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*On Frankétienne: The course of an opus.*¹

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It has been more than 40 years since Frankétienne published his first collections of poems, and exactly 40 years since the first book that garnered him some critical reception, *Mûr à crever*, was published. 1968 was also the year in which Gallimard released the great trilogy of Marie Chauvet, *Amour, colère, et folie*, that simultaneously closed and opened a double trend in Haitian fiction: “return to the country” and “exile.”² Over the course of these years of persistent work, he published some forty volumes representing some ten thousand printed pages, becoming undoubtedly one of the most prolific Caribbean writers of the twentieth century, and one of the great figures of world literature that critics compare to James Joyce, John Dos Passos, Antonin Artaud, and François Rabelais, among others.

Frankétienne’s work is complex. Its “march,” (to adopt one of Frankétienne’s very first titles), goes from *Au fil du temps* (1964) to *Chevaux de l’avant-jour* (1967), which ends what could be called his years of apprenticeship through poetry, and gives one year later a first text mirroring a (fictional) novel, *Mûr à crever*, which clearly projects the spiral as a privileged form. This first text in prose, subtitled “genre total,” contains the seed of all that which would develop, either manifestly or latently, in Frankétienne’s later works: the enigmatic relations with the father, the ambiguous relationship with the woman, the mythic figure of the mother, the freedom of expression, the esthetic search, the artist’s responsibility, and his embroilments with power, but also and above all a quest for a typo/topographic language, for a typo/topo/poethics,³ which, beginning with *Chevaux*, attempts to integrate the image into

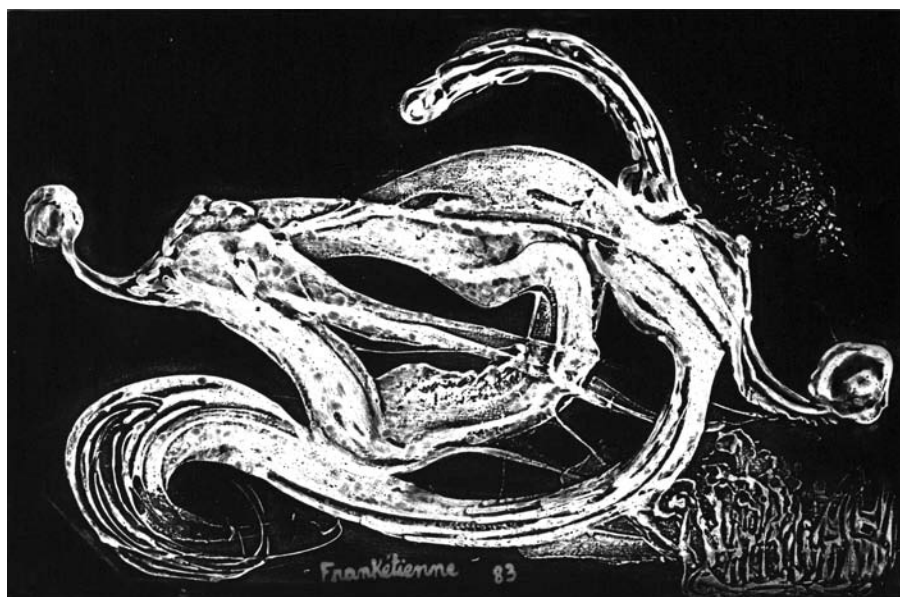
1 This article is taken in good part from the introduction from my forthcoming work, *Typo/topo/poéthique: sur Frankétienne* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2008).

2 See Jean-Claude Fignolé, *Vœux de voyage et intention romanesque* (Port-au-Prince: Fardin, 1978); Jean Jonassaint, “Romans et romanciers haïtiens de la diaspora,” *Le Pouvoir des mots, les maux du pouvoir: des romanciers haïtiens de l’exil* (Montreal and Paris: PUM and Arcantère, 1986), 241-258; *Des romans de tradition haïtienne: sur un récit tragique* (Paris and Montreal: L’Harmattan and Cidihca, 2002), 19-96.

3 For more on these concepts, see Jean Jonassaint, “Matériaux pour une édition critique: concordances et variantes des publications haïtiennes et étrangères de Frankétienne,” in *Typo/topo/poéthique: sur Frankétienne* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2008).

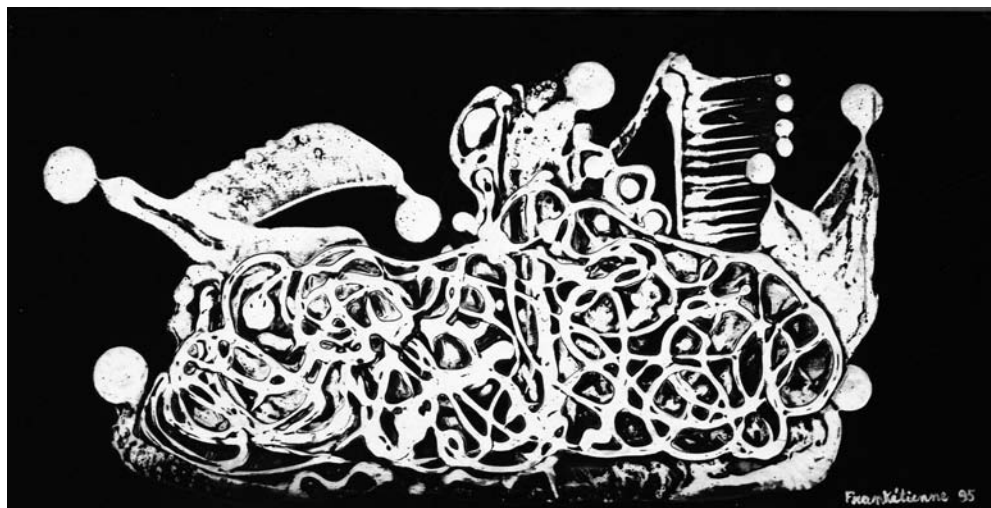


the text, to bind graphic and written art. If, even today, this has not been completely realized, and remains unnoticed, the illustration on the cover of *Chevaux de l'avant-jour*—where the name of the author, title and date of publication are inscribed, or engulfed, in the same red ink—is by Frankétienne. An unsigned illustration, certainly anonymous, which prefigures the blurry (or hazy) forms, the “zobòp” horde, or mass of zombies, haunting the painted surface, which he would develop, notably from the 1980s, in both his larger and smaller paintings, which made their mark on the greater public, and which the images reproduced on pages 113, 114, and 119 show like a darkroom.



According to Frankétienne’s estimation, his artistic production comprises some 2000 pictures dating to the beginning of the 1970s, more accurately after the publication of *Ultravocal* (2002). Indeed, it is after *Ultravocal* that he devotes himself in a professional way, if not even an obsessional one, to this new method of work, the paintbrush, and a new form of plastic expression. His public entrance into art was made with a first exhibition in 1974, at Dante Alighieri Hall at the Italian embassy in Port-au-Prince, culminating, in 1985, with the inauguration of an imposing triptych (2 x 20 meters) that hung in the Hall of the French Institute of Haiti for the Bicentennial of Port-au-Prince until the building was ransacked





in 2000. With this important institutional acknowledgement, he establishes himself definitively as a painter, with his dense, black signature of clearly written letters, his clean lines that find roots as much in modern Western art (Mathieu, Pollack, Michaux, the Cobra group, among others) as in popular Haitian culture, notably in the tradition of vaudou, to which he renders an homage in the works reproduced here. In these monochromatic (black and white) canvasses, which reveal his esthetic better than his color works and recapture the symbolism of the Guédés [*Translator's note*—*mischievous, often obscene voodoo spirits of death*], he brings out multiple spectral forms, that rise grotesquely or nearly from the black darkness like the white bones of a sepulcher. It is, strictly speaking, in its most exposed, its most manifest form, the esthetic of chaos or of the uncertainty of the long passages down in the turbulent hold, or of interminable nights of half-sacred, half-profane bacchanals of the *rara* bands. For his painting—“neither completely abstract nor completely figurative,” as he has defined it in a recent interview⁴—like the *vèvè* in the center of the vaudou peristyle, is first of all an effect of the movement of the bodies in and outside of the space of the *représentation*. It demands particular attention to contain, beyond its compact mass, the central magma, the details cutting across it in all directions in a tangle of successive layers. Therefore, it has more to do with the exploration of forms,

⁴ See Guy Tegomo, “Je me suis toujours défini comme un nègre avec la peau à l’envers: un entrevue avec Frankétienne,” in *Typo/topo/poétique: sur Frankétienne* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2008).



particularly the placement of points, lines, curves or spirals, than with colors. In this sense, it clearly distinguishes itself from a certain type of Haitian painting that is said to be primitive.

Despite the impression of vivacity or multiplicity of colors that these paintings leave us with, their palettes are rather restricted, limited to a few primary colors. Frankétienne's paintings are often two-colors, even though an inattentive eye seems to perceive a profusion of colors emerging from the sinuous entanglement of forms, and the abundance of coats or lines of colors as in *Tête à tête* (1991), *Émergence* (1999), or the cover illustration of *H'Éros-Chimères* (2002). In fact, apart from black and white, three to five colors—brown, red, yellow, green, and blue—frequently appear in diverse shades in his work.⁵

The decade (1974-1984), that marks his emergence as an artist, is one of intense creative energy, one in which he changes his language as well and dedicates himself to dramatic writing. In fact, between 1969 and 1972, Frankétienne writes a “spiral,” *Visa pour la lumière* and a “spiralist tetralogy,” *Lampe-témoin*, which have never been published. They were burnt (an autodafé) in 1975, thus allowing him, in a few months, to reach the national expression in his maternal tongue, Haitian, with *Dézaïfi*. Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant have rightly underscored the importance of this publication for the whole of “creole languages,” affirming that with this novel “Creolophone literature is going to find its *lettres de noblesse*.”⁶ In addition, it is important to point out that *Dézaïfi* is also an homage to two great Haitian novelists, Jacques Stephen Alexis—from whom Frankétienne borrows the chronotope of the *deserted courtyard in the night* from *Compère Général Soleil* (1957)—and Jacques

5 Jean Jonassaint, “Beyond Painting or Writing: Frankétienne’s Poetic Quest,” *Research in African Literatures* 35:2 (2004), 148. For a more extensive sampling of the painting of Frankétienne, see this article (among others) and the color illustrations that accompany it.

6 Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant, *Lettres créoles: tracées antillaises et continentales de la littérature 1635-1975* (Paris: Hatier, 1991), 173.



Roumain, making allusion to the pseudo-idyllic ending of *Gouverneurs de la Rosée* (1944) in the final paragraph of his tale of the liberation of the zombies. *Wishing to communicate with his own people,*⁷ those who surround him, who inspire him, who speak to him—and at the initiative of the director of the Haitian National Theater, François Latour—he embarks upon dramatic writing. The majority of unilingual Haitian-Creole speakers, who have no real access to national literature written in French, found in Frankétienne, from his first plays (particularly *Troufoban* and *Pèlin-Tèt*, created December 8, 1977, and July 6, 1978, respectively) an exceptional champion. Certainly, he does not invent a theater of Haitian language, but one can say undoubtedly that, in Haiti,⁸ he brings a truly Haitian dramatic language to a heretofore unknown culmination and resonance with his public. But this work is not made in isolation, outside a context and tradition going back to the nineteenth century. In fact, contrary to what one too often hears, Haitians have written in this language since that time, and to some extent, the first book that might qualify as Haitian (at least published after Haitian independence) is most probably a bilingual brochure, *Idylles, ou essais de poésie créole*, in which the Haitian (or Creole) section is far superior to the French. First published anonymously in 1804 in New York by “a Settler of Santo Domingo,” it was republished in 1811 in Philadelphia, in an edition revised and augmented by “an Inhabitant of Haiti,” under the title *Idylles et chansons, ou essais de poésie créole*. The later version is the one that was known until just recently.⁹

This anonymous book, which revives such popular texts as “Lisette quitté la plaine” and is the first imprint of the Haitian language that would have reached us fully, is also the first significant milestone of the long progression of the Haitian language towards a more literary, written form. The second that would have reached us fully is

7 I paraphrase here a formula dear to another giant of Francophone letters, the late Senegalese novelist and filmmaker, Sembène Ousmane, who also changed language media to connect with his true public, and thus, in a happy paradox, reached an international audience.

8 Despite the reluctance of some, one must insist on the difference between Haitian productions within Haiti and those outside Haiti, particularly as concerns theater, where the work of the Kouidor troupe in New York, from 1971-1972, which radically revitalized Haitian theater, has no equivalent in Haiti from 1970-1980, nor even perhaps until the present.

9 For an analysis of the importance of this text, see Deborah Jenson, “Mimetic Mastery and Colonial Mimicry in the First Franco-Antillean Creole Anthology,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 17.1 (2004), 83-106; Jean Jonassaint, “Transnationalism, Multilingualism and Literature: the challenge of Caribbean Studies,” *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas* 40.1 (2007), 21-34.



Cric ? Crac ! by Georges Sylvain, a bilingual, annotated edition from his adaptations of La Fontaine's *Fables*.¹⁰ As to the more contemporary period, there is, among other works, all the popular theater of the comedian-dramatists Languichatte and Alcibiade, as well as the dramatic works of Félix Morisseau-Leroy and Franck Fouché. Frankétienne was nourished on this theater, but he was also nourished on the classical and modern theater, and certainly above all on Haitian popular culture, or more precisely popular narratives.¹¹ It is all these elements that he mixes together to create a theater that would have an exceptional resonance in Haitian cultural space, of which *Pèlin-Tèt* is the most significant example, a play which, rightly or wrongly, is said to have "liberated speech in Haiti." Personally, I cannot forget that in the midst of the period of protest against the Aristide government, the immigration agent who greeted me at the airport in Port-au-Prince on August 8, 2002, upon learning that I was Frankétienne's guest, asked me: "When will Frankétienne give us another *Pèlentèt?*" How better to indicate the exceptional place of this giant within the Haitian cultural space.

During this long period of production almost exclusively in the Haitian language (at least at the level of printed works) that goes from 1975 to 1985, there is an interlude, *Les Affres d'un défi* (1979), a French adaptation of *Dézafi*, which that same year opened a new, international window for Frankétienne, including a long interview with Josie Fanon in the Franco-African magazine, *Demain l'Afrique*, "Frankétienne: la passion d'Haïti," which was preceded by a great presentation by the Franco-Mauritian poet and critic, Édouard J. Maunick. A year later, more recognition from his peers comes through an homage made to *Ultravocal* by the Canadian-Tunisian poet and scholar,

10 One must note that the second edition (Port-au-Prince: Chez Mme Georges Sylvain, 1929), bereft of the preface of Louis Borno and of Sylvain's annotations—the volume went from 246 to 163 pages—does no justice to this colossal work of translation and contemplation of Haitian poetics. The subtitle of the original edition (Paris: Ateliers haïtiens, 1901), "FABLES DE LA FONTAINE RACONTÉES PAR UN MONTAGNARD HAÏTIEN, et transcrites en vers créoles PAR GEORGES SYLVAIN—Avec une Préface de M. Louis BORNO, une Notice sur le créole et des NOTES ETYMOLOGIQUES de l'Auteur," gives a good measure of the enterprise.

11 On the relationship of the Haitian novel with popular narrative, see Jean Jonassaint, *Des romans de tradition haïtienne: sur un récit tragique* (Paris and Montreal: L'Harmattan and Cidihca, 2002), most particularly chapter 2, "Un texte national allogène," as well as the observations of Figiolé on this aspect of the origin of the "spiral" as a Haitian form of expression—Dieudonné Fardin and Jean-Claude Figiolé, "Dialogue à bâtons rompus sur le spiralisme," *Le Petit Samedi Soir* 13 (1972), 22-24, 26.



Hédi Bouraoui in *Haitivois*.¹² The next year, in 1981, it is Édouard Glissant who hails *Dézafi* in his *Discours antillais*. Just at the time when his work begins to have more and more resonance on the international stage, Frankétienne announces that he will “no longer write in French.”¹³

In 1986, either changing his mind or under attenuating duress, at the moment when (as is commonly said) speech is liberated in Haiti—that is, the departure of president Jean-Claude Duvalier—amidst a complete “democratic spree,” after having adapted into French his play *Kaselezo*, Frankétienne publishes in that language *Fleurs d’insomnie*, which echoed his condition as a nocturnal creator. But one year later, he presents a monumental text, *Adjanoumelezo*, up to now his last great book in Haitian, which Raphael Lucas justly compares to James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*.¹⁴ Divided by a double linguistic heritage, a *schizophonía*, he seems then to devote himself more and more to an extreme scriptural quest, where the priority is words, French or Haitian, which “possess” him. This obsession for words, this desire to embrace words leads to *L’Oiseau Schizophone*, the story of a writer condemned to eat the pages of his book and therefore his words. This work, which marks another turning point in his production, like *Mûr à crever*, is also a pivotal book. In other words, it is a work that introduces and discusses at length the premise of a new way of writing, or better of expressing oneself. Here he tries to play on two linguistic keyboards, in contrast to his preceding books: the Haitian passing through or exerting itself upon the French; to combine two passions, writing and painting. We see a strong first effort to integrate text and image (some years after a weak attempt in *Dézafi*), which is not completely accomplished. However, *L’Oiseau Schizophone* is the book that opens for him the doors of French mainstream publishers and media, with a new release by Jean-Michel Place in Paris (1998), and a double page within the influential Paris magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur*.¹⁵ He comes back to it three years later to make *Métamorphoses de l’Oiseau*

12 Hédi Bouraoui, “L’art de saturer pour raturer. À l’écoute d’Ultravocal de Frankétienne,” *Haitivois* (Montreal, Nouvelle Optique), 57-74.

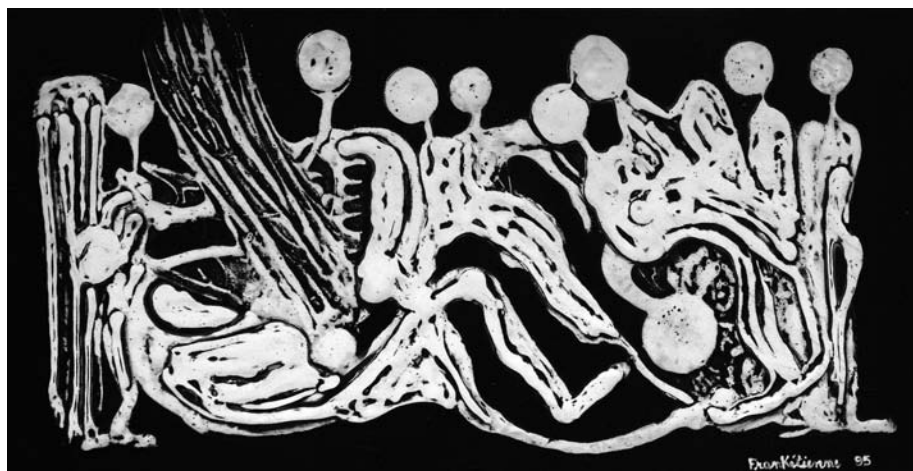
13 See Pierre Clitandre, “Frank Étienne n’écrit plus en français” [interview], *Le Petit Samedi Soir* 294 (1979), 25-26.

14 Rafael Lucas, “La littérisation de la langue haïtienne dans l’œuvre de Frankétienne,” in *Typo/topo/poétique: sur Frankétienne* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2008).

15 See Bernard Loupias, “Frankétienne le flamboyant,” *Le Nouvel Observateur* 1782 (30 December 1998 – 6 January 1999), 42-43.



Schizophone: cutting out the entire iconographic part to leave only the revised and augmented text. However, he renews the differentiated typo/topography launched with *Mûr à crever* (1968), but left in sketch form in *Ultravocal* (1972), *Fleurs d'insomnie* (1986), and to a lesser degree in *Adjanoumelezo* (1987), and which he had been trying to surpass in *L'Oiseau*. There is thus a return to typo/topographic experimentation, but it is a return that is also another surpassing, the very principle of the spiral. In fact, this time, he pushes new limits that he will exploit particularly in the new books that are overtly bilingual, French/Haitian: *Voix marassas: spirale francréolophonique* (1998), *Rapjaz̃: journal d'un paria* (1999), *Foukifoura* (2000).



After *Mûr à crever* is revisited in 1994, and *Ultravocal* in 1995, in terms of French texts, the rewriting of *L'Oiseau* in *Les Métamorphoses* (1996-1997) constitutes the key point in a series of rewriting and re-edition that begins with *Chevaux de l'avant-jour*, revised, corrected, and reissued in 1987. However, in this period after *Adjanoumelezo*, going from 1987 to 2002, on the level of theater and texts in Haitian, it is necessary to clearly underscore the process of continual metamorphosis of *Totolomannwèl*, with its different versions in both French and Haitian, for one or two comedians; some years later, these versions are combined in a one-man show *Foukifoura*, putting Frankétienne himself on stage as comedian, singer, scenographer, and costume designer. This is a relatively unique posture in the Caribbean theater, which Alvina Ruprecht has analyzed.¹⁶

¹⁶ Alvina Ruprecht, "Totolomannwèl: Frankétienne and the one man show," *Journal of Haitian Studies* (forthcoming Spring 2008).



It was thought, then, that with *L'Oiseau*, the series of *Métamorphoses* and the work in progress *Totolomannwèl / Foukifoura*, that Frankétienne had reached the end of his experimental quest or quests. This was not to know him. In 2002, the same year when he delivers new versions of *Pèlentèt* and *Dézafé*, he publishes in French a momentous book in which he attains a new summit in his pursuit of a typo/topo/poethics, *H'Éros-Chimères*. In it he succeeds for the first time in making magnificently the synthesis between image and text that he sought in *L'Oiseau*, pushing to theretofore unparalleled limits the desire (quest) for a differentiated and significant typo/topography, which harks back to Mallarmé and beyond, to remain in the Modern Franco-European space. With this title, Frankétienne also introduces a new element, something fresh that he will develop more and more, the large format of a literal family album (with reproductions of his canvasses and of reworked photos of his family, including a self-portrait). These are the major, overtly autobiographical volumes in which Frankétienne indulges without indulging, asking of the reader such a physical expenditure, a gymnastics of reading, befitting a daredevil, that there are probably many who give up. It is the project of *L'Oiseau* that is carried to maturity. And this particular quest is followed through and perfected in *Miraculeuse* (2003), and above all *Galaxie Chaos-Babel* (2006), where he introduces color, thus taking advantage of the last technological advances that render four-color printing affordable (as he had been able to take advantage of computer developments to explore the limits of copy-art in *H'Éros-Chimères*. These major volumes, that present even physical problems for their reader, lead us to pose the question of the state of autobiography in the work of Frankétienne, of which the first traces can already be found implicitly in *Chevaux de l'avant-jour*, and manifest themselves strongly in *Mûr à crever*. Thus, like Robbe-Grillet, Frankétienne would be able to say, "I have never spoken of anything other than myself."

Syracuse, December 2007–January 2008

(Translated from the French by Christopher W. Lemelin and Mariana Past)

