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Categories in Edouard Glissant's Writings (2nd version)

Abstract

The writings of Edouard Glissant are made of poems, novels, theater, essays, and speeches. A network of categories flows through all of these works, which include « language », « poetics », « knowledge », « Tout-monde », « Relation », « cultural vistas », « creolisation », etc. These categories of thought are encapsulated in each other. The purpose of this paper is to present some of them, comment on their relevance, and show the coherence of the architecture they form.

The category of language

The first and most important category in Edouard Glissant's writing is "*language*". All the other categories are to be found within that particular one. In Glissant's language, this common word "*language*" has a specific meaning. Poetry readers are accustomed to contextual definition and know that literature usually contains its own dictionary.

"In any authorized tongue you shall build your language"
"All languages are created from a tongue"

From Holderlin to Glissant, poets, within a chosen tongue, (German, French, English, Creole), are engaged in excavating a form, making a symbolic space for poetry; this hollow architecture, defined within an idiom, represents what Glissant calls a '*language*'. As such, a "*language*" is the form of a subject inhabiting a tongue.

What is the effect, the impact, of this '*language*' into a language? For Glissant, "*language is the strong stamp marks of the poet*" in the tongue in which he has chosen to write. Guided by Glissant, the alchemist, the musician, the magician of words, we enter into a full (and necessary) revolution of an idiom. And we realise that the chosen tongue is no longer playing the role of surrounding support but is absorbed in the poetry-language. Walt Whitman did it for American English, "One self I sing", Appolinaire, Césaire and Glissant, in this century, did it for French. An idiom has to go through its poetry to survive. "*Tongues grow by poetic language*," he wrote.

Hence forth, one can say that poetry is written in a tongue in as much as this tongue has found its place in this poetry. Attributing language to poets is very natural thought and high school common sense says that French is Molière or Voltaire's tongue. Hence, we should say that idioms find their way through literature in a more obvious way than the other way round.

Why is this reversed relation so important? Because "*the first cultural tool of a community is language*". That is to say, in order to be free as a human being in society, one has to know that he or she is a language within a language.

Reading Glissant, we are engaged in an inverted view point. Our academic habits teach us to consider literature within the reality of social and historical contexts but, on the contrary, we must realize that a great deal of our conception of reality has emerged from and inhabits our literature and language. Hence, literature is not an offshoot of social studies as it seems. It is pointless to try to determine how human beings live in society as long as one does not

know how this society is represented in their minds. People harbour the representations they have of the world they live in.

Poetics

Glissant's language is a symbolic architecture, a labyrinth full of wonders and mysteries, construed as a network of significant categories. This network of questions, answers, oppositions, discovering new insights of our living experience in today's world, is what Glissant refers to as a "*poétique*." "*Toute poétique est un réseau*". (All poetics is network) of significant symbols giving new sense to what is.

Hence, we shall say that '*language*,' in Glissant's sense is the "topos" of his "*poétique*". This poetic network is everywhere in his work : in poems, novels, theatre, essays and speeches. This "*poétique*" and its language represent the author himself.

The word 'poétique' in Glissant's language is not taken from standard French. Usually, as a nominal, 'la poétique' designates a technique to the study of prosody. But Glissant's use is closer to the Greek 'poiesis'; it is to be understood as the discourse of poetry.

Concerning the English equivalent 'poetics' (which does not mean 'poétique' in Glissant's sense), I leave it to the reader to make its own proper translation. I will do the same for all the categories that we are going to talk about.

Poetics and knowledge

In western culture, since Plato, poetry no longer belongs to the sphere of the theory of knowledge (not even to ethics). The only place assigned to poetics is aesthetics which makes it irrelevant in the search for truth. The first thing a reader encounters in Glissant is the question, "*how come poets are not allowed in the field of knowledge ?*"

"We have noticed how in the Western world idealism has split asunder the poetical function and the quest for knowledge".

Indeed, in science, according to K. Popper, only concrete reality makes the domain of our experience. What about poetry ? Glissant would answer that all possible imaginary constructs is the reality poetry is concerned with. Imaginary constructs, paradoxically, are not imaginary. Throughout Glissant's works, one perceives that, most of the time, human beings live and act in such constructs. That is a straightforward evidence in social life and in sciences as well. Indeed, if we had a constant true apprehension of reality, we would not be in need of any science at all. As Glissant puts it, "*Le poème est une des matrices alchimiques du réel*." (Poetry is one of the alchemistic matrix of reality). For him, "*The poetic act is an element of knowledge of reality*", "*poets don't describe reality like sciences, but discover new points of view*", "*the poet is the one that conceives a new relation between human being and the world*".

The categories encountered in our journey into Glissant's labyrinth are all in a counter attitudinal advocacy. He calls his poetics a "*counter poetics*" or "*forced poetics*". Then his categories are counter categories. Each of them stands against its opposite and one realizes that if Glissant's stance is a criticism of Western culture, it is a criticism from inside.

Birth of philosophy in Western culture

In following Glissant from language to poetics and from poetics to theory of knowledge, we will bump into a key question, namely the concept of oneness (in French l'Un).

"Oneness is harmony . It is full of itself. Like a god, it feels self sufficient to nurture its dream".

The concept of oneness lies in the very foundation of Western philosophy, dating from the VI century BC in the time of Heraclites and Parmenides. This foundation appears to be determinant in the tragic history of the world after Christopher Columbus. Before we get to this story, let us note that Glissant opposes the concept of "oneness" and its corollaries, universality and absolute, to the shattered poetics of plurality, diversity, and chaos.

"Reason is hellenistic," wrote Senghor. This highly controversial line, however shocking, is the plain truth. Only the Greeks, and Western culture after them, take rationality as object for itself. The well known distinction, Logos vs Mythos, is the mark of the so-called Greek miracle. In Heraclites, 'logos is what is' and in Parmenides, 'yes, being is, and no, non-being is not'. The Western quest for knowledge will be later characterized by a critical acumen, Logos, deductive discourse as opposed to myth-making, Muthos, narrative discourse. Logos debunks the speech whenever the logical possibility to say, "Yes," is lost; Muthos keeps supporting the tale beyond any conceivable reason.

In the ontology of Parmenides, the universe, (what there is), is oneness and harmony. But, in those times, Western philosophy was not yet born. The proto-Socratic Parmenides is not a philosopher, but a poet, and in Glissant's sense, ontology is his poetics. Parmenides' poem, "On Nature," starts with the mythical : on his horse cart the hero gallops to the top of the sacred mountain where Dike, the goddess, tells him that there is no such thing as a divinity, because truth relies only on what there is. Henceforth, contemporary specialists of this question say that logic, the philosophy of logos, presupposes the sacrifice of the very poetry that gives birth to it.

This insight partially answers Glissant's question on the place of poetry in the theory of knowledge.

The Glissantian poetical stance aims at contributing to the knowledge of reality devoid of ontological absolute. He writes, *"lets quit these infantile dreams of uniqueness of truth; lets us say no to oneness"*. For Glissant, oneness is an imaginary conception and not a material truth. For him it is a myth among others, even if it has been a very efficient one.

"Western culture grew from the rule according to which the spirituality of a human person depends on his individuation". Indeed in classical metaphysics, ontology is enclosed between two poles, oneness on the one hand, individuality on the other hand and nothing in between.

Tout-monde (mundi in toto)

Let us come now to Copernica's and Galileo's time - times of the birth (or re-birth) of physics, time of the "discovery" of the American continent, the missing piece in the European geographic puzzle. In that times, Western culture possessed an adequate conceptual and mathematical framework, reliable instruments of navigation, guns, monotheist religion, etc. All that was needed to carry out the biggest scheme ever conceived by human beings, the entire conquest of the earth.

Before Galileo's chasm, and the 'discoveries' by European navigators, the world as we know it did not exist. Before appearing as a whole to human consciousness, the earth was made up of lands (or worlds) that ignored each other especially if oceans separated them. Each of these worlds, schematically, lives its own history construed in accordance with its own conception of time, its myths, its knowledge and know-hows. Some worlds are in contact with others, some are not. The mythical limits of these worlds are made of forbidden and terrifying abysses. *"Il n'y avait plus de bout du monde et bientôt plus de centre"*.

Following Glissant, let us call the plurality of these worlds, spread out on the surface of the earth, *"le tout-monde."* (mundi in toto - plurality of worlds within one, as opposed to omnis mundus, oneness of the whole world).

This mundi in toto is historically prior to the omnis mundus in its uniqueness. It is made, *"by a cluster of unconnected systems"*. Indeed, the world as a whole cannot exist until it appears, by fair means or not, to peoples's consciousness all over the planet.

Hence, one should say, that the history of the world could not begin before this world was recognized. Consequently, we should consider that this very world is a relatively new object of knowledge. It has been known only for five centuries. *"Tous les peuples sont jeunes dans la totalité monde ... nous sommes tous jeunes et anciens sur les horizons. " " La géographie soupire. Toutes les terres sont en terre. Tous les soleils tombent en terre."*

In the midst of wars, massacres, destructions, the beginning of the history of the world (as a whole), constitutes the eschatology, the end of the end of all histories. Let us say that before the big chasm, there are histories but yet no world as such. After, there is a world, but there is no real history anymore. *"History ended when histories met."*

"Now, the earth was becoming one. And, by this density, oneness was mandated by the imaginary thought of western mind."

"Ainsi l'homme d'Occident crut vivre la vie au monde, là où il ne fit que réduire le monde et en induire une globalité idéale qui n'est certes pas totalité monde"

For the Western world, there is on earth, one, and only one, world. Such is the geographical, political and cultural axiom of the conqueror. By this axiom, supported by the oneness of geometry (and also the oneness of monotheism), the notion of plurality of worlds become, de facto, a metaphor. In other words, cultural differences are supposed to vanish into tropisms. The concept of oneness, exclusive and absorbing, constitutes the foundation of this axiom. *"The Europeans are the people who have invented a totalitarianist conception of history."* And, Glissant adds, *"oneness is a dream"*, just a particular cultural vista among others.

Worldy wars - the western great scheme

« L'Occident n'est pas à l'ouest; ce n'est pas un lieu, c'est un projet. » (The western world is not out west. It isn't a place but a scheme)

"Le monde s'est trouvé large de ces pays qui hier encore s'épaississaient dans la nuit. On a entendu le cri de leurs habitants. Le sang de terre a coulé dans la terre."

From the beginning, the Western scheme boils down to a globalization, namely a colonization of the earth. In other words, the Western world has waged a five century war against the worlds.

The conquerors of the new world were not guided by an epic vocation as they have been often represented. The only vocation of the Western scheme was the colonisation and

capitalist exploitation of the entire earth. They did not come to meet new people and cultures but for investment and profit. All the constituents for a global economy were there : well-governed states, military power, banks, high sea navigation, mines, mono-agriculture, international market, manpower (slaves), etc.

Enslavement of people presupposes capture which presupposes hunt. For more than 200 years, this highly rationalized industry was based on man-hunt.

The Western great scheme implied globalisation of thinking, destabilisation, and whenever possible, destruction of cultures and languages. All the worlds and cultures enter gradually end up in ruin and decadence, or more simply were eradicated by genocide.

No conqueror has ever projected nor succeeded in such a vast a scheme of domination. Without possible contest, westerners have been the greatest conquerors of all times.

On earth there is one world which considers itself as the world. This universal stance covers all diversities. The scheme requires uniqueness of thought. All the rest is considered as strange customs, bizzare behaviors, irrelevant gesticulations, and, as such, uncivilized and savage. Everyone has learned in their high school text-books that only one world (one culture) is to be considered as the modern and contemporary world (or culture). All others should be classified as backward, as living the past in present. In a five century war, the western world has culturally and politically cannibalised the planet.

Westerners do not represent a people nor a place but an historical venture.

To be consistent with itself, the western scheme had literally to invent the concept of racism. The words "white" (myth of descent), "oneness" (myth of absolute), and "individual self" (as a corollary), are the western categories that make the whole scheme consistent.

The Poetics of Relation

We now enter into the main category in Glissant's work, namely the Category of the Relation.

The word "Relation" in Glissant's language is not a logical link between two points. It is a narrative rather than a deductive and inferential category. It comes from the French verb 'relater,' which means, 'telling a story.'" And more, as a noun, it defines, not a line but a space of time. More simply, one should use the word in the same fashion as when one says "living a love relation."

The Relation is the name of the story of the great western scheme between the world and its parts. It started in 1492. And since that time the populations of the earth have lived the wordly wars. "*Relating the relation*," means telling the true story of these shattered worlds and peoples.

"The first African captured on the Gold Coast "

Did the first African who was captured on the Gold Coast know the Gold Coast ? Did he know he was African ? "Gold Coast," is the name for a desire in which he had no part, and "African" is the pan-continental label he was given when he was unloaded from the belly of the slave holding ship in the Americas. In fact he became African when he ceased to be it.

"Bien sûr je ne concevais pas que j'étais africain, l'Afrique n'est vraiment l'Afrique aux yeux des autres qu'au moment de la conquête"

The category of Relation has two faces, one of the oneness and the other of the diversity of the world. The speech of the Western great scheme, its version of the World-Relation, is what Western culture calls history. For the descendents of the slaves, the memory of time before the chasm is lost. Their time has nothing to do with the ancient Greek and European Middle Ages. Their temporal equation is $1492 = 0$. Before that point, one can as well count in negative numbers. (As I would say 50 before CC for Christopher Columbus.)

The belly of the slave ship is their true origin. That zero time is the time when they became Africans and cease to be it. For the slaves and their descendents history starts with the history of the world beginning in 1492, and as such, today, we are the younger people on earth. *"We are at the root of the Relation."* Within the space of the negative datation there remains only strange dreams and imaginary constructs.

"Past, our painful past, which is not yet history for us is nevertheless here haunting us. The role of the poet is to go and explore his pain and to make it appear continuously in the actual present."

"il faut que je rattrape a l'instant ces espaces où ma mémoire s'est égarée"

"The genuine genesis of Caribbean people, is the belly of the slave ship and the hell of plantation."

Why should we consider the Relation a counter category of History ? Because there is no such thing as the history of this or that country, state or people. Since the great chasm, the only relevant history is that of the world in its diversified oneness. The slave and his master are characters of the same story. Since that time, all histories of the "Tout-monde" have been interconnected. The history of each human being is factually criss-crossed by the history of all the others. There can be no observer of the Relation. It allows for no way out, and this Relation, differently for each person, is the same space-time enclosure, limited by earthly geometry.

Hormis la Relation, le monde est totalitaire."

Creolisation and cultural vistas

After five centuries of conquest, the Western political scheme has gone full circle. Engulfing the totality of the worlds, it has entered its reverse phase. By the means of "creolisation" the gagged worlds and cultures deconstruct its illusory unity from the inside.

The many cultural vistas (in French "étendues") opened by 'world-totality' are encapsulated in the real world. Cultures and languages are overlapping, intertwined, wreaking havoc among imaginary concepts. Today, the limits outlining cultural vistas collapse in a confusion that nobody seems to be able to decipher. The false harmony of oneness has changed into the paradigm of chaos.

"We are told, and this is the truth, that all is out of order, bewildered, broken down, run amock, blood turned into winds. We see it and we go through it. But it is the whole world which is talking to you in so many gagged voices."

Differences as opposed to universality has become the key word the world over. And Glissant's Relation is the dialectic of cultural differences. This dialectic is not the hopeless temptation for dialogue between cultures, but the accepted fact of the presence, the difference and the opacity of the other. "I don't pretend to understand him. I just accept his existence as difference."

