

## **Nostalgia – from Disease to Metaphysical Feeling\***

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to follow two perspectives on nostalgia: the medical perspective and the metaphysical one. While the former considers nostalgia a disease, the latter assumes it is a true metaphysical feeling that defines the human condition in itself. The histories of the two approaches are not separate; on the contrary, they are inextricably linked. They, in fact, throw some light on ourselves, on the modality in which we receive or reject, accept or repudiate those unusual emotions, “intimately-strange” that we experience as profoundly ours and simultaneously as coming from somewhere else.

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### **Introduction**

*The* birth of a word is fascinating by itself when its story is known. Therefore, even more fascinating will be the birth story of the name of an emotion. Then between the name and the reality or being of an emotion a relation is established, which cannot be exhausted by choosing between convention and the nature of the thing. The distinction blurs in regard to emotions, because it is not entirely clear where convention ends and their nature begins. The entire dialectics is captured by a French historian of emotions in a remarkable fragment in the beginning of a writing on the concept of nostalgia: “That an emotion inscribes itself in a name (and especially in a fashionable name) – here is a thing that cannot involve consequences of a certain importance. On the one hand, the passing to verbalization (to the linguistic self-consciousness) – is the auget of reflection and, sometimes, of criticism. On the other hand, as soon as the name of an emotion is brought forward – as fashion can do it –, the word, by its own efficiency, contributes to the anchoring, propagation and generalization of the affective experience whose indication it is.

The emotion is not the word, but he cannot spread without words. In liminal situations and when they are favoured, some words come to cover what does not correspond to them at all. La Rochefoucauld used to say forcefully and very simply:

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“There are people who would have never been in love had they not heard one’s talking about love.” (...) The verbalization of the affective experience enters the composition in the very structure of the lived experience. The history of emotions cannot be, therefore, something else than the history of the words in which emotions were uttered. The task of the historian, in this field, relates to the philologist’s; he must know how to recognize different states of the language, the individual style by means of which experience (singular or collective) has opted to express itself, it is historical semantics.”<sup>1</sup>

Nostalgia represents an individual case as compared to other emotions since the date its name was registered in documents is precisely known. We could say that the official act of the birth of nostalgia is the doctoral dissertation of the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer de Mulhouse<sup>2</sup>, defended in 1688.

There is no doubt that, under the name *heimweh* or *maladie du pays*, the homesick feeling or the one of longing for the return to the native land were widely known. With Hofer, however, these gain, besides conceptual unity, the commanding appearance of a Greek denomination/labelling which allows them to desert a low condition and to proudly enter the aristocracy of the nosography of the times. Hofer’s medical dissertation ennobles a whole category of affects and affections – known up to him only at the level of an intuitive psychology – introducing order, establishing distinctions, degrees and nuances, constituted as a variety of clinical symptoms and manifestations. The moment is an extremely favourable one since the whole epoch stands under the sign of systematization, of taxonomies, of the rigorous order imposed on the mental “disorder”.<sup>3</sup>

The word invented by Hofer, nostalgia, is made up of two words of Greek origin: *nostos* (νόστος) – return (home, to the native land) and *algos* (άλγος) – suffering, pain.<sup>4</sup> Hofer’s terminological genius manifested itself in a single creation. What has been said about the great creators, that they end up being killed by the characters they invent, is eventruer for the creators of words – these cannot

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Starobinsky, *Melancolie, nostalgie, ironie*, (Bucharest: Editura Meridiane, 1983), 132.

<sup>2</sup> Johannes Hofer de Mulhouse, *Dissertatio medica de nostalgia* (Basel, 1688). Translation into English in *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 2 (1934), 379 ff.. quoted in J. Starobinsky, *Melancolie, nostalgie, ironie*, 135.

<sup>3</sup> “The novelty consisted in the attention of the physician, in the decision to recruit this affective phenomenon in order to transform it into a morbid entity and subdue it to the interpretations of the scholar reasoning. When classification appeared in medicine, when, similarly to systematic botanic, efforts were made to envisage an outlook of genera morborum, the idea was to enlist all varieties that could enrich the repertoire.” Jean Starobinsky, *Melancolie, nostalgie, ironie*, 135.

<sup>4</sup> Hofer notes that the term is “Greek by origin and made up of two elements, one of them is *nostos*, the return to the native country, and the other, *algos*, which means suffering or pain; (...) the state of sadness born of the desire to return home.” Carolyn Kiser Anspach, trans., “Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia by Johannes Hofer, 1688,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 2 (1934): 376–391., quoted in Stanley W. Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression From Hippocratic Times to Modern Times* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 373.

become part of the natural language unless we completely forget about their artificial origin/genesis. This has happened with “nostalgia”, which has quickly left the specialized field of medicine and entered the common usage of language, making its parent fall into complete oblivion. As it loses its rigour, transforming itself from a technical into an increasingly vague term, the popularity of nostalgia grows.

The gradual loss of the proper, medical sense of nostalgia associates with the increasing and irreversible fading of Hofer’s name. The term will expand its scope, becoming increasingly vague, and frequently used, thus imposing itself permanently. For this to happen, it was necessary for Hofer’s name to fall into oblivion, a name which, associated with nostalgia, would constantly have reminded of the particular nature of the emotion, that of a disease “discovered” at a certain moment by a Swiss physician. The evolution of nostalgia from disease to emotion necessarily passes through the “ambiguization” of its meaning, indispensable from its parent’s falling into oblivion.

However, the medical connotations do not remain foreign to the common meaning/sense, managing to survive for more than a century. Thus, in Milan, the French writer Honoré de Balzac is appalled by the tragic end that nostalgia could reserve for him.<sup>1</sup> The same uneasiness is experienced by the captain of a ship sailing on the seas of the South who asks Charles Baudelaire to join him lest he should be touched by this “cruel disease, nostalgia, whose effects are often so sinister.”<sup>2</sup>

### **1.1. The nostalgic: the xenophobic intruder. A disease of departure, nostalgia is cured by return.**

As symptoms that indicate the imminence of the disease, Hofer mentions a tendency to melancholy that is born from the very nature of the individual, the aversion to foreign habits and social gatherings. The proper manifestation of nostalgia is revealed by “a continuous melancholy, the constant thinking about the native land, insomnia, weakness, loss of appetite, anxiety.”<sup>3</sup> As for the pathogenesis, the disease is basically caused by “an affected/corrupted imagination, the most damaged part of the brain being the one in which the images of the missed beings and places are located. (...) Experience proves that only imagination can cause all these.” This condition is curable only if “the longing can be satisfied; incurable, deadly or very serious when circumstances prevent its satisfaction.”<sup>4</sup> Trying to defend his thesis, Hofer brings in its support two medical cases in which those contaminated with nostalgia recovered instantaneously at the very thought of

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<sup>1</sup> “From Milan, Balzac writes to Madam Hanska: “Dear, I’m sick for my country... I wander to and fro, heartless, not able to say what’s wrong, and if I stay like this for two weeks, I’ll be a dead man.” (May 23, 1838) Jean Starobinsky, *Melancolie, nostalgie, ironie*, 136.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> George Rosen, “Nostalgia: A Forgotten Psychological Disorder,” *Psychological Medicine* 5 (1975): 340–355, quoted in Stanley W. Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, 375.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 342.

returning home.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, nostalgia is the disease of remoteness/distance whose cure seems to be fairly easy: the return home, to the native land. The irritability, anxiety, the obsession of return, the exacerbated positive valuing of the native land, the loathing of the place in which the nostalgic finds himself away from home and the despise of the indigenous people with whom he has to cohabit – all these represent some of the symptoms confessed by nostalgics, the majority of whom are, states Hofer, young persons, lacking social interaction.<sup>2</sup>

Very similar to love-sickness, which used to lay waste during the Middle Ages, the triggering mechanism is the same: as the beloved's inner image – changed into the most intimate part of the lover's soul or, more precisely, into his very soul – asks for its object, so the mental representations of the native lands ask, with maximum acuity, their presence; otherwise, the effects on the psychic organism are similar to the effects triggered by the lack of vital elements in the physical body.<sup>3</sup> However, one will start by trying a symptomatic treatment: everything is welcome that relates to the alleviation of the sufferer, from purgatives and bleeding to pleasant companionships and agreeable trips – these will make the nostalgic forget his suffering by blotting out both the bodily and spiritual traces of the disease. All these remedies could enter the class of some “nosto-analgesics” that, unless effective, must immediately be replaced by an urgent return to the native land.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Hofer defends his thesis by appealing to two cases of the same significance. (1) A man from Bern who studied in Basel and who suffered from ‘sadness for a considerable period of time.’ This has been associated with fever, anxiety, palpitations, the symptoms worsening to thinking that he is to die and prayers should be read for his soul. The apothecary that visited him realized that he suffers from homesickness and recommended that he should be sent home. As soon as the patient heard that and realized that the advice was to become facts, he started to feel better; on his way from Basel to his house his condition improved consistently and he recovered completely before reaching Bern. (2) A young country-girl from the Basel region, hospitalized after an accident, became nostalgic and refused food and the necessary medication. After repeated lamentations that she wanted to go home, her parents took her home and she recovered immediately.” Stanley W. Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, 374.

<sup>2</sup> “The conclusions drawn by Hofer from these cases and from other observations are: the persons most amenable to this affection are the young people who live in foreign lands and, from among these, especially those who led an isolated life and did not have much social interaction back home. These find it very hard to adapt to foreign habits and to forget the maternal care they benefited from at home. In time they become very irritable, agitated, they reject everything that is local, denounce the most insignificant acts of injustice produced against them, they eulogize ardently the native land, thinking about return becomes a constant and finally symptoms become somatic: insomnia, sleep disorders, weakness, anxiety, heart palpitations, and fever.” Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> “In *De regimine mentis* (1763), Jerome Gaub (1705–1780) referred to nostalgia or homesickness together with the love affection, both included in ‘[t]he dangerous body effects of the unconfessed love.’ Then, referring to ‘[t]he beneficial effects of hope as associated with varieties of food,’ he considers that those who suffer from nostalgia are reanimated by the hope of their return to the native land.” Ibid., 376.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 375.

### 1.2. Jean-Jacques Scheuchzer – Nostalgia as “low altitude sickness”

Hofer's pioneering work opens way to intense debates on the medical problem of nostalgia. The Swiss physicians are among the most sensitive to this topic and both developments and nuances on this are not late.

Firstly, the scattering area of nostalgia is extended: not only the Swiss suffer from nostalgia, but the same behaviour can be noticed in the inhabitants of other geographical areas.<sup>1</sup> The sailors are also included in the list of those amenable to nostalgia, together with students abroad, girls working as maids away from their native region, and soldiers of other nationalities than Swiss, serving in foreign countries.

In addition, the explanation given by Hofer could not but stir a certain patriotic indisposition among those who did not want to accept character flaws in the case of a “courageous, strong, free and vigorous race.”<sup>2</sup> That was the reason why, Jean-Jacques Scheuchzer from Zurich, would try (firstly in 1705 and then in 1719) the change of Hofer's moral interpretation with a mechanical one, especially since that type of explanation was authorized by the science of the age. Thus, in order to heal the wounded morale of the Swiss, Scheuchzer will establish, both ingeniously and in accordance with the episteme of the times, a physical cause of the depression that overwhelmed the Swiss.

That was no less than the decompression the Swiss faced when they had to descend the crests – the highest in Europe – they used to dwell on. More precisely, because of the rarefied air which they incorporate and carry with them, the Swiss are faced with an extremely powerful pressure exercised by the heavy air that reigns over the plains where they have to go.<sup>3</sup> The danger is neither more nor less but compression. That is the reason why, in the case in which the sick man cannot be repatriated, he has to be relocated in a dwelling on the top of a hill, in a tower, or he has to be administered, as an allopathic treatment, some medicine containing “compressed air”, such as saltpetre, nitre salt, nitre alcohol. Neither wine nor beer should be ignored given the aerial substances these contain.<sup>4</sup>

Though adopted for a while, this theory fell into abeyance along with, or due to the appearance of the Edinburgh School theories and the vital force discussed at Montpellier, both of which re-incriminating the psychic sufferance, the fixed idea which causes organic lesions in time given the solidarity of the human body.

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<sup>1</sup> “The interpretation of Johannes Hofer, in 1688, appeals to the classic notion of *imagination laesa*. Why, asks Johannes Hofer, the young Swiss are so frequently inclined to nostalgia when they go abroad? Without any doubt, because many of them have never met a different environment. And then it is difficult to forget the care they were surrounded with by their mothers.” Jean Starobinsky, *Melancolie, nostalgie, ironie*, 138.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> One should not forget that Hofer also mentions, even if briefly, among other circumstances that favour nostalgia, “the atmospheric changes that act upon the blood and the nervous characters.” Cf. Stanley W. Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, 374.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Starobinsky, *Melancolie, nostalgie, ironie*, 139.

### 1.3. New causes: the association of ideas and the alienation of desire; new remedies: forgetting and hedonism

The obvious link between nostalgia and memory is brought into discussion in 1720 by Theodore Zwinger in Basel who uses the law of association in order to explain the nostalgia which makes havoc of the Swiss soldiers in France or in Belgium. Zwinger is as focused as possible in his attempt to prove his thesis: when hearing a specific cantilena – used by the Swiss countrymen to shepherd the flocks in the Alps – the soldiers are suddenly caught by an acute state of sadness that can end with the death or desertion of the victim. Confronted with the dimensions of the psychic blast, the officers came to forbid this kind of songs, even their humming being severely punished. Locke could any time be invoked in favour of this theory: the association of idea is one of the working laws of thinking.<sup>1</sup>

Another crucial moment is represented by the contribution of Francois Boissier de Sauvages (1706–1767), the French physician and botanist, the founder of nosology on the model/pattern represented by botanical classifications. Nostalgia comes under *Des Folies*, but it is not brought together with melancholy or other forms of madness, but together with *Les Bizareries* or *Les Morosités*, it is considered an alienation of desire.<sup>2</sup> “He defined nostalgia as a species of fantasy which used to influence the foreigners to return to their country, foreigners who, unless succeeding in doing so, were overwhelmed by sadness, insomnia, the loss of appetite and other serious symptoms.”<sup>3</sup> From Sauvages’ major work, *Nosologie Methodique*, we find out that nostalgia ramifies, in its turn, in three types. The first, called *simple nostalgia*, applies to the ones away from the native land, either students or soldiers, according to the recent tradition of nostalgia. Nostalgia remains, therefore, in its first and simplest form, a disease of remoteness. The second type, according to Sauvages, is related to a kind of somatization of nostalgia, a complication of this by its association with different physical affections, therefore being called *complicated nostalgia*.

As nothing escapes exhaustive tendencies, no form can be left out, not even the faked nostalgia – the simulated nostalgia, easily detectable among the soldiers who want to escape, permanently or at least for a while, the military service.<sup>4</sup>

What is essential in the treatment suggested for nostalgia by Sauvages is drawing or focusing attention away from things past to things present.<sup>5</sup> In order to avoid the extreme measure of returning home, the patient had to be accustomed to what was ‘here’ by means of what ‘happens now’. Since space and time are indissolubly related in nostalgia, by an intelligent operation at the level of one dimension one can obtain the desired change in the other as well. One recommends

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Jean Starobinsky, *Melancolie, nostalgie, ironie*, 141.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Stanley W. Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, 375–6.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 376.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> “As to the treatment, he underlines the role of the psychological remedies, such as entertainment and satisfying the ill’s desires; but he does not remark the fact that, quite often, starting the journey back home or only being assured that they would return home bring them an amelioration.” Ibid., 376.

that the patient's all wishes and pleasures should be satisfied, so that the time spent pleurably should cast a favourable light on the space where these took place. If return – asked by nostalgia – is not only a spatial movement but a 'return in time' as well, a trip against the clock, then, by modifying the subject's temporality from past to present, from 'then' to 'now', one obtains the conversion of his spatiality from 'there' to 'here'.<sup>1</sup>

The return home to the native land represents, however, the ultimate solution when all other ones fail: "Friedrich Schiller, in *On Relation Between Man's Animal and Spiritual Nature*, his dissertation at the end of his medical studies (in 1780), discusses the beneficial effects of mental pleasure on health and asserts that: "This is most evidently confirmed by the example of patients who were cured by joy. Send back to the native land the one who has been reduced to a skeleton by the harshest of nostalgia and he will rejuvenate and relive the most flourishing health."<sup>2</sup>

#### **1.4. Medical perspectives on nostalgia: simulated disease, partial madness, erroneous appetite, pathetic madness**

The preoccupations with nostalgia revolve, in the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century, around its appearance among the soldiers in Western armies. In 1754, in a treatise on military medicine, De Meyserey refers to nostalgia in relation with the practice of its simulation by soldiers. Nostalgia is preferred, given the ambiguity of the disease, its strange and rapid evolution, and the complications it could lead to any time.<sup>3</sup> The suspicion on nostalgia would not stop, not even later, as we shall see. Nostalgia may be the perfect disease for an "imaginary patient." The play of mirrors and masks, Romantic by excellence, affects nostalgia as well. There is no definite criterion for discriminating between simulated and true nostalgia.

Real sufferance has a certain degree of theatricality and frivolity, in the same way in which the mimicked suffering has, deep inside, a true core of pain, since the reason for which the soldier simulated nostalgia is the very longing for his kind, the desire to return home. Genuine nostalgia is indistinct from faked nostalgia – one form is very likely to convert to the other – and that is why nostalgia is as

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<sup>1</sup> "For the great Romantics nostalgia is incurable. The physicians from the 18<sup>th</sup> century used to say that it disappears once the patient returns to the native land. It would be far too simple. The nostalgic does not stop to toss about, the wound does not close. And why? Kant, in his anthropology, gives us a subtle interpretation of this passion: the nostalgic does not crave for the place of his youth but for his youth itself, his childhood. His desire does not long for something that he could find again, but for an irreversible and irrecoverable time (*Antropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, 1798, I, XXXII). Back home, the nostalgic is unhappy because he finds here people and places that no longer resemble the old ones. His childhood is not given back. Before Rimbaud to say: 'One cannot leave', Kant warned us: there is no return." Jean Starobinsky, *Melancolie, nostalgie, ironie*, 145.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Dewhurst and Nigel Reeves, *Friedrich Schiller: Medicine, Psychology and Literature...* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 271., quoted in Stanley W. Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, 377.

<sup>3</sup> Nauman Naqvi "The Nostalgic Subject. A Genealogy of the 'Critique of Nostalgia'." Working Paper 23. <http://www.cirsdig.it/Pubblicazioni/naqvi.pdf>. Accessed October 18, 2011.

credible as it is questionable. That is why one will search for objective, somatic criteria in order to delimit true, serious nostalgia from the faked one.

Thus, Leopold Auenbrugger (1722–1809), the inventor of the percussion technique, brought as a new contribution the association of nostalgia with a deaf tone in the chest of the patients as well as the lung adherence to pleura as discovered during the autopsy of those who die from this disease.<sup>1</sup> From the perspective of modern medicine, it is obvious that what Auenbrugger describes are manifestations of tuberculosis; as Jean Starobinsky rightfully asserted, one has the sensation that the physician describes rather his own association of ideas than the proper state of things: “the pulmonary opacity is the concrete image of the psychological darkness”.<sup>2</sup>

Nosology does not miss from almost any of the nosologic schemes of the time. Either a “species of melancholy” (Vogel), or a version of “partial madness” (Sauvages, Sagar), “erroneous appetite” (Cullen), the pathological character of nostalgia is recognized by the medical science of the epoch.<sup>3</sup> In his *Nosology*, Cullen places it together with bulimia, polydipsia, Satyriasis and nymphomania, under the label “Erroneous Appetites.”<sup>4</sup> We can understand this classification if we consider that the desire to return is an aberrant one insofar as, unlike the normal appetite that exercises itself to what is present or to what can be obtained in the present, it manifests itself in relation to a past object, unlikely to be brought into the present.

Thomas Arnold (1742–1816) in *Observations on Madness* (1780) claims that “nostalgic madness” is a type of pathetic madness which he includes under the general category of “notional madness” that provokes illusions, unlike “ideal madness” that triggers hallucinations. Pathetic madness does not affect reason, but it places itself at the level of affectivity, passion controlling reason.<sup>5</sup>

### **1.5. Un-medicalizing nostalgia: degradation to the status of “feeling of a seriously oppressed spirit” and “fixed idea of domestic happiness”**

Unlike Arnold’s conception according to which although nostalgia had affinities with melancholia, it was not a form of melancholia, at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, nostalgia becomes a form of melancholia. It is the case of Johann Christian Heinroth (1773–1843) who, in 1818 “included homesickness or nostalgia among the ‘subspecies, variations and modifications of melancholia’ and asserted that ‘its

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Stanley W. Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, 376.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Starobinsky, *Melancolie, nostalgie, ironie*, 149.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Stanley W. Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, 377.

<sup>4</sup> Eldad Lewis, trans., William Cullen, *A Methodical System of Nosology* (Stockbridge: Cornelius Sturtevant, 1808), 142., 182., quoted in Stanley W. Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, 377.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Arnold, *Observations on the Nature, Kinds, Causes, and prevention of Insanity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Richard Phillips, 1806), 1–185, quoted in Stanley W. Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, 377.



entire character is that of pure/genuine melancholia, except the fact that it is modified by a clearly defined object”<sup>1</sup>.



**Irina Dumitrașcu, *Untitled Nature 23*,  
Photography – Cprint, ø 40cm, 2008  
Website: [www.bavardestudio.ro](http://www.bavardestudio.ro)**

Similarly, it is the case of Ernst Von Feuchtersleben (1806–1849) for whom nostalgia does not represent “an alienation of personality”, but it is the “feeling of a seriously oppressed spirit.”<sup>2</sup> Only at a high degree of suffering can nostalgia

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<sup>1</sup> Johann Christian Heinroth, *Textbook of Disturbances of Mental Life: Or, Disturbances of the Soul and Their Treatment*, trans., J. Schmorak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 195., quoted in Stanley W. Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, 376.

<sup>2</sup> Ernst von Feuchtersleben, *The Principles of Medical Psychology...*, trans. H. Evans Lloyd and B. G. Babington (London: Sydenham Society, 1867), 187., quoted in Stanley W. Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, 377.

become madness, then representing “melancholia with a fixed idea of domestic happiness”.<sup>1</sup>

The conception expressed by Wilhelm Griesinger (1817–1868), John Charles Bucknill (1817–1897) and Daniel H. Tuke (1827–1895) also takes nostalgia to be a form of melancholia. Although still present within some medical treatises, nostalgia undergoes an entire process of un-medicalization. Its assimilation with a form of melancholia, its erasure from the list of serious psychic affections, all these are the signs of a secularization process of a disease initially feared, turning increasingly familiar to a simple state of mind. Thus Wilhelm Griesinger would write that: “Another variety of melancholia is that form characterized by homesickness and the predominance of those ideas that refer to returning home. (...) Obviously, homesickness is not always a mental affection... In itself, it represents an inclination to sadness induced by external circumstances. It becomes madness when this inclination impregnates all the faculties of the mind so powerfully that obliterates the intrusion of any other feeling, or when it is accompanied by delirious conceptions and hallucinations; a state of mind in which physical disturbances – such as the loss of appetite or emaciation – are often absent. Shortly, nostalgia should *in foro* be considered as a mental affection only when it shows the common symptoms of madness.”<sup>2</sup>

John Charles Bucknill and Daniel H. Tuke continue this enterprise, linking nostalgia to melancholia. Rejecting the inclusion of nostalgia in the category of the intellect affections (hallucinations or illusions), they consider it a “simple form” of melancholia: “The mental faculties in the nostalgic patients are the first to suffer any change... an impressive exaltation of the imaginative faculty. The perspective of the native home lays out to the inner eye all by itself... described in the most extravagant and illusory nuances which a morbid fantasy could suggest. This state of mental excitement is accompanied, in the beginning of the affection, by corresponding physical symptoms. The temperature at the head level is increased – the pulse accelerated; there is a certain redness of the conjunctiva: unusual movements of the patients can often be observed – produced, probably, by uncertain pains in various parts of the body, of which he usually complains. (...) There is an inability of focusing attention, while conversations are, consequently, somehow inconsecutive.”<sup>3</sup>

Although it is still a disease, nostalgia is no longer a serious disease, one that should deserve a treatment distinct from melancholia. It decays more and more to the status of a ‘soft’ form of melancholia, a form which, certainly, could aggravate in case it is not correspondingly treated. The prestige of nostalgia as “mal du pays” for which “all peoples and social classes can become subjects, from the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> C. Lockhart Robertson and James Rutherford, trans., W. Griesinger, *Mental Pathology and Therapeutics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: New Sydenham Society, 1867), 245–246, quoted in Stanley W. Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, 377.

<sup>3</sup> John Charles Bucknill and Daniel H. Tuke, *A Manual of Psychological Medicine...* (Philadelphia: Blanchard and Lea, 1858), 158., quoted in Stanley W. Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, 379.

Lapps in Greenland to the Afro-Americans in slavery”<sup>1</sup> diminishes to become again the subject of specialized treatises of military medicine. The circle closes: nostalgia started under the auspices of a professional disease typical to the military career, while its trajectory ends in the same place, of the medical dissertations referring to militaries’ affections.<sup>2</sup> Not by coincidence, in the dictionary of psychological medicine edited by Tuke, there shall be introduced, besides ‘nostalgia’, a new term, namely ‘nostomania.’ The former, in spite of the efforts of semantic revitalization, shows itself too weakened to be credited as a name of a disease any more.<sup>3</sup> Thus nostomania will be defined as “the homesickness so intensely morbid that it becomes a monomania”.<sup>4</sup> In the end, nostalgia will desert the last battlefields which it used to haunt, becoming a memory itself.<sup>5</sup>

#### **1.6. The change of paradigms or the ultimate cure of nostalgia. One stop at the lunatic asylum**

Banished from medicine treatises, nostalgia finds, not for long, a shelter in a kindred field: psychiatry. A remarkable example, mentioned by Starobinsky in his work is the medicine paper by Karl Jaspers from 1909, called *Heimweh und Verbrechen* (Nostalgia and Criminality).<sup>6</sup>

Psychiatry will renounce quickly enough to this term, being replaced with others: “depressive reaction to social inadaptation,” “socio-affective deficiency”, “pathology of separation,” “regression”.<sup>7</sup> The explanations suggested by Starobinsky refer to the disappearance of a paradigm. It is not only the betterment of means of transportation that offers the possibility of a rapid fulfilment of the desire to return to the beloved places that suppresses the incubation period necessary for the instauration of nostalgia. Literally speaking, the contemporary man has no longer time to miss anyone or anything.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Starobinsky, *Melancolie, nostalgie, ironie*, 146.

<sup>2</sup> “Nostalgia continues to be a critical concern for the military authorities and the military physicians. This concern has been prominent in the second part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and remained present throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. To the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, nostalgia being already absorbed among the forms of melancholia, this condition starts to decay from the nosologic schemes.” Stanley W. Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, 379–380.

<sup>3</sup> According to this, nostalgia is “a form of melancholia that has been etiologically named nostalgic melancholia or nostalgia... Nostalgia has always represented a combination of both physical and psychical disturbances and, based on that, it must be defined as a disease and it can become the object of medical treatment.” D. Hack Tuke, ed., *A Dictionary of Psychological Medicine*.... 2 vols. (Philadelphia: P. Blakiston, Son, 1892), 2: 858., quoted in Stanley W. Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, 380.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> A desperate attempt to regain positions was represented, in 1873, by the paper on nostalgia by Auguste Haspel, praised by The Academy of Medicine. However, the psychosomatic medical tradition loses ground in favour of the “Pasteurian era and the pathological anatomy.” Cf. Starobinsky *Melancolie, nostalgie, ironie*, 149–150.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 152.

Equally it is about the disappearance of the local particularities, what one would nowadays call an increased globalization. The difference between home and away tends nowadays to be annulled not by a cosmopolitan feeling, but by a levelling of society in general. Home can be anywhere because home is no longer anywhere. The loss of particularities, colours and local perfumes is associated with the explosion – infinite and indifferent – of a variety of global colours and perfumes.

On the other hand, the extreme and early mobility of people nowadays leads to the feeling of a multiple belonging or, more precisely, to the feeling of belonging to a unique and levelled world, rather than to a specific country or a specific place. But this world is not the cosmos in which the ancient philosophers felt themselves citizens; it is the world of preoccupations to which we deliver ourselves so that being and feeling at home mean being surrounded by people that share the same sphere of interests, have the same job and follow the same goals and ideals.

Nowadays, feeling yourself a stranger has become the equivalent of feeling yourself alone. The nostalgia today is a solitary that longs for communion.

Also, the disappearance of nostalgia is linked to another paradigm of childhood. Childhood no longer represents the relation with a place, with a familiar space, a landscape, but it designates – since Freud – a relation with certain people, especially a relation with parents. It is not a particular space that we want to return to, but to a particular time. And this return will not point to a lost country but, under the Freudian version of ‘regression’, “it recaps the way back to the stages in which desire could not take into account the external hindrance and it was not condemned to postpone its fulfillment.”<sup>1</sup>

## **2. Nostalgia as a metaphysical feeling: Romanticism**

Jean Starobinsky notices that from the medical and psychological discussion on nostalgia to its metaphysical investment there is only one small step left. Nostalgia cannot remain only a psycho-medical reality and it leaves the game of being home – being abroad in order to enter the horizon enlarged by the old theme of the humanity of the exile, the ontological estrangement and the longing of home return, to a primordial condition; once this is impossible, one would try the reconstruction of a primordial condition, at least a spiritual, internal one if not external, in a terrestrial paradise.

Romanticism stays under the sign of nostalgia so obviously that one could say that it is the thinking trend in which the epoch of nostalgia manifests best. If Enlightenment also promotes the return to an initial natural condition or its normative and theoretical reconstruction, Romanticism raises the concepts of return and nostalgia to a dignity they have not experienced before, registering its meanings with such precision and accuracy that one could define Romanticism as the complete dictionary of nostalgia meanings. It is not the purpose of this article to fathom this aspect – which is a separate research topic –, its only aim is to underline the intimate connection between Romanticism and nostalgia. Nostalgia has also the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 153.

gift of bringing together two thinking trends – Enlightenment and Romanticism – considered not only separately, but in opposition, too. If we want to discuss one single common image, that of the circle – an archetype of nostalgia – we shall notice that both the Enlightenment and Romanticism share the same mental paradigm, even if differently illustrated. Thus, the image of Encyclopaedia, of education by complete, exhaustive covering of the human knowledge circle does nothing but differently embody the idea that will found *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*.<sup>1</sup>

## 2.1. Nostalgia – the Schism of the One

With the onset of romanticism, the sense of the infinite and the feeling of regret overtake man's soul. The harmonious, limited world of the past is now lost forever. The Romantic world is an infinite one as limitless as the suffering it provokes. Thus, Friedrich Schiller establishes a clear boundary between Antiquity and the modern or romantic poetry: on the one hand, we can find harmony, especially between nature and man, then among people, while on the other hand, we shall face the feeling of inner torment, the regret of the paradise lost, of nostalgia.<sup>2</sup> In his turn, W. Schlegel considers that while old poetry is characterized by limitation and balance, the modern one tends to the infinite; classicism does not mingle genres, while romanticism does; classical poetry is architectural and plastic, modern poetry is picturesque; the former is a poetry of joy and equilibrium, the latter is one of unrest and desires – religiously founded by Christianity. Friedrich Schlegel will sketch in *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, before Schiller, the opposition between ancient and modern art: “modern poetry is the poetry of the infinite progress, of unsatisfied nostalgia, unlike ancient poetry, one of closed circles.”<sup>3</sup> In *The Dialogue on Poetry* – of a Platonic nature – published in the *Athäneum* journal in 1800, Friedrich Schlegel characterizes the new poetry beginning from the introduction as an “expression of a nostalgia which cannot be extinguished, a

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<sup>1</sup> “The Romantic soul is by excellence nostalgic, while nostalgia is the very longing for something impossible to determine precisely. In *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, Hegel analyzes Romanticism in the chapter on the beautiful soul, which is nothing else but the romantic soul. Nowhere has the essence of the romantic nostalgia been more clearly exposed. It is about that subjectivity closed in itself, incapable of seeing the absolute anywhere else than in itself. That is why art is the stratum from which romanticism draws its sap, since it is only the artist who can impose his own laws on matter. This is the man of genius, as Kant defined him in *The Critique of Judgment*. The man of genius is one of the favourite themes in the Romantics.” Nicolae Râmbu, *Romantismul filosofic german* (The German philosophical Romanticism) (Iași: Polirom, 2001), 16.

<sup>2</sup> “The modern poet, a product of an entire cultural evolution, has lost the naïve harmony; for him, the old unity of youth is lost, becoming the object of nostalgia, feeding the consciousness of a painful loss. He searches for nature. This is how the sentimental poetry appears, after Schiller, (soon renamed as Romantic poetry), dominated by the regret after the lost paradise of childhood, marked not by unity, but by contradiction and an internal tearing that generates a permanent conflicting state of mind.” Vera Călin, *Romantismul* (Romanticism) (Bucharest: Editura Univers, 1975), 19.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

product of the subconscious, of a total spontaneity, efflorescence that draws its sap from the unseen ancestral forces of humankind.”<sup>1</sup>

By means of poetry, the romantics at *Athäneum* believe, one recuperates the primordial force of language, due to metaphor, myth and symbol. Romanticism transforms everything into myths: history, nature, time and space, the human being. Even if they accept together with Immanuel Kant that – being limited to phenomena – men cannot know an entity in itself, the Romantics concede that there are specific means to enter the centre of essentiality. Strange as it may seem, the means by which this operation is performed is the most subjective faculty, namely imagination. Space and time, lacking objective existence, can be manipulated by the transcendental subject. From here to Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s assertion that the world is the self, there is just one small step. Between the self and the world, the subject and the object, the created and the creator there is not a solution of continuity, the two dimensions are only apparently separated, having a profound intimate unity. The finality of romantic nostalgia from this perspective will not be something else than the explicit reestablishment of this unity, a kind of recuperation of the primordial state before the separation between subject and object, especially before the appearance of consciousness. That is why poetry and art in general will be privileged by romanticism: the irrational is not exalted for the sake of the irrational, but what is wished for is the overcoming of the schism on which every intellectual operation founds itself and thus the recovery of the previous essential unity.<sup>2</sup>

## **2.2. Nostalgia: the return as a project**

In his turn, Wilhelm Joseph Schelling postulates the idea of unity, of absolute identity. Unlike Fichte, Schelling starts from nature, but they both meet at the same point that absorbs the differentiation between the ideal and the real. Unity is the truth, duality is the false; identity is the essence, difference is the appearance; the terms themselves of duality and unity are not the most proper ones since they make us think in antagonist terms, while our interest is to recreate the spiritual state of mind before the cognitive scission. By virtue of this unity, analogies are allowed between everything that exists: consciousness, the subconscious, the finite, the infinite. The good and the bad do not signify a duality, but they relate to the unity spirit-nature, the evil resulting from the attempt to break the entity.<sup>3</sup> Through art one could reach this much desired unity, this ardent desire to return to the unity of being. Through art the infinite is represented in the finite, the forces of the spirit come all together. Imagination is creative due to its unifying power and as such it is not only the tool of the poetic creation, but of the philosophical one as well, since

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>2</sup> “The immense hypertrophy of the self which makes the individual feel a world and divinity – an idea common to many Romantics – is directly or indirectly debtor to Fichte’s philosophy.” Ibid., 35.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 36.

the origin of any philosophical system is to be found in a fundamental experience, which can only be made possible by imagination.<sup>1</sup>

The idealization of the past, so specifically romantic, may also be caused by the apprehension triggered by the future. The only convenient temporal ecstasy for the one who aspires to the immutable is the past: this is the only 'time' that cannot be corrupted, altered, liable to temporal evanescence. As the cyclical becoming represented for the Greeks the temporal copy of eternity, the past represents for the Romantics the temporal mode of the atemporal: incorruptible, unchangeable, never dying, the past is the manifestation in time of what transcends time. Terra Firma between the moving sands of the future and the present, the past is also the field of our almost divine freedom and power: our omniscience as to the past (unaffected by oblivion because nothing can be forgotten) brings past events in a simultaneity whose perspective God has over the entire time dimension. From the past we can choose any time we want, we can live again any moment we choose; more than that, by means of imagination, we can intervene, rearrange, merge different moments, annul distances, we can have, generally speaking, an ultimate power over the past.<sup>2</sup>

H. G. Schenk considers that the Romantic nostalgia as to the past appears in three essential variants. Firstly, from a religious point of view, the Romantics relate to the Christian Middle Ages as to an epoch of certitude and trust, as opposed to the present time characterized by "spiritual insecurity" and "faltering belief." Secondly, from a political and cultural perspective, the medieval epoch is the apex of peoples' development. The epoch of feudalism and chivalry is also lamented.<sup>3</sup>

By the alienation from Christianity, the modern man suffered "a dramatic and very likely irreparable loss." For Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, the European culture in the Middle Ages owed almost everything to the church.<sup>4</sup> Imagination is also brought into discussion, being considered one of the capacities in which a historian should excel. We do not have an alternative access to the past than that

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<sup>1</sup> "The feeling of the lost unity can still be regained, suggests the Schellingean analogic system, by magic or dreams, by the immersion in the subconscious, in the past, in the night of consciousness. Hence the importance of dreams and the subconscious in the Romantic literature. Declared adepts of the universal unity philosophy or not, the Romantics display a spirit oriented to the infinite, attracted by a unifying and synthetic vision. (...) All processes of nature indicate a way of return to the lost unity, which the Romantic poet tries to find again by means of magic, ecstasy, the immersion into the subconscious, or by mythical inspiration." *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>2</sup> Those who fear the future will look nostalgically back into the past and, most of the times, they will try to live in an epoch from long gone. This is one of the most relevant characteristics of Romanticism. August Wilhelm Schlegel said: "As a sensitive being, man is positioned in time; however, as a spontaneous being, he carries time within him, and this means that he can live in the past and, in spirit, he can live wherever he likes." H. G. Schenk, *The Mind of the European Romantics* (London: Constable, 1966), 34.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 34–35.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 40–41.

provided by imagination.<sup>1</sup> Imagination plays a crucial role in reconstructing passed times. It is impossible not to remark here a defining characteristic of nostalgia – that of updating places and times left behind. By nostalgia we manage to relate to the past not as to something irreversible and irrecoverable, but to a place where we could return when we want. Nostalgia turns time special, translates it in the terms of simultaneity, forgetting about its successive character. Everything that is behind can be recuperated by return, while the “nostic” faculties by excellence are imagination and memory. By means of these two, the past is updated.

For the Romantics, history represents not only a field of knowledge but, more than that, a modality of self-knowledge,<sup>2</sup> a chance of escaping the deficiencies of the present. History represents a different world in which we can transcend, a paradise ‘from which we cannot be banished’. History does not represent, as we could say nowadays, a lesson for the present and future, but it represents, as paradoxical as it may seem, the very future of this present.

An exhausted and ill present can no longer find its deliverance in the future, but only in its past. Time seems to have consumed all resources, and then the only salvation from the death that it pushes us towards is to return to the past, to the times and epochs when everything was fresh and new. Return thus becomes an existential project of the Romantics. Living in the past should not be rejected, as it is nowadays; on the contrary, living in the past may represent a true *modus vivendi*. The Romantic nostalgia starts as a regret and ends as hope. It is true that the nostalgic hope is one that has an inverted meaning, having as its object things passed, but it is still about hope. More than a time of hope, the past is, for the Romantic, a time of faith. According to the Romantics, the Middle Ages represent the religious time by excellence, the sacred time, which they treasure as a true cult. The past is full of sacredness, and Christianity appears in the writings of the Romantics with a changed signification that serves the finality of their discourse.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “One of the essential contributions of the Romantics to the science of history consists in making it aware that a historian’s enterprises cannot be fulfilled without an effort of his imaginative faculties. Imagination manages to revive the past, to bring it back in the present, to reconstitute the context of the problems and of the conflicts from a certain epoch.” *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>2</sup> “For Friedrich Schlegel a historian’s research is, first of all, a manifestation of the self-knowledge research by the individual so that the whole potential of the human character could be forayed.” *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>3</sup> “Yet, the most worrying aspect of the Romantic attitude to the past must be perceived in the half-aware tendency to use history as a substitute of religion. Remembering was perceived by Jean Paul as “the only paradise from which we cannot be banned”; with this assertion, there has become imminent the peril that the individual’s mind should focus too much on the consolation with the past and too little on the hope to achieve happiness in the future. In the same time, the Christian transcendental concept of the human soul will be replaced by the idea of a pure “terrestrial immortality”, founded on the memory of posterity on its own past.” *Ibid.*, 46.



### **2. 3. The duplicate self: the absolute and the relative, the infinite and the finite**

All the aforementioned issues gravitate around a new centre. Neither the object of knowledge, nor God himself represent the goal of the Romantics' aspirations, but their own assertion, their self-expression.

The new centre is the self, the subjectivity, the subject as producer or creator of the object. The entire effort of the Romantic philosophy will consist in deducing the entire world, God himself from the subject itself; most of the times, this philosophy will try to assimilate the absolute to the self. From Fichte to Schelling and then to Hegel, the self is in a continuous search for itself. It starts from itself, alienates from itself and then returns, all this time remaining as it started. Identity itself is strange, estranged from itself, in the same way in which exile is no more than a modality of identity. The return is an ideal, a project. What has been before is, in fact, that 'home' where I have to return. Everything that exists, as soon as it exists, finds itself on the way of returning to itself. That is why knowledge is very important for the Romantics: in self-consciousness we find the duplicate self, this subject which is its own absolute, its own alterity. The individual is by himself and starts to feel the sublime as he feels being the Absolute itself. Things are never simple: the individual has to bear his finitude together with the infinity, he is both finite and infinite, or, better, a finite that has to engulf the infinite. By knowledge, man realizes that the infinite expresses itself through him. His forces are scarce, his thinking is limited, and then how can he face the burden of the infinite? Art, poetry, music, dreams, symbols are more proper for this task than the appeal to concepts and reasoning.

The self is its own return to itself. Being this, he is at the same time at the remotest distance from itself. He is both intimate and strange to itself. Eventually, he can assert about itself that it exists and it does not, that he is and is not a being. The intimate is the most remote, the familiar is the strangest from me. That is why, paradoxically, in order to know myself I have to distance from myself, I have to get out of me because this distancing is a true and real return to the self. You would not have found yourself unless you had left, this is what the father has to tell the prodigal son.<sup>1</sup>

The way is long and nobody can help the one who set off in order to find himself. The night through which the wanderer walks to his own self is the night of the nothingness that has to encircle the absolute itself. But from this very nothingness his own being springs out.

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<sup>1</sup> "This point of view determines Schelling's general concept on history, which is well illustrated in the following quotation: '**History** is an epic poetically *written* in the *mind* of **God**. It has two main parts: one depicting mankind's egress from its center to its farthest point of displacement; the other, its return. The former is, as it were, history's Iliad; the latter, it's Odyssey. In the one, the direction is centrifugal; in the other, it becomes centripetal. In this way, the great purpose of the phenomenal world reveals itself in history.'" Schelling, *Philosophie und Religion* W 4., 32., quoted in Frederick Copleston, *Istoria filosofiei* VII. *Filosofia germană din secolele XVIII și XIX* (The history of philosophy 7. 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosophy) (Bucharest: Editura All, 2008).

Without the category of nostalgia, a modality of experiencing the void of existence, Romanticism would remain almost impossible to decipher. Nostalgia is equally the living of the emptiness, of the non-being and the retrieval of a firm land.

### **Conclusions**

The double treatment that nostalgia has undergone – medical and metaphysical – divulges much from the modality in which we usually relate to those “intimate-strange” emotions that we experience both as ours and totally different from us.

Such feelings attract and reject, provoke happiness and awe, therefore they fascinate. That is why their understanding varies between the two aforementioned poles: the medical and the metaphysical. In the first approach, the focus will be on the unfamiliar side of the affect. This is perceived as alienation, an estrangement of the sufferer both from his kindred and himself; consequently, it will be considered a disease and treated as such. As we have seen, the physicians of the times hurry to place on different shelves the potions for the multitude of forms of the illness called nostalgia. The same happened in the case of melancholia and akedia. The more intense the fear of one’s own evil, the more persistent the phantasm of its extension. This is the modality in which nostalgia has been perceived by some authors as a “pest”, a pandemic ready to engulf lands and entire peoples.

On the other side, the metaphysical approach acknowledges the very dual nature of nostalgia in which it finds the infinite play of mirrors. In fact, the one who speculates on the metaphysical load of nostalgia relates to its phenomenon as such, as it is delivered, simple, a whole, undivided. Only thus can he recognize that nostalgia names not just one state or another, but our very human condition.