

A RESEARCH AND MEMORIAL ABOUT THE LOST TIME OF CHILDHOOD

“WHAT’S LEFT OF THE CHILD WE WERE?”

INTRODUCTION

“The true paradises are the paradises that we have lost”, writes Proust in *Swann’s Way*¹.

Nostalgia is a strange feeling— wistful, reflective, infinitely out of place in a time and society continuously geared towards the future. To me, nostalgia is intimately linked to childhood— what truer paradise is there than the one of beauty and bliss, away from the hurts of modern life? How can one recover from growing up, i.e. practically losing that time of wonder and facing a world of hurts and uneasiness?

Having my views about the loss of childhood evolve from a naïve and corny feeling to an actual and legitimate one did not come immediately. For a long time, I’ve thought they were ingenuous, misplaced, even ridiculous, instead of embracing them as part of my own growth. I would cry over David Bowie tunes or the Fairuz songs my grandmother would sing to me without knowing why. But the fact is, people share pictures of their young selves on Facebook and Instagram. They delight in the smells of their favorite meals as children and their heart gets fuzzy when they hear the intro song to that specific cartoon. People talk about the past. People get nostalgic.

¹ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time. Volume 1: Swann’s Way.* (1913 – 1927)

This research and its memorial aim to explore the somewhat universality of that feeling, to create an echo between past and present and help reconnect with the lost self. It is possible this whole project is a chase to try and reason myself into knowing the bliss of childhood has passed, and that it is time to quit daydreaming about it. It is possible also that it is a way to convince myself that indulging in the daydream is primordial, and that I should encourage everyone to do it urgently. That returning to the haven of childhood feelings is the only way of finding bliss and fulfillment in adult development. The memorial accompanying this research will thus explore the form of the tent, as a space of secrecy and protection.

This paper will first proceed to talk of childhood as a space, both physical and metaphorical. It will go on to study the origins of the feelings involved and why we carry them with us, to end with the nature of those feelings, questioning the very term of nostalgia in my personal advancements.

1. THE SPACE OF CHILDHOOD

Up until the mid-20th century, nostalgia was considered something of an illness. A disease of the heart or mind which would cripple or disable. Inspired by Odysseus' voyage, the word comes from a combination of the Greek *nostos* (return) and *algos* (pain). Nostalgia thus literally becomes the longing to return home, the pain of being away from the dear place one has left. Considered through the prism of this research, childhood becomes a home one leaves and forever longs to find again.

It is important to note, however, that there is a distinction to be made between nostalgia and homesickness, as they are so often mingled. In a University of Southampton study², it was

² Constantine Sedikides et al., *Nostalgia: Past, Present, and Future*. (Southampton: University of Southampton, 2008)

noticed that participants would associate words such as *warm* and *childhood* to nostalgia, which was found– in opposition to homesickness– to be present in all social groups, no matter culture or age. Moreover, it was discovered that 80% of British undergraduates would experience nostalgia at least once a week– radically making my sentiments of ridiculousness towards experiencing nostalgia obsolete.

There is something strange in the idea that such an intimate feeling can soar through everyone in such a universal manner. That everyone has that dear space lost in the past which they cannot return to. Often, that space incarnates in physical locations– a comforter, a childhood home, a piece of jewelry. In the *Royal Tenenbaums*³, Richie finds Margot in the tent they slept in when running away from home when they were kids. At crossroads between trauma and tragedy, the tent seems to be the only place where they can shield themselves from the outside world and truly talk of their love for each other. Decorated with childish tokens– a globe, old records, a multi-colored lamp, it is a perfect example for re-entering a space of the past, and the effect it has on those entering it. Continuing with this idea, Ryan Gander⁴ sculpts in marble his daughter’s tents and forts made of pillows– capturing something of a fleeting childhood destined to vanish. In both cases, there is this materialization of a space of nostalgia;



³ Wes Anderson, *The Royal Tenenbaums*. (United States, 2001)

⁴ Ryan Gander, *The conceptual Cul de Sac*. (2012)

the memories, the spirit, find a place to concentrate and converge. It is literally somewhere to go back home to, tainted by the fact that time has actually passed. The marble tents are impenetrable, Richie has tried to commit suicide and he and Margot cannot innocently ignore their attraction. Hence, the pain and longing.

Nostalgia thus isn't simply a disincarnate feeling floating around— it is deeply rooted in spaces and objects that constitute it, and is relived through material spaces and objects— with everyone having their own Proust *madeleine*⁵.



2. WHY NOSTALGIA?

I remember once seeing my mother cry when looking at pictures of my baby cousins. When asking her why, the only thing she said to me was “*they are still so little, and they can still be anything they want*” – it is hard to explain how poignant I found that answer to be.

I believe it is in that very moment that I realized the longing for childhood wasn't exclusively mine. That, just like my mother, thinking of children or of ourselves as children also meant thinking of ourselves before a binding chain of decisions, i.e. before everything we have come to be and before the acknowledgement of reality. In that sense, Dolto writes “*it takes a long*

⁵ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time. Volume 1: Swann's Way*. (1913 – 1927)

time before one can place historical memories in relationship with memories from one's own time", and goes on to explain how immediate the desire of a child is, not giving any credit to the other's desire⁶. That is, maybe, what makes the childhood bliss so intense— being entirely focused on itself, there is simply no space for existential anguish to exist in a child. We look profoundly traumatized by loss of innocence, opportunities, recklessness.

It seems that we feel nostalgic precisely to counter the traumatism. It has proven to be effective against loneliness, boredom and anxiety.⁷ Odysseus would use warm memories from home, from his family and friends, to overcome the adventures that would come his way. People use nostalgia in cold rooms to feel warmer on the inside. In short, nostalgia is a strength that we use to get through the existential anguish, to find comfort despite the loss of bliss. Dr. Routledge, a researcher on nostalgia⁸, says "*[it] serves a crucial existential function. It brings to mind cherished experiences that assure us we are valued people who have meaningful lives.*" In short, we bounce off the dearest memories from our childhood to find strength to build a better future.

3. ABOUT THE DUALITY OF NOSTALGIA

I must admit I was surprised when discovering, through this research, that nostalgia should lead to happiness. To me, nostalgia has always been on the melancholic side; I guess it boils down to a matter of personality, and a sad nostalgia was commonly found in people with a tendency to mental illnesses⁹. When I tried expressing how painful I found it to think of past

⁶ Françoise Dolto, *Enfances*. (France: Points, 1999)

⁷ John Tierney, *What Is Nostalgia Good For? Quite a Bit, Research Shows*. (The New York Times, 2013)

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Constantine Sedikides et al., *Nostalgia: Past, Present, and Future*. (Southampton: University of Southampton, 2008)

memories to my sister, she replied *whatever* and went on about how important it was to look forward. It felt very strange. There we were, having had almost the same childhood, with radically different views about it.

This all leads me thinking that *nostalgia* maybe isn't the appropriate word for this whole research. Of course, there is something of nostalgia in all of it— the longing, the returning home. But it is more than that, and less joyful, on a very personal scale at least. In a radio interview¹⁰, Georges Didi-Huberman talks of Aristotle's idea of melancholy as a style of living, a way of apprehending the world and our existence in it. This idea suits me better. He also goes on to talk of melancholy as a discomfort, insisting that it is not a sickness and that there is no remedy to it. According to him, rather than complying in it or diverting oneself from it, one must go across one's melancholia to achieve the joy and desire of life.

Maybe that is precisely what this whole research and memorial conception have been about— diving into the feeling, studying it, thinking of it in all of its form to finally be able to apprehend it with peace. Meaning, it is okay to feel the hurts of modern, grown-up life. It is okay to have lost paradise.

It is okay, also, to think about nostalgia in its dual form. It is both happy and sad, which does not have to make sense. A feeling which is so rooted in intimacy and personal past cannot possibly be theorized or generalized. And this research fully acknowledges this weakness, not pretending to go any further than the strangeness my own personal experience.

¹⁰ Georges Didi-Huberman, "*La mélancolie ne se fuit pas, elle se traverse*". (France: France Inter, 2017)

4. A MEMORIAL

This research having followed a very personal axis, it only made sense that my actual memorial would do the same. The first thing I did was calling my mother and asking her to put my sister on speakerphone, proceeding to record the call.

I was surprised to have so much come out from the discussion, to have it sum up so many issues. How my sister and I have completely different views of our childhood. How my mother has regrets, too. How nostalgia can also be about the future. It all converged and helped me understand my whole quest a little bit better. Sentences about Lebanon's current situation are mixed in, as light allusions to the present, to my personal history to my country, and to how far away everything feels to me.

I then reworked the audio file, playing a recording of heavy wind over it, as I wanted the whole feel of it to be very distant, coming almost from another time. I've also intentionally left out most of the answers from the questions that were asked, because – to be honest – I don't really have them, and I wouldn't want to impose answers on anyone.

Then came the matter of the tent itself. Working with a bedsheet and embroidery, I wanted it to have a characteristic feel of childhood. Words are sewn onto it in the three primary colours – *“what is nostalgia, what is melancholy, what pushes you forward, what doesn't”*, as a way to symbolize the whole thought process behind it. On the top of it are the words *“a tent is a shell”*, reinforcing the idea of a haven, or even of memories as a portable home– a portable longing to return home. The tent is sewn shut, affirming an impossible return.

The translation of the conversation in English is projected onto the front of the tent. The audio comes from inside of it, muffled and secret.

The memorial is meant to be set on display, preferably in a white room of a museum, making the embroidery visible and using a strong enough projector for the words to be visible. It

seems to me like the ideal setting, as it is an element of past time, which I would like to be treated as such. I envision it as something quite intimate, which would require both envy and effort to be seen or reached.

CONCLUSION

If nostalgia is a feeling that virtually everyone experiences on a regular basis, the form it takes at its core seems to vary from person to person. There is nostalgia, and there is nostalgia tainted with other feelings.

It is strange to say that this whole research hasn't provided me with definitive answers, and I now believe there aren't any. This is also what the memorial wants to convey. There is no "right way" of living nostalgia—except for the fact of not drowning in the past. Everyone has a right to long for home. Everyone has a right to dream of inaccessible paradise. Everyone has a right to stop and reflect on their own past, even though the world around them spins substantially fast towards the future.

When working on my memorial, I had the privilege of being the only one who could ever go inside my tent. Under the bedsheet, with threads hanging everywhere and uncomfortable heat due to my first trials with a projector, the seemingly small space suddenly appeared infinite. It felt as if I was taken aback for an instant to the time of bliss and paradise – and if nothing, I will forever cherish the fleeting feeling I had the chance to experience. I even wondered, for an instant, if I shouldn't open up the tent and share the experience with others—but I guess the child inside of me prevailed, and decided the fort had to be forever protected from intruders.

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