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On Not Going Home

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I had a piano teacher who used to talk about the most familiar musical cadence – in which a piece returns, after wandering and variation, to its original key, the tonic – as ‘going home’. It seemed so easy when music did it: who wouldn’t want to swat away those black accidentals and come back to sunny C major? These satisfying resolutions are sometimes called ‘perfect cadences’; there is a lovely subspecies called the ‘English cadence’, used often by composers like Tallis and Byrd, in which, just before the expected resolution, a dissonance sharpens its blade and seems about to wreck things – and is then persuaded home, as it should be.

I wish I could hear that English cadence again, the way I first properly heard it in Durham Cathedral. I was 11 years old. During the lesson, we choristers had been exchanging notes, probably sniggering at one of the more pompous priests – the one who, as he processed towards his stall, held his clasped hands pointing outwards from his breast, like a pious fish – and then we were up on our feet, and were singing ‘O Nata Lux’ by Thomas Tallis^[1]. I knew the piece but hadn’t really listened to it. Now I was struck – assaulted, thrown – by its utter beauty: the soft equanimity of its articulation, like the voice of justice; the sweet dissonance, welcome as pain. That dissonance, with its distinctive Tudor sound, is partly produced by a movement known as ‘false relation’, in which the note you expect to hear in the harmony of a chord is shadowed by its nearest relation – the same note but a semitone off. As the Tallis was ending, I saw a middle-aged woman with a canvas shoulder-bag enter the shadowy hinterland at the back of the huge building. Standing so far away, a singular figure, she might have been a tentative tourist. But I knew the full bag, that coat I always wanted to be a bit more impressive than it was, the anxious rectitude of my mother’s posture. She came every Tuesday

afternoon, because the girls' school she taught at got out early then. My parents lived only a mile or so from the cathedral, but I had to board; Tuesday afternoons, before I went back to school, gave me the chance to exchange a few words, and grab whatever she brought in that bag – comics and sweets; and more reliably, socks.

In my memory this is exactly what happened: the radiance of the music, the revelation of its beauty, the final cadences of the Tallis, and my happy glimpsing of my mother. But it happened 37 years ago, and the scene has a convenient, dream-like composition. Perhaps I have really dreamed it. As I get older I dream more frequently of that magnificent cathedral – the long grey cool interior hanging somehow like memory itself. These are intense experiences, from which I awake hearing every single note of a piece of remembered music; happy dreams, never troubled. I like returning to that place in my sleep, even look forward to it.

But real life is a different matter. The few occasions I have returned to Durham have been strangely disappointing. My parents no longer live there; I no longer live in the country. The city has become a dream. Herodotus says that the Scythians were hard to defeat because they had no cities or settled forts: 'they carry their houses with them and shoot with bows from horseback ... their dwellings are on their wagons. How then can they fail to be invincible and inaccessible for others?' To have a home is to become vulnerable. Not just to the attacks of others, but to our own adventures in alienation. I left my home twice – the first time, just after university, when I went to London, in the familiar march of the provincial for the metropolis. I borrowed a thousand pounds from the NatWest bank in Durham (an account I still have), rented a van one-way, put everything I owned into it, and drove south; I remember thinking, as I waved at my parents and my sister, that the gesture was both authentic and oddly artificial, the authorised novelistic journey. In this way, many of us are homeless: the exodus of expansion. The second departure occurred in 1995, when at the age of thirty I left Britain for the United States. I was married to an American – to put it more precisely, I was married to an American citizen whose French father and Canadian mother, themselves immigrants, lived in the States. We had no children, and America would surely be new and exciting. We might even stay there for a few years – five at the most?

I have now lived 18 years in the United States. It's a bit feeble to say I didn't expect to stay that long; and ungrateful, or even meaningless or dishonest, to say I didn't want to. I must have wanted to; there has been plenty of gain. But I had so little concept of what might be lost. 'Losing a country', or 'losing a home', if I gave the matter much thought when I was young, was an acute world-historical event, forcibly meted out on the victim, lamented and canonised in literature and theory as 'exile' or 'displacement', and defined with appropriate terminality by Edward Said in his essay, 'Reflections on Exile':

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind for ever.

Said's emphasis on the self's 'true home' has a slightly theological, or perhaps Platonic, sound. When there is such universal homelessness, of both the forced and the unforced kind, the idea of a 'true home' surely suffers an amount of unsympathetic modification. Perhaps Said's implication is that unwanted homelessness only bears down on those who have a true home and thus always reinforces the purity of the origin, while voluntary homelessness – the softer emigration I am trying to define – means that home can't have been very 'true' after all. I doubt he intended that, but nonetheless, the desert of exile seems to need the oasis of primal belonging, the two held in a biblical clasp.

In that essay, Said distinguishes between exile, refugee, expatriate and émigré. Exile, as he understands it, is tragic homelessness, connected to the ancient sentence of banishment; he approves of Adorno's subtitle to *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Mutilated Life*. It's hard to see how the milder, unforced journey I am describing could belong to this grander vision of suffering. 'Not going home' is not exactly the same as 'homelessness'. That nice old boarding school standby, 'homesickness', might fit better, particularly if allowed a certain doubleness. I am sometimes homesick, where homesickness is a kind of longing for Britain and an irritation with Britain: sickness *for* and sickness *of*. I bump into plenty of people in America who tell me that they miss their native countries – Britain, Germany, Russia, Holland, South Africa – and who in the next breath say they cannot imagine returning. It is possible, I suppose, to miss home terribly, not know what home really is anymore, and refuse to go home, all at once. Such a tangle of feelings might then be a definition of luxurious freedom, as far removed from Said's tragic homelessness as can be imagined.

Logically, a refusal to go home should validate, negatively, the very idea of home, rather in the way that Said's idea of exile validates the idea of an original 'true home'. But perhaps the refusal to go home is consequent on the loss, or lack, of home: as if those fortunate expatriates were really saying to me: 'I couldn't go back home because I wouldn't know how to anymore.' And there is 'Home' and 'a home'. Authors used to be described on book dust-jackets as 'making a home': 'Mr Blackmur makes his home in Princeton, New Jersey.' I have made a home in the United States, but it is not quite Home. For instance, I have no desire to become an American citizen. Recently, when I arrived at Boston, the immigration officer

commented on the length of time I've held a Green Card. 'A Green Card is usually considered a path to citizenship,' he said, a sentiment both irritatingly reproving and movingly patriotic. I mumbled something about how he was perfectly correct, and left it at that. But consider the fundamental openness and generosity of the gesture (along with the undeniable coercion): it's hard to imagine his British counterpart so freely offering citizenship – as if it were, indeed, uncomplicatedly on offer, a service or commodity. He was generously saying, 'Would you like to be an American citizen?' along with the less generous: 'Why don't you want to be an American citizen?' Can we imagine either sentiment being expressed at Heathrow airport? The poet and novelist Patrick McGuinness, in his forthcoming book *Other People's Countries* (itself a rich analysis of home and homelessness; McGuinness is half-Irish and half-Belgian) quotes Simenon, who was asked why he didn't change his nationality, 'the way successful francophone Belgians often did'. Simenon replied: 'There was no reason for me to be born Belgian, so there's no reason for me to stop being Belgian.' I wanted to say something similar, less wittily, to the immigration officer: precisely because I don't need to become an American citizen, to take citizenship would seem flippant; leave its benefits for those who need a new land.

So whatever this state I am talking about is, this 'not going home', it is not tragic; there's probably something a bit ridiculous in these privileged laments – oh, sing 'dem Harvard blues, white boy! But I am trying to describe *some* kind of loss, some kind of falling away. (The gain is obvious enough and thus less interesting to analyse.) I asked Christopher Hitchens, long before he was terminally ill, where he would go if he had only a few weeks to live. Would he stay in America? 'No, I'd go to Dartmoor, without a doubt,' he told me. It was the landscape of his childhood. Dartmoor, not the MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. It's not uncommon for expatriates, émigrés, refugees and travellers to want to die 'at home'. The desire to return, after so long away, is gladly irrational, and is perhaps premised on the loss of the original home (as the refusal to go home may also be premised on the loss of home). Home swells as a sentiment because it has disappeared as an achievable reality. Marusya Tatarovich, the heroine of the novel *A Foreign Woman*, by the Russian émigré writer Sergei Dovlatov, comes to the conclusion that she has made a mistake in leaving Russia for New York City, and decides to return. Dovlatov, who left the Soviet Union for America in 1979, and who appears as himself in the novel, tries to talk her out of it. You've just forgotten what life is like there, he says: 'The rudeness, the lies.' She replies: 'If people are rude in Moscow, at least it's in Russian.' But she stays in America. I once saw, in Germany, a small exhibition of Samuel Beckett's correspondence with his German publisher. Many brief note-cards were arranged chronologically, the last written only a few months before his death. Beckett wrote to his publisher not in German but in French, a language in which he was deeply at home; but in the final year of his life, he switched to English. 'Going home,' I

thought.

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After so many years, life in America, or in my small part of America, has become my life. And life is made up of particulars: friends, conversation, dailiness of all sorts. I love, for instance, that certain New England states alert drivers that they are entering a built-up area with the sign: ‘Thickly Settled’. I love the Hudson River, its steady brown flow; generally, I like the way most American rivers make their European rivals look like wan streams. There is the crimson livery of the Boar’s Head trucks[2]. Or the way the mailman, delivering the post in the dark winter afternoon, wears a little miner’s lamp on his head, and peers down at his paper bundle. Large American radiators in old apartment buildings, with their hissing and ghostly clanking. A certain general store in New Hampshire that sells winter boots, hand cream, excellent bacon and firearms. I cherish the phrase, ‘Take it easy,’ and the scandalous idea that people would actually say this to each other! I am even fond, now, of things that reliably irritate Europeans, especially the British: American sports, say; or the fact that the word *fortnight* does not exist; that *fudge* is just chocolate; and that seemingly no one can properly pronounce the words *croissant*, *milieu* or *bourgeois*.

But there is always the reality of a certain outsider-dom. Take the beautiful American train horn, the crushed klaxon peal you can hear almost anywhere in the States: at the end of my street at night-time, across a New Hampshire valley, in some small Midwestern town – a crumple of notes, blown out on an easy, loitering wail[3]. It sounds less like a horn than a sudden prairie wind or an animal’s cry. That big easy loiter is, for me, the sound of America, whatever America is. But it must also be ‘the sound of America’ for thousands, perhaps millions of non-Americans. It’s a shared possession, not a personal one. I’m outside it; I appreciate it, as something slightly distant. It is unhistorical for me: it doesn’t have my past in it, drags no old associations. (We lived about half a mile from Durham station, and from my bedroom, at night I could hear the arhythmic thunder of the big yellow-nosed Deltic diesels, as they pulled their shabby carriages onto the Victorian viaduct that curves out of town, bound for London or Edinburgh, and sometimes blew their parsimonious horns – the British Rail minor third.)

Or suppose I am looking down our Boston street, in dead summer. I see a familiar life: the clapboard houses, the porches, the heat-mirage hanging over the patched road (snakes of asphalt like black chewing gum), the grey cement sidewalks (signed in one place, when the cement was new, by three young siblings), the heavy maple trees, the unkempt willow down at the end, an old white Cadillac with the bumper sticker ‘Ted Kennedy has killed more people than my gun,’ and I feel ... nothing: some recognition, but no comprehension, no real connection, no past, despite all the years I have lived there – just a tugging distance from it

all. A panic suddenly overtakes me, and I wonder: how did I get here? And then the moment passes, and ordinary life closes itself around what had seemed, for a moment, a desperate lack.

Edward Said says that it is no surprise that exiles are often novelists, chess players, intellectuals. ‘The exile’s new world, logically enough, is unnatural, and its unreality resembles fiction.’ He reminds us that Georg Lukács considered the novel the great form of what Lukács called ‘transcendental homelessness’. I am not an exile, but it is sometimes hard to shake the ‘unreality’ Said speaks of. I watch my children grow up as Americans in the same way that I might read about, or create, fictional characters. They are not fictional, of course, but their Americanism can sometimes seem unreal to me. ‘I have an American seventh-grader,’ I say to myself with amazement, as I watch my 12-year-old daughter perform at one of those dastardly school events always held in gymnasiums. Doubtless, amazement attends all the stages of a child’s growth – all is unexpected. But there is also that strange distance, the light veil of alienation thrown over everything.

And then there is the same light veil thrown over everything when I go back to Britain. When I was first living in the States, I was eager to keep up with life ‘back at home’ – who was in the cabinet, the new music, what people were saying in the newspapers, how the schools were doing, the price of petrol, the shape of friends’ lives. It became harder to do so, because the meaning of these things grew less and less personal. For me, English reality has disappeared into memory, has ‘changed itself to past’, as Larkin has it. I know very little about modern daily life in London, or Edinburgh, or Durham. There’s a quality of masquerade when I return, as if I were putting on my wedding suit, to see if it still fits.

In America, I crave the English reality that has disappeared; childhood seems breathingly close. But the sense of masquerade persists: I gorge on nostalgia, on fondnesses that might have embarrassed me when I lived in Britain. Geoff Dyer writes funnily, in *Out of Sheer Rage*, about the obsession with reading the TV listings in English papers he developed when he was living in Italy, even though he had never watched TV when he lived in England, and didn’t like it. To hear a Geordie voice on an American news programme leaves me flushed with longing: the dance of that dialect, with its seasick Scandinavian pitch. And all those fabulous words: *segs* (the metal plates you’d bang onto your shoe-heels, to make sparks on the ground and act like a hard-nut); *kets* (‘sweets’); *neb* (‘nose’); *nowt* (‘nothing’); *stotty-cake* (a kind of flat, doughy bread) *claggy* (‘sticky’). The way Northerners say *eee*, as an exclamation: ‘Eee, it’s red-hot today!’ (Any temperature over about 72 degrees.) Recently, I heard the old song ‘When the Boat Comes In’ on National Public Radio, and I almost wept^[4].

Now come here little Jacky

Now I've smoked me packy,
 Let's have some cracky
 Till the boat comes in.
 And you shall have a fishy
 On a little dishy
 You shall have a fishy
 When the boat comes in.

But I really disliked that song when I was a boy. I never had a very Northern accent. My father was born in London. It was important to my Scottish petty-bourgeois mother that I didn't sound like a Geordie. Friends used to say, with a bit of menace in their voices: 'You don't talk like a Durham lad. Where are you from?' Sometimes it was necessary to mimic the accent, to fit in, or avoid getting beaten up. I could never say, as the man in the song 'Home Newcastle' foolishly does: 'And I'm proud to be a Geordie/And to live in Geordie-land.'

My town was the university and the cathedral: it seemed that almost everyone who lived on our street was an academic (like my father), or a clergyman; and they didn't sound like Geordies. How vivid all those neighbours are, in my mind! And how strange they were. I think now that in the 1970s I caught the fading comet-end of allowable eccentricity. There was Mrs Jolley, though she was in fact anything but, who walked with three canes, one for the left leg and two (bound together with string) for the right. There was the dry, bony Reader in Classical Epigraphy, Dr Fowler, who was fond of repeating, as a kind of motto: 'Tell it not in Gath!' Next door to us, separated only by a wall, lived a profoundly learned scholar, the university librarian. He knew many languages, and pages of Dickens by heart, and sometimes we would hear him pacing up and down, reciting and laughing. A sweet, innocent, Dickensian character himself: one day, he was on the bus with my father, going to the university, and embarrassed him by loudly opining: 'You could say that the girls who serve in Woolworth's are the *intellectual scum of the earth*.' This academic-religious world had obscure prohibitions and rules. There was a historian who for some reason forbade his two slightly green-hued, fearsomely clever daughters from watching *The Forsyte Saga* on television; and a thrifty professor of divinity whose household had no television and who, according to my mother, always had sausages, never turkey, on Christmas Day – that family's fantastical drabness sealed in my childish mind by the information that he and his wife and three children exchanged only cotton handkerchiefs as presents. Our headmaster at the Durham Chorister School, also a clergyman, told us that we should start our essays 'with a bang: Bacon began his essay on Gardens, "God Almighty first planted a Garden": try to emulate Bacon.' He had an elaborate system of mnemonics to help us with difficult Latin words. Whenever the word *unde* appeared in a text, he would suck on his pipe and intone, in

Oxonian basso: ‘Marks and Spencer, Marks and Spencer!’ This was supposed to trigger, ‘Where do you get your undies?’ ‘From Marks and Spencer.’ And then lead us to the meaning of the word, which is: ‘where’. As you can see, I haven’t forgotten it.

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A recent editorial in the Brooklyn-based literary journal *n+1* inveighed against so-called ‘World Literature’. In their opinion, postcolonial writing has lost its political bite and now fills its toothless face at the trough of global capitalism. *Midnight’s Children* gave way, as it were, to the inoffensive Rushdie of *The Ground beneath Her Feet*. The essay argued that World Literature should really be called Global Literature. It has its royalty, like Coetzee and Ondaatje, Mohsin Hamid and Kiran Desai; its prizes (the Nobel, the International Man Booker), its festivals (Jaipur, Hay), and its intellectual support system (the universities). The success of World Literature, the editors said, is a by-product of successful capitalism, and of a globalised aesthetic that prizes writers who, like Orhan Pamuk, Ma Jian and Haruki Murakami, are thought to have transcended local issues and acquired a ‘universal relevance’.

It’s hard not to share the derision, once the victim has been so tendentiously trussed. Who could possibly approve of this complacent, festival-haunting, unit-shifting, prize-winning monster? Who wouldn’t choose a ‘thorny internationalism’ over the ‘smoothly global’, untranslatable felicities over windy width – and Elena Ferrante over Kamila Shamsie? In the end, a case was being made for well-written, vital, challenging literature, full of sharp local particularities, wherever it turns up in the world; and so there was inevitably something a bit random about the writers chosen for the preferred canon of Thorny Internationalists: Elena Ferrante, Kirill Medvedev, Samanth Subramanian, Juan Villoro.

Perhaps, though, postcolonial literature hasn’t only morphed into a bloated World Lit. One of its new branches may be a significant contemporary literature that moves between, and powerfully treats, questions of homelessness, displacement, emigration, voluntary or economic migration, and even flaneurial tourism; a literature that blurs the demarcations offered in ‘Reflections on Exile’, because emigration itself has become more complex, amorphous and widespread. *N+1* inaudibly conceded as much when it praised *Open City*, by Teju Cole, a Nigerian writer based in New York City, whose first novel is narrated by a young half-Nigerian, half-German psychiatry intern, and which mixes elements of familiar postcoloniality with W.G. Sebald’s flaneurial émigré sensibility.

But to *Open City* could be added Sebald’s work; McGuinness’s *Other People’s Countries*; the half-Nigerian, half-Ghanaian novelist Taiye Selasi; Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland*, which makes acute distinctions between the privileged economic migration of the Dutch banker who narrates the novel, and the much less privileged immigration of the Trinidadian trickster who

is the book's tragic hero; the work of the Bosnian-American writer, Aleksandar Hemon; Marilynne Robinson's *Home*; some of the writing of Geoff Dyer; the stories of Nam Le, a Vietnamese-born Australian; the fiction and essays of the Indian novelist Amit Chaudhuri.

The 'great movement of peoples that was to take place in the second half of the 20th century', that V.S. Naipaul spoke of in *The Enigma of Arrival* was, as Naipaul put it, 'a movement between all the continents'. It could no longer be confined to a single paradigm (post-colonialism, internationalism, globalism, world literature). The jet engine has probably had a greater impact than the internet. It brings a Nigerian to New York, a Bosnian to Chicago, a Mexican to Berlin, an Australian to London, a German to Manchester. It brought one of *n+1*'s founding editors, Keith Gessen, as a little boy, from Russia to America in 1981, and now takes him back and forth between those countries (a liberty unknown to émigrés like Nabokov or Sergei Dovlatov).

Recall Lukács's phrase 'transcendental homelessness'. What I have been describing, both in my own life and in the lives of others, is more like secular homelessness. It cannot claim the theological prestige of the transcendent. Perhaps it is not even homelessness; *homelooseness* (with an admixture of loss) might be the necessary (hideous) neologism: in which the ties that might bind one to Home have been loosened, perhaps happily, perhaps unhappily, perhaps permanently, perhaps only temporarily. Clearly, this secular homelessness overlaps, at times, with the more established categories of emigration, exile and postcolonial movement. Just as clearly, it diverges from them at times. Sebald, a German writer who lived most of his adult life in England (and who was thus perhaps an emigrant, certainly an immigrant, but not exactly an émigré, nor an exile), had an exquisite sense of the varieties of not-belonging. He came to Manchester, from Germany, in the mid-1960s, as a graduate student. He returned, briefly, to Switzerland, and then came back to England in 1970, to take a lectureship at the University of East Anglia. The pattern of his own emigration is one of secular homelessness or homelooseness. He had the economic freedom to return to West Germany; and once he was well known, in the mid-1990s, he could have worked almost anywhere he wanted to.

Sebald was interested, however, not in his own wandering, but in an emigration and displacement closer to tragic or transcendental homelessness. In *The Emigrants*, he wrote about four such wanderers: Dr Henry Selwyn, a Lithuanian Jew who arrived in Britain at the beginning of the 20th century, and who lived a life of stealthy masquerade as an English doctor, before committing suicide late in life; Paul Bereyter, a German who because of his part-Jewish ancestry was prohibited from teaching during the Third Reich, never recovered from this setback, and later committed suicide; Sebald's great-uncle, Adelwarth, who arrived in America in the 1920s, worked as a servant for a wealthy family on Long Island, but ended up in a mental asylum in Ithaca, New York; and Max Ferber, a fictional character based on

the painter Frank Auerbach, who left his parents behind in Germany in 1939, when he escaped for England.

When *The Emigrants* appeared in Michael Hulse's English translation, in 1996, it was often described as a book about four victims of the Holocaust, which it was not – only two of the emigrants are direct victims. Because the book is deeply invested in questions of fictionality, decipherment and archival witness – and because of the book's teasing photographs – it was also often assumed that these were fictional or fictionalised sketches. Almost the opposite is true. They are more like documentary life-studies; Sebald told me in an interview that about 90 per cent of the photographs were 'what you would describe as authentic, i.e., they really did come out of the photo albums of the people described in those texts and are a direct testimony to the fact that these people did exist in that particular shape and form.' Sebald did indeed meet Dr Selwyn in 1970; Paul Bereyter was Sebald's primary school teacher; his great-uncle Adelwarth immigrated to America in the 1920s; and Max Ferber's life was closely modelled on Frank Auerbach's.

None of this suggests that Sebald doesn't enrich the documentary evidence in all kinds of subtle, slippery, fictive ways. And one of the subtleties involves his relationship, as a kind of emigrant, with his subjects. Henry Selwyn and Max Ferber were, essentially, political refugees, from different waves of 20th-century Jewish flight; Adelwarth was an economic immigrant; and Paul Bereyter became an inner emigrant, a postwar German survivor who, in the end, didn't survive. And Sebald himself? His own emigration would seem to play out in a minor key, by comparison. Officially, he could return to his homeland whenever he wanted. But perhaps he had decided, for political reasons, that he could never go home again, could never return to a country whose unfinished postwar business had so disgusted him in the 1960s.

Sebald is a ghostly presence in *The Emigrants*. We are offered only glimpses of the German academic in England. Yet in another way, the author is strongly present, felt as a steady insistence in regulated hysteria. Who is this apparently well-established professor, so obsessed with the lives of his subjects that he crosses Europe or the Atlantic to interview their relatives, ransack their archives, frown over their photograph albums, and follow their journeys? There is a beautiful moment in the first story, about Dr Henry Selwyn, when the text glances at Sebald's own, lesser homelessness, and then glances away, as if politely conceding its smaller claim on tragedy:

On one of these visits, Clara being away in town, Dr Selwyn and I had a long talk prompted by his asking whether I was ever homesick. I could not think of any adequate reply, but Dr Selwyn, after a pause for thought, confessed (no other

word will do) that in recent years he had been beset by homesickness more and more.

Sebald then describes Dr Selwyn's homesickness for the village in Lithuania he had to leave at the age of seven. We hear about the horse ride to the station, the train journey to Riga, the ship from Riga, and the arrival in a broad river estuary:

All the emigrants had gathered on deck and were waiting for the Statue of Liberty to appear out of the drifting mist, since everyone of them had booked a passage to Americum, as we called it. When we disembarked we were still in no doubt whatsoever that beneath our feet was the soil of the New World, of the Promised City of New York. But in fact, as we learned some time later to our dismay (the ship having long since cast off again), we had gone ashore in London.

I find moving the way in which Sebald's homesickness becomes Selwyn's, is swallowed by the acuter claims of the larger narrative. We can only guess at the smothered anguish in Sebald's primly painful aside: 'I could not think of any adequate reply.' There is also something touchingly estranged, unhoused even, about Sebald's language – this peculiar, reticent, antiquarian prose, in an English created by Michael Hulse and then strenuously worked over by the bilingual author.

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Sebald seems to know the difference between homesickness and homelessness. If there is anguish, there is also discretion: how could my loss adequately compare with yours? Where exile is often marked by the absolutism of the separation, secular homelessness is marked by a certain provisionality, a structure of departure and return that may not end. This is a powerful motif in the work of Aleksandar Hemon, a Bosnian-American writer who came to the States from Sarajevo, in 1992, only to discover that the siege of his hometown prohibited his return. Hemon stayed in America, learned how to write a brilliant, Nabokovian English (a feat in some sense greater than Nabokov's because achieved at a steroidal pace), and published his first book, *The Question of Bruno*, in 2000 (dedicated to his wife, and to Sarajevo). Once the Bosnian war was over, Hemon could, presumably, have returned to his native city. What had not been a choice became one; he decided to make himself into an American writer.

Hemon's work stages both his departure and return. In the novella *Blind Jozef Pronek & Dead Souls*, Pronek arrives in America on a student exchange programme. Like Hemon, Pronek is from Sarajevo, is trapped by the war, and stays in America. He finds the United

States a bewildering, alienating place, full of vulgarity and ignorance. When, near the end of the story, he returns to Sarajevo, the reader expects him to stay. Though the city is terribly damaged, and familiar landmarks have disappeared, he seems to have come back to his ‘true home’ – where ‘every place had a name, and everybody and everything in that place had a name, and you could never be nowhere, because there was something everywhere.’ Sarajevo, it seems, is where names and things, words and referents, are primally united. He goes through his parents’ apartment, touching everything:

the clean, striped tablecloth; the radio, with seven ivory-coloured buttons and a Donald Duck sticker; the grinning African masks; the carpets with intricate, yet familiar, geometric patterns, full of gashes, from under which the parquet was gone, burned in the rusty iron stove in the corner; the demitasse, the coffee grinder, the spoons; Father’s suits, damp, with shrapnel slashes ...

But Jozef doesn’t stay, and as the novella closes, we see him in Vienna airport, about to board a flight to America:

He did not want to fly to Chicago. He imagined walking from Vienna to the Atlantic Ocean, and then hopping on a slow transatlantic steamer. It would take a month to get across the ocean, and he would be on the sea, land and borders nowhere to be found. Then he would see the Statue of Liberty and walk slowly to Chicago, stopping wherever he wished, talking to people, telling them stories about far-off lands, where people ate honey and pickles, where no one put ice in the water, where pigeons nested in pantries.

It’s as if jet flight is existentially shallow; a slower journey would enact the gravity and enormity of the transformation. Pronek returns to America, but must take his home with him, and must try to tell incomprehensible stories – pigeons in the attics, honey and pickles – of that home to a people who readily confuse Bosnia with Slovakia, and write off the war as ‘thousands of years of hatred’. And at the same time, he is making a new home in America. Or not quite: for he will stay in America, but will, it seems, never rid himself of the idea that putting ice in the water is a superfluity. And like Sebald, though in a different register, Hemon writes a prose that doesn’t sound smoothly native – a fractionally homeless prose. Like his master, Nabokov, he has the immigrant’s love of puns, of finding buried meanings in words that have become flattened in English, like *vacuous* and *petrified*. One character has ‘a sagely beard’, another ‘fenestral glasses’. Tea is described as ‘limpid’.

Exile is acute, massive, transformative, but secular homelessness, because it moves along its

axis of departure and return, can be banal, welcome, necessary, continuous. There is the movement of the provincial to the metropolis, or the journey out of one social class into another. This was my mother's journey from Scotland to England, my father's journey from the working classes into the middle classes, my short drive from Durham to London. It is Ursula Brangwen's struggle for departure, in *The Rainbow*, when she quarrels with her parents about leaving her home in the Midlands and becoming a teacher in Kingston upon Thames – what her father calls 'dancing off to th'other side of London'.

Most of us have to leave home, at least once; there is the need to leave, the difficulty of returning, and then, in later life as one's parents begin to falter, the need to return again. Secular homelessness, not the singular extremity of the exile or the chosenness of biblical diaspora, might be the inevitable ordinary state. Secular homelessness is not just what will always occur in Eden, but what should occur, again and again. There is a beautiful section at the end of Ismail Kadare's great novel *Chronicle in Stone* entitled 'Draft of a Memorial Plaque'. Kadare was born, in 1936, in the city of Gjirokastër, in southern Albania, but has spent much of his writing life in Paris. *Chronicle in Stone* is a joyful, comic tribute to the ancient native city he left behind. At the end of the book, Kadare directly addresses his hometown: 'Often, striding along wide lighted boulevards in foreign cities, I somehow stumble in places where no one ever trips. Passersby turn in surprise, but I always know it's you. You emerge from the asphalt all of a sudden and then sink back down straight away.' It is Kadare's nicely humdrum version of the moment in Proust when Marcel stumbles on the uneven stones in the Guermantes' courtyard, and memory opens itself up.

If it didn't trip you up, you wouldn't remember anything. For the émigré writer, returning to live in Gjirokastër is doubtless unimaginable, in rather the way that living in Paris must have seemed unimaginable when Kadare was a young man in Albania. But a life without stumbling is also unimaginable: perhaps to be in between two places, to be at home in neither, is the inevitable fallen state, almost as natural as being at home in one place.

*

Almost. But not quite. When I left this country 18 years ago, I didn't know how strangely departure would obliterate return: how could I have done? It's one of time's lessons, and can only be learned temporally. What is peculiar, even a little bitter, about living for so many years away from the country of my birth, is the slow revelation that I made a large choice a long time ago that did not resemble a large choice at the time; that it has taken years for me to see this; and that this process of retrospective comprehension in fact constitutes a life – is indeed how life is lived. Freud has a wonderful word, 'afterwardness', which I need to borrow, even at the cost of kidnapping it from its very different context. To think about home and the departure from home, about not going home and no longer feeling able to go home, is to be

filled with a remarkable sense of ‘afterwardness’: it is too late to do anything about it now, and too late to know what should have been done. And that may be all right.

My Scottish grandmother used to play a game, in which she entered the room with her hands behind her back. You had to guess which hand held a sweet, as she intoned: ‘Which hand do you tak, the richt or the wrang?’ When we were children, the decision seemed momentous: you *had* at all costs to avoid the disappointment of the empty ‘wrang hand’.

Which did I choose?

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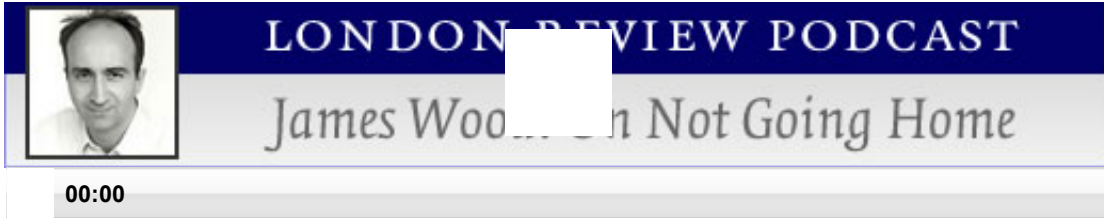


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