

## October Fifth All Year Long

The word *nostalgie* was coined in 1668 by the Alsatian physician Johannes Hofer. Combining the Greek *nostros* for “homecoming” and *algos* for “pain, grief, and distress” he used the term to describe the disease of “extreme homesickness.” At the time, this was ill stuff. It could jaundice the soul, blind the spirit, and wither one to dust if left undiagnosed. Doctors shuddered less when encountering *ennui* because at least the equally arresting condition had a way of mutating here and there into eureka snaps. They thought of it as *nostalgie*'s sister sickness because at the critical stage of each disease the stricken appeared the same. At said stage the ailing would stare transfixed on a single dot on a wall for weeks. It was as if the sufferer of *ennui* bored to death by life kept whittling away substance he couldn't find interest in until he'd narrowed it all down to one single dot on the wall and in the fortunate cases, the force inside this dot propelled by the ebb and flow of the cosmos would then reverse its own trajectory into a Big Bang sort of effect releasing the ailed into a furious sweat of ideas. The sufferer of *nostalgie* however had no similar simple reactionary hope. He would stare at this same dot because it was the end result of his attempt to whittle back to the point he came from unable to ever return. He got stuck on a line and to turn him around would be to place him back in the original direction he was running away from: awareness of the dot at the opposite end of that line.

The doctors were stuck too. No honest treatment was available for the disease. In Alsace- Lorraine going home has never been quite so easy. You could rarely just send the sick home to start afresh. Home was often in someone else's hands. The first recorded history of the region has the Celts fighting vertical wars with the Romans for control of the salt mines, and then some sort of horizontal Franco-Germanic conflict has kept the area inflamed to the present. It's been pummeled from every angle. Who knew what language would be spoken in the home you grew up in, assuming your home was even still standing.

It was this same displacement however that inadvertently produced the cure. The truth is Hofer invented the word, but not the condition. The condition was already well researched and known in German as *heimweh*. Johannes Hofer knew it well. Being Alsatian, he spoke both languages and studied on both sides of the Rhine. In 1668 most of Alsace was in the hands of France though, capitulated by the Hapsburgs in the Treaty of Westphalia a few decades earlier. The Hapsburgs would then lose the rest to Louis the XIV within the next few decades therein making French that centuries temporarily imposed tongue and so whether it was by a Franco royal edict or personal preference history appropriately does not document, but Johannes Hofer inventing a word where a word already existed stumbled him into the recipe for vaccinations one hundred years before the first vaccine was accredited in use for fighting smallpox. In other words, he discovered that the antidote to the virus *is always* the virus. By fighting *heimweh* with *nostalgie* Hofer was able to spin the victim's maligned existential lines into whirlwindic circles that vacillated the victims between languages losing track of who's on first, what's on second, and sent them out of the infirmary on the long slow skip home.

“Wait doctor, so is it *heimweh* or *nostalgie* I suffer from?”

“Well, you see, in a word both...it was *heimweh*, it is currently *nostalgie*, and if I have my way you may very soon carry with you something similar called *nostalgie*. Whatever word we chose to call it, this condition which ponders the past you will see exists in all tenses. It is always around. However, it is this inescapability of *nostalgie* that frees us. May I offer you October fifth as proof? This day is just deep enough into Fall to begin feeling nostalgic for past summer's follies while simultaneously near enough to the holiday season you look forward to nostalgically as a summation of all the past holidays you

enjoyed. On October fifth both the past and future are nostalgic. Either direction you turn you see the past. This is an impossible equation. All things lead backwards? If this is the case then we must have mistaken what backwards truly is. Backwards must be forwards as well. On October fifth therefore you move forward with no other direction to move. It is for this reason you can not recall a single memory from October fifth. You were moving forward, free of memory. You don't remember it, but you were happy then. The day is so liberated from memory you are not even sure if it is October fifth precisely you fail to remember. It may have been the fourth, sixth, seventh, or eighth. Seeing as you can't remember the day, you also can't recall the date. Yes, you were happy then because you were heading home as you are now.

"Patient, allow me to extrapolate further. You must also understand that to bring you this word for your condition I had to travel to Greece to seek the words the ancient's would have used to secure firm footing for my new word. With the imperial forces in this region toppled so frequently I needed a word that would weather any crown. However, from the Alsace there are two routes to go, the northern and the southern routes. I decided to try them both. The south on my way there, the north on my way back. As I passed through Italy on my southern route I heard the first part of this word *nos* which they used to mean "our." On my return voyage through the northern route I passed through the Schwarz Wald where I heard the second part of this word *tal* which they used to mean "valley." This suffix "gie" was used in some way in every language I encountered to mean just about anything so let's call this tail to our word "everything." I realized by taking this circular trip to and from my destination I was in possession of a word with the same meaning as the ancient's but with a different etymology entirely! In the circular etymology it translates quite literally to 'Our Valley of Everything.' You see, we all suffer from nostalgia to a larger or lesser degree. We all carry it with us. It is ours. It is therefore not just your disease. We all share it and if we all share it it can't quite be considered a disease at all then, can it? Please don't burden yourself with the weight of the entire load. It is there with or without your extra burden."

And so through the wordplay of Johannes Hofer the pain was imparted into all of us and *nostalgie* mellowed into the softer *nostalgia* and it ceased tormenting us as a disease. It may continue to exist as a valley of sorts, but if we recognize it as the valley doesn't that in the very least say something of our position on the hill? Nostalgia exists like any element does. It is not a force to eradicate. It is yet another element to monitor and ride as it paints the scene. Luckily it's also a beautiful word and just to say it keeps its hazards in check. *Nostalgia*.

Oh it's a great word, but our northern fear of stagnation and lack of advancement has created an unbalanced cultural focus on all things future tense that clouds our ability to appreciate it. It's such an unbalanced focus it borders on a fear of retrospection in the event that it could suck you into some reminiscent unproductive bog becoming a disease yet again. It's not necessarily a negative word though or even a depressive one. It's a word that demands a certain comprehensive breath to say, true, but any word that pretty should. Perhaps we get nervous around it because our northern contribution to the word, the valley, the *tal*, is the heavy side.

Fortunately, the first part of the word, the collective part, the uplifting part, the *nos* came from Hofer's southern trek. He found that along the Mediterranean things operated differently with the northern and southern uses of nostalgia existing in concentric circles overlapping only in the 'comprehensive breath' quadrant. They're almost different words entirely. The rest of the free space in the southern pie leans towards things like progress, the timeless wisdom of masonry, and communion in fact. He believed this

Mediterranean soul surrounded by ruins is raised on his imponderable equation: when every direction leads to the past you find yourself heading towards the future back to home. They don't need to learn it. It's in them. The ruins have stood millennia as Vespas, theocratic campaigns, and souvenir crazed tourists whipped within and without. They've been bombed, burned, pardoned, and recently preserved. These people aren't living in the past by carrying it with them, they're celebrating the story of past, present, and future as it happens at once in all directions.

It is our northern inability to wrap our heads completely around this notion that not only impedes our ability to digest and enjoy the ruins as our own ruins but also impedes our ability to appreciate the gaudiness of the modern Mediterranean art being thrown up in seeming contrast around them today. We vacation to Rome to ponder both how a modern city grew around ruins without knocking them down and how the intellect of Michelangelo could produce something as garish as the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. We can dig into the gaudiness through irony, but to discuss irony is to discuss a different disease altogether. There is another purer way to value gaudiness. Michelangelo understood it. Mediterranean art is meant to ripen. Ripen over centuries with the salt from the sea air, the paws of the patrons, the bullet holes from wars we can't too soon forget. The colors are meant to be too brash, the columns are meant to be overly ornate, the grotesques are not all meant to remain. In Mediterranean art what may first appear as overdone is in fact a great understanding of humility. The artist knows that though he is a conduit for a Muse there is a man inbetween to contend with. A flawed man. A man who can't possibly get it right. Therefore the Mediterranean artist overdoes it to allow the immaculate visions of history and the elements remedy his faults.

Interestingly, the Romans never specified which Muse exactly was the Muse of Art. Johannes Vermeer believed Clio, the Muse of History, lime lighted as the Muse of Art. Vermeer knew that now is the time to see the Parthenon, for example. It's ripened with history. It may have peaked in the past century, but it was certainly too much to look at when Iktinos completed it 2500 years ago. History has finally completed the job. It took away what wasn't meant to stay. I think Vermeer would also agree that Venice's Basilica de San Marco awaits some more. Clio's not yet done. She may be waiting for Venice to sink, when the only way to visit the church is by boat and who wouldn't concur with her that that would perfect the project.

William Hogarth believed Thalia, the Muse of Comedy, masqueraded as the Muse of Art. Yes, he was on to something too. Moving west across the Mediterranean to Barcelona we face a metaphor to blunt to admit: Antoni Gaudi is both the architect and archetype of gaudy. Painfully so. He's bedazzled Barcelona with eyesores Catalans have no choice but to esteem. It would be too much to expect them to humble into a confession that their number one attraction, La Sagrada Familia, is hideous -- Oh there I go with my northern mind already forgetting why Hogarth invoked Thalia! Yes yes, the Barcelonans are laughing at me! Gaudi's creations are modern history! They have yet to ripen with us and the elements! In due time they will mute, soften, breathe and be breathed upon, occupy a nook in "Our Valley of Everything," and our collective narcissism will both take credit for and adore them as they will be worthy of adoration.

I talk this talk though fellow New Worlders further West and centuries younger than perhaps the spirit of any New Worlder is qualified to do. As I pause for a minute to reflect on my own city I realize how hard pressed you'd be to find a single New Yorker not ready to tear down Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim and start anew. We don't just hate seeing it, we think it's dumb. But am I trying to tell myself that in due time this building will make sense? It is already starting to peel and they haven't done a renovation on the

abomination in years. Are the curators already on my nostalgic tip? No, I don't buy it. Just because things go up doesn't mean they should stay up. The Guggenheim should come down and I promise my opinion does not stem from a rash American *deus et machina machismo*. It just doesn't work. It won't ripen. We're gradually figuring out how to read these things. Beginning with the transference of the banners of modernity to the newer and taller skylines of Asia and then solidified by the bombing of the Towers, the spirit of New Yorkers is changing. We're almost part of the Old World. We're gaining nostalgic perspective. Even New Jersey is producing a successful organic vineyard. We're plowing ahead with our ability to accept the past in the present while attempting to carry with us our own past of a complete irreverence for it. This is obviously no easy task.

Thalia's been our Muse since conception. We've been tearing mansions down to build skyscrapers in their stead. We've been consuming everything that floats ashore and claiming it as our own creation. We've proudly sold shirts proclaiming things like "Welcome to New York, Now Duck Mother Fucker." We've been laughing at ourselves. That's not our city anymore though, and yet we're cautious to welcome Clio in as our new Muse. These are tricky times.

This flux of Muses has left us debating helter skelter things like whether to or not to tear down CBGB's. The lease is up and the new one's got an extra zero. In the last century this debate would have never even existed. Goodbye Cotton Club. So long Copacabana. We awaited the next step. Goodbye Filmore East. Goodbye Cat Club. Couldn't wait to see what came next. The clubs in West Chelsea have changed names and hands a hundred times. The Palladium became an NYU dorm. Christ! Can you imagine if they all still stood? How old would that make us? CBGB's, though once seminal, still stands and hasn't supported a non-referential act in over a decade. Last call to define the genre boundaries of the bands that play its stage closed at a hardcore matinee in 1988. Of course, newness isn't an essential element of goodness, but packaging redundancy and selling it as newness is reason enough to support that new lease. Yes, love our northern minds for studying the ways of the south, the *nos*, by trying to officially make CB's "ours", but pity us for being stuck in the classroom still unable to get down to the curb. Eager to get the *nos* we've tried to lose the *tal*. You need them both to form the word and there are other ways to fill the valley than leaving all the ruins up. The air holds memories as well as the soil does. If we buried CBGB's in the soil of the Fresh Kills landfill rest assured the ocean air would breeze across Staten Island as it does now and bring CB's and all its original smells back to us everyday. CBGB's is everybody's now. Time to offer her up.

So aged Jersey rocker Little Stevie has been spearheading the movement to preserve it with the inane claim that "it's the last rock and roll club in the universe." Good god how my heart aches for all the good people behind La Sala Rosa in Montreal, The Earl in Atlanta, Kafe Kult in Munich, Mono in Glasgow, The Replay Lounge in Lawrence, Kansas and the myriad other crusaders across the globe losing money dealing with the petty idiosyncrasies of musicians because they believe in it when they have the nagging option all along of just turning on the jukebox and selling booze. Muddy Waters is spinning in his grave embarrassed by the hacks that consider themselves his offspring. He was tearing walls down, rockers, not putting them up. Where was Little Stevie in 1971 when Caetano Veloso released the song "Nostalgia (That's What Rock and Roll Is All About)"? Where was Little Stevie when Tim Yohannon led a parade of casket bearers carrying effigies of hippies down Haight Street proclaiming the Death of Flower Power in 1967? And could Little Stevie have possibly made it through school without reading Leo

Tolstoy's "The Kreutzer Sonata" wherein the revolutionary grip of music gets people fi-zz-ucked against their greater will? Tolstoy managed to never use the words "rock and roll."

Yes, it is time to close CBGB's, but more importantly we should applaud ourselves for at least debating it. In debating it we've created something new; a debate where none would have existed in the past. And seeing as this debate truly is something new I propose we offer up this newness as our appropriate eulogy to the newness CB's once spawned. We're looking back to our musical past for advice and it tells us to start a revolution towards the future, but to tear the building down is contrary to our architectural past which is on one hand ashamed we tore down masterpieces like Penn Station but proud we're rebuilding it in the future according to plans similar to those of the past. In other words, it is October fifth or thereabouts today and I expect it to remain this way all year long. Savor this transference of Muses on our trip home because if things work out we won't remember it when we arrive.

Chris Leo