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Landscape of Memory / Queller

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to the new inhabitants?

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FOREWORD

*Permanent Transients*

André Aciman



What does it mean to be an exile? How does exile alter someone? How does it reinvent one? What *is* exile? When does it go away? Does it ever go away? What is the difference between, say, a refugee and an expatriate, or between an immigrant and an emigrant, or between the uprooted and the unrooted, the displaced, the *dépaysés*, the evicted, the *émigrés*?—people who didn't just lift themselves up with their roots but who may have no roots left at all? These are the issues each of the five authors gathered here has tried to address in these essays originally delivered in The New York Public Library's lecture series "Letters of Transit."

Everyone's exile is different, and every writer has his or her own way of groping in the dark. Some have triumphed over exile. Others even found displacement exciting, invigorating. Others were able to don it and doff it, like a costume, while others have never been able to shake it off. But exile, however exiles deal with it, is never far behind, whether we're talking of a Yugoslavian in exile (Charles Simic), or a Bengali in exile (Bharati Mukherjee), or a Pole in exile (Eva Hoffman), or a Palestinian in exile (Edward Said), or an

Alexandrian in exile (André Aciman). Each one of the writers here writes from overt, or, more frequently, covert homesickness—tales of memory, loss, fear, anger, inevitable acculturation, muffled irony in the face of self-pity, and final redemption in this strange and often sorely unnatural thing called naturalization. Having chosen careers in writing, each uses the written word as a way of fashioning a new home elsewhere, of revisiting, transposing, or perpetuating the old one on paper, writing away the past the way one writes off bad debts, doing the one absurd thing all exiles do, which is to look for their homeland abroad, or to try to restore it abroad, or, more radical yet, to dispose of it abroad. However successful the endeavor is by the end of the day, the same perplexities, the same homesickness stirs to life again the next morning.

What makes exile the pernicious thing it is is not really the state of being away, as much as the impossibility of ever *not* being away—not just being absent, but never being able to redeem this absence. You look back on your life and find your exile announced everywhere, from events shaped as far back as the Congress of Vienna in 1815 down to the fact that, for some fortuitous reason, your parents decided to make certain you learned English as a child. Bewildered by narratives that pullulate everywhere he looks, an exile has yet to answer a far more fundamental question: in what language will he express his confused awareness of these intimate paradoxes?

Paradoxically enough, the answer in these five cases is English—the foreign tongue.

Five voices, five tales, five worlds, five lives that might have little in common but for the fact that none of the foreign-born authors gathered in this volume is a native speaker of English. English, for all five, is an acquired language, a foreign idiom, and it remains, perhaps against their will and more than they care to own, alien, strange, distant. After many decades in the United States, or Canada, or England, most still speak English with an accent, as though an accent didn't betray just the body's inability to adapt or to square away the details of a naturalization that should have been finalized decades ago, but its reluctance to let go of things that are at once private and timeless, the way childhood and ritual and memory are private and timeless. Some of the writers still make out traces of an accent in their own prose, call it a particular cadence in a language that is never quite just English but not anything else either. An accent is the tell-tale scar left by the unfinished struggle to acquire a new language. But it is much more.

It is an author's way of compromising with a world that is not his world and for which he was not and, in a strange sense, will never be prepared, torn as he'll always remain between a new, thoroughly functional here-and-now and an old, competing altogether-out-there that continues to exert a vestigial but enduring pull. An accent marks the lag between two cultures, two languages, the space where you let go of one identity, invent another, and end up being more than one person though never quite two.

Yet all five of these authors are so thoroughly at home—*rooted* might be the more appropriate, if ironic, term—in English that it is difficult to remember they come from an entirely different hemisphere. English has become the language they speak at home. They write almost exclusively in English, and ultimately count, sing, cook, quarrel, and dream in English. Those of them who have children have tried to pass on the ur-language with varying degrees of success. But the ur-anything pales when it comes to report cards, baseball practice, television, college applications, careers. English is the everyday, nuts-and-bolts language. It may not be the language of the heart, the language of grief and gossip and good-night kisses; but all of these authors write in English when they write from the heart.

Every successful sentence they write reminds them that they've probably made it to safety. It is, after all, a source of no small satisfaction to be mistaken for a native speaker. Theirs, however, is the satisfaction that men like Demosthenes and Moses might have felt on telling their closest admirers that what turned them to public speaking was not the power of their beliefs but something as trivial as a speech defect. Foreigners frequently master the grammar of a language better than its native speakers, the better, perhaps, to hide their difference, their diffidence, which also explains why they are so tactful, almost ceremonial, when it comes to the language they adopt, bowing before its splendor, its arcane syntax, to say nothing of its slang, which they use sparingly, and somewhat stiffly, with the studied nonchalance of people who aren't

confident enough to dress down when the need arises.

Eventually, of course, one does stop being an exile. But even a "reformed" exile will continue to practice the one thing exiles do almost as a matter of instinct: compulsive retrospection. With their memories perpetually on overload, exiles see double, feel double, are double. When exiles see one place they're also seeing—or looking for—another behind it. Everything bears two faces, everything is shifty because everything is mobile, the point being that exile, like love, is not just a condition of pain, it's a condition of deceit.

Or put it another way: exiles can be supremely mobile, and they can be totally dislodged from their original orbit, but in this jittery state of transience, they are thoroughly stationary—no less stationary than those displaced Europeans perpetually awaiting letters of transit in the film *Casablanca*. They are never really in *Casablanca*, but they are not going anywhere either. They are in permanent transience.

Exiles see two or more places at the same time not just because they're addicted to a lost past. There is a very real, active component to seeing in this particularly heightened retrospective manner: an exile is continuously prospecting for a future home—forever looking at alien land as land that could conceivably become his. Except that he does not stop shopping for a home once he's acquired one or once he's finally divested himself of exile. He goes on prospecting, partly because he cannot have the home he remembers and partly because his new home bears no relationship

to the old. Over and above these minor distinctions, however, his problem starts at home, with home. There isn't—and, in certain cases, wasn't—any.

The question our five writers ask is how do you—indeed, can you ever—rebuild a home? What kinds of shifts must take place for a person to acquire, let alone accept, a new identity, a new language? The answers are different, not just because their voices and concerns are different, but because the psychological raw material which each author brings to the puzzle is different as well. Still, here, in this volume, all five authors have shown us how each, in his or her way, has tried to make a home and refashion a life. Let's bear in mind that the next time we read them they won't be as forthcoming. Like friends who happened to open up one day only to withdraw afterwards, they'll be addressing a host of other issues, almost forgetting they showed us their deepest and most private side here.

Let's remember, then, that the words they'll be using won't just be English words jotted down in an effort to communicate with their English-speaking readers. Their words, despite their desire to appear so coolly collected and focused, are the priceless buoys with which they try to stay afloat both as professional thinkers and human beings.

Boji

## ~~Shadow Cities~~

~~André Aciman~~



In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov makes the poetic, or the playful, speculation that Russian children before the Revolution—and his exile—were blessed with a surfeit of sensual impressions to compensate them for what was to come. Of course, fate doesn't play such premonitory games, but memory can perform retrospective maneuvers to compensate for fate. Loss is a magical preservative.

FROM *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (1989)



"Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life." Thus Genesis, on humankind's first exiles. Since then, is there anyone who does not—in some way, on some level—feel that they are in exile? We feel ejected from our first homes and landscapes, from childhood, from our first family romance, from our authentic self. We feel there is an ideal sense of belonging, of community, of attunement with others and at-homeness with ourselves, that keeps eluding us. The tree of life is barred to us by a flaming sword, turning this way and that to confound us and make the task of approaching it harder.

On one level, exile is a universal experience. But, of course, exile also refers to a specific social and political condition—although even in that sense, it was never a unitary category, and we tend to compress too many situations under its heading. The different circumstances surrounding individual

migration, and the wider political or cultural contexts within which it takes place, can have enormous practical and psychic repercussions, reflected in the various words we use for those who leave one country for another. There are refugees, émigrés, emigrants, and expatriates, designations that point to distinct kinds of social, but also internal, experience. It matters enormously, for starters, whether you choose to leave or are forced to; it matters also whether you're coming to a new land unprotected and unprovided for or whether you can expect, or transport, some kind of safety net. When my family came from Poland to Canada, we were immigrants, a term that has connotations of class—lower than émigrés, higher perhaps than refugees—and degree of choice—more than is given to refugees, less than to expatriates.

Historically, too, the symbolic meaning and therefore the experience of exile has changed. In medieval Europe, exile was the worst punishment that could be inflicted. This was because one's identity was defined by one's role and place in society; to lose that was to lose a large portion of one's self. After being banished from Florence, Dante lived less than a hundred miles from his city-state—and yet he felt that his expulsion was a kind of psychic and social death, and his dream was either of return or of revenge (which he certainly executed very effectively in the *Inferno*). Real life, for Dante, was in Florence; it could not exist fully anywhere else. Joseph Conrad's father wrote to his infant son, who had been born

during a time when Poland was erased from the map, "Tell yourself that you are without land, without love, without Fatherland, without humanity—as long as Poland, our Mother, is enslaved." In other words, for a patriot of an occupied nation, it was possible to feel radically exiled within that country, as long as it did not possess the crucial aspect of national sovereignty.

All of these forms of exile implied a highly charged concept of home—although that home was not necessarily coeval with one's birthplace. For the medieval clerics and church functionaries who traveled from monastery to monastery, the center of gravity was the city that housed the papal seat. The Jews have had the most prolonged historical experience of collective exile; but they survived their Diaspora—in the sense of preserving and maintaining their identity—by nurturing a powerful idea of home. That home existed on two levels: there were the real communities that Jews inhabited in various countries; but on the symbolic and perhaps the more important plane, home consisted of the entity "Israel," which increasingly became less a geographic and more a spiritual territory, with Jerusalem at its heart. While living in dispersion, Jews oriented themselves toward this imaginative center of the world, from which they derived their essential identity.

In our own century, the two great totalitarianisms, Nazi and Soviet, produced the most potent forms of exile, although the Soviet expulsions proved more permanent. The refugees from Nazi Germany, with their



bright galaxy of artists and intellectuals—Hannah Arendt, Bertolt Brecht, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and others—were pushed from their country by a vile regime, but once the war was over, they could go back, and some chose to do so. The exiles from Eastern Europe—Vladimir Nabokov, Czeslaw Milosz, Milan Kundera, Joseph Brodsky, and others—thought that their banishment was for life, though history reversed it for some of them in the end.

But in recent years, in Europe most markedly, great tectonic shifts in the political and social landscape have taken place, which I think are affecting the very notion of exile—and of home. For what is happening today is that cross-cultural movement has become the norm rather than the exception, which in turn means that leaving one's native country is simply not as dramatic or traumatic as it used to be. The ease of travel and communication, combined with the loosening of borders following the changes of 1989, give rise to endless crisscrossing streams of wanderers and guest workers, nomadic adventurers and international drifters. Many are driven by harsh circumstance, but the element of voluntarism, of choice, is there for most. The people who leave the former Soviet Union nowadays are likely to be economic migrants or mafia tax dodgers buying up elegant real estate in London rather than dissidents expelled by ruthless state power. In one Bengali village, for example, there is a tradition of long seasonal migration, or sojourning. Many of the village's men

leave for several years or even decades, but always with the intention of returning. These are hardly privileged émigrés or expatriates, but neither are they powerless victims of globalization. Instead, they are people with agency and intentionality, playing the system. Smart young men choose different countries for the timely economic advantages they offer—better wages, better interest rates. Almost all go back, a bit richer and a bit more important in the eyes of their fellow villagers. Theirs are migrations divested of tragedy if not of adversity.

Of course, there are still parts of the world, South America or Southeast Asia, where political dissidents are expelled by demagogic dictatorships and cannot return while those dictatorships endure. There are still refugees from Bosnia whose return is barred by the sword of violence. I do not mean to underestimate for a moment their hardships, but I would think that even in their case, the vastly increased mobility and communicative possibilities of our world change the premises of their banishment: friends can visit or phone; they know that if the government of their country changes—and political arrangements, along with everything else, have become susceptible to quicker change—they can go back, or travel back and forth.

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ingly routine, communications easy and instant, and telecommuting a serious option. They are abroad in a world where they can watch the Super Bowl live from a Moscow sports bar or send an e-mail from an Internet cafe in Prague."

Well, exactly. We all recognize these basic features of our new, fast-changing social landscape. Whether we have left or not, we know how easy it is to leave. We know that we live in a global village, although the village is very virtual indeed—a village dependent not on locality or the soil but on what some theorists call deterritorialization—that is, the detachment of knowledge, action, information, and identity from specific place or physical source. We have become less space-bound, if not yet free of time.

Simultaneously there has grown up a vast body of commentary and theory that is rethinking and revising the concept of exile and the related contrapuntal concept of home. The basic revision has been to attach a positive sign to exile and the cluster of mental and emotional experiences associated with it. Exile used to be thought of as a difficult condition. It involves dislocation, disorientation, self-division. But today, at least within the framework of postmodern theory, we have come to value exactly those qualities of experience that exile demands—uncertainty, displacement, the fragmented identity. Within this conceptual framework, exile becomes, well, sexy, glamorous, interesting. Nomadism and diasporism have become fashionable terms in intellectual discourse. What is at stake is not

only, or not even primarily, actual exile but our preferred psychic positioning, so to speak, how we situate ourselves in the world. And these days we think the exilic position has precisely the virtues of instability, marginality, absence, and outsidersness. This privileging of exile compresses two things: first, a real description of our world, which indeed has become more decentered, fragmented, and unstable, and second, an approbation of these qualities, which is more problematic, because it underestimates the sheer human cost of actual exile as well as some of its psychic implications, and perhaps even lessons.

My emigration took place during the Cold War, though not in the worst Stalinist years. My parents chose to leave, though that choice was so overdetermined that it could hardly have been called "free." But I happened to be a young and unwilling emigrant, yanked from my childhood, which I had believed to be happy. Therefore, I felt the loss of my first homeland acutely, fueled by the sense (the certain knowledge, it seemed then) that this departure was irrevocable. Poland was abruptly sundered from me by an unbridgeable gap; it was suddenly elsewhere, unreachable, on the other side, and I felt, indeed, as if I were being taken out of life itself.

This kind of abrupt rupture breeds its own set of symptoms and syndromes. It is, first of all, a powerful narrative shaper; it creates chiaroscuro contrasts, a stark sense of biographical drama. The stories that emerged from the Cold War are legion, but one

certain outcome of exile that takes place in a bipolar world is the creation of a bipolar personal world. Spatially, the world becomes riven into two parts, divided by an uncrossable barrier. Temporally, the past is all of a sudden on one side of a divide, the present on the other.

Flash-forward to 1994, and a rather ordinary trip I took to Kraków that year with an English friend. The Westernization of my native town was everywhere evident. Where previously there had been no market, there was now commerce. Where before there was the great Eastern European *nada*, now there were boutiques, Krups coffee machines, Armani suits. It was perhaps the presence of my Western friend, who kept saying that Kraków looked like any small European city with a well-preserved historical center, that made me realize palpably what I had known in principle: that the differences between East and West were blurring pretty completely and that simultaneously the various divisions and oppositions I had set up in my inner landscape were shifting and blurring, too. When I came upon a lone shopwindow featuring a display familiar from the days of yore—a dry loaf of bread, an apple, and a desultory can of Coke—I pointed it out to my friend excitedly. Look! This was how it used to be! But this was not the way things were now. The dusty little vitrine was a trace, a remaining mark of a world that, for all its misery, had the appeal of familiarity and, most saliently, of clarity. Now I would have to live in a world in which the bipolar

structure was gone, in which everything is intermingled and no site is more privileged—either in its deprivation or in its pleasures—than anywhere else. I would have to change my narrative.

At this vanishing of contrasts I confess that I felt not only relief but regret. It was a regret, undoubtedly perverse, for the waning of clarity. But I also felt the loss of the very sense of loss I had experienced on my emigration. For the paroxysm I experienced on leaving Poland was, for all the pain, an index of the significance I attached to what I left behind.

Still, what had I mourned in 1959? What was it that stood for home? Though I was too young to know it, the fervor of my feelings was produced by the Cold War. And yet my response had nothing of geopolitics about it. As a bare adolescent, I was too politically innocent to be a budding nationalist; in any case, as a daughter of Jewish parents recently transplanted from the Ukraine and not fully engaged in the body politic, I was in a poor position to become a patriot. So it was not the nation I felt exiled from, not Conrad's father's Poland; my homeland was made of something much earlier, more primary than ideology. Landscapes, certainly, and cityscapes, a sense of place. I was lucky enough to grow up in a city that really is quite enchanting and that escaped the ravages of the war. There was the webwork of friendships and other relationships, for example with my teachers. But there were also elements less palpable that nevertheless constituted my psychic home.

For the great first lessons of my uprooting were in the enormous importance of language and of culture. My first recognition, as I was prized out of familiar speech and social environment, was that these entities are not luxuries or even external necessities but the medium in which we live, the stuff of which we are made. In other words, they constitute us in a way of which we perhaps remain unconscious if we stay safely ensconced within one culture.

For a while, like so many emigrants, I was in effect without language, and from the bleakness of that condition, I understood how much our inner existence, our sense of self, depends on having a living speech within us. To lose an internal language is to subside into an inarticulate darkness in which we become alien to ourselves; to lose the ability to describe the world is to render that world a bit less vivid, a bit less lucid. And yet the richness of articulation gives the hues of subtlety and nuance to our perceptions and thought. To me, one of the most moving passages in Nabokov's writing is his invocation of Russian at the end of *Lolita*. There he summons not only the melodiousness or euphony of Russian sounds, compelling though these may be, but the depth and wholeness with which the original language exists within us. It is that relationship to language, rather than any more superficial mastery, that is so difficult to duplicate in languages one learns subsequently.

In more religious times, certain languages were considered sacred; that is, they were thought, in the

words of a wonderful social historian, Benedict Anderson, to have "ontological reality inseparable from a single system of representation." Arabic, for example, was considered to be the only language in which the Koran could be written; the sacred texts could not be translated into any other language. So with Latin for the medieval Catholic church and Hebrew for Orthodox Jews. Some premodern people today still have the sense that their language is the true language, that it corresponds to reality in a way other languages don't. And it may be that one's first language has, for the child, this aura of sacrality. Because we learn it unconsciously, at the same time as we are learning the world, the words in one's first language seem to be equivalent to the things they name. They seem to express us and the world directly. When we learn a language in adulthood, we know that the words in it "stand for" the things they describe; that the signs on the page are only signs—arbitrary, replaceable by others. It takes time before a new language begins to inhabit us deeply, to enter the fabric of the psyche and express who we are.

As with language, so with culture: what the period of first, radical dislocation brought home was how much we are creatures of culture, how much we are constructed and shaped by it—and how much incoherence we risk if we fall out of its matrix. We know that cultures differ in customs, food, religions, social arrangements. What takes longer to understand is that each culture has subliminal values, predisposi-

tions, and beliefs that inform our most intimate assumptions and perceptions, our sense of beauty, for example, or of acceptable distances between people or notions of pleasure and pain. On that fundamental level, a culture does not exist independently of us but within us. It is inscribed in the psyche, and it gives form and focus to our mental and emotional lives. We could hardly acquire a human identity outside it, just as we could hardly think or perceive outside language. In a way, we are nothing more—or less—than an encoded memory of our heritage.

It is because these things go so deep, because they are not only passed on to us but *are* us, that one's original home is a potent structure and force and that being uprooted from it is so painful. Real dislocation, the loss of all familiar external and internal parameters, is not glamorous, and it is not cool. It is a matter not of willful psychic positioning but of an upheaval in the deep material of the self.

Is it then all pain and no gain? Of course not.

Being deframed, so to speak, from everything familiar, makes for a certain fertile detachment and gives one new ways of observing and seeing. It brings you up against certain questions that otherwise could easily remain unasked and quiescent, and brings to the fore fundamental problems that might otherwise simmer inaudibly in the background. This perhaps is the great advantage, for a writer, of exile, the compensation for the loss and the formal bonus—that it gives you a perspective, a vantage point.

The distancing from the past, combined with the sense of loss and yearning, can be a wonderful stimulus to writing. Joyce Carol Oates, in a striking formulation, has written that “for most novelists, the art of writing might be defined as the use to which we put our homesickness. So powerful is the instinct to memorialize in prose—one’s region, one’s family, one’s past—that many writers, shorn of such subjects, would be rendered paralyzed and mute.” In exile, the impulse to memorialize is magnified, and much glorious literature has emerged from it. *Native Realm* by Milosz or Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory*, some of Brodsky’s essays in *Less Than One*, or even Kundera’s much cooler take on transplantation in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*—these are works of lyrical commemoration informed by a tenderness for what is lost and by the need, even the obligation, to remember.

But the perspective one gains from dislocation is, of course, not only retrospective but prospective. Exile places one at an oblique angle to one’s new world and makes every emigrant, willy-nilly, into an anthropologist and relativist; for to have a deep experience of two cultures is to know that no culture is absolute—it is to discover that even the most interstitial and seemingly natural aspects of our identities and social reality are constructed rather than given and that they could be arranged, shaped, articulated in quite another way.

For this reason, too, exile can be a great impetus to thought and to creativity, which is why so many

artists have actively chosen it: James Joyce, with his motto of "Silence, exile, and cunning"; Samuel Beckett with his decision to write in French rather than English, precisely for the advantages of defamiliarization. And for the nonwriter, too, biculturalism can have its bracing pleasures—the relish of sharpened insight, the saviness of skepticism—which can become positively addictive.

But I have come to believe that these virtues have their serious defects, that in the long term, the addiction may be too seductive, that as a psychological choice, the exilic position may become not only too arduous but too easy. Perhaps the chief risk of privileging the exilic narrative is a psychic split—living in a story in which one's past becomes radically different from the present and in which the lost homeland becomes sequestered in the imagination as a mythic, static realm. That realm can be idealized or demonized, but the past can all too easily become not only "another country" but a space of projections and fantasies. Some people decide to abandon the past, never to look back. For others, the great lure is nostalgia—an excess of memory. One of the most extreme examples of "living in the past" I've come across is the history of Polish refugee camps in England, which had been set up during World War II for people who had come there with the Polish army. These camps remained until the late 1950s, their inhabitants existing in virtual isolation, many never learning English and always hoping that the magic moment of

redemption—the moment of return—was around the corner. But the actual Poland was no longer the one they remembered; it had changed in ways they would surely have found unpalatable, or at least highly perplexing, had they actually been able to go back.

For Jews in their long Diaspora, the need to preserve the symbolic center in an indifferent world—to keep intact a vision of a lost paradise and a promised land—often led them to insulate themselves from their surroundings, to retreat to their community as a place of refuge and spiritual fortress. I have written a book about the history of a shtetl in Poland, a small town whose population was half-Jewish, half-Polish.<sup>1</sup> The shtetl, for Eastern European Jews, was home in its most secure—internally secure, that is—form. In these small, rural enclaves, everyone knew everyone else, and everyone followed the same rules of behavior and spiritual life. No one was allowed to fall out of the communal net; no one needed to suffer from the modern malaise of uncertainty and alienation. The shtetl was a highly resilient, highly organized micro-society, and for many of its members, its strict codes and protective arrangements provided the satisfactions of warmth, safety, and certainty. But for others, the regulation of everyday life became oppressive, the avoidance of the larger world stifling.

1. *Shtetl: The Life and Death of a Small Town and the World of Polish Jews* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

Even before World War II, the metaphoric walls of the shtetl were beginning to break down. Many of its inhabitants, for various reasons, chose to leave literally; others began to question the structures of belief, causing heated conflicts within the shtetl itself.

Of course, the insulation of the shtetl was not only self-inflicted. But my point is that exile, and the pain of radical change, do not necessarily lead to a more radical personality structure or greater openness to the world. On the contrary, upheaval and dislocation can sometimes produce some rather more conservative impulses of self-defense and self-preservation. My own tendency was certainly to nostalgia and idealization—perhaps because I was ejected before my loss of innocence, before I could develop more considered opinions and preferences or revise my feelings about the place I came from. And once you leave, such revisions become very difficult.

In the later phases, the potential rigidity of the exilic posture may inhere not so much in a fixation on the past as in habitual detachment from the present. Such detachment can of course be a psychic, or even moral, luxury—but it comes at a price. In his fascinating, provocative essay “Exile as a Neurotic Solution,”<sup>2</sup> A. B. Yehoshua, a leading Israeli writer, makes the startling observation that during the eighteen

2. In Étan Levine, ed., *Diaspora: Exile and the Contemporary Jewish Condition* (New York: Steimatzky/Shapolsky, 1986).

hundred years of the Diaspora, there were many intervals when Jews could have settled in Palestine easily, or more easily, than in the countries where they chose to live, but that in fact, Palestine was the one place they consistently avoided. It was as if, he suggests, they were afraid precisely of reaching their promised land and the responsibilities and conflicts involved in turning the mythical Israel into an actual, ordinary home. Life in Diaspora had its enormous difficulties; but it offered the benefit of turning conflict outward, against a hostile or uncomprehending world, and thus avoiding the internal conflicts within the Jewish polity—conflicts that have certainly become evident since the founding of Israel (as they are in any functioning society).

Whatever the historical accuracy of Yehoshua's thesis, it does remind us of certain hazardous syndromes of the exiled stance: that this posture, if maintained too long, allows people to conceive of themselves as perpetually Other, and therefore unimplicated in the mundane, compromised, conflict-ridden locality that they inhabit; it allows them to imagine the sources and causes of predicaments as located outside, in a hostile or oppressive environment, rather than within.

In our current, habitually diasporic, habitually nomadic world, the oppositional, bipolar model no longer holds. The goalposts have shifted—indeed, the whole playing field has changed—in ways that remain elusive and hard to define. When all borders



are crossable and all boundaries permeable, it is harder to project conflict outward, to imagine an idyllic realm or a permanent enemy. This is initially confusing, but it is surely to the good. Indeed, the merits of the new situation are easily discernible. They are the benefits available to those American expatriates who can leave America without ever really leaving. We move not only between places but between cultures with more grace and ease. We are less shocked by the varied assumptions prevailing among different peoples, less prone to absolutist assertions of our rightness. We have become tangibly aware of the plurality of values that such liberal thinkers as Isaiah Berlin have tried to teach us. In the political sphere, the ease of movement across borders should surely work to counter dogmatic or fanatical nationalism, although given the rise of national conflicts, this result may not be self-evident. But for those who move freely among countries and cultures, it becomes difficult to maintain the notion of any one nation's superiority or special destiny. The literature of this new nomadism or diasporism, of which Salman Rushdie is perhaps the most prominent representative, is a transnational literature in which multiple cultural references collide and collude and in which their interplay is seen as exactly that—robust, vital play. This is a vision of exile, if it can still be called that, as comedy, rather than despair.

Is it then, in this blithe new world, all gain and no pain? I don't quite think so.

The new nomadism is different from other Diasporas. It exists in a decentered world, one in which the wanderers no longer trace and retrace a given territory or look to any one symbolic locus of meaning. If we take such radical decentering as a metaphor for a way of being and of selfhood, if we rewrite displacement as the favored position (which it holds in postmodern theory), then the model is not without its own, sometimes high, costs. In the Bengali village people have a suggestive way of talking about this: they say that their land has lost some of its strength because its inhabitants are dispersed—as if the land draws power from the loyalty and attachment of the humans who live on it. But I wonder if, in our world of easy come, easy go, of traveling light and sliding among places and meanings without alighting on any of them for long, we don't risk a dispersion of internal focus and perhaps even of certain strengths—strengths that come from the gathering of experiences so that they add up to memories, from the accumulation of understanding, from placing ourselves squarely where we are and living in a framework shared with others. I wonder if, in trying to exist in liminal spaces, or conceiving of experience as movement between discrete dots on a horizontal map, we don't risk what Kundera calls the "unbearable lightness of being," the illness that comes upon people unanchored in any place or structure, the Don Juans of experience who travel perpetually to new moments and sensations and to whom no

internal site—of attachment, need, desire—is more important than any other.

In the “bipolar” mentality, the idea of home may become too dramatized or sentimentalized. In the “nomadic” configuration, exile loses its charge, since there is no place from which one can be expelled, no powerful notion of home. Indeed, these days we are wont to say not so much that all fiction is homesickness as that all homesickness is fiction—that home never was what it was cracked up to be, the haven of safety and affection we dream of and imagine. Instead, home is conceived of mostly as a conservative site of enclosure and closure, of narrow-mindedness, patriarchal attitudes, and dissemination of nationalism. And, indeed, the notion of “home” may have been, in recent times, peculiarly overcharged, as the concepts of “country” and “nation” have been superimposed on each other with a seeming inevitability. “France,” for the French, is both *la belle France* and *la patrie*. Such overlapping is not a necessary one. We have seen, for example, in the unhappy case of the former Yugoslavia, that a geographic territory can abruptly change its national identity. But the nostalgia of exiles for their birthplace has undoubtedly often been augmented by this conjunction of geographic and patriotic longing.

The transports of patriotism, narrowness of provincial perspectives, and confinements of parochial traditions are not plausible solutions to the dilemmas of our time. And yet continual dislocation, or dispersion,

is both facile and, in the long run, arid. Can anything be rescued from the notion of home, or at-homeness, that is sufficient to our condition?

One of the most interesting and subtle meditations on home I know of is found in V. S. Naipaul's autobiographical novel *The Enigma of Arrival*. The place at which he was trying to arrive was a small cottage attached to a large house on a historic estate in England. For Naipaul, this entails multiple ironies; he grew up in an Indian community in Trinidad and understands all too well that his very presence on the estate is the end result of long imperial relations. He also knows that the cottage, the manor, the ancient plain, correspond for him to some fantasy of England that he developed precisely when growing up in Trinidad and that included some dream of permanence, dignity, beauty. It takes a while before Naipaul squares these preconceptions with the realities of the place where he lives—realities that include change, modernization, conflict. Slowly he begins to see the landscape before him through other eyes. He imagines how the estate looks to the temporary workers, to whom a cottage with a thatched roof is simply temporary shelter, not a home, “a place to which you could transfer (or risk transferring) emotion or hopes.” He begins to imagine how the estate looks and feels to its owner, who suffers from *accidie*, a melancholic withdrawal from the world; Naipaul interprets this malaise as a symptom of the landlord's excessive at-homeness, a security that has become

a stasis. He understands that the power relations of today are complex enough to confer on him some advantages unavailable to his aristocratic landlord—the advantages of dynamism, of ambition, even of need. Slowly Naipaul learns to read the landscape in a less romantic and more complex way. He comes to love the place from the position not of fantasy but of knowledge.

The slowness of this process is crucial; in Naipaul's book, that ruminative leisureliness makes the act of creating a home akin to the process of writing. It is through gradual accretion of details, of knowledge, of relationships that he comes to imaginative possession of the place, as he comes to imaginative possession of his subject.

Naipaul's understated allegory suggests that there are two kinds of homes: the home of our childhood and origin, which is a given, a fate, for better or for worse, and the home of our adulthood, which is achieved only through an act of possession, hard-earned, patient, imbued with time, a possession made of our choice, agency, the labor of understanding, and gradual arrival.

The experience of enforced exile paradoxically accentuates the potency of what is given, of the forces that have shaped us before we could shape ourselves. This is what Brodsky says about the magnetic pull of one's parental home and the exile's dilemma of having wandered away—or having been forced to wander—too far:

For a while, he is absorbed with new vistas, absorbed with building his own nest, with manufacturing his own reality. Then one day, when the new reality is mastered, when his own terms are implemented, he suddenly learns that his old nest is gone, that those who gave him life are dead. On that day he feels like an effect suddenly without a cause. . . . What he can't blame on nature is the discovery that his achievement, the reality of his own manufacture, is less valid than the reality of his abandoned nest. That if there ever was any-thing real in his life, it was precisely that nest, oppressive and suffocating, from which he so badly wanted to flee. He knows how willful, how intended and premeditated everything that he has manufactured is. How, in the end, all of it is provisional.<sup>3</sup>

I agree and sympathize, even empathize, with this almost entirely. The acute loss I felt on emigrating was commensurate with the depth of my attachment—and there is something about that that I don't want to disavow, and which can be a source of later perceptions and affections. After leaving Russia, Nabokov

3. Joseph Brodsky, "A Room and a Half," in his *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986), end of section 18.

wrote in several languages masterfully, but he was transposing the love of his first language to his subsequent ones. We need to develop a model in which the force of our first legacy can be transposed or brought into dialogue with our later experiences, in which we can build new meanings as valid as the first ones. This can be done only through a deepening investigation, through familiarization. It is fine, and illuminating, to see all the structures that construct us for what they are and to see through them; but we must acknowledge the need for frameworks that contain us, for sites that are more than temporary shelters. And we need to see that in our world it may be insufficient to define ourselves as Other in opposition to some archetypal oppressor or hypothetical insider. Our societies are too fragmented to have an easily discernible inside or permanent centers of power. At the same time, we need a conception of a shared world, a world in which we exist by virtue of shared interests rather than mutual alienation, to which we can bring our chosen commitments and hopes.

There is a Hasidic parable about the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Hasidic movement. In the parable, thieves come to the Baal Shem Tov and tell him of a network of underground corridors and tunnels that leads directly from Poland to Palestine. They offer to take him there, and he agrees. They walk through the tunnels with great difficulty. At one point, they come to a murky bog, which almost stops them. But they persist. They get more than halfway to

their destination. Then, suddenly, the Baal Shem Tov sees before him "a flaming sword, turning this way and that," and decides to go no farther. He turns back to the place from which he started.

The psychological or mythological meaning of this parable has had many interpretations. Perhaps on one level it says something about the Baal Shem Tov's ambivalence about going to Palestine, his own neurotic solution. But I think that the parable's unconscious, compressed message may be that you can't steal into paradise. You can't approach the tree of life by a shortcut. Of course, the parable also suggests something about the fearsomeness of approaching our object of desire and finding ourselves in paradise—which may then turn out to be an ordinary garden, needing weeding, tilling, and watering.

To be sure, in our human condition, it takes long, strenuous work to find the wished-for terrains of safety or significance or love. And it may often be easier to live in exile with a fantasy of paradise than to suffer the inevitable ambiguities and compromises of cultivating actual, earthly places. And yet, without some move of creating homing structures for ourselves, we risk a condition of exile that we do not even recognize as banishment. And paradoxically, if we do not acknowledge the possibility and the real pain of expulsion, then we will not know that somewhere there is a tree of life that, if we labor hard enough to approach it, can yield fruits of meaning after all.

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