THE FRENCH REVIEW, Vol. LIII, No. 2, December 1979 *Printed in U.S.A.*

Narrative Techniques in Edouard Glissant's *Malemort*

by Elinor S. Miller

OVER THE PAST HALF CENTURY, since French literature written outside Europe began receiving recognition as more than a curiosity, the tiny island of Martinique has consistently produced writers rivaling those from the vast expanses of Africa and Canada. René Maran's tale, *Batouala*, which received the Prix Goncourt, was published in 1921; Aimé Césaire's narrative poem, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, landmark of the *négritude* movement, in 1939; Joseph Zobel's autobiographical novel, *La Rue Cases-nègres*, in 1955. In non-fiction, the name of Frantz Fanon is known worldwide: he, too, was born and bred in Martinique. Today it is primarily Edouard Glissant who maintains the tradition. After his early poetry, his first novel, *La Lézarde*, was awarded the Prix Renaudot the year it appeared, 1958. Through the eyes of a first-person narrator who grows up as the story progresses, the novel tells of a group of young people engaged in a political campaign. Some of the same characters reappear in *Le Quatrième Siècle*, published in 1964, a novel which treats a longer period of time. Through several narrative voices, the history of two slaves and their descendants is presented: the ones who escaped as maroons, and the ones who did not. The four centuries are not so much years as cataclysms: crossing the ocean, slavery, escape as maroons, and finally survival in today's depleted land.[1] In *Malemort*,[2] published in 1975, the original maroon has become legend and the date of his landing marks the earliest known history, in an evocation of the people as a whole, represented both by three specific closely-linked characters who live in time, and by three anonymous figures who span the centuries. Thus Glissant seeks in his work to recover the identity of the Martiniquais. In his school, the Institut Martiniquais d'Etudes, the students learn their own history and culture in addition to the standard French program. Throughout the Caribbean there is slippage of identity, and although Martinique has remained French almost without interruption since its colonization in 1635, the Martiniquais share with the other Caribbean peoples a heritage of slavery and natural disaster. In addition, they suffered conscription and blockade

[1] Edouard Glissant, *Le Quatrième Siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1964), pp. 268–69. "'La mer qu'on traverse, c'est un siècle.' Oui, un siècle. Et la côte où tu débarques, aveuglé, sans âme ni voix, est un siècle. Et la forêt, entretenue dans sa force jusqu'à ce jour de ton marronnage . . . est un siècle. Et la terre, peu à peu aplatie, dénudée . . . est un siècle."

[2] Edouard Glissant, *Malemort* (Paris: Seuil, 1975). Page references are given in parentheses within the text.

during the world wars, and today, as citizens of a department of France, find themselves economically dependent on a distant center—and on tourism. Glissant, in his works as in his school, demonstrates for his people what it means to be Martiniquais. For the rest of the world, he offers not only insight and understanding, but a brilliantly constructed poetic novel.

In his useful article on the first two novels, F. I. Case has said, "Students of *Le Quatrième Siècle* often abandon the text in frustration claiming that they are incapable of understanding the novel because of the method of presentation. They comment on the difficulty of language: sentence, paragraph and chapter construction; frequent parentheses; use of italics. . . . The list of causes of frustration is long."[3] The same is certainly true of *Malemort*. Examination of variants in a primitive version of chapter two, published in 1972, reveals Glissant's specific concern for many minute details: along with a few changes in wording, commas and periods are deleted, italic type is substituted for roman, *à* becomes *de* and a plural in *s* is corrected to *x*.[4] It is certain that the style itself, with all its difficulties, is an integral part of Glissant's intention. Further, a first-person plural narrator is added in *Malemort*; the "je" of the earlier works has become "nous," a metamorphosis developed at length in his *Intention poétique*.[5] Finally, the wide variety of narrative techniques, often interwoven and combined, is very demanding, posing problems to be addressed here.

The body of *Malemort* is composed of thirteen dated chapters, which are not in chronological order, in accord with Glissant's usual approach. The periods emphasized are the war years, 1939–48, less extensively the crisis years 1958–60, and finally 1973–74, always viewed against a past reaching back to 1788, the year the first maroon was landed and sold into slavery. The main characters are three: Dlan,[6] Médellus and Silacier, presented in early years as inseparable, almost as one person, but gradually differentiated as they reach their individual, though parallel, destinies. In 1973 Dlan ends up a preacher for his own church; Médellus grieves over the destruction of his commune for the poor, and in 1974 Silacier is still, as always, looking for work. Neither traditional heroes, nor symbolic, they are what the world would call mad; yet in the novel's terms, each seems to have behaved perfectly reasonably, sometimes nobly. The action is the history of a people whose past has not heretofore been recorded as they lived it. Thus, whereas "Dlan Médellus Silacier," together or separately, figure as actors at a given moment in time in a particular scene, they function also in a much larger sense as a part of the whole, throughout Glissant's four centuries. The quest by the whole

[3] F. I. Case, "The Novels of Edouard Glissant," *Black Images*, 2 (1973), 7. See also my article, "The Identity of the Narrator in Edouard Glissant's *La Lézarde*," *South Atlantic Bulletin*, 43, 2 (May 1978), 25, n. 1.

[4] Edouard Glissant, "Billons," *Acoma*, 3 (1972), 7–23.

[5] Edouard Glissant, *L'Intention poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), p. 8. See also Guy Ducornet, "Edouard Glissant and the Problem of Time: Prologomena to a Study of his Poetry," *Black Images*, 2 (1973), 13–14.

[6] Delan, "Garcin Delan dit Dlan" (p. 200). Probably for his birthday, as Apocal and Fetnat, "né on dirait le jour de l'Apocalypse" and "né un 14 juillet" (p. 89).

people for identity proceeds in pendulum swings, or at best with three steps forward and two steps back, but continues still today.

All the chapters but one, chapter six, are told by an omniscient narrator. His style is extremely varied from one chapter to the next, and within a single chapter. Ordinarily he uses very long sentences with many commas and parentheses but few or no periods. Open paragraphs without capital letter or end punctuation may or may not signal particularly poetic passages. Italics are used frequently, but not always, for speeches run into the narration, and interior monologue and dialogue may or may not have speech tags. Occasionally the sentences are very short and choppy, sometimes only phrases or single words. The unconventionalities, however, are not incomprehensible; they are in accord with and express the infinite variety of the land and its people.

In examining these narrative techniques, we will look first at the chapters in which the first-person plural narrator speaks briefly (two, three, four, five and eleven), looking first at "nous" and then at the varied techniques of the omniscient narrator in these same chapters. Next we will consider the two chapters narrated entirely by "nous" (nine, ten), followed by the chapters narrated entirely by the omniscient narrator, proceeding from the simplest to the most complex (one, thirteen, seven, eight, twelve). Then we will focus on the chapter told by neither "nous" nor the omniscient narrator (six), concluding with the central chapter (seven), again told by the omniscient narrator.

The voice of "nous" is revealed early. In chapter two, dated 1941, the omniscient narrator begins, but "nous" then takes over, itemizing its own membership: a child, his father Colentroc (whose pig runs amok), the pig, the long bread line who "en ce matin d'août de guerre lointaine attendaient devant la mer close" (p. 22) and "Dlan Médellus Silacier." In the course of the chapter "nous" is redefined as "non différencié, intact, humilié, chose et âme," and "un seul . . . pour tous les autres" and "pourquoi pas ces trois-là, eux-mêmes nous, eux-mêmes fous" (p. 23). Dlan expresses the same solidarity when he says, after the pig has calmed down, "Mais le seul qui l'arrête c'est monsieur Silacier par voie de conséquent c'est nous trois ici" (p. 31). Finally, "nous Colentroc" becomes anxious for the three to leave: "Nous voici Colentroc en deux méfiant et fraternel," and "Ainsi donc qu'après tout pourquoi pas eux pusiqu'ils étaient là immobiles dans la nuit des hauts, eux-mêmes fous eux-mêmes nous . . . " (p. 39). The "nous" is all, that is, all who are a part of the land. There is no question that some characters belong outside: the whites, whether planters or bourgeois (*békés*), are not a part of "nous," nor are the militia, guards or police, of whatever color.

In these five chapters otherwise told by the omniscient narrator, the contribution of "nous" is usually some foretaste of the future, as "nous" speaks only in chapters dated 1939 and after. Thus, in the 1943 section of chapter three, the omniscient narrator describes the jubilation of the police over finally killing a fugitive; they have no qualms about their action, and "nous" adds: "(Car ils auraient déjà science qu'à ces vingt-cinq ans plus tard nous les aimerons les aimerons les aimerons)" (p. 45). "Nous" knows well the feeling of the people for the police in 1968. In the 1939 section of chapter four, "nous" interrupts the

omniscient narrator three times, once relative to the future. Then in chapter five, 1945–46, "nous" interjects a cynical echo to Césaire's point that "nous" never invented anything and seems to be unable to conform to Western practices. That is, there is one thing "nous" can indeed do: "Il est hors de doute, depuis ces temps que nous venons au vent d'illusion si doucement nommé alizé, il est absolument hors d'aucun doute que nous savons remplir les urnes" (p. 72). Finally, in chapter eleven, 1974, "nous" speaks briefly and poignantly, this time of a future after the end of the novel. Among the desolation caused by modernization, all are asking, "Mais qu'est-ce qu'il faut faire? Sans compter ces trois, Médellus Silacier Dlan, qui bientôt peut-être vont se perdre, nous avec eux, dans la jaune clarté de terre diffuse où s'enfouissent les antans mais où demain jamais ne lève" (pp. 189–90).

In these five chapters in which "nous" speaks only briefly, the omniscient narrator uses varied techniques. Chapter five is almost entirely a monologue, M. Lesprit's "song of the ballot-box," in which he reports dialogue (often hilarious), interjects creole proverbs (helpfully translated in the glossary), and makes asides to the barmaid while gleefully recounting the great strides made in political corruption. The omniscient narrator serves only to introduce brief exchanges between Lesprit and his fellow domino-players and the interior monologues of the listening Silacier. The second section of chapter two, after Colentroc's pig calms down, is similarly constructed, as conversation is presented almost traditionally. However, in the first section of chapter two, the omniscient narrator, describing the heroes' chase after the pig, is much more present, more serious, more poetic, using long series of open paragraphs, with ironic mock-epic effect. It is hunger, after all, which periodically drives the pig berserk, an impulse universally understood. The next chapter, three, is still more complex: on the one hand, Médellus tells of his trip with Silacier to the south end of the island, constantly interrupted by Dlan's contradictions and Silacier's additions. On the other hand, the omniscient narrator speaks in paragraphs alternating with Médellus's story, relating the events of 1936 to those of the present, 1943. At first these sections begin with "C'était l'homme" or "L'homme," but these hints are gradually abandoned as the reader becomes familiar with the technique. Then the omniscient narrator presents fourteen short prose poems, for the most part without capitals or periods, developing the resemblances and differences between the original Négateur of 1788, the modern fugitive of 1936 and 1943, and a mysterious Odibert.[7] Time is collapsed by the omniscient narrator, who sees past

[7] Odibert is part of the subsidiary action of a murder. Submerged in popular legend and officially promulgated misinformation, the mystery is hinted at throughout the work and is finally solved by Silacier. The wife of a man vaguely recalled as named something like Beautemps is assaulted by a *béké* in 1936. Beautemps attempts to kill the *béké*, fails, and remains a fugitive in the hills until 1943. Meanwhile, M. Lesprit, secretary to the mayor of "Lambrianne," hires Odibert to assassinate a threatening political candidate, Nainfol. Odibert flees the scene of the murder, protected by the police chief in league with M. Lesprit, but observed and followed by Beautemps. Silacier sees only "une ombre qui ne pouvait être qu'Odibert" (p. 216), and Beautemps in pursuit. He holds Beautemps, without knowing why, thus preventing his catching the murderer. Subsequently, Odibert, fearing Beautemps may come forward to testify, tries to kill him, fails, and eventually seeks refuge in the sea, where he disappears. The police manage to find and kill Beautemps by luck.

and future along with the present, whereas "Dlan Médellus Silacier" are victims of hearsay and willful misinformation. The omniscient narrator does not answer the questions raised by the three, but suggests that the importance of the fugitive's story and its varied interpretations does not lie in the actual historical events, but rather in the apprehension of loss, of the absence of accurate memory, of the void which is the past.

Chapters four and eleven occupy corresponding positions after the first and central chapters, and are both subtitled "Pays." The first is dated 1788 and 1939, the second 1974. Chapter four is altogether in the poetic prose style characteristic of the omniscient narrator. It treats of the Négateur, then of "Dlan Médellus Silacier," and ends with diverse misinformation about the war. This first "Pays" introduces its two datings by "Premièrement donc" and "deuxièmement par conséquent"; in chapter eleven, 1974, we have a "dernièrement donc." This second "Pays," by contrast, is dry and precise, beginning with a few short direct quotations: "Pour quoi faire, disent-ils—désassemblés—le passé quel passé, Négateur quel négateur, qui vient qui est né c'est le même, qu'est-ce que c'est un pays de quoi, de blancs de mulâtres d'indiens, c'est un pays d'hommes tout court" (p. 189). There follow five cold lists, of events and dates, of the present state of several characters, of the devastation of the landscape, and finally "Télés," quotations from visiting metropolitans: "Oui, dit—en fin de visite—le ministre en parlant d'un ministre, mon collègue est d'ailleurs guadeloupéen, puisqu'il a acquis des terres là-bas" (p. 194). Such problems as white metropolitan ownership of land, with resultant displacement of the people, are thus concisely resumed.

The two chapters narrated entirely by "nous" are very different from each other in form. Chapter nine is what might be called straight narration, with interspersed dialogue. There is, however, a refrain, "Nous les aimons," repeated ten times with variation. "Nous," recalling teachers during the Occupation years, is personal, humorous, tender, and would seem here to be the voice of this particular class of high school students. In chapter ten "nous" speaks antiphonally with other voices, a structure easy to follow thanks to the typography. In roman type Dlan Médellus Silacier talk relatively matter-of-factly, while watching an auto race.[8] The alternating sections are in italics, as "nous" rhapsodizes on the unity of the Caribbean experience in St. Lucy, Dominica, Haiti, Cuba and all the way to the Andes. "Nous" here has its widest embrace: in Caribbean terms it is universal.

One might expect the chapters narrated wholly by the omniscient narrator without interruptions from "nous" to be simple in form. Indeed, chapters one and thirteen are straightforward: the narrator recounts an event accompanied in the first case by Dlan's interior monologue, and in the other by Silacier's. However, each of the other chapters is presented quite differently. The structure of chapter twelve is relatively simple: in 1944 Médellus outlines to a listener, "tu," through direct quotations, his plan for a commune, aided by a printed diagram. The omniscient narrator takes up a poetic antiphonal response, opening always with "Voulant dire," ostensibly to explain Médellus's choppy phrases, which become

[8] Relatively, but not completely: Silacier, encouraged by Dlan, creates an ode to escape across the sea, printed as a poem, in predominantly seven-syllable lines, with repetitions.

increasingly obscure. The two voices vividly portray the exploitation and misery which are overwhelming ideas and ideals, but by 1973 the omniscient narrator tells us sadly that people are thinking, "Médellus est tombé fou on n'entend plus sa parole" (p. 213).

Chapter eight is almost entirely presented through interior monologue and dialogue of many different characters. Within a single paragraph, mainly of short sentences, the words or thoughts of several speakers may be juxtaposed along with the narration. The effect is of a crowd in confusion, each individual thinking or talking at random. And indeed, the scene is of the whole town's arriving to comment on a dig for buried treasure in the mayor's garden. Then a line occurring earlier in the chapter is repeated: "Du fond des bois tombe de roche en roche l'eau de rivière," with the addition, "écoutez," introducing a poem (p. 143). Fifteen two-, three-, and four-line statements, mainly of seventeen syllables, variously indented and irregularly spaced on the page, splash as water from rock to rock. The last is an alexandrine: "Allons il faut remplir / la terre avec la terre" (p. 144). They have found no treasure. Each statement could have been made by more than one of those present, or by the narrator, as the identity of the individual speaker is unimportant: it is the collectivity of the people which matters, urgently. At the end of the chapter, Dlan and Médellus recite a litany of the ways in which the poor are cheated; "C'est la raison pourquoi" (pp. 146–47) is the response. They conclude with the question whether there is a place in the world for little people. "Silacier en rage criait: il n'y a pas, il n'y a jamais" (p. 147).

Reserving the central chapter for final consideration, let us turn to chapter six, the only one told neither by the omniscient narrator nor by "nous." Silacier is the narrator who says "je" in a poem, set off typographically in an indented column, with a few initial capitals but no other punctuation. The effect is one of acceleration, as the lines increase in number of syllables, while still appearing in the same width column. Silacier, in the army, has borrowed (stolen) the commandant's 11 HP Citroën and is driving at a completely mad pace around Fort-de-France. Pushed beyond endurance by the hopelessness of present and future, he deliberately chooses seven and one-half minutes of dangerous bliss in control of a powerful car, even though it will mean months in the stockade. The breathless, unbroken form of the poetry forces the reader into Silacier's mind, thinking his thoughts, seeing his world. The poem successfully sweeps the reader, gasping, into the world of the maroons of 1788, as they escape uphill into the forest, where the next chapter begins.

The central chapter, seven, "Vision de ceux qui tombent et se relèvent fusillés," 1788–1974, is twenty pages long, written as one sentence in one paragraph without initial capital or final period, and with only occasional commas and colons. And yet it is perfectly comprehensible, thanks primarily to the repetitions of "ils tombèrent" or a synonym, followed by "ils se levèrent." Through his unrelieved presentation of three men who are shot down only to rise again, Glissant summarizes, for once in chronological order, the history of the people of Martinique: dogged, unrelenting refusal to succumb to mindless armed forces. Significantly, the final section is not concluded by death: the phrase "Ils se levèrent des

griffures d'ananas aigre marchèrent" (p. 133) has no end punctuation, implying that the sequence continues still.

The technique creates meaning for the deaths: the three who first escape as maroons are shot down to become the three who rampage through the plantation house and are shot down to become the three who run throughout the island proclaiming abolition and are shot down—an overwhelming series of resurrections continuing to the present time. Repetitions typical of oral literature are used not only in the unifying phrases, but also within sections. Thus the messengers of abolition repeat "Arrêtez arrêtez partout" eight times. Another technique of storytellers is dialogue run in with the narrative, usually without speech tags, but in which the speaker is readily distinguishable by his attitude. Following a massacre, it is clearly the militiamen who say, "Dommage pour la dépense ils valaient cher et un autre nous n'avons même pas eu le temps de nous amuser un tant soit peu avec" (p. 116). Themes are developed historically: the killers first ride horses, then in jeeps, finally in helicopters. The three die in fields first of tobacco, then coffee, cocoa, cane, cane, cane, and finally today's pineapples. A child who witnesses and survives appears several times, first as the son of a couple who tried to harbor the maroons, whose eyes "emplissaient la forêt" (p. 117) as their cabin is burned. Other children observe; a baby appears to sleep in his mother's arms "comme s'il en avait trop vu et qu'il s'était désormais retiré de l'autre côté du soleil" (p. 120) as the messengers of abolition are shot down by the police. Near the end, however, it is three children who are shot by a guard from a moving truck as they sit watching the riots of 1959. Finally, as strike organizers are gunned down, "il y avait avec eux un enfant aux yeux élargis, comme si l'ancienne forêt disparue avait continué de supporter dans l'air ces yeux qui l'avaient emplie" (p. 133), and the child, dying, watches the others die.

More significant than the changes in agriculture and industry, than the deforestation, a change of a different order can be perceived as the tale unwinds. After the riots of 1959, "il y avait quelque chose de changé depuis les tas d'années que les nègres pour un oui pour un non se faisaient fusiller sans écho ni souvenir" (p. 128). As the strike organizers are mowed down, "décidément il y avait quelque chose de changé" (p. 131) and finally "Il se fit tuer. net" is followed by "Il partit debout non plus vers l'oubli mais peut-être vers quelque chose qui enfin commencerait à ressembler à la connaissance et au souvenir il y avait quelque chose de changé" (p. 132). It is not only that children, originally spared, are in modern times killed along with the three rebels, but also that there is a change for the better: a language is gradually being developed in which to express "ce qu'ils n'appelaient pas encore l'histoire" (p. 131), but "il y avait donc quelque chose qui se suivait et poursuivait et dont ils allaient pouvoir toucher le déroulement et peut-être le bout" in "ce défilé de mort qu'on pourrait appeler leur histoire" (p. 132).

The overwhelming effect of the uninterrupted flood of words, of events, is the inevitability of destiny's unrolling. Glissant's consistent concern to write Martinique's history as lived by its people is justified here by the form chosen. The reader wants, needs, to stop, but there is no stop, as there was no pause in that

history. Médellus, the only one to have found "ce chemin secret tracé par un Négateur," has lost it again (p. 212). But the indomitable three of the central chapter, whose spirit is easily recognized in Dlan Médellus Silacier, rise to march on.

Thus, once accustomed to the style of *Malemort*, the reader is still bombarded with constant change, from omniscient narrator to "nous" to Silacier, from conventional dialogue to thoughts and speeches of many different characters printed without punctuation, from lists to poems, from extended interior monologue to antiphonal voices speaking on different subjects from different years. The result is in many ways a poem rather than a prose novel. No single, conventional narrative technique could have been more appropriate to this creation of the vibrant history of a complex people.

Much has been written about the problematic role of the Western critic treating African literature, as he confronts unfamiliar literary conventions. Some of the same difficulties obtain relative to Caribbean literature, but are further complicated by resemblances to Afro-American works. The difficulties of *Malemort* do not, however, derive from such cultural differences, but rather from Glissant's unique artistic interpretation of the best means to achieve his ends. New critics could fruitfully make ideological and even psychoanalytical studies of *Malemort*. Moreover, an essential part of the work is the demonstration of *langue* as the basis of cultural identity. But the effectiveness of Glissant's view of Martinique, as if seen through a kaleidoscope, depends on the light beyond, that is, on truth, beauty or poetry. It may be that we critics who break open the kaleidoscope, sorting and enumerating according to our chosen approach, offer instead only spilled fragments of colored glass.

ROLLINS COLLEGE