

## Errantry, Exile

Roots make the commonality of errantry<sup>1</sup> and exile, for in both instances roots are lacking. We must begin with that.<sup>2</sup>

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari criticized notions of the root and, even perhaps, notions of being rooted. The root is unique, a stock taking all upon itself and killing all around it. In opposition to this they propose the rhizome, an enmeshed root system, a network spreading either in the ground or in the air, with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently. The notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root. Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other.

These authors extol nomadism, which supposedly liberates Being, in contrast, perhaps, to a settled way of life, with its law based upon the intolerant root. Already Kant, at the beginning of *Critique of Pure Reason*, had seen similarities between skeptics and nomads, remarking also that, from time to time, "they break the social bond." He seems thus to establish correlations between, on the one hand, a settled way of life, truth, and society and, on the other, nomadism, skepticism, and anarchy. This parallel with Kant suggests that the rhizome concept appears interesting for its anticonformism, but one cannot infer from this that it is subversive or that rhizomatic thought has the capacity to overturn the

order of the world—because, by so doing, one reverts to ideological claims presumably challenged by this thought.<sup>3</sup>

But is the nomad not overdetermined by the conditions of his existence? Rather than the enjoyment of freedom, is nomadism not a form of obedience to contingencies that are restrictive? Take, for example, circular nomadism: each time a portion of the territory is exhausted, the group moves around. Its function is to ensure the survival of the group by means of this circularity. This is the nomadism practiced by populations that move from one part of the forest to another, by the Arawak communities who navigated from island to island in the Caribbean, by hired laborers in their pilgrimage from farm to farm, by circus people in their peregrinations from village to village, all of whom are driven by some specific need to move, in which daring or aggression play no part. Circular nomadism is a not-intolerant form of an impossible settlement.

Contrast this with invading nomadism, that of the Huns, for example, or the Conquistadors, whose goal was to conquer lands by exterminating their occupants. Neither prudent nor circular nomadism, it spares no effort. It is an absolute forward projection: an arrowlike nomadism. But the descendants of the Huns, Vandals, or Visigoths, as indeed those of the Conquistadors, who established their clans, settled down bit by bit, melting into their conquests. Arrowlike nomadism is a devastating desire for settlement.\*

Neither in arrowlike nomadism nor in circular nomadism are roots valid. Before it is won through conquest, what “holds” the invader is what lies ahead; moreover, one could almost say that being compelled to lead a settled way of life

\* The idea that this devastation can turn history around in a positive manner (in relation to the decline of the Roman Empire, for example) and beget some fertile negative element does not concern us here. Generally speaking, what is meant is that arrowlike nomadism gives birth to new eras, whereas circular nomadism would be endogenous and without a future. This is a pure and simple legitimation of the act of conquest.

would constitute the real uprooting of a circular nomad. There is, furthermore, no pain of exile bearing down, nor is there the wanderlust of errantry growing keener. Relation to the earth is too immediate or too plundering to be linked with any preoccupation with identity—this claim to or consciousness of a lineage inscribed in a territory. Identity will be achieved when communities attempt to legitimate their right to possession of a territory through myth or the revealed word. Such an assertion can predate its actual accomplishment by quite some time. Thus, an often and long contested legitimacy will have multiple forms that later will delineate the afflicted or soothing dimensions of exile or errantry.

In Western antiquity a man in exile does not feel he is helpless or inferior, because he does not feel burdened with deprivation—of a nation that for him does not yet exist. It even seems, if one is to believe the biographies of numerous Greek thinkers including Plato and Aristotle, that some experience of voyaging and exile is considered necessary for a being's complete fulfillment. Plato was the first to attempt to base legitimacy not on community within territory (as it was before and would be later) but on the City in the rationality of its laws. This at a time when his city, Athens, was already threatened by a "final" deregulation.\*

In this period identification is with a culture (conceived of as civilization), not yet with a nation.\*\* The pre-Christian West along with pre-Columbian America, Africa of the time of the great conquerors, and the Asian kingdoms all shared this mode of seeing and feeling. The relay of actions exerted

\*Platonic Dialogues take over the function of the Myth. The latter establishes the legitimacy of the possession of a territory based usually on the uninterrupted rigors of filiation. The Dialogue establishes the City's justice based on the revelation of a superior reason organizing rigorous successions of a political order.

\*\*Through the entirely Western notion of civilization the experience of a society is summed up, in order to project it immediately into an evolution, most often an expansion as well. When one says civilization, the immediate implication is a will to civilize. This idea is linked to the passion to impose civilization on the Other.

by arrowlike nomadism and the settled way of life were first directed against generalization (the drive for an identifying universal as practiced by the Roman Empire). Thus, the particular resists a generalizing universal and soon begets specific and local senses of identity, in concentric circles (provinces then nations). The idea of civilization, bit by bit, helps hold together opposites, whose only former identity existed in their opposition to the Other.

During this period of invading nomads the passion for self-definition first appears in the guise of personal adventure. Along the route of their voyages conquerors established empires that collapsed at their death. Their capitals went where they went. "Rome is no longer in Rome, it is wherever I am." The root is not important. Movement is. The idea of errantry, still inhibited in the face of this mad reality, this too-functional nomadism, whose ends it could not know, does not yet make an appearance. Center and periphery are equivalent. Conquerors are the moving, transient root of their people.

The West, therefore, is where this movement becomes fixed and nations declare themselves in preparation for their repercussions in the world. This fixing, this declaration, this expansion, all require that the idea of the root gradually take on the intolerant sense that Deleuze and Guattari, no doubt, meant to challenge. The reason for our return to this episode in Western history is that it spread throughout the world. The model came in handy. Most of the nations that gained freedom from colonization have tended to form around an idea of power—the totalitarian drive of a single, unique root—rather than around a fundamental relationship with the Other. Culture's self-conception was dualistic, pitting citizen against barbarian. Nothing has ever more solidly opposed the thought of errantry than this period in human history when Western nations were established and then made their impact on the world.

At first this thought of errantry, bucking the current of nationalist expansion, was disguised "within" very personal-

ized adventures—just as the appearance of Western nations had been preceded by the ventures of empire builders. The errantry of a troubadour or that of Rimbaud is not yet a thorough, thick (opaque) experience of the world, but it is already an arrant, passionate desire to go against a root. The reality of exile during this period is felt as a (temporary) lack that primarily concerns, interestingly enough, language. Western nations were established on the basis of linguistic intransigence, and the exile readily admits that he suffers most from the impossibility of communicating in his language. The root is monolingual. For the troubadour and for Rimbaud errantry is a vocation only told via detour. The call of Relation is heard, but it is not yet a fully present experience.

However, and this is an immense paradox, the great founding books of communities, the Old Testament, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Chansons de Geste*, the *Islandic Sagas*, the *Aeneid*, or the African epics, were all books about exile and often about errantry. This epic literature is amazingly prophetic. It tells of the community, but, through relating the community's apparent failure or in any case its being surpassed, it tells of errantry as a temptation (the desire to go against the root) and, frequently, actually experienced. Within the collective books concerning the sacred and the notion of history lies the germ of the exact opposite of what they so loudly proclaim. When the very idea of territory becomes relative, nuances appear in the legitimacy of territorial possession. These are books about the birth of collective consciousness, but they also introduce the unrest and suspense that allow the individual to discover himself there, whenever he himself becomes the issue. The Greek victory in the *Iliad* depends on trickery; Ulysses returns from his *Odyssey* and is recognized only by his dog; the Old Testament David bears the stain of adultery and murder; the *Chanson de Roland* is the chronicle of a defeat; the characters in the *Sagas* are branded by an unstemmable fate, and so forth. These books are the begin-

ning of something entirely different from massive, dogmatic, and totalitarian certainty (despite the religious uses to which they will be put). These are books of errantry, going beyond the pursuits and triumphs of rootedness required by the evolution of history.

Some of these books are devoted entirely to the supreme errantry, as in the Egyptian Book of the Dead. The very book whose function is to consecrate an intransigent community is already a compromise, qualifying its triumph with revelatory wanderings.\*

In both *L'Intention poétique* (*Poetic Intention*) and *Le Discours antillais* (*Caribbean Discourse*)—of which the present work is a reconstituted echo or a spiral retelling—I approached this dimension of epic literature. I began wondering if we did not still need such founding works today, ones that would use a similar dialectics of rerouting,<sup>4</sup> asserting, for example, political strength but, simultaneously, the rhizome of a multiple relationship with the Other and basing every community's reasons for existence on a modern form of the sacred, which would be, all in all, a Poetics of Relation.\*\*

This movement, therefore (one among others, equally important, in other parts of the world), has led from a primordial nomadism to the settled way of life of Western nations then to Discovery and Conquest, which achieved a final, almost mystical perfection in the Voyage.

In the course of this journey identity, at least as far as the Western peoples who made up the great majority of voyagers, discoverers, and conquerors were concerned, consolidates

\*Hegel, in book 3 of his *Aesthetics*, shows how the founding works of communities appear spontaneously at the moment in which a still naive collective consciousness reassures itself about its own legitimacy, or, not to mince words: about its right to possess a land. In this sense Epic thought is close to that of Myth.

\*\*The necessary surpassing of mythic and epic thought took place in the political reason organizing the City. Epic expression is obscure and unfathomable, one of the conditions of naïveté. Political discourse is obvious. Surpassing can be contradiction.

itself implicitly at first (“my root is the strongest”) and then is explicitly exported as a value (“a person’s worth is determined by his root”).\* The conquered or visited peoples are thus forced into a long and painful quest after an identity whose first task will be opposition to the denaturing process introduced by the conqueror. A tragic variation of a search for identity. For more than two centuries whole populations have had to assert their identity in opposition to the processes of identification or annihilation triggered by these invaders. Whereas the Western nation is first of all an “opposite,”\*\* for colonized peoples identity will be primarily “opposed to”—that is, a limitation from the beginning. Decolonization will have done its real work when it goes beyond this limit.

The duality of self-perception (one is citizen or foreigner) has repercussions on one’s idea of the Other (one is visitor or visited; one goes or stays; one conquers or is conquered). Thought of the Other cannot escape its own dualism until the time when differences become acknowledged. From that point on thought of the Other “comprehends”<sup>5</sup> multiplicity, but mechanically and still taking the subtle hierarchies of a generalizing universal as its basis. Acknowledging differences does not compel one to be involved in the dialectics of their totality. One could get away with: “I can acknowledge your difference and continue to think it is harmful to you. I can think that my strength lies in the Voyage (I am making History) and that your difference is motionless and silent.” Another step remains to be taken before one really enters the dialectic of totality. And, contrary to the mechanics of the Voyage, this dialectic turns out to be driven by the thought of errantry.

\*That is, as we have said, essentially by his language.

\*\*If the idea of civilization holds opposites together, a generalizing universal will be the principle of their action in the world, the principle that will allow them to realize conflicts of interest in a finalist conception of History. The first colonist, Christopher Columbus, did not voyage in the name of a country but of an idea.

Let us suppose that the quest for totality, starting from a nonuniversal context of histories of the West, has passed through the following stages:

- the thinking of territory and self (ontological, dual)
- the thinking of voyage and other (mechanical, multiple)
- the thinking of errantry and totality (relational, dialectical).

We will agree that this thinking of errantry, this errant thought, silently emerges from the destructuring of compact national entities that yesterday were still triumphant and, at the same time, from difficult, uncertain births of new forms of identity that call to us.

In this context uprooting can work toward identity, and exile can be seen as beneficial, when these are experienced as a search for the Other (through circular nomadism) rather than as an expansion of territory (an arrowlike nomadism). Totality's imaginary allows the detours that lead away from anything totalitarian.

Errantry, therefore, does not proceed from renunciation nor from frustration regarding a supposedly deteriorated (deteriorialized) situation of origin; it is not a resolute act of rejection or an uncontrolled impulse of abandonment. Sometimes, by taking up the problems of the Other, it is possible to find oneself. Contemporary history provides several striking examples of this, among them Frantz Fanon, whose path led from Martinique to Algeria. That is very much the image of the rhizome, prompting the knowledge that identity is no longer completely within the root but also in Relation. Because the thought of errantry is also the thought of what is relative, the thing relayed as well as the thing related. The thought of errantry is a poetics, which always infers that at some moment it is told. The tale of errantry is the tale of Relation.

In contrast to arrowlike nomadism (discovery or conquest), in contrast to the situation of exile, errantry gives-on-and-with the negation of every pole and every metropolis, whether connected or not to a conqueror's voyaging act. We have repeatedly mentioned that the first thing exported by the conqueror was his language. Moreover, the great Western languages were supposedly vehicular languages, which often took the place of an actual metropolis. Relation, in contrast, is spoken multilingually. Going beyond the impositions of economic forces and cultural pressures, Relation rightfully opposes the totalitarianism of any monolingual intent.

At this point we seem to be far removed from the sufferings and preoccupations of those who must bear the world's injustice. Their errantry is, in effect, immobile. They have never experienced the melancholy and extroverted luxury of uprooting. They do not travel. But one of the constants of our world is that a knowledge of roots will be conveyed to them from within intuitions of Relation from now on. Traveling is no longer the locus of power but, rather, a pleasurable, if privileged, time. The ontological obsession with knowledge gives way here to the enjoyment of a relation; in its elementary and often caricatural form this is tourism. Those who stay behind thrill to this passion for the world shared by all. Or, indeed, they may suffer the torments of internal exile.

I would not describe the physical situation of those who suffer the oppression of an Other within their own country, such as the blacks in South Africa, as internal exile. Because the solution here is visible and the outcome determined; force alone can oppose this. Internal exile strikes individuals living where solutions concerning the relationship of a community to its surroundings are not, or at least not yet, consented to by this community as a whole. These solutions, precariously outlined as decisions, are still the prerogative of only a few, who, as a result, are marginalized. Internal exile is the voyage out of this enclosure. It is a motionless and exac-

erbad introduction to the thought of errantry. Most often it is diverted into partial, pleasurable compensations in which the individual is consumed. Internal exile tends toward material comfort, which cannot really distract from anguish.

Whereas exile may erode one's sense of identity, the thought of errantry—the thought of that which relates—usually reinforces this sense of identity. It seems possible, at least to one observer, that the persecuted errantry, the wandering of the Jews, may have reinforced their sense of identity far more than their present settling in the land of Palestine. Being exiled Jews turned into a vocation of errantry, their point of reference an ideal land whose power may, in fact, have been undermined by concrete land (a territory), chosen and conquered. This, however, is mere conjecture. Because, while one can communicate through errantry's imaginary vision, the experiences of exiles are incommunicable.

The thought of errantry is not apolitical nor is it inconsistent with the will to identity, which is, after all, nothing other than the search for a freedom within particular surroundings. If it is at variance with territorial intolerance, or the predatory effects of the unique root (which makes processes of identification so difficult today), this is because, in the poetics of Relation, one who is errant (who is no longer traveler, discoverer, or conqueror) strives to know the totality of the world yet already knows he will never accomplish this—and knows that is precisely where the threatened beauty of the world resides.

Errant, he challenges and discards the universal—this generalizing edict that summarized the world as something obvious and transparent, claiming for it one presupposed sense and one destiny. He plunges into the opacities of that part of the world to which he has access. Generalization is totalitarian: from the world it chooses one side of the reports, one set of ideas, which it sets apart from others and tries to impose by

exporting as a model. The thinking of errantry conceives of totality but willingly renounces any claims to sum it up or to possess it.

The founding books have taught us that the sacred dimension consists always of going deeper into the mystery of the root, shaded with variations of errantry. In reality errant thinking is the postulation of an unyielding and unfading sacred. We remember that Plato, who understood the power of Myth, had hoped to banish the poets, those who force obscurity, far from the Republic. He distrusted the fathomless word. Are we not returning here, in the unforeseeable meanders of Relation, to this abyssal word? Nowhere is it stated that now, in this thought of errantry, humanity will not succeed in transmuting Myth's opacities (which were formerly the occasion for setting roots) and the diffracted insights of political philosophy, thereby reconciling Homer and Plato, Hegel and the African griot.

But we need to figure out whether or not there are other succulencies of Relation in other parts of the world (and already at work in an underground manner) that will suddenly open up other avenues and soon help to correct whatever simplifying, ethnocentric exclusions may have arisen from such a perspective.

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As far as literature is concerned (without my having to establish a pantheon, an isolation these works would refuse), there are two contemporary bodies of work, it seems to me, in which errantry and Relation are at play.

Faulkner's work, somehow theological. This writing is about digging up roots in the South—an obvious place to do so in the United States. But the root begins to act like a rhizome; there is no basis for certainty; the relation is tragic. Because of this dispute over source, the sacred—but henceforth unspeakable—enigma of the root's location, Faulkner's

world represents one of the thrilling moments in the modern poetics of Relation. At one time I regretted that such a world had not gone farther, spreading its vision into the Caribbean and Latin America. But, perhaps, this was a reaction of unconscious frustration on the part of one who felt excluded.

And Saint-John Perse's erratic work, in search of that which moves, of that which goes—in the absolute sense.<sup>6</sup> A work leading to totality—to the out-and-out exaltation of a universal that becomes exhausted from being said too much.

## Notes

### ERRANTRY, EXILE

1. While *errance* is usually translated as “wandering,” “errantry” seems better suited to Glissant’s use of the word, and there is precedence in translations of Césaire. *Errance* for Glissant, while not aimed like an arrow’s trajectory, nor circular and repetitive like the nomad’s, is not idle roaming, but includes a sense of sacred motivation. *Trans.*
2. The poet Monchoachi organized a series of lectures on the theme of errantry, in Marin, a city in the southern part of Martinique. I was one of the first, I believe, called upon to discuss it in this setting. The Caribbean is a land of rootedness and of errantry. The numerous antillean exiles are evidence of this.
3. Kant, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, presents what he says about Relation in this manner:

*Unconditioned unity*  
of RELATION  
that is  
itself, not as inherent  
but as  
SUBSISTENT.

*(Pléiade, vol. 1; 1468)*

Whether this Relation works toward the systematic unity of ends (moral principle) or toward the unity of understandings (architectonic principle), one can assert here two qualities: first, that it is the binding agent that guarantees the permanence of thought in the individual; and, second, that it has no share in the substance. This

difference that Kant seems to establish between substance and subsistence is invaluable. Be that as it may, the idea of Relation for him does not intervene as an opening onto plurality, insofar as it would be a totality. For Kant plurality takes place in time, not in space. In space there is existence, which seems not to be differentiated within itself.

4. The word I have translated here as “rerouting” is *détournement*, one of a number of related words that are important in Glissant’s work. (Others are *détourner*, *détour*, *retour*.) Usually, I believe that Glissant sees these words in a very active sense, implying a real change of direction. This can be the act of taking another path, or forcing evolution to flow in a different course. It can also be a turning away, or turning aside in a redirection of, or refusal to direct, attention. There are times, for instance, in the slave/master relation when “diversion” in the sense of “providing amusement” was a tactical move on the part of the slave, diverting the master from the slave’s actual desires or agenda, but in general I have tried to stress the most active sense. *Trans.*
5. Here Glissant uses the verb *comprendre* in the mechanical sense of including within a system, and *comprehends* is the best translation. In other cases, however, he stresses an almost rapacious quality of the word, its division into two parts based on its Latin roots (i.e. *comprendre*: to take with, which I have translated as “grasps”). He contrasts this with a neologistic phrase: *donner-avec*, which would constitute understanding in Relation. Because, in doing so, he means *donner* both in the sense of generosity and in the sense of “looking out toward” (as in *la fenêtre donne sur la mer*), and because our combining the words *give* and *with* constitutes less a notion of sharing than one of yielding (i.e., “he gave with the blow”), which—though not dominant—is not totally absent from Glissant’s usage, *donner-avec* will be translated as “gives-on-and-with.” *Trans.*
6. The poetic striving toward totality in no way impugns the minutiae of those who struggle in a given place. The subject matter is not in conflict, and Saint-John Perse does not eclipse Faulkner. Rather, it is possible that the harped-on universal, with which Saint-John Perse so splendidly threw his lot, scatters before Relation, without really coming in contact with it. Generalizing words do not always accompany the cry of the peoples or countries naming themselves.

The spirit of universalization, moreover, is willingly connected with a tendency to deny specific times and histories that are periph-

eral (Borges or Saint-John Perse), and the aspiration toward this universal tends to disclaim particular spaces and evolutions (V. S. Naipaul).

Numerous writers in our countries strive in similar ways. Rather than dealing with their own fertile imperfections in their works, they revel in the completed and reassuring perfections of the Other. They call them universal. There they find a bitter and legitimate pleasure that gives them the authority to hold themselves above the surroundings in which they might share. The distance they keep from commonality thus leads them to judge quite dispassionately whatever babbles there beside them. But their serene dispassion is strained.

## POETICS

1. Glissant's phrase word "full-sense" will appear throughout the text as the translation of *plein-sens*. It indicates a combination of signification, direction, and concrete sensory perception. *Trans*.
2. In *La conquête de l'Amérique* (Editions du Seuil, 1982) (*The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* [New York: Harper and Row, 1984], trans. Richard Howard) Tzvetan Todorov studied one of the most important manifestations of this relationship between the Same and the Other: that which opposed the American Indians to the Conquistadors. He suggests that when they entered into this relation the Indians reacted with a logic of totality, putting them in a situation of technical inferiority when they confronted the Conquistadors, who acted solely on the basis of a logic of self-interest ("There exist two great forms of communication, one between man and man, the other between man and the world, the Indians cultivated the latter above all, the Spanish the former" [75]). Todorov infers from this that, whereas from the point of view of conquest the Indians, in fact, suffered a defeat that was the prelude to reshaping the Continent and the start of a new history, on the other hand, from the point of view of what I call here a worldwide Relation, their system of reference was the most durable (the most profitable?) one there is. He thus took into account the state of the world, the stage at which we are today, and, in proposing this perception of it, he does not place greater importance on a (Western) "sense" in relation to a (global) content; despite the claim that perhaps he never stopped being