

Some Notes on Nostalgia

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NOSTALGIA is a psycho-physiological condition commonly observed in homesickness. Such psychological disturbances are frequently extreme variants of milder conditions which occur commonly in everyday life. Amnesia, for example, is a pathological condition which is exemplified in various degrees of forgetfulness. So also with nostalgia; there are to be observed in ordinary experience emotions and sentiments of a similar but more attenuated character. These we may term nostalgic sentiments.

In extreme forms the symptoms of nostalgia are acute and violent. The respiratory, circulatory, and digestive functions are disturbed. Extreme lassitude, dizziness, inability to assimilate food, inability to articulate, spasmodic movements of the diaphragm, uncontrollable weeping—these manifestations are present in various degrees, resulting frequently in gross functional maladjustment. The duration of an attack may be brief, or it may be prolonged; and occasionally death results from one or another consequence of this psycho-physiological disorganization.

The onset of nostalgia is likely to be abrupt. The circumstances to which the attack is attributed may have already been completely developed. Considerable time may even have elapsed. And then some slight and apparently inconsequential event—a familiar strain of music, a photograph, the sound of rain on the roof or of wind in the chimney, the smell of grass or of burning leaves—sometimes for no apparent reason, the individual is swept away in a torrent of nostalgic emotion.

Two general characteristics of nostalgia are worth noting. First, it is psychogenic. There is no modification of environment or organism that appears adequate for the response. Nor is the modification of the environment sufficient in itself to produce the effect. The interposition of a personal psychological, or psycho-neurological, factor is indispensable for the attack.

Second, nostalgia is not associated with a particular civilization or culture. It is ancient and modern, urban and rural. It is found in primitive societies as well as in advanced, among the brown peoples of Melanesia as well as among the blond Teutonic tribes of northern Europe. It is a phenomenon more fundamental than any particular culture.

Nostalgic sentiments are associated

not only with home, that is with place, but also with persons and with things. Curiously, nostalgic sentiments attach both to first-hand personal experiences with place, person, and past time, and to vicarious experience as well, as is illustrated in the yearning for the Middle Ages which is frequent in Europe, or in the lament of the Jewish people: "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion."

One of the most beautiful and poignant descriptions of nostalgic emotion is to be found in Thornton Wilder's "The Woman of Andros," in



a parable which tells of the pain and grief of a hero who was permitted by the King of the Dead to live over again, both as participant and as onlooker, that day of his life which had been least eventful. Proust in "Remembrance of Things Past" makes this phenomenon his central theme. One who has experienced the brief recapture of a moment of past time with all the *klang* and substance of present reality, maintaining the while externality as observer, recognizes the devastating emotional character of the experience, and apprehends the essential nostalgic quality.

In searching for a mechanism, or at least a clue, to the explanation of these profound and general influences on human behavior, I was drawn to a neglected area of *gestalt* psychology, namely the emotional concomitants of *gestalt* transformations. Here I found introspectively a suggestion, not only for the depth and generality of the nostalgic, but also for the emotionality associated with the person as an individual. The reader is cautioned to regard the observations which follow as suggestive only, and to treat

them as tentative hypotheses, subject to modification without reservation.

The term *gestalt*, translated literally, means "pattern" or "configuration," and is used to refer to the unity which the mind gives to a group of particular images simultaneously present in conscious activity. The particular images are parts of a whole, but the whole is greater than the parts. It is the whole which has meaning and significance, and, except when analyzed, the parts are not apprehended as such. The German term *gestalt* is wisely used to designate these phenomena, since this unfamiliar word carries the implication of a unity in awareness that is less well brought out by the more familiar English words, "pattern" or "configuration."

The *gestalt* is the characteristic element in all conscious or subconscious experience. Through it is blended the raw material of sensory experience, and only through it is behavior possible on a level higher than the sensory-motor reflex. The *gestalt* is the time-binding force in nature, and is the foundation for conscious awareness and for self-conscious individuality. Without it there could be no behavior that we would recognize as "human." It is a "given" in a universe that includes the human person in its nature.

The transformation of the *gestalt* are among the most fascinating commonplaces of elementary psychology—a few lines and angles in two dimensions are seen as a solid cube, then suddenly as a hollow box. In the more complicated *gestalt* patterns, such transformations may be somewhat formally classified as destructive and as constructive. In the constructive transformation of the *gestalt*, the elements of the pattern achieve a higher integration, a unity, a cohesive and indivisible substantiality; conversely, in the destructive transformation, the pattern falls apart, the unity vanishes, the fragments appear as crude, formless irrelevancies.

SINCE *gestalt* patterns are the basic elements of conscious awareness, the significance and meaning of any perceptual image or of any specific or general idea concerning the external world results from consolidating the image or idea with a residue of present and past experience which gives them quality and form. These meaningful consolidations we may distinguish as the "*gestalt* of the outer world."

The nostalgic sentiments are associated with transformations of this *gestalt*. When the transformations are destructive, when the world falls to

pieces, the emotional experience is the negative phase. When the transformations are constructive, when the pattern takes on a sudden higher unity, a transcendent, when formless elements of experience become a significant totality, the emotional experience is positive; it is the esthetic sentiment, and, in its extreme phase, religious ecstasy. Yearning, *sehnsucht*, esthetic feeling and certain forms of religious emotion are therefore associated as nostalgic sentiments in a single family of emotional behavior—all arising as *gestalt* transformations of the outer world.

ANOTHER group of powerful emotional phenomena similar and complementary to those associated with transformations in the “*gestalt* of the outer world” are those which arise from the individual’s consciousness of the significance of himself as a person. The content which is drawn upon to create the ever-changing pattern of self-conscious personality lies within the individual and is organically and psychologically distinguishable from that of the external world. The consolidations of precept and idea by the individual, of meaningful awareness of himself as a person, we may designate as the “*gestalt* of the inner world.”

The emotions and sentiments which are associated with transformations of the *gestalt* of the inner world we may refer to as egoic sentiments in contrast to the nostalgic sentiments which are associated with changes in the outer world *gestalt*.

Like the nostalgic sentiments, the egoic sentiments also have two phases, positive and negative. When the transformations of the inner world *gestalt* are constructive and expansive, the egoic sentiment is positive and we experience the elation of ego-aggrandizement. The elation which is commonly associated with personal success in competitive activity, or in the solution of a self-imposed problem, or in social recognition of personal status, is characteristic of the positive phase. When the transformations are destructive, when the *gestalt* of the inner world disintegrates, the egoic sentiment is negative and we have feelings of subjugation, shame, and humiliation.

It would be premature to discuss at too great length questions of mechanism; the observational foundation is inadequate, and the analysis is both incomplete and over-simplified. Such discussion has value only insofar as it is suggestive of the new avenues of observation, or as it sharpens and reinforces empirical generalizations. For the moment three points only need to be stressed: first, a group of



powerful sentiments and emotions, termed nostalgic because of their qualitative relation to nostalgia, may be distinguished; second, these nostalgic sentiments derive from primitive and fundamental sources of behavior; and third, the nostalgic sentiments are characteristically associated with the external world and are separable from another group of sentiments and emotions, termed egoic, which arise from the personality itself.

The egoic sentiments are well known. They loom large in the psychological interpretation of behavior. Their gratification is the object of much of the business of life. The consideration of the egoic sentiments is regarded as a matter of practical concern and the egoic sentiments themselves are regarded as substantial and real.

The nostalgic sentiments are less well understood. Although abundantly represented in literature and in art, they have found no appropriate place in social theory. Nostalgic sentiments being incommensurable in the hedonistic calculus, are regarded as somewhat removed from the hard logic of nature and touched by a bit of moonlight and summer madness.

But it must be realized that the same degree of reality attaches to the nostalgic as to the egoic, that there is to be found in the nostalgic an equally significant emotional foundation for behavior. And from this point of view, the interpretation of certain political, economic, and social phenomena is considerably altered and enriched.

An understanding of political behavior, of patriotism, nationality, racial and class solidarity is crucial in any analysis of human and social behavior. It is apparent that in the high emotionality observable in these social groupings there are both egoic and nostalgic constituents. Manifestations of patriotism exhibit pride and

elation in the ego-aggrandizement, extraordinary sensitivity to status, face-saving compulsions, susceptibility to humiliation, desire for revenge. The nostalgic elements are also present and are clearly observable in situations where no questions involving status arise. These sentiments and emotions are mystical and romantic, and are colored by non-personal elation or by wistful yearning and exquisite sadness. Love of country is by no means merely love of self through country. Through the nostalgic sentiments come the drives that result in sacrificial devotion to a national or racial cause. The understanding of political behavior cannot be complete in terms of any calculus of self-seeking motives; nor can the nostalgic elements be dismissed as epiphenomenal, incidental, and accidental. The nostalgic sentiments are fundamental, essential, and ubiquitous, and must be given due consideration in political analysis at either the theoretical or practical level.

THE existence in human nature of the nostalgic gives the possibility of protection against one of the greatest hazards to the organization of a durable peace, namely mass migrations of peoples. Fortunately the nostalgic sentiments cause most people to live out their lives in the setting of land, sea, and sky that became organized into them as their homeland. Economic and political conditions must become extremely severe to result in population movements, and accordingly, if we can secure a certain minimum provision for what is accepted as a satisfactory way of life, we shall be able to avoid the issues and struggles that would otherwise arise in efforts at mass population redistribution.

Nostalgic sentiments complicate behavior which is called economic. They add a further element of irrationality to conduct already recognized to be scarcely rational enough to justify the precocity of “straight economic thinking.” In a world of increasing material abundance, human wants will express themselves in increasing measure as desire for the satisfaction of ego-aggrandizement. Pride, status, and prestige deriving from egoic sentiments have always been somewhat awkward to fit into economic theory, and it is likely that they will become more so. But being greed of a certain kind, the search for ego status does no essential violence to economic logic. The nostalgic sentiments, however, pointing as they do to a basis in nature for economic give-away, are much more difficult to handle. The

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nostalgic gives the impulse to holding investments beyond their time, to displays of uneconomic loyalty to partners, employees, and associates in the business craft, to irrational preferences for goods of a particular origin or tradition. It may become necessary to study quite realistically the role of human nature in economic behavior, and this being done, to examine the definiteness and assumptions on the basis of which economics asserts its conceptual separateness among the social sciences.

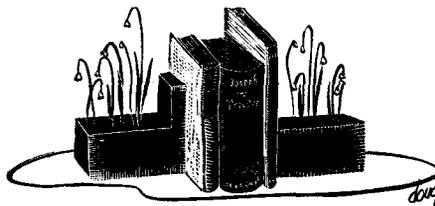
The understanding of interpersonal relationships also requires an appreciation of the role played by the nostalgic sentiments. We need to realize that friendship, affection, love, whether between persons of the same or of different sexes, have an emotional basis that is always in part and frequently dominantly nostalgic. Psychology can be charged with no error greater than permitting the almost exclusive identification of love and affection with the reproductive instinct and with sex. The most casual observation will show that this association to this degree is false, and that, except for the emotionality that is engendered by sex taboos, love and affection have as their essential basis the egoic and nostalgic sentiments. The love of David and Jonathan is not always, or even usually, a homosexual perversion; men and women may feel for each other deep affection that is neither adulterous nor lecherous; a girl may marry a man resembling her father without always or even frequently manifesting incest phantasies. The identification of sex with sin and of love with sex has been a heavy burden for the world.

Nostalgic sentiments are powerful in the maintenance of family life and family solidarity. The family normally provides conditions which are most favorable for the building of nostalgic foundations. As the life of the family unfolds from year to year with all its associations of place and of persons and of things, a nostalgic emotional structure is created that survives and grows when sex, the reproductive instinct, and even the egoic impulses themselves have become shadows or have faded away.

A recognition of the fundamental and pervasive influence of the nostalgic, under whatever names, will enable us to reinterpret human behavior with a new realism. This reinterpretation of human behavior will make it possible for us to rewrite the drama of sin and self and sex, to supplement the invisible hand that is presumed to fashion good from greed, and to discover in nature an antidote to the evils of predatory nationalism.

AS THE war was reaching its end, when the enemy in Europe had already fallen and the enemy in the East was on the way to surrender, John Dos Passos, one of the most brilliant writers on the First World War and on events both at home and abroad that followed upon it, toured the lands where American soldiers had been fighting. In "Tour of Duty" (Houghton Mifflin), he sets down with sympathy, with understanding, and with vividness what he saw of the morale, the aspirations, and the attitudes of our youth in arms. An admirable piece of war reportage. . . .

War in different guise, as it is lived on an auxiliary vessel—a cargo ship—is depicted in Thomas Haggen's



"Mister Roberts" (Houghton Mifflin). This is a lusty, humorous sea tale, a story of men without women living their days out in the monotony of the hot Pacific and bestowing their admiration upon their first lieutenant. It is breezy and ribald and not without tenderness. . . .

The long history of the German people, a history in which Veit Valentin, who sought refuge for his scholarly labors in England and Switzerland when he fell under the ban of Hitler, is well versed, is set forth succinctly and with enough vivacity to give it appeal for the thoughtful general reader in "The German People" (Knopf). . . .

Years ago, when the artist was an unknown man with his sketches appearing in an Australian paper, Arnold Bennett pronounced David Low the only significant cartoonist of the day. Since that time he has won and held world-wide recognition—how well he deserves it is plain to see in "Years of Wrath: A Cartoon History, 1931 to 1945" (Simon & Schuster). The scathing drawings and apt captions by Low are supplemented by brief textual elucidation

of the events back of the drawings by Quincy Howe. . . .

The very economy of means by which Christopher La Farge develops his story of the hurricanes of 1938 and 1944 in "The Sudden Guest" (Coward-McCann) conduces to the mounting tension and excitement of the tale. Centered about the reactions of a solitary woman in a house on the Rhode Island coast around which the storm rages, and in which while one hurricane is spending its force she lives over again in memory the earlier one, it is a taut, effective novel which holds the reader strongly in its grip. . . .

Robert Penn Warren has been remarkably successful in reproducing the tempo, the tone, and the character of Southern life in "All the King's Men" (Harcourt, Brace), a powerful and effective portrayal of the making of a dictator. The book is interesting both as a convincing character study and as an interesting novel of locale. . . .

George Orwell, or possibly his publisher for him, disclaims the direct parallel between his "Animal Farm" (Harcourt, Brace) and the U.S.S.R. and maintains that his novel is a satire on the totalitarian state in general rather than on Russia in particular. Whatever its wider implications may be, it certainly bears a vivid resemblance to the course of events in Soviet history. Here is a book which has originality, ingenuity, and wit—one of the few satires that hold up to the end. And what an end! . . .

Howard Fast has chosen a dramatic episode of American history for his new novel, "The American" (Duell, Sloan & Pearce). The book takes as protagonist a man who in his day convulsed the United States as much as John L. Lewis does our own—Governor John Peter Altgeld of Illinois, radical sympathizer who came into collision with the authority of the Federal government. . . .

Humor and tragedy mingle in Margery Sharp's "Britannia Mews" (Little, Brown), a novel which, while it contains the clever dialogue and amusing situations that this author has led us to expect, has more depth and somberness than her earlier works. It is a chronicle spanning the life of three generations of British