

## Book Reviews

Edouard Glissant. *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. Trans. J. Michael Dash. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1989. pp. xlvii, 272. \$13.95 pb.

Although this is rarely acknowledged, cultural exchange is endemic to the Caribbean region. For example, West Indian writers, such as Derek Walcott, are markedly influenced by French Caribbean and South American authors. Yet, literary critics have been slow to explore these influences, concentrating instead on the literary traditions of each writer's colonizing culture.

Edouard Glissant has made it his mission—flying in the face of the failed political unions—to engender a culturally unified Caribbean, reversing its status as the margin of empire to that of well-spring of the New World. The appearance of this translation of Glissant's groundbreaking essays (recently augmented by a paperback edition) fittingly assists in furthering Glissant's cross-cultural spirit. Furthermore, this work is part of an important series of translations of French African and Caribbean writing brought out under the rubric of Caraf Books by the University Press of Virginia. Other volumes of note in this excellent series include an edition of Aimé Césaire's lyric and dramatic poetry, a significant re-contextualization and re-assessment of his work. This Glissant edition—like the Césaire—contains an extensive introduction which, along with the recent Glissant symposium (published in *World Literature Today*, volume 63, number 4, 1989, but not noted in the bibliography here) will do much to further scholarly activity on this important but underappreciated writer. More important, this work will help to fill the gap in indigenous (as opposed to academic establishment) theorizing about postcolonial literatures.

The essays collected here, aside from two early pieces, were produced in the 1970s, making them all the more remarkable for their foresight concerning current debates about the "new" literatures. Together, these essays make the forward-looking assertion that the Caribbean is not a backwater of divisiveness but a prescient example of the creolization that is happening worldwide. The realization of this potential for wider community requires a twin process of what Glissant labels diver-

sion/reversion—a moving outward in a constant metamorphosis that abandons notions of fixed being, plus a concomitant moving inward towards self-discovery.

Glissant's program for a revived, repositioned Caribbean is rooted in a re-vision of history, replacing the colonizing West's preoccupation with linearity and the hierarchal with a more Caribbean-centered notion of history as rupture and sudden emergence. Instead of a history that is a systemized meta-discourse, Glissant proposes a cross-fertilization of histories, "the whole of which no one can claim to master nor even conceive" (77), with no clear chronology, no uniformity—only the obscurity and density of the here and now.

Careful to ground his poststructuralist theorizing about history in the economic, political, and cultural reality of his native Martinique, Glissant devotes a good part of the essays to the specific concerns of the island itself. Yet, the greatest value of *Caribbean Discourse* lies in its implications for literature, not only the literature of Martinique or the Caribbean but beyond to the larger postcolonial scene as well, making this book required reading for all those involved in reading the new literatures.

At the heart of Glissant's program for this new kind of discourse is his notion of a cross-cultural poetics that is decidedly oral in its replacement of harmony with a "polyphony of dramatic shocks" (106). Instead of a discourse of sudden inspiration, Glissant emphasizes orality's preference for the qualities of duration and repetition that are characteristic of a communal literature. A poetics of lived rhythms, cross-cultural poetics eschews writing's tendency towards transparency, immobility, and privacy for the obscurity of "dense accretions" (136) in which everything can be said, producing a "symbolic notation of a seldom-seen side of reality" (155), allowing that reality to come "all at once, in a massive accumulation" (156). Naive, it nonetheless moves beyond folklore towards experimentation, conducting simultaneously a personal ethnography, history, linguistics, and architecture. Bringing to light "beliefs hidden deep in the collective past" (243), cross-cultural poetics speaks in "not a single shout [but] sustained speech" (238-39), unceasing and deliberate, establishing something new at every turn.

Glissant's aesthetic manages to be both non-essentialist and non-universalizing, attending to Caribbean particularity but refusing to be limited by it. The workability of this approach can be seen in its applicability to established Caribbean writers, such as Wilson Harris, but also in its foreshadowing of the work of newer voices, such as that of Erna Brodber. Both of these writers practice a cross-cultural poetics of the kind that Glissant theorizes about, moving beyond the earlier developments of a Saint-John Perse or an Aimé Césaire, developments which Glissant reveals here as requiring a transforming reintegration and renewal.

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