

Conversation with Daniel-Henri Pageaux: Louis-Philippe Dalembert

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Louis-Philippe Dalembert, born in 1962 in Port-au-Prince (Haiti), divides his life today between his native land, Paris, and Italy. A poet, literary critic, and novelist, he has received the Prix du Livre RFO for L'Autre face de la mer (1998) and the prestigious Premio Casa de las Américas (Cuba) for his novel Les dieux voyagent la nuit (2006). Among his latest publications, his novel Ballade d'un amour inachevé is set in Italy and based around the 2009 earthquake in the Abruzzi. If he initially associated himself with the great tradition of magic realism and a Caribbean Neo-Baroque, he has since imposed his own style, combining humour and poetry with his profound faith in mankind.

Daniel-Henri Pageaux: You made your literary debut with a (double) collection of poetry for which, moreover, you received a prize. And you continue to compose and publish poems. What does this poetic composition represent for you? Does it differ from your writing of fiction, and if so, why? There is clearly a complementarity, however. Does the question “what does poetry bring you that the novel does not provide?” have a meaning for you?

Louis-Philippe Dalembert. Poetry is at once a transgressive form of expression, one which therefore disturbs, and a discomfort for the poet in search of truth, his truth. It is the place where the man as much as the poet risks himself. Where no prior strategy is possible. From where comes an initial difference with the writing of prose fiction. I belong to a generation which was born and grew up under a hereditary dictatorship. At the time, I thought that poetry could overthrow the dictatorship, that, like faith, it could move mountains. It was through that way of thinking that I came into literature with, at the age of 19, a first collection of poems which were more than clumsy. At that time, my adolescent outlook could conceive of poetry only as something engaged in the struggle in favour of the most deprived, and for the liberation of a stifled nation.

An act of politics, then, in the sense that Sartre intended. A voice which carried over its conscience of being in the world and which, in the Haiti of that period, could not easily make an abstraction of the real. Since then, my relationship with poetry has evolved. Today I know that a love poem, especially within a political context such as the one I mentioned, can become just as subversive by its capacity to re-appropriate for itself the humanity that a totalitarian system has denied it and declared not to exist.

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My link with poetry is also to be found in the urgency to speak. In the “*irrué*,” the inrush, as Édouard Glissant expresses it, of the word. This urgency rarely supports being deferred until a later date, as can happen with prose. Certainly one must subsequently tame this raw word, by little polishing touches. That was the case for my *Poem to accompany absence*, published in 2005, but whose first draft dates from the early days of the year 2001. It was a matter of elaborating in a foreign land a basic structure through which to grieve. In a state of separation and in the absence of ancestral rituals. And with each rediscovery, to become again part of, and prolong, the rhythm that had been left to lie fallow. To master pain while reviving it.

In summary, poetry is rhythm. Whence my tendency to recite my texts aloud while writing them, and to correct them in the light of this musicality alone. This rhythm which is first and foremost from within, cannot be shared unless it is genuine. It is in this sense that it is a transgression.

Since your birth in Haiti, and after studying in France, your journeys and sojourns in various countries have multiplied. What do these experiences of the foreign represent for you? To apply a term currently in use, would you say that you were a “nomad” writer?

We are always an alien for somebody, are we not? That is, first of all, in the sense of the ancient Greek word *μέτοικος*, meaning a foreigner in the city who had no civil rights despite living there and participating in the cultural life and the defence of that same city. It relates also to a broader philosophical question which all human beings confront at some point or other in their lives: “Where do I come from? Where am I going? Is there a life after death?” And before being a foreigner in any given country, could it not be that humans are foreigners on Earth itself?

On the other hand, I do not consider myself to be a “nomad” writer, even though I have been living for a long time now astride several countries, languages and cultures, without for all that – and very importantly – having ever lost contact with my point of departure. To my mind, nomadism, as exile or wandering, arises out of an experience “undergone.” One does not choose to be born in a nomad family or culture.

Hence, the idea of “*vagabondage*” is more expressive for me, both from a cultural as well as a personal point of view. It is manifested by an obsession for changing locations – and its concomitant, the appeal of the elsewhere – drawn in large part from one’s childhood. Beyond the personal aspect, it comes in the individual from his or her recognition of their freedom, which is intrinsically linked to their humanity and the ephemeral character of this.

That is what explains the migrations and incessant movings-on of the characters in my novels. Languages too, which are necessary tools for the vagabond life, become intermingled. Likewise for the genres: poetry passes into prose, and vice versa. But even more importantly, it is one’s *vagabondage* over time, going from childhood to adulthood and vice versa which interests me.

This solar manner of being in the world also has its dark side. The main character of *L’Île au bout des rêves* [The Island at the End of Dreams] tells it like this: “My grandmother often used to say that she helped people pass over. [...] Perhaps the fact of helping others to pass over was a way of not watching oneself pass over. As for me, I lead a life that is constantly moving. [...] The notion of remaining anywhere is foreign to me. I don’t boast of it, it is a simple observation of a way of life that certainly has its share of freedom, but also of melancholy sometimes, and at times of loneliness.

In my collection of poems called *Transhumances*, “Changing Pastures,” I write: “The stranger on the move on earth/never makes a dependable act/nor speaks the appropriate word/and his offer of affection/often resonates with awkwardness.” A little like Baudelaire’s albatross.

It appears that, among the literatures and cultures that you refer to in your works, those of America (both South and North) count for a great deal. How do you think and react to what might be taken as active “presences”? Are there others which are just as important for you?

Active presences, and conscious ones. One never writes in isolation, but always in the conscious or unconscious echo of things read which have marked us as readers. It is the same for the cultures in which we have grown up or which have shaped and/or fascinated us. Resonance of this awareness can be found in my first short story collection, *Le Songe d'une photo d'enfance*. In the same way as the beginning of my latest novel, *Ballade d'un amour inachevé*, is a sort of dialogue at a distance with García Márquez's *Hundred Years of Solitude*. It was arriving in Europe at the age of 23 that I grasped (and inhabited) my Americanness. On the far side of the ideologies which link the Blacks of the American continent to the former European colonial power, then to a mythical Africa, for want, for the grand majority, of being able to retrace the names of their ancestors.

That so, I also draw my references from elsewhere, in Italian literature and culture, as for example *Ballade...* shows. *Rue du Faubourg Saint-Denis* is an attempt at an even more engaged dialogue with *La Vie devant soi* of Émile Ajar/Romain Gary. Perhaps one day I will establish an acknowledgement of debt towards the great Russian classics which marked my adolescence.

Does the question of identity, of an identity, have a meaning for you, and if so, what?

We live in a strange era where, for a large part of the world, that which has access to technological progress, the planet has never seemed so small. Whence perhaps the fear for some of finding themselves lost as individuals and cultures. This fear, which is at the heart of numerous tensions throughout the world, encourages a turning inward in search of one's identity, which thus foments nationalisms on a narrower and narrower scale. But the identity strata by which I personally am configured as an American (in the broad sense), better, as a person of the Caribbean, are much too visible because, among other things, of a more recent historicity than in other cultures for me to claim to assert any kind of “purity.” Hence I am not touched by that particular fear.

Opening oneself up to the Other does not mean as a consequence a renunciation of self. But this presence for oneself cannot be constructed either in fear or through exclusion. It allows me rather to go towards the Other, to be in a state of sharing or in a relationship of equal to equal. And for that, you have to know where you come from, in other words, who you are. This kind of relationship is one that I see as untrammelled by any element of submission on the one hand or domination on the other. In other words, all identities are of equal worth, in respecting the humanity of the Other and that of oneself.

In general you write in French, but you have also published in the Creole language. What represents for you that which we call “Francophonie” (or the Francophonies)? Could you accord us a few remarks or observations on this dual inspiration in terms of language, particularly on the poetic level of writing?

I always feel a little uncomfortable about speaking about my relationship to writing by associating it with the Francophone space, or spaces. This discomfort comes from a certain common acceptance of the concept of “Francophonie,” which time has not managed to deliver from the perception of its being a sort of sub-department of France. Whence the eternal question: “Why do you write in French?” which constantly gets asked of Francophone writers born outside of France.

In fact, this question arises out of the relationship of the French themselves with their own identity, in the expression of which the language plays a quasi-exclusive role. Often, when the questioner is French, what he or she wants to hear in reply is a declaration of love for the French language, and hence for France itself, tantamount to a relationship close to fetishism which would exclude those with other languages. But for the writer, whether mono- or plurilingual, their first language, which for linguists is their instrument of communication, is first and foremost a tool of trade.

For my part, my relationship with writing does not limit me to the use of a single language. I write in French and in Creole. Both are part of my identity and allow me to state my vision of the world. I do not feel myself bound to the French language except insofar as it creates a synthesis within me. A synthesis between the different places where I have lived, and which inhabit me still even when I have left them. A synthesis between the child that I was and the adult that I have become. Between the believer of yesterday, raised in the strict respect of the Sabbath, and the agnostic of today.

A synthesis also and especially between the languages with which I have lived and continue to live on a daily basis. My voice, at the beginning, was obliged to situate itself between the French of the books, and Creole. My education, then my “vagabondage,” have added Spanish, English, and especially Italian. Even some German, Portuguese, and Hebrew. For more than 25 years I have been living amid the use, and I have been writing amid the constant echo, of words that have come from all over. Thus, Spanish and Italian irrigate my writing in a way that is sometimes invisible but not less present for that.

It is between these languages and cultures which somewhere pervade me that I try to trace out my language and my writer’s voice. In refusing all enclosure, whether linguistic or relating to my identity.

What does the triple heading of this special issue of Diogenes: “Pathways, Borders, and Cross-fertilization” evoke for you?

More than the spatial dimension, which is often restrictive in relation to identity, I deeply believe that man inhabits Time. Whence the concept of “time-land” developed in *Le Crayon du bon dieu n’a pas de gomme* in relation to the concept of the eponymous novel, before the impossibility for the narrator to rediscover a character who had marked his childhood. The impossibility, in effect, of re-inhabiting his childhood, that other self-land, as one might resettle in a country which one had left years before. And when you have been away for a long time, you often have the impression that everything, or almost everything, has changed with respect to that *illo tempore* which you have kept in your memory. I freely imagine human existence as a “vagabondage” in which, from birth to death, you cross borders, stopping here and there and going from one inn to another, those of the various time-lands which you visit for a shorter or longer duration until arriving at the final destination. And at these inns, you create little bastard offspring who are refractory to all idea of authenticity or purity. Because they belong to one time – one land – and to another.

Translated from the French by Colin Anderson