



**Felip Martí-Jufresa**

# The exile of knowledge

**I shall start from a headline definition of exile, the kind of slogan or notice you might find on the lintel of a door, an imaginary door that would be the door to all possible homes. That notice would state the law of exile: “Forbidden to go back home”.**

So we shall say that anyone who finds himself on the threshold of such a door will be in exile. Now, to understand that law, we have to define what home means. What exactly is one forbidden to do when one is forbidden to go home?

But before going *back to* the essence of the house, where I hope we shall be allowed in and welcomed, I would like to begin the cycle of variations on the theme I have just stated. Yes, I could also have just said “Forbidden to go back” and I would thus have elided another way of saying the home, I would have elided *inside*: “Forbidden to go back inside”, “Forbidden inside”. We could not have escaped the semantics of the inside and the outside so often visited by the philosophical styles that populated a large part of the philosophical scene in the French language in the sixties and seventies, so it is best to refer to it straight away. What *home* means is still what *inside* means.

## HOME AND MASTERY

The assumption of this essay will be that *home* or *inside* is the name given to any situation of knowledge or mastery. *Home*, *inside*, are the names we give to the situation created by the effectiveness of some knowledge. A being is at home where he knows how to do what he does. *Home* is the name of the location of some knowledge, the name given to the place where some knowledge occurs, and that place is none other than the there of

some knowledge, i.e. its very effectiveness, the effectiveness of the relationship established between who or what knows and what is known, it is the name given to the situation of knowledge. *Home* is the name we give to the relationship between the subject of some knowledge and the very effectiveness of his knowledge: “there, I know”, “there, I am *at home*”. There, where some knowledge takes place, *there* is the house, *there* is home. If the condition of home, if the interiority is the fact of knowing, an effect of knowing, we must then take stock of what *knowing* means. Knowing here is knowing how to do, knowing how to deal with... any activity, any practice. Knowing how to do is thus mastering what has to be done so that any activity takes place properly, according to the rule or the regulations that constitute or define it. Knowing how to walk is no more than producing the effectiveness of walking regularly, without falling down too often; knowing how to speak a language is no more than producing the effectiveness of the word or the sound so that mutual understanding occurs in a banal way, without making too many mistakes by watering a flower when one should be washing the floor or receiving a packet of paper when one was expecting a paperback. Knowing how to deal with a computer programme is no more than producing the effectiveness of the operations it enables us to perform regularly and without too many worries; knowing how to play music is no more than producing the effectiveness of what will be recognised in some social context or other as being music and not painting or a fountain pen.

### NO MORE KNOWLEDGE

And so it is only from that concept of knowledge and thus of an understanding of what *home* means that we can approach the law of exile, that law we had posted in capital letters on the lintel of any door, any threshold of an inside. Thus our notice becomes, drifts towards the following statement: “Forbidden to know”.

And so we can now venture more confidently that being in exile is being where we no longer have a mastered knowledge of such and such a practice, where we no longer know how to do, where we no longer know the rule, the code, the regulation that allows us to deal with... the word, painting, standing upright, seeing, writing, friendship, justice, making clothes, building houses, whatever, relationships with wolves and so on.

Exile is the place where our knowledge of such and such a practice is precarious, where we *no longer* have sufficient mastery of a situation, of an operation in progress. Where an activity in progress escapes us visibly, effectively. Exile is the practical evidence felt by a body of a loss of knowledge, of knowing how, of *techne* or *episteme* in classical Greek vocabulary.

Exile comes into being, is shaped as a comparison between a past of mastery and a present of experiment, of pauperisation of experience, of groping. This comparison can only appear as such through the presence of that precariousness where we feel, we travel through, the absence of knowledge. Exile is thus an essentially retrospective experience which presupposes a memory of what was some knowledge, of what it governed and what it no longer governs. As that shows, exile is an essentially melancholy or sad situation, as an experience of a being unable, the crossing of a desert of knowledge (“that was, I shall no longer be able to talk, to make music, to direct my existence, to live on the planet...”) and for that very reason highly susceptible to turning towards nostalgia, i.e. specifically towards the wish to rediscover the forbidden, deposed

knowledge, the bygone mastery. Exile is the name of an undefined no-man's land between some knowledge and some other knowledge, which can be more or less the same, but which cannot be guaranteed; exile is the effective crossing of that no-man's land, the practice without product in which that land, that absence consists.

And so exile is not simply identifiable with ignorance, it is a particular type or case of ignorance, it is a becoming ignorant when we were not ignorant before. It is not that place where we simply do *not* have

knowledge, where we simply do not know how to perform some activity or other, where we stupidly do not know the way of doing; it is that place where we *no longer* have that knowledge through which we formerly performed this or that task, relation, activity or set of activities. The difference between simple ignorance and exile can be expressed as the difference signified by those two

forms of negation: *not*, *no longer*. A baby does *not* know how to speak, an immigrant worker or a traveller *no longer* knows how to speak; an apprentice does not know how to paint, a modern painter no longer knows how to paint; the governed subject does not know how to govern, the anarchist no longer knows how to govern...

Let us put the same thing another way, at the risk of being tedious. Mastery, knowledge is what makes home and it is that home that is missing where we no longer know how to do, where we are exposed once again to the precariousness of ignorance. Setting a rule for construction marks the birth of knowledge, and thus the establishment, the building of a home. Thought, artistic practice, the body is at home where it manages to set a rule for construction, where it operates regularly, *regulatedly*. In philosophical terms a rule for construction is called *a concept*. Regulated practices make up the content of what we call regular practices, whose fabric constitutes an everyday or everyday life. A regular practice of non-regulated practices, here perhaps is a definition of exile which shows its instability, its paradoxical precariousness. The everyday is a fabric of *conceptuated* or determined practices, exile is a scrap of *conceptuating* or reflecting practices. That call to reflection, to investigation, to that situation where we are forced to deal with an activity without knowing the rules allows us to perceive the crack through which a gaiety of exile may surface. It is a trait that will later enable us to understand the possibility of an affirmative figure of that exile.

“Home” is the name we give to the relationship between the subject of some knowledge and the very effectiveness of his knowledge

## PRODUCTS OF EXILE

That allows us to approach the question of exile from the evidence of its results. What, turning to the etymological baggage of the word, we might call *the poetry of exile*, its production, is both all those works (often overflowing with mastery) which show the retrospective trait of exile in all imaginable senses, which give shape to that hiatus between the “having been” and the “no longer being” of knowledge and everything that

is done, or rather badly done or undone, and which bears specific witness to the presence of non-knowledge. Perhaps the production of exile is above all the traces of those *deregulated*, groping, reflective practices: those incomprehensible agrammatical non-phrases, but also those poorly made, ill matching, mispronounced phrases, but phrases nonetheless; those hesitant hand gestures, those clumsy body movements, those blunders, those stumblings.

**Exile is the place where our knowledge of such and such a practice is precarious, where we no longer have sufficient mastery of a situation**

An exile does not manifest itself only through this big bag of transgressions, this hotchpotch of oddments and failures, of muddlings and arrangements that “do not hold course”. Exile is the kingdom of error and scraping by: *the empire of muddling through*.

The poetry of exile is each of those results, each trace of those movements: scraps, blunders, attempts of all kinds, falls, fragments, loose ends, mumblings... (the French word, *bredouillements*, comes from the verb *bredouiller*, which in turn

comes from *bretonner*, which meant no more or less than “speaking —French, of course— like a Breton”: here we are at the heart of our theme...). The main archive of the poetry of exile is, first and foremost, a dustbin. But also drawers in workshops of all kinds, police, customs or job centre files, wherever the traces of that no-longer-knowing are deposited, the depots of that journey through non-mastery of which exile specifically consists.

The drawers and the dustbins, in the strictest sense of the word, but also the “dustbins of history”, the pit where all the political attempts of the people who specifically embarked on the enterprise of getting rid of, of unlearning their own knowledge of the best known, the most familiar, the most performed social orders throughout the history of the animal man are thrown. And notably the attempts at un-knowing the ways of doing of rich and poor or governments and governed. Those attempts can only be made through exiles, that is, by crossing a desert of knowledge, a desert of habits, a desert of the everyday. Knowledge of those ways of doing of worlds without rich or poor, without governments or governed, without “bourgeois or proletarians” is no guarantee of progress, we still do not know whether we are capable of it at this point in the history of human societies. The group of human beings who want to set about, to shoulder the burden of that task will have to go into exile, exile quite specifically from the ways of doing of societies based on an unequal distribution of wealth and government. Revolution leads inexorably to exile.

## EXILOPHILIA

I would like to add that one of the aims of this brief essay would be to propose that it is not essential to distinguish the source of the non-knowledge or the un-knowing of which an exile consists. Whether it is I, you, he or that or we or she, what puts us in exile in no way changes what exile consists in, the effectiveness of the situation in which “I no longer know how to do what I once knew how to do”.

Evidently, a lover or a friend of exile, an *exilophile*, will have a quite different relation with this un-knowing situation from someone simply in exile, but that does prevent there being exile for both of them.

And so we must make it clear why *exilophilia* is, indeed, marginal, because the one who exiles is rarely the same as the one who is exiled or, to put it another way, why exile is almost always conjugated in the passive voice and rarely as a reflexive pronominal verb: "I am exiled" rather than "I exile myself". Why is it almost always the other who exiles? Clearly that has to do with the fact that exile is a denuding situation, the fact that to be exiled is to be stripped, stripped of one or a series of masteries, denuded of one or more items of knowledge and thus far more exposed to the loss of what is at stake than before, when one lived in the cosy home of mastery. Exile is economically very risky, even harmful, which is why a living being (yes, life, always life...) or more generally a wise one cannot desire it in itself, except by desiring his own loss. In exile, as we well know, one is always forced. One does not leave a home unless, one way or another, one comes to the conclusion that that home is forbidden, ruined, or on the way to being so, and that it is better to expose oneself to exile than to succumb to the implosion of the inside. Exile can only be accepted by the intervention of a calculation about what it may end in.

We could call the subject of *exilophilia* a *traveller*, that unlikely figure who loves to exile himself, in other words, to lose his knowledge, to let go of it in order to be confronted by, or rather in the midst of, that reflecting situation in which he will have to cope if he is not to lose everything. The traveller loves the reflection to which he is obliged by exile; he likes to paddle, at the risk of slipping, in the swamp of reflecting practices.

So the traveller has to be an exceptional, rare figure, otherwise exile would never have been a punishment. And that rarity undoubtedly comes from the fact that travelling is taking pleasure in the crossing of a desert of knowledge in which the whole (life, painting, music... whatever) in fact risks its neck far more evidently than by staying in the house of mastered knowledge. The journey is only a journey when the very taking place of the activity is at risk.

The traveller in painting is only one when, by removing his pictorial mastery, he simply risks

ceasing to be able to paint, never doing painting again. The traveller in philosophy is only one when, by removing his philosophical mastery, he risks saying goodbye to philosophy. The traveller in life is only one when he risks life as such.

So, if the journey may be regarded as the case of an affirmed exile, the figure of the good traveller is on the crest of knowledge. A traveller can only be a coper, otherwise he perishes on his journey; and that good which distinguishes the good traveller from the bad traveller doomed to lose can only be knowledge, certainly a weird kind of knowledge, knowledge at the boundary of knowledge because it is incapable of setting a rule, knowledge grappling with the singular, with the case by case: knowledge that will

If the journey may be regarded as the case of an affirmed exile, the figure of the good traveller is on the crest of knowledge

not be strictly a knowing-how-to-deal with, but that *knowing how to get out of a tight spot* by which we usually define that strange art of coping, so fascinating, so unstable, so linked to the poverty of exile.

### TEMPO AND EXILE

We should stop for a few moments now, before ending, to consider a matter of rhythm or tempo. Since ways of doing are evidently shifting, in motion —whether more or less perceptibly— and thus the transitions between knowledge and non-knowledge are constantly occurring, can we consider any passage between knowledge and un-knowing relevant to exile? Is old age, for example, an exile? That gradual loss of faculties, of knowledge, which we call *ageing*, does it have to do with exile or should we essentially associate with exile the idea of an abrupt transition, a drastic transition from knowledge to non-knowledge? Is exile a deflagration of non-knowledge, a sudden immersion in the unknown, in the “no longer knowing how to deal with...”? The victim of an accident who can no longer walk, which is to say that he no longer knows how to walk, would be in exile from walking, so much so that he would not have managed to find new knowledge of moving forward, another way of moving forward which would not involve using the legs but by a play of arms and sticks or a machine with wheels. And so much so that he would not, through a task of relearning, succeed in making his legs walk, in returning to the land of walking which he had known so well, inhabited so joyously before being abruptly banished by the crash. Would the old man who can hardly walk, who loses the knowledge of walking over a series of small thresholds, also be in exile or do we need to find another name, another concept for that slow-burning expulsion, that peeling transition from knowledge to non-knowledge? I leave the question open ||