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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Poetics of Relation* by Edouard Glissant and Betsy Wing

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George's own comments on a literary work. Because she considers the Jameson essay of great significance, she mentions four times that it is not discussed in *The Empire Writes Back*. Some debatable critical judgments are given as if they needed no justification. While *Biswas* is praised, the rest of V. S. Naipaul's work is dismissed as lacking in "wisdom and generosity" (91).

In an attempt to link the disparate essays, Rosemary George ends each chapter with a paragraph about the following chapter. Such pointing to the organization of the book seems a substitute for creating a solid structure. There are also awkward sentences, the occasional use of jargon ("auratic"?), and an irritating tendency to qualify critics with effusive praise. Rob Nixon's reading of Naipaul is "outstanding" (89), Said's discussion of exile is "elaborate and moving" (243). Women critics do even better. Chandra Mohanty is "brilliant" (128), Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha write a "spectacular" introduction (144), an essay by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak shows "her usual elegance" (231).

Rosemary George quotes an essay by Conrad in which he says that the English novelist does not start with a precise intention. Conrad continues: "It never occurs to him that a book is a deed, that the writing of it is an enterprise as much as the conquest of a colony." She interprets this comment as showing Conrad's awareness of the political implications of his writing, which he compares to colonial conquest (76). I read it rather as stating Conrad's refusal to equate literature with politics. Similarly Rosemary George's dismissal of Homi Bhabha's theory that a "nation" is rewritten at its marginal sites seems based on a partial reading. She counters Homi Bhabha by suggesting that many immigrants do not want integration into a national culture. Bhabha is, of course, not talking of the desires of the individual writer. The differing ways of looking at center and margins, however, do provide a good example of Rosemary George's distinction between a female and a male approach, between thinking of individuals and their search for homes and considering the construction of the larger entity.

—Adele King

*Poetics of Relation*, by Edouard Glissant. Trans. Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997. xxiii + 226 pp. ISBN 0-472-00629-3 paper.

Betsy Wing's 1997 translation of Edouard Glissant's 1990 Gallimard edition of *Poétique de la relation* will prove, no doubt, most useful to the academic community. Anyone familiar with Glissant's extraordinary brand of French knows what an arduous task translating any of his works must be, even for an experienced translator. In several translation seminars, I and my graduate students have had the opportunity to examine excerpts from Michael Dash's meritorious English rendition of *Le discours antillais*. In all honesty, I must admit that whenever some criticism has come up regarding the translator's rendition of one particular word or section, most of the time, the choice of another, better solution has been quite problematic.

First, let me rapidly situate the original work within the general context of Glissant's productions. *Poétique de la relation* has been preceded by three other books of essays, namely, *Soleil de la conscience* (1956), *L'intention poétique*

(1969), and *Le discours antillais* (1981). To *Introduction à une Poétique du Divers* (1966) and *Traité du Tout-Monde, Poétique IV* (1997), I would like to add the gorgeous *Faulkner, Mississippi* (1996), although some readers might not include this book in the same category as the aforementioned works (incidentally, Glissant's own subtitle to *Traité: Poétique IV* suggests that he had mentally excluded two of the preceding works (?) from the Poetics series). In any case, any good reader of Glissant's writings should know that all of them demonstrate the author's practice of creative *repetition*—a leit-motif of his—and therefore, any well-trained eye will detect in them many a page closely related to another, and this, in more ways than one. All of Glissant's texts, to use some of his seminal expressions, are indeed related: *linked, relinked (relayed), told and retold*. Of course, these few remarks could be extended to his other "types" of writing: poetry, drama, fiction. Glissant's work is truly a Poetics of relation in progress. The more one reads him, the more unable one feels to speak sensibly, truthfully, about his work to an uninformed group of students without a constant, quasi-superhuman view of the whole work in mind.

Half of the essays included in *Poetics of Relation* are based on oral versions presented at various places and on various occasions (the interface between oral and written being another important aspect of the Relation practice for Glissant, as well as, incidentally, the interface between original and translated texts). Once again, not surprisingly, the whole book takes up several of Glissant's most cherished themes, such as "Errantry, Exile," "Expanse and Filiation," "Closed Place, Open Word," "Concerning a Baroque Abroad in the World," "Transparency and Opacity," "The Relative and Chaos" . . . , and most prominent of all themes, of course, "Relation" in all its dimensions. Of all these terms, "Chaos" is, I believe, the newest one in Glissant's idiom.

At first sight, one might believe that Glissant's essays are somewhat easier to translate than his fiction and poetry. After careful consideration, I have come to the conclusion that this is probably not the case, owing to the close intricacy between philosophical thought and poetic imagination that characterizes most of them. In Glissant, the sheer beauty of the language (*langage*) is a dangerous lure. One is tempted to let oneself be swept away by the stream of pleasure-giving words without having really understood what they mean. Hence, the patient scanning one will have to undertake, the repetitive attention one will have to pay to each segment of each sentence. The reward will be such that, step after step, the reader will be led to understand that nothing, in the text, is gratuitous, superfluous, or misplaced, that everything *means*. At the same time, that same reader will become aware that she is both witness of and participant in the author's thinking process (*la pensée pensante*) rather than being fed an arrogant (in fact impossible) recording of (dead) thoughts. Consequently, many of Glissant's texts will exude strength, fullness, brilliance, as well as suppleness and novelty, will exude subtle lights radiating from old Glissantian motifs—the never-seen, never-heard-before kind of resonance, although the same words, or nearly the same, were used somewhere else, in other texts of his. All this makes the challenge facing the translator quite formidable.

Moreover, if one believes, as I do, that a good translation should draw the reader into the world of the original, rather than force the source language to adapt itself to the (new) reader's world, then, the translation should, to a certain extent, transform both the target language and culture, and ultimately the reader herself.

By and large, Wing has chosen to follow the text very closely. For instance, whereas Dash had imperfectly (I believe) elected "Cross-Cultural Poetics," she has more appropriately kept "Poetics of Relation." Whereas Dash had translated "détour" as "diversion," and "retour" as "reversion," she has chosen "detour" and "return" (see Wing's note 4, p. 216). After stressing, as I myself did above, albeit in other words, that "associative principles" combined with a rigorous demonstration of "analytical thought" (xii), are the building blocks of *Poetics of Relation*, Betsy Wing discusses in her most informative introduction some of the problems she encountered. I fully agree with her that readers of the original French will often be disconcerted by certain phrases as will English readers, when confronted with the translation. With this in mind, I think the principle I proposed in the last sentence of my foregoing paragraph makes particularly good sense, in fact double sense, when it comes to reading Glissant. I believe that Wing has pushed this principle to its extreme conclusion: thus, she deliberately chose to leave untranslated some crucial expressions, such as *la totalité-monde*, *les échos-mondes*, *le chaos-monde*, not only because they would have been difficult to translate "concisely," but because they function as "neologisms" in French (xv). Although, theoretically, I would say that every element in a book ought to be translated, I too, for instance, would have rejected "world-chaos," since the "chaos-monde" is definitely not the "chaos du monde" in a negative sense. Yet I cannot help wondering whether the fact that French has, at the present time, retained its importance on the international scene—added to the fact that most readers of Glissant are acquainted with at least some aspects of French and Caribbean cultures—makes the decision to leave certain segments untranslated easier; it does not make it intellectually, or democratically, more satisfying. Be that as it may, for lack of a better solution, French and English readers alike, myself included, will appreciate the rich explanatory notes added by Wing to her untranslated phrases, and to some of her chosen translations such as: "errantry" (*errance*), "common place" (*lieu commun*), "commonplace" (*lieu-commun*); will appreciate the French words in parentheses following, for instance: "expanse" (*étendue*) or "voice-languages" (*langues*) and "use-languages" (*langages*). The glossary that follows her introduction will also prove useful, but perhaps it would have been preferable not to mix the translator's notes with Glissant's own.

I regret that, for lack of space, I can only offer here a rather sketchy review excluding an attempt at analyzing in some detail Wing's syntax and choice of stylistic turns. However, I wish to stress that I do see in *Poetics of Relation* translation at its best: in this work, the translator stands out as a very competent language and culture scholar, an erudite thinker, a sharp critic, and a very sensitive interpreter.

—Bernadette Cailler