

PATRICK CHAMOISEAU, *Que peut Littérature quand elle ne peut?*
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In a heterogeneous cultural context and a tense socio-political climate marked by a crisis of democratic discourses, Patrick Chamoiseau revisits the issue of the power and legitimacy of Literature. What are the limits of literary discourse in the face of past traumas, as well as the violence of the present? What is the purpose of art in an age of doubt? Can literature still accomplish anything in relation to the concrete challenges of reality? These are the questions Chamoiseau seeks to answer, emphasising the fact that the question posed in the title is all the more necessary because of the current epistemic and historical framework. *Que peut Littérature quand elle ne peut?* represents an important study on the contemporary relevance of literary inquiry and on the different worlds that Literature can create.

By proposing the form *Littérature* in the very title, as a strategy of personifying it, in an attempt to detach it from conventional, generalising or limitative interpretations of literary productions, one of Patrick Chamoiseau's main objectives is to rethink the discourse around the role played by literature today. He does so by overturning the comfortable tendencies of interpreting works of art merely in terms of their content or form. In light of these aspects, the work stands out as a significant manifesto for the ways in which critical discourse on world literature is shaped, in the context of the hermeneutic, aesthetic, and socio-political tensions of recent decades.

The question raised by the title itself – *Que peut Littérature quand elle ne peut?* – reveals a much deeper reflection on the dimensions of the relation between literature and the world or, better yet, between literary creation and the different worlds that emerge today. Under the sign of an apparent powerlessness or diminishing role of literary creation in the face of everyday challenges, Patrick Chamoiseau reopens the investigation into the utilitarian dimension of the literary.

It is no coincidence that the work begins with a message of awareness regarding the collective traumas that inevitably influence aesthetic discourse and the relationship between literatures and the world. The emphasis is placed on the fact that, despite all discourses of tolerance, in a world which continues to be dominated by cultural prejudices, a critical reflection on literature could not possibly ignore the major oppressions of recent years: acts of violence that are themselves part of the harsh legacy left by Western discourses marked by nationalist nostalgia and imperialist ambitions. Within this framework, the oppressions in Palestinian and Tibetan regions are discussed, as well as the brutalities involving the Kurds, Ukrainians, and Syrians. Thus, in relation to these present-day global conflicts, Chamoiseau seeks to awaken critical awareness regarding the power (or the powerlessness) of literature in the face of what is shaping up to be yet another form of the *banality of evil* (Hannah Arendt) on a global scale.

Essentially, this compelling and poetic work subtly guides us through a recent history of literature, evoking the key works and writers who embraced the challenge of the unspeakable and the innovation of language. It shows how a new discourse on creation is compiled, between the two coordinates of contemporary cultural discourse, Arendt's famous formula and the idea of a reparative literature.

However, this discourse involves reevaluating the mission of interpreting literary works within the same context, which is as diverse as it is unified in the human desire to understand life in a way that shows other worlds exist. The second objective of the work is to raise the readers' awareness of a new *poietic* commitment.

The author's proposed thesis is therefore clear and connected to the construction of a new discourse on literature: literature today cannot be conceived outside the worlds in which it is produced, but also those that remain to be (re)invented through the act of creation. Capturing these worlds, as well as constructing a different kind of (aesthetic, ethical or human) discourse, is one of the responsibilities of the contemporary author. For instance, when discussing this (re)invention of the world, one cannot ignore the *becomings* experienced by the worlds of (cultural, racial, sexual, etc.) minorities, the realisation of these changes being "une urgence commune, un « nous » très large auquel nous – artistes du langage – avons charge d'assurer le renfort des plus libres propulsions esthétiques" (14). It is no exaggeration to say that one of the essential points of this ambitious work is an overview on literature understood as responsibility – not only from an aesthetic viewpoint, but also (perhaps even more so) from an existential, human, cultural, and democratic stance.

However, the author mentions the fact that responsibility is also tied to a reflection on the authority that the artistic gesture still holds today. The legitimacy of literature lies in its power to change the world by creating other *vital* spaces. Literature not only creates such worlds (spaces where humanity can breathe differently) but it can do so precisely starting from those small, still-marginal worlds that seem to be crystallizing within our cultures, nations, and societies. Art thus holds the power to change the way the individual's inner world connects to the immediate realities, restoring voice to those people or even cultures that have not yet been heard.

If, in the face of the atrocities of today's world (the rebirth of the old monstrous fascist rhetoric, the populist and ultra-commercial dogma, or limitations such as racism, xenophobia, or wars waged in the name of old imperial nostalgias or long-standing territorial conflicts) "nothing in our current capacity for consciousness can truly oppose them" (15), Chamoiseau's essay does not reduce itself to a mere cataloguing of these catastrophes and to a bleak view on literature's powerlessness. Instead, it offers a fundamental opening toward an authority of the sensitive and of the investigation of new ontological and epistemic spaces that have been won. In this context, a particularly compelling observation made by Chamoiseau is that, beyond all these horrors that are unleashed when a dominant civilisation or certain dominant groups come to accept crime, violence, suffering, and the collapse of society itself, there nevertheless remains a portion of *the intelligible* and *the sensitive* that shuts itself off from progress. Yet, the aforementioned opening resides precisely in this apparent closure, which must be dissected –

paradoxically, within this closure, “art can do something” and literature holds the power to break the barriers that oppose the freedom of the spirit.

Que peut Littérature quand elle ne peut pas? is a manifesto for Literature, also marked by a tribute to literary and militant voices such as René Char and Edouard Glissant, without, however, reducing the work to a purely impressionistic endeavour. Supported by both critical acumen and a refined style, the book is a Cartesian demonstration of the importance of the artistic creation process in an extremely problematic context, where critical thinking and literature seem to have reached a point of saturation, a kind of helplessness in the face of the geopolitical tempo and expressive manifestations of the speed-driven era. One observation that quickly draws the reader’s attention is that the question of literature’s *power* is, in fact, shockingly concrete. At the same time, as we follow the author along this ambitious yet tangled path of literary thought, we are once again reminded of how much literature exceeds the mere sphere of entertainment and pleasure, for it *asserts itself* precisely where it seems it *cannot, does not, or brings nothing*. Consequently, literature draws its lifeblood from the very sense of general cowardice that makes us embrace powerlessness in the face of crises. It is here, in this space of human exhaustion, that art tries to breathe again, thus marking the *urgency* of our literatures.

Nonetheless, the *Notes de sentimenthèque* [Notes from a *sentimentheque*], which traverse the entire work, are not merely illustrative or justificatory notes for Chamoiseau’s reflection; they create a world of their own, meant to mirror and deepen the reflection in the foreground. These notes, revealing an intimate perspective on inner libraries and on the way in which the thought process around the force of literature is built upon reading, are in themselves proof that the power of the literary resides in the gesture of venturing into the unknown, into the unintelligible – just as many of the figures cited by the author did, among whom we must mention Char, Faulkner, Woolf, Perse, Borges, Wilde, etc.

The chapters dedicated to the thorny issues of present-day realities and the author’s *sentimenthèque* notes construct together an analysis of utilitarian literature. How can we understand this utilitarian dimension of literary creation? To do so, it seems necessary to return, in an inevitably reflexive and *poietic* gesture, to Friedrich Hölderlin’s famous question: *What are poets for in times of distress?* This fundamental question also guides Chamoiseau’s argument, for, distancing himself from the aims of traditional hermeneutics, he tells us in his notes that it is not the understanding of a work’s content that should guide our literary journey, but rather that we must question *poiesis* itself (the act of creation, of bringing the work into being) especially since “les littératures se renouvellent à la source du Poète, donc du réel,” and they “ont besoin du Poète qui leur tient porte ouverte” (29). As paradoxical as this may seem, it is crucial to the way we think about the relationship between literature and the world in the context of (re)legitimising the artistic act. Therefore, there is a need to renew the discourse on creation by rethinking *poiesis*, which cannot be detached from the real, particularly because, by drawing inspiration from the real world itself, the poetic can open new pathways through which, despite the obstacles of History’s painful silences, the confrontation with traumatic consciousness, or the bleak political and historical inheritance, we could dare to maintain the hope of discovering new territories, and even a redemption through art.

Thus, Chamoiseau overturns the conventional understanding of the idea of a grand narrative (*le Grand récit*), which can only be totalitarian and reductionist in its claim to make all of the small ambiguities of the world pivot around a single reality or a singular truth – one that ultimately ignores the heterogeneity of our world, where narratives can only be complex, plural, and open to the inner complexity of the human being and to the multiple forms of existence. In fact, the socio-political or ethnic crises are attributed precisely to these grand narrative discourses, fuelled by the ambitions of various nations, which hide “les purifications ethniques, les vestiges coloniaux, les fascismes et leurs avatars [qui] entretiennent leur fermentation dessous de Grands récits” (34).

By supporting the idea of the composite nature of human thought and life, Patrick Chamoiseau questions the way literature *can recount* the world in terms of diversity, vitality, and (un)intelligibility, while also revealing the possibility of bringing new worlds into being.

This endeavour entails a reflection on language and its limits, particularly in the context in which, as the author himself emphasises, when faced with reality, the Poet enriches their language with what we could regard as “*un avant-la-langue, un après-la-langue, un au-delà-de-la-langue...*” (43). The stake of this observation lies in examining literature’s ability to use “*autant l’alphabet du silence que les expansions musicales du phonème*” (43). One of the great merits of Chamoiseau’s work is that, by emphasising the diverse nature of the worlds that make up human thought, this reflection highlights literature’s power not only to invent worlds (starting from what cannot be immediately conceptualized within our realities) but also to invent new means of expression in order to narrate these worlds, to render them artistically, and ultimately, to think them in relation to their becoming.

In the second part of his work, Chamoiseau borrows Edouard Glissant’s concept of the *Tout-monde* in order to emphasise the inextricable relationship between the aesthetic and the political, in laying the foundation for a different kind of world literature, namely a literature that belongs to everyone and speaks of the *Whole-world*, which, paradoxically, distances itself from generalising schemes and rejects the tendency to universalize aesthetic discourse. Chamoiseau’s book is a commitment to literature’s power to alter the relationship between art and the idea of the *Tout-monde*. In response to such a principle, literatures must not be considered only in relation to their historical evolution or from one work to another according to universal principles of analysis, but rather in terms of how, from one work to another, literatures encounter shadows, craters, and the unspeakable itself. What Chamoiseau shows us is that the way life unfolds today demands a reassessment of the expressive frameworks and approaches to literary material, while also acknowledging that the magmatic matter of the world is precisely where literature is concentrated, namely on the verge of overcoming its latent state.

If our species, *Sapiens*, has been characterised from the very beginning by a “great narrative concern” reflected in our thinking and societal, mythological, magical constructs, human evolution has simultaneously dictated the structuring of a dominant, universalising narrative. However, certain particular creations have sought to distance themselves, aiming to explore what Chamoiseau called the “mental bubble of reason and madness” created by *Sapiens* “in order to master, then sublimate an unthinkable and dangerous reality” (65). This book also

proposes an anthropological probing of the poetic act, so as to question the way in which the creations of the human species are conceived – more precisely, works dedicated to cultural shocks and the awareness of realities that are opaque, mysterious, or initially unthinkable. Yet, in this human search for meaning, literature is not responsible for explaining everything, and the purpose of commentary on literature (such as Chamoiseau's own work) is not to reveal the abstract meanings of the work. At this point, Chamoiseau's perspectives converge with those of Susan Sontag in *Against Interpretation*: the function of commentary on literature, on works of art in general, is to emphasise the articulation between the experience of the work and the experience of reality, focusing on the construction of the work, rather than on sterile meanings detached from the opacities of the realities contained within existence.

By observing the renewed interest in ideas such as the canon and hermeneutics, Patrick Chamoiseau provides an engaging lesson about the vitality of literature and the search for ways to discuss the preservation or transcendence of canons within a networked literary thought. Thus, by exploring the works of Kafka, Joyce, Kateb, Glissant, García Márquez, the work *Que peut Littérature quand elle ne peut?* can be read as a groundbreaking approach to these reflections on the restructuring of the literary canon. It readdress the topic of the importance of these authors who not only dared, despite the limitations of language, to capture both forms of revolt and the complexity of the unspeakable, but who also continually sought to invent through literary creation a new *poietic* language capable of carrying the essence of diverse *existential situations*. This work essentially dissects the idea of a rhizomatic "*narrative organism*," based on the idea of relationship, on the diversity and fluidity of worlds and on the discourses accompanying them, but also on the idea of "*un nous planétaire et cosmique, ouvert, mouvant, mobile, qui devrait naître du tissage de nos individuations accomplies*" (77).

In a world in which the democratic spirit coexists with the wars fuelled by totalitarian discourses, Chamoiseau aims to put forward a highly encouraging text in favour of reading and (re)exploring the archaic stories that remain crucial for understanding and building new worlds. However, the author's faith in the power of literature is not based on blind optimism, but on the fact that the question of what literature is remains permanently open and relevant, as does the question around literature's role in the world and the individual's commitment to this art.

Through his writing style, which is both passionate and engaging, poetic and declarative, Patrick Chamoiseau reasserts the fact that any important work, just like any process of creating new meanings through art, cannot help but, at some point, seek to capture Beauty and even define it in a particular historical moment. By evoking the views of Jean Starobinski and Edouard Glissant, the author skilfully shows how literature contains life and the hidden beauty of things.

However, to what extent is it truly a new paradigm of world literature in the age of speed? In the context in which "*l'exigence narrative contemporaine ne relève pas du roman-monde, d'une World fiction, mais justement de la nécessité de mettre à bas la fausse perception d'une unicité du monde qu'illustrent à sa manière le Grand récit occidental ou même les autres Grands récits qui œuvrent à prendre sa place*" (91), the final part of the essay emphasizes a militant tone in the discourse, aiming to pave the way for criticism towards a new literary commitment.

Such a commitment must embrace a semiotic orientation and critical principles that do not fall for the illusion of globalisation, but that boldly embrace risk, excess, and imprudence in the face of the inherent unknown of reality. The author does speak of crossing known boundaries, of a literature of diversity and *transversings*, but it is a strategy of excess, a transgressive mode of thinking applied to critical approaches. Any reading or interpretive effort, Chamoiseau insists, should be sensitive to the extent that works themselves are open to surpassing spheres of certainty, transparency, or moderation, favouring instead their opposites: unpredictability, uncertainty, “fertile opacity,” excess. The literary expression must support the “événements narratifs aussi vertigineux que l’impensable du monde” (91).

What remains truly remarkable is the way in which, in a concise work, the author operates with surgical precision on the meanings of this “narrative archipelago” that has formed over centuries of literature, particularly since, beyond metaphors, the writer considers stories necessary for humankind’s survival. Moreover, only through art can humans venture onto the shifting sands of the unspeakable. Thus, only narrative can probe and guess at a certain part of human existence that otherwise remains hidden.

The book’s conclusion is that literatures respond to an aesthetics of excess; the variety of *poietic* conceptions can only be preserved through the return to and execution of a final transgression of boundaries, meant to tear down all discursive or epistemic barriers in order to dismantle the temptation of a sovereign *récit*. In a final gesture articulating structured critical reflections and intimate notes, Chamoiseau renews his belief in a *poietics of networks*, of relationships among literatures, between literature and the world, between languages and existences. This would revive not only the Barthesian turn by returning to the understanding of the text as a weaving, but also the importance of *idiorrhythmia*, the coexistence and articulation of all fundamentally different individual existences, within a framework in which the paradoxical and sometimes invisible beauty of the world arises precisely from the “grand vertige de l’incertain” (108) and the inconceivable.

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