

Only the Poem Can Speak and Write the Limitless Journey of Errancy: Reading Edouard Maunick's Poetry

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Abstract: Over more than fifty years, a poetic dialogue unfolds as Maunick travels seas and lands of the Mascarene Islands and the Caribbean, crossing from Africa to Europe, from the northern to the southern Americas, journeys driven either by an irrepressible need to wander or by professional necessity. These journeys are moments of encounter, be it, with Césaire and Senghor in Paris, Mandela in South Africa, or Maryse Condé in the Caribbean Island of Guadeloupe, among others. His poetry invites the reader to become a privileged witness to a process of deterritorialization fully embraced by a poet-traveller released from any center, geographical, cultural, political, and otherwise. Maunick navigates seas and lands at the edges of peripheries, where all destinations are ultimately dissolved because of the narrow lands which force him onto limitless journeys.

Keywords: Maunick, Poetry, Métissage, Mauritian literature, Exile

1. Introduction

The title of this article suggests a graphic inscription wherein Maunick's poetry relays his intention to speak and write the impossible return of the métis poet embarked on a limitless journey. Here the focus is not on the dialectics between the centre and the periphery but is rather on the poetry of Maunick as the only viable space that can recount the journey of a self-described sentinel of words who watches over the waves in eagerness for the next departure (Amado, 1992). His poetry collections give voice to journeys through imagined, hoped-for, and lived geographies.

Over more than fifty years, a poetic dialogue unfolds as Maunick travels seas and lands of the Mascarene Islands and the Caribbean, crossing from Africa to Europe, from the northern to the southern Americas, journeys driven either by an irrepressible need to wander or by professional necessity. These journeys are moments of encounter, be it, with Césaire and Senghor in Paris, Mandela in South Africa, or Maryse Condé in the Caribbean Island of Guadeloupe, among others. His poetry invites the reader to become a privileged witness to a process of deterritorialization fully embraced by a poet-traveller released from any center, geographical, cultural, political, and otherwise. Maunick navigates seas and lands at the edges of peripheries, where all destinations are ultimately dissolved because of the “terres étroites de nos voyages illimités”, the narrow lands which force him onto limitless journeys (Maunick E., 1990, p. 36).

2. Travel as Absolute: The Impossible Return of the Poet-Traveller

Guattari and Deleuze (1987)) conceptualize deterritorialization as the nomadic journey of the postmodern subject who deliberately reject all forms of rootedness and for whom the distinctions between center nor periphery no longer hold. Each new journey bids a new

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departure, for the wanderer refuses any voyage bounded by the fixed spaces of departure and arrival. Instead, they propound the intermezzo as the space of the trajectory, and perpetual motion. The objective is no longer to arrive at a destination, but to remain suspended in the temporality of the journey itself. It is a destination never reached but always sought after, always desired (Sainsbury, 2019).

In Maunick's case, the desire for travel does not stem from an absence or a privation but rather from an excess of desire born from the island. The poet is not an errant on this journey. He rather consciously chooses errancy as a repeated motion, a continual recommencement, endlessly suspended between departure and arrival. The limitless journey becomes poetic breath, giving voice to persona in *Ensoleillé Vif* (Maunick E., 1976) like the snow-woman (p. 23) the earth-woman (p. 25), to Métis, his destiny and death. It also serves as a cry of protest against slavery and the condition of sub-humanity it engenders, and eventually rises as a declaration of identity in *Les Manèges de la mer* (Maunick E., 1964), *that of a wilful nigger*, "nègre de preference" (p. 22).

The poet protests and claims solidarity with all struggles against exclusion, against every form of enslavement, to sustain a belief in a world founded on justice. He denounces apartheid, the crime of innocence murdered in childhood, while reaching toward a new epiphany in which Christ becomes water, all the waters of the Earth joined in a single alleluia in *Cantate païenne pour Jésus-Fleuve* (Maunick E., 1983)!

3. Island and Exile: Journey and Errancy

In this context, errancy acquires a phenomenological dimension, as Maunick (2019, p. 52) explains that his poetic word will create my true legend, "ma parole sera ma vraie légende". His lived experience reveals who he is: an islander limited by geographical territoriality but whose lived word defines the guiding principles of his personal and poetic identity. As Heidegger (Heidegger, 1988) explains, every phenomenon is tied to existence and can only be apprehended through the sensitivity and intuition of the subject experiencing it. To be-in-the-world implies a state of being-with-the-world in which meaning is grasped through the lived experience. Maunick's lived insular origins defines his poetry.

Writing then elevates the island to the status of an existential urgency. Maunick must continually name it, describe it to proclaim it as his absolute for the island is the source of his being, his only credo. The island has been transformed and 'islanded' within him, "insulée", as he states in an interview with Jasmina Šopova (1994, p. 5), "On nait insulaire mais on devient insulé". One is born insular, but one becomes islanded. Maunick explains that he coined the expression out of a need for precision to illuminate the metamorphosis from person into island, "la métamorphose de l'être en ile" (p. 4). Despite his ceaseless departures, the presence of the first homeland cast in metal, "coulée de metal", his watchtower "aire de vigie" (Maunick E., 1989, p. 5). Moreover, in an interview with Maryse Condé, Maunick admits once again that poetry enabled him to discover the grandeur and immensity of that small, narrow piece of land which has since become the essence of his quest as both man and poet (Assibatu, 2021). Sitting before the harbor in Port Louis, Mauritius, he further confesses that the island embodied the whole world but the boats in the port with all their cargoes coming from everywhere enticed him away from the island into incessant voyages (Rouabhi, 1985).

Though his poetry remains faithful to his native land evoked in an ever-renewed poem woven from memory and sung to the rhythm of his Creole words, he needs to depart, to drift with the tides, to throw himself onto the seas into exile (Joubert, 2009; Dix, 2022). He has heard its sirens and is driven to a territory, that remains absent, never fully lived, glimpsed but never attained as he is conscious that there will always be one more sea to cross, “Il y aura toujours/ENCORE UNE MER A TRAVERSER”.

In those verses of the poem *Toi Laminaire: italics for Aimé Césaire* (1990, p. 17), the use of capitalization reveals an unconscious force that may seem to contradict his claims about the island, yet asserts a fuller and more profound truth for the poet. Torn by the desire for an imagined territory, the poet has no choice but to yield to the demands of a ceaseless journey. Maunick acknowledges that once one's eyes are no longer fixed on the island's centre, one is made to look out towards the sea. The horizon then becomes another country, the other countries, the dream begins, the urge to leave, “on se retourne vers la mer et l'horizon devient l'autre pays. Les autres pays. Et là commence le rêve. Le désir de partir...” (Šopova, 1994, p. 4).

His poems affirm that island and exile coexist in strange tensions, locations that meet, complement each another, only to negate each other ultimately. For the other face of the island is exile (Delpech, 2008). The island calls for exile, and in return, exile speaks of the dichotomous movement away from the island, against the island. One could here attempt the pun, *ex-ile*, on the French word *ile* meaning island. Thus, one could argue that one must leave, extricate oneself from the maternal island, cut the moorings, set out to sea, because the island is narrow, enclosing, and closing in upon itself (Šopova, 1994, p. 4). The island, then, cannot be experienced as a livable space, as “our corner of the world” (Bachelard, 2015, p. 32), at least not for Maunick.

Thus, exile responds to the island in an endless palaver, a ceaseless dialogue about errancy (Tranquille, 2000). One must depart this narrow land to *ex-ist*, to manifest and express the limitless hope of being oneself and being in the world, in order to be of it. Between the island and the sea thus unfolds a wondrous journey, the errancy of the pilgrim, or rather, of the pilgrim-poet. One might then ask whether Maunick's poetics reaches an absolute (Certeau, 1987) that accentuates an irrepressible need for an extended dialogue with the self, with the other, and with the other within the self, and of which the journey from the island is the epitome.

3.1 Errancy as Epektasis

His poetry seems caught in a kind of *epektasis*, as Maunick (1989, p. 3) appears to have relinquished the idea of inhabiting any land permanently, having instead embraced exile and the incessant voyages, the irrepressible nature of humankind and places around him. Drawing from the Greek etymology of the word *epektasis*, meaning elongation or projection, one might argue that the errancy represents a form of prolongation of the island. In this light, the poet is then propelled into an irreversible voyage. Moreover, in Christian doctrine, *epektasis* is primarily used to denote the process of advancing towards the One, by walking in the path of the Word (Daniélou, 1945, p. 119).

Where should one look then for the absolute and the divine in Maunick's spiritual journey when his word is only of poetic essence? Could there be an answer in his poem, *En mémoire du mémorable : suivi de Jusqu'en terre Yoruba* (1979) ? There, indeed, he reveals having been

captivated by the cult of Oshun in city of Oshogbo situated between Ibadan and the Ofatedo River in Nigeria. This experience allowed him to draw parallels between diverse systems of beliefs, envisioning the Gardens of Gethsemane as akin to the kingdom of the African métis at the Black River on his native island. There, Maunick (1979, p. 173) explains, fishermen become the accomplices of the sea, and dancers of séga. Hence, he affirms belonging to all lands and all beliefs, to the West and its Judeo-Christian heritage, to contemplative India ablaze with spirituality and to animistic Africa, “de l’occident, de la raison et du Christ, de l’Inde contemplative et ignée, de l’Afrique animiste et plus forte que voix de juge” (Maunick E., 1979, p. 171).

One might therefore liken this mysticism born of poetry to the joy of a word that celebrates the nomadic errancy of the poet who foresees no other destination than the ceaseless journey beyond the island. His poetry also seems to subvert Western philosophical traditions, that prescribe an inward and private path for the mystic’s encounter with the divine. Maunick, for his part, openly and publicly stands on the thresholds of the waves of all seas, to pray (Maunick E., 1964, p. 192)!

As he expounds in his interview with Jasmin Šopova (1994, p. 6), “l’exil alors devient une chance accordée à la connaissance. Un fabuleux voyage”. Errancy, then, becomes a fabulous voyage where one learns to partake in the deeper sense of humanity by discovering the other within oneself. Through repeated journeys and a rejection of any fixed rooting, his poetry articulates the imperative for dialogue among peoples. He confides in *Mascaret, le livre de la mer et de la mort* (Maunick E., 1966, p. 12) all of mankind shares a profound kinship despite geographical boundaries.

4. Métissage: Way to a Limitless Journey

The nomadic poet now inhabits this intermediate territory, which can never be reached. A that stage of his poetry, his nomadism, erected against all systemic thought, is the credo of a man freed from all belonging and all rooting. He expresses both the suffering inherent in his condition and the liberation from all constraints of belonging (Maunick E., 2019, p. 46). He bears witness to his multiple heritage and constructs for himself a fragmented, hybrid identity that suits a consciously embraced and fully lived Métis identity (Joubert, 2009; Tranquille, 2005). Maunick’s poetry reveals itself as the only possible territory where to explore multiplicity and exalt the otherness within oneself. The poet has divested himself of any singular identity that would imprison him within a specific spatial area. Even if he has sacrificed the island for errancy, the métissage, he advocates as the premises of his poetic expression, takes its source in the island of Mauritius only!

The poet reveals that he has encountered on his island the Other, visiting foreigners who brought with them a fragment of elsewhere. In an interview, he recounts how, on his island, one can, with a single glance, encompass simultaneously the cathedral, the Hindu temple, the pagoda, and the mosque. Thus, he explains, it was imperative for him to engage in errancy to discern his share of human and poetic truth (Rowell, 1989). He is no more in search of the ‘other’. The other and he are one and the same because he is métis by virtue of a fractured, multiple, and dispersed genealogy, without any desire for appropriation or need for reconstruction of a whole.

The Mauritian métis poet can then inhabit this métis poetic space of his creation, one that reflects, in an egalitarian and non-hierarchical, non-historical relationship (Lionnet, 2022), the diversity he carries within himself. Maunick situates his voice within a triad of man/errancy/poetry and proclaims himself a métis citizen-poet, as he deconstructs boundaries between the center and the periphery. This poetic osmosis of spaces merged and lived at the junction of all possibilities becomes the only true territory the poet can inhabit. Mistaken for an Arab in Paris during the Algerian War, rejected by some for not being entirely of African blood, Maunick (1989, p. 5) knows that his only true legend is his métis speech. Therefore, while he (1989, p. 63) embraces the cause of the black man, he also consciously chooses not to appropriate the history of slavery, instead seeking to transcend it by refusing to dwell on the past. He states instead that he is in this world to never again carry the burden of being of mixed blood and ascertains that he prefers to rise anew as a Metis. For him, being a métis means standing in the light of day, and thus, he intends to greet the world, “qu’ai-je à corriger de tout ce qui se fit avant moi/je suis au monde pour ne jamais/plus peser du poids d’avoir mal d’être de sang mêlé .../mais aussi et surtout de ressusciter en tant que métis/métis veut dire lumière mètèque veut dire bonjour /dans la lumière donc je vous salue” (Maunick E., 1976, p. 15).

4.1 Poetry: Space for Maunick’s Métissage

Only the métis poem can allow Maunick to become the narrator of the complexities of blood, of racial mixtures and palavers between the island and the sea, and to be a watchman in exile. He further transforms the images of his island into a complex set of symbols to express the blazing force of his métis language, “je prophétise le sang mêlé comme une langue de feu” (1976, p. 16). The foundations of his new and original poetic voice thus anchor his métis identity while drawing from his personal experience.

He chooses a new cadence, a new meaning, a musicality attuned to the Creole rhythm of his island to say/write. This rhythmic impulse of his language allows poetic images to emerge, caught in an iterative, suggestive, and fundamentally creative Creole momentum (Maunick E., 1989, p. 3). The poet of mixed blood is métis; his language is métis as well. Syntax has shattered, the semantic system, reinvented. All these ruptures are necessary because his language is above all a living speech born from a fable that comes from the sea, told and not written. His poetry, Jean-Louis Joubert reminds us, gives rise to “a violently elliptical lyricism, saturated with blazing images” that demands to be carried by the voice (Joubert, 2005, p. 125). And Maunick himself recalls, in the parabases of his final anthology, *Manière de dire non à la mort*, that he belongs to the race of those who speak because his words instinctively dance, and his scansion matches his single breath. That is why on the back cover of this very text, he can once again attest that he did not write poems, that he only spoke and chanted his verses (2019, p. 8).

Consequently, orality directly engages with and unsettles the written word, giving rise to a renewed, revitalized language. Should this be understood merely as an oral phenomenon typical of island cultures, where speaking takes precedence over writing? Is it merely reducing writing to a particular idiolect? Or does this linguistic configuration instead reflect, in Maunick’s work, a deeper dimension: an elaborated logos, a singular form of episteme? He contends rather that his poetry gives rise, through great and devouring passion, “une grande et dévoreuse passion”, to a language that leans towards to a profusion of words and images than

to a rigorous poetic syntax. He has chosen to make the former wild and to civilize his creative word, distancing it tradition, “l’ensauvage”, “la civilise autrement”, for it remains forever his poetic licence (1989, p. 3).

Furthermore, his poetry boldly intertwines linguistic universes that are both distinct and interlaced, seeking to define a semantic and linguistic space between Creole and French. In doing so, it evokes the social, historical, and cultural realities of Creole worlds shaped by colonization and decolonization, worlds that turn toward France, whether willingly or forcibly, by choice or by necessity. In these Creole lands, both Creole and French are spoken quite well, as he puts it to Césaire (1990, p. 56). Writing within these two intertwined linguistic scopes enables the resurgence of both social and memorial significance.

Yet Maunick does not position his voice beneath the dominant linguistic system; he understands that the simple insertion of Creole words does not suffice to forge a truly *métis* poetic language. Instead, it must be shaped from within, always with the awareness that these words carry the weight of other origins. This is why he requires a language that is authentically his own to give voice to his poetry. He refuses both silence and the silencing of his voice, “Allez ma voix allez/kose papa kose/na pas silence ki konte” (1990, p. 57).

One might have expected Maunick, at that point, to make a final attempt to forge a poetic space beyond the oceans, his poetry having given voice to the solidarity of diverse Creole peoples bound by a shared history despite being of geographically dispersed regions (Spear, 2021). Yet Maunick appears to turn back, stepping away from this expansive, global vision of Creoleness, leaving *Antillanité* to Glissant, and hybridity to others such as Confiant, Condé, and Chamoiseau (Lionnet, 1989). Instead, he returns to his island, choosing not to reject any part of his heritage, and affirming himself as a *métis* rooted in Mauritius.

This deliberate choice allows him to continue imagining, within his island, the multiplicity of beings imbued with ambiguity and ambivalence. He thus pays homage to his island through a correspondence of traditions, mixtures, and connectivity, both individual and collective. His poem transforms into a text, from its etymological origin meaning a woven fabric, and weaves a poetic structure from chains of threads coloured by his *métissage*. His words palaver his Africanness, sing his Indianness impregnated with Creoleness, to better raise the voice of his island through his embodied *métissage*. For this reason, Senghor highlights in his preface to *Ensoileillé Vif* (1976), the *métissage* of Maunick, which causes him to oscillate between his preferred *négritude* and his triple allegiance to his European, African, and Indian heritage. Senghor titles his preface *La Négritude métisse* to emphasize that Maunick’s poetry belongs neither to the colonial past nor the present-day but solely to a *métis* time-space he has carved for himself.

5. Only the Poem to Speak/Write against death: the ultimate voyage

Only the Poem (2000) evokes the images of Maunick’s childhood, journeys, and memories as a sustained chant, an affirmation that the poem alone can summon the figures of the past, “*Seul le poème / auquel nous avons droit / obéit aveuglement / à un grand besoin de mémoire*” (p. 12). Maunick’s poetry then becomes a palimpsest of memories from all times and spaces written, erased, and inscribed anew in an act of resistance against oblivion. The island, the primary source of the poet’s thought, has by then escaped any physical cartography and is now experienced as a memorial site (Rogers, 2013). Maunick draws both from his personal memory

and the more collective memory of his island, even of the Creole islands more broadly, attributing to these mnemonic traces a metaphorical and metonymic value imbued with aesthetic richness.

It is no longer sufficient for him merely to speak; he summons writing in order to aestheticize historical, collective, and individual memory (1989, p. 3). His verse becomes a call toward a reality that may lie beyond historical fact. In an interview, he explains that while he cannot claim this reality to be exact, he knows it to be true, because it emerged from his words: a reality, a world, which to him is both real and authentic. He insists that poetry does not fail to depict reality; rather, it moves toward a realm beyond what is seen, a space that, though invisible, undoubtedly exists. “Je ne sais pas si elle est exacte mais je sais qu’elle est vraie... Finalement sortait de ma bouche une réalité, un monde, qui était, pour moi, réel véritable... non pas que la poésie ne soit pas la réalité mais qu’elle est la surréalité, cette partie de la réalité qu’on ne voit pas mais qui existe” (Rouabhi, 1985).

Moreover, Maunick’s complex relationship to memory seeks above all to elevate lived images and the sensory experience of beings and moments fleetingly encountered, transforming them into enduring poetic objects. He transcends realities to access the instinctive and the intuitive through the symbolic force of imagination, the resonance of sounds and colours and the presence of smells and tastes. His island becomes a metaphor for the kaleidoscopic condition of humanity and its unfolding history. In this way, poetic speech is transfigured into a reasoned poetic urgency!

5.1 Death, for a sky of no return

In Song 3 of *Seul le poème* (*Only the Poem*), Maunick also states that the words of the tribe “les mots de la tribu” (2000, p. 76) cannot die because they alone are capable of conjuring Gorée, “capables de conjurer Gorée” and of blindly obeying to a deep need for memory in the face of absence and temporary death (p. 61). If the poem dies, banishment will be total “la mise au ban sera totale” (p. 82). Could death be the final continent beyond the seas that the poet must reach or even conquer?

Already in his very first anthology, *Ces oiseaux de sang* (1954), the theme of death weaves itself like a leitmotif, before recurring throughout *Mascaret, le livre de la vie et de la mort* (1966) and *Fusillez-moi* (1970), and culminating in his more solemn composition of *50 Quatrains pour Narguer la Mort* (2006). In a mnemonic interplay, he interlaces figures glimpsed during his travels with the ever-present figure of death, both in the other and in oneself. Thus, in *50 Quatrains pour Narguer la Mort*, Maunick acts as a mediator of words and, from the very first line, asks his reader to hold his hand and accompany him on this journey toward the feared one. He invites the reader to open with him the book of memories (2006, p. 12). Death, the unconquered space taunts him but he vows that his poetry will always resist it. Indeed, the poem must continue to speak/write. In sum, the function of the poem is to stand as a bulwark against death, all deaths, and TO NEVER DIE IN POETRY (1989, p. 98).

In a final summons, his ultimate *Manière de dire non à la mort* (2019) emerges, a compilation of poems written between 1954 and 2004 and personally selected by Maunick. In the postface, he affirms that he can now scream in all serenity that the poet never dies. However, Maunick did not travel to Mauritius to present this collection to the public, as he was too ill to make the journey from Paris: a missed journey this time?

6. Conclusion

From island to errancy, through unending journeys, either forbidden or imposed, Maunick continually reminds us that travel exposes the persistent unease of the self in search of itself and the other. Through fragmentation, textual delimitations, and mirrored reflections, Maunickian poetry generates its own meaning following a sequential logic unique to the demands of his poetic approach of speaking and writing. By deftly navigating all poetic licenses, the poet sustains a dialogue, with himself and his reader, in a continuous poem ever renewed and skillfully maintained over more than fifty years.

One might say Maunick's texts rely on relations of reference, substitution, and ellipsis. His poetic writing thus lays bare words that reflect each other, echoing back and forth in a game of presence-absence, as if everything begins within the folds of citations, seeking to re-inscribe themselves within a complex interweaving of traces borne by the poet's ceaseless travels and inexhaustible utterance. Hence, all binary oppositions between the original and the derivative, the first and the second, the centre and the periphery, the beginning and the end lose their relevance as the poem alone becomes as the subliminal territory transcending even death. For Maunick, the limitless journey, never complete nor completed, has carved the essence of a poetry, that is both original and forever unruly, governed only by the poet's sovereign act of speaking and writing.

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