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Rebecca West and the Meaning of Exile

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Like all people who have lived long in exile, she sometimes felt that everything peculiar to the strange place where she found herself was a spreading sore, bubo of a plague that will infect and kill.

Rebecca West (1941: 945)

Exile is always painful, but often strangely productive.

Anders Olsson (735)

Rebecca West (1892–1983) was a British journalist and novelist of considerable stature, known for her fierce intellectual independence, her psychologically astute novels, and her penetrating journalism about treason, racism, and politics. She rose meteor-like from obscure poverty to the inner circles of England's intellectual élite while still in her early twenties. West knew practically everybody of literary consequence in London from Ford Madox Ford, to H. G. Wells (with whom she had a long-lasting affair, and a son), to George Bernard Shaw, to Virginia Woolf; she was also acquainted with Bertrand Russell, A. J. P. Taylor, Lionel Trilling, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. Her opinions, ranging from feminism, to anti-communism, to religious liberalism, were influential and provocative, causing her work to be sought after by, among others, *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The London Times*, and *The Daily Telegraph*. Her novels constitute landmarks of World War I fiction (*The Return of the Soldier*), literary modernism (*Harriet Hume*), and the espionage genre (*The Birds Fall Down*). Her cultural and historical anatomy of Yugoslavia, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941), still enjoys a large and ardent following that includes the likes of Christopher Hitchens, Geoff Dyer, and Robert D. Kaplan.

Within West's diverse output, one theme occurs repeatedly: exile. This subject informs her thinking on nationalism and the roots of selfhood; it guides her sympathy towards figures like Emma Goldmann, Leon Trotsky, and a host of other exiles whom she personally helped; and it suffuses her thinking about God and the nature of the universe. Exile is more than a recurrent motif in West's work — it is a symptom of her

entire worldview and politics. Her deep anxiety about and abhorrence of exile contrasts with the more positive modernist (and postmodernist) approaches to the issue. I shall explore the reasons for this divergence, probing West's negative view of both forced and voluntary displacement and tracing possible ramifications of exile in relation to larger artistic, intellectual, social, philosophical, and spiritual phenomena. It is one of West's achievements that her work can shed light on all of these facets of the theme and thereby enhance our understanding of the forces that shaped the century of which she was such an eloquent witness.

Until about one hundred years ago, the dominant approach to exile has been to see it as a negative state of being. *Exilium*, banishment, figures as a form of punishment, entailing utter loss and ultimately the threat of un-selving. In Republican Rome, a citizen facing the death penalty would often choose exile as an alternative, commonly viewed as a virtually equivalent punishment (see Claassen 20). Later, emperors could send an offender to the margins of the Roman empire, which meant isolation so extreme that complaints from exile became a separate sub-genre of poetic and philosophical writing. Ovid's *Tristia* ("Sad Songs") and *Ex Ponto* ("Letters from the Black Sea") set the elegiac and consolatory tone of reflections about exile, establishing "many of the conventions of exilic poetry, for example the stereotypical bleakness of the place of exile, the metaphor of exile as death, and the mythologizing of the central, lonely figure of the exile" (Claassen 31). Similarly, Seneca's meditations on exile in *Epistolae morales*, "reflect his preoccupation with the basic ills of humanity, of which exile is one" (Claassen 24). In this view, exile signifies a complete loss of everything one holds dear — home, culture, neighbors, property — representing a wholly negative condition, from which only few can emerge with their dignity and their sanity intact.

It is not difficult to see the continuing relevance of such a bleak view of exile at the present time. Victims of large-scale displacement and dispossession such as refugees escaping armed conflicts in the Congo, Pakistanis fleeing the war on terror in Waziristan, or the villagers forcefully re-settled during construction of the Three-Gorges dam in China — such people are not likely to embrace the condition of uprootedness with any degree of enthusiasm. In other cases, failure to gain a foothold in a new society can dampen the joy of those who initially craved exile.¹ The view

¹ Thus an Iraqi who received a coveted U.S. immigrant visa in 2007, realized, after months of joblessness in Florida, "that he's in the wrong place to build a new life" since "If you don't have enough money to survive . . . it will not be heaven — it will be hell" (Ludden).

of exile as deprivation, struggle, and homesickness is arguably the common experience among the majority of displaced people throughout the world.

However, an alternative perspective on exile, associated with modernist and postmodernist writers and intellectuals, presents exile as favorable to artistic and intellectual work. This view, wide-spread during the height of modernism (approximately 1910–1930) among artists and thinkers, holds that cultural transplantation offers opportunities for positive change, occasions for expanding one’s horizons, and invitations to reinvent oneself. Robert Edwards (18) invokes this positive attitude when he says that “exile can also involve withdrawal as a means to gain or learn something, and such retreat is often the prelude to change.” Sharmistha Lahiri (2) shares this opinion: “The disruption in communication allowed the exile the distance required to develop a fresh insight and a creative perspective on the familiar images.” Coco Owen similarly suggests that in their prolonged absence from home artists may burnish their intellectual and creative faculties: “although leaving home entails a risk that writers might lose connection and tradition, they may succeed in remaking themselves into the image of the foreign they often felt they were at home — and may in fact have been. In expatriating there is an attempt to (re)create an identity congruent with the artist’s own sense of self” (181). These views echo the position voiced in Georg Simmel’s seminal essay “The Stranger” (1908) which presents “the objectivity of the stranger” as an advantageous position since “the specific role of the stranger” (or, for that matter, of the exile) is that “he is the freer man, practically and theoretically; he examines conditions with less prejudice; he assesses them against standards that are more general and more objective; and his actions are not confined by custom, piety, or precedent” (1999: 186). Among intellectuals, actual exiles have come to this conclusion as well. For example, Kosara Gavrilovic, one of the refugees whom West supported during the 1940s, expressed sentiments that are close to Simmel’s assessment of exile. Although she starts from the negative premise, saying that “exile is something inherently hostile, which is *inflicted* upon one,” she goes on to qualify that statement in view of what she calls “exile as a privileged state” in which “a ‘stranger’ confers upon himself a sort of superiority in relation to the ‘community’ which he has entered but which does not really accept him. He is an outsider, and outsiders, we know, always have a clearer view of the reality around them precisely because they are outside of it.”² Thus exile, though inherently painful, has

² Kosara Gavrilovic. Private email to the author, March 12, 2009.

the potential of leading to a higher level of awareness, to an ultimately progressive transformation of the self, and to a sharpening of analytical as well as artistic capabilities. Yet this view is applicable mainly to a subset of the exile community — to artists and philosophers who operate in supra-territorial economies of cultural and intellectual exchange and whose very skill set enables them to turn disorientation and wonder into productive forms of engagement and a source of inspiration.

Among the members of these cultural elites, the line between forced exile and voluntary expatriation is often blurred: whether one is driven from one's country or leaves it on one's own terms (emigrates), both situations require similar adaptation strategies and coping mechanisms. As scholars from Raymond Williams to James McFarlane have argued, the modernist tradition has indeed multiple links with expatriation. Foreign soil, especially metropolises, are seen as conducive to the development of the modernist writer's celebration of departure, experimentation, and self re-invention through art. McFarlane links the modernist project explicitly to the roaming of its key exponents, declaring that modernism is the art of "the wanderer, the loner, the exile, the restless and rootless and homeless individual" (66). Compared to the alleged artistic and intellectual merits of wandering, the realities of displacement encountered by the masses of refugees and expatriates the world over is, of course, a quite different matter.

What is Rebecca West's stance on these issues? First of all, she, too, did not make a categorical distinction between the state of exile and that of immigration. However, she went directly against her fellow modernists because she viewed any form of expatriation — be it forced or voluntary — as a prelude to loss of identity, a draining of artistic vitality, and a gradual sapping of the life-force. In *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941), for instance, she discusses the life of a British expatriate in Serbia: "Like all people who have lived long in exile, she [Mrs. Mac] sometimes felt that everything peculiar to the strange place where she found herself was a spreading sore, bubo of a plague that will infect and kill if there is not instant flight to the aseptic" (1994: 945). Having accompanied her husband to a Serbian mining town to pursue a business opportunity, Mrs. Mac is not, technically, an exile. Still, West presents her condition in figurative language as a type of sickness, and the foreign environment as a kind of creeping infection that will eventually kill her. Ovid could not have put it more poignantly in his laments from exile, although for him there was no hope of return.

West also applied the metaphor of illness to the predicament of Jewish fugitives in pre-war Europe: "all over England and France and Amer-

ica so many Jews were mourning for the fatherland in a grief visible as jaundice" (1994: 198). This refers to Jews displaced from Germany in the 1930s, but West's sympathy for the plight of exiles was not restricted to any one group or nationality. In a book review written in 1971, West recalls a conversation she had with an exiled Yugoslav in Washington who defined exile as "a bleaching process which first makes one an albino and then a corpse." West develops this metaphor further: "To the shame of humanity, this bleaching process has been one of the world's great industries, and it is for the good of our souls that we should read two books which deal with widely different but equally poignant examples of the cruel operation." "Bleaching" connotes protein denaturation and cell death; "industry" connotes unprecedented mass production of displacement in the twentieth century; and the transformative nature of the process is suggested by the word "operation." Thus, exile, a condition that saps the lifeblood, is distanced from the notions of vitality, change, or reinvention.

The hyper-metaphoricity of West's discourse is arresting. Robert Edwards (18–19) has remarked on the curious "proliferations of metaphor" whenever the figure of an exile is invoked as a "wanderer, pilgrim, outlaw." The poet Joseph Brodsky, straining for his own definition of the exiled writer, similarly falls back on metaphorical language: "to be an exiled writer is like being a dog or a man hurtled into outer space in a capsule. . . . And your capsule is your language. To finish the metaphor off, it must be added that before long the capsule's passenger discovers that it gravitates not earthward but outward" (108). It is this kind of metaphorical excess whenever exile is invoked that caused Edwards to speculate about an intrinsic "conjunction of alienation and metaphor." (19).

Such a connection is integral to the very word "metaphor," which is based on the Greek *metaphorein* ("carrying along"). "Metaphor" means just that — "moving" an object from one place to another, relocating it. A Greek moving truck with the words "metaphorein" painted on its sides may well be conveying a future exile to his new domicile. Paradoxically, a metaphor is only original, creative, and striking as long as it is perceived as a "word exile," that is, while it still has an alien feel about it. As soon as the exiled word becomes completely adapted to its new context (such as "parry a verbal attack" or "the leg of the table"), as soon as it ceases to be a verbal "exile," it becomes a "tired" metaphor or a "dead" one. Lamenting exile in the language of metaphor may thus amount to a self-contradiction. When West uses words such as "sore," "bleaching," and "industry" to refer to the effect of exile, she effectively yanks words out of their accustomed verbal surroundings to settle them in new discurs-

sive territories. Turning words into metaphors by “exiling” them is not the same as driving people out of their homelands. Still, on the structural level, the process of displacement is at work in both cases, and the new role played by one’s native language in a strange environment may well have the effect of bringing to the fore new creative possibilities and poetic vigor.

In his landmark essay “Art as Technique” (1917), Victor Shklovsky argues that habitualization narrows both the scope and intensity of perception, thereby impoverishing our cognitive engagement with the world and that this deadening can be overcome by the “defamiliarizing” effect of art. Shklovsky regards artistic production as the privileged means for intensifying experience and renewing human perception: “art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects “‘unfamiliar,’ . . . to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (58). Exiles would be predisposed to see the world of their adoptive home as “unfamiliar” in its human and physical manifestations; they would see their environment in terms comparable to the experience of defamiliarization generated by reading a richly figurative, innovative literary text. In other words, the exiles’ perception might be keener and more attuned to the texture and the phenomenology of the external world because they have not yet been dulled by habituation.

This view transpires in a recent discussion of modernism’s exilic roots: “Exile can help writers create. It is a disruption that also makes speech possible. . . . Exile makes language the only home possible in homelessness” (Olsson 735, 752). Of course, while many intellectuals (such as Auerbach, Arendt, and Camus) wrote their best work under conditions of displacement, others did not fare as well. The quality of Solzhenitsyn’s writing in his Vermont exile did not match that of his earlier work composed in Russia, and the charismatic Armenian-British writer Michael Arlen, after emigrating to the United States, experienced such a severe writer’s block that his name has come to be almost synonymous with that condition. In her 1971 review of *Exiles*, a memoir written by Arlen’s son, West states that the father “never got under the skin of America. He stopped writing. He read very little.” However, on balance, it appears that writers more often than not thrive under conditions of exile.

This is especially true for the loose grouping of expatriate modernists, including Jean Rhys, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound,

Katherine Mansfield, T. S. Eliot, and others, who flourished precisely because their (voluntary) exile infused new vigor and fresh perspectives into their artistic endeavors. Raymond Williams argues that “Paris, Vienna, Berlin, London, New York took on a new silhouette as the eponymous City of Strangers, the most appropriate locale for art made by the restlessly mobile émigré or exile, the internationally anti-bourgeois artist. From Apollinaire and Joyce, to Beckett and Ionesco, writers were continuously moving to Paris, Vienna, and Berlin, meeting there exiles from the Revolution coming the other way, bringing with them the manifestos of post-revolutionary formation” (34). This observation points to a crucial difference between Ovid’s experience of banishment and the self-imposed exile of these writers, especially because Ovid endured decapitation at the periphery of his known world whereas writers such as Joyce, Beckett, and Eliot moved from what was perceived as a kind of cultural periphery to centers of cosmopolitanism. If an active embrace of this kind of voluntary, urban exile is the hallmark of international modernism, then an anti-exilic stance could, conversely, be taken as an indication that a given artist or thinker remains on the margins of modernism. Such is indeed the case with Rebecca West, who shunned Bloomsbury,³ disliked T. S. Eliot’s aesthetic,⁴ and was unenthusiastic about Joyce’s *Ulysses*.⁵

West saw exile as the bane of modern life, thus parting company with aestheticist or formalist views on the subject. This negative assessment was reinforced by her numerous encounters with actual exiles and refugees. Indeed, from the 1930s onward, she became actively involved in helping refugees who were beginning to stream into London from the Soviet Union, Germany, and Austria. She served as an unofficial advisor to the Royal Yugoslav Government in London and gave personal assistance to this and other governments in exile. Victoria Glendinning emphasizes West’s fierce dedication to the plight of these exiles: “There was a demanding personal dimension to her political involvement. Milan Gavrilovic had a wife and children; to this family and so many other refugees and exiles Rebecca and [her husband] Henry offered friendship, hospitality, financial help, and — most valuable and difficult of all

³“The Bloomsbury Group did not like me, and I did not like them” (undated typescript, Rebecca West Papers, McFarlin Special Collections, University of Tulsa).

⁴“Mr. Eliot’s influence on English letters has been pernicious,” she wrote in a review of *Selected Essays* by T. S. Eliot (typescript dated Sept. 30, 1932, Rebecca West Papers, McFarlin Special Collections, University of Tulsa).

⁵*Ulysses* “is full of mincing sentimentalities, it is frequently incompetent, it is narcissistic” (West 1928b: 178).

— time. Her papers contain letters from exiles as prominent as General Simovic, and from unknown and obscure Eastern Europeans, all giving testimony to what this meant to them” (169). West also helped Jews who were fleeing Nazi Germany. One example is Walter Landau, a Jewish doctor: West was prepared to “pay, say, 1000 dollars a year to some institution to employ him, if that would help him to get into the country.”⁶ Besides giving them her time and money, West also made room for refugees in her own house. During the war she took in scores of strangers at her estate, Ibstone House. In a letter to an acquaintance, dated October 1944, she reports: “my house was filled with refugees, some of whom I knew, some of whom I didn’t” (2000: 184). Her commitment to these refugees continued long after the war was over: “she and Henry sponsored refugees and stateless persons, helping them with both cash and influence to find jobs or educational opportunities in England and America” (Glendinning 169). She was not alone in this engagement on behalf of exiled persons. Among the British writers who helped refugees at the time were Vera Brittain, Storm Jameson, Rose Macaulay, and J. B. Priestley,⁷ all of whom matched or even exceeded West’s involvement on behalf of exiled writers and political refugees. This stalwart group of charitable intellectuals, affiliated with International PEN, worked tirelessly for the relief of exiled writers in England.

West’s numerous encounters with refugees in England, as well as her visits to refugee camps in postwar Germany, further confirmed her attitude towards exile as a misfortune. In a letter to Lionel Trilling dated June 1952, she writes: “for the last nineteen years I have been coming more and more in contact with exiles and refugees as they presented themselves before me in increasing destitution and hopelessness, and I know very well what ideas they have cast off, and what have survived in their minds as true. In none of them has the idea of internationalism and universality had any strength, it was nationalism, the pride of a people in their own country and in their own culture, which kept them in a state to have an international use and universal value” (2000: 259). And here lies the crux of the matter that lets us understand West’s attitude to exile and to expatriation.

While her personal encounters with displaced persons revealed to her the bitterness of exile, her own affection for England made expatriation

⁶ Letter to Ben Huebsch, December 22, 1938 (West 2000: 167).

⁷ I would like to thank Elizabeth Maslen for helping me appreciate the efforts made by West’s fellow British artists on behalf of war-time refugees.

seem almost a case of treason. This affected her relationship with her son, Anthony, who had chosen to emigrate to America in 1950. Carl Rollyson writes: "I don't think Rebecca ever forgave Anthony for leaving England after the war, and when he tried to return in the seventies that only made her angrier. Of course she had nothing against America, his adopted land, but still, as a British patriot she could not quite accept that a son of hers should actually leave his native land permanently. She really was a very patriotic person. I think that is what endeared her so much to Michael Foot, who is also deeply patriotic."⁸ West was so successful in America and had so many contacts there that she could have comfortably settled in the U.S., but she never even considered such an option — it would have robbed her of her deeply seated sense of national belonging and patriotic pride. In a BBC talk reprinted in *The Listener* in April 1942, West mentions a reverse example of her son's emigration trajectory, i.e. the situation of an American who "has settled down here and made himself as much like an English person as possible, losing his American accent and his American point of view. Then we feel disappointed, for we know that he will have nothing to give us, as he will have lost his heritage of the American tradition, and he will not have acquired the English tradition, for you cannot become one of another people any more than you can become the daughter of a man who is in fact not your father" (1942: 563). Again, West emphasizes the essential unity of self and *patria*, and the loss of identity in foreign surroundings.

In West's view, "true nationalism" means that "a nation wishes to develop its faculties" (562) and that it does so by looking to its own traditions for inspiration, not by conquering others and expanding its territory. Such a monistic definition of nationalism is open to attacks, especially as it assumes that a nation is made up of one homogenous cultural essence and that this essence overrides other factors such as class or region. Moreover, it is problematic insofar as it can be advanced as a rationale for territorial expansion in order to integrate a nation according to cultural, rather than political, boundaries. That West was deeply inimical to any aggressive, expansionist agenda is clear both from her sustained critique of imperialism and from her steady support of internationalist cooperation. But it is equally clear that she ranks internationalism after nationalism. In an essay titled "The Necessity and Grandeur of the International Ideal," written in 1935, she argued that "it is natural and wholesome that an Englishman, born and bred in England, should feel towards

⁸ Carl Rollyson. Private email to the author. February 25, 2009.

it the same kind of deep emotional concern, of visceral pull, that he feels towards his father and mother and brothers and sisters, and that this feeling for his country should for the most part, just like his feeling for his family, take a form which may reasonably be called love. . . . His country can help him to live as no other can, because it can give him a tradition which is appropriate to him” (2005: 42). This concern with continuity, with the blood relationship to the *patria*, and with the “sacred process” (43) of national destiny renders the option of exile as psychologically undesirable as it is artistically counter-productive: “He may be the exception who can contribute most to civilization in alien surroundings: El Greco worked very well in Toledo. But it is more probable that he is a drifter or the sort that strikes no roots and bears neither flower nor fruit, that, multiplied, would make an obscure and helot people” (43).

Most modernists and postmodernists would not sanction such a statement. Anders Olsson (736) argues that “Camus, Brodsky and many modern exile writers use the myth of the stranger lacking pre-given bonds. It has roots in the romantic era, when the writer disconnects his relations with the state and achieves his independence as a free artist. At the same time, a global awareness of literature as *Weltliteratur* develops, making it natural for writers to see ‘exile’ as a forming spiritual journey, a *Bildungsreise*, and as part of their career.” This theory, rooted in Simmel’s argument about the epistemological privilege of the stranger, was alien to Rebecca West. In *Survivors in Mexico*⁹ she outlines the exile’s trauma of deracination as follows:

Many people can, of course, tear up the roots and go to live in a strange country without a pang, but the very fact that a man has been exiled shows that when the blow fell he was happy where he was and hoped to continue to be there. Now he is in a place he never chose as his home: he will almost certainly have lost some of his family and his friends, and perhaps all of them; he may have made a fortune in his new country, but he has nevertheless not got the tables and chairs and beds his grandfather left him; he cannot open the shutters of his bedroom in the morning and look out on the field where the old white horse used to graze. He perhaps endures the most frustrating experience of all. As he gets into his seventies and eighties, he may long to go back to his own country, on any terms, making any submissions that are demanded, only that he may die in a particular house,

⁹ *Survivors in Mexico* is a cultural anatomy, a historical-philosophical hybrid reminiscent of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. West’s Mexican oeuvre remained incomplete at her death and was edited and published posthumously by this author in 2003.

which, however, may now no longer exist. It has been bombed or burned. (2003: 81)

Authentic selfhood, according to West, is tied to one's original location, which sustains a living memory, and memory, in turn, constitutes part of one's identity. The memory of "the old white horse" is not enough. One needs to be physically present at the place where the horse used to graze, in order to fulfill the identity-sustaining effects of memory. Once the link between memory and place is disrupted, it is as if one's life-force were beginning to drain.

This emphasis on belonging and rootedness shows that where matters of identity were concerned, West was practically a determinist:

There is nothing very mystical in the idea that the mind, even as the body, grows stronger in the country of its race. . . . And the man removed from his country has torn from his shoulders the net of human relationship wherein he might have learnt love, which so greatly fortifies the will to live. Never will he be knit to many people by laughter over local jokes, never will he join with strangers in the shameless untuneful singing of old songs about the past national glories. For never can one become completely assimilated to another nation. . . . Only in one's own country is the rose of life planted where one would have it, shaped as far as could be by the will of one's own people, nourished by one's own blood. (1915: 251–52).

Such views can be traced back to the intellectual climate prevailing in the home where West grew up. Herbert Spencer, who exerted a strong influence on her father, was a rigid determinist, as were the anarchist Reclus brothers, one of whom (Elie) had been the tutor of West's father. According to Marie Fleming (181), the Reclus brothers held the view that "the elements making up 'national character' were largely determined by environment, in particular that geographical location helped determine social and political institutions." West concurred, as evidenced also in a 1928 article titled "Environment Matters Most." Moving to a new environment entails changing one's personality, a prospect that West did not relish. Indeed, she had no desire to re-construct a new, liminal self or to see identity as fluid, hybrid, and adaptable.

Because of her commitment to a stable self anchored in one's home culture, West resisted the view of exile as (in terms of the postmodernist preference) conducive to a fluid and provisional "protean" sense of self.¹⁰ Although West was well aware of the contingency and multiplic-

¹⁰ Cf. Robert Lifton's idea of "the protean self" which "emerges from confusion, from the widespread feeling that we are losing our psychological moorings. We feel ourselves

ity of each individual's view of the world, the final goal for her was not fluidity, relativism, uncertainty, and deferral of judgment; it was, on the contrary, lasting moral values, firm political convictions, and metaphysical truths fashioned from the confusing raw materials of human experience. If "fatherlessness and homelessness" (Lifton 5), are the hallmark of the protean self, West's attitude to exile can be properly understood as a reaction to both of these conditions. Indeed, as a child she suffered from her father's absence,¹¹ while strongly identifying with the English homeland.

The notion of the "protean self" is itself a historical construct. It emerged in a context marked by accelerated "dislocations of rapid historical change, the mass media revolution, and the threat of human extinction" (Lifton 3) in the second half of the twentieth century. This ad-hoc conception of the self represents "a balancing act between responsive shape-shifting, on the one hand, and efforts to consolidate and cohere on the other" (9), an attitude "consistent with contemporary cultural and intellectual expressions now designated as 'postmodern'" (8). Indeed, the postmodern discourse about identity and displacement has largely abandoned the semantic field of exile and has instead adopted such keywords as *diaspora*, *transnationalism*, and *globalization*. Each one of these terms carries connotations shading from the neutral to the positive: it would be hard to imagine a "lament" of the diaspora comparable to the lament of exile. Writers such as Rushdie, Desai, Achebe, and Naipaul, who have left their homelands to write abroad, are working in their adoptive contexts in ways that invoke the modernist celebrations of voluntary exile.

Paradoxically, West too displayed some elements of a proto-postmodern sensibility — an interest in marginal subject positions, an ability to deconstruct binaries, a critique of master narratives, and a fascination with process (see Schweizer 2006). But her fear of exile trumped these visionary conceptual positions. Most notably, she dissociated the thought of exile from that of process. The latter was "her most encompassing doctrine. Reconciling her dualism, [the idea of process] captures the best as-

buffeted about by unmanageable historical forces and social uncertainties. Leaders appear suddenly, recede equally rapidly, and are difficult for us to believe in when they are around. We change ideas and partners frequently, and do the same with jobs and places of residence. Enduring moral convictions, clear principles of action and behavior: we believe these must exist, but where?" (1993: 1).

¹¹ West's father, Charles Fairfield, left the family under mysterious circumstances when West was only eight years old, never to return. He died destitute and alone in Liverpool in 1903.

pects of the male and female principles. Like love, it promotes happiness, freedom, and fullness of expression. . . . It may be defined as the sum of man's civilized energies, or, perhaps more accurately, as the application of civilized energies for civilizing purposes" (Wolfe 12). Since West saw nothing vital, progressive, or edifying about the state of exile, she saw it as a perpetually fixed state of being. To some degree this emphasis on stasis in exile seems counter-intuitive: the flight from one's home may lead to initial elation about being safe, followed by homesickness, gloom, and economic hardship, which, in turn, are often succeeded by a slow acculturation to the new environment, an evolving, hybrid cultural identity and, sometimes, artistic and social success. Yet Rebecca West denies that exile can be conducive to positive personal change, which causes her to emphasize the morbid and unnatural ramifications of deracination and to see it as stasis.

This view is associated with her essentialism, a philosophical position that was reinforced by her dualistic temper. It is generally acknowledged that West, an inveterate dualist, considered the workings of the world in terms of unstoppable, universal dichotomies, notably between male and female, knowledge and ignorance, life force and death drive, etc. In *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, she argues that the life-force is strongly embedded in the Serbian collective psyche, whereas her English compatriots are infused with a defeatist desire for self-sacrifice. It is this kind of essentialism that affected her thinking about exile as a fixed condition, contrasting sharply with, for instance, Edward Said's hybrid, provisional view of exilic identity: "the exile therefore exists in a median state, neither completely at one with the new setting nor fully disencumbered of the old, beset with half-involvements and half-detachments, nostalgic and sentimental on one level, an adept mimic or secret outcast on another" (49). Said, himself an exile, was not averse to the view of exile as de-centering — to him, this was the quintessential characteristic of the public intellectual, a figure he saw as the proverbial outsider, although one who takes an abiding interest in the health and progress of his host society. To West, such thinking was not available, for she conceived of identity as unified and stable, though not necessarily as autonomous.

How can it be explained that West saw no possibility of individual growth in exile? I believe that she saw in the state of exile the reflection of a fundamental problem of being, a problem that is neither amenable to human volition nor conducive to personal development. Indeed, she had a tendency to see exile not only as an historical condition but as a reflection of our cosmic homelessness in a cold, inhospitable universe. Her most

radical thoughts on that matter were not even meant to be published; they remained tucked away among drafts of her unfinished oeuvre about Mexico. As her posthumously published *Survivors in Mexico* reveals, she dons the garb of an existential rebel when she says that the exile's "case against God is very strong" (81). She argues that exiles should be among the first to reject God because of their existential disappointment with the arrangement of God's world. From seeing exile as "the shame of humanity" (1971), she goes one step further to say that exiles should blame God for their condition. But rather than seeing evidence for such an attitude in Mexico, she finds that exiles there are precisely the most fervent believers: "it is exiles who borrow churches left derelict by the comfortable population of the country of their exile, fill them to the doors, and find no difficulty in worshipping God, whom they do not only fail to blame for their misfortune, but regard as if He were the most unfortunate exile of them all, whom they must do all they can to comfort, even to listening to the words they have heard a thousand times before, if that is what He wants" (2003: 81). For her, the "case against religion is the responsibility of God for the sufferings of mankind, which makes it impossible to believe the good things said about Him in the Bible, and consequently to believe anything it says about Him" (ibidem). This existential bitterness, this "misotheism" (Schweizer 2010), is the broader framework for her negative view of exile.

In the classical tradition, "the pervasive topic of a rudderless victim wandering over land and sea, driven by an angry god, shows the exiled poet as an Odysseus-Aeneas" (Claassen 30). By contrast, in the domain of Christian values, "the denial of self that Latin writers equate with civic exile paradoxically becomes in Christ's admonition to his disciples a means of salvation — that is, of regaining oneself" (Edwards 16). In other words, overcoming one's human exile amounts to the pious wish to be reunited with God. In Edwards's view, "the literature of exile depends precisely on devising ways to walk in faith despite historical contingencies" (ibidem). This is consistent with St. Augustine's belief that Christian faith will make possible a return to God and, therefore, an end to the human condition as exile from His loving presence.

One of the main themes in St. Augustine's *City of God* is precisely that life on earth, even within the church, represents a kind of exile from the heavenly city. This view implies that exiles should feel a *stronger* kinship with the Church because of the common search for their way back home through salvation. West was not willing to concede this point; nor did she accept Augustine's doctrine of atonement. Human exile had to be

fenced off not by religious practices but by vital attachments to family, friends, patria, and culture.

West's work presents a panorama of a hostile universe (see Schweizer 2002), with multiple references to the coldness of the cosmos, the absurdity of the human condition, and the indifference of God. The Judge, for example, can easily be read as a precursor of existentialist fiction. The female protagonist of the story, a suffragette like Rebecca West, is convinced that she lives "in the midst of the indifferent universe" (1995: 95), that humanity is "no more than an ugly parasite infesting the earth" (54), and that the wind of her apocalyptic sunsets is "glacial" (115). In this cold universe, God is either uninvolved in human affairs or hostile to man. Such existential perspectives provide a strong rationale for West's inability to have faith in the Christian solution to humanity's exile. She could not rationalize the casting off of humanity from God's grace as a fortunate fall, and she could not convince herself that the return to God would end our existential homelessness.

West's younger contemporary Hannah Arendt, who produced her best work in exile, indeed held a more nuanced and positive attitude towards the condition of exile, largely avoiding the dualistic thinking that characterizes West's approach. Beyond the two extreme outcomes of complete assimilation (a betrayal of the self) and complete isolation in the host country, Arendt promotes a third way, in which the exile engages in a proactive interrelationship with the Other. Significantly, she notes that "history has forced the status of outlaws upon both, upon pariahs and parvenus alike" (66). Under *pariah* she understands the exiled outsider, in particular the shunned Jew; under *parvenu* she understands the assimilationist who dons a new identity every time he finds himself displaced to a new environment. As Julia Matveev has argued, Arendt acknowledges this polarity only to step out of it:

exile-at-the-beginning . . . presupposes the dynamic being-in-between that is grounded on political action. In accordance with the model of the *conscious* return-into-oneself, such dynamic exile passes through three stages — from the unique place-in-being to coexistence with others, and thence to a *conscious* return-into-oneself. One should not think of the stages as separate, but rather as a trinity. This trinity entails neither the domination of the unique over the universal, nor does it mean assimilation; it means neither forgetting the past nor completely being-thrown-back-to-the-past. This trinity enables continuity and is an open event that occurs without coming to an end. (312–13)

This dynamic conception of exile as an ongoing negotiation between three equivalent forces anticipates Said's dictum about the in-betweenness of exilic public intellectualism, requiring constant re-positioning between extreme poles. Arendt recognized that the self is constituted in part by the way it is perceived by the Other, and that interaction with the Other is crucial in shaping the features of the self. At the same time, she emphasized the significance of political action within the community as a bridge to the larger social environment, especially in exile. Matveev concludes that for Arendt "exile can only be overcome by a new political conscience, by a creative force of action that brings regeneration" (317).

Rebecca West had, indeed, thought deeply about one person, Leon Trotsky, who had engaged in just this kind of political activism while living in his Mexican exile. To her, he never overcame his handicap of exile, being "in the wrong scenery, mimosa blossom drooping over him in uncontrollable and overscented luxury and tickling his neck, Indian ceramics and Aztec idols of terrible fragility hemming him in" (2003: 27). However, one can well speculate that, had Trotsky escaped Ramon Mercader's ice pick, he might have lived a sufficiently full life in his Mexican exile. He loved his trips to the countryside to collect cacti, he had good friends, including Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, and he helped to found the Fourth International in Mexico City. He might have borne out Hannah Arendt's vision of being a "conscious exile," neither a pariah nor a parvenu, but a man who built a new existence for himself based on an active political life in his adoptive country, a member of a vibrant leftist diaspora rather than a passive, morbid émigré. In *Survivors in Mexico*, however, West suggests that Trotsky did not do more to forestall the fatal attack on him because he was "life-weary" — it was almost as if he walked knowingly towards his death. This interpretation is born of West's conviction that exiles cannot, ultimately, be whole human beings, that their life-force is drained by their continued absence from their homeland.

Thus West's abhorrence of exile can be seen as the result of several mutually reinforcing factors. First, there is the biographical factor: West saw herself in some ways as an internal exile. Specifically, she suffered marginalization simply for being a woman (and the single mother of an illegitimate child at that), for being an anti-communist leftist, and for being an upwardly mobile, newly-rich professional who came from an impoverished background; the sense of victimization and discomfort that these social forms of outsiderhood entailed affected her attitude towards exile. Equally decisive was the effect of her acquaintance with so many

refugees fleeing the horrors of totalitarianism. Her tireless efforts in giving succor to bewildered, destitute, and aching exiles convinced her that exile was a curse. Second, there is the philosophical dimension: she was a deterministic humanist, who espoused a conception of selfhood as unified and rational, but not autonomous: settling in an alien environment would be equivalent to creating a new and not necessarily germane identity. Third, she was a nostalgic nationalist who saw in patriotism a bulwark against human alienation. Betrayal of one's nation was anathema to her, and expatriation constituted a lesser form of betrayal, as nobody with strong ties to the homeland could, in her opinion, choose to forsake that essential embeddedness. Fourth, she perceived the human condition as largely exilic to begin with, but she tended towards existentialism in her negative assessment of exile and did not rely on religion for an antidote to the feeling of being cast away. Finally, her essentialistic dualism precluded the possibility of re-validating exile as a condition of hybridity, and it denied the exile's potential for building supranational diasporic ties.

In our era of almost frenetic mobility, transnational migrations, and rapid global movements of goods, services, and capital, West's approach to exile and expatriation can seem outdated. This, however, does not diminish the value of West's thinking on the subject. Tracing the reasons for West's abhorrence of exile gives us a better understanding of the relationship of philosophical systems to one's choices in life and of the impact that historical circumstances can have on shaping one's worldview. It is indeed humbling to acknowledge the contingent nature of our most firmly held ideas. Experience and perception have a way of seeping into the deepest recesses of our philosophical thinking and of coloring even abstract ideas with tints of subjectivity. Moreover, different components of our philosophy and ideology tend to interact, giving rise to complex networks of ideas that influence each other. However, truly relevant thinkers transcend such contingencies and idiosyncrasies to serve as touchstones of their age's dominant concerns. Rebecca West is one of those thinkers, and her ideas on exile, like Ovid's, Joyce's, or Said's, reflect a major phase in the long history of this politically, socially, and psychologically loaded topic.

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