Two Centers and Somewhere in Between

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Abstract. For exiles, there is no possibility of returning. The disparity between the home in one’s memory and the actual place changing over time gives no chance to the exile that he or she can still find home. The moment they are forced to leave, the homeland they remember can only be retrieved in memory. Aciman didn’t expect his return to Alexandria to be exciting. Instead, he already knew he would fail to find home. Nevertheless, he insisted on returning as if it were a ritual that he must perform as an exile. Once the foot is set outside that door, everything left behind becomes history that one carries along with other luggage. Yet it doesn’t matter how far the exile goes, every detail of home clings to him fast and wouldn’t let him go.

Introduction
Exile is a constant movement in search for unity and wholeness between the place of departure and the closure of arrival. When talking about Russian exiles, in Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years Brian Boyd says that exile is “a mere locus of movement, or at best a station where people only kill time between a place they remember coming from and a destination they do not know” (246). It is no coincidence that the exile’s sense of loss, already inscribed in his or her consciousness, is best reflected in this kind of space such as railway station or hotel lobby, where people show no interest to the surroundings and rush in and out in a hurry. However, the hustle and bustle as well as the indifference in these places contrasts most sharply with the silence and dispossession of a dislocated and lamenting exile, who, on a foreign soil, is not only disorientated but also can no longer articulate himself. Often in these seemingly irrelevant and unexpected places, the places that are out of their daily routine, Aciman and Gowbrickivicz find their state of exile more protruding and their loss more devastating.

Organization of the Text
This article shall start introduce the condition of the exile to help contextualize the idea of “there and then.” Secondly, it will borrow Kracauer’s description of hotel lobby as a metaphor and draw similarities between the transitional space of hotel lobby and the neither here nor there dilemma of the exile. Third, this paper concludes on the note that the modern life bears resemblance to the neither here nor there living condition of the exile.

Exile Life
In exile literature, writers often describe two centers in their exilic lives: the place of birth, “there and then,” which is unattainable but haunts them wherever they go, and “here and now,” the place of exile, or the terrible elsewhere. Once being expelled from the native land, the exile is eternally drawn by the past and retrospection plays an excessive role.

New homeland is impossible nor is return. Therefore, the exile prefers to remember than to qualify. But what is between these two centers? What can be neither “here” nor “there”? What is an exile in this transitional zone? It seems to me that Kracauer’s hotel lobby, Straus Park in Aciman’s False Paper, and Gombrowicz’ Goya offer good examples of this liminal space where the thematic of exile and estrangement are brought to light. At the first sight, it might be unthinkable to put into one
package these places, the hotel lobby, Straus Park, and Goya: they are too different to be considered together. However, they share at least one thing in common: they are exactly the places that are left out from the categories of “here” and “there”—they are somewhere in between. In this paper, I shall first look into how the two centers influence the exilic writers’ lives and then examine these three places to explore how what is written on the liminal zone reflects the condition of exile.

Two Centers

The first center of the exile is his or her birthplace like Rome to Ovid or Dante’s Florence. This place, right after the forced departure, can be only accessible in one’s memory. It is not to say that the exile can never return to the place of origin. Of course, one may physically return to the old place like Aciman’s revisit of Alexandria but the aura of the place, conflated with the old time, is forever gone and irretrievable in reality. The one the exile returns and visits later on will never be the same one when he or she leaves. Return often results in an enhancement of the sense of loss but the exile can’t resist the temptation to see with one’s own eyes that the place no longer exists. When Orpheus goes to the underworld in an attempt to rescue his beloved Euridice, against the warning he looks back to make sure that she is still there the moment before he steps out of that threshold. The consequence of this fatal looking back is that he not only loses his beloved for good but also his own life.

Consequently, the present appear to be unreal while the future is always shadowed with his or her nostalgic longing for a real but unattainable “there.” Bachelard in “Poetics of Space” notices, “…over and beyond our memories, the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us. It is a group of organic habits. After twenty years, in spite of all other anonymous stairways; we would recapture the reflexes of the ‘first stairway’, we would not stumble on that rather high step. The house’s entire being would open up, faithful to our own being” [1]. Home, combining space and time, both the birthplace and the childhood, stays intact in memory from the external world. Sometimes the nostalgia is so strong and intense that it replaces the present with the past because, to the exile, yesterday is real but today is the opposite. Andrei in Tarkovsky’s Nostalgia is a character who lives his every present moment in his past. He thinks and dreams about Russian home while he is physically in Italy. The memory of home seems to take a life of its own: it breathes and grows; sometimes it even reconstructs itself. It separates the protagonist from his surroundings and he appears to be a phantom to other people.

Exiles move forward with their heads turning back towards the direction of their home. Joseph Brodsky, a Nobel Prize winner for poetry, offers a fine explanation of this aspect of exile in his essay “The Condition We Call Exile.” He analyses the condition of exile from a position of an exilic artist. To him, although an exilic poet might gain safety and freedom from the host country but he or she will risk social significance by losing authority and audience back at home. Exile uproots him or her not only from homeland but also casts the artist in diaspora into total isolation. The past, whether bleak or colorful, never fails to draw his or her full attention. The allure to it is so strong that the dispossession and alienation from the native land does not reduce his or her desire for home but only makes him or her lament the loss more intensively. The first center can only exist in memory but the exile’s discontent for the very idea of accepting elsewhere as home denies the possibility of duplicating “there and then.” As a result, the exile is trapped in this timeless estrangement of exile.

The impression derived from the description of the hotel lobby, Straus Park and Goya is the sense of estrangement. In some way, the detachment of the guests in the hotel lobby, Aciman’s oscillation between indifference and involvement in the park, and Gombrowicz’s solitude in Goya are all conveniently the qualities of the stranger. Georg Simmel in his essay “the Stranger” indicates, “The unity of nearness and remoteness involved in every human relation is organized, in the phenomenon of the stranger, in a way which may be most briefly formulated by saying that in the relationship to him, distance means that he, who is close by, is far, and strangeness means that he, who also is far, is actually near.” Through examining the guests’ relationship with the hotel lobby, Aciman’s emotion towards the park and Gombrowicz’s thoughts on Goya, we gain a glimpse of how people’s relationship to the place mirror human relations. What is more, in History: the Last Things before the
Last, Kracauer points out, “The exile’s true mode of existence is that of the stranger. So he may look at his previous existence with the eyes of one ‘who does not belong to the house.’ And just as he is free to step outside the culture which was his own, he is sufficiently uncommitted to get inside the minds of the foreign people in whose midst he is living”[2]. The status of an exile resembles that of a stranger who never stays too close to or too far away from the group. This perfect position of the stranger in society gives him a character of objectivity, which quality is primary for a historian.

Hotel Lobby

The hotel lobby, Straus Park, and Goya are neither homeland nor the place of exile. The hotel lobby contains people but it functions more like a bus stop or a railway station. People are in transit: they come in with goals and once they finish the business they quickly go to somewhere else. Everything is processed with great efficiency. The relation to an individual here is a non-relation. He or she does not live here or belong here. In New York City, Straus Park is just an ordinary park which Aciman notices when passing by. According to the author, the park is not such a eye-catching place that everyone loves. Its existence only draws the author’s attention when he suspects that it is going to disappear for good. The frequent visitors of the park are often the social outcasts: “the homeless, the drunk, and the drug-addicted”[3]. Even they do not stay here for long. Also, Goya is a small unknown island in Argentina that Gombrowicz visits on an impulse. Gombrowicz is a traveler in Goya but he doesn’t seem to have a tourist’s excitement. Instead, he brings along his private and silent nostalgia. In his eyes, Goya is reduced to a few simple objects which a tourist usually catches in snapshots: a dog, a storekeeper, a butterfly, a bicycle, and etc.

The hotel lobby, Straus Park, and Goya to Gombrowicz are transitional places where people come to leave, not to stay. Exile disrupts life by taking one away from the predictable path by force and casts him or her into the chaotic unpredictability. The hotel lobby, Straus Park, and Goya also reflect this “undecidable” quality. People in the hotel lobby, or Straus Park, or Gombrwoicz in Goya are all surrounded by anonymous people. They are strangers to their surroundings and others. These three places seem full of possibilities while they actually provide possibility for nothing. They are overflowed with movements and accidents. This instability and uncertainty mirrors the condition of exile, in sharp contrast to certitude and plentitude that one is familiar with on his or her own native soil. Kracauer observes, “It is the coming and going of unfamiliar people who have become empty forms because they have lost their password, and who now file by as ungraspable flat ghosts. If they possessed an interior, it would have no windows at all, and they would perish aware of their endless abandonment, instead of knowing of their homeland as the congregation does”[4]. Like a bus stop, a railway station, or an airport which is not for a permanent residence but a short break from the past before embarking for the future, these places, closely related to the experience of exile, are also involved with waiting and uncertainty.

Summary

Of course, it is not necessary that these places are always different from the second center. Sometimes they overlap with the place of exile: to the exile, they can be the same. What the exile sees and feels here relates more fully to his or her inner suffering than to his surroundings. It is in these seemingly irrelevant and insignificant places that the author finds the sense of loss most overwhelming. Seemingly random places like the hotel lobby, Straus Park, and Goya constitutes an integral part of the exile experience. Through writing about this liminal zone, the exilic writers convey the estrangement due to modernity or not being at home. The sense of loss is expressed through writing about nostalgia of homeland or alienation and isolation on the new land but what is written about the space in between should not be left out of consideration. This space has a character of its own and the writing, either concerning the thoughts evoked by this liminal zone or simply jotted down in these surroundings, is worth careful examination.
References

