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From Levinas to Glissant¹

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Totality and Infinity, the title of a well-known work by Emmanuel Levinas, takes up a word which readers of *Poetic Intention* and of many other texts of Édouard Glissant's will easily recognize: a term sometimes used in a sense that is clearly positive, sometimes in a sense that is not quite as positive, such as when, for instance, he compares "totalizing Reason" to the "Montaigne's tolerant relativism."² In his final³ collection of essays, *Traité du tout-monde, Poétique IV*, Glissant attempts one more time to clarify the sense in which the reader will have to understand his use of the word "totality," thinking, and rightfully so, that this word might lead to some confusion: "To write is to say the world. The world as totality, which is so dangerously close to the totalitarian."⁴ Of course, here, it will be necessary to try to ascertain whether or not Levinas's totality and Glissant's can peacefully coexist, or, rather, whether this word might, in Glissant, have opposite meanings. Where the second word is concerned, "infinity," any reader of Glissant will know that he locates its source in those societies he calls atavistic, which are grounded in foundational texts that are the bearers of stories of filiation, of legitimacy, societies whose arrogance and whose errors the author never ceases to decry and whose decomposition, in the very times in which we live, he never ceases to announce (even as Glissant recognizes that there was a time when atavistic cultures undoubtedly must have experienced their own period of creolization, and that, conversely, composite cultures undoubtedly often tend to become atavistic).⁵ On this level, "totality" and "infinity," for him, seem to belong to the same world. Thus, and still in *Traité du tout-monde*, he proposes that

Hebraism, Christianity, Islam are grounded in the same spirituality of the One and to the same belief in a revealed Truth... The thought of the One that has done so much to magnify, as well as to

denature. How can one consent to this thought, which transfigures while neither offending nor de-routing the Diverse?⁶

Moreover, it would be interesting, I think, to know how Levinas might react to these words of Glissant's: "Totality is not that which has often been called the universal. It is the finite and realized quantity of the infinite detail of the real." This word, "infinite," is decidedly dangerous: what is an "infinite detail?" Does this word, "infinite," not always lead to the unknown, to the non-totalizable, to what Levinas would call an "enigma," to what Glissant would call an "opacity"?

Nevertheless, there is little doubt that Levinas's Infinite belongs to a metaphysical dimension that Glissant, on a certain level, would not accept. And yet... We know that Levinas—wary of Descartes's solitary Cogito, Levinas, who therefore refused that being might be reduced to thought—grounds his notion of alterity in this "idea of infinity" which, he notes, "designates a relation with a being that maintains its total exteriority with respect to him who thinks it." Here Levinas also gives his famous definition of the face: "The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name the face."⁷ I sincerely doubt that, here, Glissant would take issue with Levinas's words. Nor do I believe that he would disagree with Levinas when the latter describes subjectivity as "welcoming the Other, as hospitality,"⁸ or notes that the relation between the Same and the Other, which is established through language, is the locus of an "ethical" relation wherein the strangeness (*étrangeté*) of an *Autrui* irreducible to the *Moi* is affirmed: a relation "whose terms do not form a totality."⁹

Here, I will simply attempt to explain how, having read it in conjunction with Levinas's meditations, Glissant's work took on for me a new urgency. It should not be forgotten, should the association of the two appear risky from the onset, that both thinkers adopt a critical and passionate stance toward the West. And I would also add that if Levinas's insistence on distinguishing his philosophy from his theology often seems excessive, given the importance in his work of the foundational Hebraic texts, it must nonetheless be noted that the Hebraism¹⁰/Christianity/Islam block to which Glissant, for his part, refers has a number of fissures, and that, moreover, we undoubtedly owe it to Levinas to read him as a highly independent voice, as a distinctive voice.

The French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who was of Jewish culture and of Lithuanian origin, passed away in December of 1995; he thus lived through the twentieth century.¹¹ The thought of Levinas was informed by his reading of the Scriptures, including the rabbinic commentaries—writings that are profoundly anchored 1) in an oral tradition that was recorded quite late, 2) in texts that remain open to discussion, to teaching, to dialogue.¹² Rooted as it was in the cultural memory of the Jews of the

Diaspora, the thought of Emmanuel Levinas emphasizes the Ethical and a constant meditation on Alterity.¹³ The question of anti-Semitism, the tragedy of the Holocaust, obviously weigh heavily on his approach. Finally, constant throughout his work is also a meditation on the relation between what he calls Jewish “propheticism” and the “Reason” of those worlds marked by their Greek heritage. Indeed, for Levinas, not only is Europe “the Bible and the Greeks,”¹⁴ traditions that inform his philosophy, but one might also wonder if, for him, other traditions have any intellectual import. In his interviews with François Poirié, he would go so far as to say: “I sometimes say: man is Europe and the Bible, and everything else can be found in them.”¹⁵ As far as I can tell, there is no trace, in his work, of what Martin Bernal called “black Athens.” Nor does he linger on the “common background of the Greek and Hebraic civilizations,” to paraphrase the title of a book published by Cyrus Gordon.¹⁶ Without dwelling on this here, we must note that as many, now famous, studies show, the relation between the Greek heritage, the Hebraic world and, in addition to those, Africa, must in fact be conceived as a network of contaminations reaching far back in time. But apart from a few references to Lévy-Bruhl and Lévi-Strauss, the reader will to my knowledge find no traces in Levinas of an interaction with, or a questioning of, African cultures, Amerindian cultures, or other cultures, even if a Humanism of the Other – the title of one his works – is everywhere recognized by him, even if the emergence, the arising, on the contemporary scene of peoples from the so-called Third World are here and there acknowledged;¹⁷ even if, above all, Levinas’s philosophy, like Glissant’s, amounts to a putting-into-question of Western Ontology. Thus, pursuing an approach he had adopted as a young man, he writes in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*:

We wonder whether the human, considered from the starting point of ontology as freedom, as will to power and as assuming in its totality and its finitude the essence of being...if the human, considered from the starting point of the ontology to which is subordinated, and on which is founded, and from which it would derive, and wherein would reside, European philosophy’s law and its moral and political obedience and all that the Bible seemed to bring to it – we wonder whether this humanity is still equal to that which in human deficiency strikes the modern intelligence. Modern intelligence is that which saw, in Auschwitz, the outcome (*aboutissement*) of law and obedience – flowing from the heroic act – in the totalitarianisms, fascist and nonfascist, of the twentieth century.¹⁸

A little farther in the text, he comments upon “the fiasco of the human appears to us to arise in the extension of a certain exaltation of the Same, of the Identical, of Activity, and of Being...”¹⁹ Levinas’s novel philosophy, in which ethics is not a branch of philosophy, but the “first philosophy,”²⁰ is thus inscribed within a progression in which Levinas breaks with a tradition

that, from Plato to Hegel, brought the Other back to the Same in a “phenomenology of *l'être* distinguished from *l'étant*,” by the same token subordinating human relations to the “knowledge-power” of a totalizing, perhaps even totalitarian, thought.²¹ As Derrida once noted in a memorable essay, as early as 1930, “La sortie de Grèce” had been “discreetly premeditated in *Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*”²² and had been carried forward through a critical examination of Heidegger, who, according to Levinas, continues to affirm the priority of “Being in relation to beings.” Levinas’s thought, wrote Derrida, makes one aware that

... to renounce the other (not by being weaned from it, but by detaching oneself from it, which is actually to be in relation to it, to respect it while nevertheless overlooking it, that is, while knowing it, identifying it, assimilating it), to renounce the other is to enclose oneself within solitude (the bad solitude of solidity and self-identity) and to repress ethical transcendence.²³

This is to practice a philosophy of power and, ultimately, of violence. This totality from which Levinas – who chooses the infinite – distances himself is also, I believe, that from which Glissant is escaping, in his vision of the *tout-monde*. A concrete truth, an awakening to the Other through the *bonjour*, a *bénédiction* precede all thought, precede any grasp of the self and of the world, as Levinas would say: the self is not substance, but response and responsibility. Derrida’s recent homage to Levinas in his *Adieu* is thus centered around what Derrida – paraphrasing certain texts of Levinas’s, most notably *Totality and Infinity* and *Beyond the Verse* – calls “the messianic politics of hospitality” for the stranger, the marginal, the “naked migrant,” as Glissant might say,²⁴ all of these *métèques*, barbarians, immigrants, whose faces Julia Kristeva also sketches in one of her works.²⁵ We know the approach Levinas adopts in his analysis of the dialogue between the *Moi* and the *Toi* in Martin Buber,²⁶ which consists of a leap out of narcissistic fusion, out of this circle wherein the Other is swallowed by the One. If, among other readings, Levinas’s reading of Buber allows him to explore the fecundity of this relation in his theory of the welcome, this reading also allows the notion of asymmetrical alterity to shine forth.²⁷ Such a notion implies not only a position of height, a position of mastery (*position seigneuriale*) so to speak, of the Other with respect to the *Moi*, but also the constant presence of a *Tiers* or of many *Tiers* between the *Moi* and the *Toi-Autre*, for the Other is, in turn, the Other for an Other, for multiple Others.

The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other – language is justice. It is not that there first would be the face, and then the being it manifests or expresses would concern himself with justice; the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity. The face in its nakedness as a face presents to me the destitution of the poor one and the stranger.²⁸

Moreover, loyal as he is to the Torah and the Talmud, Levinas nevertheless remains open to the best moments, to the best pages, found in Christianity. As we know, he did not hesitate to offer his contribution to multiple meetings of various faiths. He liked to note, indirectly and subtly, that the best of Christianity could be found in the words of Matthew 25 – “I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I needed clothes and you clothed me...” – for he saw in those words an echo of the Jew’s essential duty to the widow, to the orphan, to the stranger, and to the poor.²⁹ Still, Levinas, in the entirety of his work, remains firm in his affirmation of the feeling of strangeness he felt with respect to Christianity, while remaining conscious, of course, of the way in which the history of European civilization and of his own philosophy cannot be detached from it. With the exception, also, of the idea of the Cross as an image of human suffering, as well as of the help certain Christians afforded to persecuted Jews. Thus, in a 1934 text, one can read:

We pass by the Cross; we do not head toward it. But we do not experience this sacred horror which the Tharaud brothers believed they had observed in a child of the Polish ghetto when we find ourselves in ‘the shadow of the Cross’ for an instant. And in a world that is increasingly hostile, that is filled with *swastikas*, it is to the Cross, with its straight and pure branches, that we often raise our eyes.³⁰

Certainly, his attitude, which is at once lenient and without compromise, is different from that of many African and Antillean writers we might think of, who are often, and in some cases profoundly, Christianized. Thus, Senghor’s position, which hopes for Africa that it “bring a supplement of soul” to tomorrow’s Civilization, entails a faith in Christianity, as well as, undoubtedly, an homage to Islam. And yet, on many occasions, Senghor spoke of his “animistic” childhood and of the symbiosis that had taken root in him.³¹ This position, which is no doubt shared by many Africans, appears to be quite close to that of Simone Weil, who believed that the non-Jewish religions of antiquity, and the non-Jewish, non-Muslim, non-Christian religions of modern times, with their multitude of myths, announced, announce, contained, contain, an intuitive grasp of the Divine. But for Levinas, who reminds us that in the Talmudic tradition, “a pagan who knows the Torah is the equal of the High Priest,”³² the symbiosis of which Senghor speaks would remain, properly-speaking, non-sensical. When Senghor describes traditional African religions, from which he does not feel himself to be purely and simply detached, he calls them “elaborate forms of magic” that bind the visible to the invisible in a manner that is properly “mystical.” And he adds that magic “animates all Negro-African social activities.”³³ Such a universe is therefore far removed from that of Levinas, who denounces myths and idols, which can also be found in Christianity.³⁴ For him, God is “transcendent to the point of absence.” Without body, He is not merely “‘the ‘first other,’ or the ‘other *par excellence*,’ or the ‘absolutely

other,' but other than the other, other otherwise, and other with an alterity prior to the alterity of the other, prior to the ethical obligation to the other and different from every neighbor..."³⁵ The possibility of a rapprochement might seem more likely with Islam: readers of Cheikh Hamidou Kane will recall that one of the titles considered for *Ambiguous Adventure* was "God is not a parent."³⁶ There is little doubt that for many colonized Africans and their descendants, the degree of theological and dogmatic strangeness felt in Christianity might be difficult to measure, beyond an adhesion to certain practices. Even when the possibility of Jesus as mediator with the Divine is not entirely excluded, the Westernization of this Message remains suspect. Thus, the Congolese (Zairian) author Valentin Mudimbe, who, like Senghor, also received a Catholic education and was therefore quite "Latinized," noted, in *L'Odeur du Père*, that the Word of Jesus Christ brought to Africa by the missionaries was not that of an "original" Jesus, but of a Jesus "encultured" in a conquering West sure of its reason. From this perspective, then, he wrote: "I do not see what the African theologian or priest has to say to me. I affirm my irreducibility in the face of their existence, and would expect the same from them."³⁷ On the other hand, in a recent, semi-autobiographical work entitled *Les Corps glorieux des mots et des êtres. Esquisse d'un jardin africain à la bénédictine*, Mudimbe refused to exclude the possibility of a connection to the Christian adventure.³⁸ Lastly, one can doubt the notion that "faith," as well as a thorough study of a religious tradition, animate the works of authors such as Césaire or Glissant, without excluding the possible importance in those same authors, or in other authors from the Africa/Antilles sphere, of their respective religious heritages; without, of course, eliding from their writings the passages in which they denounce the caricatures or betrayals of religious ideals (thus, see Jacques Roumain, Césaire, Tchicaya U Tam'Si, Ousmane Sembène...).³⁹ With respect to Glissant, there is no need to reiterate the extent to which he is suspicious of the idea of a revealed Truth, of a Verb that would function as written Law, and moreover, as he would once more note in *Traité du tout-monde*,⁴⁰ the extent to which he rejected the "image of the Greek-Latin Negro," even as he praised, in his beautiful homage to Senghor, the fact that the latter was able to connect the African song-poem (woy) to the Greek ode, words Glissant characterized as "the most profound Western man has ever uttered."⁴¹ But in reality, Albert Memmi's resounding "alas, God does not exist!," in *Ce que je crois*⁴² – a God in the image of that single Truth/Law Glissant rejects – takes its place in a philosophy of life that is not so different from that of Levinas, who has little patience for the Christian wait for a reward in the hereafter in exchange for "good deeds" accomplished here below; Levinas, for whom the just, the saints are those who do good, as atheists would or could, as if God did not exist, and who place the life, the hunger, of the other above their own lives, their own hunger, their own salvation.⁴³ The caution with which Levinas dissuades anyone from accusing another of "materialism," when this other is the one who is hungry and who

is suffering from social injustices, undoubtedly directs one's attention to the complex and bumpy ties that exist between many Antillean texts and Marxism (Jacques Roumain, Césaire, Senghor, Depestre, Frantz Fanon, Glissant himself).⁴⁴ In the Judaic tradition lauded by Levinas, only a human being can forgive a human being. God cannot erase the fault committed by one human being against another. To Levinas, that the face of the Other—a face that is most often suffering, and always separate, distant—reveals the Divine, or, as we called above, the “Infinite,” became obvious quite early. He would eventually add the following words to an article he had written in 1934:

We must ask whether liberalism is sufficient for the authentic dignity of the human subject. Does the subject attain the human condition prior to accepting responsibility for the other in the Election that lifts him up to this level? An election that comes from a god—or from God—that sees him in the face of the other, his fellow man, the original ‘locus’ of Revelation.⁴⁵

For the Jew he is, God is one with the “You shall not murder” of his Word.⁴⁶ In this homage to the Word can no doubt be found points of convergence with the old teachings of the African oral tradition, as well as, perhaps, the sketch of the charismatic Césairean leader who has nothing but his word and his desire to change life: “and I say/and my word is peace...;” “my speech is my only weapon, I speak and I awaken... I speak and, attacking oppression and servitude at their base, I make possible, for the first time, I make fraternity possible!”⁴⁷ One must nevertheless ask what becomes, in many Negritude texts—which are a dialectical response to the murderous negation of the Other by one who purports to be, who believes himself to be, who thinks himself to be, all that there is—of this transcendental idea of the “face,” which gives rise to both the prohibition to murder and its possibility, but also from which any Senghorian idea of a quasi-mystical fusion between the gaze and its object is banished.⁴⁸ When reading some of Senghor's key texts, for instance, the attentive reader will see that, in his exaltation of “Negro emotion” in contrast with “Hellenic reason.” “Hellenic reason,” (which remains more or less intact even in his quite recent *Liberté 5. Le Dialogue des cultures* [1993]), Senghor lays out, to begin with, a philosophy of Being: Ethics – which is important in its portrayal of African culture – remains a branch of philosophy. Even though one's reading of those pages describing the communal spirit of traditional African societies might make it seem as though Senghor were aligned with Levinas and his theory of the welcome – wherein the host becomes the Other's ‘hostage,’ the Other's captive⁴⁹ – his exposition of one's knowledge (connaissance) of the Other, in the form of the human being or of nature, might lead one to believe that Africans are all mystics lost in communion, in participation, in ecstasy. At this point, the alterity Levinas describes disappears. To be sure, if Sartre's famous phrase in “Black Orpheus” – “to

use Heidegger's language, negritude is the Negro's being-in-the-world"⁵⁰ – ushers Negritude into a philosophical sphere marked by post-Hegelian phenomenology, and thus contemporaneous with Levinas's meditations, the danger of narcissistic suffocation remains.

Senghor's brother in Negritude, Aimé Césaire, also makes use, in certain places in his poetic texts (especially in his early writings), of these images of the man-tree, "abandoned", "grasped", "by the essence of all things";⁵¹ in those moments, he appears to be following his African elder's path. Nevertheless, as Ronnie Scharfman showed so well, if it is true that binary relations can be found throughout Césaire's poetry, these relations are quite complex, fluid, unstable, constitutive of the subject itself. In her conclusion, in which she takes up once again her analysis of the "subject" in Césaire, Scharfman writes:

The subject cannot know itself, indeed cannot articulate itself poetically without positing a relationship of otherness... The relationship can function positively, permitting the subject to identify itself personally, poetically, and communally. Or this relationship can function negatively, revealing the ways in which the subject is alienated, inhibiting it from establishing itself as an integrated unity in language and history. But these two functions relate dialectically, informing each other and transcending each other, rotating slightly in each poem so as to expose a (sic) different *dramatis personae*.⁵²

One could say that in Césaire, the subject can only ever be in relation to another. Moreover, two dimensions of Césaire's discourse bring his work closer to that of Levinas, insofar as it simultaneously entails 1) the fraternity brought about by a community of suffering, beyond any ethnic or cultural differences, and 2) a political and ethical engagement in which the voice of a "reasonable" discourse can indeed be heard.⁵³ One could see a possible common ground, here, between Levinas, Césaire, and Glissant – for whom, as we know, the relation with the other is "interred in the suffering of the transported"⁵⁴ – were Glissant's reluctance to inscribe the concept of "relation" within morality and the "election" not so striking. Recall this clear assertion in the recent *Traité du Tout-Monde*: "In so far as Relation is a-moral, it does not elect."⁵⁵ If Levinas's Ethics were purely and simply a moralizing ethics, which I do not believe, then it would be impossible for these two great 20th century thinkers to converge. While I cannot expound on this idea, Glissant's leap out of Hegel's house and away from a discourse of the "Greek-Latin Negro" appears to me to be of a kind with the leap through which Levinas's distances himself from totalitarian totality and clears the way for alterity/relation. In Glissant's theories of the "poetics of relation" – recently taken up in the beautiful works already mentioned, *Introduction à une poétique du divers* (a title that is, of course, inspired by Ségalen) and *Traité du Tout-Monde* – Levinas's notion of an asymmetrical alterity seems to

me to have the potential to be fully developed. In these texts, true divergences from the dominant discourses begin to take shape, as Mudimbe describes so well in, amongst others, his collection of essays entitled *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and Power of Knowledge* (1988), even if we ought to keep in mind that the Antillean discourse cannot be conflated with the African discourse Mudimbe discusses. The latter's inquiries and words reach far. They suggest that even the contemporary African and Africanist discourses, discourses of revolt against the grasp of the West on Africa, are inscribed within the gears of the development of Western philosophy and methods of knowledge; are inscribed, for that matter, within what Levinas would call the bad conscience 20th century Europe experienced with respect to its own philosophy, to its own History. And Mudimbe poses what remains, to me, an essential question, namely, how to escape the vicious circles in which African and Africanist discourses are caught, so as to reveal "the *chose du texte*," what he calls "the primordial African discourse, in its variety and simplicity."⁵⁶ This challenge posed to the dominant discourses necessarily entails, as I am trying to show in this paper, a different approach to alterity. As I noted earlier, the concept of asymmetrical alterity of which Levinas writes precludes, on the one hand, any imprisonment within a *métissage* in which either one or the other finds herself denied, assimilated, crushed, and, on the other, any imprisonment within the simple relation to the *Toi*. As such, it is an attitude that not only assures an opening to the "Tout-Monde," as Glissant would say,⁵⁷ but also functions as a safeguard against the injustices and blindness which might arise from a love for, a devotion to, a single race, people, land, ancestor, culture, or memory. This philosophy is rich in lessons that serve to counter the racisms and sexism which characterize those areas where the histories of the former Colonizer and the former Colonized clash. Lessons through which one comes to understand that respect for the other person requires a vision of "difference" that goes far beyond what the geographical environment and "culture" have created: while "difference" and "relation," in their everyday senses, are a consequence of History, alterity, on the other hand, is truly what makes human beings human, and it could, should, will establish the abolition of all massacres, of all oppression, perpetrated in the name of "difference." This observation makes the adventure upon which so many Colonizers and Colonized so dangerously embarked all the more tragic. This observation also forces us to inscribe any discourse (*toute parole*) within the "infinite detail of the real," that dream of measurelessness (*la démesure*) that animates Glissant:

I dream of a new approach, a new appreciation of literature, of literature as a discovery of the world, as a discovery of the *Tout-Monde*. I think that all peoples today have an important role to play in the non-system of relations of the *Tout-Monde*, and that a people that lacks the means to think about this function is indeed an oppressed people, a people that is kept in a state of infirmity. Thus,

I dream, since I am a writer, I dream of a new approach to literature in this excess that is the *Tout-Monde*.⁵⁸

To this day, the extraordinary architecture of Glissant's œuvre, including novels, poems, and plays, portrays a world in which the actual and potential greatness and flaws of Negritude emerge, mature, are transcended, then opened up to an Other, both within the text and within life. Hence the figure of the Leader-Messiah, that of the Césairean hero, of whom Glissant subtly denied that it could "be the mouth of misfortunes that have no mouths"⁵⁹ – it would be impossible, he states, for us to be the voice for those without a voice, "in that we are but a part of their voices"⁶⁰ – the figure of the Leader-Messiah, then, continues to haunt the legend of the Negator in which a new epic of the Conqueror, a new totalizing discourse—a totality so close to totalitarian, Glissant might say—ran the risk (if falsely) of taking root: a giant with feet of clay. It is Levinas, still, who noted that "the negator and the negated are posited together, form a system, that is, a totality."⁶¹ Glissant's work, in its developments, in reality shows that a quasi-Hegelian philosophy of the Negator will be upended by the force of relations; an œuvre that, as I stated in a book devoted to Glissant, slowly "metaphorizes the subversion of a Novel of the Negator..." By that, I meant, of course, that it metaphorizes the progressive disintegration of what could have become a Novel of the Negator: a text that subverts its own subversion.⁶² Upon the publication of *Mahogany* (1987), the author's fifth novel and a text that is in my opinion crucial for a "poetics of relation," I continued to unearth the traps the author has for many years set for the philosophies of totality, that old totality, those philosophies of binarism and of "difference," noting, though I used different words, the constant and increasing presence of various "tiers" – keepers of alterity – in Glissant's discourse.⁶³ Therefore, whenever Glissant speaks of "Creolization," the opposition of "the difficult complexion of a relation identity" to a "single root identity,"⁶⁴ he does not mean Senghor's old *métissage* – even if the latter, with this concept, purports to be moving beyond a binary *métissage* of the West and of Africa. The Creolization imagined by Glissant, beyond any false synthesis, entails, *a priori*, the Levinasian idea of rupture, of exteriority, coupled with the idea of the unforeseeable, of the unknown, another Levinasian term. It is the locus of a subject in a state of insomnia, a subject always on the lookout. Glissant expressed it thus:

What happened in the Caribbean, which can be summarized with the term creolization, gives us a more or less complete idea of the process of Relation: not only a meeting, a shock, a cultural *métissage*, but a heretofore unseen dimension that allows one to be here and elsewhere, rooted and open, lost in the mountains and free upon the sea, in harmony and exiled.⁶⁵

The consequences of such a project are far-reaching. Nevertheless, we should consider the many passages in which Glissant notes that the texts–

and the realities— of the contemporary Relation arose on a historical and cultural ground from which the “foundational texts,” he proposes, have disappeared.⁶⁶ The Levinasian conception of the relation with *Autrui*—rooted in a foundational text—challenges, it seems to me, Glissant’s overly-categorical premise, without in any way weakening the Martinican poet-philosopher’s “prophetic” vision. If the post-Freudian conception of the subject, now “stranger to itself” (Kristeva) could already be found on several levels of the texts of Negritude – the works of poets and works of alienated people – for Glissant and Levinas, extraneity is not only interior to the subject; it concerns the very dwelling (*l’habitation*) of the subject, who is destined to be a nomad, a visitor, upon a land graciously lent out. I think Levinas would be in full agreement with Glissant when the latter denounces the use of foundational myths in granting a community the right to “consider the land it inhabits, which has become a territory, as absolutely its own.”⁶⁷ I would like to note here that Levinas liked to cite this word of Pascal’s: “‘There lies my place in the sun’: There lie the beginning and the image of the usurpation of the earth entire.” Herein, then, the obsession of the root, of the “native” land that must be defended, disappears; herein the messianic City (*Cité*) appears. No longer is the native land the brass idol; it becomes impregnable Jerusalem, whose inhabitant, through his very hospitality, by offering up his home, is no longer master of the earth and where the stranger continues to be the beloved, the messenger, of God/the gods. This idea of a native land is akin, it seems to me, to what Glissant calls the “place (*lieu*)” from which one emits speech (*la parole*) – not a territory stifled by fortifications, but an immense “area:” a “place,” in reality, freed of the “superstitions of the Place” which Levinas denounced;⁶⁸ a conception of “place” that includes a most skeptical attitude with respect to filiation and legitimacy. At this point, all subjects of writing are possible, including, and especially, the forsaking, Glissant would say, of the “proud story” of cultural pseudo-histories (pseudo-mémoires),⁶⁹ a story that alienates more often than it liberates. But we can go even further. In the “creolized” works of this nascent 21st century, the native isle, the village, the ancestor himself, may no longer need to be named in order to nourish speech. Questions of cultural nationalism, of national literature, of language are displaced, seen in a novel light. Henceforth, the writer is immersed in multilingualism, which does not mean, as Glissant would say, that he abandons his native language/s, or that he necessarily speaks or writes in different languages, but that the language and culture of the other, other languages and cultures, are always there in their multiple resonances, indispensable, and infusing his own cultural expression, in one way or another.⁷⁰ Hence, too, the increasing interest shown in “foreign” literatures, in “translations,” in “interpretations,” beyond the sphere of Francophony, the Antilles, Africa. Reading Patrick Chamoiseau’s splendid literary vignettes in this context, which can be found in his recent *Ecrire en pays dominé* (1997) and which he calls “sentimenthèque,” it is as though there erupted from this vibrant Antillean

heart/place re-appropriations, rehabilitations of texts, born of a gaze that is other. One could also refer to the astounding study of William Faulkner that Glissant recently published, a work presaged, it should be said, by many of his previous writings. Faulkner, who long inhabited the “clearing” of his words – as Glissant himself said of Saint-John Perse’s presence in his own work – Faulkner, who made possible a number of maturations in the Antillean poet’s progression within his own “*lieu*,” finds himself in turn infused with all of the Antillean wisdom born of that very place. Glissant’s own comings and goings, between the closed space (*lieu clos*) and the open border-place (*lieu-frontière ouverte*), make possible a thoroughly pertinent analysis of Faulkner, whose work puts into words, he writes, “the movement, the hesitation, the passage from the certainty of fixed identities and necessary truths to the spell cast by the possible and the impossible caught up in one another.”⁷¹

There remains in this adventure the danger of losing the language of “memory” – Hebrew, Arabic, Berber, Creole, Serer ...; there remains that for some French-language writers, this language of memory is still the language of “the place,” of the power to say. In fact, this is a paradox on which such creative texts must often feed, if they are to be considered “good.” We would still have to ascertain whether the notion of peace invoked by Levinas’s meditations in *Totality and Infinity*, and of which Derrida describes so well the power and beauty in his *Adieu*, does not remain the dream of only a few rare spirits. This essay should be followed by another, which would analyze the adventures of the “poetics of relation” precisely with regard to this ethics of peace, in Antillean writings, certainly, but also in writings of the Maghreb and of sub-Saharan Africa. In this moment of human history, our own, a history aware it has witnessed the extermination of the Amerindians, the deportation and the enslavement of Africans, Colonization, the pogroms, the Holocaust, the tragedies of Palestine, Yugoslavia, Rwanda..., the shift called for by Levinas and Glissant might seem perfectly utopian: that peace, not war, come first; that to see the face of the Other is to answer to him, and to answer for him, rather than to kill him: “It is no longer necessary that I understand the other, that is, to reduce him to the model of my own transparency, in order to live with this other or to build something with him,” to cite a precious little passage of Glissant’s.⁷² To reduce the other to the model of my own transparency would be to live in accordance with the old totality which both Levinas and Glissant reject. Both would be the first to argue that utopia is necessary. It is Levinas, again, who reminds us that 2000 years of theoretical non-violence have failed to diminish the violence of a world profoundly marked by the Christian discourse, a world in which “charity” unfortunately often takes the place of justice. And yet, when all is said and done, what perhaps remains unanswered in the concept of Creolization described by Glissant is the question of whether or not the imperative of justice limits, can or should limit, Relation. Moreover, this reader somewhat regrets that the articulation–

in truth, the opposition—of the concept of negative Totality and that of the *Tout-Monde* of which he dreams, is not more clearly established in his discourse. Let me repeat, these terms, totality, totalizing, in their alternate meanings, are not the happiest of terms; they are too open to equivocation, confronted as they are by the ever-open baroque richness of the texts.*

*Translation by David-Olivier Gougelet, in collaboration with Bernadette Cailler. NOTE: when English translations of French works are available, the existing English translations have been used and citations are given to both the French original and the translation. When English translations are not available, all translations into English by David-Olivier Gougelet and Bernadette Cailler.

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¹ I would like to thank Harry Paul (University of Florida) and Valentin Mudimbe (Stanford University) for having read a first, and longer, version of this essay, as well as for their helpful comments and suggestions. I would also like to thank Alain Baudot for reminding me, following my presentation of this essay in Paris, that he had himself suggested the possibility of this connection between Levinas and Glissant in the preface to his annotated bibliography of Édouard Glissant (*Bibliographie annotée d’Édouard Glissant*. [Toronto: Éditions du GREF, 1993]). I did not recall this passage of his preface. Let me here pay sincere homage to his work.

² Édouard Glissant, *L’intention poétique*. (Paris: Seuil, 1969), 37; *Poetic Intention*, trs. Nathalie Stephens with Anne Malena. (Callicoon, NY: Nightboat Books, 2010), 31.

³ The original version of this essay was published in 1999 (Ed. note).

⁴ Édouard Glissant, *Traité du tout-monde*. Paris: Gallimard, 1997, 119.

⁵ See Glissant, *Traité du tout-monde*, 194-195.

⁶ Glissant, *Traité du tout-monde*, 157.

⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et l’infini*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961, 20-21; *Totality and Infinity*, trs. Alphonso Lingis. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 50.

⁸ Levinas, *Totalité et l’infini*, xv/27.

⁹ Levinas, *Totalité et l’infini*, 9/41.

¹⁰ Note that Glissant does indeed use the term Hebraism, rather than Judaism, in his reference to this trilogy. This is probably because the word Judaism immediately implies a diaspora, a dispersal, thereby making the distinction Glissant seeks to establish with his thought of the “Diverse” more fragile.

¹¹ See Judith Friedlander, *Vilna on the Seine: Jewish Intellectuals in France since 1968*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 80-97; and also François Poirié, *Emmanuel Lévinas: Essai et Entretiens*. (Arles: Actes Sud, 1996), 1996.

¹² See especially Emmanuel Levinas, *L’au-delà du verset*. (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1982); *Beyond the Verse*, trs. Gary Mole. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

¹³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterité et transcendance*. (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1995); *Alterity and Transcendence*, trs. Michael Smith. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

¹⁴ Poirié, *Emmanuel Lévinas*, 134-136.

¹⁵ Poirié, *Emmanuel Lévinas*, 137.

- ¹⁶ See Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, 2 vols. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987, 1991). See also Martin Bernal, "Race, Class, and Gender in the Formation of the Aryan Model of Greek Origins," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 94, no. 4 (Fall 1995): 987-1008. See also Cyrus Gordon, *Before the Bible: The Common Background of Greek and Hebrew Civilisations* (Evanston and London: Harper and Row, 1962).
- ¹⁷ Levinas, *Alterité et transcendance*, 138-150/131-144.
- ¹⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*. (Paris: Vrin, 1986), 83; *Of a God Who Comes to Mind*, trs. Bettina Bergo. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 47.
- ¹⁹ Levinas, *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, 86/49.
- ²⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," trs. Séan Hand in *The Levinas Reader*. (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1989).
- ²¹ Poirié, *Emmanuel Lévinas*, 78, 178.
- ²² Jacques Derrida, "Violence et métaphysique," *L'écriture et la différence*. (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967), 125; "Violence and Metaphysics," trs. Alan Bass, in *Writing and Difference*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 84.
- ²³ Derrida, "Violence et métaphysique," 136/91.
- ²⁴ Édouard Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du Divers*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 14.
- ²⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Etrangers à nous-mêmes*. (Paris: Fayard, 1988).
- ²⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Noms propres*. (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1976), 29-55; *Proper Names*, trs. Michael Smith. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 17-35.
- ²⁷ N.N. Glatzer (ed.), *The Way of Response: Martin Buber. Selections from His Writings*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1966). Also, see Levinas, *Noms propre*, 29-55/17-35 and *Totalité et l'infini*, 190-191/215-216.
- ²⁸ Levinas, *Totalité et l'infini*, 188/213.
- ²⁹ See Poirié, *Emmanuel Lévinas* 114; Levinas, *L'au-delà du verset*, 17-25/3-12; and Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficile liberté*. (Paris: Albin, 1983), 42-45; *Difficult Freedom*, trs. Séan Hand. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 24-26.
- ³⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, "Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlérisme," in Miguel Abensour and Catherine Chalier (eds.), *Emmanuel Levinas*. (Paris: L'Herne, 1991), 152.
- ³¹ Léopold Sédar Senghor, *La poésie de l'action. Conversations avec Mohamed Aziza*. (Paris: Stock, 1980), 31-46.
- ³² Levinas, *Difficile liberté*, 39/22.
- ³³ Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Liberté I. Négritude et humanisme*. (Paris: Seuil, 1964), 267-268.
- ³⁴ Levinas, *Difficile liberté*, 178-188/159-166.
- ³⁵ Levinas, *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, 115/69.
- ³⁶ Cheikh Hamidou Kane, *L'Aventure ambiguë*. (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1971), 15.
- ³⁷ Valentin Y. Mudimbe, *L'odeur du père. Essai sur des limites de la science et de la vie en Afrique noire*. (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1982), 71.
- ³⁸ Valentin Y. Mudimbe, *Les Corps glorieux des mots et des êtres. Esquisse d'un jardin africain à la benédicte*. (Montréal et Paris: Humanitas et Présence Africaine, 1994) and Bernadette Cailler, "Interface Between Fiction and Autobiography: From *Shaba deux* to *Les Corps Glorieux*," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 30, no. 3 (1996): 371-386.
- ³⁹ Jacques Roumain, "Nouveau sermon nègre," *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de la langue française par Léopold Sédar Senghor* (Paris: P.U.F., 1969), 119-120. Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1955). Tchicaya U Tam'Si, "Le Contempteur," *Arc musical suivi d'Épitomé* (Honfleur.: Oswald, 1970), 61-65. Ousmane Sémbène, "Mahmoud Fall" and "Souleymane," *Voltaire* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1962), 127-155.
- ⁴⁰ Glissant, *Traité du tout-monde*, 113.
- ⁴¹ Glissant, *Traité du tout-monde*, 189.
- ⁴² Albert Memmi, *Ce que je crois*. (Paris: Grasset, 1985), 169-194.

⁴³ Levinas, *Difficile liberté*, 15-31/11-24.

⁴⁴ Roumain (see note 3). Césaire, *Lettre à Maurice Thorez* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1956). Senghor, *Liberté 2. Nation et voie africaine du socialisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), *La poésie de l'action. Conversation avec Mohamed Aziza* (Paris: Stock, 1980), 109-147. René Depestre, "Lettre de Cuba à Claude Roy," *Poète à Cuba* (Paris: Oswald, 1976) 17-29. Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre* (Paris: Maspero, 1970).

⁴⁵ Levinas, "Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlérisme," 159-160, see also *Totalité et l'infini*, 168-185/194-208.

⁴⁶ Levinas, *Difficile liberté*, 15-80/3-58; and Levinas, *Alterité et transcendance*, 108-120/97-110.

⁴⁷ Aimé Césaire, *Les pur-sang, Armes*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 19; Aimé Césaire, *Au saison au Congo*. (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1967), Acte 3, sc. 1, 94; Bernadette Cailler, *Proposition poétique: Une lecture de l'oeuvre d'Aimé Césaire*. (Sherbrooke: Naaman, 1976).

⁴⁸ Senghor, *Liberté I*, 252-286.

⁴⁹ Levinas, *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, 118/72; Jacques Derrida, *Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas*. (Paris: Galilée, 1997); *Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas*, trs. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Senghor, *Liberté I*, 252-286

⁵⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Orphée Noir," *Situations III*. (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 262; *What is Literature?*, trs. John MacCombe. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 314.

⁵¹ Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1971), 117-119.

⁵² Ronnie Leah Scharfman, *Engagement and the Language of the Subject in the Poetry of Aimé Césaire*. (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1980), 112.

⁵³ One could compare these passages taken from each thinker's work:

Levinas: "A la mémoire des ..." (épigraphe, to *Autrement qu'être, ou au-delà de l'essence*).

Césaire: "Moi je parle de sociétés vidées..." (*Discours sur le colonialisme*, 19) and "Comme il y a des hommes-hyènes..." (*Cahier*, 57).

Le Rebelle: "My name: offended; my first name: humiliated; my state: in revolt; my age: the stone age." (Aimé Césaire, *Et les chiens se taisaient*. [Paris: Présence Africaine, 1956], Acte 2, 68) and "... mon frère le baiser de sang de la tête coupée au plat d'argent..." (*Et les chiens se taisaient*, Acte 3, 117).

Levinas: "I have always thought of Jewish consciousness as an attentiveness which is kept alert by centuries of inhumanity and pays particular attention to what occasionally is human in man: the feeling that you personally are implicated each time that somewhere-especially when it's somewhere close to you-humanity is guilty..." ("Ethics and Politics," in *The Levinas Reader* 289-297. This interview took place after the Sabra and Chatila massacres, in Lebanon) and "Le fait de ne pas se dérober..." (*Difficile liberté*, 120).

Césaire: "Tous les hommes ont mêmes droits. J'y souscris..." (*Le tragédie roi Christophe*. [Paris: Présence Africaine, 1963, 59).

⁵⁴ Glissant, *L'intention poétique*, 191/182.

⁵⁵ Glissant, *Traité du tout-monde*, 24.

⁵⁶ First, the attentive reader will not doubt that Mudimbe, prior even to examining this "invention," puts in question the presumed extent of the revisions effected by Western thought since Hegel, a questioning that is informed by Levinas's investigations (Miguel Abensour and Catherine Chalier (eds.), *Emmanuel Levinas*, 97-112). With that in mind, the reader will fully appreciate the preface to Mudimbe's remarkable work, a work that is at times the victim of commentaries that are as unfair as they are surprising, in that these commentaries reveal an intellectually-incorrect reading of the author's words. Mudimbe writes:

The fact of the matter is that, until now, Western interpreters as well as African analysts have been using categories and conceptual systems which depend on a Western epistemological order. Even in the most explicitly 'Afrocentric' descriptions models of analysis explicitly or implicitly refer to the same order (x).

Later, he thus notes that:

...in relation to its conditions of possibility, negritude stands as the result of multiple influences: the Bible, anthropologists' books, and French intellectual schools (symbolism, romanticism, surrealism, etc.), literary legacies, and literary models (Beaudelaire, Lautréamont, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Valéry, Claudel, Saint-John Perse, Apollinaire, etc.) (87).

And finally:

One wonders whether the discourses of African gnosis do not obscure a fundamental reality, their own *chose du texte*, the primordial African discourse in its variety and multiplicity. Is not this reality distorted in the expression of African modalities in non-African languages? Is it not inverted, modified by anthropological and philosophical categories used by specialists of dominant discourses? Does the question of how to relate in a more faithful way to la chose du texte necessarily imply another epistemological shift? Is it possible to consider this shift outside of the very epistemological field which makes my question both possible and thinkable? (186)

One will also read with interest the volume published under Mudimbe's direction: *The Surreptitious Speech. Présence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness 1947-1987* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992). The following work by D. A. Masolo also strikes as being of singular importance with respect to the questions I have discussed here: *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (Bloomington and Edinburgh: Indiana University Press and Edinburgh University, 1994). Masolo, amongst others, offers a precise and detailed study of Mudimbe's approach. But the tone of his critique of Mudimbe, a critique that highlights the fact that the latter raises more questions than he "solves," is not only unsavory, but for me surprising. As Masolo writes:

Although Mudimbe makes an important contribution to the debate on the creation of knowledge, he lamentably fails to emancipate himself from the vicious circle inherent in the deconstructionist stance. In other words, he fails, in *The Invention of Africa* and elsewhere to show clearly how the "usable past" should be used by experts to construct an authentic African episteme" (179). Given the historical conjunction where Mudimbe's work is necessarily situated, this work is and will remain far more significant and useful than "lamentable."

⁵⁷ See also Édouard Glissant, *Tout-Monde*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1993).

⁵⁸ Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du Divers*, 91-92.

⁵⁹ Césaire, *Cahier*, 61.

⁶⁰ Glissant, *L'intention poétique*, 191/183.

⁶¹ Levinas, *Totalité et l'infini*, 11/41.

⁶² Bernadette Cailler, *Conquérants de la nuit nue. Édouard Glissant et l'H(h)istoire antillaise*. (Tubingen: Günter Narr Verlag, 1988), 168-169.

- ⁶³ Bernadette Cailler, "Édouard Glissant, a Creative Critic," *World Literature Today* 63, no. 4 (Autumn 1989): 589-592.
- ⁶⁴ Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du Divers*, 23-24.
- ⁶⁵ Édouard Glissant, "La Caraïbe, les Amériques et la poétique de la relation," *CELACEF* III, 1-2 (1989): 12.
- ⁶⁶ Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du Divers*, 33-46, 61-64.
- ⁶⁷ Glissant, *Traité du tout-monde*, 196.
- ⁶⁸ See Derrida, "Violence et métaphysique," 136/91; Derrida, *Adieu*, 177-211/105-123; Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du Divers*, 29, 130-144. The following article by Daphna Golan will be of great interest here: "Between Universalism and Particularism: The 'Border' in Israeli Discourse," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* (1995): 1055-1073. Also see Note 2 above.
- ⁶⁹ Édouard Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*. (Paris: Stock, 1996), 312; *Faulkner, Mississippi*, trs. Barbara Lewis and Thomas C. Spear. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996), 207.
- ⁷⁰ Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du Divers*, 111-127.
- ⁷¹ Édouard Glissant, "Saint-John Perse et les Antillais," *Nouvelle Revue Française. Hommage à Saint-John Perse* 278 (February 1976): 73; Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du Divers*, 14; Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, 306-307/224-225.
- ⁷² Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du Divers*, 71.