

Normal and Pathological Nostalgia

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THE EXPERIENCE OF NOSTALGIA is both ancient and widespread. It has been a major theme in myth and poetry; the Bible, Homer's *Odyssey*—the literature of all ages—give eloquent voice to this human phenomenon; indeed, there is scarcely a person who has never experienced it. The contemporary psychiatric literature that deals with nostalgia is limited, and the psychoanalytic studies can be numbered on one hand. Although these explorations sometimes converge, they tend to reduce nostalgia to a single particular view which necessarily excludes important normal and clinical findings. In this paper I shall attempt to clarify and integrate some of the conceptions about nostalgia that have previously been developed and present some new ideas.

The word nostalgia was introduced by J. Hofer (1678), in the late seventeenth century, as a literal translation into Greek of the German *heimweh* and, like the latter, means a painful yearning for home or country. Hofer regarded homesickness as a cerebral disease of essentially demonic cause. Since his time there has been an abundant literature dealing with homesickness and its physical and psychological aspects. Physicians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries devoted many studies to this problem, often based on observations of soldiers in the armies of the wars of the French Revolution, and later of those in Napoleon's Imperial Army. Pinel, Broussais, Esquirol, and Jean Colombier were among the many

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prominent physicians who contributed to this literature. Their work was critically reviewed by Bachet (1950) who himself examined some of the mentally disturbed deportees who were repatriated to France from Nazi prisoner-of-war camps during World War II. The most recent extensive review of homesickness was undertaken by McCann (1941) who studied a group of homesick students.

During the first half of the nineteenth century nostalgia began to taken on an additional, broader meaning, defined by Webster's (1966) as "a longing for something far away or long ago." Robert (1970) gives a quotation from Balzac employing this usage, thus dating this new meaning from the third or fourth decade of the nineteenth century. It is nostalgia in this sense that is the subject of this communication. However, while it may at times be difficult to differentiate nostalgia, in the broader sense, from homesickness, the latter generally follows upon the separation of a person from his home, homeland, or loved ones, and is resolved quickly by a return to that place; in fact, the mere promise of such reunion often alleviates the pain of homesickness. The homesick person is typically overwhelmed by sadness and suffers from a variety of more or less severe somatic symptoms. Nostalgia, on the other hand, is an experience with particular cognitive and affective components. The cognitive aspects consist of memories of a given place—rather than of objects—at a given time, and the affect associated with these memories is characteristically described as bittersweet.

Some authors equate homesickness and nostalgia; this reduces these phenomena to a single underlying dynamic configuration and thereby excludes much of their richness and variability. Fodor (1950), for example, regards nostalgia as a manifestation of an intense desire to return to the country, town, or home from which one came. He sees utopian fantasies as the same sort of experience, behind which is hidden the "yearning for childhood," which in turn derives from a longing for the prenatal home. He believes that whereas nostalgia

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is not a mental disturbance, it can develop into a "monomaniacal, obsessive mental state" under unspecified conditions. No mention is made of the affective nature of nostalgia, nor does Fodor deal with any psychodynamic features other than that just mentioned.

Martin (1954) is another who discusses homesickness and nostalgia as a single entity. The thrust of his view is that there exists a "true nostalgia," which is related to and involves a healthy surrender to a "biological and rhythmic homing tendency to return to the past," to childhood, to sleep, and to the unconscious. This conception is compatible with many observations both in and out of analysis, but exception must be taken to his *a priori* notion of a "biological and rhythmic" tendency. In contrast to this form of nostalgia, Martin describes the unbiological, unrhythmical, culturally induced phenomena of "nostomania" and "nostophobia," i.e., "compulsive movements toward and

against the home and whatever home means, literally and figuratively" (p. 103). "True nostalgia" meets with many obstacles because our culture has taken flight from what it regards as emotional and old-fashioned and because the "compulsive-intellectual type" of personality has significant difficulties in permitting himself to experience such feelings. Martin seems to be referring here to an inhibition of "regression in the service of the ego."

Freedman (1956) reports on the analysis of a young composer who in the early months of his treatment nostalgically recalled locales where he had been taken as a child by his mother or father. At first, these recollections were used as a resistance to keep the analyst in ignorance of his current life situation. Analysis later revealed that they were related to an intense desire for the pregenital mother (corresponding to the joyful aspect of his nostalgia) and to his destructive wishes regarding the father (the "bitter" side of the memories) alongside of his wish to maintain the affectionate feelings he had for him. When analysis led to the lifting of repression, phobias for the previously desired locales developed, demonstrating the

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counterphobic nature of the patient's nostalgia. Freedman asserts that the depressive component of nostalgia is related to the turning back on the self of death wishes originally directed to the father.

Exploring the subjective nature of nostalgia from an existential point of view, Howland (1962) describes the mixture of joy and sadness for what had "formerly been part of our lives" and from which we are cut off by time and space; and, if we manage to "return home," we find it is not the way we remembered it. Although Howland suggests that the nostalgic memory may represent only a longing for something "dreamed about," like many of the writers dealing with nostalgia, he does not explore the dynamics of this idealization. Rather curiously, and without any supportive evidence, he notes that our nostalgic experiences are "unique" and cannot be shared; in fact, groups can and do share nostalgic memories, which is obviously not unrelated to their common ideals and therefore to the tensions in and between groups.

Nawas and Platt (1965), who also regard nostalgia as synonymous with homesickness, classify theories about it according to their relation to time: the "past-oriented view," which sees the nostalgic person as wishing to return to something in the past; the "present-oriented" conception, which regards nostalgia as a reaction to an unsuccessful adaption to the present environment; and their own view, which sees the nostalgic subject as suffering from a "concern over or dread of the future." Those then, who emphasize futurity are

not likely to "fall victims to nostalgia." Middle-class people, the authors say, whose education emphasizes futurity, are less likely than "lower-class" or "tradition-bound" people to become nostalgic. They suggest that psychotherapy should help the patient to structure goals and plans rather than to "analyze the causes of his nostalgia." While Nawas and Platt reduce nostalgia to a dread of the future, which may indeed be a reality for some people, they do not elucidate the roots of that anxiety. Although writing about fantasy, Freud's words (1908) apply

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equally well here to nostalgia: "Thus past, present and future are strung together, as it were, on the thread of the wish that runs through them" (p. 148).

The relation between nostalgia and mourning is dealt with in a searching psychoanalytic contribution by Geahchan (1968), a French psychoanalyst. He regards the basic representations of nostalgia as a wish to go or return to a place, to a time past or a time to come, or to a beloved or awaited person. Nostalgia is essentially normal unless it dominates the psychic economy. He describes a "nostalgic relationship" to the lost object which avoids both internalizing the object and the work of mourning, and safeguards the subject from psychosis. While fantasy seeks to fulfill a desire, nostalgia repetitively tends toward a fantasy that never takes place. In this way the desire is "fulfilled" by not being realized, and so the subject is safe from the loss of the object, and the object is guarded by being kept in the nostalgic relationship. Outwardly the subject appears to mourn the lost object, but intrapsychically it is not actually given up; perhaps this is because the nostalgic relationship corresponds to the subject's own ego ideal. Hence, the nostalgic relationship is sought and maintained for itself.

The nostalgic relationship is characteristically indeterminate in its representations, and by its imaginary nature the subject is able to maintain separateness from the object. This leads to an indefinite and indefinable quest—and if an object should appear that seems to correspond to the nostalgic desire, it is promptly rejected, it becomes demythologized; it is not what it promised to be: the subject's projection of what it should be. The subject can thus only enjoy the search and never the possession. The nostalgic person may appear depressed because he cannot find an object to embody his ideal, but he does not have the sense of loss of the depressed patient, who, in losing his object, seems at the same time to lose his ego ideal.

Geahchan (1968) observes that patients with strong nostalgic tendencies regularly show a particular libidinal organization

characterized by: intense narcissistic trends, pronounced anal sadism, significant repression, marked homosexual trends in women, and a prominent feeling of repulsion for the female genitalia in men.

The multiple aspects of nostalgia are brought forth in a case presentation by Kleiner (1970) of an analytic patient who was constantly stimulated to experience nostalgic memories such as romping with playmates, a lazy summer afternoon, or cozy feelings of a winter evening. The patient felt these recollections as if they were foreign bodies, but she could not rid herself of them. Typically, they were idealizations of something lost in the past, never to be recaptured.

As a small girl this patient was traumatically affected by the death of her baby brother. She apparently attempted to deal with the loss and the guilt by denial, incorporation, and idealization, but her immature ego was unable to mourn his death adequately. Instead, she went back to an earlier time to seek a reunion with her preoedipal mother to whom she was orally fixated; this fixation followed an interruption of breast feeding due to a depression which the mother had suffered. Eventually, all phases of her libidinal development were influenced by the threat of object loss, and so, for example, she was led to an idealization of her father—but at the expense of a depreciated husband. Later in life she was unable to mourn and found herself idealizing other lost objects in an attempt to defend them against her aggression. Ultimately she had to give up her search for the lost objects so that she could be free to accept new ones. As long as the past so massively intruded into the present, so long was the patient "governed as much by the pleasure principle as by reality" (p. 29).

Nostalgia, then, is an ambivalently felt, affective-cognitive experience. Its cognitive aspects typically consist of a memory of a particular place at a given time. The places usually have existed in reality, but they may also be derived from myths or literature or may be totally imaginary, such as the yearning for a Paradise Lost. Whatever their actuality,

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these scenes are uniformly idealized. The location in time is usually also in the past, but is equally flexible, and may be at any period in the subject's life, or even before, or indeed in the future—for subjects may yearn for a utopia or the millenium. The affects associated with these memories are characteristically

described as bittersweet, indicating a wistful pleasure, a joy tinged with sadness. Whatever else the sadness indicates, it always acknowledges that the past is in fact irretrievable. It is the subtlety, iridescence, and ambivalence of these feelings that gives nostalgia its inimitable coloration. No better description of nostalgia can be given than the one found in the last lines of Eduard Mörike's poem *Im Frühling* (1957, pp. 353-354): "I think about this and that, I wish longingly for something, I am not quite sure what; it is half pleasure, half mourning; oh, tell me, my heart, what memories are you weaving in the twilight of the golden green branches? Old times I dare not talk about."¹

The ubiquity of nostalgia suggests that we are dealing with a human experience that for the most part is normal. Taking pleasure in the past recalls Freud's comment that "Actually, we can never give anything up; we can only exchange one thing for another. What appears to be a renunciation is really the formation of a substitute or a surrogate" (1908, p. 145).

Nostalgia resembles fantasy in certain limited respects. Like fantasy, it is stimulated by some current impression which leads the subject back to earlier experiences of gratification; nostalgia, however, seems more apt to be precipitated by sensory stimuli. Whereas fantasy is a substitute for the fulfillment, in the present, of a wish, usually, as Freud noted, for power or for erotic gratification, and diminishes or disappears when genuine gratification ensues, nostalgia is not a substitute for a wish but is an experience of the past that is recalled, normally or pathologically, for itself. The past is particularly tenacious when it was experienced as markedly pleasurable,

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painful, or ambivalent. All nostalgic thoughts do not necessarily indicate that the subject, in yearning for the past, wishes to return to it; one can briefly savour a time in the past without in the least wishing to exchange one's present situation in life for a former one.

The stimulus of unpleasant or painful current life situations in the evocation of nostalgia is well known, and Kleiner's patient clearly illustrates this. The aged, faced with limitations imposed upon them by their advanced years, and with some awareness of the end of life, often will delight in recalling their childhood. Soldiers will spend hours talking about earlier, idealized, days in civilian life, as an escape from the unfulfilling situation in which they find themselves; later, as veterans, they may look back on army days, now thoroughly mythologized, with shared pleasure.

The line between normal and pathological nostalgia, as with most mental phenomena, is not a sharp one. Proust, perhaps the most famous *grand nostalgique*, turned the tables on his neurotic symptoms and used these now classic episodes of nostalgia to create an imperishable masterpiece. It is through his literary "remembrance of things past" (more accurately, of time past) that he was able to hold on to the lost object, his mother, while avoiding that working through of mourning which might have enabled a reinvestment of a new love object—something neither he nor his protagonist was able to do. His work became the aesthetic crystallization of his nostalgia. Miller, who has written the most thorough, large-scale psychoanalytic study of Proust (1956), suggests (in a personal communication) that Proust's problem of mourning is "solved by tapping the well-springs of the past, renewing joys stored in the unconscious"—thus art enables Proust "to live the true essences of life outside of time—death is overcome by escaping from time." No real object could be expected to embody the one which was lost, and so the past, like a fossil, lives on in the amber of his great novel; the quest for the object is continued by other means.

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All pervasive experiences of nostalgia are not, however, exploited so richly. In some individuals the very core of their psychopathology consists of nostalgic memories which dominate their mental life. A common neurotic use of memories is as a means of dealing with poorly resolved traumatic experiences of childhood. A patient who had suffered from early deprivation of both mother and father recalled coming home from school and being greeted by the redolent odors of cakes her mother was baking for church suppers. Another patient who, in fact, had been virtually ignored by her father, kept harkening back to her delight on a swing, which was probably being pushed by her father who, however, did not physically appear in the memory. In both these patients there is an attempt to master early feelings of rejection—and rage and guilt—by idealizing the past. A patient thus creates his private mythology and actually believes it. Another patient, after a period of analysis, wryly commented that he was no longer able to believe his "lies." This particular mechanism, consisting of denial and idealization associated with bittersweet feelings, is analogous to a screen affect.

The attempt and the failure to idealize and recapture the past is poignantly expressed by Hermann Hesse in *Die Kindheit* (Childhood):²

My farthest valley, you are

Bewitched and vanished.

Many times, in my grief and agony,

You have beckoned upward to me from your country of

shadows

And opened your legendary eyes

Till I, lost in a quick illusion,

Lost myself back to you wholly.

O dark gate,

O dark hour of death,

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Come forth,

So I can recover from this life's emptiness

And go home to my own dreams.

I described the role of nostalgia as a substitute for mourning in reviewing Geahchan's work. Briefly, the principle relates to the maintenance of the lost object in the nostalgic memory; this impedes an effective renunciation which would permit a new object to be libidinally invested. The failure of mourning leads to a continuing search for the idealized lost object, an inability to love new objects, a depreciation of objects in one's current life, and an endless pursuit of nostalgic memories for themselves at the expense of an inhibition in many areas of existence. Noteworthy is the disappointment of these patients in new objects which are regularly found to fall short of their idealized representation. There is, however, a normal aspect to this process. Inasmuch as mourning is probably never accomplished totally, it is natural that a part of the object is retained. This is borne out by the occasional recurrence of nostalgic memories of places associated with the loved one, in distinction to memories of the object itself.

In psychotherapy, nostalgia may prove to be a means of distorting the past; this can be very confusing to the analyst inasmuch as the patient himself intensely believes in the reality of this idealized, perhaps largely falsified, past, and because the memories are associated with poignant feelings. At the same time, nostalgia may operate as a powerful resistance against bringing current conflicts into the analytic situation.

The counterphobic mechanism of nostalgia, as Freedman described it, in which the originally yearned-for places represent, in part, destructive tendencies to objects, the ensuing guilt, and the turning of these feelings against the self, does not appear to be a common occurrence, but does occur. The possible defensive uses of nostalgia are surely not limited by the foregoing examples, but these seem to represent the most usual encountered.

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One fundamental trait of nostalgia, which must be explored, is the relative absence of a conscious representation of objects in nostalgic memory. Their appearance tends to be rare and, when present, is shadowy, marginal, or exists as a mere feeling of its presence. This erasure of objects from the nostalgic memory is all the more curious since it is clear that these memories of places relate essentially to objects, and this situation prevails whether the remembrances are normal or pathological. The most plausible explanation of this phenomenon seems to involve an original displacement of the affective-cognitive memory from the object to an idealized place with which they become associated. Most probably this defensive process stems from the subject's need to repress direct memories of the object because they would evoke intolerably painful feelings of blissful gratifications from the object now lost, or frightening or depriving experiences related to the object, or intensely ambivalent feelings toward the object, especially when destructive, guilt-laden wishes conflict with loving feelings. As a result, nostalgia serves both as a screen memory and a screen affect, and, if it is associated with mild sadness, it also brings forth pleasurable, sweet feelings, ensuring the continuance of this particular kind of universally experienced memory.

SUMMARY

Nostalgia is distinguished from homesickness from which it was originally derived, and from fantasy to which it is related. It is described as an affective-cognitive experience, usually involving memories of places in one's past. These memories are associated with a characteristic affective coloration described as

"bittersweet." It is concluded that the locales remembered are displacements from objects whose representation was repressed. Nostalgia is a ubiquitous human experience that is evoked by particular stimuli under special circumstances, and, while it is generally a normal occurrence, pathological

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forms occur. Among those discussed are: nostalgia as a substitute for mourning, as an attempted mastery through idealization and displacement of a painful past, as a resistance in analysis, and as a counterphobic mechanism. Nostalgia not only serves as a screen memory, but may also be said to operate as a screen affect.

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