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A Modern Form of the Sacred

Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*

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Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* is unlikely to strike most readers as a sacred text. True, the design of the 1997 English paperback edition hints at something mysterious within. The seventeenth century map on the cover, glowing green and only partially visible from the front, disrupts the geographic orientation a map might be expected to provide. The seeming clarity of the title, author, and translator, is likewise unsettled by their placement, suspended above the surrounding white expanse. Yet this trace of eeriness is easily dispelled by the physical book's assertion of scholarly credentials. "Michigan," the name of the university press publisher, prominent on the spine and back, also announces itself on the front cover, and the text on the back declares the book an aesthetic and political—but not sacred—project, with three blurbs praising the translator's achievement and the author's brilliance. The Library of Congress cataloguing information on the copyright page tells us that *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant's third monograph, is first and foremost about his birthplace (Martinique--civilization, language, culture, nationalism, and literature of). Secondarily, according to the cataloguers, it is a book about the French connection ("6. Martinique—Dependency on France. 7. West Indies, French—Relations—France. 8. France—Relations—West Indies."). Scholarly interpretations of *Poetics of Relation* are of course more expansive and exploratory than cataloguing's brevity allows. Still, most who write about this strange and beautiful text focus on poetics and politics, with very few lingering over Glissant's own claims about the importance of the sacred.[1]

No wonder, for the sacred is a troubled, and troubling, notion. While it may seem blanched of any particular significance when invoked as a synonym for "special," or "set apart," the sacred remains encrusted by its long history as well as secularism's current value judgments when it signifies something no longer possible or plausible--a dimension of reality believed in by "simpler" people in the past and "less-developed" (often dark-skinned) people in the present. The sacred highlights the need for genealogical

accounts of religion's—and particularly Christianity's—mystifying power and death-dealing claims to transcendent sovereignty.[2] For all of these reasons, the sacred seems to point us elsewhere rather than inviting us to tarry alongside Glissant, as he considers its power and possibilities. But what if we shared Glissant's curiosity? What if we wondered with him what a modern sacred might entail? What might we discover if we reflected, as he does—implicitly as well as explicitly—about the relationship between sacredness and temporality, particularity, and historicity? In what follows, I try to do just that, to highlight the familiarity as well as the oddity of Glissant's references to the sacred, to explore his ambivalence as well as his ambition, in a work that I believe is best read as enacting what it also calls for: a modern form of the sacred.

Indeed, Glissant says that it is this emergent concern with the sacred that differentiates *Poetics of Relation* (published in French in 1990), from the two related works he wrote in earlier decades, *L'Intention poétique* (1969), and *Le Discours antillais* (1981), both of which explore the errant possibilities within the narrative structure of ancient epics. On this point, Glissant says, *Poetics of Relation* should be understood as a "spiral retelling" of its predecessors, for it shares their interpretation of "founding texts," works ranging from the Old Testament, the *Iliad,* and the *Odyssey*, to the *Chansons de Geste*, the Icelandic *Sagas,* the *Aeneid,* the African epics, and the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. These foundational works affirm communal identity, Glissant explains, but also the ever-present possibility of its dissolution. In *Poetics of Relation,* he summarizes his deconstructive reading this way: while canonical texts established "the sacred and the notion of history" that fortified self-understanding, they also contained "the germ of the exact opposite of what they so loudly proclaim."[3]

This recognition that these essential literary works undermine their own imperial effect structures all of Glissant's work. *Poetics of Relation* in particular, however, was prompted by the question of whether new texts might provide what the old had for so long:

> I began wondering if we did not still need such founding works today, ones that would use a similar dialectics of rerouting, asserting, for example, political strength but, simultaneously, the rhizome of a multiple relationship with the Other and basing every community's reasons for existence on a modern form of the sacred, which would be, all in all, a Poetics of Relation.[4]

Glissant's wonderment yields almost immediately to more confident claims about how and why these newer versions could work. Like the old stories, the founding documents resonant today would likewise be dialectic, asserting collective strength while simultaneously exposing "the rhizome of a multiple relationship with the Other." And like the old stories, these would provide sacred foundations for particular peoples. The replication is crucial, but so too is the novelty and ambition of Glissant's concluding claim, that these new

founding texts would mean that "every community's reasons for existence" could be based "on a modern form of the sacred which would be, all in all, a Poetics of Relation." This sacred is, in short, the primary topic and aim of his book. *Poetics of Relation* is a sacred project, a work that variously invites and describes but also performs and provides a modern form of the sacred.

What should we make of this ambition? The answer is elusive. The origin story at the beginning of the book, for example, is notably lacking in any direct reference to sacrality. Entitled "The Open Boat," these opening paragraphs immerse us in the hold of a slave ship, trying to evoke what it might have felt like as day after day at sea revealed not just captivity but an unimaginable transport into the unknown. Here we encounter also the image of a hand-drawn fibril linking Africa to the "East" and to the Americas in the "West." The text describes the creolization inaugurated by the slave trade, "the most completely known confrontation between the powers of the written word and the impulses of orality." The account book is also featured, as the singular authoritative script on the ships, listing the exchange value of slaves as only one of the many forms of violence stifling the voices of the deported, a "confrontation," Glissant observes flatly, that "still reverberates to this day." All that in the opening pages of *Poetics of Relation*. No mention of the sacred here.

Instead, readers are oriented, and reoriented, to history, culture, and maps. Indeed, the figure of the fibril seems an apt synechdoche for the project, for making sense of it requires reader to bring to mind their own global map as they trace the fibril's long spine stretching from Africa to the Americas, its tasseled ends representing the exchange of money and foodstuffs and gems and other minerals and animal skins and, now, human beings. In this simple sketch, the many trade routes connecting African lands to points east narrow to a single vector of enslavement enabled by the tendrils at the other end, connecting Europe's regnant powers to its many colonial ventures. Glissant thus begins by depicting history as a work of imagination inescapably bound to material realities.

"The Open Boat" seeks to reorient readers to specific people and places on earth. To the "actual experience of Relation" made up of "shared knowledge."[5] To advocacy on behalf of a "renewed Indies," born from knowledge of "the horror of hunger and ignorance, torture and massacre" and the exhaustion felt "as we pass from one era to another—from forest to city, from story to computer."[6] What can the sacred add without distorting this historicity? Why invoke the spectre of an otherworldly escape, the mystification of authority, the force of transcendence (as Glissant does just a few pages later, in the section entitled "Errantry and Exile")?

Readers who take the time to trace the interwoven images in "The Open Boat"—the brief opening section that begins with a description of what might have been felt and thought by people captured five hundred years ago, the

African men, women, and children who found themselves in chains, on boats captained by Europeans speaking languages they did not know, cast off on a vast expanse of water many of them had likely never seen or heard or touched, already severed from anything they had ever imagined and with no way to know what the future would bring, and ends with a different kind of speculation, unmoored from history, evoking an imagined future, a scene of unspecified peoples standing together on the deck of a vessel that would voyage on behalf of everyone—might be prepared to extend the weave not just forward but also backward, to a scriptural antecedent.

Consider, for example, how the abyss created by those who profited from the European slave trade compares to one of the Bible's genesis stories, of a flood that destroyed all life except the lives of the animals and humans gathered together on Noah's ark.[7] Although Glissant's incantation of the slave trade denies any analogy between this scriptural tale of divine retribution and salvation and the historical experience of enslaved Africans, amputated from their known world, his own version of a founding tale also invites this comparison, as he positions the reader beside him, looking out from the bow of a boat to see what might be shared.

Notably, the Genesis story repeatedly defers its own assurance of survival, and ends with a confusing mix of curses and promises, establishing a covenant that guarantees human mastery over all living things while also proclaiming that ecology takes precedence over humanity. Consider, for example, how numbers pile upon numbers in the formal cadence of the biblical account, relayed here in the language provided by English bishops writing at King James's behest, crafting a work of poetic artistry as slave ships traveled the Atlantic, transformed Europe's economy, and enriched the sovereign head of their national church. "The waters prevailed upon the earth an hundred and fifty days," they wrote.[8] And then, when God "remembered" Noah and the living things upon his boat, the water finally abated and the waiting began. Set upon Mt. Ararat in the seventh month, those in the ark had three months to wait before the tops of mountains could be seen. Then forty days, and Noah sent forth a raven. An unspecified number of days, no word on the raven, and he released a dove. Unable to find a perch, the dove returned, and seven more days passed. "Again he sent forth the dove out of the ark; and the dove came to him in the evening; and lo, in her mouth was an olive leaf pluckt off, so Noah knew that the waters were abated from the earth." The wait had not ended. And he stayed another seven days, and another month, and then another—here the sources stutter in their specificity, as it "came to pass in the six hundredth and first year, in the first month, the first day of the month" that "the face of the ground was dry," and then the next verse, another set of numbers: "and in the second month, on the seventh and twentieth day of the month, was the earth dried."

Readers of the Bible conditioned by stories of salvation and divine power read this as a story not of horror but redemption. God destroyed the

world, but guided Noah to ensure it would continue when divine displeasure abated along with the waters. Scripture, however, dwells in the darkness, and the uncertainty, and offers as much confusion as clarity for anyone seeking to summarize the outcome. What did God promise in the end? That such a flood would never again envelop the earth. That much is clear. Or clear at least for those comforted by the promise that this promise applies for as long as the earth endures. "While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease."[9] Then comes the blessing given to Noah and his sons, with no mention of wives and daughters, and the statement repeated twice: "be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth,"[10] and assurance of human domination ("and the fear of you, and dread of you" will be shared by all living things)[11] followed by many more statements about how the divine covenant is made not just with Noah and his descendants but "every living creature that is with you."

Exclusivity and universality merge here, sanctioning both the dynamic of ownership and annihilation Glissant condemns as characteristic of imperial civilizations[12] and also the non-totalizing universality, the whole made up of rhizomatically rooted parts, that Glissant equates with a poetics of relation.

There is no promise without a curse and no curse without a promise, no unmitigated version of the absolute certainty so often associated with these stories of divine—biblical!—covenants. The story of Noah's ark, like the story of the middle passage told from the perspective of the enslaved, rebukes any notion that the sacred equates with the assurance of otherworldly salvation or this-worldly triumph.

The problem, however, is that this rebuke is seldom heard and rarely heeded. Glissant was not the first to show that the canonical founding texts, those that established territorial imperialism, also contained the "germ of the exact opposite of what they so loudly proclaim."[13] Others before Glissant had also learned the painful lesson that such radical readings (radical here meaning those that go back to the *radix,* or root, of the text and find there a rhizomatic web rather than a singular message) cannot easily counter the power of simplistic certainties, especially when those certainties affirm acquisitive desires and exclusionary fantasies.[14] But the fates of those who dare to err—including errant Christians such as Montanists in late antiquity, condemned for advocating spiritual authority and gender equality; spiritual Franciscans in thirteenth century Italy, declared heretical for espousing absolute poverty; Marguerite Porete (d.1310), burned at the stake for refusing to renounce writings that advocated the anti-authoritarian universality of love; or Nat Turner, executed for a slave rebellion inspired by his biblicism—confirms the dangers they face and the powers summoned against errancy by those who believe founding texts must instead support sacred filiation, or what Glissant identifies as "root" as opposed to "relation" identity.[15]

If, in his first two books, Glissant sought to expose the inadequacy of conventional readings, providing diverse interpretations as an antidote to the abyssal violence of colonialism and slavery, *Poetics of Relation* acknowledges how difficult it is to weave a delicate web amid the brutalist architecture of Scripture, The Bible, and other Sacred Texts. Glissant's call for a modern form of the sacred betrays frustration and confesses the limits, even futility of his earlier efforts. Clearly errant interpretations are not enough.

But just as Glissant does not give up on poetry, so too he does not renounce poetry's connection to the sacred: "And despite our consenting to all the indisputable technologies; despite seeing the political leap that must be managed, the horror of hunger and ignorance, torture and massacre to be conquered, the full load of knowledge to be tamed, the weight of every piece of machinery that we shall finally control, and the exhausting flashes as we pass from one era to another—from forest to city, from story to computer—at the bow there is still something we now share: this murmur, cloud or rain or peaceful smoke. We know ourselves as part and as crowd, in an unknown that does not terrify. We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone."[16]

What he does instead in *Poetics of Relation*—where "The Open Boat" serves as just one example of his new sacred texts—confirms Glissant's repeated claims about the sacred nature of errancy, of wandering, of the opacities of the root, of a poetics of relation spun from the particularities of people and places but not contained, or containable, within a single epoch. For Glissant, the oppressive force of sacred filiation can be found in western Myth and Epic, and in Christian universality, and in new variations of the old filiation in Darwinian theory,[17] and modern forms of ecology that "extend to the planet Earth the former sacred thought of Territory."[18] Conversely, the alternative modern sacred, the relational version Glissant calls for, is present also in ancient texts, in Genesis as well as Buddhist scriptures, as well as the more recent work of Faulkner and Glissant himself.

Poetics of Relation thereby reveals the centrality of the sacred to Glissant's project as a whole, as he seeks to expose the annihilating force of Christian universality and illuminate an alternative by reimagining the collective significance of Caribbean particularity. By invoking the sacred, Glissant names his project as religious in the following sense: as an ideal inseparable from, but not limited to, historical reality. "The sacred dimension," Glissant says, "consists always in going deeper into the mystery of the root, shaded with variations of errantry." Errantry and complexity are holy, according to Glissant. Fixity and rootedness are not. This is why Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom* is a theological text, because it "destroys the sacredness of filiation," closing the "history of the Sons of Solomon forever and lay[ing] out the prospect open to the sons of Snopes, the unmitigated upstart". It goes "beyond politics and lyricism, but it makes us contend with their contemporary poles, violence and opacity."[19] So too with Shakespeare,

whose work offers some hope that there could be modern epic and modern tragedy that would express political consciousness, an "initiation into totality without renouncing the particular." In this context, the "action of Diversity," a sacrificial victim-hero would not be required: instead, we "will look straight at the sacred, the assumed order in the disorder of Relation, without being stricken with awe. We will imagine it without divining the hand of a god there in full force. To imagine the transparency of Relation is also to justify the opacity of what impels it. *The sacred is of us, of this network, of our wandering, our errantry.*"[20] This sacred of us is the action of diversity, the Relation of cultural contact.

This is true in the founding texts of old as in the sacred story told in "The Open Boat." This is the old newly told, the endurance of the sacred presented anew to those who think modernity is defined by its absence, and the historicity of all truths, sacred and otherwise, made visible in a story that declares that nothing is ever only confined to its own time and place. For Glissant, the sacred is, like poetics, "not exclusion but, rather, where difference is realized in going beyond."[21]

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[1] Among the few English-language examples found in a literature search was the occasional lecture by Manthia Diawara and Terri Geis, "The New Sacred since André Breton and Édouard Glissant," accessed May 27, 2023

https://www.academia.edu/44301939/The_New_Sacred_Since_Andr%C3%A9_Breton_and_%C3%89douard_Glissant_co_authored_with_Manthia_Diawara_

For the singular example I found of French scholarship's interest in the sacred, see *L'écriture et le sacré: Senghor*, *Césaire*, *Glissant*, *Chamoiseau*, ed. Jean-François Durand (Montpellier, Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2002), http://publications.univ-montp3.fr/l-ecriture-et-le-sacre-senghor-cesaire-glissant-chamoiseau

[2] See, e.g., Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); and Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—an Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257-337.

[3] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*. trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 15.

[4] Ibid., 16.

[5] Ibid., 8.

[6] Ibid., 9.

[7] Ibid., 6:9-7:22.

[8] Ibid., 7.24.

[9]Ibid., 8:22.

[10]Ibid., 9:1; 9:7.

[11]Ibid., 9:2.

[12] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 49, cf. 143-144.

[13] Ibid., 15.

[14] As the examples subsequently listed in the text confirms, even western Christianity provides numerous examples, from every period of its history, of interpreters who highlight, as Glissant does, how scriptural texts challenge the hegemonic status of imperialist claims. Two helpful studies, exploring what in relation to this work on Glissant could be called postcolonial possibilities *avant la lettre*, see, e.g. M. Cooper Harriss, "On the Eirobiblical: Critical Mimesis and Ironic Resistance in the Confessions of Nat Turner," *Biblical Interpretation* 21, no. 4-5 (Autumn 2013): 469-93 and the assessment of Marguerite de Navarre's *L'Heptaméron* (1558) and Christine de Pizan's *Cité des dames* (1405) in Margaret Ferguson, *Dido's Daughters: Literacy, Gender, and Empire in Early Modern France and England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[15] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 143-144.

[16] Ibid., 9.

[17] Ibid., 48-51.

[18] Ibid., 146.

[19] Ibid., 58.

[20] Ibid., 55-56, my emphasis.

[21] Ibid., 82.