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WITTGENSTEIN AS EXILE:
PHILOSOPHICAL TOPOGRAPHY

The philosopher is not a member of any community of ideas Wittgenstein (Z § 455)

I felt strange/a stranger/in the world. When you are bound neither to men nor to God, then you are a stranger. Wittgenstein (cited in Nedo et al, 2005: 11)

If true exile is a condition of terminal loss, why has it been transformed so easily into a potent, even enriching motif of modern culture? Modern western culture is in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, refugees. Edward Said (1994: 138).

EXHILIC THOUGHT: EXILES, ÉMIGRÉS, REFUGEES

Exhilic thought is the thought and ‘education’ of the exile. It is a kind of uprooted thought developed away from ‘home’ under conditions of displacement and uncertainty, often in a different mother tongue, language tradition and culture. Exhilic thought is sometimes the self-imposed discipline of the ‘stranger’ who develops his or her identity as an ‘alien’ or immigrant against the conventions of a host culture and from the perspective of an outsider. The motif the exile-stranger in a foreign land finding his or her way about for the first time is fable-ized in ancient accounts of ‘first contacts’ and early cultural exchanges. This notion of the exile invokes the model of the anthropologist as ‘participant observer’, of someone perpetually looking in through the window of another culture, who is both observer and participant. At the same time ‘exile’ often marks a complex ambivalence to one’s own home culture and, therefore, also to questions of one’s own national, cultural and personal identity. Exile is one of the central and most powerful motifs of the intellectual in the twentieth century: it describes a profound existential condition

1 I began a very similar essay based on roughly the same theme in 1999 before attending a conference on ‘philosophy and biography’ organized by James Klagge at Virginia State University, where I presented a paper. The ‘exile’ paper was lost in my shift from the University of Auckland (New Zealand) to the University of Glasgow (Scotland) in 2000, not a shift that I regard as an example of ‘exile’ or one that ever produced ‘homesickness’.

2 This is true of the first oral-formulaic epic narratives in the western Homeric tradition including the Iliad and the Odyssey that strongly influenced Plato and was a basis for Roman education. It is also the case with Marco Polo's travels in 1260 and his presence at the court of Kublai Khan. ‘First contact’ was later systematized in the emerging discipline of anthropology during the early era of European colonization and developed with the formalization of ‘ethnology’ and later ‘ethnography’, which while it had origins in the Florentine Renaissance (especially archeology) and grew out of philosophical anthropology concern principally with the nature of ‘Man’, took its modern form with Durkheim and Mauss (on primitive classification), and later, with Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski.
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of cultural estrangement, and sometimes alienation that defines identity in terms of migration, movement, departure, homelessness. It prefigures a notion of thought that is ‘nomadic’, formed in a different context, and laced with observations that at once make the familiar strange and the strange familiar.

We ought to guard against the trivialization and romanticization of this condition for the experience of exile, voluntary or forced, is the fate of millions of desperate people who under the impact of globalization are driven to relocate themselves. This is the case for ‘illegal immigrants’ who suffer the indignities of resettlement camps, run the gauntlet of border patrols and risk their lives on a daily basis to find a place—legal or otherwise—in the first world.3

The condition of exile while a characteristic of a globalized late modernity has its diasporic roots in pre-Biblical times, defining Judaic religious identity. It has been revisited by each major ethnic and religious persecution down through the centuries. In an essay called “Being Jewish” from Infinite Conversations Maurice Blanchot, for example, argues that the positive aspect of the Jewish experience and of being Jewish is that:

the idea of exodus and the idea of exile can exist as a legitimate movement; it exists, through exile and through the initiative that is exodus, so that the experience of strangeness may affirm itself close to hand as an irreducible relation; it exists so that, by the authority of this experience, we might learn to speak (12).

Sauer-Thompson (2005) notes ‘Being Jewish affirms uprooting, the affirmation of nomadic truth, exodus, the exile. For Blanchot being Jewish is being destined to dispersion, to a sojourn without place, to a setting out on the road, a state of wandering, and not being bound to the determination of place.’4 This metaphorical reading of Blanchot’s ‘nomadic truth’ that foreshadows Deleuze and Guattari’s notion suggests that we take the notion of thinking as a journey and education seriously.

The forced journey requires continual readjustment under new and changing conditions without the security or familiarity of ‘home’ and thus, without the normal structures that anchor and prop up identity. Nomadic truth is borne of the traveler’s education, the exchange of ideas, and acquaintance with new landscapes of thought, borne of encounters of the Other with different cultures often producing new hybridities that are not simply the result of grafted cultural stock. Michael J. Brogan (2004) argues that the dominance of the question of ‘radical otherness’ in cultural and religious

3 The United Nations Population Division estimates that some 190–200 million people, roughly three percent of the world population, live outside their country of birth for a minimum of one year.
5 For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), nomads are characterized in opposition to the system of the State which is sedentary; nomadism is, thus, a revolutionnary alternative to the State. The nomad is the ‘outsider’ and nomadic thought is ‘outside’ thought (an expression borrowed from Blanchot). See also Delueze and Guattari’s (1986) Nomadology: The War Machine.