

thinking

togetherness

ANDREJ BOŽIČ (*Ed.*)

THINKING TOGETHERNESS

PHENOMENOLOGY AND SOCIALITY

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PHENOMENOLOGY AND SOCIALITY

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Silvia Pierosara

MANAGING THE ABSENT

ON THE ROLE OF NOSTALGIA IN INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

Abstract: The study explores the phenomenology of nostalgia as well as the latter's relationship with individual and collective memory. Its starting point is related to a particular definition of nostalgia as a pathology of memory and of imagination. The research hypothesis is that, far from only being a limit, the experiences of absence, loss, and oblivion are not contrary to memory, but are rather an integral part of its dynamics. This relationship with absence is constitutive for a phenomenology of nostalgia, which can work towards the construction of an ethically good memory or, on the contrary, act as an obstacle to the positive role of memory in building and enforcing personal and social relational environments.

Keywords: nostalgia, totality, absence, memory, imagination.

1. The feeling of nostalgia: A phenomenological path

The present study explores the phenomenology of nostalgia as well as the latter's relationship with individual and collective memory. Its starting point is related to a particular definition of nostalgia as a pathology of memory and of imagination. The research hypothesis is that, far from only being a limit, the experiences of absence, loss, and oblivion are not contrary to memory, but are rather an integral part of its dynamics. This relationship with absence is constitutive for a phenomenology of nostalgia, which can work towards the construction of an ethically good memory or, on the contrary, act as an obstacle to the positive role of memory in building and enforcing personal and social relational environments. This study is divided into three sections. First, the

meaning that nostalgia has acquired throughout the modern and contemporary age is explored, showing that it deals with absence and lost time. Second, the feeling of nostalgia as longing for an imagined totality, an integral reality that neither ever existed as such nor is desirable, is investigated; both on a personal as well as a social level, the wish to regain totality is pathological. Third, this study maintains that there can be other forms of nostalgia, which are not regressive, but equate the feeling of an unavoidable loss, without aspiring to reconciliation, but evaluating the fragment, the hidden possibilities of the past.

2. Longing for the past: A brief history of nostalgia

300 Nostalgia is commonly defined as a feeling, also often as a social passion; it corresponds to the German *Sehnsucht*.¹ It is almost associated with a “regressive” feeling, a backwards-oriented glance, which paradoxically does not have a defined “noema,” since it is capable of inventing it through the work of a pathological imagination. What we remember and long for never happened as such. We aim to go back to something unavoidably lost. Therein lie the dangers of nostalgia, both on a personal as well as on a social level. Drawing on Jean Starobinski’s history of the idea of nostalgia, it is worth briefly reconstructing the origins of this concept, with a particular focus on Kant who transforms nostalgia from the suffering from a lost place to the suffering from a definitively passed time. The feeling of nostalgia was codified, and the word invented, at the end of the seventeenth century by the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer, according to whom nostalgia was a pathology of imagination that affected Swiss soldiers far from home. A century later, Kant recognized that nostalgia deals with time, rather than with spaces and places.

In his *Anthropologie*, Kant has given a subtle interpretation to his irrational desire; what a person wishes to recover is not so much the actual place where he passed his childhood but his youth itself. He is not straining towards something he can repossess, but towards an age which is forever beyond his reach. (Starobinski 1966, 94.)

¹ For an accurate reconstruction of the philosophical history of the German word *Sehnsucht*, see Corbineau-Hoffman 1995.

Even if very superficially sketched, this history of nostalgia depicts it as a feeling of something absent that the subject represents with the help of imagination, often a pathological one. Before suggesting this feeling is addressed not only to the past, but also, and maybe even to a greater extent, to the future, as an attempt to build something that is not completely achievable, it is worth drawing on some phenomenological categories, in order to highlight some features of this particular feeling. When nostalgia is directed towards the past, it works with the remembrances that are unavoidably imagined and, to an extent, distorted. It can be equated to the wish to gain a lost unity, a lost “golden age.” To the extent that it distorts the mere events, it can be oppressive or liberating. This section focuses on the fusional, dangerous, backwards-oriented traits of nostalgia, and the emancipatory openings of nostalgia are discussed in the last section.

Nostalgia is usually conceived of as a passion, in the etymological sense of the word; it is not something we choose, it happens in a non-voluntary way and concerns human ways of remembering the past. Even if it is to a certain extent unintentional, it has an intentional content, a noema, which could be defined as “the world-under-nostalgement [...] a past world, a world that no longer exists” (Casey 1987, 364). Moreover, the experience of nostalgia goes beyond the act of remembrance, since it can be experienced as an “affective tonality” that guides and accompanies human experience. In other words, nostalgia is not only directed towards something, but can be a characteristic of the experience. Nostalgia is not simply directed towards an object, but is a way of experiencing something, which shapes the experience. According to Hart, the author of a famous article on “The Phenomenology of Nostalgia,” nostalgia is an “affective synthesis of the heart’s desire” (1973, 410).

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In the brief phenomenological history of nostalgia, it is impossible not to mention Vladimir Jankélévitch, whose masterpiece *L'irréversible et la nostalgie* is one of the most complete and exhaustive philosophical inquiries on this topic. In short, he highlights the essential connection between the irreversible passing of time and the feeling of nostalgia, which accompanies the experience of transience. This confirms that nostalgia is often perceived as a feeling of incompleteness, finitude, an unhappy finitude that strives for an impossible unification and accomplishment.

This short discussion helps us to thematize the features of nostalgia. It is a passion, a passive experience, a “pathological” one, in the sense of something not chosen but lived. We are lived and oriented by nostalgia, and we cannot decide to experience it; quite the contrary, it “experiences” and lives us, and conditions our way of looking at time, our temporality. In this sense, it is not voluntary, but at the same time it is intentional, it is directed towards something; a content, although with blurred contours, can be recognized in it. This content can be identified both with the punctual remembrance, which provokes suffering, since it is unavoidably past, and with a particular way of living temporal experience, a kind of bitter awareness that what we are living is structurally incomplete. If this awareness turns into a kind of resistance to the past, then it is not only illusory from an existential viewpoint, but also unrealistic from a theoretical viewpoint, and hubristic from an ethical viewpoint.

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It becomes clear that nostalgia deals with how humans live and experience absence in the forms of time passed, loss, and incompleteness. If directed to rescuing something unavoidably gone, nostalgia seems doomed to pursue unity at all costs. From the standpoint of personal relations, this striving towards unity can lead to the acceptance of fusional relations, which aim to overcome the distinction between “I” and “thou.” If translated in relational terms, the need to recompose a lost unity becomes the need to come back to a state of indistinction, a dangerous condition, a death drive. Lacan’s category of the imaginary and his reading of familial complexes testify to the threatening side of the nostalgia for fusion. Nostalgia does not limit itself to a “vertical” feeling, directed to the “deep-seatedness” of the past. It also acquires a horizontal dimension, and in its attempt to become horizontal, it turns into the wish for fusion, the need to overcome distance, the will to fill in absence. All these are impossible attempts that lead to death. This threatening side of nostalgia becomes all the more evident in the context of social relations, where fusional attitudes applied to the idea of community can easily become a cage, a deadly and exclusionary *dispositif*. This can be sadly true not only for the nation-state, but also in all the contexts, where social action calls for processes of self-identification and self-recognition.² A common trait between

2 In an insightful essay significantly entitled “El camino nostálgico hacia el

the experiences of nostalgia on a personal as well as a social level is rooted in the incapacity of accepting finitude, difference, and absence, which leads us to strive for surrogates, false identities and identifications, objects that are thought to be sufficient.

3. Nostalgia, memory, and the impossible totality

According to Hart, “nostalgia is not a remembering of better past times but a reverie of the past. The reverie is not an actual recollection of the past as it was experienced. Rather, it is an idealized constitution of the past.” (Hart 1973, 402.) This idea of a reverie is related to the interpretation of nostalgia as a pathology of imagination. If we move from the perspective of a physician,³ who medicalizes this relation with the passing of time, to a metaphysical perspective, we can recognize the same illusionary reverie of completeness and identity, an attitude doomed to try to block the transitoriness of time, to grasp its image once and for all.

In order to focus on the metaphysical import of a phenomenology of nostalgia, this section, by deepening some suggestions that have previously emerged, explores the relationship between nostalgia and memory from a phenomenological viewpoint taking a cue from Levinas. The images, the traces, and the narratives that nostalgia and memory construct are structurally interwoven with absence, precarity, imperfection. Nostalgia can, thus, be considered as the particular feeling that humans perceive in the face of this absence, as an attitude towards the acknowledgment of the impossible totality. Nostalgia, like memory, can be open to indeterminacy or folded back on itself, it can foster life or lead to death. Such a feeling is not unidirectional, and potentially has the resources to work for the change and the flourishing of human beings and inclusive societies. However, to free nostalgia from its abuses in the social and public domain, it is worth exploring the origins of

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reconocimiento de sí,” Jorge Montesó-Ventura (2021) explores the positive role of nostalgia in the dynamics of self-recognition.

³ As already mentioned, this perspective belongs to the first scholars who invented the word nostalgia, but if we think back to Karl Jaspers’s “Heimweh und Verbrechen,” it is a die-hard tradition.

such distortion in more depth. This study hypothesizes that it can be traced back to the human relationship with totality.

For the abovementioned, this study focuses on the privileged interlocutor Emmanuel Levinas. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas mentions nostalgia with reference to desire and metaphysics. The first appearance of the term is emblematic:

Desire would characterize a being indigent and incomplete or fallen from its past grandeur. It would coincide with the consciousness of what has been lost; it would be essentially a nostalgia, a longing for return. But thus it would not even suspect what the veritably other is. The metaphysical desire does not long to return, for it is desire for a land not of our birth, for a land foreign to every nature, which has not been our fatherland and to which we shall never betake ourselves. The metaphysical desire does not rest upon any prior kinship. (Levinas 1969, 33.)

304 This dense and thought-provoking passage contains both the reasons to suspect nostalgia as well as the reasons to rescue it from this suspicion. When Levinas describes metaphysical desire, he invites us to beware its interpretation as of something that lost its unity and strives to recompose it. Metaphysics cannot be a nostalgia for the origin, for fusion, for totality. Quite the contrary, it is directed towards the genuinely unknown, aware that this desire cannot be structurally satisfied, since it cannot by definition transform into knowledge. Here, the otherness of the other is at stake. It deals directly with the issue of nostalgia. If interpreted as a feeling folded back onto the past, striving for regaining something lost, nostalgia reproduces the metaphysics of identity, but does not leave open the possibility of a desire towards infinity.

On the other hand, going beyond Levinas, we could hypothesize that there is a feeling of nostalgia that is forwards-oriented, open to possibilities that cannot be determined prior, and has always already accepted incompleteness and absence. The capacity of living with the awareness of absence, without filling it in with images, concepts, and fictitious identities, can transform the affective tonality of nostalgia into an awareness open to the future, and not desperately closed on the past. From this standpoint, nostalgia can be correctly

interpreted as a symptom of a pathology of the imagination, since it imagines a fusional state, a metaphysical truth whose content has to be rescued from oblivion and made present. The imagination of a fusional state does not correspond to anything real, its “noema” is an impossible ground, a supposed identity whose experience is not given to us. If it intends to avoid the risks of a closure, nostalgia can only be directed to the future, one that is undetermined and open to infinity.

One of the main gains of the Levinasian reading of nostalgia deals with his intuition of linking it to the problem of identity. Paraphrasing Adorno, we could say that nostalgia should become aware of the non-identical, without aspiring to it. Levinas writes that the nostalgia for identity is not equitable to the metaphysics of desire, since it does not recognize the other, it is persuaded to know it, but every knowledge is impossible, every attempt to depict defined contours of knowledge is doomed to become a dangerous exercise of fictitious identification. Nostalgia can be rescued from the idea of fusional identification only by coming to terms with absence, by interpreting loss and absence as a dimension of alterity that inhabits us, without being defined once and for all, and without being reproducible as it happened in the past. The past is unavoidably gone, it does not necessarily contain the truth of the origins, the truth as identity or totality. The dignity of finitude is crossed by absence; it is its thread, with which it is intermingled. Only by liberating finitude from the obsession of infinity as something to regain, as an achievable possession—thereby denying infinity itself—, can nostalgia be seen as potentially open to the future.

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In understanding being as exteriority, in breaking with the panoramic existing of being and the totality in which it is produced, we can understand the meaning of the *finite* without its limitation, occurring within the infinite, requiring an incomprehensible fall of the infinite, without finitude consisting in nostalgia for infinity, a longing for return. (Ibid., 292.)

The past is unavoidably gone, no memory can rescue it from its transitoriness, there is no way of coming back to an original status of unity

and perfection. What is lost is simply the imperfect experience as we humans can do it, without any hubristic conception of perfection. Following this path, it could be argued that the experience of nostalgia should pass through the filter of fragmentation. Nostalgia is not a longing for the perfect past, but for fragments of experience we know to be unrecoverable. Hence, nostalgia can be equated to this awareness, directed not to an entirety and a totality, but rather to moments, fragments, and its ethical import compels us to resist the temptation to revive them. Even when nostalgia is directed to joyful moments of the past, it should always be accompanied by the will to live something different in the future, and not to re-experience the same moments already lived. Only this openness to the future can make it possible to live a life worthy of infinity.

306 Before moving to the next section, where these phenomenological considerations are applied to the social world, it should be highlighted that, in order to take nostalgia seriously, one should not forget that it is linked to the transitoriness of time. Both when nostalgia distorts our remembrances, making them better than they were, as well as when it is directed to real joyful experiences lived in the past, it needs to come to terms with absence so as not to become pathological.

4. Nostalgia “for the particular”: Coming to terms with totality and keeping fusion at a distance

This section argues that nostalgia, to the extent that it is a feeling, which we experience without willing it, is neither good nor bad in itself, but it can become useful or dangerous depending upon its transformation into action. In other words, its ethical quality depends on the direction that it outlines and, consequently, on the uses and abuses of memory. If we consider Bergson’s still-valid proposal of thinking memory as an action, we could say that, when nostalgia affects the act of remembrance with the aim of reproducing totality, it can be easily distorted and used ideologically. If nostalgia is directed only to an impossible return to an imaginary and regressive state of fusion that mystifies memory, and uses it as a justification for restoring or maintaining the status quo, both personally and socially, then it can be recognized as a “restorative” feeling. In her famous book *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym lists two opposed kinds of nostalgia, a restorative and a reflective nostalgia: “nostalgia

of the first type gravitates towards collective pictorial symbols and oral culture. Nostalgia of the second type is more oriented towards an individual narrative that savors details and memorial signs, perpetually deferring homecoming itself.” (Boym 2001, 49.) Even if partial and not strictly philosophical, the experience of nostalgia, as described by Boym, is relevant for at least two reasons. First, it highlights that it can become a resource directed at the construction of a life in common. Second, it stresses the dangers of the attempt to recompose an “original image,” an identity given once and for all, and at the same time invites to use reflective nostalgia to correct some too teleological pictures of history. Indeed, reflective nostalgia has to do with fragments, with the possibility to narrate the past anew and to detach from the traditional ways of giving accounts of history. Restorative nostalgia points to imaginary identities; reflective nostalgia is a “wise” feeling, and it can be useful to discuss the supposed unavailability of progress. Taking a break and listening to divergent accounts of the past, far from the triumphal images of modernity, the first step could be to discuss the idea of a “universal history.”

If we venture beyond Boym, it is not by chance that nostalgia was codified as a pathology at the end of the seventeenth century, when the idea of progress was starting to emerge as a philosophy of history. Nostalgia was, thus, seen as a feeling that compelled people to live with eyes directed backwards, a sort of brake to the triumphant march of progress. Reflective nostalgia is not a feeling of a striving for totality, impossible to regain and hubristic to desire, but rather a sort of a symptom that there could be many other ways of narrating history by pluralizing them. Transitoriness of time does not mean the unavailability of progress. The traces left along the way cannot be revived, of course, but can serve as signs of a different future yet to come, free from the compulsion to repeat, and open to the possibility of actualizing something new, not before having tried to know more from that past, from the experiences of suffering people.

In other words, if nostalgia recalls the act of memory that is able to accept the transitoriness of time and recalls the past to act in the future, questions the inherited tradition, and addresses it in a critical and reflective way, then it can become a means to compare, determine unheard voices from the past, and give them the possibility to be heard. Defined as such, nostalgia is pacified with its impossibility to grasp totality

and in its dwelling in the fragment. In a very different context and for totally different aims, Iris Murdoch used the expression “nostalgia for the particular.” Here, the hypothesis is that nostalgia is directed to the particular that is not repeatable as such but can be used as something to compare with the present. A renewed phenomenology could be one that is attentive to histories of nostalgia and capable of making a genealogy as well as a critique of it, without censoring or removing it from the public sphere. According to Atia and Davis (2010), nostalgia can be read as a kind of subaltern memory that works through the past, has a potential instrument of critique, and calls for the attention of social scientists.

308 The famous exchange between Horkheimer and Benjamin paves the way to an interpretation of nostalgia as longing for the particular. At the same time, the need to distance from a reading of nostalgia as a feeling devoted to the conquest of an impossible totality, clearly emerges from their exchange. This reading of nostalgia calls for a refiguration of history and progress. Is nostalgia unavoidably linked to the idea of progress and linearity of time? Is it possible to use it leaving aside this pathological reference to a distorted idea of redemption meant as a perfect totality that overlooks suffering in history? With the words of Max Horkheimer:

The determination of incompleteness is idealistic if completeness is not comprised within it. Past injustice has occurred and is completed. The slain are really slain . . . If one takes the lack of closure entirely seriously, one must believe in the Last Judgment . . . Perhaps, with regard to incompleteness, there is a difference between the positive and the negative, so that only the injustice, the horror, the sufferings of the past are irreparable. The justice practiced, the joys, the works, have a different relation to time, for their positive character is largely negated by the transience of things. (Max Horkheimer; in Benjamin 2002, 471.)

From a phenomenology of nostalgia aimed at exploring the issues, the pitfalls, the mistakes of a memory that cultivates dreams of totality, this study considers the phenomenology of nostalgia as an urgent task in our societies,

one that should take divergent narratives into account, always starting from the awareness of an impossible totality to reach or recover from the past. Nostalgia, reflective nostalgia, can collect together the openness to the future, the need to remember, the awareness of the transitoriness of time, and the critical attitude towards triumphant stories of progress, by keeping fusion and a “monolithic” idea of identity at a distance.

5. Concluding remarks

In these concluding, but open-ended remarks, the study highlights that suffering from something absent is one of the engines of memory, but the kind of reaction to such suffering makes the difference between a pathological and a safe nostalgia, an overloaded and a pluralized memory, which usually correspond to a kind of society that is open and inclusive, or in turn a kind of society that is excluding. Even if always already gone, the awful past can always come back, though in other forms. Contrarily, even if disappeared once and for all, joyful moments can become something different, if used to imagine and project future possibilities yet to come. In the first section, this work demonstrated that nostalgia is not only an attitude towards the past, but can be also a way of experiencing the world. The risks of a nostalgia that is meant to recover unity and totality, by erasing loss or by filling it in with surrogates, were highlighted. Deepening this line of inquiry, the research highlighted that a precise concept of desire and of the metaphysics of desire is at stake in distorted interpretations of nostalgia. Further, how and why nostalgia can be dangerous, with its passion for the identical, leaving no room to the different and to the divergent, was also explained. In the third section, the argument becomes explicitly a social-ethical one, since we explored the possibility of grasping a kind of nostalgia that is open to the future and does strive neither for the past nor for the idea of reconciliation. Rather, it deals with a pluralization of histories, with their actualization that is able to keep the transitoriness of the past together with the critique of an automatically teleological version of progress and history.

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“The publication edited by Andrej Božič on *Thinking Togetherness. Phenomenology and Sociality* presents a novel and up-to-date account of phenomenology, which comprehends this philosophy as an essentially intersubjective or a communal enterprise; in the volume, phenomenology exceeds narrow limits of subjective life of consciousness, and focuses on various phenomena connected to the public, communal, and political spheres. [...] The book can serve both as a textbook in the heritage of the phenomenological movement and as a collection of original studies.”

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Institute of Philosophy, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw

“The comprehensive collection of contributions entitled *Thinking Togetherness. Phenomenology and Sociality* represents an important scientific achievement within the field of phenomenological philosophy. The monograph, the central topic of which is the elucidation of some of the essential dimensions of the social, was prepared, as already a simple glimpse over the table of contents reveals, in cooperation with an assemblage of authors from across the world. Such an international configuration of the whole composed of 32 chapters, meaningfully arranged into seven thematic sections, imparts upon the volume the character of an extensive and exhaustive, panoramic scrutiny of the phenomenological manner of confronting the question what constitutes the fundamental traits of interpersonal co-habitation with others. [...] *Thinking Togetherness. Phenomenology and Sociality*, therefore, not only offers a historical account with regard to the development of phenomenology, but also quite straightforwardly concerns its relevance within the philosophical research that deals with the contemporary problems of society.”

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