

## *Meditations on Exile and Home*

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This issue of *The Hedgehog Review* explores the experience of exile and the particular perspective it offers on the place of home in contemporary life. The word “home” can seem old-fashioned in some contexts. Some forms of cosmopolitanism embrace global rootlessness, valorizing citizens of the world with no fixed home, eschewing the local for the global. The postmodern emphasis on deconstruction, continual movement, and fluid identities can make home seem a stagnating, fuddy-duddy sort of place. And yet, one doesn’t have to be nostalgic or hopelessly idealistic to see home as a legitimate longing, a genuine comfort, and something worth working hard to create.

But in everyday life, the experience of home is being transformed by the patterns of people’s lives: people are traveling more and more, to further and further places; people change houses and jobs frequently as a matter of course; remaining in one’s hometown is unusual in many places. “Settling down,” as some see it, is for the unadventurous or those without many opportunities, and creating a long-term home with another person, while still an ideal for many, has become a less and less common reality. Just how important is home?

For those in exile, the sense of home’s importance is acute. In the twenty-first century, not having a home is, for an astounding number of people, not a lifestyle or identity choice, but rather a hard reality imposed on them by circumstances beyond their control. The places these people called home became sites of violence, repression, and danger such that they were forced to leave or reluctantly chose to leave. In these situations, the place of comfort, familiarity, and rest became the site of deep loss, trauma, and alienation. From this vantage point one does not speak casually of the need for home.

Holocaust survivor Jean Améry argues that home is more important than we whose homes are secure can imagine:

How much home a person needs cannot be quantified. And still, precisely at this time, when home is losing some of its repute, one is greatly tempted to answer the purely rhetorical question and say: he needs more home, more, at any rate, than a world of people with a homeland, whose entire pride is their cosmopolitan vacation fun, can dream of.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Améry, *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980) 60.

By looking at home from the perspective of exile, we can begin to see home not as a sentimental place for those who are nostalgic; a source of security for those who lack imagination, an adventurous spirit, or opportunity; or a dull place from which we escape to exotic lands, either from time to time or permanently. Instead, home comes into view as a place that shapes our identities, engages some of our deepest longings, and affects our involvement with others and the world—in constructive and destructive ways.

Whether nurturing or damaging, whether through its presence or absence, home unavoidably shapes who we are. Considering the meaning of exile and home involves grappling with such questions as: How is the changing experience of home affecting the formation of identity in contemporary life? What constitutes home for those who have been forced to leave their homeland? How is the past reconfigured in the experience of exile? How is it reconfigured when the landscapes of our hometowns are completely altered? Have we lost a sense of home and, in the process, some of who we are?

When asked to write about exile and home, several contributors turned to a more personal, even meditative, style, as if the topic itself pressured the shift to such writing. With all the upheaval both chosen and imposed in people's experiences of home, the word is still evocative, bringing to mind a multitude of connotations: identity, family, comfort, domesticity, privacy, space, the past. This issue of *The Hedgehog Review* seeks to suggest that we need more home than we "can dream of," and because of that, we need to move beyond the sentimentalization of home to a more thorough exploration of its place in our lives and to the suffering inflicted by the imposition of its absence in exile.

—T.H.R.