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Exiles Masked, Masks of Exile

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Aspects of the exiled, visible and invisible

There is a sense in which the émigré is the person who has left the place where they were born – which is not necessarily a different 'country' from the one they are going to live in – either because they have been forced out or can no longer find the living conditions there that are right for them. This is most often the case for our contemporaries, economic, often postcolonial, migrations or those related to ethnic origins or other. Sometimes these are mass migrations; in which people lose their particular character as individuals and where, if we are not careful enough, we run the risk of seeing them as some sort of livestock, as undifferentiated beings. In this sense of emigration there is a so-called 'biological' connotation where the desire is to stay alive, or even to keep alive the family that has stayed behind. The fantasy is that of the poor, almost illiterate creature in search of subsistence or, closer to ourselves in France, that of the young Kabyle arriving at Renault in Billancourt, the French-Algerian family from Bab-el-Oued who were told 'it's suitcase or coffin'. Though this exile is submitted to, it is nonetheless carried out in an Eros movement, a leap into the life instinct. This kind of person, who likewise emigrates and immigrates in the same movement, has a deep desire to live, and goes elsewhere in order to do so. He is allowed to feel homesick and yearn for his homeland, which may be reduced to an exotic romanticism if he integrates – and if, as is preferable, his children become the product of the adoptive society's norms. If he does not manage to integrate, his brusque change of life is likely to cause his offspring to sink into a kind of '*sous-vie*' or sub-life.

There is also the situation where the 'exile' is thrown out of his country for reasons connected with the nature of those in power, suffering forced exile or even banishment, leaving his country because his life is threatened less for economic reasons than 'ontological' ones, of opinion or sensitivity. A stereotypical political exile, in such instances is experienced as a 'run-for-your-life', since it is about saving 'your skin' because you are 'stifling', or you are the victim of various attempts to

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stifle you. A slightly different emphasis appears here, to supplement the first: an emphasis with 'cultural' flavour, and it is perhaps the tiniest difference that marks it out. Then it is a question of 'symbolic' exile. Rather than a matter of life instinct, could we here talk about a simple matter of 'survival', which is in fact a reverse form of '*sous-vie*'?

This more burdensome exile is the one experienced by 'educated' people. It is voluntary or involuntary, between wished-for within and imposed from outside, with a whole spectrum of intermediate levels. The associated fantasy is that of the victim turned out of her home, a bayonet at her back. For a long time she is allowed the right to pain, unhappiness and '*saudade*', or that right is even reserved for her. This may or may not be presented as a *forced* (*subi*) exile, and History corroborates how sudden (*subit*) it can be.

There are also the voluntary departures of ordinary people who leave their country because they think they or their children have only a mediocre future (*à venir* – to come) there and so they choose an accessible country: often a country whose language they speak, which at first does not make them seem like 'foreigners', except for a slight accent . . . This then is a form of invisible exile and when they dare to talk of themselves as migrants, others reply: 'But your life wasn't in danger like the ***s, and your neighbours, who came from ***: couldn't you have stayed in your country?' And from then on there is no place, no reason for their regrets and discomfort. They can have no fantasy, no stereotype, however crude, and so no excuse. For everyone this 'unspoken', which is 'over-implied', will emphasize the invisible nature of their immigration throughout their lives. What is not heard sometimes ends up being silenced. People keep to themselves and keep quiet.

Mixed cases can even be found, educated people leaving their country voluntarily, attracted by a distant somewhere, or for apparently political motives which, as the years go by, turn out to be an expression of getting away from the family, or illiterate people finding the resources to cross frontiers illegally because a death has suddenly exposed to them the poverty of their situation . . .

Others leave home because they cannot stay any longer; without really knowing why, something tells them they are not 'at home' in their life, or, more intimately, in their sex.

And yet others, who do not move, have the feeling they came from somewhere else, because of an alien signifier that has been passed on to them: a grandfather's ritual recipe which is not from here, the presence of an object, a fleetingly different notation, a disturbing strangeness coming from within that for them means elsewhere. Might we not talk about geostationary migrations for human beings as well as for satellites? Might migration not be seen as a state of destiny, an irrepressible command? That would make us think quite differently about the notion of exile. Beyond social, economic, political, cultural statistics what is *below history's radar* questions individual destinies one by one.

So who can claim that only banished political exile is worthy of bearing the title 'exile' thus representing suffering and pain, and celebrating homesickness? Should not everyone have their right to a discourse of uprooting? Maybe it is time to see and study exile in other mental, feeling, verbal territories than those to which we have more or less restricted it up to now.

Exile and mother tongue

Our times emphasize the crucial importance of loss of mother tongue in migration. This would mean that migrants who make their way to countries speaking their language would not be considered exiles . . . But this is a reductive approach for the Brit who goes to Australia, the educated Vietnamese who comes to live in France, the Egyptian in North Africa or the French-speaker from the Mediterranean in Canada. The examples are numerous and obvious.

In addition, it is often hard to speak of mother tongue in the singular, as many migrants were simultaneously immersed in several languages from birth. And what if the mother was herself brought up in a multilingual environment? The young Kabyle employed by Renault had inevitably heard Berber, French and Arabic spoken from early childhood. Similarly, the young French-Algerian would be torn between French and Arabic, probably some Italian or Spanish, Jewish Spanish or Ladino. The Polish Jew who arrived in the early 20th century had grown up amid Polish, Yiddish, maybe even Hebrew sounds. Italians in the 1930s heard their local dialect spoken – Lombard, Romagnol, Venetian, Neapolitan – as well as Italian. People from Martinique were surrounded by Creole and French. And we can extend yet further the hypothesis that the fact of having been immersed in a multilingual environment maybe helped to create the conditions of possibility for migration.

It is not a question of ignoring the harm that may be caused by having to speak, work, write, educate your children in a specific language (like modern Hebrew, which new Israeli immigrants were obliged to use in order to help set up their country) and at the same time giving up a language which people may see as the one in which they 'chat', the language 'that supports them'. This is another aspect of the relationship with language and might be the subject of other considerations.

The language environment in early childhood is in many cases far richer that we imagine. Here instead we need to raise one question, possibly thinking of relativizing the strictly 'maternal' influence, assumed to be unitary and exclusive, in the process of constructing the relationship with language. The preponderance assigned to the mother tongue seems to be linked with the idea that, since it contains the secret of the original signifier, the primal repression, it may bear each person's secret whole, in the guise of the lost paradise. But a primal repression may also carry maternal distress, her ability to leave her child, tomorrow's emigrant, in the same state of 'helplessness' as any other. So we may wonder if idealizing the mother tongue does not have an influence as 'eluding' and (or) exonerating the bedrock of this subject.

The single exclusive definition of 'mother tongue' therefore seems to be a hypernaturalistic fiction. In which language would she have offered the child her breast or the first bottle? How should we approach the question if the mother herself is immersed in a multilingual world, if she switches language depending on who she is talking to, the time, the emotions to be expressed which are better spoken in one language? When the child who is surrounded by a multilingual universe finds herself in the country she has migrated to, she will have lost not 'one' mother tongue but a multiple, diverse, many-coloured sound and language environment. So exile will be associated with the loss of that environment where the mixture of languages performed its work of impregnation. Anyone who has seen a small child speaking in

one language to its mother and in another to its nanny or a grandmother cannot but be convinced of this. Below the radar of social or family status the question will continue to be asked: what language will she consider to be her 'mother' tongue, her biological mother's or the language of the person who represents the strongest emotional attachment, even though that attachment may be harmful?

Familiar tunes and distant murmurs

Loss of the sound environment may legitimately be considered as more important, strictly speaking, than that of the mother tongue. That environment is each person's 'familiar tunes'.

Imagining loss, through migration, of the mother tongue as an essential even primary factor, leads to the following: in cases where the migrant goes away to live elsewhere but does not switch language, or in another place where he knows the language, the fact that there has been a loss is obliterated. The migrant will then be in a situation of 'masked exile'.

'Losing the world' – a personal journey

Contrary to every normal practice I would like to contribute a personal experience here. I was born in Tunis just after the end of the war and lived there till the age of 14 just after the end of the war. We were Tunisian citizens. My early childhood was spent amid the sound of two languages: the 'main' one was French, the 'minor' one Arabic. I was spoken to in French and Arabic. I answered solely in French, even if I was being spoken to in Arabic. But I understood it perfectly. At school there was half an hour of Arabic a day: so I learnt to read and write it from the age of 6 and all through primary school, but I have never used it. My mother spoke French very well; she had been brought up and educated in the language but spoke Arabic daily to her mother my maternal grandmother who, other than Arabic, knew Italian just as well since she had been born Italian. Sometimes she spoke Italian too, but not so often. French was her adopted language because she had left the Italian school at around 10 years of age on her own initiative and entered the French school. My mother and her mother wrote only in French. My father spoke French perfectly, having learnt it at 5 when he started school. His father and mother spoke only Arabic and had given him an Arab first name, to which the French authorities later added a French equivalent. He had been raised in Arabic, which he spoke and wrote. His ability in both languages was appreciated in his work as a senior executive in the state tax organization that subsequently became the Tunisian Cereals Board. After Independence he carried on working there, even though the French Protectorate directors left.

My father was not involved in politics. He thought Tunisian Independence was the direction indicated by history but he was not active either in favour of independence or for maintaining the French presence. He took me to a gathering to welcome Pierre Mendès-France in 1952 or 1953 when he came to offer Tunisians 'internal autonomy', which some commentators called 'independence in interde-

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pendence'. Effective independence came in 1956. Two years later Bourguiba's government, encountering some domestic difficulties, launched an extremely strategic programme called 'the Tunisification of Tunisia'; there were speeches on the radio, crowds and banners in the streets to spread propaganda.

One Monday morning my father found one of his colleagues installed in his office. It was explained to him that he no longer had a position because of 'tunisification', and he was advised to make other plans for the future of his two children. My father reminded them he was Tunisian. The answer was: 'but not Muslim'. He was Jewish. It should be said in passing that, as regards Jewishness, my father avoided synagogues and rabbis, in fact he was closer to freethinkers.

My father fell ill. As soon as he had recovered his health it was decided that we would leave for France, and the first steps were taken to get French nationality. My father was still a government employee. Even though he had been informed of his dismissal he knew that, if the Tunisians were to become aware of what he was planning, he could be in serious trouble: he had the latest information on all the figures to do with state production of cereals, since he had organized their distribution, monitoring and warehousing by creating dozens of centres throughout the country. Therefore he needed to take precautions using discretion and secrecy. Being aware of that danger was a burden for me at 12.

A little over a year later I received a French consular card, which was supposed to protect me if any problems arose on the public highway, and finally a blue passport: a French one. My father took me with him to the Interior Ministry where he renounced his Tunisian nationality, proving that he wanted to symbolically renounce his nationality in person, in order to separate from his native land. Born before the First World War, he had remained faithful to his Tunisian family allegiance.

Though he was born less than 24 years after colonization he nevertheless admired the ideal France of Human Rights and the Popular Front. He had involved himself very deeply in voluntary work for philanthropic organizations: for instance he had worked with the organizers of the 'Bal des petits lits blancs' (fundraising events for children in hospital), then with the French authorities assessing war damage caused by the German bombing in 1942 and 1943, as well as other similar operations. The French authorities found it difficult to deny the services rendered, which spoke in our favour. Still today I cannot accept that our migration could not have been seen as a political exile; but was that not what it was to a large extent? We are in some way History's waste products, a little collateral damage, but really nothing too serious.

And so at 14 and with a two-hour flight I changed nationality, country, language background, urban bustle and family environment: I would never see my two grandmothers again.

We settled in Paris in 1960. I took a long time to understand that I was going into exile and that this exile was not at all visible. What did we have in common with those poor young people, illiterate and alone, brought from Kabylia to work in manual jobs and live in Nanterre shanty-towns; or with those old white Russian political refugees reduced to being taxi-drivers; or with the Armenians, the sons of those who had escaped the genocide? In comparison with them we could consider ourselves privileged: we were not stateless, we knew the language of the country, we had social security, a flat . . . I had been accepted at a reputable school.

It was not just a matter of mother tongue, but of a separation, a break. The fact of speaking the same language and the comparison with 'other' forms of exile mask that separation and have devastating effects. My father had a three-hour journey by train and bus every day to go to work, and my mother in our civil service flat in the suburbs spent her days in isolation. Her Mediterranean sociability and spontaneity were rejected by the local people in the Val-de-Marne. And I paid a heavy price in travelling for the privilege of being accepted at 'the best girls' school in France', especially as the literature teachers were so lacking in courtesy as to ask me how, coming from such an ordinary school, I had achieved that level in French and Latin. The question was meant as a compliment but it was accompanied by excessive condescension.

We were definitively separated, and what mourning could we talk about, what could we lament? What homesickness could we feel? Later I understood that exile is not measured in those terms. It was not objectivistic. It was not visible. What was lost was simply the world.

Exile and loss

But what is 'the world' if not space-time, a place of representations, fantasy and every projection? In that case it is on another screen and in another physical, geographical, linguistic place that projects have to be realized. Interior space would no longer find points to hook into – or not enough of them – in external space. How should we not compare what is happening with what used to happen in day-to-day detail, climate, bustle, atmosphere in its least obvious aspects? Prior space appears only in the dialectic set up with present space: the street you did not observe but were immersed in is not the same anymore, and that changes everything. It appears where the child, the teenager, the adult, who imagined as the days passed what the near or distant future would bring in a particular place, even and especially without realizing it, finds an obstacle each time he thinks about it and a permanent adjustment has to be made. That is where the more social idea of adaptation comes into play. So we may suppose that with migration a dissociation between time and space takes place. It is true that the notion of exile has given the greatest authors food for thought, from the writers of adventure stories to mystics via philosophers. Who is not in exile? Is living not a series of exiles? Those questions remain in all their profound legitimacy. This exploration has a more modest aim.

How do migrants respond? Some seize hold of this new space and commit themselves wholeheartedly; others, more numerous, withdraw, and so diminish everyone's prominence. As for me, the France I knew because I had spent holidays there was the country I saw as a refuge, where I went to recharge my batteries, refresh my ideas: a country of culture, the Revolution, freedom. France played a part in a dialectic with my birthplace, to which it was in a way an antithesis. Now the refuge showed me its everyday rough edges. The country of asylum turned into an asylum for strangers, the 'aliens' that we had become.

Where had my father's French dream gone? Though sad in appearance he was working as hard as he could. But 35 years later, soon after his 85th birthday, he

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suffered a serious mental breakdown to the point where he asked me suddenly, 'Take me home'.

Necessary mourning, another form of the invisible

Nowadays we know that in any final separation a work of mourning is essential. Mourning is a complex form of letting go, rejection, revolt, integration; it is like a slow, difficult piece of interiorized work that everyone undertakes with their own resources.

What emerges as fundamental in mourning is the 'final' dimension of the story. It is 'never again'. For migrants the homeland is still there, 'the earth does not move'. But it is a matter of their relationship with it and what it represents. Can immigrants who go back for holidays every year with children born in France claim that nothing has changed? Of course that is unthinkable, unless they are in denial or crazy.

In exile some must learn to adapt. But how to adapt if no mourning has taken place? In order to take on new forms of being which perform the adaptation, they probably need to make a bit of space, clear out what they are carrying within them. Obviously they have to learn a new 'language', but it is not only a question of language in the narrow sense, but a whole system of signs and also the ability to project themselves or, if not, to create conditions into which their descendants, inheriting their 'previous place', can project themselves, reducing the discontinuity between time and space that belongs to their elders. But how much space should be made, and how to do it? What should be given up to make room to welcome in the new? What kind of hybridity should be constructed and how should they understand that this hybridity will itself take as many forms as the people involved?

And before cramming migrants with fresh information about the host country, what if they were in fact invited to work on mourning, each in their own way, since for them it is unavoidable? Unsuccessful plans for integration and assimilation have long come up against problems. That is where the difficulty lies because that is the reign of the specific, the 'one by one' and case by case. What is it like for each individual? It is hard for someone from another country to get round that question. Some will see in it the need to trace their roots, others the need to identify the culture they come from, yet others will search for the mysteries of a kind of fidelity, or else the possibility of a dual culture.

If, one day in adolescence or later, the person who has *not* moved away from their own land starts to tear up their upbringing and revisit their environment with a critical eye, why shouldn't the migrant be excused that too? In any inheritance there is baggage, pain, and everyone knows they need to get rid of it, cast it aside, simply to live. Whatever the circumstances, the future is also built with and through letting go. For migrants that is probably a hard discourse to absorb because for them their memories may hold the status of capital, maybe even constitute their capital.

Furthermore, it is inappropriate talk from a social worker with a welcoming function who often saw herself as the spokesperson for hospitality: how can a job of welcoming encourage the letting go, is that the role of the welcomers, or would they not then be suspect? Here again it is a matter of going back to immateriality, the

invisible, the diffuse and immeasurable, both for migrants and for those who deal with them. Because it is not just about the social but an entirely different level, a personal and private one. What if we tackled the problem from the other end? But how? Can it be organized as programmes of social work that go above and beyond the social? I do not know, but for me, today, this is the perspective to aim for.

And I forgot to ask my father what language he dreamed in and where he dreamed of.

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