained in and through this expansion works to maintain actual domination. Imperialism (the thought as well as the reality of empire) does not conceive of anything universal but in every instance is a substitute for it.

We can see another difference in the relationship, whether manifest or latent, of these vehicular languages to the vernacular or composite or subversive languages with which they have been in contact. Attempts have been made to understand why, during European expansion in the Caribbean, only French gave rise to compromise languages—the francophone Creoles—that get away from it and at the same time remain dangerously close. Other languages that spread into these regions permitted only pidgins or sub-

versive practices inscribed within the language itself or distinctive features that only emphasized regional cultural characteristics, without, apparently, calling into question the organic unicity of each of these vehicular languages.* The result of this is that Spanish, for instance, really became the national language of Cubans and Colombians, with no spectacular problems or acknowledged conflicts. This did not happen with French. The language underwent far greater changes when it became Quebecois; it was not able to serve as an unproblematic national language for the states of former French-speaking Africa; nor—because of diglossia—could it “naturally” be the language of inspiration for the people of the Antilles or Réunion.**

Despite these differences in situation, one cannot help but notice that, in varying degrees of complexity, there exist several English, Spanish, or French languages (not counting the Anglo-American *sabir* that everybody readily uses). Whatever the degree of complexity, the one thing henceforth outmoded is the principle (if not the reality) of a language’s intangible unicity. Multiplicity has invaded vehicular languages and is an internal part of them from now on, even when—like Spanish—they seem to resist any centrifugal movement. What does this multiplicity consist of? The implicit renunciation of an arrogant, monolingual separateness and the temptation to participate in worldwide entanglement.

We can deduce three results of this: first, the bolstering of old oral, vernacular, or composite languages, their fixing and

*What I call Creole here (and contrary, perhaps, to the rules) is a language whose lexicon and syntax belong to two heterogeneous linguistic masses: Creole is a compromise. What I call pidgin is a lexical and syntactical reforming within the mass of a single language, with an aggressive will to deformation, which is what distinguishes pidgin from a dialect. Both practices are products of an active creolization.

**What I call diglossia (an idea that made its appearance in linguistics, though linguists say it doesn’t work) is the domination of one language over one or several others in the same region.

transcription, will necessarily be subjected to the hazards of this internal complexity that is now part of the system of languages. It would be almost futile and even dangerous to defend these languages from a monolingual point of view, because this would enclose them within an ideology and a practice that are already outmoded. Next, any method of learning or translation today has to take into account this internal multiplicity of languages, which goes even further than the old divisions of dialects that were peculiar to each language. Finally, and this observation is how the process operates, the share of opacity allotted to each language, whether vehicular or vernacular, dominating or dominated, is vastly increased by this new multiplicity. The situational competence of each of the languages of our world is overdetermined by the complexity of these relationships. The internal multiplicity of languages here confirms the reality of multilingualism and corresponds to it organically. Our poetics are overwhelmed by it.

It is, therefore, an anachronism, in applying teaching or translation techniques, to teach *the* French language or to translate into *the* French language. It is an epistemological anachronism, by means of which people continue to consider as classic, hence eternal, something that apparently does not “comprehend” opacity or tries to stand in the way of it. Whatever the craven purist may say (and he has neither Étiemble’s arguments nor his force of conviction, hunting down *sabirs*), there are several French languages today, and languages allow us to conceive of their unicity according to a new mode, in which French can no longer be monolingual. If language is given in advance, if it claims to have a mission, it misses out on the adventure and does not *catch on* in the world.

The same is true for those languages that are currently struggling inside the folklore pigeonhole. Through fixation and new methods of transcription they are trying to join into the baroque chorus, the violent and cunningly extended frame-

work of our intertextuality. But because intertextuality is neither fusion nor confusion, if it is to be fruitful and capable of transcendence, the languages that end up involved in it must first have been in charge of their own specificities. Consequently, it is all the more urgent to carefully untangle moments of diglossia. If one is in too much of a hurry to join the concert, there is a risk of mistaking as autonomous participation something that is only some disguised leftover of former alienations. Opacities must be preserved; an appetite for opportune obscurity in translation must be created; and falsely convenient vehicular sabirs must be relentlessly refuted. The framework is not made of transparency; and it is not enough to assert one's right to linguistic difference or, conversely, to interlexicality, to be sure of realizing them.

It would be worthwhile for someone who works with languages to reverse the order of questions and begin his approach by shedding light on the relations of language-culture-situation to the world. That is, by contemplating a poetics. Otherwise, he runs the risk of turning in circles within a code, whose fragile first stirrings he stubbornly insists on legitimizing, to establish the illusion that it is scientific, doing so at the very point in this concert that languages would already have slipped away toward other, fruitful and unpredictable controversies.

The Black Beach

The beach at Le Diamant on the southern coast of Martinique has a subterranean, cyclical life. During the rainy season, *hivernage*, it shrinks to a corridor of black sand that you would almost think had come from the slopes above, where Mont Pelée branches out into foliage of quelled lava. As if the sea kept alive some underground intercourse with the volcano's hidden fire. And I imagine those murky layers undulating along the sea floor, bringing to our airy regions a convoy of this substance of night and impassive ashes ripened by the harshness of the north.

Then the beach is whipped by a wind not felt on the body; it is a secret wind. High waves come in, lifting close to the shore, they form less than ten meters out, the green of *campêche* trees, and in this short distance they unleash their countless galaxies. Branches of manchineel and seagrape lie about in havoc, writing in the more peaceful sunlight a memoir of the night sea's work. Brown seaweed piled there by the invisible assault buries the line between sand and soil. Uprooted coconut palms have tumbled sideways like stricken bodies. Along their trail, all the way to the rocky mound marking the distant Morne Larcher, one can sense the power of a hurricane one knows will come.

Just as one knows that in *carême*, the dry season, this chaotic grandeur will be carried off, made evanescent by the return of white sand and slack seas. The edge of the sea thus represents the alternation (but one that is illegible) between

order and chaos. The established municipalities do their best to manage this constant movement between threatening excess and dreamy fragility.

The movement of the beach, this rhythmic rhetoric of a shore, do not seem to me gratuitous. They weave a circularity that draws me in.

This is where I first saw a ghostly young man go by; his tireless wandering traced a frontier between the land and water as invisible as floodtide at night. I'm not sure what he was called, because he no longer answered to any given name. One morning he started walking and began to pace up and down the shore. He refused to speak and no longer admitted the possibility of any language. His mother became desperate; his friends tried in vain to break down the barrier of total silence. He didn't get angry; he didn't smile; he would move vaguely when a car missed him by a hair or threatened to knock him down. He walked, pulling the belt of his pants up around his waist and wrapping it tighter as his body grew thinner and thinner. It doesn't feel right to have to represent someone so rigorously adrift, so I won't try to describe him. What I would like to show is the nature of this speechlessness. All the languages of the world had come to die here in the quiet, tortured rejection of what was going on all around him in this country: another constant downward drift yet one performed with an anxious satisfaction; the obtrusive sounds of an excitement that is not sure of itself, the pursuit of a happiness that is limited to shaky privileges, the imperceptible numbing effect of quarrels taken to represent a major battle. All this he rejected, casting us out to the edges of his silence.

I made an attempt to communicate with this absence. I respected his stubborn silence, but (frustrated by my inability to make myself "understood" or accepted) wanted nonetheless to establish some system of relation with this walker that was not based on words. Since he went back and forth with the regularity of a metronome in front of the little garden between our house and the beach, one day I called him

silently. I didn't exactly know what sign to make—it had to be something neither affected or condescending but also not critical or distant. That time he didn't answer, but the second or third time around (since without being insistent I was insisting) he replied with a sign that was minute, at least to my eyes; for this gesture was perhaps the utmost he was capable of expressing: "I understand what you are attempting to undertake. You are trying to find out why I walk like this—not-here. I accept your trying. But look around and see if it's worth explaining. Are you, yourself, worth my explaining this to you? So, let's leave it at that. We have gone as far as we can together." I was inordinately proud to have gotten this answer.

It was really a minute, imperceptible signal, sort of seesawing his barely lifted hand, and it became (because I adopted it as well) our sign of complicity. It seemed to me that we were perfecting this sign language, adding shades of all the possible meanings that chanced along. So until my departure we shared scraps of the language of gesture that Jean-Jacques Rousseau claimed preceded all spoken language.

I thought of the people struggling within this speck of the world against silence and obliteration. And of how they—in the obstinacy of their venture—have consented to being reduced to sectarianism, stereotyped discourse, zeal, to convey definitive truths, the appetite for power. And also of what Alain Gontrand has described so well as "our masquerades of temperament." I thought about those people throughout the rest of the world (and the rest, moreover, is what is on the move) who have not had the opportunity to take refuge, as this walker has, in absence—having been forced out by raw poverty, extortion, famines, or massacres. It is paradoxical that so many acts of violence everywhere produce language at its most rudimentary, if not the extinction of words. Is there no valid language for Chaos? Or does Chaos only produce a sort of language that reduces and annihilates? Does its echo recede into a sabir of sabirs at the level of a roar?

The beach, however, has confirmed its volcanic nature. The water now runs along the sea wall of rocks heaped there, a souvenir of former hurricane damage, Beulah or David. The black sand glistens under the foam like peeling skin. The shoreline is cornered, up among coconut palms that now stand in the sea, hailing with their foliage—so perfectly suited—the energy of the deep. We gauge the more and more drastic shrinkage as the winter season strengthens. Then, abruptly, at least for those of us attentive to such changes, the water subsides, daily creating a wider and wider grayish strip. Don't get the idea that this is a tide. But, still, it is on the ebb! The beach, as it broadens, is the precursor of a future *carême*.

It seemed to me that the silent walker accelerated the rhythm of his walks. And that exhilaration also infected the surrounding country. At all costs we wanted to imitate the motion we felt everywhere else, by synthesizing, agitating, and speeding everything up (noise, speech, things to eat and drink, *zouc*, automobiles). Forgetting ourselves any way possible in any kind of speed.

Then, in this circularity I haunt, I turned my efforts toward seeing the beach's backwash into the nearby eddying void as the equivalent of the circling of this man completely withdrawn into his motor forces; tried to relate them, and myself as well, to this rhythm of the world that we consent to without being able to measure or control its course. I thought how everywhere, and in how many different modes, it is the same necessity to fit into the chaotic drive of totality that is at work, despite being subjected to the exaltations or numbing effects of specific existences. I thought about these modes that are just so many commonplaces: the fear, the wasting away, the tortured extinction, the obstinate means of resistance, the naive belief, the famines that go unmentioned, the trepidation, the stubborn determination to learn, the imprisonments, the hopeless struggles, the withdrawal and isolation, the arrogant powers, the blind wealth, the maintenance of the status quo, the numbness, the hidden ideologies, the

flaunted ideologies, the crime, the whole mess, the ways of being racist, the slums, the sophisticated techniques, the simple games, the subtle games, the desertions and betrayals, the unshrinking lives, the schools that work, the schools in ruin, the power plots, the prizes for excellence, the children they shoot, the computers, the classrooms with neither paper nor pencils, the exacerbated starvation, the tracking of quarry, the strokes of luck, the ghettos, the assimilations, the immigrations, the Earth's illnesses, the religions, the mind's illnesses, the musics of passion, the rages of what we so simply call libido, the pleasures of our urges and athletic pleasures, and so many other infinite variations of life and death. That these commonplaces, whose quantities are both countless and precise, in fact produced this Roar, in which we could still hear intoned every language in the world. Chaos has no language but gives rise to quantifiable myriads of them. We puzzle out the cycle of their confluences, the tempo of their momentums, the similarities of their diversions.

The beach now undergoes tempestuous change. The sand is the color of confusion, neither dull nor bright, and yet it suits the quality of the atmosphere and wind. The sea is unseasonably foamy: one feels that it will soon subdue the attacks on shoaling rocks. It is haloed by flickering surfaces. As if this reality (the sand, the sea trees, the volcano's conductive water) organized its economy according to a cyclical plan, buttressed by disorder. Those fantastic projects set up every two years or so to save the country crossed my mind: every one of them determined by notions of subjection and inevitably destroyed, swallowed up by personal profit. I wondered whether, in little countries such as ours ("I believe in the future of little countries"), economic prospects (their inspiration) ought not to be more like the beach at Le Diamant: cyclical, changeable, mutating, running through an economy of disorder whose detail would be meticulously calculated but whose comprehensive view would change rapidly depending on different circumstances.

When, in fact, we list unmethodically some of the realms demonstrating every level of economic development in a country like this—the infrastructure and its maintenance, the terms of investment, the budget of the state (what state?), professional training, the search for prospects, energy sources (what sources?), unemployment, the will to create, Social Security coverage, taxes, union dialogue, the internal market, import-export, capital accumulation, the division of the national product (of what nation?)—every single one is in crisis, nonexistent, or impossible; not one has summoned its inspiration from independent political power; furthermore, all are products of structural disorder inherited from colonization, which no adjustment of parity (between the former colony and the former home country) and, moreover, no planning of an ideological order could ever remedy.

That is what we have to shake off. To return to the sources of our cultures and the mobility of their relational content, in order to have a better appreciation of this disorder and to modulate every action according to it. To adapt action to the various possibilities in turn: to the subsistence economy as it existed on the Plantation fringes; to a market economy as the contemporary world imposes it upon us; to a regional economy, in order to reunite with the reality of our Caribbean surroundings; and to a controlled economy whose forms have been suggested by what we have learned from the sciences.

To forsake the single perspective of an economy whose central mechanism is maximum subsidization, that has to be obtained at the whim of an other. Obsession with these subsidies year after year clots thought, paralyzes initiative, and tends to distribute the manna to the most exuberant, neglecting perhaps those who are the most effective.

An economy of disorder, which, I now recall, Marc Guillaume had turned into a completely different theory (*Éloge du désordre*, Gallimard, 1978), but perhaps it is one that would be akin to what Samir Amin said about autocentric economies. Madness! was my first thought. Then—madness!

they jeer. But this is madness made up of considerable possibilities of reflection for experts in the matter.

Here acceleration becomes the most important virtue. Not the deliberately forgetful haste prevailing everywhere but an intense acuteness of thought, quick to change its heading. The capability of varying speed and direction at any moment, without, however, changing its nature, its intention, or its will, might be perhaps the optimal principle for such an economic system. Course changes would be dependent on a harsh analysis of reality. As for steadfastness of intention and will, this we would forge as we come to know our cultures.

This acceleration and speed race across the Earth. “And yet, it does turn!” Galileo’s aside did not simply determine a new order in our knowledge of the stars; it prophesied the circularity of languages, the convergent speed of cultures, the autonomy (in relation to any dogma) of the resultant energy.

But, while I was wandering like this, a silence as dizzying as speed and disorder gradually rose from the uproar of the sea.

The voiceless man who walks keeps on carting his black sand from a distant volcano known only to himself, to the beaches he pretends to share with us. How can he run faster when he is growing so desperately thin? One of us whispers: “He goes faster and faster because if he stops, if he slows down—he will fall.”

We are not going any faster, we are all hurtling onward—for fear of falling.

ever, it is only the human imaginary that cannot be contaminated by its objects. Because it alone diversifies them infinitely yet brings them back, nonetheless, to a full burst of unity. The highest point of knowledge is always a poetics.

Distancing, Determining

Contemporary violence is the response societies make to the immediacy of contacts and is exacerbated by the brutality of the flash agents of Communication.¹ It is not all that easy to forego the comfortable expanses of time formerly allowing changes to occur imperceptibly. In cities this speed becomes concentrated, and the response explodes. These same mechanisms are at work both in cultures of intervention and in emerging cultures: New York or Lagos.* In the shantytowns and ghettos of even the smallest cities the same gears engage: the violence of poverty and mud but also an unconscious and desperate rage at not “grasping” [*com-prendre*] the chaos of the world. Those who dominate benefit from the chaos; those who are oppressed are exasperated by it.

This speeding up of relationships has repercussions on how the full-sense of identity is understood. The latter is no longer linked, except in an occasionally anachronistic or more often lethal manner, to the sacred mystery of the root. It depends on how a society participates in global relation, registers its speed, and controls its conveyance or doesn't. Identity is no longer just permanence; it is a capacity for variation, yes, a variable—either under control or wildly fluctuating.

The old idea of identity as root, whenever it proves hard to

*The cultures that I call “emerging” are those that do not have at their disposal the institutionalized—nor, for that matter, improvised—means of speaking up in the planetary flow of Communication.

define or impossible to maintain, leads inexorably to the refuges of generalization provided by the universal as value. This is how the elite populations in southern countries have usually reacted when choosing to renounce their own difficult definition. A generalizing universal reassures them.

Identity as a system of relation, as an aptitude for "giving-on-and-with" [*donner-avec*], is, in contrast, a form of violence that challenges the generalizing universal and necessitates even more stringent demands for specificity. But it is hard to keep in balance.* Why is there this paradox in Relation? Why the necessity to approach the specificities of communities as closely as possible? To cut down on the danger of being bogged down, diluted, or "arrested" in undifferentiated conglomerations.

But, in any case, the speed with which geocultural entities, aggregates formed through encounters and kinships, change in the world is relative. For example, there is a real situational community among the creolizing cultures of the Caribbean and those of the Indian Ocean (in Réunion or Seychelles). However, there is nothing to say that accelerated evolution will not soon entail equally powerful and decisive encounters between the Caribbean region and Brazil, or among the smaller Antillean islands (both French- and English-speaking), that will lead to the formation of new zones of relational community. It would not be possible to base ontological thinking on the existence of entities such as these, whose very nature is to vary tremendously within Relation. This variation is, on the contrary, evidence that ontological thought no longer "functions," no longer provides a founding certainty that is stock-still, once and for all, in a restrictive territory.

In such an evolution we are justified in maintaining the following principle: "Relation exists, especially as the particulars that are its interdependent constituent have first freed themselves from any approximation of dependency."

*There is a growing tendency in Western aesthetic theories, from ethnopoetics to geopoetics to cosmopoetics, to make some claim of going beyond notions or dimensions of identity.

Gradually, premonitions of the interdependence at work in the world today have replaced the ideologies of national independence that drove the struggles for decolonization. But the absolute presupposition of this interdependence is that instances of independence will be defined as closely as possible and actually won or sustained. Because it is only beneficial to all (it only stops being a pretext or ruse) at the point at which it governs the distancings that are determinant.

One of the most dramatic consequences of interdependence concerns the hazards of emigration. When identity is determined by a root, the emigrant is condemned (especially in the second generation) to being split and flattened. Usually an outcast in the place he has newly set anchor, he is forced into impossible attempts to reconcile his former and his present belonging.

Despite their French citizenship, most of the Antilleans who live in France, participating in the widespread movement of emigration into this country (North Africans, Portuguese, Senegalese, etc.), have not been spared this condition. It is through a rather impressive turnabout in history, in Martinique, that its leaders are now speaking up to suggest that it would not, after all, be such a bad thing to participate in a dignified manner in this citizenship.

Summarizing what we know concerning the varieties of identity, we arrive at the following:

Root identity

- is founded in the distant past in a vision, a myth of the creation of the world;
- is sanctified by the hidden violence of a filiation that strictly follows from this founding episode;
- is ratified by a claim to legitimacy that allows a community to proclaim its entitlement to the possession of a land, which thus becomes a territory;
- is preserved by being projected onto other territories,

making their conquest legitimate—and through the project of a discursive knowledge.

Root identity therefore rooted the thought of self and of territory and set in motion the thought of the other and of voyage.

Relation identity

- is linked not to a creation of the world but to the conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among cultures;
- is produced in the chaotic network of Relation and not in the hidden violence of filiation;
- does not devise any legitimacy as its guarantee of entitlement, but circulates, newly extended;
- does not think of a land as a territory from which to project toward other territories but as a place where one gives-on-and-with rather than grasps.

Relation identity exults the thought of errantry and of totality.

The shock of relating, hence, has repercussions on several levels. When secular cultures come into contact through their intolerances, the ensuing violence triggers mutual exclusions that are of a sacred nature and for which any future reconciliation is hard to foresee. When a culture that is expressly composite, such as the culture of Martinique, is touched by another (French) that “entered into” its composition and continues to determine it, not radically but through the erosion of assimilation, the violence of reaction is intermittent and unsure of itself. For the Martinican it has no solid rootstock in any sacred territory or filiation. This, indeed, is a case in which specificity is a strict requirement and must be defined as closely as possible. For this composite culture is fragile in the extreme, wearing down through contact with a masked colonization.

Consequently, wouldn't it be best just to go along with it? Wouldn't it be a viable solution to embellish the alienation,

to endure while comfortably receiving state assistance, with all the obvious guarantees implied in such a decision? This is what the technocratic elite, created for the management of decoy positions, have to talk themselves into before they convince the people of Martinique. Their task is all the less difficult since they use it to give themselves airs of conciliation, of cooperative humanism, of a realism anxious to make concrete improvements in circumstances. Not counting the pleasures of permissive consumption. Not counting the actual advantages of a special position, in which public funds (from France or Europe) serve to satisfy a rather large number of people (to the benefit, however, of French or European companies that are more and more visible in the country or castes of *békés* converted from former planters into a tertiary sector and thus won over to the ideas of this elite) and serve to foster the hopes of an even greater number.*

And it is true that in a context of this sort one spares oneself both the sacred violence, which is boundless, and the violence of absolute destitution, which is spreading with such lightning speed over half the planet. What remains here is only the suppressed and intermittent violence of a community convulsively demonstrating its sense of disquiet. What sense of disquiet? The one that comes from having to consume the world without participating in it, without even the least idea of it, without being able to offer it anything other than a vague homily to a generalizing universal. Privileged disquiet.

Traumatic reaction is not, however, the only form of resistance in Martinique. In a nonatavistic society of this sort three rallying points have grown in strength: relationship with the natural surroundings, the Caribbean; defense of the

*This year (1990) Martinique, which is an underdeveloped country with 40 percent unemployment, consumed 1.3 tons of Iranian caviar (imported from France) and forty million francs' worth of champagne; there are 173,000 cars registered for its 320,000 inhabitants. As the television newscaster, in a felicitous commentary on these figures, said, “We'll do better next year!”

people's language, Creole; protection of the land, by mobilizing everyone. Three modes of existence that challenge the establishment (three cultural reflexes that are not without ambiguity themselves), that do not link, however, the severe demand for specificity to the intolerance of a root but, rather, to an ecological vision of Relation.

Ecology, going above and beyond its concerns with what we call the environment, seems to us to represent mankind's drive to extend to the planet Earth the former sacred thought of Territory. Thus, it has a double orientation: either it can be conceived of as a by-product of this sacred and in this case be experienced as mysticism, or else this extending thought will bear the germ of criticism of territorial thought (of its sacredness and exclusiveness), so that ecology will then act as politics.

The politics of ecology has implications for populations that are decimated or threatened with disappearance as a people. For, far from consenting to sacred intolerance, it is a driving force for the relational interdependence of all lands, of the whole Earth. It is this very interdependence that forms the basis for entitlement. Other factors become null and void.

Concerning the Antilles, for example, there is a lot of discussion concerning the legitimacy of land "possession." According to the mysterious laws of rootedness (of filiation), the only "possessors" of the Archipelago would be the Caribs or their predecessors, who have been exterminated. The restrictive force of the sacred always tends to seek out the first occupants of a territory (those closest to an original "creation"). So, in the Caribbean would this be Caribs and Arawaks or other older and, consequently, more legitimate and "determining" populations? The massacre of the Indians, uprooting the sacred, has already invalidated this futile search. Once that had happened, Antillean soil could not become a territory but, rather, a rhizomed land. Indeed, Martinican soil does not belong as a rooted absolute either to the

descendants of deported Africans or to the *békés* or to the Hindus or to the mulattoes. But the consequences of European expansion (extermination of the Pre-Columbians, importation of new populations) is precisely what forms the basis for a new relationship with the land: not the absolute ontological possession regarded as sacred but the complicity of relation. Those who have endured the land's constraint, who are perhaps mistrustful of it, who have perhaps attempted to escape it to forget their slavery, have also begun to foster these new connections with it, in which the sacred intolerance of the root, with its sectarian exclusiveness, has no longer any share.

Ecological mysticism relies on this intolerance. A reactionary, that is to say infertile, way of thinking about the Earth, it would almost be akin to the "return to the land" championed by Pétain, whose only instinct was to reactivate the forces of tradition and abdication while at the same time appealing to a withdrawal reflex.

In Western countries these two ecological options (political and mystical) come together in action. Still, one cannot ignore the differences that drive them. Not acknowledging these differences in our countries predisposes us in favor of mimetic practices that are either quite simply imported because of the pressures of Western opinion or else the baggage of standardized fashion, such as jogging and hiking.

We end up every time with the following axiom—one not given in advance: Pronouncing one's specificity is not enough if one is to escape the lethal, indistinct confusion of assimilations; this specificity still has to be put into action before consenting to any outcome.

But the axiom, though not a priori, is unbending when applied. A perilous equilibrium exists between self-knowledge and another's practice. If we are to renounce intolerances, why hold out against outright consent? And, if we are to follow our freedom to its "logical consequences," why not have the right to confirm it in a radical negation of the Other?

These dilemmas have their own particular areas of application to govern. Such as the need for poor countries to exercise self-sufficiency that is economically and physically sustaining. Such as the definition of how forms of independence are experienced or hoped for. Such as the putting into practice of ethnotechnology as an instrument of self-sufficiency. Never have obligations been so chancy in reality.

To oppose the disturbing affective standardization of peoples, whose affect has been diverted by the processes and products of international exchange, either consented to or imposed, it is necessary to renew the visions and aesthetics of relating to the earth.

But, since sensibilities have already been diverted widely by these processes of exchange, it will not be easy to get anyone to replace products bearing an intense relational charge, such as Coca-Cola, wheat bread, or dairy butter with yams, breadfruit or a revived production of *madou*, *mabi* or any other "local" products. All the more since products of this sort, whose excellence depends on their fragility, do not tend to keep well, which is one of the secrets of large-scale commerce. Standardization of taste is "managed" by the industrial powers.

There are plenty of native Martinicans who will confess that when they were children they used to hate breadfruit (a staple vegetable and, therefore, intimately associated with the idea of poverty and the reality of destitution). Then the reverse has become true with age, especially for those who have lived for a long time away from the island—they have acquired a lasting taste for it. Any survey taken would show the same to be true today for most of the children in Martinique. With a fierce "tchip!" of the lips, children reject even the thought of breadfruit and relish the idea of dried sausage. In countries in which imports reign, childhood is the first deportee.

I made note of someone who, claiming to criticize novelists from Martinique whose vision of reality is expressed in

the poetics of a language irrigated by Creole, spoke disdainfully of "*dachinisme*" (from the word *dachine* [dasheen], or Chinese cabbage, another local vegetable). Thus, the same negativity is used to punish any production that does not consent to international standardization or conform to the generalizing universal.

In rich nations, in which imports are balanced with more or less difficulty by exports and in which, consequently, foreign goods offered for consumption are exchanged more or less indirectly against local production, it is easier to maintain equilibrium between the levels. The international product has a less severe impact on sensibilities; "desire" for it is not so implacable.

In poor countries any appeal for self-sufficiency grounded solely in economics and good sense is doomed to failure. Good sense is of no consequence in the tangle of world Relation. Sensibilities have become so profoundly contaminated, in most cases, and the habit of material comfort is so well established, even in the midst of the greatest poverty, that political dictates or proclamations are inadequate remedies. Here, as elsewhere, one must figure out how much we have to consent to the planetary evolution toward standardization of consumer products (the present course in Martinique, with French products widely imported) and how much we should push for invention and a new sensibility in association with "national" products.

This is where the imagination and expression of an aesthetics of the earth—freed from quaint naïveté, to rhizome instead throughout our cultures' understanding—become indispensable.

It is certainly true that we do not work the land, are no longer the country people we used to be, with our same old instinctive patience. Too many international parameters come into this relationship. A man involved in agriculture is inevitably a man involved in culture: he can no longer produce innocently.

Daily we hear about how occupations connected with the land are among the sorriest that exist. The farmer's traditional solitude has become exacerbated by the embarrassed thought that his work is anachronistic, in developed countries, or pathetic, in poor countries. In the former he struggles against productivity, taxes, markets, and surplus; in the latter against dust, the lack of tools, epidemics, and shortages. Both here and there the display of technological wealth overwhelms him. It would be obnoxious to indulge in idiotic praise of the peasantry when it is going downhill this way everywhere. Will it die, or will it be transformed into a reserve labor force for advanced techniques?

It is said—a commonplace—that the future of humanity is at stake, unless, before extinction, such techniques make possible the massive production of artificial foods that would take care of the richest. Picture an uncultivated land when the factories producing synthetics have provided enough for the stomachs of the chosen few. It would only be used for leisure, for a kind of Voyage in which seeking and knowledge would have no place at all. It would become scenery. That is what would happen to our countries, since it is entirely possible that the aforesaid factories would never be located in them (unless they are really responsible for producing too much waste). We would inhabit Museums of Natural Non-History. Reactivating an aesthetics of the earth will perhaps help differ this nightmare, air-conditioned or not.

This trend toward international standardization of consumption will not be reversed unless we make drastic changes in the diverse sensibilities of communities by putting forward the prospect—or at least the possibility—of this revived aesthetic connection with the earth.

How can such a poetics be resuscitated, when its mind-set drifts between the obsolete mysticism that we noted and the mockery of production that is emerging everywhere? An aesthetics of the earth seems, as always, anachronistic or naive: reactionary or sterile.

But we must get beyond this seemingly impossible task. If we don't, all the prestige (and denaturation) felt in internationally standardized consumption will triumph permanently over the pleasure of consuming one's own product. The problem is that these denaturations create imbalance and dry things up. Understood in its full-sense, passion for the land where one lives is a start, an action we must endlessly risk.

An aesthetics of the earth? In the half-starved dust of Africas? In the mud of flooded Asias? In epidemics, masked forms of exploitation, flies buzz-bombing the skeleton skins of children? In the frozen silence of the Andes? In the rains uprooting *favelas* and shantytowns? In the scrub and scree of Bantu lands? In flowers encircling necks and ukuleles? In mud huts crowning goldmines? In city sewers? In haggard aboriginal wind? In red-light districts? In drunken indiscriminate consumption? In the noose? The cabin? Night with no candle?

Yes. But an aesthetics of disruption and intrusion. Finding the fever of passion for the ideas of "environment" (which I call surroundings) and "ecology," both apparently such futile notions in these landscapes of desolation. Imagining the idea of love of the earth—so ridiculously inadequate or else frequently the basis for such sectarian intolerance—with all the strength of charcoal fires or sweet syrup.

Aesthetics of rupture and connection.

Because that is the crux of it, and almost everything is said in pointing out that under no circumstances could it ever be a question of transforming land into territory again. Territory is the basis for conquest. Territory requires that filiation be planted and legitimated. Territory is defined by its limits, and they must be expanded. A land henceforth has no limits. That is the reason it is worth defending against every form of alienation.

Aesthetics of a variable continuum, of an invariant discontinuum.

Self-sufficiency can be worked out. With the sole condition that it not end up in the exclusivity of territory. A necessary condition but not enough to incite the radicalities capable of saving us from ambiguity, rallied together within a landscape—reforming our taste, without our having to force ourselves into it.

Thus, within the pitiless panorama of the worldwide commercial market, we debate our problems. No matter where you are or what government brings you together into a community, the forces of this market are going to find you. If there is profit to be made, they will deal with you. These are not vague forces that you might accommodate out of politeness; these are hidden forces of inexorable logic that must be answered with the total logic of your behavior. For example, one could not accept state assistance and at the same time pretend to oppose it. You must choose your bearing. And, to get back to the question raised earlier, simply consenting would not be worth it, in any case. Contradiction would knot the community (which ceases to be one) with impossibilities, profoundly destabilizing it. The entire country would become a Plantation, believing it operates with freedom of decision but, in fact, being outer directed. The exchange of goods (in this case in Martinique: the exchange of imported public money against exported private profit) is the rule. Bustling commerce only confirms the fragmentation and opposition to change. Minds get used up in this superficial comfort, which has cost them an unconscious, enervating braining.

This is the dilemma to be resolved. We have learned that peremptory declarations, grounded in the old Manichaeism of liberation, are of no use here, because they only contribute to reinforcing a stereotypical language with no hold in reality. These are all liabilities whose dialectics must first be either realized or bypassed.

Thinking, for example, that ethnotechnology would save us from excessive importation, protect the vivid physical quality of the country, find an equilibrium for our drive to con-

sume, and cement links among all the individuals concerned with producing and creating amounts to saying that we would return to a pretechnical, artisan level, elevated to the rank of a system, leaving it to others to take care of providing us with the spin-off from their dizzying experiments, making us admire from afar the achievements of their science, and renting us (but under what conditions) the fruits of their industry. Have something to exchange that isn't just sand and coconut trees but, instead, the result of our creative activity. Integrate what we have, even if it is sea and sun, with the adventure of a culture that is ours to share and for which we take responsibility.

There is no value to practicing self-sufficiency, or consenting to interdependence, or mastering ethnotechnology, unless these processes constitute both distancings from and accord with (and in relation to) their referent: the multiform elsewhere always set forth as a monolithic necessity in any country that is dominated.

We struggle against our problems, without knowing that throughout the world they are widespread. There is no place that does not have its elsewhere. No place where this is not an essential dilemma. No place where it is not necessary to come as close as possible to figuring out this dialectic of interdependencies or this difficult necessity for ethnotechniques.

The massive and diffracted confluence of cultures thus makes every distancing (from a suggested or imposed pre-norm) be determinant but also makes every (self-)determination be a generative distancing.

Now let us try to summarize the things we don't yet know, the things we have no current means of knowing, concerning all the singularities, all the trajectories, all the histories, all the forms of denaturation, and all the syntheses that are at work or that have resulted from our confluences. How have cultures—Chinese or Basque, Indian or Inuit, Polynesian or Alpine—made their way to us, and how have we reached them? What remains to us of all the vanished cultures, col-

lapsed or exterminated, and in what form? What is our experience, even now, of the pressure of dominant cultures? Through what fantastic accumulations of how many existences, both individual and collective? Let us try to calculate the result of all that. We will be incapable of doing so. Our experience of this confluence will forever be only one part of its totality.

No matter how many studies and references we accumulate (though it is our profession to carry out such things), we will never reach the end of such a volume; knowing this in advance makes it possible for us to dwell there. Not knowing this totality is not a weakness. Not wanting to know it certainly is. Consequently, we imagine it through a poetics: this imaginary realm provides the full-sense of all these always decisive differentiations. A lack of this poetics, its absence or its negation, would constitute a failing.*

Similarly, thought of the Other is sterile without the other of Thought.

Thought of the Other is the moral generosity disposing me to accept the principle of alterity, to conceive of the world as not simple and straightforward, with only one truth—mine. But thought of the Other can dwell within me without making me alter course, without “prizing me open,” without changing me within myself. An ethical principle, it is enough that I not violate it.

The other of Thought is precisely this altering. Then I have to act. That is the moment I change my thought, without renouncing its contribution. I change, and I exchange.

*I see the extent to which this imaginary appears to me to have a certain form in space: I spoke of circularity (imitating, perhaps, those curvatures of space-time that Einstein invented) and of volume, the spherical nature of concepts, of various poetics and the realities of the *chaos-monde*, all of which reconstitutes (for me) the image of the mother planet, an Earth that would be primordial. But mothering is excluded from this symbolic system—at least, I believe that it is. As well as the idea (so dear to Aristotle and Ptolemy) of a perfection in circularity.

This is an aesthetics of turbulence whose corresponding ethics is not provided in advance.

If, thus, we allow that an aesthetics is an art of conceiving, imagining, and acting, the other of Thought is the aesthetics implemented by me and by you to join the dynamics to which we are to contribute. This is the part fallen to me in an aesthetics of chaos, the work I am to undertake, the road I am to travel. Thought of the Other is occasionally presupposed by dominant populations, but with an utterly sovereign power, or proposed until it hurts by those under them, who set themselves free. The other of Thought is always set in motion by its confluences as a whole, in which each is changed by and changes the other.

Common sense tells us that the world through which we move is so profoundly disturbed (most would call it crazy) and has such direct repercussions on each one of us that some are obliged to exist in absolute misery and others in a sort of generalized suspension. We line one day up after the other, day after day, as if the world did not exist, though daily it seeks us out with such violence. Yes, we act as if. For if we stopped to think about it really we would let everything go. A commonplace—one I have heard so often repeated.

To suspend the suspense we have recourse to this imaginary construct of totality, by means of which we transmute for ourselves this mad state of the world into a chaos that we are able to contemplate. An imaginary rekindled by the other of Thought. A distancing in relation to the predetermined or imposed norm but also perhaps in relation to the norms or beliefs that we have passively inherited. How can we put this distancing into practice if we have not fully mastered beforehand the things that are ours or part of us? Dependencies are infirmities of Relation, obstacles to the hard work of its entanglement. Independencies, for the same reasons, despite being uncomfortable or precarious, are always worth something.

The suffering of human cultures does not confine us permanently within a mute actuality, mere presence grievously closed. Sometimes this suffering authorizes an absence that constitutes release, soaring over: thought rising from the prisms of poverty, unfurling its own opaque violence, that gives-on-and-with every violence of contact between cultures. The most peaceful thought is, thus, in its turn a violence, when it imagines the risky processes of Relation yet nonetheless avoids the always comfortable trap of generalization. This antiviolence violence is no trivial thing; it is opening and creation. It adds a full-sense to the operative violence of those on the margins, the rebels, the deviants, all specialists in distancing.

The marginal and the deviant sense in advance the shock of cultures; they live its future excess. The rebel paves the way for such a shock, or at least its legibility, by refusing to be cramped by any tradition at all, even when the force of his rebellion comes from the defense of a tradition that is ridiculed or oppressed by another tradition that simply has more powerful means of action. The rebel defends his right to do his own surpassing; the lives of marginal and deviant persons take this right to extremes.

We have not yet begun to imagine or figure out the results of all the distancings that are determinant. They have emerged from everywhere, bearing every tradition and the surpassing of them all, in a confluence that does away with trajectories (itineraries), all the while realizing them in the end.

Though the cultural contacts of the moment are terrifyingly "immediate," another vast expanse of time looms before us, nonetheless: it is what will be necessary to counterbalance specific situations, to defuse oppressions, to assemble the poetics. This time to come seems as infinite as galactic spaces.

Meanwhile, contemporary violence is one of the logics—organic—of the turbulence of the *chaos-monde*. This violence

is what instinctively opposes any thought intending to make this chaos monolithic, grasping it to control it.

Distancings are necessary to Relation and depend on it: like the coexistence of sea olive and manchineel.

Relinked, (Relayed), Related

1

It would be impossible to maintain that each particular culture constitutes a prime element among all those activated in Relation, since the latter defines the elements thus at stake, and at the same time it affects (changes) them. Nor could it be asserted that each particular culture is plainly knowable in its particularity, since its proper limit is not discernible in Relation.

Each particular culture is impelled by the knowledge of its particularity, but this knowledge is boundless. By the same token one cannot break each particular culture down into prime elements, since its limit is not defined and since Relation functions both in this internal relationship (that of each culture to its components) and, at the same time, in an external relationship (that of this culture to others that affect it).

Definition of the internal relationship is never-ending, in other words unrecognizable in turn, because the components of a culture, even when located, cannot be reduced to the indivisibility of prime elements. But such a definition is a working model. It allows us to imagine.

Definition of the external relationship could be infinitely analyzed as well, because, not being plainly composed of prime—indivisible—elements, no particular culture in turn

can be considered as a prime element in Relation. The result is that we come back to our original propositions, completing the circle—the round—of our space-time. Paradoxically, every breakthrough toward a definition of this external relationship (between cultures) permits us a better approach to the components of each of the particular cultures considered.

Analysis helps us to imagine better; the imaginary then helps us to grasp the (not prime) elements of our totality.

Case by case and society after society, the humanities, from anthropology to sociology, have studied these structural components and dynamic relationships. But none of these disciplines forms any conception of the overall rhythm, though without their work this would be inaccessible.

If we carry over these two movements (internal and external relationship) to certain presuppositions of thought, the assessment, perhaps, will be that the former is determined by something related to the physical nature of beings, whereas the latter would follow a course that amounts to an approach to Being.

The internal relay would be massive, operating directly, whereas the external relation would be evasive (expanded), too swift in any case for any possibility of grasping its laws of operation at the moment that they apply.

We shall guard against suggesting, parabolically, that beings would be solid and Being volatile nor that a variable mass of beings would assume, in contrast, the infinity of Being. We must, rather, abandon this apposition of Being and beings: renounce the fruitful maxim whereby Being is relation, to consider that Relation alone is relation.

But Relation is not to be confused with the cultures we are discussing nor with the economy of their internal relationships nor with the projection of their external relationships nor even with the intangible results of the intricate involvement of all internal relationships with all possible external

relationships. Nor is it to be confused with some marvelous accident that might suddenly occur apart from any relationship, the known unknown, in which chance would be the magnet. Relation is all these things at once.

The genesis of a particular culture could be grasped and its specificity approached without having to be defined. The genesis of Relation cannot be approached, whereas the definition of it can be, if not decided, at least imagined.

If one misjudged the intensity of the particularity of a culture, if one meant to deny the particular value of any culture, for example, in the name of the universality of an All, the implication would be either that Relation has its principle in itself (it would be the universal in-itself and only that) or else that it relays afferents providing one another with mutual reference and consequently leading not to totality but to the totalitarian.

The totalitarian is introduced into relation on the basis of some nonprime element (violence, for example, or race) whose definition is overdetermined but knowledge of which, nonetheless, has limits. This totalitarian relation is, in turn, approachable, but its definition cannot be imagined. Because one cannot imagine a relation—open—among elements the knowledge of which has boundaries. Totality, on the other hand, like Relation, is not approached, but its definition is imaginable.

The difference between Relation and totality lies in the fact that Relation is active within itself, whereas totality, already in its very concept, is in danger of immobility. Relation is open totality; totality would be relation at rest. Totality is virtual. Actually, only rest could, in itself, be legitimately or totally virtual. For movement is precisely that which realizes itself absolutely. Relation is movement.

Not only does Relation not base its principles on itself (rather with and through the elements whose relationship it con-

ducts), but also these principles must be supposed to change as rapidly as the elements thus put into play define (embody) new relationships and change them.

Let us repeat this, chaotically: Relation neither relays nor links afferents that can be assimilated or allied only in their principle, for the simple reason that it always differentiates among them concretely and diverts them from the totalitarian—because its work always changes all the elements composing it and, consequently, the resulting relationship, which then changes them all over again.

2

Relation, as we have emphasized, does not act upon prime elements that are separable or reducible. If this were true, it would itself be reduced to some mechanics capable of being taken apart or reproduced. It does not precede itself in its action and presupposes no a priori. It is the boundless effort of the world: to become realized in its totality, that is, to evade rest. One does not first enter Relation, as one might enter a religion. One does not first conceive of it the way we have expected to conceive of Being.

3

The thing that makes the understanding of every culture limitless is precisely the thing that allows us to imagine, without

approaching it, the infinite interaction of cultures. Magma in profusion, tending to empty all thought of ideology, which is considered inapplicable to such an amalgam. Collective drives tend more toward the literal and utilitarian (the reassuring heft of concrete results promoted to the dignity of a value) or toward the providential and ideal (the reassuring determination of a cause or hero making choices for you). Literal and ideal make good company for each other.

Repressed in this manner, ideological thought (the need to analyze, understand, transform) invents new forms for itself and plays tricks with profusion: it projects itself into futurology, which also has no limits. It attempts, for example, to create a synthesis with likely applications from the sciences, which gradually leads into theories of model making. The models claim to base the matter of Relation in relationships; in other words, they claim to catch its movement in the act and then translate this in terms of dynamic or energized structures.

Thus, ideological thought and structural thought come together in their use of models to protest against the amalgam's mixing action. Making models is a (generalizing) attempt to get beyond the transient currency of fashion and the falsely definitive obviousness of the commonplace.

4

Relation relinks (relays), relates. Domination and resistance, osmosis and withdrawal, the consent to dominating language (*langage*) and defense of dominated languages (*langues*).¹ They do not add up to anything clearcut or easily perceptible with any certainty. The relinked (relayed), the related, cannot be combined conclusively. Their mixing in nonappear-

ance (or depth) shows nothing revealing on the surface. This revealer is set astir when the poetics of Relation calls upon the imagination. What best emerges from Relation is what one senses.

By the same token, whenever we try to analyze Relation, the analysis as such being in turn an element of relation, it seems pointless to grant every new proposition in a succession of convincing examples. The example only bears a relationship to one element of a multiple whose parts are in harmony with and repel one another in many areas at once. Choosing one example (introducing it as evidence, using it for demonstration) also unduly privileges one of these areas: misperceiving relationship within Relation.

The accumulation of examples is reassuring to us but is outside of any claim to system. Relation cannot be "proved," because its totality is not approachable. But it can be imagined, conceivable in transport of thought. The accumulation of examples aims at perfecting a never complete description of the processes of relation, not circumscribing them or giving legitimacy to some impossible global truth. In this sense the most harmonious analysis is the one that poetically describes flying or diving. Description is no proof; it simply adds something to Relation insofar as the latter is a synthesis-gensis that never is complete.

5

Cultures coincide in the historic precipitousness (the confluence of histories) that has become their commonplace. There is no point now to the vast expanses of time (let us get back to this) that formerly allowed slow, deep sedimentations to accumulate gradually. They used to authorize,

unheeded, thus all the more decisive contacts whose quality of interrelation was not immediately foreseeable or measurable, in the same way that haste today distracts us, spreading out before our eyes the networks of causality whose workings we might have been able to discover. The results of unheeded contact became as essential as original elements, just as if only the internal movement of a particular culture had caused them—an infinite and undefinable movement.

Industrialized nations have long beat time for this precipitousness, determining its speed and giving rhythm to trends, through the control they exert over modes of power and means of communication. The situation worldwide "integrates" cultures becoming exhausted by this speed and others that are stuck somewhere off by themselves. The latter are kept in a state of sluggish, passive receptivity in which fantasies of spectacular development and overwhelming consumption remain fantasies.

An important principle of the process of interaction is that its force lines can be reported without the report ever having any effect. Contemporary flash agents (radios, newspapers, televisions, films, and their by-products) have long ceased to be capable of producing such effects, but this is because they spread the radiance of their own dazzle, which is only the reflection of force lines that go unnoticed. For that matter this is possibly the quickest route to identifying the lines of force thus revealed (identification being made not through reflection but through the sort of diffracted provocation that is the mark of these agents).

What is apparently an infinite regression (the accumulation of commonplaces that are publicly shared and celebrated in ephemeral rituals) thus withstands the presumed barbaric nature of fashion but at the same time delineates the evolving depth of Relation. It is no longer easy to spot the possible influence of any group of individuals or works belonging to an "elite," except at the limited stage of some technical or scientific specialization that is tacitly recognized

without verification. Proof by elite has ceased to count. The enormous divagation replacing it leaves no time for retreat or re-seizure.

Such an analysis, whose gears start to engage at the place where flash agents are generated (roughly, the industrialized countries), is absolutely valid for those subjected to its imposition (roughly, the countries existing in absolute poverty).

We will never be able to list all the commonplaces echoing throughout Relation: an idea rerun across many, in principle, heterogeneous fields; repetitions (in a rudimentary and caricatural but immediately triumphant form) by flash agents of some reflected-upon information, which moreover had gone under and vanished just because it was a reflection, that is, suspiciously deep; baroque assemblages of force lines that intensify in unexpected places, etc.

The commonplace (defined as the manifestation by some flash agent of a major, latent, or unsuspected line of force) thus immediately acquires a neutral power whose side effects are spectacle and swift passage. Even the very notion of fashion is outrun at this speed. Indeed, what we have is a sequence of moments of inebriation whose sense no fashion could fathom. Commonplaces are rambling, ephemeral particles within communication, this cold nodule; all the ideas are in the air, but it is the public manifestation of these (pushed, whenever possible, to the limit or simplified) that counts. (Thus, the commonplace, *lieu-commun*, with its hyphen in French between the two terms articulating and constituting it, is the spectacular manifestation of this open and mysterious poetic necessity—the common place.)² What is public, therefore, is first spectacular. The conclusion is immediately obvious: the cultures apart,* who are receivers of this manifestation of the spectacular but not its generators, have no thought that counts.

A particular culture can pretend to function off on the
*Apart is not the same as what was formerly peripheral: it refers to de facto dependence, no longer a dependence by Law.

sidelines (because of being cut off from relay lines or because it has no flash agents or because it chose, defining its own dazzle to scorn such lines), but it nonetheless plays a part—because things couldn't be otherwise—as an active relay of Relation.

The relaying action of cultures does not depend on their will or even their power to relay. The consequences of the succession of relays go beyond the occasion of the first relay, or the original relay, which claimed to have started it all. The inadequacy of this claim is revealed when the sequence stops or becomes realized in another area or another cycle. This is why Relation, which is the world's newness, drives every possible fashion faster and faster. In contrast with the parade of fashions, Relation does not present itself as anything new. Indiscriminately, it is newness.

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Any presence—even though it is ignored—of a particular culture, even a silent one, is an active relay in Relation. Could passive relays exist? Of course not, but in any case there are neutral relays. A factor that is consumed in its own dazzle: the intervention of one State on the territory of another, genocide, the universal triumph of a way of life, generalization of a standardized product, humanitarian aid, an international institution, commercial exchange on a large or small scale, the ritual demonstration of sports gatherings, the great planetary swell of gut-wrenching music. . . . All these are direct agents, in fact, but ones whose relay is not directly perceived to the extent that what is spectacular about the agent overrides the continuum of its effect, and masks it through the very organization of its spectacle. The difficulty one has in

For Opacity

Several years back, if I made the statement, "We demand the right to opacity," or argued in favor of this, whoever I was speaking to would exclaim indignantly: "Now it's back to barbarism! How can you communicate with what you don't understand?" But in 1989, and before very diverse audiences, when the same demand was formulated, it aroused new interest. Who knows? Maybe, in the meanwhile, the topicality of the question of differences (the right to difference) had been exhausted.

The theory of difference is invaluable. It has allowed us to struggle against the reductive thought produced, in genetics for example, by the presumption of racial excellence or superiority. Albert Jacquard (*Éloge de la différence*, Éditions du Seuil, 1978) dismantled the mechanisms of this barbaric notion and demonstrated how ridiculous it was to claim a "scientific" basis for them. (I call the reversal and exasperation of self barbaric and just as inconceivable as the cruel results of these mechanisms.) This theory has also made it possible to take in, perhaps, not their existence but at least the rightful entitlement to recognition of the minorities swarming throughout the world and the defense of their status. (I call "rightful" the escape far from any legitimacy anchored silently or resolutely in possession and conquest.)

But difference itself can still contrive to reduce things to the Transparent.

If we examine the process of "understanding" people and

ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce.¹

Accepting differences does, of course, upset the hierarchy of this scale. I understand your difference, or in other words, without creating a hierarchy, I relate it to my norm. I admit you to existence, within my system. I create you afresh. —But perhaps we need to bring an end to the very notion of a scale. Displace all reduction.

Agree not merely to the right to difference but, carrying this further, agree also to the right to opacity that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity. Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components. For the time being, perhaps, give up this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures. There would be something great and noble about initiating such a movement, referring not to Humanity but to the exultant divergence of humanities. Thought of self and thought of other here become obsolete in their duality. Every Other is a citizen and no longer a barbarian. What is here is open, as much as this there. I would be incapable of projecting from one to the other. This-here is the weave, and it weaves no boundaries. The right to opacity would not establish autism; it would be the real foundation of Relation, in freedoms.

And now what they tell me is, “You calmly pack your poetics into these craters of opacity and claim to rise so serenely beyond the prodigiously elucidating work that the West has accomplished, but there you go talking nonstop about this West.” —“And what would you rather I talk about at the beginning, if not this transparency whose aim was to reduce

us? Because, if I don't begin there, you will see me consumed with the sullen jabber of childish refusal, convulsive and powerless. This is where I start. As for my identity, I'll take care of that myself." There has to be dialogue with the West, which, moreover is contradictory in itself (usually this is the argument raised when I talk about cultures of the One); the complementary discourse of whoever wants to give-on-and-with must be added to the West. And can you not see that we are implicated in its evolution?

Merely consider the hypothesis of a Christian Europe, convinced of its legitimacy, rallied together in its reconstituted universality, having once again, therefore, transformed its forces into a "universal" value—triangulated with the technological strength of the United States and the financial sovereignty of Japan—and you will have some notion of the silence and indifference that for the next fifty years (if it is possible thus to estimate) surround the problems, the dependencies and the chaotic sufferings of the countries of the south with nothingness.

And also consider that the West itself has produced the variables to contradict its impressive trajectory every time. This is the way in which the West is not monolithic, and this is why it is surely necessary that it move toward entanglement. The real question is whether it will do so in a participatory manner or if its entanglement will be based on old impositions. And even if we should have no illusions about the realities, their facts already begin to change simply by asking this question.

The opaque is not the obscure, though it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such. It is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence. We are far from the opacities of Myth or Tragedy, whose obscurity was accompanied by exclusion and whose transparency aimed at "grasping." In this version of understanding the verb *to grasp* contains the movement of

hands that grab their surroundings and bring them back to themselves. A gesture of enclosure if not appropriation. Let our understanding prefer the gesture of giving-on-and-with that opens finally on totality.

At this point I need to explain what I mean by this totality I have made so much noise about. It is the idea itself of totality, as expressed so superbly in Western thought, that is threatened with immobility. We have suggested that Relation is an open totality evolving upon itself. That means that, thought of in this manner, it is the principle of unity that we subtract from this idea. In Relation the whole is not the finality of its parts: for multiplicity in totality is totally diversity. Let us say this again, opaquely: the idea of totality alone is an obstacle to totality.

We have already articulated the poetic force. We see it as radiant—replacing the absorbing concept of unity; it is the opacity of the diverse animating the imagined transparency of Relation. The imaginary does not bear with it the coercive requirements of idea. It prefigures reality, without determining it a priori.

The thought of opacity distracts me from absolute truths whose guardian I might believe myself to be. Far from cornering me within futility and inactivity, by making me sensitive to the limits of every method, it relativizes every possibility of every action within me. Whether this consists of spreading overarching general ideas or hanging on to the concrete, the law of facts, the precision of details, or sacrificing some apparently less important thing in the name of efficacy, the thought of opacity saves me from unequivocal courses and irreversible choices.

As far as my identity is concerned, I will take care of it myself. That is, I shall not allow it to become cornered in any essence; I shall also pay attention to not mixing it into any amalgam. Rather, it does not disturb me to accept that there are places where my identity is obscure to me, and the fact that it amazes me does not mean I relinquish it. Human

behaviors are fractal in nature. If we become conscious of this and give up trying to reduce such behaviors to the obviousness of a transparency, this will, perhaps, contribute to lightening their load, as every individual begins not grasping his own motivations, taking himself apart in this manner. The rule of action (what is called ethics or else the ideal or just logical relation) would gain ground—as an obvious fact—by not being mixed into the preconceived transparency of universal models. The rule of every action, individual or community, would gain ground by perfecting itself through the experience of Relation. It is the network that expresses the ethics. Every moral doctrine is a utopia. But this morality would only become a utopia if Relation itself had sunk into an absolute excessiveness of Chaos. The wager is that Chaos is order and disorder, excessiveness with no absolute, fate and evolution.

I thus am able to conceive of the opacity of the other for me, without reproach for my opacity for him. To feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary to try to become the other (to become other) nor to “make” him in my image. These projects of transmutation—without metempsychosis—have resulted from the worst pretensions and the greatest of magnanimities on the part of West. They describe the fate of Victor Segalen.

The death of Segalen is not just a physiological outcome. We recall his confiding, in the last days of his life, about the slovenliness of his body, whose illness he was unable to diagnose and whose decline he was unable to control. No doubt it will be known, with a list of his symptoms and the help of medical progress, what he died of. And no doubt the people around him could say he died of some sort of generalized consumption. But I myself believe that he died of the opacity of the Other, of coming face to face with the impossibility of accomplishing the transmutation that he dreamed of.

Like every European of his day, he was marked with a sub-

stantial, even if unconscious, dose of ethnocentrism. But he was also possessed, more than any of his contemporaries, by this absolute and incomplete generosity that drove him to realize himself elsewhere. He suffered from this accursed contradiction. Unable to know that a transfer into transparency ran counter to his project and that, on the contrary, respect for mutual forms of opacity would have accomplished it, he was heroically consumed in the impossibility of being Other. Death is the outcome of the opacities, and this is why the idea of death never leaves us.

On the other hand, if an opacity is the basis for a Legitimacy, this would be the sign of its having entered into a political dimension. A formidable prospect, less dangerous perhaps than the erring ways to which so many certainties and so many clear, so-called lucid truths have led. The excesses of these political assurances would fortunately be contained by the sense not that everything is futile but that there are limits to absolute truth. How can one point out these limits without lapsing into skepticism or paralysis? How can one reconcile the hard line inherent in any politics and the questioning essential to any relation? Only by understanding that it is impossible to reduce anyone, no matter who, to a truth he would not have generated on his own. That is, within the opacity of his time and place. Plato's city is for Plato, Hegel's vision is for Hegel, the griot's town is for the griot. Nothing prohibits our seeing them in confluence, without confusing them in some magma or reducing them to each other. This same opacity is also the force that drives every community: the thing that would bring us together forever and make us permanently distinctive. Widespread consent to specific opacities is the most straightforward equivalent of nonbarbarism.

We clamor for the right to opacity for everyone.