



***Ubi Bene Ibi Patria:*<sup>1</sup>Reflections on Home and Homelessness**  
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Philosophy is essentially homesickness –  
 an urge to feel at home, everywhere.  
*Novalis (Das Allgemeine Brouillon # 857)*

“How much home does a person need?” asks Jean Améry, a refugee from annexed Austria, and the answer he comes up with is : “all the more, the less one can carry within oneself” (Améry, p.44). Given that home is less about a concrete location, and more about idealized, distorted and split memories of one’s childhood and youth, it quickly becomes obvious that when referring to home, one is actually talking about a psychic entity (with all the over-determination that that entails) i.e. about a central internal object, inhabiting one’s subjective consciousness. Améry goes on to suggest, that if one were to ascribe elements like “full command of the dialectics of knowledge and recognition, trust and confidence” to the notion of ‘feeling at home’, home would reveal itself to be a representation of no less and no more than, “basic security” (ibid p.47).

Inquiring into faraway eras and mentalities, one comes across the classical scholar Moses Finley who, while commenting on Homer’s concept of home [*oikos*], writes: “ ... *oikos* was the centre around which life was organized, from which flowed not only the satisfaction of material needs, including security, but also ethical norms and values, duties, obligations and responsibilities” (Finley, 1979 p. 57). Hence home for the ancient Greeks, was what gave to human beings, a sense of identity and purpose, deeply embedded as it is, within a context of communal belonging.

To the extent that home therefore, stands for a concretization of the psychic state of a secure generative base, it is intricately linked to the putatively once-experienced or indeed the retrogradely imagined (fantasized) states of primordial completion or unity, where no disquieting differentiation between me and not-me exists, and therefore no individuation can be forced upon the sense of Being. These views clearly coincide with the thinking of the psychoanalyst Joseph Sandler. He has suggested a *principle of safety*, which through its dynamic constancy – based on the modulation of inner and outer perception – mediates the movement from the pleasure principle to the reality principle – i.e. from a narcissistic attachment to an anaclitic attachment (Sandler, 1960). This sense of safety has been put forward as a stable affective background framing all experience, and – unless overwhelmed – acting as bulwark against the destabilization that anxiety, danger or trauma are expected to cause. It is conceived as emerging both as a vital provision from outside and as an internal developmental achievement of the ego. The eventuality of its not being established, would leave one in a state of constant underlying uncontainable anxiety.

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<sup>1</sup> Wherever at home, there homeland be.

If Freud's conceptualization of the functioning of the psychic apparatus can simplistically be described as a psychological dynamic in which when certain psychic elements are causing dissatisfaction, conflict and hence insecurity, they are defensively repressed in order to render consciousness secure once again, it would appear as no coincidence that Freud chooses to use the expression "the Repressed is an Inner Exile" in his writings (Freud, 1933 p. ) in order to highlight the profound usefulness that the double metaphor 'homeland-exile' has acquired for his understanding of the human psyche.

The 'imagined geographies' that the adult subject labels home (to use Edward Said's poignant expression) are crucially defined by their link to loss (be it space-wise or time-wise or both). Their very existence and value rests on the fact that they are forever lost and hence forever missed and desired. The imagined home, an object of desire since its presence in the conscious mind is dependent on its absence/lack in external reality, can easily stand for a) the search for the return of the primary object (Lacan's *objet petit a*) or b) the so-called metaphysical desire, i.e. longing for the Infinite, longing for union with God.

On the other hand, home as representative of a fantasy of primordial completion, unity and bliss, is intricately linked to Winnicott's concept of the environmental mother and hence forms part of the self. Seen from this perspective, home appears to represent a part of me that does eventually cease to be part of me, and forms a part of not-me, whilst still partly residing within me. Distancing or exile from this not-me part of me will leave me impoverished, if not lifeless even when alive. And yet it is this exile and impoverishment that will generate unending desire for a "true" fulfilling life elsewhere – this elsewhere of course, being forever elusive. It is a true paradox that such an unquenchable desire is only made possible by the present state of experiential 'homelessness', which happens to be the very element that makes life livable and defines human experience, including the very process of thinking. The predicament of the object of desire, like any object of hope must – at all costs – be kept at arms length however, be forever 'over there', be always just beyond reach. Eventually this desire for an ideal *telos* gets to be transformed, so that desire itself becomes the *telos*, thereby sustaining the evolution of the living process. This is a most unexpected process whereby a lost element becomes a found *raison d'être*. It is Nietzsche curiously enough, who would have us remember that what is profound in man, is that he is no more than a connecting bridge, that he is not bound to any specific purpose. (Nietzsche, 1989 p. 10-11) Moving towards through creating links, stands firmly opposed to any deadly arrival.

The flip side of desire, a never-ending grudge and resentment is essentially an alternative manifestation of the very same dynamic. Here too, like in longing for the idealized object, the never-ending desire for a *status quo ante* is fuelling the psychic equilibrium. Any unresolvable inner conflict or endless complaint as expression of "negative submission" (Shengold, 2000 p. 445) must needs be as much a sign of adhesive/insecure attachment and inability to let go and gain autonomy, as manifest submission and servitude to an idealized entity, is. The iconic predicament of the Biblical Job (without the

unconvincing happy ending) or indeed that of the tragic Philoctetes, are indicative of the inherent inability to have the link replaced with new attachments, and as such ends up unalteredly preserving the maintenance, and steady nurturance, of the melancholic identification. It is a movement (albeit viciously circular) through old familiar links that eschews the abandonment to linklessness – even a temporary one – necessary in order to make a new unfamiliar link. A desire (albeit a negatively tinged one) towards an unretrievable object is once again in full display.

The risk under these conditions, is that the tension caused by the unquenchable desire, instead of generating life-giving energy to motivate creativity, ends up deteriorating into energizing the suspended animation of a psychic retreat. The immovability of a melancholic process, always at the service of the Death Drive, has as its desire, deconstruction and annihilation, leading eventually to the deadness of the inorganic state.

Home can thus be conceptualised in two opposing ways: a) as the lost and forever sought after ideal state, the quest of which promotes generativity and activates the Life Drives and b) as the lost and resented object whose un-mournable loss stultifies growth by defensively evading the pangs of freedom from incestuous dependence, as well as evading the pangs of freedom to individuate and subjectivate. The resulting stuckness of this defensive psychic retreat perversely feeds and maintains a false sense of security – a pseudo-home as final resting place, i.e. a tomb. The melancholic process in this instance, just like in clinical melancholia, gets entangled in an inability to surpass the incestuous dependency on a hated abusive object of narcissistic attachment.

Dependence on a ‘linking object’ that is coloured almost exclusively by frustration, i.e. badness/deadness (one that does not allow for a natural ambivalence), cannot but stifle all attempts at gradual dis-investment and subsequent novel investment that one would expect to encounter in proper mourning. Phenomenologically it emerges as paralysing ‘homesickness’. This form of homesickness (as opposed to the bitter-sweet wistfulness of the occasional remembrance of past times) is a manifestation of melancholic self-destruction – a bit-by-bit dismantling, through hatred, of one’s own past and thereby of one’s present. The manifest longing for the lost object in these cases, unconsciously carries within it a latent murderous/destructive intent, which by being relentless, cannot bring about any change – a murder that can never be over and done with.

Proper mourning on the other hand, dependant as it is on one’s acceptance of, or submission to, being profoundly transformed by the loss – a transformation that one cannot fully control, predict or determine – entails a fluidity of investment that promotes growth (Butler, 2004 p. 21). Mourning the loss of a home, being that is, in a state of homelessness, brings one face to face with the acceptance of the fact, that one is forever changed by the loss. Return to the lost self-state being impossible, transitory homelessness looms large as an invitation to become a self one never was, up until then – to establish that is, a new, more fluid and dependable home to dwell in. It is the trusted internal home that will allow and support such a movement.

Corresponding reflections can be found in Winnicott's concept of *continuity of being*. He postulates a primordial, ante-natal state of no awareness, because there exists no self-agency as yet, to instigate awareness – a state where all there is, is *being*. Even though Winnicott does not use the term 'home', the descriptions he provides, point to indubitable affinities. He attributes to this state the character of an all-encompassing "essential aloneness that can only take place under maximum conditions of dependence." (Winnicott, 1988 p.131) The universal but futile wish to return to this aloneness is then linked to the "... the idea that there is a peaceful state before aloneness that can be peacefully reached by an extreme of regression. Most of what is commonly said and felt about death is about this first state before aliveness, where aloneness is a fact and dependence [whilst maximally present] is not an object of awareness" (ibid. p. 132). This is reminiscent of what Lacan would call the never attainable *objet petit a*, forever promising the impossible not-drive-related *jouissance* which is located in the order of the Real (a state before and beyond subjectivation, in fact its undoing). Jonathan Lear, a contemporary psychoanalyst on the other hand, uses the expression "*a truly happy life*" for this state of affairs, and comments thus: "... a [condition] lacking in nothing, hints at the idea that the truly happy life is somehow beyond lacks, i.e. beyond desire... the fantasy of a truly happy life then becomes tinged with the suggestion of a life beyond life – a certain kind of living death" (Lear, 2002 p. 27).

Transitory homelessness or permanent homelessness has been an aporia troubling philosophy for a long time. A permanent sense of Being-in-the-World supported by religion, science and the belief in the eventual knowability and predictability of the cosmos, has, over the years, been repeatedly challenged by thinkers who suggest that instead of 'home' being a metaphor for the core of human essence and existence, it is indeed 'homelessness' that should occupy that position. From Kierkegaard who talks of existential anxiety (i.e. insecurity) as the point from which human consciousness springs, through Heidegger who talks of 'Thrownness [*Geworfenheit*]' and essential 'Homelessness [*Heimatlosigkeit*]' as trademarks of Being, linked as they are to man's alienation and inability in 'Dwelling [*Wohnen*]', all the way to Levinas with his concept of the horror of an antecedent 'There be [*il y a*]', the notion of "homelessness" as an initial fundamental existential state, appears to have come to stay. Levinas keeps referring to an impersonal existential quality of hollowness – "a void devoid ... even of the void" (Levinas, 1993 p. 91) – that envelops existence, and which – because it stays beyond consciousness and subjectivity – can only be intuited as a constant background vigilance. 'There be' is identified by him as a quality of neither being nor nothingness, but rather (very much like the Platonic *khora*) as the quality of the primordial principle generating differentiations out of chaos. "Faced with this obscure invasion, i.e. the menace of the pure and simple presence of the *there be*, it is impossible to take shelter in oneself, to withdraw into one's shell. One is utterly exposed" (ibid p. 92).

The metaphors employed by this author too, clearly emphasize the centrality of the home/homelessness theme. Heidegger's understanding of homelessness on the other hand, appears to be linked to what he calls, a strong denial of "the unavoidable truth that we

mortals are forever and repeatedly in search of the nature of Dwelling ...” denial that is, of a process he calls the ‘Dwelling-plight (*Wohnungsnot*)’ (Heidegger, 2000 p.163). As long as this *Dwelling-plight* is not taken seriously, he claims, the profound background sense of homelessness lingers on. Dwelling is made possible only in a searched for “home”, and “[d]welling... is the basic feature of Being, in accordance with which, mortals are!” (ibid, p.163). This searched for home is for Heidegger an achievement, and never a given. He argues that an at-home-territory-existence is only ever given to us as a potentiality. There is no homeland-in-itself, into which one is simply born, homeland can only become there, where there is meaningful inter-human interaction (a manifestation of *Being-with [Mitsein]*.) Clearly for this thinker too, the notion of Dwelling or Home-- is never a matter of concrete rootedness in a single spot, but tends rather to imply an active mode of engagement in the world that recognizes its own finitude. As long as one does not own up to such a homeland in the course of the unfolding of one’s life and thinking therefore, one remains, according to Heidegger, homeless and in denial of the Dwelling-plight.

Heidegger’s student, the psychoanalyst Hans Loewald courageously attempted to link his teacher’s views with psychoanalytic thinking. If Thrownness and Essential Homelessness are primordial, they must – according to Loewald – be counterbalanced by the fact that “...the truth of human beings is revealed in their interrelatedness” (Loewald, 2000 p. 297-8). Initial fundamental Thrownness and Homelessness (reminiscent of Freud’s elemental helplessness) ends up forcing object relatedness upon mankind, as well as its natural derivative which is the ethical turn of recognition and responsibility towards the Other. It inevitably forces a drive-response towards the (M)Other – not only to the drives that enliven her, but mainly to the conflicts of her drives. This response takes the form of vital conflicts relating to loving and hating, to dependence and to wishing to get rid of, to killing off and being free from, and it is all these in conjunction, that begin to incrementally build a sense of home in the burgeoning consciousness.

Having established a home, it is then time to leave and meet the world. If the eventual ‘leaving home’ can be understood as a form of symbolic parricide, the haunting guilt that that condition entails, ends up permeating and shaping the anxieties encountered in the resulting homelessness. “... without the guilty deed of parricide [which we must all inevitably commit and pay harsh punishment for] there is no individual self, worthy of the name” (ibid, p. 394) claims Loewald, thereby underscoring the fact that such a universal parricide serves as a way out of the frustrations of symbiosis. Thus, if parricide acts as a first step towards individuation (i.e. establishing a new psychological home), the second step would be the good enough working through of this guilt, which will render the homelessness temporary and will subsequently allow for an investment in establishing a new home in which to dwell as a subject imbued with a sense of ambivalence.

These are not novel thoughts. Freud in *Totem & Taboo* describes the murder of the father as a formative prerequisite for social life. If primary autonomy / individuation is achieved through the separation provided by the unconscious killing off of the mother-object, aspects of which have been previously securely internalized, secondary individuation

(*vis à vis* the group) can only be achieved through the ‘murder of the father’ (Roussillon, 1999). Once secure primary attachment is established – once a good enough home-in-which-habitation-is-viable has been constructed internally, the emerging individual can attempt to disengage – through symbolisation and other processes of representation – from the symbiotic background upon which he had been leaning hitherto, and commence the process of primary subjectivation leading to whole-object relating. This process is subsequently repeated in its oedipal configuration, with the subject attempting this time, to individuate (i.e. find a home for himself) outside the paternal space, just as he had previously done it with the maternal space. Dialectically linked to this capacity to stand alone (i.e. have an internal home) whilst facing the father, is the subject’s subsequent capacity to stand alone whilst facing the social. Facing the social is a function reserved for whole subjects.

Freud has ingeniously bridged this process with poetic creativity (Freud, 1921). The epic poet, he suggested, utilizes his imagination, i.e. the virtuality of the symbolic order, in order to experience the murder of the father vicariously, by turning it into a narrative. It is through a state of agency springing from a secure internal home, whilst facing the father alone, that the subject can maintain its individuality in the face of the social. “Being replaceable and yet unique, is the trademark of being an individual” claims Roussillon (1999 p. 797), and one could potentially paraphrase this to suggest, that a unique, hence meaningful and reliable inner home, renders external homes and belongings (be they ancestral or current) interchangeable for any mature subject.

It is a bitter and hence repeatedly neglected paradox, that should the object of desire ever be attained, it would both kill desire and end up evoking sheer disappointment. How odd it is then, that if home is to be longed for, and if homelessness is to be somehow bitterly endured and creatively transformed, one has to never return, to never reach home. Because of the split, and various distortions due to idealization, the home, long-term separation from which engenders homelessness, is a non-topos i.e. a utopia. Imagining it as ‘having once existed’, allows for this concretised primary object to have its utterly illusory quality be masterfully disguised or denied. Home as a representation of desire, fulfils its function only in so far as it remains unreachable.

Cavafy sums it up in a nutshell:

.... if you find her poor,  
Ithaka has not deceived you.  
Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.  
Without her you wouldn't have set out.  
She has nothing left to give you now.

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