



Edouard Glissant

As we bid welcome to our honorary graduand, we have uppermost in our minds the unfulfilled dream of a Pan Caribbean consciousness and unity; indeed we recall the prophecy of the 19th century French abolitionist, Victor Schoelcher, that the countries of the Caribbean:

"...might well unite in confederation, joined by common interest and possess ...an industry, arts and a literature all their own; that will not come about in a year, nor in two, perhaps in three centuries, but come about it some day shall, for it is natural it be so"

In pursuit of this ideal, we look to our artists, our novelists and our poets to illuminate our understanding of ourselves through a synthesis of ideas from their own intuitive feelings for an unwritten past, no less than from the facts of history.

Mr. Chancellor, I present Edouard Glissant, Distinguished Professor at Louisiana State University, Doctor of Letters and Social Sciences, novelist, poet, dramatist and philosopher. He is a man of the Caribbean, who through his exploration of the Martiniquan psyche has provided insights to social and cultural relations that are relevant to all Caribbean societies. Art, he argues, is inseparable from politics and ethics, dreams inseparable from reality.

Edouard Glissant was born in 1928 in Sainte Marie, Martinique, a community of the hills to the north-east of the island, noted for its retention of traditions from its pre-Columbian and African precursors. As a child he moved with his family to the plains of the west, receiving his secondary education at the Lycée Schoelcher in Forte-de-France. While still at school, he came under the influence of Aimé Cézaire, the celebrated Martiniquan poet and political activist, from whom he learnt the concept of Negritude and the notion of poetic imagination as an instrument of revolution. And so the young Glissant reading voraciously and encouraged by his teachers, grew through adolescence to maturity. He developed a passionate concern for the people of Martinique, became steeped in its history and saw clearly the central dilemma of the West Indian: a longing for cultural and economic independence while lacking the resources to sever the chains of economic dependence. In these formative years he also became acutely conscious of the shaping power and symbolism of the Martiniquan landscape: the mountain's coat of undergrowth on thick forests with ferns drooping—the traditional refuge; the cane green plains of an untold history; the independent sea, beyond pain and time, offering challenge and hope—these three elements linked by the fertile intrusion of the serpent river.

Moving to Paris on a scholarship, he read philosophy and anthropology and immersed himself in political and cultural activities. He participated in the

First Congress of Black Writers and even attracted the censure of the French Government through his association with the Front Antillo-Guyanais which promoted the political liberation of the colonial world and the cultural integration of the French West Indies in the Caribbean region.

His long sojourn in France, some nineteen years, saw his emergence on the international stage as an essayist, poet and novelist whose works not only excited considerable interest but won critical acclaim, his first novel *La Lézarde* receiving the Prix Renandot and his second, *La Quatrième Siècle*, the Prix Charles Veillon, an international award for the best Francophone novel of 1965.

On his return to Martinique in 1965 he took up a post in philosophy at the Lycée des Jeunes Filles and founded the Institute of Martiniquan Studies for the promotion of educational activities.

His output of poetry, novels and essays, almost all on the theme of cross-culturation in the West Indian context, is prodigious and has earned him the Puterbaugh Foundation Biennial Prize. Significantly he makes it clear that negritude should be seen as a phase in the evolution of viable prescriptions for the contemporary Caribbean situation. To use his words:

*One cannot take root in poetic desire, even desires that
proclaim one's roots, nor in a distant country even if it is the
mother country...
We must move from desire to reality*

His collection of essays, *Caribbean Discourse*, rated by *Le Monde*, the prestigious French Journal, as one of the most important works of the decade of the 80s, is seen by his biographer, our own Michael Dash as

*"an unflaggingly ambitious attempt to read the Caribbean and the New
World experience not as a response to fixed univocal meanings imposed
by the past but as an infinitely varied, dauntingly inexhaustible text"*

Although Professor Glissant's recent writings betray the frustrations wrought by what he calls "successful colonisation," one senses that the expectancy and optimism of his earlier works have not been abandoned and that his vision of Antillianté—Caribbeanness—endures. He leaves us with the thought:

*The fervent rediscovery of ourselves should not lead to a sterile and
exclusive preoccupation with the past. This vocation impels us forward;
the impact of cultures is positive and dynamic.*

Our last word is taken from his first novel, *La Lézarde*:

*"Et un jour La Lézarde sera claire devant la mer. Comme un peuple assure
vient au-devant des autres peuples."*

*"One day the Lézarde will be clear when it reaches the sea—in the way
that a national full of confidence approaches other nations."*

I request you Chancellor, by the authority of Senate and Council to admit Edouard Glissant to the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.