

EDOUARD GLISSANT

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Introduction

At present, Edouard Glissant's eminence not only in French Caribbean literature but in Caribbean literature as a whole is undisputed. There is also evidence of his emerging status as a theorist whose concepts and terminology have gained widespread acceptance. The use of such terms as *opacité*, *détour* and *relation* is increasing as these notions have become the investigative tools of literary critics as well as of those whose concerns are anthropological, sociological and linguistic. Since one of the distinctive features of Glissant's work is the fusion of the imaginative and the theoretical, it comes as no surprise that his influence should transcend the narrowly literary. This is especially so given the present theoretical context of post-modernism and the general interest in cultural diversity that Glissant's ideas seem to have anticipated.

No one initially seemed to know quite what to make of Glissant and his work. He offered a bewildering range of ideas at a time when surrealism, negritude and *francophonie* were the dominant movements. He was neither exclusively poet, novelist, dramatist nor essayist but creatively combined all categories, often simultaneously. This at least partly accounts for the early difficulty in assessing Glissant's significance and in establishing his literary and ideological credentials. For instance, Gaëton Picon in his *Panorama de la nouvelle littérature française* (1960) presents Glissant as a Marxist because of the latter's apparent criticism of European expansion and his sympathy with the dominated peoples of the Caribbean in his epic poem *Les Indes* (1956). Later, Jacques Nantet, given the ideological orientation towards negritude of his *Panorama de la*

littérature noire d'expression française (1972), would offer Glissant a place in black *francophonie* as Aimé Césaire's successor in French Caribbean negritude. To Nantet, Glissant's work showed evidence of a late surrealism, very much in the vein of Aimé Césaire. Nantet's conclusion was no different from that of Léonard Sainville's *Anthologie négro-africaine* (1963) and Jacques Chévrier's *Littérature nègre* (1974).

The success of Glissant's first novel *La Lézarde*, which won the Prix Renaudot in 1958, established him as an important post-war writer. The Bordas *Histoire de la littérature française* (1972) commends him for his meditation on history in the wake of World War II. His place was equally secure in anthologies of black writing, such as the well-known *Anthologie négro-africaine* (1967) by Lilyan Kesteloot who includes him in the category 'une négritude militante'. Kesteloot's reservations about his inclusion are, however, very revealing. She confesses that Glissant's novel *La Lézarde* pleased French more than African readers. She goes on to say that French West Indians hardly recognise Martinique in Glissant's characters and the language they utter. The usual panegyrics in reference to Glissant's prose barely conceal the problems posed by trying to fit Glissant into a Procrustean bed of predetermined literary and ideological categories.

Some of the difficulties presented by Glissant's work were, perhaps, unique at the time. What does one make of a writer whose literary ancestors do not appear to come from his own cultural past? In particular, what does one do with a black francophone writer who invokes neither Marx, Breton, Sartre nor Césaire? Glissant professed an attachment to writers as diverse and puzzling as the novelist from the American South, William Faulkner; Saint-John Perse, born in Guadeloupe but destined to be a poet wandering across cultures; and the little-known French travel writer Victor Segalen, whose meditations on cultural displacement and diversity have deeply influenced Glissant. It was not until the 1970s that the nature of Glissant's literary enterprise was understood, and it was no coincidence that an accurate grasp of Glissant's ideas would

emerge within the context of Caribbean writing as distinct from negritude or *francophonie*.

In the 1980s, Martinique's literary politics notwithstanding, appreciation of Glissant's impressive undertakings by French Caribbean critics has been increasingly insightful. In *Caraïbales* (1981) Jacques André uses a Freudian methodology to analyse Glissant's work. In 1982 Daniel Radford devoted one book in the series 'Poètes d'aujourd'hui' to Glissant. The power of Glissant's ideas in the French West Indies has, perhaps, been most dramatically apparent in the essay *Eloge de la Créolité* by Jean Bernabé, Raphael Confiant and Patrick Chamoiseau published in 1989. Both Confiant and Chamoiseau represent a new literary generation, steeped in Glissant's language and ideas. As Glissant's reputation as a major Caribbean writer becomes more recognised, special issues of journals such as *CARE*, *World Literature Today* and *Carbet* have been devoted to him.

With an oeuvre comprising six novels, seven books of poetry and four books of essays by 1993, Glissant is now the major writer and theorist from the French West Indies. This is no small achievement since the francophone Caribbean has produced such influential literary figures as Jean Price-Mars, Jacques Stephen Alexis, Jacques Roumain, Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon. Perhaps, more than any of his predecessors, Glissant's ideas and his writing are centred on the Caribbean and the socio-cultural dynamism of the archipelago. In a region characterised by impermanence, instability and hybrid forms, Glissant undertakes the daunting task of tracing each 'fold' of Caribbean reality, of establishing hidden continuities and creating a 'neo-baroque' form of expression in his works. Most importantly, the major thrust of his ideas is the conceptualising of a Caribbean identity within the Americas. It is precisely this impulse that informs the strength and originality of Glissant's all-encompassing literary endeavour.