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The Nomadic Intellect

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I've entitled this talk, 'The Nomadic Intellect', as a salutation to a book several readers will know, others at least heard of, as one of the elements, among other recent attempts in Scotland, to recover the country's original intellectual, cultural energies and open up a new field. I'm referring to George Davie's *The Democratic Intellect* (1961) and its ominously titled sequel (1986), *The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect*.

I don't intend here to go into the whole theory of 'the nomadic intellect', which involves a multitude of paths, and, I risk saying evolves in a space, at once more open, more radical, more acute than the 'democratic intellect'. In *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, T. E. Lawrence called nomadism 'that most deep and biting social discipline'. He was referring to the pastoral nomadism of the Bedouin. What I've called intellectual nomadism is the most deep and biting of mental disciplines. I laid out its mapping and making in a book entitled *L'Esprit nomade* (Paris, 1987), which is at present being translated into English, after other languages, and will appear in the *Collected Works* now underway at Edinburgh University Press..

What I intend to do in this text is a general overview providing the sense of a whole itinerary.

1

When we get right down to basics, the root words we use are: living, being, existence. Living is a biological term, moving into the sociological and the economic. Being, a hazier notion, can move up into metaphysics – in fact the whole of Western metaphysics is based on it. Existence is a tougher term to grasp, extend and expand.

What we're all after is ways out of 'ourselves' as conditioned human beings, out of an oppressive state of society and civilisation, out of rigid systems of thought and stale discourse. As Ronald Laing, psychiartrist in Glasgow, in his book *The Politics of Experience*, put it: 'Our social realities are so ugly if seen in

the light of exiled truth, and beauty is almost no longer possible if it is not a lie. What is to be done? We who are still half alive, living in the often fibrillating heartland of a senescent capitalism – can we do more than reflect the decay around and within us? Humanity is estranged from its authentic possibilities.'

The whole process began for me in a small seaport village on the West coast of Scotland. I dwelt there for years in a kind of oceanic consciousness, fertile in multiple sensations and perceptions. Then I began to read philosophy, from Plato on, and the notion of 'being' took over. This concept turned up a lot in my early poems and essays. It was in Glasgow I started to *exist*, and it was a chilly kind of experience. I roamed about the streets in a black anorak. Somewhere between Dostoievki's 'underground man' and Hesse's 'wolf of the steppes', my thought moving between an archaic fundamentalism and an anarchic kind of nihilism. With a music running through my head made up of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*, Scottish and Irish folksong, and snatches of quotations from Rimbaud's *Season in Hell*.

As a student in this city situated between Chicago and Moscow, I was always hunting for books, usually among the secondhand barrows then clustered around the Central Station. It was in one of them that I came across *The Lives of the Scottish Poets* by David Irving, published in 1810. In it, Irving has a page on John Cameron (I'm a Cameron on my mother's side), who was professor of Greek at the University here in Glasgow. About Cameron, Irving has this to say: 'Being seized with the desire of visiting foreign countries, he soon relinquished his situation, and, in the year 1600, passed over to France, the favourite region of Scottish wanderers.'

We're already into the Franco-Scottish connection, part of the thematics of this gathering. Before going into the larger aspects of our theme, let me just confirm and strengthen the strands of the general Franco-Scottish connection, serving it in all its depth and scope, which is not always the case.

Here's Alfred North Whitehead, Englishman, in his *Adventures of Ideas* (1932): 'Adam Smith and David Hume are two of the last great Scotchmen who mark the traditional affiliation of Scotland with France. At their date the intellectual life of Edinburgh and Glasgow is not to be assimilated with that of England. Throughout the greater part of the eighteenth century, during its central portion, the intellectual life of England, so far as concerns any orignative energy, is negligible.' In my early days in Ayrshire, Whitehead was the only modern English-writing philosopher I was deeply interested in. His *Process and Reality*, 'an essay in cosmology', originally a series of lectures delivered at

the University of Edinburgh, 1927–1928, was a key-book for me. Throughout Whitehead's books, you can come across phrases like that 'originative energy', 'emerging lines of thought', that struck my brain like lightning. And the general tenor of *Process and Reality* seemed to me like a programme: 'In each age of the world distinguished by high activity there will be found at its culmination, and among the agencies leading to that culmination, some profound cosmological outlook.'

One last confirmation before going on. In his book on *The Atlantic Republican Tradition*, J. G. A. Pocock lays a lot of emphasis on those 'Scottish and French conjectural historians' who, outside all mere historicism, tried to see *emergent lines in time* (my emphasis).

This first Glasgow period of my itinerary came to an end with my Finals, in French and German, at Glasgow University. I was lucky. My external examiner was Enid Starkie, professor of French at Oxford, biographer of Rimbaud. What started out as an examination turned into an animated conversation. Starkie ended up by saying that in all her teaching days she'd never seen my like. That kind of pleased me. Anyway, I came away with a bursary for post-graduate study in Paris.

I left for Paris in the Autumn of 1959, to live there with Marie-Claude, whom I'd met in Glasgow where she was *assistante* and where she was going to be working at the Sorbonne on a memoir devoted to Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *A Scots Quair*.

For a couple of years, living in small rooms with Marie-Claude, while working away in libraries, I wandered all over Paris, from Montparnasse to Montmartre, from the Mt Ste Geneviève (where the old Scots College stood) to Place Blanche, from the quays of the Seine to the Ourcq Canal, jouking into dives and cafés here and there, frequenting the studios of painters, talking with a variety of characters from tramps to hyper-intellectuals.

Then we moved out to Meudon, ten minutes south-west from Montparnasse railway station. This, I learned, was the area (Meudon, Clamart…), where a lot of Russian exiles, such as Berdyaev and Chestov, had settled: it was where the Russian 'philosophical boat' registered in Kiev around 1900, had found a temporary harbour. I could still hear Russian in the streets, and could talk with some of those exiles or their descendants in the taverns. A strange coincidence was that Louis-Ferdinand Céline, author of *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (*Voyage to the End of Night*), a book I must have read ten times during my student years in Glasgow, had just died there, leaving his last book, *Rigodon*, a 'chronicle of clownish history', dedicated to 'the animals'.

Alongside my first thesis on 'Politics and Poetics in the Context of Surrealism' I was working then, at a collection of essays provisionally entitled *Marx, Freud and the Third Eye*, and at a crazy manuscript entitled *Incandescent Limbo*, which, amid all kinds of elements, situations and projections, was an existential auto-analysis. I was working my way, on several planes, from the political to the poetical via the philosophical, into something original. Maybe the titles of *Incandescent Limbo*'s seven chapters will be enough here to provide an approximate idea: 'Notes of a Nothing Man', 'On the Hyperborean Fringe', 'A Short Introduction to Eskimo Studies', 'The Hermit of the Rue Gay-Lussac', 'A Little Place in Nowhere', 'It's Raining Tea in Darjeeling', 'The Cabinet of White Meditation'.

2

Now, to look closely, from the singular position I've just evoked, at the whole field of what the Americans call 'French theory'.

My particular involvement in, and angle of view upon this 'French theory', may be useful in the English language context. First, to perturb a little, if possible, the kind of intellectual complacency that came across in the interview I heard once of an English don, from Cambridge, if I remember rightly, in which he declared that he was 'not really aware of Continental thought'. Second, and it's more complex, to shed light on my relationship to French literature and thought, which differs from minds certainly more demanding than that of our don, both in Britain and the U.S., but who often pick up and stick to French theories that have undergone criticism and, more deeply, overpassing, in France itself.

I did a lot of this kind of undermining and overpassing, often to the wrath and the reaction of more established French intellectuals and literati. Here's an anecdote that illustrates this. I'd published some pieces in French magazines when Maurice Nadeau asked me to write regular articles for his *Quinzaine littéraire*, then one of the main critical reviews of the time. I might begin these articles, which were in fact essays (Nadeau gave me all the space I wanted) about some recent literary production, but I always broached larger themes. I'd get letters from readers, saying: 'At last something live on the scene!' But reaction was also growing. At one point Nadeau said to me: 'The next time you come into Paris, do it in an armoured car, for they're out to get you, gun you down.' There was a certain amount of gun-popping over the years. In France, I've never been just a quiet guest, but an active participant in what I considered, and still do, the deepest and liveliest intellectual field in Europe, in the world.

I propose to look into the deep lines and work out some co-ordinates.

When I arrived in France, the key-word was structure: structure here, structure there, structure everywhere.

Structuralism began with a new look into text, for example, in the study of semio-narrative structures with Greimas, or the structures of the imagination with Gilbert Durand. Structure became the key-word, developing from a literary methodology into a whole conceptual system. Levi-Strauss, ex-philosopher, ethnologist, transferred it to family organisation and anthropology. Soon it was all over the board, running from linguistics to biology via the science of cognition, giving rise to a new formation of the intelligentsia, a new intellectualist community, with new rituals of communion, with which I had nothing to do, and said so. I never saw in structuralism any more than a half-way house. If it was a search for deeper formations than the common ones, if it could be empirically valid in specific contexts, it seemed to me short in theory, and might have stemmed ultimately from a desire to grab hold of at least something in the general emptiness of the long post-war period in which the last lightning-strokes of surrealism had given way to Sartrean existentialism that hovered between langorous nightclub libertarianism and hasty political engagement, with nauseous boredom in between.

What was trying to find its spaces, places and paces was a whole post-structuralist movement.

The first sign of it, as I see things, came across in an essay, published in 1963 by Henri Lefebvre in the *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie*, entitled '*Réflexions sur le structuralisme et l'histoire*' ('Reflections on Structuralism and History'), later picked up in his book of 1971: *Au-delà du structuralisme* (Beyond Structuralism). The very juxtaposition of those two words, 'structuralism' and 'history', says Lefebvre at the beginning of his essay: 'indicate the matter of a considerable debate destined to be in the forefront of contemporary thought'. Unfortunately, he goes on, debates in themselves never lead to much except to more debating. How to get out of all this? – that is the question posed at the end of Lefebvre essay. There was no immediate, definitive answer. But the radical antinomy appearing on the horizon was obvious enough for any percipient, outward-looking mind: that between *structure* and *movement*, *model* and *way*, implying consequences in theory and in practice, in politics, in philosophy, and in literature.

That was what interested me, what I was involved in.

This anti-structuralist position was continued into the practice of de-construction, as put forward and put into effect by Jacques Derrida, which

was exemplified for me mainly by his book *Glas*. When I first saw this large format volume, with that word *GLAS* ('knell') emblazoned on its cover, I couldn't keep thinking of Glasgow, where, amid the tolling of ecclesiastical bells and the booming of municipal clocks, I'd heard myself the knell of a certain History, and had been doing a lot of deconstruction on my own. What deconstruction meant in Derrida's clandestine book *Glas* was picking holes in Hegel, breaking down that great cultural-historical monument. After that erosion of Hegelianism, Derrida turned to the dissemination of 'being' and, from there, to the white page – the white page on which, in an extraordinarily inspired moment, the poet Mallarmé was able only to space out a multitude of scattered work-notes. In more general terms, both political and literary, Derrida was moving out from the Marxist heritage of dialectics to what he called galactics. What lurked in this latter term was the possibility, a perpetually delayed possibility (*différance,* with an 'a') of a new logic, a new text.

It was in this general movement I saw also Foucault, Lyotard and Deleuze, the figures I felt most affinities with.

In the early sixties Foucault had begun his study *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* ('A History of Madness in the Classical Age'). This historico-philosophical investigation was, as its title indicated, a study of mental illness and psychiatric practice, but it rapidly turned into an examination of the whole imaginary landscape and epistemological scene of the Renaissance. The themes of this early study – the relationship between individual and institution, that between power-structures and knowledge (including self knowledge), the dialectic of sense (common and uncommon) and society, the nature and processes of the thinking and writing author, were developed in other books by Foucault such as *Les Mots et les Choses* (Words and Things) and *L'archéologie du savoir* (The Archaelogy of Knowledge).

On that basis, let's follow out the continuous and discontinuous lines of an emergent configuration.

In 1973, there appeared in Paris a book with, for me, a significant title: *Dérive à partir de Marx et de Freud* ('Drifting away from Marx and Freud') by Jean-François Lyotard. It was significant for the psycho-sociological context in the France of the time. And for me, it wasn't only significant, it was coincidental, in that I was working at the time on a book entitled *Travels in the Drifting Dawn*, seeing the whole time-space beginning to emerge as 'the years of the great drift'. Lyotard's notion of 'the drift' also coincided, at least in part, with mine: that there would be no prescribed schedule, no invented 'plot' to be worked out, no 'totality' to be arrived at, which was, wrote Lyotard, 'the model of

Hegelian dialectics and all of bourgeois thought and practice'. The drift was rather like a maelstrom of fragments, the mind process involved being both oceanic and sismographic. As Lyotard wrote in his book *Rudiments païens:* 'The old platonico-christian canvas is in shreds, all the attempts to mend it, even the Marxist ones, are falling apart.' The only possibility left was to move towards '*a region that semiotics has no notion of*', a region '*like those white spaces indicating unknown land in the cartography of signs.*'

I now come to Gilles Deleuze, with whom I was most in personal contact, in that he was invited to be on the jury of my second thesis – on what I called 'intellectual nomadism' – at the Sorbonne in 1979, and accepted, telling me he already knew of my work. The presentation of my thesis at the Sorbonne went extremely well and, after a glowing report of his own, Deleuze signed the report prepared by my patron, the Americanist, Michel Gresset, who had said this work of mine wasn't only a remarkable thesis, but one which opened up a new field of study. Given all this, I was a little surprised to see, a few years later, in the book he wrote with Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux*, Deleuze taking issue with me on two points: my 'celticism' and my 'orientalism'. It wasn't a head-on attack, but it cast suspicion, as if, on the one hand, I was a rabid Celtomaniac, and, on the other, a potential guru, on both counts a dangerous character.

To take this a little seriously, though, I think it hardly merits it.

I'd made it clear, in essay after essay, poem after poem, exactly what my position was on 'celticism': in very general terms, a current of culture and thought gone underground in Europe, and of which I insisted on the salient intellectual and poetic features, my references being, not to some militant nationalist, but to John Scot Erigena, Duns Scot, and others of that ilk. If Deleuze (flanked by Guattari) chose to stick to more commonplace and history-bound references, it was perhaps, on the one hand, because they knew no other, but also because, I hazard the hypothesis, they were out to cast aspersions on a theory-practice that was treading on their grass.

The ignorance regarding Celtic culture prevailed also in the domain of orientalism.

In his *Production de l'espace* (1985), Lefebvre asks: 'What do we know about Asian spatiality and ideograms?' – but never took the trouble to find out. In *L'Archéologie du savoir*, Foucault confessed to total incompetence, and remained satisfied with the confession. In his book on *Foucault* (1986), Deleuze comes to the question and makes a conjecture: 'If we're to attain to a life with an "outside force", how do we know it won't be a terrifying, unbreathable void'

– which might have entailed an entry into the vast field of *Sunyata* studies, but didn't. In *Mille Plateaux*, with regard to my own case, he's content with a derogatory 'yoga, tao, zen and all that'.

It all hinged, in final terms, on the opening and the co-ordination of a space outside normal conditions and containments.

Foucault, to come back to his analysis, had begun to approach this space. He saw the classical, humanist model of human being, already eroded by the economic determinism of Marx and the psychoanalysis of Freud, disappearing 'like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the tide', saying that he himself spoke from 'a white space', but he never went deeply into it.

In Foucault's later work, the only signs we see of the possibility of another, more open existential and intellectual space are in his work-notes for a lecture '*Des espaces autres*', never composed or developed, set aside, published only years later in the journal *Architecture Mouvement Continuité* (1984), and in English 'Of other spaces', in *Diacritics* (1986). In these notes, Foucault launches the term *hétérotopies*, presenting, as examples, among several others, the old bourgeois *maison close* and the new popular Club Med. To say the least, all this was a crushing reduction of that 'white space' he evoked in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. But it was enough for semi-intellectuals in France to start talking about *hétérotopologie* and for somebody like Edward Soja in the U.S. (whose merit had been to introduce Henri Lefebvre's work, notably *La Production de l'espace*, to English-language speakers) to wax enthusiastic, and pump it up to what he called *Thirdspace* (1996), which is pure bubble-gum. In the absence of anything like a really live intellectual field, all kinds of 'blockbusters' can be concocted from a peck of superficial theorisation wrapped in a mass of statistics and descriptions.

Having worked, with differences, alongside those French thinkers, I continued working on that 'space-thing' on my own, via essay, what I called 'waybook' (neither novel nor travel-writing) and poem.

3

After, in this overview, going into theory, and given some sense of an intellectual itinerary, it remains in this concluding section of my talk to give some idea of the social strategy of the intellectual nomad.

A French critic once said of me I was a social activist who at times went into long retreats. He was right about the dialectic, but he got the emphasis wrong, and inverted the elements. I think rather I'm a loner, at one with the universe and the whole of world culture, who sometimes makes public incursions.

What's true in any case is that this double movement exists. When I broke with Britain in the late sixties, I spent nine years in the Pyrenees, publishing next to nothing, but working, shall we say, like the devil, undergroundedly, with my eye on the high line of the Pyrenees. When I started publishing again, book after book, at the speed of the Ganges, as Nietzsche says, another critic said: 'This fellow must never sleep'. In fact, I sleep quite a lot, maybe not so much as Descartes, but a full share, to let the neurones recharge, ready for new synapses.

Of this dialectical, paradoxical activity, which, in my mind and in my practice, goes on outside that of the 'intellectual engagé' and beyond that of the mediatic intellectual who, week in, week out, comments, more or less philosophically, on events and participates conscientiously in debates, a few concrete examples.

While lone-wolfing in Glasgow around 1966, I set up the Jargon Group, devoted to what I called 'cultural revolution' and 'ontological renovation'. When, after deciding Britain wasn't ready for ontological-cultural revolution, I left for France in 1967, I continued the glasgovian work with a group I called *Feuillage*, a word the Francophile American Walt Whitman used in one of his poems: 'always our old feuillage, always the free range and diversity.' All of this, you'll have noticed, well before the French revolt of May '68, in which I participated, with inner distance (I found most of the discourse stale), my slogan being: 'Not Mao, the Tao!' After '68, in the early seventies in Paris, I set up another group, with another roneotyped review, *The Featherd Egg*, its motto being 'eggs need hatching', meaning by this that if May '68 had broken shells and made a kind of *omelette baveuse*, it hadn't created wings for flight. Then, years later, after more teaching (I've always considered university teaching as the oral prolongation of my silent thinking), in 1989 (two centuries after the French Revolution) I set up the International Institute of Geopoetics, so as to propagate the idea of geopoetics, a theory-practice that had emerged in my mind after long years of intellectual nomadism across territories and cultures. I did this with ideas of organisation I'd been mulling over. After setting up the Institute, I proposed the creation of geopoetic groups across the world, working according to local conditions. Groups have been set up, temporary or lasting, in France, Scotland, Belgium, Italy, Serbia, Russia, Chile, and others are in the making. For various reasons, principal among them being the absence of the fundamental texts (for example, books of mine such as *L'Esprit nomade, Le plateau de l'Albatros, Au large de l'Histoire,* still do not exist in English), not all of these groups work in the higher reaches of geopoetics and exercise its

expansive potentiality. But all are aware of the significance of the concept, and all are careful not to let the term run down into the kind of banal usage that has befallen, for example, the term 'surrealist' or even the term 'existentialist'. The Institute, which houses a selection of the principal texts and now exists in eight languages, remains the central point of reference. As in all organisational practice, the question is always one of inspiration and application.

Now, in conclusion, let's look at things from a distance and from high up.

That there is in the world today a great unrest, is the least that can be said. The title of Freud's diagnosis, *Civilisation and its Discontents* comes to mind, a book that meant a lot to me when I first read it as an adolescent.

Most of the political discourse present, most of the cultural discourse, however well-meaning, and with partial relevance (often with perverse results) is totally inadequate to the context.

The fundamental paradigm in civilisation is that between the nomad and the sedentary, the one moving in space, the other establishing a politics. As the old political phase puts it: *Nomades sunt, civilitatem non habent* ('They are nomads, they do not know civilisation').

That there is a discontent, and a distrust, in politics today, often expressed in very confused manner, is just as evident as the general civilisation unrest, of which it is a part. And this may be based, ultimately, on the fact that, as etymology shows, politics is of the city (*polis*), to the neglect of the territory. Which is why the most public critique of politics at the moment comes from ecology, giving rise to an extension, an expansion of politics, as eco-politics, earth-politics, etc. This, as the oft-used phrase puts it, is 'going in the right direction'. But it is still probably too superficial, representing only an intermediary stage. It will take more than a mix of ecology and politics to get at a full earth-existence, a grounded culture, a live and lasting, open world. The theme lies before us, and has vista.