

The Immigrant, the Exile, and the Experience of Nostalgia

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Resulting from a retrospective idealization of lost objects, nostalgia helps the immigrant defend against the aggression resulting from current frustrations. This experience is missing in the exile whose deeply traumatizing departure from his land of origin spoils whatever good memories of that land might exist within him. Retrospective idealization is not possible and the ego is deprived of the nostalgic defense. The psychoanalyst dealing with the immigrant's nostalgia must offer psychic space for its development while keeping an eye upon the hidden transference allusions in the nostalgic pleasure as well as upon its screen functions vis-à-vis aggression in the here and now. Psychoanalytic work with the exile requires a different slant. Empathy with how bad the land of origin was must precede for a long while before defenses against the emergence of nostalgia can be analyzed.

Introduction

Migration from one country to another involves profound losses. Leaving behind familiar food, native music, unquestioned social customs, known history, and often even one's attire and language, the individual is faced with strange tasting food, different music, new political concerns, cumbersome language, pale festivals, psychically unearned history, and visually unfriendly landscape. The response to this psychic depletion depends, among other factors, upon whether one arrives in a new country as an immigrant

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or an exile. This difference, especially as it pertains to the experience of nostalgia, is the focus of this brief communication.

I will begin by delineating the distinctions between the actual circumstances of the immigrant and the exile. Then I will describe the powerful role of nostalgia in the immigrant's psychic experience. Following this, I will comment upon a particular type of emotional blockage encountered among the exiles and refugees which renders them unable to experience nostalgia. Finally, I will discuss the implications of this difference to the psychoanalytic treatment of individuals from these two groups. In this context, I will underscore the protective aims and screen functions of the immigrant's nostalgia and the defensive repudiation of the pre-traumatic good feelings involving one's homeland in the exile. I will conclude with some remarks to bring together the various issues raised in the paper.

The Immigrant and the Exile

Based upon external parameters, the immigrant and the exile differ in five important ways. *First*, the immigrant has left his country voluntarily while the exile has been forced out of his land. *Second*, the immigrant has usually had more time available for preparing to leave, while the exile has had little or no notice for his departure. *Third*, less traumatic events are generally associated with the immigrant's leaving his home; the exile has often fled a catastrophic sociopolitical situation in his country. *Fourth*, the immigrant retains the possibility of revisiting his home country while the exile, having broken the tether of belonging, lacks this important source of emotional refueling. *Finally*, the manner in which the two groups are received by the host population might also vary. The immigrant arrives with less sociopolitical baggage and is therefore likely to encounter greater hospitality than the exile who is viewed with suspicion and accepted reluctantly by the host population.

These external distinctions contribute to the differences in the intrapsychic processes of mourning and adaptation in the two groups. Before discussing these internal issues, however, two linguistic clarifications seem warranted. *First*, the use of the masculine pronoun throughout this paper is merely for literary ease and, in no way, meant to exclude the experience of women facing similar situations. *Second*, while the juxtaposition of the terms "exile" and "immigrant" is intended to highlight the difference between traumatized and non-traumatized migrants, such vocabulary is not entirely satisfactory since all migration is inherently traumatic. The polarity of traumatized and non-

traumatized migrants is therefore spurious. One can only speak of more or less traumatic migrations. Moreover, the expression

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“exile” has a linguistic twin in the term “refugee.” The former emphasizes the inability or unwillingness to revisit the home country while the latter emphasizes the element of escape from danger or persecution (see Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1987, p. 435 and p. 991 respectively). Actually the two conditions (i.e., blocked revisiting and escape from danger) usually occur together. The term “exile” is being used here to denote both these types of severely traumatized migrants. With such clarifications and with the above-mentioned distinctions between the immigrant and the exile in mind, we can now address the way in which these two types of individuals feel about their country of origin.

The Immigrant's Nostalgia

Facing the “mental pain” (Freud, 1926, p. 169) of separation, the immigrant readily resorts to a hypercathexis of the objects he has lost. Described originally by Freud (1917), this mechanism results in an idealization of the immigrant's past. Everything from that era acquires a glow. Such over-estimation often centers more upon memories of places than of people. This is not surprising. Throughout childhood and adolescence, the nonhuman environment presents itself as a neutral alternative area in which all the vicissitudes of human interactions can be expressed, experienced, and worked through in relative psychic privacy (Searles, 1960). The screen functions of longing for lost places (Freedman, 1956) notwithstanding, the immigrant employing this mechanism comes to live in the past. His most powerful affects become associated with his recall of the houses, cafes, street corners, hills, and countryside of his homeland. Like an emotionally-deprived child with but one toy, he clings to their memories. Ever wistful, the immigrant develops an “if only” (Akhtar, 1996) fantasy which says that had he not left these places, his life would have been wonderful or that when he was there he had no problems.

The accompanying wish to recapture an idealized past stirs up a poignant mixture of pain and joy. Pain is evoked by the awareness of separation from the now idealized object and joy by a fantasized reunion with it through maudlin reminiscences. Cultural artifacts from “back home” and pieces of native music and poetry readily evoke tears of aching pride and affection. “It is the subtlety, iridescence, and ambivalence of these feelings that give nostalgia its inimitable

coloration" (Werman, 1977, p. 393). Nostalgia is a characteristically "bitter-sweet pleasure" (Kleiner, 1970, p. 11) which brings forward much wistfulness as well as a soothing sense of affiliation.

This fantasy of a lost paradise expresses a position whereby primary objects are neither given up through the work of mourning nor assimilated

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into the ego through identification. The result is a temporal fracture of the psyche. This, at times, manifests itself in the immigrant's fervent plans to "someday" (Akhtar, 1996) return to his homeland; fantasies of retirement or burial in one's country of origin are further temporally displaced versions of this wish. With such a dynamic shift, the future becomes idealized, robbing the present of full psychic commitment. Often such "if only" and "someday" fantasies coexist, with longing for the past fueling the hope of return to "home" in the future. Meanwhile, the immigrant might continue to seek "a climate and ethnic surrounding, much like his original, and may become involved in a life long attempt of symbolic restitution of his mother land" (Krystal, 1966, p. 217).

The Exile's Inability to Experience Nostalgia

The individual who has had to leave his land against his will or who was escaping from natural danger and/or political persecution feels differently about his country of origin. His internal experience is strikingly different from the ordinary immigrant. Having to leave against his will burdens him with a shameful experience of passivity and rejection. The suddenness of his departure deprives him of the "protective rite of farewell" (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989, p. 157), precludes anticipatory mourning, and complicates subsequent adaptation. The traumatic circumstances responsible for his exit stir up annihilation anxiety and secondarily, narcissistic rage. The amount of aggression thus mobilized can hardly be bound by associative reverie; instead it irradiates "backwards" and, in the process, maliciously contaminates the positive memories pertaining to the times before the traumatic event. The suspicious and half-hearted reception in the host country makes the exile's assimilation arduous. The inability or the unwillingness to revisit one's homeland blocks access to emotional refueling. The child within is orphaned and must reclaim inch by inch the psychic territory lost. This is achieved with the aid of new transferences, introspection, and creativity, as well as old photographs, music, books, relics, etc. Under such circumstances physical

possessions acquire the status of “linking objects” (Volkan, 1981) in a mourning process that might last a lifetime and still remain incomplete (Pollock, 1989).

Not surprisingly, indulging in nostalgic ruminations seems a psychic luxury to the exile. The place left is so hated that one neither wishes to nor perhaps can idealize it, even retrospectively. The inner object world is thus split and, in an act of ironic retribution, the earlier positive representations of the land are themselves sent into an intrapsychic exile. The “sweet” element of the “bitter-sweet” pleasure of nostalgia is lost, leaving nothing

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but bitterness. Yet another factor that precludes the exile from feeling nostalgia is his guilt. Like the immigrant, he feels guilty over success and affluence but unlike the immigrant, he has the additional burden of the “survivor's guilt” (Niederland, 1968). After all, many of his kin have perished under the circumstances that he has fled. This more powerful core of guilt prevents him from “enjoying” the nostalgic regression. There is an adaptive reason for not feeling nostalgia too. “The impossibility of returning concentrates all one's efforts in the direction of integration with the new surroundings” (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989, p. 147). Together, these traumatic, guilty, and adaptive reasons deprive the exile of the capacity to retrospectively idealize his homeland and use this exalted view as a handy defense against frustrations in his current life. I call this phenomenon, “the poisoning of nostalgia.”

Technical Issues

Elsewhere, I have outlined eight guidelines that need to be kept in mind while working with immigrant patients in psychoanalysis or psychoanalytic psychotherapy (Akhtar, 1995). I suggest that the analyst must (1) remember that certain aspects of the setting and frame (e.g., punctuality) are affected by cultural differences; (2) help the patients disengage cultural conflicts from intrapsychic conflicts; (3) observe the ways in which cultural differences affect transference and countertransference; (4) empathize with the patient's geographical and historical dislocation; (5) tolerate the patient's seemingly inoptimal individuation, multiple transferences, and the profusion of relatives in the associative material; (6) remain attuned, in the case of bilingual patients, to the adaptive and defensive linguistic shifts; (7) be prepared to play a relatively greater role as a “new object;” and (8) recognize that mourning-like elements, integral to all analyses, carry greater significance in the treatment of immigrants. He must empathize with the immigrant analysand's loss of

historical continuity and the need for its restoration. Patients' lapses into nostalgia must find respect and empathic counterresonance in the analyst. The analyst, however, must not overlook that nostalgic yearning can be used as a psychic ointment to soothe frustration and rage in the external reality as well as in the transference. Expression of warm feelings about things "back home" can also be a shy deflection of acknowledging the pleasure of belonging in the here and now of the analyst's office.

At the same time, the contemporary emphasis that the immigrant places upon his nostalgic yearning must not make one overlook that the sentiment attributed to the loss of one's homeland might have its basis in

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an incomplete mourning of a disrupted early mother-child relationship. Sterba (1940) was the first to correlate "homesickness" with a longing for the maternal breast. Fenichel (1945) also explained nostalgia as a wish to return to the preoedipal mother. Fodor (1950) went so far as to trace nostalgic yearnings to a deep-seated longing for the undisturbed prenatal state. The elegance of these formulations notwithstanding, Hartmann's (1964) warning regarding the genetic fallacy must be heeded here. In other words, references to prenatal bliss, maternal breast, and preoedipal mother, in this context, should be viewed as largely metaphorical. Combining this caution with a healthy skepticism toward the literalness of the immigrant's current suffering yields a resilient technique that views the lament of contemporary dislocation and the wailing about childhood loss as defending against each other in a dialectical fashion.

Psychoanalytic work with refugees and exiles, however, requires a different technical approach. Instead of allowing psychic space for the elaboration of losses, empathizing with the attendant pain, and analyzing its defensive functions, the analyst has to deal with an individual who does not miss his country of origin at all. Since such an individual is almost invariably deeply traumatized, the analyst's task, for a long time, remains centered upon empathizing with how *bad*, and not how good, the country that has been left indeed was. As this work proceeds, the patient may unwittingly begin to reveal the existence of some pleasant memories of the homeland as well. The analyst, however, must not bring these to the patient's attention too quickly; that would only lead to a defensive recoil. After a sufficient length of time and with the security that their complaints are regarded as "legitimate"—as they indeed often are—the patient might be prepared to bring into his full consciousness the opposite constellation of his attitude.³ To thus undo the psychic compartmentalization caused by splitting necessitates that the analyst retain

the patient's contradictory emotional attitudes in mind and make “bridging interventions” (Kernberg, 1975, p. 96; Akhtar, 1998) that gently demonstrate their co-existence to the patient. Indeed, the analyst must also analyze the defenses against the emergence of nostalgic longing. He must demonstrate to the patient that the catastrophe which forced him out of his homeland also rendered him unable to recall anything positive about his homeland; the trauma spread backwards to poison the good times before it. In other words, empathy with the “bitter” side of the patient's “negative nostalgia,” interpretive resolution of the defenses against nostalgia, and bridging interventions to

³*In a study of 1,348 Southeast Asian refugees resettled in Vancouver, British Columbia, Bieser and Hyman (1997) found that it was only when safety and predictability of a routine life was restored that these survivors of adversity permitted the past to emerge into consciousness and began experiencing nostalgia.*

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link up the “sweet” with the “bitter” memories of the homeland, are the three mainstays of the analytic treatment of the refugees and exiles.

Summary and Conclusion

The affect of nostalgia, a central aspect of the immigrant's psychic life, is a characteristically bittersweet pleasure. It evokes a poignant mixture of psychic pain and joy. Pain results from the awareness of separation from the now idealized, lost objects and joy from a fantasized reunion with them through reminiscences. Anchored in mournful longing for the early mother-child relationship on the one hand, and serving defensive functions vis-à-vis aggression in the current life on the other hand, the immigrant's nostalgia capitalizes upon his libidinal experiences in the land of origin as well as upon his guilt in voluntarily leaving that land. The psychoanalyst dealing with such an immigrant must offer psychic space, respect, and empathy while keeping an eye upon the hidden transference allusions in nostalgic pleasure as well as upon its screen functions vis-à-vis the past and defensive aims in the here and now.

A different situation is however presented by the severely traumatized immigrant who has had to leave his land against his will. Exile wounds the psyche deeply and results in amounts of aggression that are not easily mournable. The associated lack of emotional refueling through revisiting the

country of origin reduces any chances of libidinally updating the ruptured self experience. Worst, a traumatic departure of this sort leads to an inability to retrospectively idealize the land of origin and thus robs the immigrant of the nostalgic defense. The psychoanalyst dealing with such an immigrant has a task at his hand that is opposite to that he has in dealing with voluntary immigrants. Instead of allowing psychic space for nostalgia and analyzing its defensive functions, he must empathically reflect the inability to experience nostalgia and analyze the defenses against the emergence of this affect.

In sum, whether it is the “privacy of the self” (Khan, 1983) or the theater of the analytic discourse, the immigrant *and* the exile both struggle with defensive alterations of libidinal investment in the memory of their homeland (and its inevitable linkages to the early maternal imagos). The immigrant needs to exaggerate the love which the exile is compelled to deny. By helping the former renunciate such idealization and the latter reclaim the warded off good feelings, the analyst facilitates genuine affection for the country of origin in both types of individuals. And, it is only with such foundation that true commitment to the country of adoption, where life is now to be lived, becomes possible!

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