

2008

Home and Exile: Some General Themes

Jennifer Ann Fawcett

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/itbj>



Part of the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fawcett, Jennifer Ann (2008) "Home and Exile: Some General Themes," *The ITB Journal*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 6.

doi:10.21427/D74T7C

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/itbj/vol9/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Ceased publication at ARROW@TU Dublin. It has been accepted for inclusion in The ITB Journal by an authorized administrator of ARROW@TU Dublin. For more information, please contact arrow.admin@tudublin.ie, aisling.coyne@tudublin.ie.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](#)

Home and Exile: Some General Themes

Jennifer Ann Fawcett

NUI Maynooth

Abstract

This paper will discuss the creative potential of liminality. This idea will be developed through a discussion of the experience of the liminal position of the exiled individual and the examination of some personalities whose lives have been shaped by exile. This will encompass the dislocation of the individual from a 'home' space into a situation of homelessness, the reworking of the individual's identity in the unfamiliar environment and the resulting consequences of this shift. It will be argued that the exilic position is characterised by almost permanent liminality, as many situations will not result in a return to normality, i.e. return to the home. It will also be argued that the particular experience of dislocation/exile affords a certain perspective which could not have been gained from remaining at home, and that homelessness therefore breeds innovation and creativity.

1. Understanding home.

For the purposes of this essay, familiar connotations of 'home' will be explored. It is important to firstly acknowledge that home may represent a site of danger, torment or unhappiness to some unfortunate individuals; therefore, it is essential not to romanticise home in some way. However, there are positive understandings of 'home' which could be recognised by most humans. Home represents acceptance of the true self, or an arena to express this, a secure environment to be sad or happy, a space of recognition from the others who belong in the home, a place to house the soul as well as the body. As Tucker (2000) states:

"Home is the reflection of our subjectivity in the world. Home is the environment that allows us to fulfil our unique selves through interaction with the world. Home is the environment that allows us to be homely..." (257).

Tucker also points out the central idea that home is not restricted to a building – "[h]ome may be an emotional environment, a culture, a geographical location, a political system, a historical time and place, etc., and a combination of all of the above" (ibid). The idea of 'home' can also be reassigned to describe the spiritual or mental existence of the individual in the world, as when Heidegger clarifies the position of 'Dasein' as "*bei* the world and the entities in it, he means that, at least in everydayness, we are *at home amid* the things in our world" (Polt, 1999: 46). Home could then be seen as some sort of sanctuary which exists on many different levels, but is best conceived of as the site of the everyday, the mundane, and the normality which provides comfort for the human being.

Turner (1967) documented the departure or separation from the constancy of home life during a ritual which occurred to maintain the normal state. The central characteristic of the rite of separation is "the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a 'state'), or from both" (Turner, 1967: 94). This may be a physical relocation, for example, in the tribal initiation rites of passage that Turner describes in his work, *The Forest of Symbols*, but

however it occurs it is a removal from what is safe and known, to be placed in an unknown space. The individual or group is then plunged into the liminal situation, characterised by a lack of structure, “*betwixt and between*” (Turner, 1967: 95) and described, among other things, as “*the wilderness*” (ibid). It is in liminality that reconfigurations of identity can take place.

If we then try to construct an idea of home within this liminal situation, we see that home is actually absent, and that liminality conveys a sense of homelessness. This is easily seen in the depictions of the iconic liminal figures of Hermes and Radin’s (1956) Trickster. Hermes’ world was the world of liminality, and “all his major characteristics (the psychagogue, the messenger (*angelos*), the mediator between life and death, and between the gods and men) [reveal] him to be at home in the homelessness” (Szokolczai, 2003: 214-215). His home, inasmuch as it exists, is in in-betweeness, at the threshold, in the margins or shadowy borderlands. Similarly, Radin’s Trickster is characterised as “wandering aimlessly” throughout the tale. Although he and his companions, the fox, the jay and the nit, agree to find a safe place to dwell (1956: 21) in the winter they decide to leave to seek food, and the Trickster gets a new home in the village. He runs away and then goes back to the village where the woman he originally married lives. Soon he leaves there as well. At one point he lives all alone. Towards the end of the cycle of the myth when he has stayed at one village for a long time, the Trickster declares:

“Well, this about as long as I will stay here. I have been here a long time. Now I am going to go around the earth again and visit different people for my children are all grown up. I was not created for what I am doing here” (Radin, 1956: 52).

All of these homes are marked by transience or impermanence, which is typical of a liminal situation. In understanding these descriptions of the lack of stability of that which is known as home, it is possible to move on to a discussion of the loss of the home as experienced by the subject in exile.

2. The loss of home.

Flight

*When we were fleeing the burning city
And looked back from the first field path,
I said: “Let the grass grow over our footprints,
Let the harsh prophets fall silent in the fire,
Let the dead explain to the dead what happened.
We are fated to beget a new and violent tribe
Free from the evil and the happiness that drowsed there.
Let us go” – and the earth was opened for us by a sword of flames.*

Goszyce, 1944
Czeslaw Milosz.
(1988: 75)

This leads to a discussion of the experience of liminality manifested in the situation of exile. Exile is essentially a separation or dislocation (by force or by choice) from one’s homeland, whether this is the real place of birth or if it is the home as perceived by the individual. I would argue that exile is a condition of permanent liminality, because it is often characterised by no phase of reaggregation or reincorporation, no consummation of the passage that began with the rite of separation (Turner, 1967: 94). This may occur

for several reasons, whether there is a physical barrier to this reaggregation, because no return to the comfortable normality of home is possible or if the barriers to reaggregation exist on a less tangible level. For example, resolution may not occur because the home has been marred by some kind of violence and return would endanger the life of the exile, or it may be that the homeland does not exist as a possibility for the exile because a threat is posed to their mental and spiritual life as well as their physical life on their return home. However, the barrier to a sense of reaggregation may also be characterised by the exile's understanding that no home truly exists. George (1996) comments that

“the sentiment accompanying the absence of home [...] could be a yearning for the authentic home (situated in the past or in the future) or it could be the recognition of the in-authenticity or the created aura of all homes” (175).

Whichever of these is more applicable, it is fair to note that the exile sees him or herself as not at home, removed from a homely environment and left to contend the unfamiliarity of the new environment. This experience is often described as homesickness or nostalgia and comprises a degree of loneliness and aloneness. Bhabha (1994) describes “the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world – the unhomeliness – that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations” (9). He also indicates that the experience of the “unhomely” cannot necessarily be accommodated in some kind of division of life into public and private spheres and that “the unhomely moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow” (ibid).

This echoes Heidegger's understanding of what he terms anxiety. In the same way that the unhomely moment creeps up, in anxiety “[t]he security of everyday existence, in which the meaning of life seems well-grounded and obvious, has been shattered” (Polt, 1999: 77). Anxiety is closely tied with liminality, as can be seen as Heidegger goes on to delimit what anxiety actually is – “a moment of meaningless confusion, as the everyday perspective has it – but it is ‘meaningless’ not in the sense that it is trivial, but in the sense that it involves a deep *crisis* of meaning” (ibid). This is similar to liminality because liminality is the loss of the boundaries or limits of what constitutes normality, or is a situation not confined by the ‘meanings’ of normality. However, it does incorporate a similar crisis to what Heidegger describes, in that it is a crisis in identity, and it involves the task of re-creating the self. Finally, the crucial link between anxiety, liminality and homelessness: “But in anxiety I feel alienated, homeless, unsettled (*unheimlich*, literally, ‘not at home’)” (Polt, 1999: 233/188-9). This is the beginning of the understanding of the power of the shaking-up, dislocating, stirring, provoking, troubling situation the exile finds himself in, and the strength of the discomfiting feeling of the ‘uncanny’ or *unheimlich*.

Pizzorno (1986) gives an example of this situation when he describes the plight of a lone wealthy business man who lands his plane among an Amazonian tribe and has to spend the rest of his life there. The businessman has no reference point back to the life he led before, and stands before the tribe as a stranger and even though “nothing has changed in him, nonetheless he must become another person” (Pizzorno, 1986: 365). As his identity will now be recognised by different criteria, he has to search within himself for some new ways of living in his new home. Very interestingly, Pizzorno suggests that perhaps the tool that will best serve him is “the capacity of recognising the unexpected otherness of human beings” (ibid), a capacity probably learned from some

situation in his past. These “sudden falls from seemingly well-secured states of recognition, sudden plunges into new tribes, sudden perceptions of the absurdity of our calculations” (ibid) are very characteristic of the life of the exile, who has to deal with extreme uncertainty in trying to reformulate an identity that others will understand, or recognise (to use Pizzorno’s term). This fundamental crisis in identity and the endeavour to reposition oneself in a new environment leads to a tension which is very well explained by Simmel (1971) in his discussion of *The Stranger*. He starts off by describing the stranger in this way:

“The stranger will thus not be considered here in the usual sense of the term, as the wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather as the man who comes today and stays tomorrow – the potential wanderer, so to speak, who, although he has gone no further, has not quite got over the freedom of coming and going. He is fixed within a certain spatial circle – or within a group whose boundaries are analogous to spatial boundaries – but his position within it is fundamentally affected by the fact that he does not belong in it initially and that he brings qualities into it that are not, and cannot be, indigenous to it” (Simmel, 1971: 143).

The stranger is also a liminal figure, comparable to the exile in that he “is by his very nature no owner of land – land not only in the physical sense but also metaphorically [...] (Simmel, 1971: 144). The stranger therefore, has a problematic home, although he may try to establish a home by ceasing his wandering, he still “has not quite got over the freedom of coming and going”. His interactions with the original inhabitants are marked by the series of distinctions and identifications that they make with his situation, or to use Simmel’s terminology, a constellation of remoteness and nearness, indifference and involvement. The stranger is comparable with the Trickster. Both arrive in a situation in which they have some association with the other individuals yet bring to it qualities which are independent to them. If the other individuals are undergoing some sort of experience, the stranger and the Trickster may have some role to play but ultimately remain objective. Simmel discusses how:

“...the purely mobile person comes incidentally into contact with every single element but is not bound up organically through established ties of kinship, locality or occupation, with any single one” (1971: 145).

He points out that the stranger therefore has a special kind of objectivity which is not a non-participatory one, but is marked by the constellation of remoteness and nearness as described above (ibid). This indicates that the stranger is a liminal person. Just as the activities of the Trickster are often the source of creativity or creation, the exile occupying a marginal or liminal place in society has the ability to use this liminality to understand the world in different ways, or to bring a different perspective which is always fundamentally creative. What follows is a discussion of several situations of exile which illustrate this creative outcome quite effectively.

Perhaps one of the most striking examples of the creative power of the marginal or liminal social position is the story of the Jews in Diaspora. Cohen (1997) discusses the tension between the ideas of Babylon as a site of oppression and as a site of creativity. He describes how Babylon became like a codeword for the Jews, encapsulating their feelings of “the afflictions, isolation and insecurity of living in a foreign place, set adrift, cut off from their roots and their sense of identity, oppressed by an alien ruling class”. He goes on to state how Jewish oral tradition passed down stories of the “trauma

of their historical experiences”. He also speaks very potently of the depiction of the diasporic Jews – as “pathological half-persons – destined never to realise themselves or to attain completeness, tranquillity or happiness as long as they were in exile” (Cohen, 1997: 3-4). He then contrasts this rather pessimistic view of the Jews in the Babylon of oppression with the idea that Babylon could be seen as the site of great creativity. Cohen suggests that:

“The tension between an ethnic, a national and a transnational identity is often a creative, enriching one. As I have shown in the instance of the Jews in Babylon [...] there are many advances to record in medicine, theology, art, music, philosophy, literature, science, industry and commerce” (1997: 24).

He shows how the exilic or diasporic Jewish communities in areas such as Alexandria, Antioch, Damascus, Asia Minor and Babylon became centres of civilisation, culture and learning (1997: 5-6). He also illustrates clearly that it was through challenging encounter with a pluralistic or diverse range of intellectual and religious debates that Jewish life and thought thrived to the extent that “when the Romans destroyed the Second Temple in AD70, it was Babylon that remained as the nerve-and brain-centre for Jewish life and thought”(1997: 5-6). Considering that Jewish ideas became generalised through Christianity to become world forces, the ability of the Jewish people to survive numerous displacements and yet continue to exist and have great influence (Roberts, 1976: 252) is a strong indication of the creative power of exile. Although the loss of the homeland was felt keenly and the sufferings of the Jews as a dislocated people well known, it could be argued that it was the strive for a sense of community or belongingness which drove the need to achieve. This could be possibly described as the first characteristic of exile which causes a motivation to create.

The second characteristic of exile as a liminal situation with a creative outcome is the constant tension between remoteness and nearness, belonging and not belonging, empathy and detachment. By the very nature of the experience of dislocation, an ability to understand events from more than one perspective is often produced. An example of this change in perspective is discussed by Nobel Prize in Literature Laureate (1980), Czesław Miłosz. He was born in Lithuania in 1911. He left his post as a diplomat to seek political asylum in France just before the start of World War II and then in 1961, moved to California where he lectured at the University of California (Berkeley) for over 20 years. As an exile, he often spoke of the impossibility of ‘stepping into the same river twice’, and explained eloquently the strangeness of finally being able to return home, as a result of winning the Nobel Prize for Literature, after thirty years’ absence. He describes it like this:

“I have to confess that it was a completely unexpected experience, the meeting with all that lush greenery, exactly as I remembered it from my childhood! Everything else was changed though, of course, because I saw it then through the eyes of a small child, so that everything that surrounded me had completely different proportions. My return to my childhood home, or more accurately, my non-home, because nothing of it remained, was in fact a kind of shock.” (Nobel Laureates in Literature, Accessed 2003)

For Miłosz, exile provided a ‘distance’ that underpinned his work. He spoke of a book which influenced him very much as a child – Selma Lagerlöf’s *Wonderful Adventures of Nils*. He describes the ‘double role’ of the hero in this tale, as “the one who flies

above the Earth and looks at it *from* above but at the same time sees it in every detail". He further explains that he understood this as a kind of double vision - the task of the poet - and how achieving this 'distance' was the means of showing events or people in "full light" so that "every event, every date becomes expressive and persists as an eternal reminder of human depravity and human greatness". His search for distance was realised in writing about his exile. For this reason, it could be argued that his success or creativity stemmed from the liminal or 'distanced' position he experienced as a result of his exile – and the way this position fuelled his 'double vision'.

The third characteristic could be distinguished as the effect suffering or trauma can have on the life of the exile. Alexander Solzhenitsyn was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970. He was born in Kislovodsk in 1918. He graduated from Rostov University in 1941 where he studied physics and mathematics. In 1945, he was sentenced to eight years in a detention camp after some correspondence with a friend was called into question on the basis of remarks they had made about Stalin. In the various camps in which he was imprisoned, he worked as a miner, a bricklayer and a foundry-man. He developed cancer, which despite an operation, was not cured. One month after completing the eight years' detention, he found out that he was to be exiled for life to southern Kazakhstan. His cancer developed until he was near death but in 1954, he was cured at a clinic in Tashkent. He describes his exile like this:

"During all the years of exile, I taught mathematics and physics in a primary school and during my hard and lonely existence I wrote prose in secret (in the camp I could only write down poetry from memory). I managed, however, to keep what I had written, and to take it with me to the European part of the country, where, in the same way, I continued as far as the outer world was concerned, to occupy myself with teaching and, in secret, to devote myself to writing..." (Nobel Laureates in Literature, Accessed 2003)

Solzhenitsyn's experience of exile was realised in the harsh landscapes of gruelling physical labour, sickness and separation from the safety of home, in the prison camps. Even when his exile in these places was over, he was sent away to another place where he had to carry out his desire to write in secret, always fearing that not even one line of his work would be read by anyone else. He however maintains that perhaps the artist has a sense of "stable harmony" that never leaves him as long as realises that he has "merely to be more keenly aware than others of the harmony of the world, of the beauty and ugliness of the human contribution to it, and to communicate this acutely to his fellow-men." This sense of harmony never leaves him even in "misfortune" and "the depths of existence – in destitution, in prison, in sickness..." (Nobel Laureates in Literature, 2003) Therefore, in this case of exile, it could be the struggle to survive under the strains of enormous suffering and hardship which is the well-spring of creativity. As Solzhenitsyn suggests, the desire to be heard or to "cry out to the world" comes from this space, and he comments that the ideas he and his fellow-prisoners had were "formed in conversations with people now dead, in prison cells and by forest fires, they were tested against THAT life, they grew out of THAT existence". This experience of liminality was also one of separation and aloneness and doubt that the safety of home could ever be reached. The fight to overcome this produces powerful work. Bhabha (1994) suggests that it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history – subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement – that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking" (1994: 172). He also discusses how the experience of social marginality "transforms our critical strategies" (ibid).

3. Conclusion

The experience of the exile therefore comprises several aspects which could help to explain the innovative and productive outputs of many of these people and groups. These can be summarised into five main points. The first is the way exiles obtain an insight into a culture other than their own, or how they achieve Milosz's double vision. This is also related to the way Heidegger describes homeless as the more primordial phenomenon because in being not-at-home or in anxiety the meanings of everyday dwelling become a problem and are put in an unfamiliar light and this gives one "the opportunity to come to grips with one's life, to dwell in the world clear-sightedly and resolutely" (Polt, 1999: 78). Said (2002) also describes how

"Seeing 'the entire world as a foreign land' makes possible originality of vision. Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions..."(186).

Secondly, there is a massive identity shift or crisis in identity, described eloquently by Pizzorno (1986), which requires that the exile re-invent him or herself or reconceptualise him or herself in the face of an unknown society. Thirdly, an element of discomfort or suffering is often present: as Said describes, "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the un-healable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (2002: 173). Next, the idea of shifting boundaries or liminality allows for a certain freedom to make comparisons or draw conclusions that might not be so easily seen before when the status quo is carefully being maintained. Milosz gives the illustration – "In a room where people unanimously maintain a conspiracy of silence, one word of truth sounds like a pistol shot." Finally, the sense of a search for home, or to remember home, to find somewhere to belong and a group to be recognised by can become the strongest motivation to produce or create something of one's own that others can identify with. In this way one can send down some sort of roots.

In conclusion, we can relate these experiences of the exile back to the home. As a result of becoming homeless, the exile comes to understand that no home is forever, and that transience and impermanence of the home are as real as the doors and windows of the house. While this can be a source of great sorrow and great need for some place of origin, many have spoken of the best that can be made of this situation. "Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience"(Said, 2002: 184-185). The achievements of those who have crossed these borders and have made contributions to the sciences, the arts, and modern thinking are numerous and definitely indicate that while the liminal experience of exile may well result in destruction and misery, it also harbours the need to anchor something of oneself in the contingent experience of homelessness and dislocation. Adorno argues that "it is part of morality not to be at home in one's home" (Said, 2002: 184), so perhaps the lessons learned from the exile will in some part counter the sadness of their leaving home.

4. Bibliography

- Bhabha, H.K. (1994), The Location of Culture. London, New York: Routledge.
- Cohen, R. (1997), Global Diasporas. An Introduction. London: UCL Press Ltd.
- George, R.M. (1996), The Politics of Home. Post-Colonial Relocations and Twentieth Century Fiction. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Milosz, C. (1988), The Collected Poems 1931-1987. London: Penguin.
- Nobel Laureates in Literature. (2003), Czeslaw Milosz and Alexander Solzhenitsyn
[Retrieved from www.nobelprize.org/literature/laureates]
- Pizzorno, A. (1986), "Some Other Kinds of Otherness: A Critique of "Rational Choice" Theories" in Foxley, A, N. MacPherson and G. O'Donnell (eds) Development, D Democracy and the Art of Trespassing. University of Notre Dame Press.
- Polt, R. (1999), Heidegger An Introduction. London: UCL Press Ltd.
- Radin, Paul. (1956), The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology. New York, Schocken Books.
- Roberts, J.M. (1976), The Penguin History of the World. London: Penguin.
- Said, E. W. (2002), Reflections on Exile and Other Essays. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Simmel, G. (ed Donald Levine) (1971), On Individuality and Social Forms. Selected Writings. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press.
- Szakolczai, A. (2003), The Genesis of Modernity. London: Routledge.
- Tucker, A. (2000), The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence from Patocka to Havel. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Turner, V. (1967), The Forest of Symbols. Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press.