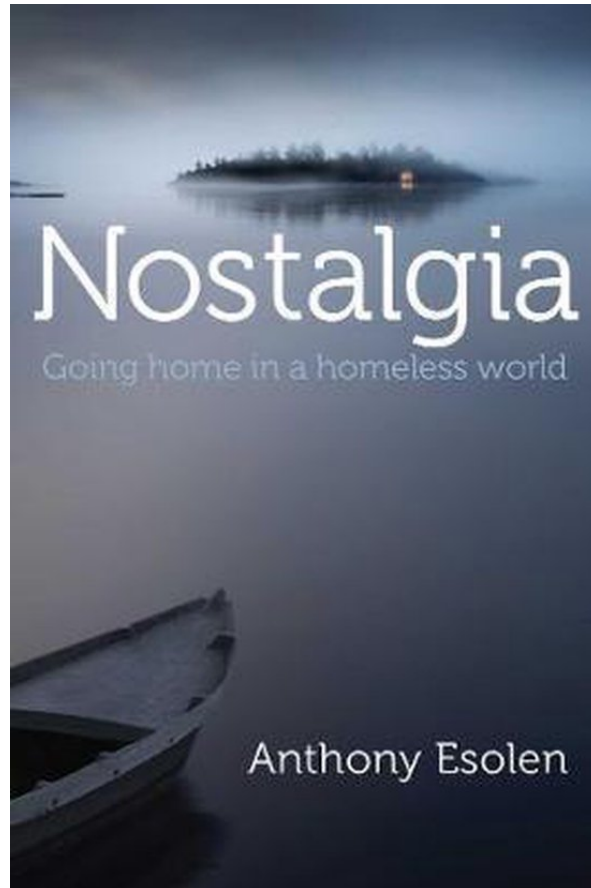


Philosophy Night
"Nostalgia:
Going Home in a Homeless World"
by Anthony Esolen



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St. Stephen Catholic Church

Introduction

The man is sitting on the shore, looking out upon the sea, his arms about his knees. That's what he has done for a long time now, longer than he can remember. He sheds a tear. ...Is it a countryside he longs for? What is special about that place, what makes his heart yearn to see it again? You can't do much with thoroughbred horses there, because the terrain is too rocky. It isn't a center of commerce, where you might meet many strangers traveling to and fro. It's good for wheat and raising pigs (vii...viii).

Would it not be easier to give up hope, to stay here on this island, and let things go as they must go, faraway? The goddess is kind. And she has promised him much more than her loyalty. He will not age, so long as he remains with her. Perpetual youth, utter security, on a beautiful island, with a goddess who loves him as you love a pet...; plenty of good food, wine, and peace (ix).

A flutter of wings and spray--the kingfisher, with a fish in his beak. All is well, except with the man. He suffers a pang of something bitter and sweet, and more bitter than sweet. Yet he does not wish that the feeling would go away. He cherishes it. It is in his language the *algea* for the *noston*: pain for the return, ache for the homecoming (ix).

The Welsh call it *hiraeth*, "longing," and in one of their folk songs they say that nobody can tell what exactly *hiraeth* is, but it brings both great joy and intense pain. ...In German, it is *Heimweh*, "home-woe," or *Sehnsucht*, "seeking to see again" --in English, homesickness. In Italian, you feel *mancanza di casa*, that is, you are "missing the home," literally the "house"; it is like a hole in your heart. The Italians express it by the Greek word that has entered English and is the subject of this book: *nostalgia*, the ache to turn back home (ix...x).

Hatred of the Present

Before I return to Odysseus on the shore, I want to spell out what this book is not. It is not a book of misty-eyed adulation of an imagined time that never existed, or of a past that is not ours, and that we half invent, less out of love for anything real than out of hatred of what is. Is it not nostalgia as despair (x).

John Henry Newman warned against wishing that you were born in another time or place, because the providence of God has willed us to be here, now; these are the neighbors we are to love as ourselves, this is the land which we honor as we honor our mother and father, these are the times that try our souls. That does not mean that we accept everything that happens about us. Newman certainly did not. Nor does it mean that we ignore the wisdom of the past. Newman did not do that, either (xii).

The history of man is a long tale of misery from which we learn nothing except, perhaps, how to avoid doing what people used to do. Only the future, which no one can know, is real to him. For the sake of that idol, all manner of evil and folly can be justified and, in the terrible wars of the twentieth century, has been justified. C.S. Lewis's shrewd demon, *Uncle Screwtape*, reveals the general principle:

The Future is, of all things, the thing least like eternity. It is the most completely temporal part of time—for the Past is frozen and no longer flows, and the Present is all lit up with its eternal rays. Hence the encouragement we have given to all those schemes of thought such as Creative Evolution, Scientific Humanism, or Communism, which fix men's attention on the Future, on the very core of temporality. Hence nearly all vices are rooted in the Future. Gratitude looks to the past and love to the Present; fear, avarice, lust, and ambition look ahead ([qtd. Lewis. *The Screwtape Letters*, p. xv] Esolen xiv).

Men are seldom as bad as the worst of their ideas. ...Witness the common and continual and changeless call for "change" for the sake of change and the contempt for people who dare to ask whether a particular change is actually for the good. What can "change" without a subject or an object possibly mean? Does a man who loves his wife want to change her from year to year? (xv).

What we love we want to endure.

No man ever said, "I used to play ball on a field that was here—I think it was here. There was a stream at its far end, and a ball hit into it on the fly was a home run. I can't imagine where any stream would be now. But I am glad, glad indeed, that it no longer exists. I am glad that there's a tangle of highways here. I am glad that the slender blade of grass is now a mile-broad clover leaf. That's progress." Even if he understands that the highway had to be built, he is not glad of the loss. I have never met a single person who was happy that the school he attended, the church where he worshiped, or the old house where he grew up is now dust. It is natural for man to long for home. It is not natural for him to knock out its posts and feed its beams to termites (xvi).

Why does Odysseus want to go home? ...Odysseus want to go home because it is his home. It is as simple as that.

But we should not let that simplicity deceive us. We must not be reductive. We cannot say that Odysseus will be happy when he has come home. He may be happy, he may not, but happiness is not the point (xvii).

It is the duty of a man to fight for his home, even when the enemy has overrun it like locusts. It is also his duty to love that home and to want to protect it, and if it has been reduced to rubble, it is his duty to build it up again. In doing so he does not pretend that it was perfect. It was not. I will speak in its place about the heaven towards which we turn our gaze. But the reason we love our home is because it simply is.

The Virtue of Piety

It is also natural for man to look to his elders for wisdom. They are the builders of his moral home. You will find this sense of reverence for the old in every culture in the world. ...This piety is at once a deeply personal virtue and a powerful force to bring together the generations, allowing the young to take root in the soil of the old to engraft their experiences onto the young, so that we sense that home is a place where the passing day partakes of long ages past and to come (xxiii).

"Honor thy father and thy mothers," says the commandment, the one that forms a bridge between our duty to God and our duty towards others. It is the only commandment with a promise: "Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord, thy God, giveth thee" [Exodus 20:12]. ...Nothing here of the puerile dismissal of the father, characteristic of our time of spoiled, unhappy, and aimless children old in years and infantile in wisdom (xxiv).

Central to a healthy attitude of reverence is an insight that the self-named progressive is ever in danger of missing, which is that man can no more discover a new moral truth than he can invent a new color of the spectrum. What we can do instead is to develop a moral insight already grasped, or we allow a moral insight to lapse into forgetfulness or confusion, or we are fitful and foolish in our application of the insight; and here the conservative needs to be careful, lest he conserve the outward trappings and lose the soul. But the truths do not change (xxv).

Chapter One: Man in Time

When I do count the clock that tells the time,
And see the brave day sunk in hideous night;
When I behold the violet past prime,
And sable curls all silvered o'er with white;
When lofty trees I see barren of leaves
Which erst from heat did canopy the herd,
And summer's green all girded up in sheaves
Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard,
Then of thy beauty do I question make,
That thou among the wastes of time must go,
Since sweets and beauties do themselves forsake
And die as fast as they see others grow;
And nothing 'gainst Time's scythe can make defense
Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence.

- William Shakespeare, Sonnet 12

Consider the above sonnet by Shakespeare. In his day, a collection of sonnets was not a grab bag of love poems tossed in at random. It was a highly organized and intricate work of art, and each sonnet was a piece of the whole. Shakespeare has thus begun his sequence of sonnets with seventeen poems that all have to do with one way, the most obvious way, to defeat the fell purposes of Time. You have children (3).

So the narrator of the sonnets, whom we should not naively identify with the poet himself, begins by telling the young man whom he addresses that he had better get married soon and have children, because Time, that "delves the parallels in beauty's brow" (Sonnet 60, line 10), will be doing its inevitable work. As spring passes into summer and summer into fall, and as the sheaves are brought

in on a bier, like the body of an old man with a white beard brought to the burial ground, so must we too pass away. The urgency is not for the human race but for the individual person (3).

Again, Shakespeare puts it brilliantly, striking home to the point where childhood greets old age and makes a man feel young again. So says King Polixenes about his nine-year-old son:

If at home, sir,
He's all my exercise, my mirth, my matter;
Now my sworn friend, and now mine enemy;
My parasite, my soldier, statesman, all;
He makes a July's day short as December,
And with his varying childness cures in me
Thoughts that would thicken my blood. (The Winter's Tale, I.ii. 199-205).

We are not talking merely about boosting the old man's metabolism. He has thoughts that would thicken his blood; these thoughts, in our quiet moods, in our old age, must be of the passing of time, the loss of loved ones, the things we have done that we cannot undo, the things we should have done that we left undone, and death. No other creature upon earth experiences anything remotely resembling these thoughts. We are immersed in time, as all things are, but we alone can grasp it as it passes, can stand above it or beside it. We alone are conscious of age and death. We alone can sin and know that we have sinned. We alone can mourn our lost innocence (4). ...It is not then survival that we ask from our children, but hope (4).

From the youthful John Milton...writing "On Shakespeare" about fifteen years after the playwright's death:

What needs my Shakespeare for his honored bones
The labor of an age in piled stones,
Or that his hallowed relics should be hid
Under a star y-pointed pyramid?
Dear son of memory, great heir of Fame,
What needst thou such weak witness of thy name?
Thou in our wonder and astonishment
Hast built thyself a livelong monument.
For whilst to the shame of slow-endeavoring art
Thy easy numbers flow, and that each heart
Hath, from thine leaves of thy unvalued book,
Those Delphic lines with deep impression took
Then thou, our fancy of itself bereaving,
Dost make us marble by too much conceiving,
And so sepulchred in such pomp dost lie,
That kings for such a tomb would wish to die.

Shakespeare, says Milton, needs no pile of slave-dredged bricks to build himself a pyramid pointing to the stars, such as the pharaohs of old Egypt had and such as Horace boasted to have erected for himself. He has a finer monument than that, a livelong monument, one that is alive and always shall be. Milton is not saying in a sentimental way that Shakespeare will live on in his work. The very spirit of Shakespeare, what he thought and felt, what he saw of the truth and what he imparted of that truth in power and beauty, seizes the souls of his readers...(8)

We who read Shakespeare and are stunned by his genius are the sepulchers, alive, in which not we but the poet speaks. Kings build grand tombs for themselves, but Shakespeare needs none. He has us, alive with gratitude and struck still with wonder (8).

(T.S.) Eliot would agree, with a stern proviso: Without tradition, it cannot be. When tradition is scorned, when the love of home has vanished, when man has neither the longing for home nor its brother-longing, the spirit of the pilgrim, Milton's words make no sense. We are the walking dead. We do not grow but shrink into obsolescence and oblivion (8). We are here in the realm of culture (9).

Culture, against Decay

By "culture" I do not mean what people with a lot of money do--going to La Scala to hear Rossini and then boasting about it at a luncheon the next day. I do not mean culture as a commodity or as a sign of social prestige. I certainly do not imply what has happened to "high" culture in our time, in the so-called Regietheater of the opera, turning works of tremendous power into crass political statements laced with the profane and the obscene (9).

Vocabulary:

Regietheater is the modern practice of allowing a director freedom in devising the way a given opera or play is staged so that the creator's original, specific intentions or stage directions can be changed, together with major elements of geographical location, chronological situation, casting and plot. Typically such changes may be made to point a particular political point or modern parallels which may be remote from traditional interpretations. Examples found in Regietheater productions may include some or all of the following:

- Relocating the story from the original location to a more modern period
- Modifications to the story from the original script
- Interpretative elements stressing the role of race/gender/class-based oppression are emphasized.

[Wikipedia]

The word suggests the inner reality. It culture because a farmer ([Latin agricola](#)) has tilled ([Latin cultivare](#)) the soil. Not with a machine for razing everything in sight; the true tiller of the soil has nothing in common with Mao. You must be careful of the soil, and the seeds you plant now may come to full fruit long after you have passed away. A man gathers the apples from a tree planted by his grandfather, and grafts into hardy stock a slip of a peach tree in the hope, not the optimism, that his children and his children's children will reap the rewards (9).

We know of no human society, except perhaps our own, without culture so defined. Every people we know of, except perhaps ourselves, has sung the songs its fathers and mothers sang and celebrated the holy days and prayed the prayers and prepared the food and carved the skillelaghs and done the thousand other things that are the more precious to a people because it knows, in its heart, its mind, and its very fingers, that they have been done just so, and will continue to be done (10).

Man without culture is an inert thing, acted upon by the psychological manipulators of mass education, mass politics, mass marketing, mass entertainment. It makes no difference that those in apparent control of these mass phenomena are themselves carried along by their swell and flow. If anything, it makes matters worse. George Orwell's linguist in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Syme, knew all about the ideological aim of Newspeak and explained it to Winston Smith with the chilling enthusiasm of a destroyer. A few weeks later, Syme was no more to be seen. Evil eats its own (12).

It Is Not Good for the Man to Be Alone

I have said that culture is one of the means by which man makes his dwelling in time and beyond time, and that it therefore requires generosity and gratitude; I must accept with thanks what I have been given and preserve all that is good in it, which will be great indeed, and seek to measure my works by its high standard and pass it on to my children with love. The iconoclast--the icon smasher--is not generally a lover of mankind. Here let me add something that is hard to see when we are thinking only of selves and their survival. It is that the longing to go home, to a real culture, is also a longing not to be alone anymore. They who are cut adrift in time are like survivors of a shipwreck, each clinging to his own spar or beam. They who are at home in culture dwell in something that spans the generations and renews them, throwing bridges across the divides of class and sex and age. Think of a black man and a white man who both love the poetry of John Keats, and what a profoundly beautiful thing they share in the depths of the souls. At the best of times the rich man and the poor man do not share enough. In our time, the rich man and the other rich man share almost nothing (13).

When Jesus and His apostles ate the Passover supper on the night before He died, they said the prayers their forefathers had said and sang the songs, and so when Jesus Himself commanded remembrance of that moment, He was doing far more than asking the apostles to think of Him when they were in their cups. He was instituting a new rite of remembrance, a new re-enactment of the liberating magnalia Dei, those past and that which was soon to come, His sacrificial death upon the Cross, as "the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of thw world" (John 1:29). That is why Saint Paul insists upon a faithful tradition, a handing on, from one believer to the next, from one generation to the next, of what Jesus did before His own blood would be spattered on the posts and lintels of a world in bondage to sin and death:

For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread: And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me. After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as

ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come. ([1 Corinthians 11:23-26] qtd in Esolen, p. 17)

This is more than habit or custom. Dogs have habits. People have plenty of customs which are little more than commonplace ways of greeting someone or saying goodbye. This is tradition in the strict sense: the bequeathing of a heritage. It is also more than that. It is a grasping of time past, time present, and the time to come, in communion with your fellow worshipers in the church where you are kneeling, and before all the altars of the world, at all times, so long as time shall be (17).

Nothing in the experience of secular man is like it. I state the obvious. When does secular man read and hear words spoken two thousand years ago, not as curiosities but as urgent revelations and warnings and commands and consolations, as still present, as if spoken to him and to his fellows face to face, words that interpret for him the whole journey of his life and the journey of the life of mankind from Adam to the men of the last day? ...Secular man, having lost the dimension of the eternal, must be swept along the rapids and eddies of time; he has no stay against them. He is "lost in the cosmos," as Walker Percy says. He builds houses in time but no home, either in eternity or in the here and now (18).

Chapter Three: Lost Among the Ruins

Advertisements for the Homeless

I once angered a number of students at the university where I taught by suggesting that "multiculturalism" is a sham. There is nothing "multi" about its uniform politics, I said, and it is too rootless and shallow to be a culture. When I met with some of them, I showed them Millet's *Angelus* (the painting of the man and the woman in the field with the abbey tower in the back ground and the man and woman stopping their work to pray). They grew uneasy. They did not want to concede that we were looking at what was essentially cultural. That was because they knew in their hearts that what I said about contemporary man is true: he has no home. One of them complained that I was imposing my view of culture upon them, but he had no reply when I said that my description fits every known culture until what, for want of a more accurate term, we call our own. ...Still another, a native speaker of English but of Hispanic ethnicity, grew petulant and said that if she had no culture, it was because other, Europeans, had robbed her and her people of it. None had any response to the point at hand, which was that the purported robbers or the descendants of the robbers, the descendants of Europeans on our campus, had no culture either, no home (61).

Those students in my office had youth's natural desire to fight. But they had nothing clear for which to fight, no clear object of devotion. So their fight was endued with bitterness and madness (63).

I might have offended them worse had I suggested that there was a home for them, if they would rise up from the unsatisfying task of feeding husks to political swine. Let me present that home...In the decades following the Civil War, Helen Hunt Jackson, a friend of Harriet Beecher Stowe and a liberal

at a time when "liberal" did not imply a complete political program to banish all liberty from human life except for the sexual, went west to examine the plight of other peoples whom the United States government had treated badly. These were the Indians. She began with the California missions, writing a series of long articles for several consecutive issues of *The Century Magazine*, in which she described the death of the great and indefatigable missionary Father Junipero Serra. ...When the bell tolled his death...the people thronged the church, weeping and lamenting, and "it was with great difficulty that the soldiers could keep them from tearing Father Juniper's habit piecemeal from his body, so ardent was their desire to possess some relic of him" Not without justification did the Indians want such memorials: "He loved them, and yearned over them as brands to be snatched from the burning. He had baptized over a thousand of them with his own hands; his whole life he spent for them, and was ready at any moment to lay it down for them if that would have benefited them more."

Lest we think that Mrs. Jackson is indulging in prettiness, she is careful to present for us items from the friars' well-kept records regarding what was accomplished and produced at the missions in California, extending from San Diego to San Francisco. We must consider the wide variety of goods and trades the friars brought to the Indians, whose life in those dry lands had been ever marked by poverty, famine, and the threat of violence from stronger tribes. The Indians for the first time cultivated the vine and the olive. They planted orchards of apples, pomegranates, and oranges. They learned the arts of foundry and the mill. They dug wells. They raised cattle and sheep. They grew corn and traded the surplus for goods from abroad. They built schools. They learned to play musical instruments.

The picture of life in one of these missions during their period of prosperity is unique and attractive. The whole place was a hive of industry: trades plying indoors and outdoors; tillers, herders, vintagers by hundreds, going to and fro; children in schools; women spinning; bands of young men playing on musical instruments; music, the scores of which, in many instances, they had themselves written out; at evening, all sorts of games of running, leaping, dancing, and ball-throwing, and the picturesque ceremonies of a religion which has always been wise in availing itself of beautiful agencies in color, form, and harmony ([June Hunt Jackson, *The Century Illustrated Magazine*. June 1883.] qtd in Esolen, pg. 66)

What happened to these homes? Governments happened to them, first the Mexican, ever levying good and moneys from these successful enterprises, and the, after the Mexican War, the regional government of California, followed by the United States. The missions were sacked. Lands to which the Indians had a claim extending back two or three generations were sold to American speculators amid confusion as to the specifics of titles, sometimes justified confusion and sometimes bad faith (66).

The question we face is not what people in the past, who were on the whole no better or worse by nature than we are now, should have done. The question is what we are to do now, and why. Where do we go?

People--there is such a thing as home. Time to rise up, and take a step in its direction (67).

Chapter Eight: O Grave, Where Is Thy Victory?

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and he is the still center of all that turns in heaven and on earth. The pilgrimage is not an escape from but a plunge into the fullness of life, for Christ rose not as a specter or a disembodied soul but in the flesh. The bodily resurrection was the single doctrine of Christianity least likely to recommend itself to the philosophers of the time, as Christ's assertion that his kingdom "was not of this world" was least likely to recommend itself to the Jewish patriots of the time. But upon that doctrine, upon man's adoration of the God who humbled himself to take on human flesh and exalted that flesh eternally, is built all that in Christian culture and civilization is good and true and beautiful... (200).

The pilgrim alone knows that his good and humble home perched on a hillside is an allegory of heaven, and not so by the arbitrary choice of the allegorist, but by its essence and our essence, as made by the God who speaks to us through those essences. In the heart and mind of the pilgrim, everything is full to bursting with the dangerous and dashing bravura of the Maker... (201).

The most common product in a world that has forgotten the pilgrimage, that worships a "progress" it defines in worldly terms if it defines it at all, is garbage: things made to become garbage and to be cast away as garbage. Old books are cast off because no one reads them because they are old. Old people are cast off because no one heeds them because they are old. Children who are not wanted—as if the most precious gift from the hand of God were nothing but scraps of costume jewelry—are cast off. History is bunk, as Henry Ford said. Garbage—mountains of it. I have found books in our town's garbage station that should be in a library, and some of them used to be in the library, until they were cast aside, unread, for garbage (201).

Here is the paradox. They who long for heaven cherish the home. They who are on the way look with kindly favor and forgiveness upon the homely places along that way where they have taken nourishment and lived and loved and suffered and died. They who adore progress and look for perfection on earth can at best tolerate those places. At worst, they despise them and want to clear them away because they speak of human folly, imperfection, and transience (201).

They who worship progress pulverize. No place speaks to them, because there is no allegory and no holy God made manifest by the allegory; their ears are clogged with the wax of the hour. Is it so surprising, then, that the sons of St. Benedict would at once devote their lives to prayer and to make and love places where there had been but barrens and wilderness before? The pilgrim understands the vow of stability; the restless wanderer hardly attains a place but he then wants to leave it (202).

Pilgrim, Come Home

I return now to Odysseus. He has arrived in Ithaca, tested the intelligence and courage of his son and the loyalty of his wife, slaughtered the one hundred and eight suitors who had been devouring his estate, cleansed the great hall with fire, and gone finally to reveal himself to his wife, Penelope. ...

What will happen then, we do not know, nor does it matter. Odysseus, the man of many dodges, is home, and there is once again a real home for him and his family and their faithful servants to dwell in.

If we feel that there is something missing at the end of the Odyssey, it is because we are not ancient Greeks listening to the rhapsode as he sings the immemorial song. Our imaginations, whether we admit it or not, have been formed by the Scriptures and the Christian hope. It seems as if Odysseus has stopped short and as if his home were less than the home for which we long (212).

Part of that is because the home is a spiritual place, which we do not fit for our tastes; we must instead be made fit for it (212).

I long on earth for a return to the way of life that is indeed a way. The trumpet sounds, and the sleepers wake. Not one good thing we have known in this world will be lost, but all flesh will be transformed, says Saint Paul, in the twinkling of an eye, the twinkle that is like a merry glint of love (217).

And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new (Rev. 21:5).

Come, let us be done with the progress of death. Let us resume the pilgrimage (218).