

In Praise of Flight

There is no salvation in becoming adapted to a world which is crazy.

—Henry Miller, *The Colossus of Maroussi*

La fuite reste souvent, loin des côtes, la seule façon de sauver le bateau et son équipage. Elle permet aussi de découvrir des rivages inconnus qui surgiront à l'horizon des calmes retrouvés. Rivages inconnus qu'ignoreront toujours ceux qui ont la chance apparente de pouvoir suivre la route des cargos et des tankers, la route sans imprévu imposée par les compagnies de transport maritime. Vous connaissez sans doute un voilier nommé "Désir."

—Henri Laborit, *Éloge de la fuite*

A man wakes. He knows exactly what is going to happen today, or at least he thinks he does (like everyone, he knows that the unexpected might occur at any time, that he might go to see his doctor and be told he has an inoperable cancer, or his girlfriend, who stood by him all through that messy divorce, will call him at the office mid-morning to say that she has met someone else, but he keeps the thought of random harm

at bay as well as he is able, usually by means of a combination of superstition, moral duplicity, and steady, if uninventive, self-medication). He knows what will happen today, not necessarily in the details, but in the overall pattern: he will go to work and try to achieve something that matters to him, but he will be subjected to a constant stream of tedious interruptions and dubious bureaucracy. When the phone rings, it will be somebody he doesn't want to talk to; when an e-mail arrives, it will convey yet another pointless demand on his time and energy. He will, in short, spend far too much, and oftentimes all, of his day rendering unto Caesar, and almost none of it doing what he wants to do. What this man needs is not a change in his lifestyle, or a new job, or a new wife. What he needs is *la fuite*.

La fuite: I use the French term (after French surgeon and philosopher, Henri Laborit) because there is no right term in English: “flight” is not only not good enough, but also carries undertones of “running away” to no other end than (cowardly) escape. *La fuite*, as described by Laborit in his extraordinary *Éloge de la fuite* is different.¹ It is a leap of the imagination, a total renewal, a commitment to the soul's logic and, if necessary, a time-out from Caesar's world for long enough that our hypothetical office worker can tear himself open and try to heal what is

buried in his frontal cortex, or his heart, or his gut. It is not a simple matter, like *reculer pour mieux sauter*—for that is still to abide by a *social* logic. It is an act, not of cowardice, but of courage. Gide says it most succinctly: “On ne découvre pas de terre nouvelle sans consentir à perdre de vue, d’abord et longtemps, tout rivage” (One cannot discover new lands unless one consents, for a long time, to lose sight of the shore).²

That said, there is nothing grand, or grandiose, about *la fuite*. Conducted in the right spirit, it can have the feel of a game (though it is one of our more common mistakes that, because it is not solemn, we assume that play is also not serious). Play is not only *serious*, it is essential. How, and if, we play is, in fact, a matter of (meaningful) life or death. Here is Miller, in a newspaper interview from the 1970s: “One of my ex-wives, when she left me, walked off with all the furniture—everything a bourgeois home should have she took. I began to get boxes from the grocery store to sit and eat on. I made a little table out of the boxes. I was at home with them and then I got the idea, ‘Henry, goddamn it, why don’t you buy a pair of roller skates and go roller-skating through the rooms here? I had a marvellous time.’”³ From this example, it is clear that, from the first, *la fuite* defies conventional rationality. We do not embark upon *la fuite* to think about our possible

options: on the contrary, we do so when we understand that our *possible* options can only return us to the condition we were in before—which is to say, *governed* by forces outside our own will. *La fuite* is a scrubbing of possible options, a rejection of the societal solution—though only because it seeks to go beyond the usual options, and push back the limits of reasoning. In fact, it's not simply that you *cannot* find a new land until you have courage to lose sight of the familiar shore, the sailor *must* lose sight of that shore—of the old system, the old way of life, the former wife, the possessions and even, in one of Miller's favorite exercises in *la fuite*, that most precious of entities, his homeland.

It should be remembered, though, that *la fuite* only works if the sailor can take it as a given, before weighing anchor, that *everything is permitted to the imagination*. As Miller says, "Imagination is the voice of daring. If there is anything godlike about God, it is that. He dared to imagine everything."⁴ Logic has its limits, but there are no actual limits to what could be imagined in a free world. As Terence says, "Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto" (I am human, and nothing human is alien to me).⁵ Unless this is the case, *la fuite* is nothing more than a daydream. However, we live in a society bent on limiting, and even denigrating, the imagination

(entrepreneurs excepted), and, as any anarchist can tell you, the first obstacle to a just community, in which men and women might govern themselves, is the early and ruthless application of social conditioning to the defenseless child's imagination, a process that begins as soon as he or she is old enough to mimic, to recognize punishment, and to listen. Societal conditioning aims at controlling every aspect of a person's life: body image, sexuality, expectations, sense of home, ability to grieve, earning capacity, societal role and status. Most of all, it seeks to control, to inhibit, and, wherever possible, to stultify the imagination and keep the machinery of Capital supplied with more or less docile operators. That the wastage rate is high is neither here nor there to the "1 percent."

THEORY OF LA FUITE

There is much more to *Éloge de la fuite* than can be discussed in the space available here. It is unfortunate, to say the least, that, to date, only two of Henri Laborit's books have been published in English translation.⁶ Certainly, Laborit is a fascinating figure, a genuine Renaissance man—scientist in several fields, philosopher, social observer, and maverick—yet he has long

been unjustly overlooked and was even denied a Nobel Prize, for purely political reasons.

Henri Marie Laborit was born in Hanoi in 1914. Though he suffered from tuberculosis as a child, he excelled in school and, having gained his *baccalauréat* in Paris, he entered the School of Naval Medicine at Bordeaux (his father, who died of tetanus when Laborit was six years old, had also been a military physician). As a navy surgeon, Laborit began his first researches in anesthesiology, which in turn led to work in pharmaceutical research and, eventually, to the development of chlorpromazine, initially used to treat soldiers suffering from shell shock after World War II, and then later on a wider spectrum of conditions. In spite of the broad range of his research, his work in this area is considered Laborit's principal achievement. Chlorpromazine—also colloquially known as “Laborit's drug”—was marketed as Largactil at the end of 1952, and, though its use as an antipsychotic has been more or less discontinued over the past decade or so, it has been widely used to treat a variety of disorders since that date.⁷

Yet Laborit's contribution to pharmacology is only one aspect of his wide range of interests and achievements, which included biology, town planning, human and animal behavior, biopsychosociology and psychosomatics, as well

as social and political science. Nominated for the Nobel Prize in the 1990s, he was passed over for political reasons—for, like Miller, Laborit wasn't just a restless, multi-talented individual; he was also highly independent, a free-thinker who did not follow the party line and did not suffer fools gladly. Most important, he was not to be governed. Indeed, he remained independent throughout his life, receiving no salary (other than his navy pay) or state money to run his laboratories, funding them instead through the sale of patents for his several innovations in pharmaceuticals.

To travel any further on this path would be to digress. My present interest in Laborit is in his theory of *la fuite*, or to paraphrase, his tenet that, at times, *escape is the only way to stay alive and keep dreaming*. However, as he also notes, there are different kinds of escape, and the reasons why we fail to get clear of danger are not always clear. On the first point, it is important that the escapee is driven by a strong desire to change his life, a desire that is usually predicated on refusal of unacceptable, unjust, or stifling environmental conditions, and/or a desire to fulfill a potential that has been denied: “When it can no longer battle the wind and the rough sea, there are two ways a sailboat can continue on its way: by drifting at the mercy of the wind and the tides, or flight before the storm, with a

minimum of sail. Often, far from shore, flight becomes the only way to save the ship and its crew. It also allows for the discovery of unknown shores that appear on the horizon after the storm has passed. Unknown shores that lie far from the sea lanes of the great cargo boats and tankers, sea lanes imposed by the great shipping companies. No doubt you have heard of a sailboat called ‘Desire.’”⁸

La fuite, then, is a strategy for preserving the integrity of “Désir” in a hostile world that would bend or break that desire to its will—and Laborit is an adept at describing exactly what constitutes “times like these.” In his beautifully eloquent, yet profoundly unsettling, conclusion to the book, he provides a catalogue of modern ills (many of them overlap entirely with the diagnoses made by Miller in his social criticism) that appear both overwhelming in their variety and severity, and inexcusable in their blatant injustice. Reading this list, we are obliged to confront an industrialized culture that can no longer be tolerated, yet we seem not to know how to change it. Why? Laborit’s suggestion, in part, is that our social conditioning marries each human organism’s primal instinct for self-preservation with what societal institutions claim is the greater good of the whole, even though it is blatantly only the good of a

privileged few (or, according to another, more generous argument, which sees the compulsion to accrue excess wealth as a kind of psychiatric disorder, the good of nobody at all).

This view depends on a certain understanding of how evolutionary imperatives govern all living organisms and of how social institutions mobilize these imperatives in pursuit of their own organizational ends. According to Laborit, there are four types of behavior in humans: (1) At the most basic level, we *consume*, that is, we satisfy our “basic needs,” such as eating, drinking, sleeping, and so forth.⁹ As long as these needs are met, we (2) *seek gratification*, that is, whenever we experience a stimulus that causes pleasure, we attempt to repeat it. We can see these behaviors as pre-social in a sense: they will happen in any living organism, as long as the wherewithal for consumption and gratification are at hand. However, the next behavior, (3) a variation on the standard fight-or-flee mechanism, is, in most humans, almost entirely social, or at least, is usually a response to pressure from a social group (family, peers, chain of command, neighbors, community, spouse, among others). This behavior is reactive, an attempt to avoid punishment or aggression, whether by fighting, in hopes of destroying the aggressors, or fleeing (at least temporarily) to avoid them. Finally,

there is (4) *inhibition*, when the defeated subject waits anxiously—but passively—for the next uncontrollable, seemingly random occurrence that will “happen to” him. As Laborit notes, anxiety of this kind marks the impossibility of mastering a situation, and it would seem essential, to safeguard the integrity of the individual, to avoid this final behavior at any cost:

Tant que mes jambes me permettent de fuir, tant que mes bras me permettent de combattre, tant que l'expérience que j'ai du monde me permet de savoir ce que je peux craindre ou désirer, nulle crainte: je puis agir. Mais lorsque le monde des hommes me contraint à observer ses lois, lorsque mon désir brise son front contre le monde des interdits, lorsque mes mains et mes jambes se trouvent emprisonnées dans les fers implacables des préjugés et des cultures, alors je frissonne, je gémiss et je pleure. Espace, je t'ai perdu et je rentre en moi-même. Je m'enferme au faite de mon clocher où, la tête dans les nuages, je fabrique l'art, la science et la folie.

(As long as my legs allow me to flee, as long as my arms allow me to fight, as long as my experience of the world allows me to decide what I can fear or desire, there is no problem: I can act. But when the human world compels me

to observe its laws, when my desire butts its head against the forbidden, when my hands and my legs are imprisoned in the relentless irons of prejudices and cultures, then I shudder, I moan and I weep. Space: I have lost you and I return to myself. I close myself up in my steeple [*clocher*] where, head in the clouds, I manufacture art, science and madness.)¹⁰

This latter point may seem a little worrying in its apparent agreement with Freud's rather strict notions of how sublimation works. However, it is not suggested as a model to be followed. Beyond that withdrawal into my own space (*clocher*), is the most mature choice of all: *to act* (which, paradoxically, may be the choice to refrain from acting, or rather, the refusal to act as expected). In the end, *la fuite* offers a temporary withdrawal that is not, on the one hand, an ivory tower or false community in which a cruel, ugly world is rejected for the sake of the finer things in life (*clocher* not only means bell tower, or belfry; it can also suggest a narrow parochialism), nor, on the other, a simple breathing space from which to take stock of "real-world" (i.e., societal) options, but a voyage into unknown waters in pursuit of a new way of being.

This form of flight, this game, is possibly Henry Miller's favorite pursuit: he played *la*

fuite often, in his personal life, and in his fiction, sometimes by choice, sometimes by contriving social conditions where he had no other option than to strip everything away and begin again. “I have no money, no resources, no hopes. I am the happiest man alive,” he says, as *Tropic of Cancer* opens. Later, he notes: “Nobody, so far as I can see, is making use of those elements in the air which give direction and motivation to our lives. Only the killers seem to be extracting from life some satisfactory measure of what they are putting into it. The age demands violence, but we are getting only abortive explosions. Revolutions are nipped in the bud or else succeed too quickly. Passion is quickly exhausted. Men fall back on ideas, *comme d’habitude*.”¹¹

The beauty of *la fuite* is in going beyond the point where it is possible to fall back on ideas. The era of *comme d’habitude* is over: *now is the time of the assassins*. This idea sits at the center of Miller’s world, but, his own life and work notwithstanding, the most elegant, the cruelest, and the most extravagant instance of *la fuite* that he would encounter came from an obscure autobiographical work by a onetime author and sailor from Germany, a man who abandoned everything—family, homeland, passport, identity—to be “one with the sea.”

HEIMAT

In 1946, Miller published a substantial review of George Dibbern's *Quest*, the true story of one man's journey from Nazi Germany to New Zealand, where, in his youth, he had spent some time living with the Maori at Dannevirke, after jumping a merchant vessel in Sydney in 1909. Then, in 1918, he was placed in an internment camp for a year before being deported back to Germany. Dibbern seems to have formed strong ties in New Zealand, especially with a Maori woman named Rangi, whom he considered his "spiritual mother." However, he made a genuine effort to settle in Germany, marrying a woman named Elisabeth Vollbrandt in 1921, and setting up as a small farmer in Schleswig-Holstein, where he and Elisabeth had three daughters over the next five years. His attempts at farming were not particularly successful, however, and after several other business ventures failed, he moved to Berlin, where he began to publish short stories based on his experiences among the Maori. Finally, as the situation in Germany became more and more uncertain, he decided to return to his first love—the sea. He had, by now, few assets, but he still had a boat that his brother-in-law had built for him, and, in 1932, he left his

family behind and crossed the Atlantic in that newly refurbished vessel, a thirty-two-foot ketch he called *Te Rapunga* (Maori for “Black Sun”), eventually landing in San Francisco after 101 days without touching land. From there, he proceeded via Hawaii to New Zealand, where he found that Mother Rangi had died in his absence. Meanwhile, after death threats were issued from Nazi groups in New Zealand and at home in Germany, Elisabeth refused to make the journey to join her husband, and he was now alone.

At this point, Dibbern made a decisive break with his former life. Because he objected to its Nazi insignia, he refused to sail the German colors on *Te Rapunga* and set about creating a flag of his own (a flag that announced his true *Heimat*, or homeland, as the entire world, not some Aryan nation but the community of life on earth). He also got rid of his passport, replacing it with a document of his own devising. It read: “I, George Dibbern, through long years in different countries and sincere friendship with many people in many lands feel my place to be outside of nationality, a citizen of the world and a friend of all peoples. I recognize the divine origin of all nations and therefore their value in being as they are, respect their laws, and feel my existence solely as a bridge of good fellowship between them. This is why, on my own ship I fly my own

flag, why I have my own passport and so place myself without other protection under the goodwill of the world.”¹²

This was a bold and dangerous step. Now, like the liegeless knight in an old saga, Dibbern was beyond the pale, traveling under no recognized flag so that, as a citizen of the world, he was nobody’s responsibility. Over the next several years, he sailed up and down the American coast, and all around the Pacific, writing his book and spreading his message of international goodwill and kinship until, on February 12, 1941, a month before *Quest* was to be published in New York, *Te Rapunga* was seized and he was once again interned on Somes Island, in Wellington Harbor. Sadly, while it worked against him in all kinds of ways (for example, when he wanted to make a land purchase in the Gulf Islands), being “a man without a country” did not help him avoid internment.

While on Somes Island, Dibbern saw his book published and, after some years, was able to read Miller’s extraordinary review (it had finally been published in *Circle* magazine in 1946). Before that, however, he had already received a letter from Miller, in which his new and most ardent admirer wrote:

Your book is a wonderful human document, a spiritual more than a physical saga. I felt that

you were a brother, and it's as a brother that I write you and pray that you are well. All your reflections about life, about war, about people, about the Bible, impressed me deeply. So few men think for themselves. That's what made your book a feast. . . . I always wondered, of course, whether you would continue cruising about, whether you would find nothing but disillusionment whenever you put ashore. The purpose of self-liberation, which you seem to have achieved, is to rejoin society but how difficult, especially when it's the kind of world we now have.¹³

As Dibbern was still interned on Somes Island, he may have entertained a slightly different perspective on the question of rejoining society, and we can only guess what he thought when he read these words: "The more you succeed in freeing yourself from passions and prejudices, from stupid fetishes and inhibitions, the less place there is for you in the world. That's how it seems. I know something of what it's all about, because I made a similar struggle all my life. The feeling of being cut off is an agony." As always, it is Miller who occupies center stage—and seems to suffer most—no matter what the drama. Nevertheless, his message, and the passion of his review, led to a lifelong friendship

of sorts, during which the two men exchanged many letters, and Miller (always generous when he actually had money) made valiant efforts to help Dibbern's family in Germany after the war. Meanwhile, having married and started a second family in New Zealand, Dibbern's ever-changing luck turned again, when he won £10,000 in the lottery and, even after he generously donated half of the money to a workmate, was able to buy two islands in Tasmania, where he and his second wife, Eileen, set up yet another farm. However, he could not resist going back to sea and did so often, mostly to take part in long-distance races. Inevitably, he and Eileen parted, and, in 1960, he was talking about going back to Germany, in order, he said, to "close the circle." Before he could make that final journey, however, Dibbern died of a heart attack in Auckland, in 1962. His beloved *Te Rapunga* was left in some disrepair for many months after his death, changing hands several times before a man named Ken Moss found the boat "in sad condition sitting under some trees at Bayswater Wharf when he bought her for NZ\$800 in 1971."¹⁴

There's an interesting passage in *Quest*, when George Dibbern tells Elisabeth that he has decided to leave Germany. She is, naturally,

unhappy about this sudden development and tries to reason with him, suggesting he try a new line of work and also that he could do more to fit in with society: “When you are in Rome,” she says, “you must do as a Roman does.” To which Dibbern replies:

If these are the conditions of Rome, who the hell wants to live in Rome? What is the good of adapting myself ninety-nine times? The hundredth time, perhaps when I am tired, I am myself, as I really am, and then they rub their eyes, and call me a traitor because I have suddenly changed. Am I not ninety-nine times a hypocrite? Whom they are right to mistrust? Don't I sell my soul ninety-nine times for a lousy piece of bread? And now I am a relief worker, unemployed, without any future—till the very soul is crushed within me, till I become a beast. Just cringing, afraid to lose my last bone. But I am not meant to be this. And I won't be! How break through—because I must!

—and the conversation continues, a painful confrontation between a desperate man and what Elisabeth can only see as the voice of reason:

Who is going to provide for the children?

Whilst I am trying to answer, some deep inner voice says: *man does not live by bread*

alone. I am shocked to hear myself saying it aloud; it sounds so smug, so like a parson. But suddenly I know it to be the truth. Perhaps it is more important that someday I may be an understanding comrade to the children than be a provider now.

A fine saying you are. Christianity starts at home, my wife answers, full of bitterness.

What use is it to keep on arguing? My mind is made up. I am dead. I therefore packed my things. So little sense of possession have I that I have always felt myself a guest in my own home, and, as an old sailor, I have few belongings. Quickly I make three heaps—one to take along, one to leave behind, and the third to throw away.¹⁵

It is instructive to compare this passage to the famous lines from *Tropic of Cancer*: “I am living at the Villa Borghese. There is not a crumb of dirt anywhere, nor a chair misplaced. We are all alone here and we are dead.”¹⁶ It is interesting, that, in the midst of ordinary life, suffering only the most familiar hardships, that these characters should think of themselves as “dead”—and that the thought should, on one level, lead to a kind of liberation. Reading these lines, one is reminded of the words of Tsunetomo Yamamoto, in *Hagakure, or The Book of the Samurai*: “If by

setting one's heart right every morning and evening, one is able to live as though his body were already dead, he gains freedom in the Way." And again: "If a warrior is not unattached to life and death, he will be of no use whatsoever. The saying that 'All abilities come from one mind' sounds as though it has to do with sentient matters, but it is in fact a matter of being unattached to life and death. With such non-attachment one can accomplish any feat."¹⁷

What more likely way to move beyond attachment to life and death than to come to the sudden realization that one is, in a meaningful sense, already dead? Now, there is nothing to lose or gain. Everything—even a family, even children, even one's homeland—can be set aside in order to realize one's true nature. This may seem cruel, of course (especially when we consider the children in this case), but it does not disturb Miller when he comes to write his review. To Miller, as to any other follower of the Daoist-Anarchist path, what matters is to live according to one's inherent nature. To do otherwise is an offense against the Way. In this context, not to be governed is much more than the personal gesture of a rebel spirit, it is an exemplary choice—but that choice must be seen through to its end. There can be no turning back, no skirting of the familiar shore. When

this is the case, when *la fuite* is enacted in its most rigorous form—as an *artful* refusal of “the kind of world we now have”—it becomes an implicit demand for a better world, a world of freedom for all. This is what Miller values in *Quest*: this sense that the most drastic measures must be taken if we are to regain our lives: “Break out or die! That is the decision we all have to make some time or other. Man does not live by bread alone. George Dibbern obeys the inner voice, leaves his wife and children whom he loves, and sets sail. It is an act of desperation, but it is an act! and he is not a man who shuns the consequences of his acts.”¹⁸

As we might expect, what Miller stresses is *Quest*’s exemplary quality, its value as an imaginative enactment of *la fuite*.

The importance of this book, which is really the log of an inner voyage, is in the example it sets forth. Relying solely upon himself, his own inner resources, Dibbern discovers the value of dependency. Out in the middle of the ocean, sitting at the tiller in utter silence for long hours, this man thinks everything out for himself. “One needs distance and aloneness,” he says. . . . Not trying is equal to not moving, *which is equal to living death*. Death is the penalty of sin; therefore not moving is sin. . . .

The long voyage is *not an escape but a quest*.
The man is seeking for a way to be of service to
the world. (my italics)

Here is the great paradox of anarchist thinking: what looks like escapism is, in fact, a grail quest. As Miller stresses, “Dibbern is not a renegade or an escapist, fatuous terms, when you think of it, since the real escapist is the man who adapts himself to a world he does not subscribe to. No, it is the purity and integrity of men like Dibbern which makes it difficult for them to fit into our world.”

But then, may we *not* ask about the children? The three daughters left behind with their mother in Nazi Germany? It is clear from the book that Dibbern did expect Elisabeth and the girls to follow him to New Zealand, and he imagines them in the place where he had been happiest, among the Maori people, with his spiritual mother, Rangi. We can also argue that it was Elisabeth, not Dibbern, who prevented this from happening: menaced by the Gestapo in Germany, and fearful for the lives of her daughters, she refused to undertake the journey that would reunite the family. By the time the war was over, Dibbern had spent five years in an internment camp, and neither he nor Elisabeth had the wherewithal to

realize that plan—and it seems clear that she decided to make a life for herself and her children in Germany.

But then, who is to say what would have happened, had Dibbern remained with his family? Already a person of interest to the Nazis, he might well have ended up in a camp, or worse, and his family might have been condemned with him. Besides, many people fled Europe at that time, and many left families behind, hoping they might follow later. Some did, some did not. Dibbern's family survived—and his daughters were able, a few months after their father's death, to meet Henry Miller in Munich. To this meeting he brought a German edition of *Quest*, published under the title, *Unter eigener Flagge*, with Miller's essay as a preface, by Claassen Verlag. Later, recalling that day, Dibbern's eldest daughter, Frauke Dibbern-Ploog, noted that her mother wasn't particularly impressed, but that she herself had read the book "so wie einen guten Roman gelesen" (as a good piece of fiction), adding that, for her, "dafür war Vater zu sehr entfernt, zu überhöht. Mutter meinte immer, er wäre ein Peter Pan gewesen—ewig Kind bleiben, keine Verpflichtungen haben, mit allen Menschen gut Freund sein" (this father was too remote, too excessive. Mother always

said, he was a kind of Peter Pan, he wanted to remain a boy forever, with no obligations, everybody's friend). Maybe she was right, but then, who wants to "grow up" and become adapted to a world that is crazy?