Shining in “Paradoxical Splendor”: The Staging of the “difficult Relation” in Faulkner’s Sagas as a Prefiguration of Postcolonial Epic

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Shining in “Paradoxical Splendor”: The Staging of the “difficult Relation” in Faulkner’s Sagas as a Prefiguration of Postcolonial Epic

Édouard Glissant’s key contribution to questions of “crossing” lies in his critical awareness that more often than not, hybridity is not the product of fluid passages, but rather, of opacity – particularly in the context of William Faulkner’s work. Paradoxically, it is by proposing epics of aporetic impermeability and “of the difficult Relation” that Faulkner prefigures and paves the way for the more permeable cultural visions that characterise postcolonial epics of diaspora.

Édouard Glissant’s poetics of creolisation and Relation can be situated within a broader postcolonial theoretical trend that identifies crossings and its variants, including hybridity, *métissage*, and mongrelisation, as salient features of post-imperial global literature. Glissant is also perhaps the only intellectual who provides sustained reflections on the postcolonial and transnational dimensions of a genre often relegated to the side-lines in postcolonial theory: the epic. In *Faulkner, Mississippi* (1996),¹ he applies his theory of the Relation to the classical epic form, thereby opening up the possibility of a postcolonial epic of Relation. Of particular interest is Glissant’s choice of William Faulkner’s oeuvre as postcolonial epic’s “thematic ancestor,” to use Pierre Macherey’s term. This begs the question: how can Faulkner’s ambivalent sagas of slavery and racism largely limited to the American Deep South possibly “prefigure” the “participatory and concluding epics” of relation that Glissant associates with the multicultural postcolonial condition? (*Faulkner* 222) In an attempt to address this question, this paper proposes to critically re-engage with the notion of “crossing” by focusing on the ambivalent affiliations between Faulkner on the one hand, and Glissant as well as anglophone postcolonial writers of epic such as Derek Walcott and Kamau Brathwaite, on the other. I argue that Glissant, an author who has systematically explored issues of racial, linguistic, cultural, and national crossings as expressions of the Relation, takes a deeply ambivalent stance *vis-à-vis* the Relation-engendering inter-racial plantation relationships and diasporic crossings. The lack of critical attention paid to the epithet “difficult” in his concept of the “difficult Relation” may be remedied by a more nuanced assessment of Glissant’s defence of cultural hybridity and creolisation.

Why Faulkner?

Glissant makes a curious choice by celebrating Faulknerian epic as an originary moment of postcolonial epic. Why does he champion a body of work deeply rooted in the Deep South’s plantation hierarchies? Why is he drawn to sagas frequently perceived as racially offensive, with little or no transnational travel, and no explicit celebration of cultural hybridity? Why Faulkner? This was the question most of Glissant’s students at Southern University, a historically black college in Baton Rouge, Louisiana,² must have

1. The translation in English by Barbara Lewis and Thomas C. Spear (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999) will be used throughout.

2. Glissant lectured at Southern University in 1989. *Faulkner, Mississippi* is dedicated, in part, to the students he taught there.

asked. Their malaise *vis-à-vis* Glissant's reading is, in fact, acknowledged by the Martinican French thinker in his book (*Faulkner* 55). We too may ask: why not Herman Melville, whose American epic *Moby Dick* presents an inclusive microcosm of America through the inter-ethnic crew of the *Pequod* that circumnavigates the world? Why not Walt Whitman, whose similarly expansive epic, *Leaves of Grass*, advocates the transcending of difference in deeply humanist terms? Glissant's paradoxical fascination with Faulkner has been tackled by critics as well as Glissant himself. In the opening pages of *Faulkner Mississippi*, Glissant is at pains to highlight the shared legacy of the plantation system, with its pluralism and perversions, that links the Caribbean islands and the Deep South (29). In this sense, Faulkner's obsessional focus on the plantation society would explain why Glissant does not choose the more metaphysical and cosmic works of Melville and Whitman, or even Saint-John Perse. Critics have been sensitive to the common inheritance of the plantation system (Loichot, Azérad) as well as to other points of convergence such as the "ethics of opacity" (Weidorn) and the theme of "ancestral crime" that recur in both Faulkner's and Glissant's work (Britton). However, the question pertaining to why Glissant chooses Faulkner as a model may be taken in another direction.

Let us recall that Glissant's rehabilitation of an author traditionally associated with colonial racism, one who, at best, generates readings ridden with ambivalence and contradiction, is, in fact, a masterful deployment of a classic – one may almost say "traditional" – postcolonial strategy of rereading the Western canon. His choice of the "white, racist, *sudiste*" Faulkner (Weidorn 192) echoes similarly provocative genealogies tracing postcolonial literature to T. S. Eliot, the self-declared royalist, classicist, and Anglo-Catholic (Brathwaite 30-1)³ to Joseph Conrad, denounced by Chinua Achebe as a "thoroughgoing racist" (Achebe 11);⁴ or if we go even further back, to Homer, considered the founding figure of European civilisation.⁵ Glissant's daring canonisation of Faulkner as the fount of a tradition that includes the work of Alejo Carpentier, Gabriel García Márquez, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Glissant himself (*Faulkner* 163, 254-5) is therefore a quintessentially postcolonial manoeuvre. However, the Martinican intellectual's rehabilitation of Faulkner is also a reappropriation of the American's work. It is based on a highly personal reading of both Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha and of European epic, against which the American writer's originality is measured. Indeed, in dealing with the Faulkner question, little attention has been paid to the specifically generic ramifications of Glissant's reading of Faulkner and its implications for postcolonial epics as a whole.

Faulkner, Mississippi draws on themes and critical concepts dear to Glissant – roots v. rhizomes, pure filiation v. creolisation, opacity – and applies them to the epic. Thus traditional epics legitimise territorial conquest through racial purity and divine predestination: these are "excluding epics" that universalise their own cultures on the strength of their "superiority." However, the "concluding and participatory epics" define iden-

3. Kamau Brathwaite, speaking on behalf of Caribbean poets, makes the following argument: "mainstream poets who were moving from standard English to nation language were influenced basically, I think (again the models are important), by T. S. Eliot. What T. S. Eliot did for Caribbean poetry and Caribbean literature was to introduce the notion of the speaking voice, the conversational tone. That is what really attracted us to Eliot" (*History* 30-1).

4. Achebe's critique notwithstanding, Conrad appears as a recurrent thematic ancestor in the work of postcolonial writers such as V. S. Naipaul (*A Bend in the River*), Patrick White (*A Fringe of Leaves*), and Margaret Atwood (*Surfacing*). For Naipaul, see Baazizi. For the two latter writers, see Brydon and Tiffin.

5. As Walcott's poet-persona writes his Caribbean epic *Omeros*, he draws literary inspiration from the eponymous Homeric figure Omeros.

tity not in exclusive, nationalist terms but in transnational and inclusive ones. Within this framework, Glissant sees Faulkner's work as orchestrating the "difficult Relation" and thereby prefiguring postcolonial epic (*Faulkner* 221-3). This excluding/participatory dyad is clearly a reformulation of Glissant's distinction between the ethnocentric root-identity and the rhizomatic relation identity in the context of epic.⁶ However, Glissant acknowledges that it is "difficult" to forge the Relation, because we cannot claim complete understanding of Other. Otherness is the opacity that resists any claim to epistemological sovereignty.⁷ Glissant's emphasis on the Relation being "difficult" merits attention, particularly since it counterbalances his own tendency to celebrate cultural hybridity and crossings. This euphoric register can be detected in his concept of a participatory epic "that could lead to the appearance of the world community of today, in which the 'universal' would be the finite and infinite quantity for all cultures and all humanities" (*Faulkner* 222). Indeed, Glissant's participatory vision is periodically put into perspective and recontextualised in tandem with hard truths. Speaking of the suffering, assassinations, and genocides that have marked human history, Glissant still chooses to believe in a world where:

we would find not only what could be called hope but also what we could conceive of as the only opening: a detour through the imaginary and the impermanent [...]. To be at one and the same time the insane tree from here and the bird of multiplicity from over there. To enter into a new emotion and an unprecedented feeling of a world collectivity, where we neither lose nor dilute ourselves, and where the frontier of the inside-outside would no longer give rise to, or maintain, an impossibility. This is difficult. (*Faulkner* 220)

"This is difficult" becomes a haunting epistrophe (231, 233, 305), a critical stance in itself. As a position hovering between the "here" of home and the "there" of transnational crossings, the rooted tree and the free-flying bird of multiplicity, its "detour" is predicated on aporia. In this sense, I would liken the "difficult" in Glissant's idea of the "difficult Relation" to Jacques Derrida's formulation of aporia as "non passage [that] resembles an impermeability." Like Glissant's conception of the "only opening" as being a "detour," Derridean impermeability "would stem from the opaque existence of an uncrossable border: a door that does not open or that *only opens according to an unlocatable condition, according to the inaccessible secret of some shibboleth*" (20, my italics). Significantly, Derrida associates this condition of aporia with war situations.⁸ This emphasis on conflict and violence resonates, in certain respects, with the dialectics of the plantation society pitting masters against slaves, whites against blacks.

Furthermore, in Glissant's case, the secrets and shibboleths, the "unlocatable condition" all point back to the repressed awareness of the Middle Passage and slavery as preconditions for the colonial plantation society. In this sense, Glissant's poetics of relation and his philosophy regarding intercultural crossing is too complex to be reduced to binary dialectics of roots and rhizomes. I would like to propose that the signi-

6. For a detailed exploration of root/rhizomatic identities and excluding/participatory epics, see my own "Postcolonial Engagements with the Epics."

7. Michael Weidorn offers an insightful analysis of opacity.

8. Derrida identifies three kinds of aporia. The presence of an uncrossable border is opposed to the two other forms of aporia, one stemming from the absence of an uncrossable border *i.e.*, a permeable border (in peacetime) and the other related to the absence of the pre-conditions of aporia itself (the impossible or the contradiction is a nonpassage precluding both kinetic passage and static impasse).

ficance of Faulkner's oeuvre as an epic of the "difficult Relation" and a prefiguration of postcolonial epic appears more clearly when seen as an epic of impasse or "aporetic nonpassage," in the Derridean sense of the term. The critical awareness of impasse, what Glissant calls "the right to opacity" (*Caribbean Discourse* 11),⁹ may thus represent the necessary condition for cultural passages and crossings. Michael Dash encapsulates Glissant's ideas well when he says: "The ingredient of *opacité* creates the cultural diversity without which the ideal of relation (cultural interrelating) is not possible" (143). In the context of *Faulkner, Mississippi*, I identify three areas in which impasse is a precondition for future passages: the counter-intuitive idea that epic is obsessed with defeat, the opaque exploration of historical violence, and Glissant's prophecy of the epic's future.

Epics of Survival

Glissant's first observation in *Faulkner, Mississippi* regarding the epic genre is its preoccupation with defeat, or at best, ambiguous victories, as a means to reinforce a community's sense of its collective past and future destiny (18). Glissant cites the examples of Hector's funeral in the *Iliad*'s closing song, Roland's defeat in *La Chanson de Roland*, but also Ulysses's crafty trick of the Trojan horse to ensure victory as recounted in the second song of the *Aeneid*. However, the *Aeneid*, with its overwhelmingly imperialistic and propagandist vision, is a problematic example. Its first six books do deal with defeat, describing the exile of Aeneas after the Trojans lost the Battle of Troy. Conversely, its last six books celebrate Aeneas's reestablishment of Troy in Rome, laying the foundation for the Roman Empire. Significantly, subsequent imitations of the *Aeneid* such as Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, Camoes's *Lusiads*, and Tasso's *The Liberation of Jerusalem* are far less concerned with defeat. Indeed, they are explicitly epics of European victory, harnessing their heroes' exploits to the propagandist aims of their royal patrons. It is against this European epic tradition of imperial victory that the specificities of post-bellum America can be thrown into relief. Like the *Aeneid* and like the *Chanson de Roland*, epic writing is obsessed with defeat precisely because "defeat [...] will lead to new and enduring victory" (*Faulkner* 19).

Unlike the teleological structure of imperial predestination governing the *Aeneid* and the *Chanson de Roland*, Faulknerian epic is an interrogation, not an affirmation, of victory emerging from defeat. Indeed, *Absalom! Absalom!* – a text that Glissant systematically refers to – painfully questions the legitimacy of Thomas Sutpen's dynastic, imperial ambitions, and by extension, the legitimacy of the founding of the American South. Instead of a Virgilian vision of an "empire without end" (*Aeneid* 1.390) based on unbroken dynastic continuity, we have a tangled web of incest and miscegenation, the depletion of Sutpen's line, and a climactic inferno destroying Sutpen's plantation. Similarly, the Compson appendix at the end of *The Sound and the Fury* presents the Compson line from its Scottish beginnings, through its foundation in America – a history stained by expropriation, miscegenation, and slavery – to its extinction. Their acts are silently witnessed by their black servants, who, significantly, outlive them, as the appendix informs us in the closing line: "They endured." Glissant returns to the French connotations of

9. For Glissant, "to accept opacity, that is the irreducible density of the other is truly to accomplish, through diversity, a human ideal. The human is not perhaps defined today as the 'image of man,' but the ever-growing network of recognised opacities" (Dash 144).

"duration" embedded in the term: "ils *en-duraient*, they lasted through the hardness of it all" (Faulkner 60, see also 25). For Glissant, "Faulkner's poetics show that, if Blacks can achieve duration [...], it is because they do not master history." Furthermore, "[a]s a character type, he [the Black] is the most meaningful witness to the former order of things. Perhaps we eventually understand that he is destined to reshape it" (Faulkner 60-1).

While Glissant does not explicitly explore the prefigurative significance of this Faulknerian strategy of oppressed Blacks as witnesses and survivors who "endured," it might be pointed out that postcolonial epics are inherently epics of survivors. Derek Walcott's epic poem *Omeros* commemorates the poet-narrator's ancestors and their experience of the Middle Passage thus: "they crossed, they survived. There is the epical splendor" (149). Kamau Brathwaite's *The Arrivants* also poetically chronicles the Middle Passage and the experience of African survivors and their descendants in the Caribbean. The narrator celebrates survival, but also echoes Glissant's emphasis on the "difficult Relation" when he declares: "I will rise / and stand on my feet" but pre- and post-qualifies this assertion with the refrain, "slowly slowly" ("The Awakening" in *Masks* 56). Georges Didi-Huberman's ideas regarding the tenacity of human experience in contemporary European society resonate equally powerfully in the postcolonial context:

One must not therefore say that experience, at whatever moment in history that it was, has been "destroyed." One must, on the contrary [...] affirm that experience is indestructible, however reduced it might find itself to the survival and clandestine presence of mere rays of light in the night. (128, my translation)

For Didi-Huberman, these surviving rays of light are "fireflies" that have "survived." Quoting Hannah Arendt, he sees their survival linked to the act of retrieving "fragments of humanity in a world that has become inhuman" (130).¹⁰ The "fireflies" refer specifically to the souls of sinners transformed into floating points of flaming light in the eighth bolgia of Dante's hell, far removed from the light of Divine Grace. In a hermeneutic move similar to postcolonial acts of writing back to the imperial literature, these fireflies have been reinterpreted by modern thinkers as symbols of resistance (notably during the Second World War), the oppressed consigned to the shadows but vested nonetheless with the capacity for survival. The survival of the fireflies echoes Glissant's ambivalent conception of Faulkner's work ("ils *en-duraient*") and the "epical splendor" of the survivors in postcolonial epic: in all these cases, one finds, to quote Didi-Huberman, "the paradoxical resource, this *liberty to make people appear* despite everything" (130, my translation).

Opaque Representations of Historical Violence

However, if we accept Glissant's premise that Faulkner prefigures the postcolonial epic, for which the examples of *Omeros* and *The Arrivants* have been used, it is necessary to acknowledge two essential points, both linked to opacity. Firstly, as opposed to white characters, the Blacks and female characters are depicted as passive, almost flat. Rare exceptions would include the attention paid to the experiences of mixed-race characters like Lucas Beauchamp in *Intruder in the Dust* and Joe Christmas in *Light in August*. For Glissant, this resistance to psychological exploration reflects Faulkner's respect for the

10. In the original, Didi-Huberman is quoting from Hannah Arendt's "De l'humanité," 12.

opacity of the Other (*Faulkner* 65). Equally opaque is the treatment of the founding events of the plantation system – the slave trade, never mentioned in Faulkner's work, as Glissant observes, and the ambivalent treatment of the institution of slavery. Glissant sees Faulkner as conditioned by his context and asserts that "[i]t certainly was not up to Faulkner to do this work" *i.e.*, unveil "the trauma of the slave trade, which for Blacks, is the source of everything" (*Faulkner* 171). Herein lies one reason why Glissant sees Faulknerian epic as prefiguring postcolonial epic: it acquires "fullness" by recognising the opacity of Otherness and by asking that "one day others would take up this task from a different point of view" (*Faulkner* 171). From this impasse will emerge future passages, exemplified by the revisiting of the "epical splendor" of surviving the Middle Passage by Walcott, Brathwaite, and Glissant.

Faulkner's opaque treatment of historical violence arises from his reworking of epic mechanics of historical allegory and sublimation. In European nationalist epics such as the *Aeneid*, the *Lusiads*, and *The Liberation of Jerusalem*, readers are provided with *raisons éternelles* (34) or "eternal reasons" (Glissant's term, *Faulkner* 20) for the Roman conquests, the crusades, and the Portuguese colonisation of India: namely, that these victories have been predestined through divine providence. Hence the recurrence of proleptic narrative strategies of prophecy delivered by gods or mystic figures, whose authority cannot be questioned. The violence of conquest is thus sublimated into the providence of predestination. In Faulkner's work, such sublimation can never be entirely successful because of the defeat of the South in the Civil War, the injustices of its plantation society, and the writer's profound ambivalence towards this society. In fact, the awareness of illegitimate foundation thwarts any kind of unproblematic projection into the future (*Faulkner* 116). Divine providence and benevolent predestination, or "sovereign machinery" as Glissant puts it (*Faulkner* 19), are singularly absent in Faulkner's oeuvre, because they have been transformed into damnation and malediction. In Faulkner's epics, the Sartorises, the McCaslins, the Compsons and the Sutpens cannot be authentic victors because their victory has been founded on usurpation of a land and of peoples that were not theirs to take. A powerful expression of this idea can be found in the short story "The Bear" in which Isaac McCaslin renounces his claim to the land to which he is "legally" entitled because God did not create the earth and man "to hold for himself and his descendants inviolable title forever [...] but to hold the earth mutual and intact in the communal anonymity of brotherhood" (246). This communal brotherhood has been violated by a historical pattern of usurpation, oppression, and moral corruption that McCaslin retraces in the context of his family back to the land which his grandfather Carothers McCaslin

had bought with white man's money from the wild men whose grandfathers without guns hunted it, and tamed and ordered or believed he had tamed and ordered it for the reason that the human beings he held in bondage [his African slaves] and in the power of life and death had removed the forest from it and in their sweat scratched the surface of it to a depth of perhaps fourteen inches in order to grow something out of it which had not been there before and which could be translated back into the money he who believes he had bought it had had to pay to get it. (243-4)

Sullied by these sins, the genealogical lines of the white families are consequently cursed with forms of violence, miscegenation, and madness – though Faulkner is too complex a writer to establish such a simplistic cause-effect relationship: the rich ambiguity of his

works derives from the fact that no single cause can explain the characters' obsessions and excesses. As epic usurpers, their history is troped not through a Virgilian moment of mythic foundation, but in an original sin or ancestral crime. For instance, Sutpen's horror at discovering that his first Haitian wife is part Black, his repression of that part of his past, and the threat of incest posed by the relationship between the son born of this first relationship (Charles Bon) and a daughter born of a later marriage (Judith), all contribute to the downfall of the clan. Faulkner, however, writes in rhizomes and as Celia Britton points out, we can never pinpoint one specific cause or crime that triggers the tragic in Faulkner's sagas. Instead, there are several versions of what this ancestral crime in Faulkner's work may be: an unknown crime carried over to America by the European ancestors, the institution of slavery, or miscegenation ("Ancestral Crime" 217-8). It is, of course, a complex combination of historical and psychological forces, rendered in a narrative style that resists easy answers. *Absalom! Absalom!* for example, is recounted by Quentin Compson through a fragmented flashback, marked by the initial hiding of significant pieces of information from the reader (such as the paternity of Charles Bon). Faulkner's work thus offers a classic example of the difficulty in creating an epic discourse of national aggrandisement when its foundation has been tainted by the sins of oppression and slavery. Glissant remarks that Faulkner

sings the epic song, hoping to redeem the original sin that seems tied into this configuration ["the difficult aggregation of the South"]. Then suddenly he feels that neither this song, nor its first occurrence (the defeat that ended the Civil War) can resolve the disturbance, get rid of what is rotten in Elsinore, or reestablish the Theban calm. He has to accompany these people to new depths.

Imagine a kind of epic literature for which no "resolution" could be conceived. [...] It would be an unsuspected and unpredictable opening, not at all systematic; it would be fragile, ambiguous, and ephemeral, but would shine with all the paradoxical splendor of the world. It must be that way; otherwise, the drying up of traditional epic would have caused a death much colder and harder than even death itself. (*Faulkner* 99-100)

Between the "original sin" of colonial oppression and "redemption" lies "no resolution": only an "unpredictable opening," a Deriddean aporia, the beginning of a "difficult Relation." Glissant's allusions to Sophocles and Shakespeare serve to reinforce a fundamental break between the Old and New Worlds, between pre-modern and modern sensibilities: the modern world must accept the tragic insight that the ancient order or equilibrium can never be restored. Traditional forms of social order and the literary forms developed to represent such order (tragedy, epic) must change, adapt, and be reborn to capture the more fleeting, ephemeral, and "paradoxical splendor" of the postcolonial world.

A New Epic

For Glissant, "Creolization is the very thing that offends Faulkner: *métissage* and miscegenation, plus their unforeseen consequences" (*Faulkner* 83). Faulknerian epic is one of impasse: narrative impasse, given the ruptures in the genealogical lines of the Sutpens, Compsons, and Sartorises; psychological impasse as reflected in the opaque treatment of Black characters as silent witnesses to the South's atrocities; and stylistic resistance in its use of modernist techniques of stream of consciousness, multiple points of view, circular repetition, and deferral of causes. It also represents an impasse on a generic level by exposing the failure of traditional epic principles – territorial claims legitimised

by unbroken filiation and “eternal causes” that predestine future conquests. Glissant reads Faulkner’s works as “a meditation upon the impossibility of the epic in this particular time and place [that of the American South]” (*Faulkner* 122). It is from the death of traditional epic that a transitional template for a new kind of epic is born. Interestingly enough, birth and death are also the ultimate form of aporia for Derrida. Playing on the polysemy of *pas* in French (meaning “not,” but also “step”), Derrida reflects on *trépas* or death by asking

What, then, is it to cross the ultimate border? [...] The “I enter,” crossing the threshold, this “I pass” (*peraô*) puts us on the path, if I may say, of the aporos or of the aporia: the difficult or the impracticable, here the impossible, passage, the refused, denied, or prohibited passage, indeed the nonpassage, which can in fact be something else, the event of a coming or of a future advent [*événement de venue ou d’avenir*], no longer has the form of the movement that consists in passing, traversing, or transiting. It would be the “coming to pass” of an event that would no longer have the form or the appearance of a *pas*: in sum, a coming without *pas*. (8)

Though Derrida is talking about the afterlife, it is his keen sense of meta-aporia, of “thinking the possibility of impossibility,” (72) that is of interest to us in Glissant’s case. Faulkner’s work, which through narrative strategies of repression, opacity, and deferral enacts “the refused, denied, or prohibited passage, indeed the nonpassage” can in fact signal “the event of a coming or of a future advent.” As Glissant puts it, “[t]he epic has dried up, it is from this very drought that his [Faulkner’s] work is born” (*Faulkner* 49). Weidorn has aptly called this strategy the “creative destruction of foundational western genres” (192). Faulkner, by making “the epic and the tragic confront their own impossibilities” (*Faulkner* 131) renders possible the new epic literature of Glissant, Walcott, and Brathwaite that would express the unsayable trauma of history from a “different point of view” (*Faulkner* 171). Glissant argues that Faulkner’s work, by leaving the trauma underlying the foundation of the American South opaque and uncrossable within its own textual universe, opens itself up to crossing, to revisitings and revitalisation, entering “into conversation with many other works, in many different languages, yet allied in their versions of the ‘scream of the world’” (164).

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