Dubravka Ugrešić **The Writer in Exile**

Dream

I live without papers, employment, assets, or permanent address.
—Darryl Pinckney

I had a dream. I was at an airport, waiting for someone. Finally the person I was waiting for, a woman of my age, appeared. Before we got into a taxi, I asked her "Don't you have any luggage?"

"No, I just have lifeage," said the woman.

The sentence my double had spoken could be translated: Life is the only luggage I carry with me.

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It seems proper that those who create art in a civilization of quasi-barbarism, which has made so many homeless, should themselves be poets unhoused and wanderers across language. Eccentric, aloof, nostalgic, deliberately untimely...—George Steiner

In the twentieth century—a century of wars, persecution, terror, genocides, revolution, totalitarian systems, a century in which maps were changed, states and state borders were created and obliterated, a century of mass migrations—writers do not have a copyright on the theme of exile. Nevertheless, although they are statistically the most insignificant and unreliable witnesses, writers are those rare migrants who leave their footprints on the cultural map of the world.

A writer explores the theme from a position of double exile: as an actual exile and as a commentator on his own "condition called exile" (Brodsky). The writer tries to rationalize his personal nightmare in writing, to calm his exile's fears in writing, to put his broken life into some sort of shape through writing, to order the chaos he has landed in through writing, to fix the insights he has come to in writing, to dilute his own bitterness in writing. Perhaps because of that inner effort, an exile's writings are often marked by a particular kind of "coldness," which can be crudely compared to posttraumatic dissociation. An exile's writings are often "nervous," fragmented, explicitly or implicitly polemical, semantically polyvalent, ironic, self-ironic, melancholic, subversive, and nostalgic. This is

because exile is itself a neurosis, a restless process of testing values and comparing worlds: the one we left and the one where we ended up. The exiled writer is torn by extremes: exile is a state of self-pity, but also of solitary rebellious audacity (Gombrowicz), a state of being drunk with freedom (Eberhardt), but of surreptitious resignation, exile is an "academy of intoxication" (Cioran), but also a "lesson in humility" (Brodsky).

Genre

Classically, exile was a punishment decreed from above, like the original sentence of banishment on Adam and Eve, which initiated human history.— Mary McCarthy

Exile is a literary condition; it not only gives you a rich menu of literary quotes, but is a literary quote itself. The Christian history of the world begins with a story of exile. Exile is also the parable of the prodigal son, of betrayal, banishment, and condemnation, the myth of the double and role reversal, the myth of Odysseus, the story of Faust and Mephistopheles. Exile is a fairy tale about being thrown out of one's home, searching for home, and returning home; it is also a Russian fairy tale of Ivan the Fool, a parable about growing up, a romantic epic of individual revolt. It is an exceptionally appealing myth about metamorphosis.

Exile is also a style, a narrative strategy. A broken life can be told only in fragments (Rilke), "Certain literary genres and certain styles cannot, by definition, be practiced in exile"; the very state of exile, "by enforcing upon a writer several perspectives," favors genres and styles other than the traditional ones" (Miłosz).

The reader accommodates the writer, and the exiled writer offers the reader his hand. It does not occur to the writer to discredit his own life story, nor would his reader forgive him that. So together author and reader create around the theme of exile an appealing aura of exclusivity. They not infrequently romanticize the theme of exile, as though it were a love story. And really, the genre of the love story and the genre of the exile's story are similar in one way: neither airs its own dirty laundry.

That is why, among other things, the important side of exile, the bureaucratic one, is always left in shadow. No one, not even the exile himself, wants to hear a story about painful encounters with bureaucracy, or consider whether Walter Benjamin might have killed himself just because he did not get his papers.

The real content of a love story is longing, and the story ends when the longing is fulfilled. A love story ends with marriage, the exile's when he acquires a passport from another country.

Decent people stay at home

Expect everything, you who are exiled. You are flung away, but you are not set free.—Victor Hugo

States do not like those who seek papers. Every state, of whatever kind, respects every other state; a bureaucrat respects a bureaucrat. That is why the emigré is punished by a lengthy, tortuous bureaucratic procedure in order to acquire a residence permit. Decent people don't abandon their states, or their old parents, just like that. Decent people stay at home.

Utopias of a world without frontiers, Khlebnikov's idea about poets having the right to a free room in any city of the world, huge migrations from worse worlds to better worlds, even nomadism as a lifestyle, even tourism— all end up facing the wall of bureaucratic regulations. And here, with the migrant's face against the wall, a new space opens up: a space of resignation and desperation, of fabrication and falsification, of mimicry and hypocrisy. Only fools piss into the wind, only stupid people make their broken lives more difficult, only the pigheaded test the extent of their rights. Only rebels become impatient towards every state, but rebels are a negligible minority. Pragmatists glide through the bureaucratic procedure without resistance, ordinary paper-seekers quietly achieve their rights, and the Mafia slides through borders like butter. The exiled writer, on the other hand, is often asked to explain publicly why he left his country. It turns out that for a criminal, "cosmopolitanism" is a lifestyle which goes with their job, while for the writer it is an exceptional life circumstance.

I myself am neither an emigré nor a refugee nor an asylum-seeker. I am a writer who at one point decided not to live in her own country anymore because her country was no longer hers.

Good girls go to heaven, bad girls go everywhere

When I lay claim to not bang an exile or an uprooted drifter (although I am a vagabond), it is because I abhor the concept of exile, which goes clothed in the myth of romantic lamentation.—Breyten Breytenbach

I once watched with interest as a fellow writer of mine, East European, showed a journalist a photograph of his family. With deep emotion, he produced a picture in which he, his wife, and his child were sitting in a harmonious arrangement. He was lying. The people in the picture were his second wife and the child he had with her. The writer had since married a third wife and a third child was on the way. His desire to project an image of himself as a person with a normal life was so strong that we all believed it, including the writer himself.

What touched me in the whole episode was the scene of self-presentation. The writer had adapted his image to a generally accepted standard. He carried this picture everywhere with him because his first wife was too old (he was ashamed) and the first child too big (he was therefore old himself). The third wife was too young for him to seem serious in the eyes of those around him. The middle one

was just right.

A woman writer in exile, single, with no children, who does not carry snapshots in her wallet, not even pictures of pets, occupies the lowest rung among exiled writers. Because decent women stay at home.

That is presumably why, when I was leaving Zagreb, my mother thrust into my hand a little album the size of a wallet, full of family photographs which she had selected.

"Take this with you," she said. "So that you have something to show, when people ask.... So they don't think you're alone in the world...."

The exile as a projection screen

Exile brings you overnight where it would normally take a lifetime to go. — Joseph Brodsky

The exiled writer is not met with indifference. His life's choice, exile, provokes not only the people in the environment he leaves but also the people in the environment where he ends up. The political aspect of exile is something which everyone expects from a writer, and which is therefore boring; what makes exile attractive is the idea of exile itself. The idea of self-banishment secretly intrigues everyone. Exile is a total change, achieving a different life, realizing the daydream of how it would be to wake up one day in a different town, in a different country, perhaps as another person. Exile is a kind of coveted trial: we all have a hidden longing to test ourselves in the exam of life. Exile is that dream of transformation.

Surrogates of exile

Good old exile ain't what it used to be.—Joseph Brodsky

Contemporary man, finally abandoned by God and ideologies, left to get by on his own as best he can, has only one thing left: himself, his naked human body. Having achieved "practical freedom" (Baudrillard), man does not seem to understand whether an encounter with himself ought to be cause for euphoria or resignation, because it seems that what contemporary man would most like to do with his new freedom is to avoid himself. Today's culture is obsessed with the idea of self-banishment and expresses this idea in numerous ways. Cultural obsessions with the invention and reinvention of the self are nothing other than signs that man feels confined in his own skin. The longing for another life is socially legitimized and stimulated by the media, and, of course, by industries always ready to satisfy the desires of their consumers.

Medicine, especially plastic surgery, has become a magic medium of transformation for contemporary man, and its variations on the theme of personal reinvention are numerous and imaginative. A certain Cindy Jackson underwent dozens of operations in order to change her appearance to resemble a Barbie doll. A New York woman endured numerous operations in order to resemble as closely as possible her beloved Siamese cat.

The cultural obsession with physical transformation (and our body is all mat we have at our disposal) is satisfied by gyms, the diet industry, techniques of sculpting the body, and, of course, fashion. "You're entitled to be whatever you want to be," says Ralph Lauren, promoting the idea that self-creation is in fact the last stage of human liberation.

The cultural obsession with "spiritual" transformation is satisfied by all kinds of gurus, happiness pills, and handbooks about how to become different, how to change. The profession of psychotherapist has been replaced by a new one: "coaches" manage personal lives, suggest life changes, direct personal life episodes.

The longing for a change of scene is no longer satisfied by tourism (also a surrogate of exile), but by an imaginative surrogate: architecture. The Disneyfication of America, and increasingly also of Europe, is confirmed by stores such as Nikeland, a multimedia commercial temple to sneakers, as well as hotels, theme parks, and shopping malls in which "consumers are transformed into immigrants. The system in which they move about is too vast to be able to fix them in one place, but too constraining for them ever to be able to escape from it and go into exile elsewhere" (Michel de Certeau).

At the end of the twentieth century, man has become his own favorite toy. And he occupies himself in making and remaking, inventing and reinventing himself. So all the great Utopias and revolutions have today merged into one: revolutionizing the idea of one's own body, one's own image, one's own person.

Exile is a life choice, and not a role-playing game. What still distinguishes the exile from the tourist and the player in the modern game of reinventing the self is the definitiveness of exile. If that were not the case, we would all be in exile.

A true exile never returns

Our fatherland is in exile.—Miguel de Unamuno

The true exile never returns, even when he can, even when the hurt called the "homeland" is healed. Why repeat the same journey? Few have the strength for two exiles.

I once asked Joseph Brodsky whether he would ever go back to Russia, at least for a visit. Instead of replying, he showed me a letter. It was a little, crumpled letter, in Russian, with a vile anti-Semitic message. Its anonymous sender warned the writer never to mink of returning home.

"How can I go back after this?" said Brodsky.

What surprised me was the pathos of his reaction—not its meaning, but the way it was expressed. Because Brodsky was certainly not among the "performers of exile."

Later, in a book of interviews with the poet, I came across a touching detail.

When a journalist had asked him the same question, Brodsky had shown him the same letter.

The famous exile evidently needed some obstacle. He did not know how to, or simply did not want to, explain his own unease, his confused emotions, maybe simply his weariness with an already worn-out story. So Brodsky responded to every question about his return to Russia with a prepared item from a pathetic pantomime with an ostensibly conclusive key argument: a stupid, crumpled, anonymous letter.

Because of sausages

"Fixed up," established in the comfort of his fall, what will he do next? He will have a choice between two forms of salvation: faith and humor.—E. M. Cioran

An acquaintance of mine, a Russian writer who emigrated during the Cold War, was exceptionally warmly welcomed in Western Europe. In numerous interviews, he stretched out, like chewing gum, a metaphor about "communism which like a vampire sucks the blood of its adherents" until he himself grew bored with it.

"I emigrated because of sausages," he said in the end.

"How do you mean?"

"In Russia, there are no sausages."

My acquaintance, in other words, performed a public act of personal deheroization. And soon he was left in peace, because he pigheadedly refused to abandon his story of the sausages. He published his books, which were unjustly neglected. The media like heroes.

Exiles are not like us

For *better or worse, you are an outsider.*—Breyten Breytenbach

I was once invited to an academic conference, and I was glad that I would be talking in front of colleagues. I was like you, I said, explaining that I had worked at a university for many years.

There was an immediate ripple of dissatisfaction among the participants. Without realizing it, I had made a social gaffe. Exiles are permitted many things, but not to be like *us,* like *normal,* orderly people. Because *we* have paid a high price for our *normal,* orderly life, but nobody cares about *us*.

One person in the audience said that my exile was not true exile, because I had a passport, I was free to return to my country, it wasn't like they had beaten me up or put me in prison, had they? I should call my exile by its true name: extended tourism.

Another participant, a Czech, shouted that he had fled to Germany from communism, while, by all accounts, I had run away from post-communism, from democracy. I should not discredit the honorable tradition of East European

exiles.

All in all, exiles like to see their own exile as the only dignified moral choice. That is why they cannot bear to have their *tragic* destiny compared with other exiles' destinies. And those who are not exiles cannot admit the possibility that exiles were once people like them, because if they were, how could they now be exiles?

Exiles don't live up to your expectations

Exile is a jealous state.—Edward Said

A West European writer once told me: "But surely you'll go back some day, won't you?"

"Why should I?" I asked.

The writer was speechless. While she herself spends six months a year in Spain and the other six in France, which she feels is quite normal, for me she had ordained a return to my homeland. Why had this West European writer gotten it into her head to send me back? Because I was an *East European* writer. And East European writers do not live in the West, unless they have to. An American writer in Berlin, a German writer in Ireland, a Dutch writer in Portugal—all of them live the life which is expected from people of their profession. A Romanian writer living in Paris, without a clear political reason, is *suspect*.

The exile is the screen onto which we project our fantasies of exile, and as long as he lets us do this, he is welcome. He is welcome as someone who has *suffered,* as a *victim of the régime,* a *fighter for democracy,* a *lover of freedom* who couldn't stand oppression in the country he left. As soon as he steps out of his stereotype, he becomes undesirable, because he has betrayed our expectations. We express our sympathy, and he, ungrateful creature, bites the hand that pets him.

The exiled writer sometimes feels like a racehorse. His friends, people who are dissatisfied with their own lives, well-meaning fans, other exiles, everyone bets on him. For exile is at the same time a dream of freedom: freedom from things, from family, from banal everyday life. The exile is living proof that an independent, creative, and dynamic life does exist. But nobody asks how the exile earns his freedom and what price he pays for it. Because the exile is someone else's projection. As well as his own.

Exile is a lesson in adaptation

Our man is a little bit corrupt, almost by definition.—Joseph Brodsky

Exile is usually a voluntary choice. Politically intolerable situations are typically tolerated: most people stay and adapt to the circumstances. The exile is a person who refuses to adapt.

If we accept the thought that exile is the result of a failure to adapt, that the exile is therefore a kind of asocial and disturbed person, then in exile the exiled person is faced with the tragicomedy of his situation. For life in exile is a process of adaptation.

Having left my country because I could not adapt to the permanent terror of lies in public, political, cultural, and everyday life, I meet my compatriots abroad, and many of them lie just like the ones who stayed at home. Yugoslav exiles (as long as they are not refugees) often lie because of some administrative detail: namely, none of them has been deprived of his passport. Those who have stayed at home also lie, because many of them could have crossed the frontier with that same passport. The impossibility of returning to their homeland gave the Cold War East European exiles an aura of tragedy. The possibility of return deprives Yugoslav exiles of this aura.

Exiled writers have an additional problem of self-presentation, because they are asked to articulate publicly their *condition called exile*. On the other hand, no one asks an exhausted Muslim woman from Bosnia with five little children anything, because everything is obvious.

With time, exiled writers touch up their own biographies (according to the demands of the environment in which they happen to be); they write hagiographies about their own exile, because that is what is expected of them, and they do not mind. With time, many adapt to the stereotypical image that those around them have of exile. Many accept their role in the sociogenre.

Among the not-so-numerous Yugoslav intellectuals-in-exile, there are those who gladly stress their role in the struggle against Serbian or Croatian nationalism (without omitting to mention that they had been victims of communism as well), although in fact they ended up abroad because they did not want to fight. There are those who publicly maintain that they ran away from their *dictators,* although maybe they actually ran away from their wives. There are those who claim that they ran away from nationalism but, when invited to, gladly accept the role of representing their national literature abroad. They have learned the lesson: it is easy to perform anti-nationalism, but difficult to remain a-national. Even Western Europe will not tolerate the nationally indifferent; the proud West European ideology of multiculturalism wants declared ethnic cultural identities in order to generously grant them the freedom of self-realization.

All in all, suspicious of states and societies (because life has taught them to be) many exiles have one foot in one state and the other in a different one. You never know when you might need one. So exile, the alleged defection from local lies, is transformed into a new lie. With time, exiled persons adapt themselves to the image which they believe is expected of them. They cannot help but remind you of professional entertainers who know their audience well.

The exiled writer and his "homeland"

Above all, do not complain. They would laugh. After the complaint, the abuse would start again, same as before, without any variation; why bother to change slime?—Victor Hugo

It is rare that people leaving their familiar surroundings do so with the clear idea that they are leaving forever. Forever or not, for the exile the surroundings he has left (and not an abstract "homeland") remain a traumatic zone.

The surroundings they have abandoned rarely forgive exiled writers. The fact that, before he left, they had burned him in effigy, spat in his face, attacked him publicly, made normal life impossible for him, threatened him, called him in the middle of the night to drive him out of the country, published his phone number in the papers so that others could do the same (and others did, with gusto), the fact that they erased him from public life, put him on blacklists, prevented him from publishing, that they publicly humiliated him, excluded him from their ranks, threw his books out of public libraries and school curricula, that they proclaimed him *a traitor to the homeland, an enemy of the nation,* the fact that this was all done by colleagues and friends with whom he had worked and associated for some twenty years (all of which, incidentally, happened to me)—none of this counts. The exile's departure is simply proof that they were right.

Those who stay will never lose interest in those who leave—all tormentors remain drawn to their victims. Those who stay stick stubbornly to their point of view, convinced that the writer is not only *a traitor of the homeland,* but that he is now living well from selling that same *homeland* all over the world. He is even making money out of them, in other words, on top of everything else.

"What do you mean, making money?" the exiled writer asks, in his imagined conversations with people "back home."

"You sell our homeland all over the world!"

"I couldn't even if I wanted to. Our homeland is small and insignificant. It would be like trying to sell Albanian chewing gum!"

"How come?"

"No one buys it."

"The CIA will always buy it!" his countrymen insist, unmoved, firmly convinced of both their importance on the geopolitical map of the world and the ClA's solvency.

The fact that the homeland is commercially worthless is the greatest insult an exile can send back home. And the fact that the exiled writer did not die when he left, that he is not only still alive but still earning, drives the people back home completely mad.

With time, the gulf which both the *exile* and the *abandoned* believe will disappear grows even wider. The home environment nurtures its fantasies about the life of the exile and an image of itself as victim. Because they live where they

live, and it does not occur to them to leave (decent people stay at home!), they are the ones who are burning themselves out on the battlefield for democracy twenty-four hours a day, and not waving a little article published in a foreign newspaper, like *some people*. They work hard and are barely able to make ends meet, while *some people* make a living out of their suffering.

The exiled writer—who just for a moment had hoped to relax a little in his role of "victim" and cry on the shoulder of his one remaining friend, to complain without restraint in his own language, to describe his struggle for survival, who hoped that he could finally list all the insults heaped on him *abroad*—has no choice but to pick up his things and head back where he came from, back into exile.

Those who have left their home because of nationalism would do well to remember that nationalism and exile are inseparable, just because they do not go together at all. The exile ought to remember that with his departure he has rated individualism higher than collectivism, that he has preferred a "fundamentally discontinuous state of being" (Said) to a false national continuity, that he has, therefore, preferred the freedom of rootlessness to "roots" and "cradles," that what he has run away from are precisely their "founding fathers, their basic, quasi-religious texts, their rhetoric of belonging, their historical and geographical landmarks, their official enemies and heroes" (Said), that he has, therefore, of his own free will, abandoned that stubborn, exclusive, self-intoxicated, aggressive noise of the isolated tribe ready to throw stones at the first person who is different from them.

The writer in the trap of a tragicomic paradox

If one were to assign the life of an exiled writer a genre, it would have to be tragicomedy.—Joseph Brodsky

Having freed himself from his homeland, the exiled writer suddenly realizes that he is caught in a tragicomic trap. Once outside the country he has abandoned, his only identity is that of a representative of that country.

Although I no longer exist in Croatia as a Croatian writer, I am elsewhere labeled a Croatian writer almost without exception. Not by my choice, I have become a *more Croatian* Croatian writer than I would have been had I stayed in Croatia. In other words, I have become what I am not.

Why does the rest of the world label me a Croatian writer? Because it simply does not know how else to label me. Everyone is someone's writer, everyone belongs to some nation, everyone writes in some language, why trouble oneself with a statistically insignificant example of the dysfunction of national identities?

Behind every writer stands his homeland. Invitations to literary gatherings with the names of the participants resemble lists of competitors in the Olympics: there is always the name of a country in parentheses. Only once did I see the word *transnational* in parentheses after the name of a writer and I immediately envied

him. At literary gatherings I feel as though I were at the Eurovision song contest and am suddenly anxious that after my reading or talk I will hear a gong and a voice announcing: Croatia, five points! I dream that one day I shall remove the stickers that other people have assiduously attached to me and become just my name. Because that, just a name, is the greatest literary recognition that any writer can earn. For everyone else: Cyprus, five points; Poland, two points; Belgium, ten points....

The advantages of exile

To be alone, to be poor, in need, to be ignored, to be an outsider who is at home everywhere, and to walk, great and by oneself, toward the conquest of the world.—Isabelle Eberhardt

Exile is a voluntary job of deconstructing the established values of human life. The exile, like it or not, tests the basic concepts around which everyone's life revolves: concepts of home, homeland, family, love, friendship, profession, personal biography. Having completed the long and arduous journey of battling with the bureaucracy of the country where he has ended up, having finally acquired papers, the exile forgets the secret knowledge he has acquired on his journey, in the name of life which must go on.

Nermina, a housewife, had lived her whole life in Sarajevo. She brought up two daughters, lost her husband, and then along came the war. One daughter escaped to London, the other went with her own daughter to America. Both did well. Hana registered for postgraduate studies in London and completed a doctorate; Senada was given a green card in an assistance package for Bosnian refugees, enrolled her daughter in a university, and got herself a job at the Los Angeles airport. Nermina refused to leave Sarajevo. "No one is going to drive me away, I will live, or die if I have to, where I was born." But when the Dayton Accords finally ended the shelling, Nermina announced that peace was far more difficult than war and set off to be with her daughter in L.A.

In her sixty-sixth year, for the first time in her life, Nermina crossed the border of Yugoslavia, the country where she was born, and with the passport of a new country, Bosnia, landed on American soil. As soon as Nermina landed, her daughter complained that life in America was alienated (that was the word she used, "alienated") and that she intended to go back to Sarajevo.

Nermina stayed. A government organization found her a little apartment, gave her a little social assistance. They registered her in a course of English for foreigners. In this class, among Mexicans, Koreans, Bosnians, among "all sorts," Nermina began a new life. She turned out to be an excellent student. She was given a little diploma. She framed the diploma. She did not abandon her studies; on the contrary, she is carrying on. Everybody at school likes her. Whenever she goes to class she brings fresh homemade Bosnian pies and feeds the Mexicans, Koreans, and Bosnians. Sometimes she calls her daughter in London and says in

English, not without pride: "This is your mother, Nermina, speaking. How are you?"

Anxious Hana, from whom I heard the story, visited her mother, trying to persuade her to go back to Sarajevo. Nermina refused.

"But what will you do in this far-off world? You have no family here!"

"I can't go back," said Nermina. "I'm going to school. Besides, what would all my Mexicans, Koreans, and Bosnians do without me and my pies...?"

In her apartment, a little replica of their Sarajevo apartment, Nermina continued, "You know, Hana, from here it seems to me that I spent my whole life decorating and cleaning that apartment of ours in Sarajevo. And here I have all the same things: Rico brought me a second-hand TV, Kim this fridge, and Sevdo dragged up this sofa...."

In an instant (because she doesn't have time to dawdle), Nermina achieved for the first time a kind of personal freedom, and was now reconciled with her life.

I tell this story to my compatriots whenever they complain that they are having a hard time (and they complain all the time, that's what people are like, what can you do!). And I tell this story to myself whenever I am tempted to complain that I am having a hard time.

The physics and metaphysics of exile

For the other truth of the matter is that exile is a metaphysical condition. — Joseph Brodsky

On a brief trip to San Antonio, I visited the famous Alamo museum. Rummaging through the museum souvenir shop, I came across a children's book whose title I liked. The book celebrated a certain "Savior of Alamo" and *Her Life Story: Presented through the Clothes She Wore*.

I could describe my nomad-exile's life through the objects I keep buying over and over again (coffee pots, household devices, can openers, hair dryers with 120V to 220V converters, CD players, plugs and adapters for my computer, slippers), because I always leave them behind. My story could be told by my suitcases and bags, which I drag after me, which keep dragging themselves after me, which I leave behind before buying new ones. My exile's life could be told by visiting cards with names which no longer denote real people, because I have forgotten who they are. My exile's life could be told by the numerous visas and stamps in my passport, bills, piles of papers which prove that I was somewhere, that I bought something somewhere, that I signed something somewhere, although with time this so-called proof corresponds less and less to my memory.

All in all, if by some miracle this heap of things were to appear in front of me, I would probably be terrified by the nightmare of my personal life. Constantly building and dismantling a new home, packing and repacking, the ever wearier

repetition of this ritual as though it were a computer game and not real life, establishes a special kind of connection between the exile and his own biography. Living the visible, bare physicality of exile, the exiled person develops a different perception of space and time than the perceptions of ordinary life.

In Berlin, coming out of the subway, I saw an elderly Bosnian woman in baggy trousers, looking around her in bewilderment at a crossroads and murmuring, "Oh God, where am I?" The exile has more opportunities to ask himself that question than other people. That is his privilege, but also the source of a profound personal terror.

Exile as destiny

Taking this route for an exiled writer, in many ways, is like going home—because he gets closer to the set of ideals which inspired him all along.

—Joseph Brodsky

The exile, if nothing else, has time for browsing through his own biography. The exile digs through his own past looking for an explanation of what is happening to him in the present. The exile wonders which came first, the chicken or the egg: did his exile not begin long before he really left, and is not this current state called exile only the realization of some distant dream?

Exile is a child's fairy tale about the cap which makes you invisible, *shapka-nevidimka*. One day, the idea which intoxicated the child's imagination became the reality of exile. For exile is a voluntary journey into anonymity, it is catapulting yourself into the margins, into voyeurism, into invisibility.

Just as once, in my distant childhood, I was excited by the cap of invisibility, I was later excited by Antonioni's film *The Passenger,* a story for grown-ups about roughly the same thing. Stealing a dead man's passport in a hotel and putting it into his pocket, the main character (Jack Nicholson) changes his identity and is soon trapped in the destiny of the dead man. Antonioni's hero, like the hero of the existential genre called exile, cannot ever go back, cannot ever simply take off the cap and make everything the way it was again.

There, at that point of impossibility of return, begins a kind of intimacy between the exile and his own "destiny."

The writers final meeting with the exile in himself

The fox is the god of cunning and treachery. If the spirit of the fox enters a man, that man's descendants will be cursed. The fox is the writer's god.

—Boris Pilnyak

There are exiles who, once they leave, having burned all their bridges behind them, become *wild people*. The exile finds it hard to part from the freedom he has acquired, his senses become more acute, he becomes sensitive to every possible trap. He angrily removes every label from himself and refuses to be classified in

any way, to be reduced to a representative of the country whose passport he possesses, to be a member of any family. In a word, he becomes a difficult person, a *pain in the neck*. He refuses to be domesticated. With time, he develops the instinct of an animal, he becomes an *outlaw,* he keeps changing his lair, he is hard to catch. If he does settle down, he becomes a stranger in his own home, with a packed suitcase always waiting by the door. He becomes someone who breaks norms, he itches at all constraints, he becomes accustomed to a life outside the normal order. With time he merges with his own alienated face. He becomes an *enemy,* a *traitor;* he moves *underground,* where he was once driven; he becomes subversive, because he was once accused of subversion; he becomes a renegade, because he was once accused of being one.

At a certain point, the writer meets the exile in himself and is reconciled. The condition called exile indeed becomes his true state. Having gone in a circle, the writer returns to his true *home.*

It was Russian avant-garde culture that most passionately took up the idea of the artist as traitor and the artistic work as treachery. This culture elaborated rich strategies of the betrayal of established artistic principles and literary traditions. Art had untouchable autonomy, and all means were permitted in the defence of that autonomy. The fundamental artistic procedure of Russian avant-garde literature was defamiliarization, *otstrannenie,* estrangement, the betrayal of readers' expectations. In that sense the writer was a traitor and the metaphor of betrayal was the trademark of the true work of art.

Double exile

The homeland? Why, every eminent person was a foreigner even at home just because of that very eminence. Readers? Why, they never wrote "for" readers anyway, always "against" them. Honors, success, renown, fame: why, they became famous precisely because they valued themselves more than their success.—Witold Gombrowicz

Finding himself in the contemporary literary marketplace, the exiled writer with his adopted set of "treacherous" artistic principles gradually realizes that he has actually ended up in a double exile. For the "artists of literary exile" are precisely the writers whom the literary market understands least. Otherwise, it wouldn't be a market, just as publishing would not be called the publishing industry. The literary market demands that people adapt to the norms of production. As a rule, it does not tolerate disobedient artists, it does not tolerate experimenters, artistic subversives, performers of strange strategies in a literary text. It rewards the artistically obedient, the adaptable, the diligent, those who respect literary norms. The literary market does not tolerate the old-fashioned idea of a work of art as a unique, unrepeatable, deeply individual artistic act. In the literary industry, writers are obedient workers, just a link in the chain of production.

Our exiled writer suddenly realizes that he has ended up in exile with an old craft which died out long ago and which no one needs. The tragicomedy of his

position is multiplied. He left his repressive environment in order to preserve himself as a writer, and has ended up in another such environment, under the repressive rules of the book market. In the end, the writer faces the last paradox: good writers feel banished wherever they are, and only bad writers feel at home everywhere.

The exiled writer is condemned to marginality, even if he wins the Nobel Prize (like Brodsky), even if he happens to fall into the mainstream of popular culture (like Nabokov), even if chance brings him fame. Some (like Solzhenitsyn) are driven by their marginality to return to their literary homelands. Because only the environment which gave them their wounds knows how to cure them, only it knows how to boost the writer s shattered ego, wave the writer s name like a national flag, let him feel his importance, teach him in school, bury him with due honors, build a statue of him, name a street after him.

The exiled writer finds himself in a snare of intoxicating and frightening freedom. That freedom implies acceptance of marginality and isolation. In choosing exile, he has chosen loneliness.

Life is a dream

Does God try to remind us, somewhat brutally, that exile is the permanent human condition?—Leszek Kolakowski

Every Saturday I call my mother in Zagreb. We have a little routine. For some reason my mother is always interested in what time it is in the country I am phoning from. We compare the weather, we talk a little about life. Mother, who has not left Zagreb for years, recently said with a sigh, "You know, my life does not seem to be mine. I don't know whose life I'm living, I only know I'm not living my own."

I was speechless and didn't know how to answer. My mother had spoken the authentic sentence of an exile.

Return to the homeland

In a century of Displaced Persons and exiles and those fleeing famine or torture, you are in a position to share and contribute to an historically important, and vital, human experience.... Take heart then. Lady Luck has smiled upon you!—Breyten Breytenbach

In school, I was enchanted by my very first reading book. It was the brightly colored pictures that did it. I quickly learned the letters, but those pictures, they were my first thrilling information about a world full of strong, clear colors. My socialist primer promoted "brotherhood and unity among the nations and nationalities of Yugoslavia." The pictures showed little people dressed in different kinds of clothes: some had fezes on their heads, others caps, still others hats, some had peasant shoes, others boots. I did not see the little people from the primer in real life until later, at folklore festivals. I suppose that is why I grew up

believing that people were all the same, they just wore different costumes. My later travels to various parts of Yugoslavia did not convince me that its inhabitants were "an interweaving of various nations and nationalities," as my primer had taught me, but even though I never managed to get to know anyone with a fez on his head, I accepted the rules from my primer and tried to respect the difference between a fez and a cap.

My socialist primer also taught me that "all the people on the globe" were "brothers," "white, yellow, and black." The little pictures of children colored yellow, black, and white particularly caught my imagination. But I could never find black or yellow children in real life, not in Yugoslavia.

Yugoslav propaganda about a multiethnic and multicultural society turned out to be unconvincing, especially much later, when the cap, the fez, and the hat went to war, maintaining that they could not live together. Then I defended Yugoslav multiculturalism. Soon the idea not only was trampled underfoot by the war, but collapsed of its own accord in a foreign refugee camp, where Yugoslav refugees not infrequently refused to be placed with others just as wretched, but of a different color.

Exile, then, becomes a return to a retro-utopia, to the pictures from some old primer. Today I really am surrounded by brothers, black and yellow and white, in New York, Berlin, London, Paris, Amsterdam.... I catch, infallibly, a spark of recognition, I know my kind. I nod my head and smile. Their belief in a better life does not permit me to slide into cynicism, their effort to survive makes me more modest, their marginality subdues my "appetite for recognition" (Brodsky). Sometimes, like my mother, I feel that I do not know whose life I am living, but I quickly forget the thought.... It must after all be mine, my "lifeage."

There's no place like home

During the twenty years of Odysseus' absence, the people of Ithaca retained many recollections of him but never felt nostalgia for him. Whereas Odysseus did suffer nostalgia, and remembered almost nothing.—Milan Kundera

Dorothy's exile doesn't begin at the beginning of her journey, when a powerful hurricane takes her away from Kansas, but at the very end, at home, when, overexcited, she tries in vain to tell the adults gathered round her bed what she experienced in Oz. The adults nod their heads and smile, but do not believe her. When Dorothy realizes that she won't be able to tell her story—when she gives up—she utters one of the most quoted phrases of all time: "There's no place like home." An attentive listener can hear more than a little disappointment mixed in with the reconciliation: Dorothy accepts the "reality" of adults, not because she herself believes it but simply because she is a polite girl. At least that's how it is in the movie. In L. Frank Baum's book the phrase is less excited: "I'm so glad to be at home again!"

My other favorite story about exile is the first one. I can easily imagine Lilith,

the serpent and first woman of knowledge, offering the apple from the Tree of Life and whispering in Eve's ear a simple slogan: "Good girls stay in heaven, bad girls go everywhere."

That's why when the Croatian president euphorically proclaimed Croatia "paradise on earth" in the early 1990s, I knew what I had to do. I took an apple and got on the first train leaving the country. I only later realized that I had completely forgotten about Adam. He's probably still there.

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