

## An Opening Door

JMG Le Clézio

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My contribution will take the form of a plea in favour of the practice of interculturality: but before doing so I would like to set out the reasons for my commitment to this.

Although I was born and grew up in France, a country in which are affirmed the values of the universal republic and of linguistic unity, I belong, through the history of my family, to another nation, Mauritius, a little independent republic in the Indian Ocean which, both from its past and its vocation, provides a good illustration of ethnic and cultural diversity. Like most of the territories lying in the trade-wind belt, the island of Mauritius was from the very start the object of the colonial powers' acquisitive ambitions. It was also one of the first to experience the violence of wars of conquest and piracy, and it became one of the purulent sores of the inhuman trade in slaves, the point of departure for slave ships heading for South America or the Pacific.

The island changed hands many times by way of treaties or naval battles. Discovered in 1507 by the Portuguese navigator Pedro de Mascarenhas, it fell successively under the control of the Spanish, then the Dutch in 1598, followed by the French in 1715, then the English in 1810, before gaining its independence in 1968. These changes in possession have left their imprint. The first French settlers, contracted by the French East India Company, were rural labourers (many were Protestants seeking a land of refuge where they might realize their egalitarian dream). But the corruption of social values turned this dream into a nightmare for the African slaves who had been imported by the settlers to work the land in their stead. Slavery in Mauritius was not, however, solely a process of criminal exploitation. It also gave rise to a new culture and a new language, Mauritian Creole, invented by the slaves from the language of their masters and which is considered the last-born of the Indo-European languages. Creole is today the vernacular language of Mauritius and is spoken by the whole of the population, regardless of their origin.

When the British abolished the slave trade in 1828, the settlers turned to a new source of immigrants to replace the slaves: indentured labourers, who came mostly from India. Through a just reversal of circumstance, it is now this population, now in the majority, that holds political sway in this island nation.

This history (of which I am part through my family heritage) is what underlies the mixed nature of the society that is observable in Mauritius and in other similar parts of the globe (in the West Indies, in the island regions of South-East Asia, in the Pacific). It is my impression that this mixture of cultures demonstrates something exemplary. As the French poet Édouard Glissant said in his *Poétique de la relation* (1990), these islands have a hundred-year advance over continental countries in terms of the intermingling of the races, the painful experiences of colonization and

the practice of exchange with others. In these islands (with the probable exception of Haiti, which was the victim of blind repression by the colonial forces), understanding between the communities came about through a process of peaceful revolution. Mauritius is a particular example of this. In this little country – approximately the size of the Korean island of Jeju – there live together men and women of every origin, every skin colour, every religion: descendants of English and French settlers, descendants of African or Malagasy slaves, grand-children of Indian and Chinese coolies brought in by the sugar-cane industry, Chinese shopkeepers, Arabs, and even a small Korean community! There you will hear several languages being spoken: primarily Creole, but also French (the language of culture), English (the official language of the island), Hindi, Urdu, Hakka (a Hong Kong dialect) and finally Bhojपुरi, a sort of Indian creole coming from the district of Bhojpur in the centre of India. Not all these languages are taught in the schools, but any citizen of Mauritius will speak at least three of them. In the same way, each inhabitant can, as he or she travels around, see the buildings of the three chief religions of Mauritius, Christian churches, Hindu temples and Muslim mosques – to which should be added the animist sanctuaries lodged in the forks of trees. These religions have retained their place in Mauritius, without any of them being more important than any other. The island's official calendar thus celebrates throughout the year Christmas Day (the anniversary of the birth of Christ), Mouloud (the birthday of the Prophet Mohammed) and Indian festivals such as Diwali (the festival of lights). It is not without pride that Mauritians, reflecting the colours of their national flag, define themselves as “the rainbow people”.

In short, this picture of Mauritius could seem idyllic with its image of cultural harmony. Alas, Mauritian society is not exempt from crisis. The close contact between the cultures does not always allow for close understanding. As the Mauritian sociologist Issa Asgarally points out in his book *L'Interculturel ou la guerre* (2003)<sup>1</sup>, the rainbow is an ephemeral phenomenon. In 2000, an incident (the death in prison of the Creole singer Kaya) provoked an insurrection. The population of African origin confronted the Indian community and the island came very close to being the scene of a bloody revolution. The reasons behind this revolt were many: inequality between the communities, the pockets of poverty, ignorance and abandonment in which the majority holding the power was leaving the Creole population, the lack of representation for minorities in the government. To which was added a mutual ignorance of the other's community and an element of racism. Only the courageous actions of President Kasaam Uteem, a Muslim, who stood in front of the rioters and urged them to put down their weapons, brought an end to the conflict and restored peace, but for how long? For the principal issues have not been resolved; certainly, the communities are recognized and have an official existence, but there is no communication between them. More recently, radical religious and cultural attitudes have widened the breach.

If I have wanted to paint the picture of my little homeland, Mauritius, it is because I think that its example raises a good number of questions thrown up by the ideal of interculturality. We cannot deny that our present world is destined to be a place of encounter. We often speak of globalization as if it were a recent occurrence. To do so is to ignore the current that has been stirring the world since the first voyages of discovery in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. When the first Spaniards set off on the conquest of the New World, it was only after they had set up their expeditions like businesses, and signed treaties (we would today characterize these as exclusive contracts) by which the shareholders in the enterprise allotted among themselves territories and peoples of which they had not the slightest prior idea (such as the contract signed in Panama between Almagro, Pinzón and Pizarro).

The discovery of different parts of the world has not always been accompanied by violence. The first contacts between Western Europe and the Far East contributed to the enrichment and progress of the whole of humanity. From India, China, Korea and Japan, European travellers brought back technologies which have transformed the world. The wheelbarrow allowed the construction of cathedrals, the raising of silk worms transformed the clothing industry, the compass and rudder enabled oceanic navigation, printing (a Chinese and Korean invention) facilitated the transmission of knowledge and the spread of

literature. This exchange took place in both directions: in the East, there was discovery of the architectural and city-planning techniques of the Arab world, while the Amerindian civilization, through the avenue of the Spanish conquistadors, improved the nutrition of the world by making available foods that were unknown outside of America until then, such as maize, beans, tomatoes and potatoes.

Out of this age of discovery was born for the first time the feeling of a prosperity on the world scale (but also, of course, the awareness of a common sharing of calamities, with the spread of smallpox, cholera and bubonic plague). As they emerged from their confinement, the countries of Europe, as with China, Japan or Korea, discovered the importance of communication. From this period date all the tales of travels, the contents of which, though sometimes fantastical, gave rise to a new science that we call today the science of man. The great ideas of philosophy, even if they cannot be assimilated to the nature of trade goods, also went along for the ride. In short, everywhere in the world, the notion of shared civilization replaced the long-standing prejudice that others were barbarians – though the progress towards this acceptance has been extremely slow and is still not entirely realized at the present time.

However, in our era of rapid communications and exchange of information across the earth at the speed of light, the question of the relative status of cultures still remains. Regularly, the developed nations give thought to the necessity of defining a single culture, a sort of human charter that has universal application. For this is certainly the question posed by the majority cultures: is there a possibility of salvation for mankind outside of these limits? Is there really a world culture? And, as a recurrent theme, despite the grim experiences foisted on the world by the perpetrators of the last world war, does there in fact exist a hierarchy of cultures, a sort of value scale by which to separate the civilized from the barbarian? But of course this latter question then implies the right, and even the duty, of the superior cultures to obliterate all those that are inferior to them.

Such questions are less abstract than they might at first seem. The Western world (Europe, but also the United States of America, Australia and, in some ways, Japan) puts forward a model of society defined as superior to others: one that is secular, democratic, marked by an economic realism and founded on the values of the individual. France is a good example of this affirmation. There is a lot of reference to the “Enlightenment Period” of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and to the grand principles of the French Revolution of 1789, in particular to the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*: a noble text, to be sure, but which should not obscure the fact that these philosophies and this Declaration cohabited with the crime of slavery – Voltaire himself was a shareholder in the East India Company that was involved in slavery – and that the high point of the slave trade, in France, in the Netherlands or in England, occurred precisely in this same period. Later, the Republic had no difficulty in accommodating the injustices of colonization, despoiling indigenous lands and maintaining whole peoples under its yoke. The Declaration of 1789 should not lead us to forget either the condition of inferiority in which women were kept – the revolutionary activist Olympe de Gouges dared to proclaim a *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Citizeness*, as a result of which she was condemned to death by the tribunal of the Republic. In France, the right to vote has been only a recent acquisition for women, and their access to things political is still far from being accepted today.

When we talk of multiculturalism, the example held up is usually that of England (the United States would tend to be the counter-example). In that country, the various groups comprising the population are recognized and even accorded favourable status. Each person has the right to practise his or her own religion, to dress and cover their heads as they wish, and to speak their own language. In Latin countries, on the other hand, immigrants are referred to rather as being “tolerated”, as if immigration was something undesirable but inevitable. In these countries, standards of dress are strict, and any divergence from these is perceived as being provocative. Recently, the French government gravely pondered what was meant by French “national identity”, and the question of whether it was acceptable that a woman (or indeed a man) should walk through Paris, down the Champs-Élysées, with their face completely veiled.

But the debate between the supporters of multiculturalism and the proponents of a single cultural model simply feeds a polemic that is sterile. For those who urge maintaining a single culture, multiculturalism promotes communitarianism, and thereby the perversion of quotas and the establishment of no-go areas. It would endanger the nation's sense of unity and would dissolve patriotism in a proliferation of sub-cultures. On the other, the supporters of multiculturalism argue that radically enforced integration leads to assimilation which conceals inequalities, creating subaltern communities excluded from knowledge and involvement in public life.

The fact is that both these models are faulty. One through excessive idealism, the other through authoritarianism. In truth, the coming together of cultures is inevitable (there is really no such thing as a mixed race physically speaking, as all human races are the result of mixtures of different stocks over thousands of years). It would be just as vain and illusory to lay claim to an ethnic purity as to wish to prevent the water of rivers and streams from flowing to the sea. You can try to build dams and hold back the flow for a while, but sooner or later the water will get around the obstacles and all rivers will come together in the sea.

One of the reasons we may be optimistic in all of this is that art has always been in advance of institutions and attitudes. Since, by inviting me to address this World Forum on the human sciences under the auspices of the Korean National Commission for UNESCO, it is literature that is being honoured, let me then speak a little about literature.

Over the whole period of its existence, literature has supplied a clear answer to the troubling question of identity. Indeed, even if it can be linked to a particular culture or territory, literature can in no case be completely identified with nationalism. The language that a literature uses, and sometimes invents, certainly will be associated with the history of a people or embedded in a legendary past. But literature involves the sublimation of this history, and not its illustration.

The Greek poet Homer (whom some say never existed, but that comes down more to belief that certainty) related the earliest myths of the Hellenic peoples: the Trojan War, the journey of Ulysses and his return to his native land are the basis of the fabulous monument on which the Greek culture was built. But the events he narrates, however majestic they may have been, are but minuscule episodes in the history of the world, and concern merely a handful of tribes in the Peloponnese. The migration of the Polynesians across the Pacific Ocean, as evoked by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Tahitian woman poet Teuira Henry, or that of the Mexicas down the American continent leading to the foundation of Tenochtitlan as told by the chronicler Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, are events of equal importance. So why have we retained one of these stories and ignored the others? And how can we, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, identify with a tale concerning a culture which, despite what the literary scholars say, is as foreign to us as if it had existed on another planet? What can there be in common between those heroes and goddesses, their metamorphoses and their loves, and our present age, dominated as it is economic anxieties and the nightmare of industrial pollution?

Let's take another example. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a reclusive man who had no job and suffered from asthma decided to chronicle the lives of his contemporaries, that is to say the very restricted milieu of the well-to-do who lived in the wealthy districts of Paris and its close suburbs. This chronicle very surprisingly has become a world-wide literary phenomenon under the name of *À la recherche du temps perdu* [In Search of Lost Time]. In fact, this massive opus, which for a very long time past remained unknown by the general public (and even by literary critics, since the first volume was rejected by the Gallimard publishing house as being "unreadable") has become a universal masterpiece, translated and distributed in almost all languages. So what does the novel of Marcel Proust and the epic poem of Homer have in common? Both – the adventures of Swann and the journeys of Ulysses – have transcended their setting and time-frame and have managed to touch in us what is common to all of us, both men and women, whatever may be the colour of our skins, our maternal language or the history of our particular country. This universal

aspect is not something complicated: it involves the anxiety about time, the search for happiness, love, the pain, exile and death of those who are dear to us.

I have not taken the example of Proust for simple ease of reference. For a long time I went without having been able to read his books, not because what they contained was foreign to me, but on the contrary because they spoke of a society and characters who were both familiar and profoundly antipathetic to me. Swann, Charlus, the Verdurins, I had met them all in my childhood, among the friends of my grandmother who were all the effluvia of that era – snobbish, self-infatuated, superficial, indifferent to the disasters of the inter-war period in which they had been actors. It was only Odette, the *demi-mondaine*, whom I managed to like, for she was really a victim of that unjust and selfish society. But I refused to enter such a world. Yet one day, by pure chance, I read the *haiku* of the great Japanese poet Matsuo, who is better known under the name of Bashô:

Listen to the rush of the  
swift mountain torrent,  
the gateway is there.

and all of a sudden I found the key to Proust's novels. In the first few pages of the first volume, *Du côté de chez Swann* [Swann's Way] when the narrator, listening to the sound of the little bell that tinkled every time Swann pushed open the Verdurins' garden gate, gave a start when feeling within himself the signal which would set off his memory. Thus, a poem written a long time ago in a foreign language can enable a reader to get to the heart of a work of literary imagination.

This little parable I find to be a useful means of illustrating what interculturality can represent – which is something different from intertextuality. In the great flow of thought which traverses both periods and continents, encounters are possible, even if these sometimes seem to strike against logic by proceeding by way of anachronism and anastrophe. The pay-off is found in the knowledge of human history, and in the relationship that it implies between periods and places. If we are able today to read the works of Hesiod alongside the volumes of Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Mythologiques*, or Cervantes's *Don Quixote* alongside crime thrillers, it is because intercultural intelligence is the real *raison d'être* of language. We now know that, in the concert of cultures, every voice and every tune has its place and that we cannot do without them. On that freedom depends the peace and future of the whole of humanity.

Such interculturality is far from being realised. The governments of the world still hesitate between the temptation of mono-cultural nationalism and the jumbled structures of multiculturalism. It is therefore our task, we who have experienced intolerance and wars of domination, to get ourselves properly prepared for intercultural peace. That is why education and training in humanism is necessary and indispensable. This project is not based merely on abstract rhetoric: in Mauritius, for three years now, there has existed a benevolent association called FIP, the *Foundation for Interculturality and Peace*, which has begun to work on the ground by distributing books to schools and presenting to children an exhibition on the theme: "All related, all different." For it is to our children that the future belongs and it will be through them that the mistakes and crimes of the past will be redeemed – that is my fervent hope.

September 2011

Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

## Note

1. Mr Asgarally is the co-founder with Mme Sarojini Bissessor and myself of the *Fondation pour l'interculturalité et la Paix* [Foundation for Interculturality and Peace] (1 Cathedral Square, Port Louis, Mauritius).