In Exilium

The Language and Experience of Exile

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> *"Exile did not come into being yesterday; it matters little how we define it. But before we try to define it, we should absorb its formula, its figure and cipher."*
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> – *Richard Exner*[1]

When we read exile literature, we are given a glimpse into the way that an individual has endured, suffered, lived and lost, and the wisdom that comes from this experience. The wanderer, the stranger, the exile, has acquired an archetypal status in our texts, no different from the hero, the villain, or the lover. From Ovid to Victor Hugo, Oscar Wilde to Edwidge Danticat, we read the words of exiled writers and weep, then rejoice when home, happiness, and belonging are found at last. Although exile as a theme spans genres, time periods, and nationalities, it is often rendered in a common language of loss, one that often strikes us with a sort of mythic intensity. Exile remains a highly personal subject, charged with a language that is emotive, lyrical, and poetic, and one that lends toward a literature focusing upon individual experience, even if that experience is a part of a group or collective story of exile. Exile is both universal and deeply personal, a theme that resonates, even if only for a moment, within all of us.

As we seek to gain an understanding of this language of exile in literature, it helps to examine the etymological history of the word. The word "exile" shows an evolving connection to the

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[1] Richard Exner, "Exul Póeta: Theme and Variations." *Books Abroad* 50, no. 2 (1976): 285–295.

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experience of undergoing exile, rather than simply a state or action. In Latin, the word *exilium* means "banishment." An *exul* is a "banished person." But, when we break this down further into the Proto Indo-European morphemes, we get *ex*, which means "away" and *al*, which indicates "wandering."[2] *Al* is also the root of the Greek word *alaomai*, which means "to wander or roam." Considering this word etymologically, we see that someone is not just "in exile" the way they might be "in France" or "in legal trouble." The roots of the word "exile" lean toward a relationship between the individual and the society and the enduring connection to one's native soil. An exile wanders; an exile is banished from the center. Writes Andre Aciman:

> 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."[3]

The exile cannot ever escape being away; "away" is at the very root of the word itself.

The word "exile" changes moving away from the Latin and Greek into the Old English and Germanic traditions. In Old English, exile was denoted by the words *wrecca* and *wræc*, which, depending on the translation, signify "wretch," "misery," "stranger," or "exile."[4] This usage represents a shift away from a place-based concept toward a more emotive understanding. Here, exile is associated with pain, sadness, loneliness, and misery. We see this in the Old English poem, "The Wanderer." The text reads:

> Oft him anhaga
> are gebideð,
> metudes miltse,
> þeah þe he modcearig
> geond lagulade
> longe sceolde

[2] Douglas Harper, "Exile." Online Etymology Dictionary. 2020, https://www.etymonline.com/word/exile.

[3] André Aciman, "Editor's Foreword: Permanent Transients," in *Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language, and Loss*, ed. André Aciman (New York: The New York Press, 1999), 9–14.

[4] Harper.

hreran mid hondum
hrimcealde sæ
wadan wræclastas.
…
wyrd seo mære,
ond þas stanhleoþu
stormas cnyssað,
hrið hreosende
hrusan bindeð,
wintres woma,
þonne won cymeð,
nipeð nihtscua,
norþan onsendeð
hreo hæglfare
hæleþum on andan.
Eall is earfoðlic
eorþan rice,
onwendeð wyrda gesceaft
weoruld under heofonum.

[He who is alone often lives to find favor, mildness of the Lord, even though he has long had to stir with his arms the frost-cold sea, troubled in heart over the water-way he had to tread the tracks of exile. … Fate the mighty; and storms beat on the stone walls, snow, the herald of winter, falling thick binds the earth when darkness comes and the night-shadow falls, sends harsh hailstones from the north in hatred of men. All earth's kingdom is wretched, the world beneath the skies is changed by the work of the fates.][5]

For this unknown poet, to wander in exile without kinship or kingdom was the cruelest fate that could be imagined, harsher even than death. The poem presents exile in a very visceral sense, in "frost-cold" isolation. The exile is relegated to the realm outside the safety and security of the settlement wall, separated from the sense of belonging that comes with home and community.

[5] "The Wanderer," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (Vol. 1, 8th edition), ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: Norton, 2006), 112–113. Original Old English text taken from Anglo-Saxons.net.

Alienated from the realm of humanity, he is exposed to the cruelty of nature, signified by hailstones, snow, winter and darkness.

Today, in the modern English language, although we do use the Latin derivative exile, the connotation of the term maintains the emotional base from the Old English. We may speak in the superficial sense of "undergoing exile," but the context in which it is used almost always points toward strong feelings of suffering and displacement from home. To consider exile by its literal definition, as a banishment or expulsion, only hints at the full scope of its meaning. To truly understand exile, one must consider the full "language of exile," a language of boundaries and borders, dislocation, displacement, otherness, and loss. Although there are many avenues to pursue within this figurative lexicon, I turn to three particular motifs in this language of exile: the role of memory, center versus borderland, and identity as a function of spatial and temporal orientation.

Memory as Unredeemable Absence

Whether unforgettably haunting, or fleeting and unreliable, memory has a prominent role in the literature of exile, often serving as a subject in and of itself. Memory is often rendered as elusive and transient—something that slowly slips out of reach as time and distance blur events and people who are now relegated to a fading past. In many texts, memory is discussed in terms of seeing the past within the present. This practice becomes a method of preserving a history that is now retained largely through memory rather than tangible people, places, or objects. Andre Aciman talks about this concept in his essay "Shadow Cities," in which he explains how he recreates his former homes within the landscapes of his present:

> I could never understand or appreciate New York unless I could make it the mirror—call it the mnemonic correlate—of other cities I've known or imagined. No Mediterranean can look at a sunset in Manhattan and not think of another sunset thousands of miles away. No Mediterranean can look at the tiny lights speckling the New Jersey cliffs at night and not remember a galaxy of little fishing boats that go out to sea at night, dotting the water with their tiny lights. It is not New

> Jersey I see when I watch the sun set from Riverside Drive.[6]

We see a similar practice in the elegies of lament in medieval literature. These works often function as a catalogue of vanishing aspects of heroic culture, describing a world bereft of warmth or comfort in the wake of this disappearing way of life. Many of these poems use a motif called *ubi sunt*, which literally translates to "where are?" The famous *ubi sunt* passage of the Wanderer asks:

> Hwær cwom mearg? Hwær cwom mago?
> Hwær cwom maþþumgyfa?
> Hwær cwom symbla gesetu?
> Hwær sindon seledreamas?
>
> [Where is the horse gone? Where is the rider?
> Where is the giver of treasure?
> Where are the seats at the feast?
> Where are the revels in the hall?][7]

The underlying sentiment within the *ubi sunt topos* is a feeling of absence and a wailing for this absence. This comes through especially in the repeated phrase "where is/where are," creating a rhythmic quality similar to a cry of mourning. There is an expression of grief in the lines; more importantly, there is a question as to where this loss places the questioner within the broader schema of the present world. It is more than a statement of absence. It is a statement of the disjointed relationship between the questioner and her surroundings, like Aciman's "mnemonic correlates." The true root of the poet's suffering comes from the way the memory of what has been lost overlays that which he experiences in the present, as well as his difficulty in establishing a new sense of belonging.

Center and Borderland

Another central motif in exile literature is that of the center versus the borderland. There are many ways we can interpret this theme in the context of exile, but it is particularly helpful in understanding the connection between exile and identity. If we

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[6] André Aciman, "Shadow Cities," in *Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language, and Loss*, ed. André Aciman (New York: The New York Press, 1999), 19–34.

[7] "The Wanderer."

consider the concept of exile eidetically, we see a movement from inside to outside space, from an organized arena infused with meaning to a chaotic periphery devoid of the life-affirming structures of community and society. To be on the borderland means to lose more than social engagement. It means losing a sense of self within the broader social organization.

This idea reflects what anthropologist Walter Goldschmidt calls "the culturally embedded self." According to Goldschmidt, our identity is built in context to other people and society, with these external factors providing the symbolic language we use to describe and understand our identity.[8] Within this viewpoint, interaction, contact, and involvement are key to forming an understanding of the self as a functioning being within the external world. Akin to Goldschdmidt's culturally embedded self, Viktor Frankl, who wrote *Man's Search for Meaning* on his experience in the concentration camps of the Holocaust, contended that "[b]eing human always points, and is directed to, something, or someone, other than oneself—be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter."[9]

Likewise, Jean-Paul Sartre, also known for enduring his own period of exile, said that in order to have truths about ourselves, we must have contact with others in order to validate these truths as more than hypotheses.[10] Sartre dramatized this idea in the play *No Exit*. The play's characters are imprisoned within a room that lacks mirrors or any other type of reflective surface. There is a significant interaction in which the character Inez helps Estelle to apply her lipstick. Devoid of a mirror, Estelle attempts to find her reflection in the shiny surface of Inez's eye. She exclaims: "Oh, I'm there! But so tiny I can't see myself properly." To which Inez responds: "But I can. Every inch of you. Now ask me questions. I'll be as candid as any looking-glass."[11]

In *No Exit*, it is only within the context of the others that each character can have validation of one's own existence. And, in much

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[8] Walter Goldschmidt, "The Culturally Embedded Self," in *The Human Career: The Self in a Symbolic World* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990) 104–106.

[9] Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon, 1959).

[10] Sartre, Jean-Paul. "Existentialism." Classics of Western Philosophy, edited by Stephen M. Cahn. 5th ed. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999.

[11] Jean-Paul Sartre, "No Exit," in *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage, 1989).

of exile literature, we see a repetition of the theme that being alone, or existing outside of the metaphoric circle of society and community, has the potential to remove one's sense of self or strip down one's identity. In this line of thinking, we can view identity as something that is assembled through reflection in the eyes of others as they mirror back our own personhood.

An extreme example of this idea is tied to certain representations of madness in literature. While the common assumption would be that famous madwomen like Bertha Rochester of Jane Eyre were removed from society as a result of mental illness, there are actually a number of literary works that present the manifesting mental illness as a *product* of exile or isolation. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys reimagines Jane Austen's Bertha Rochester in a sympathetic lens, presenting her psychosis as a tragic product of loneliness, misunderstanding, and misogyny. Rhys' "Bertha" is first relegated to the periphery of society before ever being consigned to isolation and ultimately madness in Mr. Rochester's attic. Likewise, in Charlotte Perkins Gilmore's "The Yellow Wallpaper," the protagonist experiences a break from reality only after a so-called "rest cure" has left her bedridden in conditions similar to solitary confinement. Finally, Guy de Maupassant's nineteenth-century short story "The Inn," (a precursor to the popular book and movie *The Shining*) epitomizes the trope of losing that which creates our "human" identity after being completely isolated from civilization in a mountaintop inn. Although these characterizations of madness may take the concept of the culturally embedded self to the extreme, they are useful in illustrating the degree to which identity can be seen as defined by our role and place in society. To exile, to move from center to borderland, is to remove our sense of meaning within the context of the community. And to lose our community means to lose a major component of our identity, to exist in the netherland that lies outside the border.

"*Destierro, Destiempo*" – Temporal Dislocation

Many of those who have written about their experience of exile have described feelings of disorientation associated with the new landscape. But this disorientation is more than just spatial. A common complaint associated with exile is feeling disoriented in time, a sort of psychic jet lag. Relegated to a realm outside of the cultural center, one also is expelled from the passage of time within that center. Novelist and Polish exile Joseph Wittlin calls this

"*destierro*, *destiempo*," literally meaning "loss of land, loss of time."[12] If exile means separation from one's country or native land, then there will be a corresponding disruption in the passage of native time, creating a sense of temporal dislocation.

There are a number of contributing factors to this phenomenon, including a shift in the rhythm or pace of life in the new location, differences in the length of daylight or nighttime hours, and changes to the socially prescribed hours of rest, recreation, meals, or work. Underlying these factors, though, is the way the human mind understands the flow of time on a greater scale. Most people conceptualize time in terms of visual cues, like the movement of the hands on a clock. Our concept of "time" in longer spans is made up of the events and changes within our lives. Like watching the hands on a clock move, we observe the passage of time within a cultural context as we see our friends and family age and our communities develop and change.[13] With the loss of community and culture, the external markers of time's progress are removed, which disrupts the internal sense of time passing.

Andre Aciman calls this a "time warp" and writes of it as "the sense that their time is not perfectly aligned to the city's, and that they've docked, as it were, a few minutes ahead or a few minutes behind Earth time."[14] Others have described the phenomenon as a sense of timelessness, wherein concepts of days, weeks, or months are meaningless and undifferentiated. Ishmael Beah wrote of his experience as a child soldier in Sierra Leone's Civil War: "I knew that day and night came and went because of the presence of the moon and the sun, but I had no idea whether it was a Sunday or a Friday."[15] Notably, in the controversy surrounding the memoir, it was Beah's recollection of dates and times spans that were called into question. Viktor Frankl described a similar paradigm in the concentration camps, in which short time spans like an hour or a day

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[12] Billy Gray, "The Lukewarm Conviction of Temporary Lodgers: Hubert Butler and the Anglo-Irish Sense of Exile." *New Hibernia Review*, no. 9.2 (2005): 84–97.

[13] Robin LePoidevin, "The Experience and Perception of Time," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2004, ed. Edward N. Zalta.

[14] Aciman, "Shadow Cities."

[15] Ishmael Beah, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2007).

seemed endless, stretching on into eternity, whereas the passage of longer time blocks like weeks or months seemed to fly by.[16]

The ability to conceptualize time is a vital mental process, and to lose this orientation greatly affects our understanding of our selves in relation to the surrounding world. Although some traditional cultures view time as circular, our understanding of time primarily recognizes it as a linear construct. This linear understanding creates a trajectory of past, present, and future. In exile, a person is no longer included within the collective future of their community, which affects one's ability to project a self located in time and space confidently toward the future. Barred from such a theoretical future, the exiled person can feel trapped in visions of the past, in shadow cities or mnemonic correlates, or mired within a provisional existence solely comprising the present. To rebuild a life within a new social context and framework, it is essential that the link toward the future also be bridged.

Exile in the Time of Covid

Today, as we navigate a global pandemic, many are feeling the pain of exile in a manner rarely experienced. We have been cut off from a sense of greater belonging by being separated from friends and family members, and we painfully feel the loss of those social identities. Our cultural selves are stripped away with the loss of community gathering; even activities as simple as dining in a restaurant among strangers creates a cultural aspect of self, an identity within the broader schema. The loss of participation in the workplace for remote workers has removed a linear touch-point in our confident progression through our physical world; as we no longer travel from place to place, we become unmoored within our own physical geography. The swiftness with which we have transitioned into a technocratic society has left many reeling in an unrecognized exile of distance learning, remote work, home grocery delivery, and civic participation solely through social media and shopping on Amazon.

This exile of the pandemic is truly unprecedented as it is arguably the first exile in human history to occur on a truly global scale. Yet there is much that we can learn be examining the words of those who have experienced similar exiles before. Key themes in exile literature can help to explain this unprecedented experience,

[16] Frankl.

from the monotony of one day blurring into the next, to mourning the loss of our culturally embedded selves, to the jarring feeling of being unmoored in space and time. Exploration of themes can provide solace, confirmation, and recognition that what feels like a private state is, in truth, universally shared. As we imagine our new future, looking to the past can create awareness that cultures and people have lived these experiences before. And, as we move forward through a world that will forever be altered by pandemic, our literature will most likely transform these classic themes of exile to a way that helps to make sense of this new reality.