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A Brief Meditation on the Connection

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More often, however, this obstinacy translates itself into the repetitiveness of nostalgia, which is, to put it bluntly, simply a failure to deal with the realities of the present or the uncertainties of the future.¹

– Joseph Brodsky

Introduction

Discussions on nostalgia are relatively infrequent, especially in the field of philosophy. Perhaps, the main obstacle is in its ambiguity that was already mentioned: “The ambiguity is evident in nostalgia’s characteristically bittersweet quality, its proclivity for combining regret with longing, a vivid sense of missing with an equally vivid sense of what is missed”.² However, some rare attempts can be found in medicine (Hofer), classical (Kant, Jankélévitch) and modern philosophy (Casey). These works will be analyzed in the first part of this essay, because thanks to it, features of nostalgia will be described. The second part will be an explanation of the role of nostalgia in mediology, therefore Régis Debray’s writings will be used. Thus, what mediology is - will be described at the beginning of the second section.

The novelty of this essay is that its aim is to introduce nostalgia as a term of mediology. It will contribute to the further development of this philosophy, because the nexus of terms will be more clearly presented for the reader and anyone, who is interested in mediology.

A General Overview of the Subject

The term 'nostalgia' was coined by Johannus Hofer in his 'Medical dissertation on nostalgia or homesickness' in 1688. Before him no one in medicine made any attempt to observe this phenomenon: "However, it lacks a particular name in medicine, because from no doctor thus far had I learned that it was observed properly or explained carefully. Thus far I had been the first to consider that I should speak more fully concerning it, at the same time that I had first considered it necessary to apply a name".³ Ordinary people called it *das Heimweh* in German or *la Maladie du Pays* in French. For creating 'nostalgia' Hofer used the combination of two Greek words: *Nosos* which means 'return to the native land' and *Algos* with the meaning of 'suffering' or 'grief'. This term defined "the sad mood originating from the desire for the return to one's native land".⁴ For him, this is a disease that is caused by the imagination, when "minds occupied solely about the idea of the Fatherland".⁵ By this fixation on one idea a person becomes as an animal, because he is "directed always toward the same motion".⁶ It has symptoms: continued sadness, disturbed sleep, decrease of strength, hunger, thirst, senses diminished, frequent sigh, stupidity of the mind, fever. It can be completely cured only by a return to the homeland.

Nostalgia as a subject of philosophy firstly appeared in Immanuel Kant's 'Anthropology from a Pragmatic Perspective':

The homesickness of the Swiss (and, as I have it from the mouth of an experienced general, also the Westphalians and Pomeranians from certain regions) that seizes them when they are transferred to other lands is the result of a longing for the places where they enjoyed the very simple pleasures of life – aroused by the recollection of images of the carefree life and neighborly company in their early years. For later, after they visit these same places, they are greatly disappointed in their expectations and thus also find their homesickness cured. To be sure, they think that this is because everything there has changed a great deal, but in fact it is because they cannot bring back their youth there. It is also noteworthy that this homesickness seizes more the peasants from a province that is poor but bound together by strong family ties than those who are busy earning money and take as their motto: *Patria ubi bene*.⁷

The philosopher noticed the temporal and the social aspect of nostalgia. The temporal aspect is based on the sudden awareness of the passing of time at the personal level, when someone through his farewell to his own youth becomes aware of it. This means that there is no return. The social aspect links to the poor and family oriented peasants, because bounds are stronger between them thanks to their interdependence than between townspeople.

This temporal aspect of nostalgia was further developed in Vladimir Jankélévitch's philosophy. It is commonly believed that it is a special kind of pain that can be cured by return. He claims this at the beginning of his thoughts in order to prove the opposite for the reader: to show him, that this belief is misleading. He gives the following definition of nostalgia:

Nostalgia is a human melancholy made possible by the consciousness that is an awareness of something else, a consciousness of somewhere else, a consciousness of contrast with the past and the present, with the present and the future. This apprehensive consciousness is the anxiety of the nostalgic. The nostalgic is at the same time here and there, not here, not there, present and absent, twice present and twice absent, therefore we can say at will that he is multipresent, or that he is nowhere: right here he is physically present, but he feels absent in spirit from this place where he is present by the body; over there, conversely, he feels morally present, but he is in fact and currently absent from these cherished places that he once left.⁸

Nostalgia, created by the consciousness, is an awareness of time. When someone is able to notice the past, the present, the future and what is between them. He looks at the whole, directly at time. The cause of the tension that follows nostalgia is this anxious consciousness. This makes nostalgia a terminal illness: "What makes the illness incurable, this is the irreversibility of time".⁹ Therefore, "Nostalgia is a reaction against the irreversible".¹⁰ According to Jankélévitch the irreversibility of time has only one direction that is the future. This is the reason of change that he explains by using the myth of Odysseus:

Therefore Odysseus will return to his Ithaca, and he will find there the same place as he had left it – because in the meantime it has not changed its location; although the Odysseus that he once was when he left his island, he will not return to there: this Odysseus-there died and is gone forever; Odysseus now is another Odysseus, who finds another Penelope... And Ithaca also is another island, at the same place, but not on the same date; this is a homeland from another time.¹¹

Hence, return is impossible. Finally, the philosopher concludes that nostalgia is not only about the awareness of time, but about someone's self-awareness, self-discovery, wisdom and transformation:

This rocky islet in the Ionian Sea, that is the stated destination of navigator, hides an invisible goal in order to meet future needs, an inaccessible goal and located at infinity: a goal of an Odyssean journey, this is the rendez-vous with oneself; having overcome all obstacles, disdain the lotus flower, the advisor of forgetfulness, refused Circe's spell, abandoned to their fate the desolate shadows of those, who don't exist anymore, turned a deaf ear to the song of the sorceresses and the sweet nothings of the nymph in love, the nostalgic had departed in order

to encounter his youth and his past. After the illusory spatialisation of time, the temporalisation of space confronts us upon returning with our deceptions and with the truth.¹²

The charm of nostalgia is caused by the fact that our past is irreplaceable, it is always our lived experiences. The pain that accompanies nostalgia comes from the realization of the irreversibility: "Let us go further: irreversibility is perhaps the key to every pain in general".¹³

The strength that someone discovers in himself through his experience of nostalgia, when he must overcome its pain - this is what makes it extremely valuable. This is life, the process of becoming mature:

That is called: to endure and to age. Instead of movement in space being pure and simple distancing, time serves us by ceaselessly distancing us from adhering. If, at least by retreating more and more into the distance of objective things, our past were able to escape us completely, we would perhaps console ourselves for this loss; by dint of being irrevocable, it would no longer interest us. But not at all; it is not so irrevocable that it no longer depends upon me. That is why the irreversibility of time in general is one of the most common causes of human pain. This happiness of being young, which will have been taken from me by time, has not ceased being mine; and so it becomes a thing that another myself offers to me as a spectacle. Here is one of the great pains of life; it is such a poignant pain that [one wonders] if all the other pains are not simple specializations of it: one wonders if in the pain of men, whatever it is, there is not above all a bitter pain of the irreparable, that is, a certain sort of remorse.¹⁴

Contemporary philosophy added to these examinations the following: the object of nostalgia is not an exact place, but an established form of being, that is called the "world-under-nostalgement".¹⁵ This is the "past that we *cannot rejoin*".¹⁶ Nostalgia is not external in relation to this world, but a part of it:

Beyond nostalgia *about* or *over* a past world, there is nostalgia *of* such a world: a nostalgia not only appreciative of this world in its absolute pastness but belonging to it, indeed clinging to it. Thus understood, nostalgia is not only elicited by an anterior world; it can even be said to be at one with it, to be contained in it.¹⁷

This "world-under-nostalgement" contains all the places that we remember, because they played a crucial role in our process of becoming. We remember only traces of the past world: "Such traces are all that we possess of the past world that solicits nostalgia. Whether expressed in things (e.g., ruins, antiques) or in persons, the traces of this world are precipitated in places conceived as localizations of the world-under-nostalgement."¹⁸

It can be concluded that nostalgia is not an emotion or a feeling, whether it is love or grief, but "It is a unique mode of insight into a world that has

become irretrievably past and that arrays itself, as we remember it now, in a plentitude of places".¹⁹

Nostalgia is a Necessity for Mediology

Mediology as a contemporary French philosophy begins in 1979 with the book of Régis Debray *Le pouvoir intellectuel en France*, which in its English translation in 1981 was entitled *Teachers, Writers, Celebrities: The Intellectuals of Modern France*. He examines the role of professional intellectual, who is defined as a "person who has an effect on other people through symbols (images, words, sounds)".²⁰ He is beyond academia or university, because his main task is to say unpleasant things that are the truth in order to influence people's opinion during his own lifetime. The role of the professional intellectual has changed, because the attitude towards truth has changed:

The truth is a luxury that rich societies will be able to afford less and less, insofar as the establishment of truth and its dissemination are slow, complicated procedures, and all tend to run counter to common sense, in other words they do not have market value, so show value. It seems to me that there is an industrial economy of reason which will increasingly make reason anti-economic.²¹

It became unaffordable, however, according to Debray, mediology is a solution to this crisis: "A rational discipline like mediology (which aims to be rigorous and must show itself to be so) can help fashion tools to make reality intelligible and weapons to transform it; inasmuch as it acknowledges the real, it can also serve those who find advantage there".²² It can help, because it is based on the mediological method, using which the process of incarnation and transmission or how abstract ideas such as people's beliefs, thoughts, experience of life get material forces and by that are saved through time. It happens in the form of traces:

A trace is not just something that remains from religion, knowledge, or opinion, but it is one of the necessary conditions for their appearance and circulation. [...] Trace supposes support, a tool, writing and reading technique, a semiotic regime, a method of indexation, control and conservation and a dissemination system.²³

The basic confirmation of mediology is that the existence of soul is impossible without the body. This idea is hidden in its name that is a Greco-Roman word combination: medium is from the Latin language with the meaning of body and logos is from Greek with the meaning of explanation. The notion of transmission was found in Paul Valéry's oeuvre and as a term of mediology preserved its meaning: "It is man's greatest triumph over things, to have been able to carry the effects and fruits of eve's labour (literally: results of labour from yesterday) until the next day. Mankind has only slowly risen on the heap of what lasts".²⁴ In order for transmission to be possible there is a need of

places of mediation such as libraries and someone, who is able to save traces, preserve it as heritage and explain its value to other people. Transmission also based on knowledge, therefore requires education with strict hierarchy, mutual respect and effort. Its aim is to evoke comprehension that leads to duration which is the definition of culture in this philosophy.

Without nostalgia there would be no mediology. Experiencing nostalgia, someone becomes aware of the passing of time. Then, he realizes his own mortality through all the moments when he bids farewell to himself during his own life, the fact that one day he will disappear forever and that there is no guarantee other people will remember him. This motivates him to invent mnemotechnics that is a technique that people use for memorizing. As an example of mnemotechnics gravestones can be mentioned. (It was the first one in the history of humankind). At the heart of mediology there is time. Mediology is focused on mnemotechnics, therefore it deals with death, memory and defines culture as duration. People attempt to preserve themselves in something that will tell the next generations, the future, about them. All these allowed Debray to come to the following conclusion: "Nostalgia is the first phase of mediological consciousness. The discovery of a clear deviation from the old norm grasps the new order as a disordering. More deeply: an intuition of the entropy of systems".²⁵

Conclusion

What kills you out there, in orbit, isn't
the lack of oxygen but the abundance
of time in its purest (with no addition
of your life) form. It's hard to breathe it.²⁶

– Joseph Brodsky

The novelty of this essay lies in its attempt to explain the essential role of the notion of nostalgia for mediology. It can contribute to the further development of this philosophy, because it helps us understand that the core idea of mediology is time. Then, basic notions of mediology, their interrelatedness and its focus on the incarnation that happens thanks to mnemotechnics become clearer for the reader.

The brief overview of nostalgia as a subject of research begins with medicine and later changes to philosophy. The aim of the examinations of these works is to describe the nature of nostalgia, its features and why it is worthy of our attention. Thanks to Kant and Jankélévitch, it can be realized that nostalgia is not about an exact place, but about time. Casey adds to this the idea that nostalgia is a form of cognitive ability that is directed to the world. Mediology cannot exist without nostalgia, because the experience of

nostalgia leads to the awareness of time, when someone realizes the fact of his own mortality. As it was grasped in poetry:

O ship setting out on a distant voyage,
Why don't I miss you the way other people do
After you've vanished from sight?
Because, when I don't see you, you cease to exist.
And if I feel nostalgia for what doesn't exist,
The feeling is in relationship to nothing.
It's not the ship but our own selves that we miss.²⁷

This realization motivates him to invent mnemotechnics in order to conquer time. Therefore, nostalgia gives birth to mediology.

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- ¹ Joseph Brodsky, *On Grief and Reason* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 30.
- ² Edward S. Casey, "The World of Nostalgia," *Man and World* 20 (1987): 361.
- ³ Carolyn K. Anspach, "Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia by Johannes Hofer, 1688," *Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine* 2 (1934): 380.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 381.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 385.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 387.
- ⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 71-72.
- ⁸ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *L'irréversible et la nostalgie* (Paris: Flammarion, 2011), 346. In French: «La nostalgie est une mélancolie humaine rendue possible par la conscience, qui est conscience de quelque chose d'autre, conscience d'un ailleurs, conscience d'un contraste entre passé et présent, entre présent et futur. Cette conscience soucieuse est l'inquiétude du nostalgique. Le nostalgique est en même temps ici et là-bas, ni ici ni là, présent et absent, deux fois présent et deux fois absent; on peut donc dire à volonté qu'il est multiprésent, ou qu'il est nulle part: ici même il est physiquement présent, mais il se sent absent en esprit de ce lieu où il est présent par le corps; là-bas, à l'inverse, il se sent moralement présent, mais il est en fait et actuellement absent de ces lieux chers qu'il a autrefois quittés» (translation - E. L. N.).
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 367. In French: «Ce qui rend la maladie incurable, c'est l'irréversibilité du temps» (translation - E. L. N.).
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 368. In French: «La nostalgie est une réaction contre l'irréversible» (translation - E. L. N.).
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 370. In French: «Ulysse retrouvera donc son Ithaque, et il la retrouvera là même où il l'avait laissée - car elle n'a pas changé de place entretemps; mais l'Ulysse qu'il était jadis quand il a quitté son île, il ne le retrouvera pas: cet Ulysse-là est mort et à jamais disparu; Ulysse est maintenant un autre Ulysse, qui retrouve une autre Pénélope... Et Ithaque aussi est une autre île, à la même place, mais non pas à la même date; c'est une patrie d'un autre temps» (translation - E. L. N.).
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 371-372. In French: «Cet îlot rocheux dans la mer Ionienne, qui est le but avoué du navigateur, cache providentiellement un but invisible, un but inaccessible et situé à l'infini: le but de l'itinéraire odysseén, c'est le rendez-vous avec soi-même; ayant franchi tous les obstacles, dédaigné la fleur de lotus conseillère d'oubli, refusé les sortilèges de Circé, abandonné à leur sort les ombres désolées de ceux qui ne sont plus, fait la sourde oreille au chant des ensorceleuses et aux douces paroles de la nymphe amoureuse, le nostalgique était parti à la rencontre de sa jeunesse et de son passé. Après l'illusoire spatialisation du temps, la temporalisation de l'espace nous confronte au retour avec nos déceptions et avec la vérité» (translation - E. L. N.).
- ¹³ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *The Bad Conscience* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 83.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 83-84.
- ¹⁵ Edward S. Casey, "The World of Nostalgia," *Man and World* 20 (1987): 364.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 365.

- ¹⁷ Ibid., 377.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 379.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 380.
- ²⁰ Régis Debray, "The Terminal Intellectual," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 18 (2001): 59.
- ²¹ Régis Debray, "Les Intellectuels et les Médias," *Contemporary French Civilization* 13 (1989): 308.
- ²² Régis Debray, *Teachers, writers, celebrities* (London: Verso, 1981), 2.
- ²³ Régis Debray, et al. "III. Abécédaire & partis pris," *Les cahiers de médiologie* 2 (1998): 281. In French: «La trace n'est pas seulement ce qui reste d'une croyance, d'un savoir ou d'une opinion, mais l'une des conditions nécessaires à leur émergence et leur propagation. [...] La trace suppose un support, un outil, une technique d'écriture et de lecture, un régime sémiotique, une méthode d'indexation, de contrôle et de conservation et un dispositif de diffusion» (translation - E. L. N.).
- ²⁴ Ibid., 281-282. In French: «C'est le plus grand triomphe de l'homme sur les choses, que d'avoir su transporter jusqu'au lendemain les effets et les fruits du labeur de la veille. L'humanité ne s'est lentement élevée que sur le tas de ce qui dure» (translation - E. L. N.).
- ²⁵ Régis Debray, *Media manifestos: on the technological transmission of cultural forms* (London and New York: Verso, 1996), 177.
- ²⁶ Joseph Brodsky, *To Urania: Selected Poems 1965-1985* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1988), 80.
- ²⁷ Fernando Pessoa, *A Little Larger Than the Entire Universe: Selected Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 72.