

PAUL BECKER

FLASH 500

IT WAS IN LYON

It was in Lyon, in the unusually hot spring following the February floods of 1968 that the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, while finishing off the final chapters of his *Difference & Repetition*, decided, with a number of close friends and one or two 'exceptional' students, to enjoy a picnic at a favourite spot near the confluence of the Saône and the Rhône rivers. Deleuze, who had apparently been reading Montaigne's *Essays* earlier that day, was interested in a line from Étienne de La Boétie, Montaigne's closest friend:

*Thus we see
a stream flows
Thoughtlessly,
One simple sequence
never ending
One ripple follows
On the other, descending*

The quote had reminded Deleuze of the thesis he was working on, in which he wrote about making and remaking, along a moving horizon, his concepts; these always appeared from a decentred centre, always from a displaced, fugitive periphery that endlessly repeated and just as endlessly, differed, like the quote from David Hume he had written at the back of his diary of that year:

Thus as the nature of a river consists in the motion and change of parts; though in less than four and twenty hours these be totally altered; this hinders not the river from continuing the same during several ages.

At some point after one or two bottles of a local Aligoté, it seems Deleuze decided he would swim right out to the deepest part, where the rivers flowed each into the other and the tones of each river and the different sediment and colours of earth mixed and split the colour of the river into two distinct streams, one muddy brown, the other more crystalline and blue. He stripped, put on his red swimming trunks and stepped into the water, which must have been shockingly cold in February. Deleuze swam hard against the heavy current and when he reached what he thought was the middle of the river, he dived down to see whether a true line existed beneath the surface, a threshold differentiating the separate parts. Diving down only a couple of metres, Deleuze looked back up over his shoulder towards the light and noticed the sun's rays penetrating deep into the water. For a second it did, indeed, appear as though each river had its own apparent texture, density and physical existence. Apparently, at that moment Deleuze's body became snared in a broken fence, which must have washed down with the recent floods. The tangled wood and wire pulled him along helplessly in the current. With a desperate struggle he managed to free himself from the wire and push for the surface, but a moment later he appeared to lose consciousness. Deleuze awoke some time later after having been pulled from the water and dragged to the bank by two students who had seen him float to the surface, unconscious. Stephanie Sanpleur and Alain Durourd, both Deleuze's students. After vomiting water for several minutes, Deleuze, who refused any medical treatment, was driven home by a colleague in silence.