

Poetics of Relation

Édouard Glissant

For Opacity

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Several years back, if I made the statement, “We demand the right to opacity,” or argued in favor of this, whoever I was speaking to would exclaim indignantly: “Now it’s back to barbarism! How can you communicate with what you don’t understand?” But in 1989, and before very diverse audiences, when the same demand was formulated, it aroused new interest. Who knows? Maybe, in the meanwhile, the topicality of the question of differences (the right to difference) had been exhausted.

The theory of difference is invaluable. It has allowed us to struggle against the reductive thought produced, in genetics for example, by the presumption of racial excellence or superiority. Albert Jacquard (*Éloge de la différence*, Éditions du Seuil, 1978) dismantled the mechanisms of this barbaric notion and demonstrated how ridiculous it was to claim a “scientific” basis for them. (I call the reversal and exasperation of self barbaric and just as inconceivable as the cruel results of these mechanisms.) This theory has also made it possible to take in, perhaps, not their existence but at least the rightful entitlement to recognition of the minorities swarming throughout the world and the defense of their status. (I call “rightful” the escape far from any legitimacy anchored silently or resolutely in possession and conquest.)

But difference itself can still contrive to reduce things to the Transparent.

If we examine the process of “understanding” people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce¹.

Accepting differences does, of course, upset the hierarchy of this scale. I understand your difference, or in other words, without creating a hierarchy, I relate it to my norm. I admit you to existence, within my system. I create you afresh. —But perhaps we need to bring an end to the very notion of a scale. Displace all reduction.

Agree not merely to the right to difference but, carrying this further, agree also to the right to opacity that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity. Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components. For the time being, perhaps, give up this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures. There would be something great and noble about initiating such a movement, referring not to Humanity but to the exultant divergence of humanities. Thought of self and thought of other here become obsolete in their duality. Every Other is a citizen and no longer a barbarian. What is here is open, as much as this there. I would be incapable of projecting from one to the other. This-here is the weave, and it weaves no boundaries. The right to opacity would

not establish autism; it would be the real foundation of Relation, in freedoms.

And now what they tell me is, “You calmly pick your poetics into these craters of opacity and claim to rise so serenely beyond the prodigiously elucidating work that the West has accomplished, but there you go talking nonstop about this West.” —“And what would you rather I talk about at the beginning, if not this transparency whose aim was to reduce us? Because, if I don’t begin there, you will see me consumed with the sullen jabber of childish refusal, convulsive and powerless. This is where I start. As for my identity, I’ll take care of that myself.” There has to be dialogue with the West, which, moreover is contradictory in itself (usually this is the argument raised when I talk about cultures of the One); the complementary discourse of whoever wants to give-on-and-with must be added to the West. And can you not see that we are implicated in its evolution?

Merely consider the hypothesis of a Christian Europe, convinced of its legitimacy, rallied together in its reconstituted universality, having once again, therefore, transformed its forces into a “universal” value—triangulated with the technological strength of the United States and the financial sovereignty of Japan—and you will have some notion of the silence and indifference that for the next fifty years (if it is possible thus to estimate) surround the problems, the dependencies and the chaotic sufferings of the countries of the south with nothingness.

And also consider that the West itself has produced the variables to contradict its impressive trajectory every time. This is the way in which the West is not monolithic, and this is why it is surely necessary that it move toward entanglement. The real question is whether it will do so in a participatory manner or if its entanglement will be based on old impositions. And even if we should have no illusions about the realities, their facts already begin to change simply by asking this question.

The opaque is not the obscure, though it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such. It is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence. We are far from the opacities of Myth or Tragedy, whose obscurity was accompanied by exclusion and whose transparency aimed at “grasping.” In this version of understanding the verb *to grasp* contains the movement of hands that grab their surroundings and bring them back to themselves. A gesture of enclosure if not appropriation. Let our understanding prefer the gesture of giving-on-and-with that opens finally on totality.

At this point I need to explain what I mean by this totality I have made so much noise about. It is the idea itself of totality, as expressed so superbly in Western thought, that is threatened with immobility. We have suggested that Relation is an open totality evolving upon itself. That means that, thought of in this manner, it is the principle of unity that we subtract from this idea. In Relation the whole is not the finality of its parts: for multiplicity in totality is totally diversity. Let us say this again, opaquely: the idea of totality alone is an obstacle to totality.

We have already articulated the poetic force. We see it as radiant—replacing the absorbing concept of unity; it is the opacity of the diverse animating the imagined transparency of Relation. The imaginary does not bear with it the

coercive requirements of idea. It prefigures reality, without determining it a priori.

The thought of opacity distracts me from absolute truths whose guardian I might believe myself to be. Far from cornering me within futility and inactivity, by making me sensitive to the limits of every method, it relativises every possibility of every action within me. Whether this consists of spreading overarching general ideas or hanging on to the concrete, the law of facts, the precision of details, or sacrificing some apparently less important thing in the name of efficacy, the thought of opacity saves me from unequivocal courses and irreversible choices.

As far as my identity is concerned, I will take care of it myself. That is, I shall not allow it to become cornered in any essence; I shall also pay attention to not mixing it into any amalgam. Rather, it does not disturb me to accept that there are places where my identity is obscure to me, and the fact that it amazes me does not mean I relinquish it. Human behaviors are fractal in nature. If we become conscious of this and give up trying to reduce such behaviors to the obviousness of a transparency, this will, perhaps, contribute to lightening their load, as every individual begins not grasping his own motivations, taking himself apart in this manner. The rule of action (what is called ethics or else the ideal or just logical relation) would gain ground—as an obvious fact—by not being mixed into the preconceived transparency of universal models. The rule of every action, individual or community, would gain ground by perfecting itself through the experience of Relation. It is the network that expresses the ethics. Every moral doctrine is a utopia. But this morality would only become a utopia if Relation itself had sunk into an absolute excessiveness of Chaos. The wager is that Chaos is order and disorder, excessiveness with no absolute, fate and evolution.

I thus am able to conceive of the opacity of the other for me, without reproach for my opacity for him. To feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary to try to become the other (to become other) nor to “make” him in my image. These projects of transmutation—without metem-psychosis—have resulted from the worst pretensions and the greatest of magnanimities on the part of West. They describe the fate of Victor Segalen.

The death of Segalen is not just a physiological outcome. We recall his confiding, in the last days of his life, about the slovenliness of his body, whose illness he was unable to diagnose and whose decline he was unable to control. No doubt it will be known, with a list of his symptoms and the help of medical progress, what he died of. And no doubt the people around him could say he died of some sort of generalized consumption. But I myself believe that he died of the opacity of the Other, of coming face to face with the impossibility of accomplishing the transmutation that he dreamed of.

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1 *Comprehension* could, of course, be translated as “comprehension” to point out the root connection with the French word *comprendre*, which I have earlier rendered as “to grasp” or, when the sense is mechanical, as “to comprehend” (and once, at Glissant’s behest, as “to integrate”). In American English, however, the controlling attitude implied in this particular instance, vis-a-vis other people or cultures, is more apparent in *understanding* than in *comprehension*. *Trans.*

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