

On Home

By John Berger

“Philosophy is really homesickness, it is the urge to be at home everywhere.”—Novalis

1 The transition from a nomadic life to a settled one is said to mark the beginning of what was later called civilization. Soon all those who survived outside the city began to be considered uncivilized. But that is another story—to be told in the hills near the wolves.

2 Perhaps during the last century and a half an equally important transformation has taken place. Never before our time have so many people been uprooted. Emigration, forced or chosen, across national frontiers or from village to metropolis, is the quintessential experience of our time. That industrialization and capitalism would require such a transport of men on an unprecedented scale and with a new kind of violence was already prophesied by the opening of the slave trade in the sixteenth century. The Western Front in the First World War with its conscripted massed armies was a later confirmation of the same practice of tearing up, assembling, transporting, and concentrating in a “no-man’s land.” Later, concentration camps, across the world, followed the logic of the same continuous practice.

3 All the modern historians from Marx to Spengler have identified the contemporary phenomenon of emigration. Why add more words? To whisper for that which has been lost. Not out of nostalgia, but because it is on the site of loss that hopes are born.

4 The term *home* (Old Norse *Heimer*, High German *heim*, Greek *oikos*, meaning “village”) has, since a long time, been taken over by two kinds of moralists, both dear to those who wield power. The notion of *home* became the keystone for a code of domestic morality, safeguarding the property (which included the women) of the family. Simultaneously the notion of *homeland* supplied a first article of faith for patriotism, persuading men to die in wars which often served no other interest except that of a minority of their ruling class. Both usages have hidden the original meaning.

5 Originally home meant the center of the world—not in a geographical, but in an ontological sense. Mircea Eliade has demonstrated how home was the place from which the world could be *founded*. A home was established, as he says, “at the heart of the real.” In traditional societies, everything that made sense of the world was real; the surrounding chaos existed and was threatening, but it was threatening because it was *unreal*. Without a home at the center of the real, one was not only shelterless, but also lost in nonbeing, in unreality. Without a home everything was fragmentation.

6 Home was the center of the world because it was the place where a vertical line crossed with a horizontal one. The vertical line was a path leading upwards to the sky and downwards to the underworld. The horizontal line represented the traffic of the world, all the possible roads leading across the earth to other places. Thus, at

home, one was nearest to the gods in the sky and to the dead in the underworld. This nearness promised access to both. And at the same time, one was at the starting point and, hopefully, the returning point of all terrestrial journeys.

7 The crossing of the two lines, the reassurance their intersection promises, was probably already there, in embryo, in the thinking and beliefs of nomadic people, but they carried the vertical line with them, as they might carry a tent pole. Perhaps at the end of this century of unprecedented transportation, vestiges of the reassurance still remain in the unarticulated feelings of many millions of displaced people.

8 Emigration does not only involve leaving behind, crossing water, living amongst strangers, but also, undoing the very meaning of the world and—at its most extreme—abandoning oneself to the unreal which is the absurd.

9 Emigration, when it is not enforced at gunpoint, may of course be prompted by hope as well as desperation. For example, to the peasant son the father's traditional authority may seem more oppressively absurd than any chaos. The poverty of the village may appear more absurd than the crimes of the metropolis. To live and die amongst foreigners may seem less absurd than to live persecuted or tortured by one's fellow countrymen. All this can be true. But to emigrate is always to dismantle the center of the world, and so to move into a lost, disoriented one of fragments.