

Ina Bergmann / Stefan Hippler (eds.)

# Cultures of Solitude

Loneliness – Limitation – Liberation



PETER LANG  
EDITION

Ina Bergmann / Stefan Hippler (eds.)

## Cultures of Solitude

This collection of essays comprises cultural analyses of practices of eremitism and reclusiveness in the USA, which are inseparably linked to the American ideals of individualism and freedom. Covering a time frame from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century, the essays study cultural products such as novels, poems, plays, songs, paintings, television shows, films, and social media, which represent the costs and benefits of deliberate withdrawal and involuntary isolation from society. Thus, this book offers valuable contributions to contemporary cultural discourses on privacy, surveillance, new

technology, pathology, anti-consumerism, simplification, and environmentalism. Solitaries can be read as trailblazers for an alternative future or as symptoms of a pathological society.

### The Editors

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December 2016

Ina Bergmann and Stefan Hippler



# **I Solitude and American Studies**



Ina Bergmann

# Cultures of Solitude: Reflections on Loneliness, Limitation, and Liberation in the US

**Abstract:** These introductory remarks to the essay collection reflect on loneliness, limitation, and liberation in American culture. They focus on the particular relevance of the diverse practices of solitude and their creative reverberations in the US, while also highlighting the more universal conditions and implications of seclusion and isolation.

## 1. Solitude, Individualism, and Freedom

Solitude, “the quality or state of being alone or remote from society” (“Solitude”), is an international and transhistorical phenomenon. Indeed, it is an anthropological constant which has continually prompted popular and artistic treatment as well as scholarly scrutiny.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the publication in hand explores specifically American cultures of solitude and their representations in cultural products.

Cultures of solitude in the US are of particular interest because solitude is directly related to concepts of individual independence and liberty which are venerable American ideals. “The Declaration of Independence” states this most prominently in its well-known second sentence. An individualist understanding of freedom is at the core of US national history and identity (Smallwood 111). Personal freedom was the initial motivation for many early settlers to come to the New World. Later, individualism and freedom motivated westward expansion and turned out to be the underlying features of the frontier spirit, as pointed out by Frederick Jackson Turner. Over the course of American history, freedom was sought in numerous arenas such as religious freedom, economic independence, political autonomy, female emancipation, the abolition of slavery, and the absence of social restrictions, among many others. Johann Georg Zimmermann states in his seminal work *Solitude Considered with Respect to Its Influence Upon the Mind and the Heart* (*Über die Einsamkeit*, 1783–85) that “[I]berty, true liberty, is no where [sic] so easily found as in a distant retirement from the tumults of men” (302). Reclusiveness and eremitism can be understood as extreme manifestations of the ideals of liberty and individualism, which are a significant, if not the second most important American cultural motif, besides, and closely linked with the theme of the settlement, colonization, and reclamation of the New World. Cultural representations of hermits and recluses, whether fictional or historical, abound in American cultural history. Media depicting solitaries range widely in time,

from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century, and in genre, from broadsides to novels, from poems to plays, from biographies to blogs, from songs to musicals, from ballet to opera, from engravings to paintings, from documentaries to TV shows, and from computer games to social network sites.

## 2. Spaces, Places, and Terms

The spaces and places of solitude are just as diverse as the reasons for eremitism. Hermits find freedom in living alone in the wilderness. They spend their lives isolated in nature. Urban recluses live outside society without spatially retreating from the city. Instead, they withdraw into the privacy of their room or house. The space the solitary inhabits is always neither here nor there, secluded from civilization, yet still a part of it, or within nature, yet apart from it. In “Of Other Spaces” (1986), Michel Foucault defines such spaces, set off from the everyday world, as heterotopias.

Both types are secularized versions of early religious solitaries. The original hermits were the Desert Fathers and Mothers, Christian hermits who removed to the deserts of Egypt and Palestine from the third century onwards (Dyas, Ellis, and Hutchinson 208; Jones, *Hermits*). The European anchorites of the Middle Ages, who followed their example, were their earliest urban equivalents (Kingsley 329; Mulder-Bakker). They are also identified as “town hermits” (Clay 66) or “recluses” (Licence 11). They lived their lives in solitude and prayer in a cell attached to a church (Dyas, Ellis, and Hutchinson 207). Originally, the terms ‘monk’ from the Ancient Greek *μόνος* denoting ‘alone,’ ‘anchorite’ from *ἀναχωρέω* ‘to withdraw, to retire,’ and ‘hermit’ from *ἐρημία* ‘a wilderness, a desert’ were used interchangeably (McAvoy, *Medieval* 2). Over the course of the Middle Ages, however, the words came to designate distinct vocations (Jones, *Hermits*). A ‘monk’ is therefore defined as a member of a male religious society, an ‘anchorite’ or ‘ anchoress’ is a person who spends his or her life in an ‘anchorhold,’ and a ‘hermit’ is a person who has retired from society to lead a (spiritual) life in solitude (Kingsley 14). Unlike anchorites, hermits were not confined to one place (Dyas, Ellis, and Hutchinson 208). They found equivalents of the Eastern desert in the wildernesses of the West (Jones, “Hermits” 5).

In the American context, the idea of the hut in the wilderness is deeply embedded in culture. Abraham Lincoln most famously exchanged a log cabin for the White House. And Henry David Thoreau’s hut at Walden Pond, where he famously wrote *Walden* (1854), an account of his retreat to nature, is now regarded as the birthplace of the American conservation movement. The modern second home in the countryside mimicks this apogee of nature dwelling and gestures towards the



ideal of simple life, even if it is equipped with central heating and air conditioning (G. Campbell 50–51). During the late nineteenth century, the US was marked by increasing urbanization due to industrialization and population growth through immigration. While most people were cramped in tenements, a few well-off individuals retreated to urban mansions and lived their lives in isolation. Prominent early examples of urban reclusiveness are Ida Mayfield (1838–1932) and Huguette Clark (1906–2011). But ultimately, it is probably only of minor importance whether the solitaries dwell in a town or in the country. Crucial is not “the fact of space,” but the “sort of space” that the solitary inhabits, “a space in which time and place fall away, a space of awakening” (Dumm, “Thoreau’s” 334).

Solitude manifests itself in a wide variety of forms. Many terms such as ‘isolation,’ ‘seclusion,’ ‘aloneness,’ ‘privacy,’ ‘secludedness,’ ‘separateness,’ and ‘solitariness’ are generally understood as synonyms of ‘solitude.’ But all of them actually further define the respective state of solitude. Related words such as ‘loneliness,’ ‘lonesomeness,’ ‘confinement,’ ‘incarceration,’ ‘retirement,’ and ‘withdrawal’ additionally differentiate the quality of being alone (“Solitude”). The solitary may be deliberately seeking out a retreat or s/he may be forced into isolation. The hermit may temporarily or definitely withdraw from society. The loner may occasionally mix with other people or completely avoid human contact. The recluse may rejoice in seclusion or feel alienated and lonely. Solitude comes at a cost, but it also has its benefits. It entails limitation as well as liberation, as the title of this collection asserts.

### 3. Limitation and Liberation

While habitually perceived as exile or enclosure, reclusiveness and eremitism often manifest themselves as a form of liberation, independent of the topographies of isolation, the politics of solitude, and the ideologies of privacy involved. Indeed, the element of liberation can be traced back to the very origins of the term ‘recluse.’ In classical Latin, *recludere* denoted ‘to un-close,’ ‘to disclose,’ or even ‘to reveal.’ Although in late Latin it came to mean ‘to shut off,’ ‘to close,’ or ‘to enclose,’ it retained its active charge: a believer opted for seclusion, thus freeing her- or himself from a restrictive environment (Licence 11; Mulder-Bakker 6). Thoreau, the epitome of the American solitary, explains his motivation for withdrawal: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately” (72). The Latin *deliberare* means ‘consider carefully, consult,’ literally ‘weigh well.’ But etymology also hints at the fact that *liberare*, from *librare* meaning ‘to balance, make level,’ may have been altered by the influence of *liberare* ‘to free, liberate’ (Harper). The conscious decision implies the privilege of freedom of choice. Solitude offers freedom from social constraints and opens up spaces for reflection and self-encounter. Spending

time alone can be beneficial and it is essential to productivity and creativity (Long and Averill; Storr). This liberating quality of solitude has been described as “the power of lonely” (Neyfakh).

At the same time, eremitism and reclusiveness also entail confinement and limitation. The liberating effects are quite often the result of an initial situation of withdrawal without alternative. Ageing, old age, and resulting pathologies may, for example, be causes for undesired isolation (Granick and Zeman). Imprisonment, especially as solitary confinement, is another form of enforced seclusion, generating unfreedom (R.A. Ferguson, *Inferno*; Manion, *Liberty's*, “Prison”; Smith, “Solitude,” “Emerson,” *Prison*). Even if the retreat is willfully sought, it goes hand in hand with deprivations of all kinds. Asceticism and frugality are, for example, physical limitations that often flank eremitism in nature. And ‘loneliness’ is the term that describes the negative feelings that involuntary solitude, the limitation or utter absence of human contact can trigger (Dumm, “Thoreau’s” 326).

#### 4. Dichotomy and Liminality

Hermits and recluses in the US illustrate typically American values such as independence and self-reliance, liberty and privacy (Fitz and Harju; Rybczynski; Slauter, *State*; Whitman). At the same time, withdrawal from society runs counter to equally prominent and venerable American merits such as community, sociability, and the social compact (Coleman; Slauter, *State*; Winthrop). They follow an ideal which emphasizes the importance of individuality, expressed in John Stuart Mill’s maxim “over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign” (14), against the idea of democracy as the “tyranny of the majority” (8). Solitude is a threat to the ideal of national (or republican and liberal) citizenship, which rests on the balance between rights and responsibilities to a community (Parker). Yet, solitude can also be interpreted as an affirmation of global citizenship, of the idea of one humanity that is transcending geopolitical borders (Berlant 41–42). Deliberate solitude can be born out of an “ecological citizenship” (Alfred Hornung qtd. in Adamson and Ruffin 2; see also Dobson 83–140). In the anthropocene, the private realm is turned into a space in which citizenship is redefined with regard to sustainability and the personal ecological footprint (Parker). US-citizenship is especially a field of contestation where competing forces, definitions, and geographies of freedom and liberty are lived out (Berlant 42). In what can be read as a discussion of citizenship, Thoreau claims in his chapter on “Sounds” in *Walden* that the cockerel has to be “naturalized without being domesticated” (100). Being naturalized means s/he is a citizen of the land s/he inhabits, but to

be domesticated means to be subjected to conformity – a life that is no life for a free person (Dumm, “Thoreau’s” 332).

These conflicting issues do have a long tradition in the American mindset, originating, respectively, in the colonial and the constitutional era. And they are still enormously relevant today. The present pertinence is obvious by its immediate connection to contemporary public discourses. Protest against public surveillance today paradoxically coincides with the breaching of all barriers of privacy in social media, which are “typically ... made up of two types of users: voyeurs and exhibitionists” (Pitchford 13). Loneliness is ironically battled but also enhanced by new technology. Our confessional culture obeys a cult of therapeutic openness. Self-help books trade on stories of people who have transformed themselves from depressed solitaries into social butterflies (Moran, “What”). Contemporary social and cultural practices such as controlled diets, ascetic or simplistic lifestyles, anti-consumerist and environmentalist political attitudes, and ameliorative activities flank or prompt willful withdrawal from society. Social disadvantages such as illness, disability, old age, unemployment, and poverty are triggers for undesired isolation. The surge of recent newspaper, magazine, and e-journal articles about contemporary forms of eremitism, reclusiveness, isolation, and loneliness reflects the present relevance of solitude as a germane topic (El-Hal; R.A. Ferguson, “Alone,” “When”; Finkel; Jordan; Neyfakh; Ortberg). Depending on the chosen perspective, solitaries can be read as trailblazers for an alternative future or as symptoms of a pathological society.

The solitary’s existence is thus a liminal one in more than one respect. Victor Turner defines the term ‘liminality’ broadly: “Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (*Ritual* 95). Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau’s mentor, says of solitude and society: “We must keep our head in the one and our hands in the other” (14). John D. Barbour similarly argues that “solitude at its best – when it realizes its fullest ethical and spiritual value – is not oriented towards escaping the world but to a different kind of participation within it” (qtd. in McAvoy, *Medieval* 5). For Barbour, the solitary her- or himself thus becomes a ‘site’ where a whole range of different ideologies, political and religious interests, and discursive practices come together and compete (McAvoy, *Medieval* 5–6). Coby Dowdell calls the position of the hermit between society and solitude, society and nature, inclusion and exclusion, head and heart, self-interest and disinterest, and life and death a “weaning stage” (“American” 131; 139). He identifies the discovery of the hermit’s manuscript, which tells the hermit’s story and spreads his wisdom – and which is often identical with the actual cultural product in hand – as

the “crucial element” of the generic formula of “the American hermit’s tale” (130). It is also “crucial for understanding the liminal status of the hermit” (131). The very existence of such a manuscript is not only evidence of the hermit’s awareness of her or his own publicity, it also renders the withdrawal a “perceptible political gesture” (131). With the manuscript, the hermit obviously aims at triggering social change or at least at initiating a discourse about social defects.

## 5. Archetypes and Universality

When pondering solitude or solitaries in American culture, one’s first association is usually with Thoreau, still “one of America’s best-known seekers of solitude” (El-Hal) and an often-studied figure of eremitism. Thus, one’s first mental image is unmistakably that of a white – more often than not bearded – man who retreats into nature to live a simplistic, contemplative life. The painting *Old Man Loy* (*Der alte Loy*, c. 1925) by my late grandfather Alois Bergmann-Franken, the cover image for this collection, might be considered an illustration of such an introverted, white, male, and, not to forget, bewhiskered hermit. The stereotypical urban millennial hipster, with his well-groomed beard, his trendy plaid flannel shirt, and Levi’s worker’s jeans, his observance of political correctness, his love of outdoor activity, his environmentalist activism, his strict commitment to vegan diet, and his perusal of *WALDEN* – not the original book, but the outdoor magazine (2015-present) – is a contemporary, albeit ironic, citation of the Thoreauvian hermit archetype. However, this archetype is problematic because hermits, solitaries, and recluses come in a variety of shapes and sizes in American literature and culture, then and now. The search for solitude is a much more general and widespread endeavor. In her book *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), Sarah Orne Jewett aptly captures and expresses the universality and relevance of solitude: “We are each the unaccompanied hermit and recluse of an hour or a day” (83). Elizabeth Cady Stanton even diagnoses a constant “solitude of self” (248). And Emily Dickinson condenses the notion of the essential solitary state of the human existence into the last lines of her lyric poem #1695: “A Soul admitted to Itself – Finite infinity” (1834).

## 6. New Trajectories and Key Aspects

The topicality of the subject of solitude further derives from the concepts and issues that inform and flank the withdrawal from society, such as the topographies of isolation, the politics of solitude, the cultures of privacy and home, the artistic and creative potentials of reclusiveness, the spiritual promises of exile, the mental and physical conditions of retreat, the social preconditions of withdrawal, and the

function of shifting representations of solitude. The contributions in this collection are arranged around a number of trajectories and key aspects in the field.

Astonishingly, the importance of space for solitude is debatable. As mentioned before, it is arguable whether or to which degree the general outline between wilderness and civilization, between open and closed spaces informs solitude. Regardless of the specific place the solitary inhabits, her/his abode is a liminal space. Ann, the narrator of Rick Bass's short story "The Hermit's Story" (1998), inhabits such a liminal space in the solitary Yaak Valley in Montana, a place between civilization, represented by a town some forty miles away, and wilderness, which is located further north, in the Canadian tundra of Saskatchewan. When she retreats to this space, it is only to find herself in a much more liminal space than before. She and her Native American companion discover a lake that is frozen on the surface and dry, warm, and hollow underneath. Ann and Gray Owl travel through the lake, safe from an ice storm, in a space that is real and at the same time magical, outside of all conventional western notions of space and time. It is a heterotopic, heterochronic, and liminal space (Achilles and Bergmann, "Betwixt"; Foucault; V. Turner, "Betwixt"). Paradoxically, Ann feels "alive in the world, free of that strange chitin" (Bass 4) in this confining space (Bergmann, "Blue").

Often, politics prompt withdrawal from society. Separateness can function as a form of denial or as an act of critiquing society, social norms, consumerism, capitalism, environmental exploitation, and other social attitudes. Jon Krakauer's non-fiction book *Into the Wild* (1996) and Sean Penn's movie adaptation (2007) relate the story of Christopher McCandless (1968–1992), the infamous American wanderer whose endeavors to leave behind civilization and to lead a self-sustained life in nature have been glorified and damned alike since his untimely death in the wilderness of Alaska. Before his final hike, the young man, who created an aptly-named persona, 'Alexander Supertramp,' for himself, wrote down what he hoped to find in isolation in nature in his personal declaration of independence: "Ultimate freedom" (Krakauer 163).

Religion or spirituality can become the motivation to retreat from society. Often, the hermit's withdrawal is perceived as a sign of sacredness or holiness by his/her followers. Yet, cultural products regularly present these conditions either as religious delusion or even as spiritual hubris. Richard Digby, the stern Puritan of Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Man of Adamant: An Apologue" (1837), believes to be the sole person who is of the true faith. To fully enjoy his 'chosenness,' he decides to seclude himself from society and to live isolated in a cave in the wilderness. He even resists the saintly apparition of a dead woman, symbolizing actual true faith, who tries to lure him back to society. In Hawthorne's

unparalleled allegorical style, Digby only drinks the water that drips from the rock of the cave and then, one day, turns into stone himself, becoming a memento of spiritual rigidity for future generations.

Strict gender norms can trigger a complete abandoning of society. Yet, solitude may also initiate the creation of alternative gender roles. In 1915, Alice Gray (1881–1925), a graduate of the University of Chicago in Mathematics, Astronomy, Latin, and Greek, came to live on the sand dunes of Lake Michigan for seven years, until her death. Soon after her arrival, she became known by the sobriquet ‘Diana of the Dunes.’ In an interview with a newspaper in 1916, she allegedly claimed the following as her motivation for her eremitism: “I wanted to live my own life – a free life” (qtd. in Urbanik). Besides her environmentalist agenda and her criticism of the modern work situation, Gray wanted to rid herself of the societal pressure for proper female conduct. By living as a recluse in nature, she successfully defied traditional gender roles (Edwards; Urbanik).

Race is frequently the cause for alienation and isolation. The practices of slavery and segregation even force individuals to withdraw from society. The slave narrative *Life and Adventures of Robert, the Hermit of Massachusetts, Who Has Lived 14 Years in a Cave, Secluded from Human Society. Comprising, An Account of his Birth, Parentage, Sufferings, and providential escape from unjust and cruel Bondage in early life – and his reasons for becoming a Recluse. Taken from his own mouth, and published for his benefit* (1829) relates the captivating story of Robert Voorhis, a hermit and former slave, who lost his freedom due to deceit and was separated by force from his family. Robert chose solitude and became a hermit out of desperation and distress. He could only achieve a certain measure of freedom in total withdrawal from society (Cope).

Regardless of the motivations or reasons for seclusion, the body is a site of contestation for solitaries. The dichotomy of mind vs. body is a recurring motif in hermit tales. The path to spiritual enlightenment is often paved by the neglect of bodily needs. It is the triumph of the soul over the abjection of the body (McAvoy, “Introduction” 6). The willful castigation of the body ranges from frugality to asceticism and from fasting to self-inflicted starving. The sublimation of sexuality is another aspect that is often tied to seclusion. Bartleby, the protagonist of Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street” (1853), can be considered the archetype of the author’s ‘isolatoe’-figures (Asselineau; Cahir; Massie). His gradual denial to perform his work, expressed in his dictum “I would prefer not to” (20) – which only recently made him the posterboy of the ‘Occupy Wall Street’ movement – leads to his liberation from the constraints of ‘the system’ and to maintaining his intellectual independence, albeit isolating him. His

workspace becomes his “hermitage” (21). When he also refuses to conform to the conventions of supposedly ‘proper’ nourishment, he more than simply turns into a “vegetarian” (23), as his boss assumes. His complete rejection of food leads to his physical demise and ultimately to his death.

Reclusiveness is also represented as social or mental deviation and is frequently accompanied by or manifests itself as a form of pathology. The solitary may show signs of madness or insanity or more particular mental disorders such as agoraphobia, claustrophobia, scopophobia, and autism. Isolation may also be generated by physical illness and by effects of ageing and old age. The brothers Homer Lusk (1881–1947) and Langley Wakeman Collyer (1885–1947) inhabited a Gilded Age mansion on upper Fifth Avenue. Over time, the two Collyers became recluses and hoarders who were known as the ‘Hermits of Harlem.’ Whether it was their mental illness, an obsessive-compulsive disorder which caused their notorious withdrawal from further social contact other than their sibling’s, or whether their reclusiveness was advanced by aspects of ageing and one brother’s blindness, as suggested by Richard Greenberg in his play *The Dazzle* (2002) and E.L. Doctorow in his novel *Homer & Langley* (2009), remains a mystery. It is recorded fact, though, that, when both men had died in 1947, the authorities had to clear hundreds of tons of junk objects the Collyers had hoarded in their house before they could get to their bodies (Achilles and Bergmann, “Greenberg”; Erskine; Lidz).

Self-prescribed reclusiveness is often also the means to create art. Isolation or solitude are fertile grounds for contemplation and this may lead to or opens up spaces for creativity (Chiavaroli; Fahs). Writing is especially perceived as a solitary activity (Emilyroese). While most artists choose only temporary seclusion, the withdrawal to a room of one’s own can also be taken to the extreme. In *The Poet in Her Bedroom* (2008), the first volume of the biographical television trilogy *Angles of a Landscape: Perspectives on Emily Dickinson* (2008–2012), an anecdote from the poet’s life is told. It is revelatory with regard to her notorious reclusiveness. Dickinson is said to have taken her niece up to her room in which she spent most of her life and – unbeknownst to almost everyone outside her close circle of family and friends – created about 1800 poems. When the two had entered the room, the ‘Queen Recluse’ made as if to lock the door from the inside with an imaginary key and explained: “Matty, here’s freedom.” While her reclusiveness has often been pathologized, this episode is evidence that the female poet paradoxically felt creatively liberated when physically confined to her Amherst room.

## 7. Literature and Visual Culture

Media depicting solitude and solitaries are broad and varied. First, fiction, but also the genres of life writing, children's and juvenile literature, poetry, drama, film, television, photography, painting, song, and musical come to mind. As early as 1924, Charles P. Weaver called the hermit the "apotheosis of solitude" (7) and predicted that this type would be of perennial interest in literature. And indeed, when reflecting upon American solitude, what immediately suggests itself are newly informed readings, particularly of well-known and canonized American fiction such as Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" (1819), which features a male solitary in nature. Hawthorne's "Wakefield" (1835), who abandons his family for twenty years, can be considered an urban counterpart of Rip. Jewett's "A White Heron" (1886) and *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, with the characters of Sylvia and Joanna, feature female hermits in nature. A more urban female recluse is Louisa in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's "The New England Nun" (1891). Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) and Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), with their respective pair of siblings, offer juxtapositions of female recluses with male solitaries in closed space scenarios. A well-known text about an African American recluse which touches upon the racial implications of solitude is Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952). More recently, Paul Harding's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Tinkers* (2009) and Denis Johnson's shortlisted novel *Train Dreams* (2002/2011) featured solitaries. Further hermit tales can be discovered among the lesser known works of canonized authors: Kate Chopin's "The Maid of Saint Philippe" (1892), with its freedom and solitude-seeking, Joan of Arc-like protagonist; Eudora Welty's "At The Landing" (1943), in which the secluded protagonist becomes an abuse victim because of her unworldliness; and Edith Wharton's "The Hermit and the Wild Woman" (1908), which might be read as an allegory or as an autobiographical portrait of the relationship between Henry James and the author herself.

Apart from (adult) fiction, the topic of solitude is also covered by a wide range of other traditional as well as more innovative forms of cultural representations: There is a recent outpouring in life writing by women in which solitude features as a trigger for self-discovery. The most noteworthy and diverse among these books are probably Emily White's *Lonely: Learning to Live with Solitude* (2010) and Cheryl Strayed's *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* (2012), which was adapted for the movies under the title *Wild* in 2014, featuring Reese Witherspoon.

Scott O'Dell's children's novel *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (1960) tells the fictionalized story of the woman who became known as Juana Maria, a Native American of the Nicoleño tribe, who spent the eighteen years between 1835 and 1853



isolated on San Nicolas Island off the shores of California (Meares). Isolation of a different kind is described in the first African American prison memoir, Austin Reed's (1820s-?) *The Life and the Adventures of a Haunted Convict* (2016), written between the 1830s and the 1850s.

In his painting *The Hermit (Il Solitario, 1908)*, John Singer Sargent expresses pantheism by picturing a male figure which almost blends into the surrounding nature, while Edward Hopper's famous *Nighthawks* (1942), but also lesser known paintings such as *Hotel Room* (1931), represent visual expressions of the loneliness and isolation of modern American urban life (Fridman; Levin). Solitude and loneliness are also often captured in photography (Yanagihara), for example in Ansel Adams's photographs of the divine landscape of the West, which depict the solitude of American national parks but also reflect on the solitude of the artist-photographer (Hammond); in Dave Heath's *A Dialogue with Solitude* (1965), which intersperses pictures of scenes of American city life with shots from the war in Korea; and in Alec Soth's *Broken Manual Series* (2006–2010), which consists of photographic portraits of contemporary hermits, recluses, and outcasts.

Robert Zemeckis's movie *Cast Away* (2000) features Tom Hanks as a contemporary Robinson Crusoe, while Martin Scorsese's *The Aviator* (2004) is a biopic about the reclusive eccentric Howard Hughes (1905–1976), who spent the later decades of his life secluded in his hotel suite. The song "Maybe" (1979) by Thom Pace evokes a desire to flee the urban rush and retreat to the wilderness, similar to the protagonist's withdrawal from society in the television series for which it served as musical theme. This series, *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams* (1974–82), depicts the adventures of a hermit in the American wilderness, based on the life of John "Grizzly" Adams (1812–1860), a famous California mountain man and trainer of grizzly bears and other wild animals. Reality television series like *Mountain Men* (2012–present), now in its fourth season, follow the lives of men who have withdrawn to and eke out their living in the American wilderness. One of them, Eustace Conway, has been exalted by Elizabeth Gilbert's *The Last American Man* (2002). *Nature* (2015), a horror television series, shows a nature activist who ventures into the wild alone in pursuit of bigfoot and presents its protagonist's descent into solitary madness in found footage style.

Even in musicals like Doug Wright, Scott Frankel, and Michael Korie's *Grey Gardens* (2006), recluses take center stage. Here, they are Jackie Kennedy's eccentric aunt and first cousin Big (1896–1977) and Little Edie Bouvier Beale (1917–2002), former socialites who retreated to a dilapidated mansion in the Hamptons, where they then lived secluded for decades. Their fascinating life story was also covered in a documentary by the Maysles brothers (1976) and became the theme

of the HBO movie *Grey Gardens* (2009), starring Drew Barrymore and Jessica Lange (Bergmann, “Little”).

## 8. The State of Research

Given these and countless further cultural reverberations of solitude in the US, it is surprising that the topic has generally failed to interest scholars. Three non-scholarly and two scholarly books address the issue of hermits in nature and approach the topic from a broad transnational, transatlantic, and transhistorical perspective, but thereby, if at all, only include one American example, the solitary archetype of Thoreau (Balcom; G. Campbell; Colegate; France; Reed, *Herd*). To my knowledge, there is only one article which solely and directly addresses the issue of solitude in Thoreau’s work (Dumm, “Thoreau’s”). Scholarly approaches to examples of American solitude and solitaries other than Thoreau hardly exist at all (Buell; Larsen; Roorda). Most of the few articles and single book chapters that do focus on representations of American hermits are temporarily confined, focusing exclusively on the late eighteenth or the first half of the nineteenth century (Cowper; Cope; Dowdell, “American”; Slauter, “Being,” *State*). There is a recent, booklength study of the notorious hermit of Palm Springs, born Friedrich Wilhelm Pester in Germany in 1885 and of Nat King Cole’s “Nature Boy” (1948) fame (Wild). And there is one biographical study of the female hermit in the Michigan sand dunes, Alice Gray (Edwards). Beyond that, there is also a homepage on eremitism, but it merely collects and does not critically question solitary lifestyles (*Hermitary*).

Urban solitude in the US is explored in a book of idiosyncratic popular philosophy from the 1930s (Powys). Another, spatially and temporarily very limited book on American recluses primarily serves a journalistic purpose and dates from half a century ago (Erskine). A recent homepage lists reclusive celebrities in tabloid style (Cuncic). And a few individual cases of urban recluses such as the Collyers (Achilles and Bergmann, “Greenberg”; Herring; Lidz), Ida Mayfield (Abbott; Bramhall; Cox), or Huguette Clark (Dedman and Newell; Gordon), the reclusive characters of Jewett’s and Willa Cather’s writings (Dowdell, “Withdrawing”; Romines; Stout), Hawthorne’s, Chopin’s, and Wharton’s solitaries as well as Melville’s ‘isolatoes’ (Asselineau; Cahir; Massie; More), and reclusive authors as diverse as Jonathan Edwards, Hawthorne, Dickinson, Flannery O’Connor, Greenberg, and Don DeLillo (Achilles and Bergmann, “Greenberg”; Dana; Dudar; Giannone; Gorman; Moran, “DeLillo”; Whitney) have received some critical attention. There is a small volume which juxtaposes Hopper’s paintings with poetry of solitude, but offers no further insights into the uses of solitude in both art forms (Levin). Two slim exhibition catalogues are slightly more insightful, as they offer accompanying essays. One

centers on the representation of rural as well as urban solitude depicted in American art (Sokol). The other focuses on the representation of solitude in the paintings of American impressionist Walter Launt Palmer (Price).

Recent sociological studies on social isolation caused by the economy or new technology, on living alone, and on solitary, everyday actions (Cohen; Klinenberg; Olds and Schwartz; Putnam; Slade; Turkle), a study on the philosophical meanings of solitude (Koch), a study of loneliness as a way of life by a political scientist (Dumm, *Loneliness*), a psychological handbook on solitude (Coplan and Bowker), psychological studies on solitarization and social withdrawal (Petroff; Rubin and Coplan), an exploration of the human need for social connection by a social neuroscientist (Cacioppo), an essay collection which combines literary theory, autobiography, performance, and criticism concerning female solitary spaces (Malin and Boynton) as well as a book on loneliness in psychology, philosophy, and literature (Mijuskovic) all shed light on a variety of global cultures of solitude from the perspective of the authors' respective disciplines. A collection of autobiographical essays on the function of social retreat (Slovic), another memoir offering cultural criticism of urban loneliness (Laing), a collection of semi-autobiographical essays on women and solitude (Wear), a recent study on the spiritual meanings of solitude (Lewis), and a book on the nature of loneliness in fiction (R.A. Ferguson, *Alone*) all narrow their focus to the American scene. But overall, these studies cannot reveal the wide-ranging historical and cultural dimensions of the phenomenon. A broad interdisciplinary consideration of the diversity and variety of cultural forms and representations of social retreat in the US is a *desideratum*.

## 9. Cultures of Solitude

The new trajectories outlined above offer up a myriad of intriguing perspectives on cultural representations of solitude in the US. As early as 1935, Walter Leisering, in his study of the motif of the hermit in the literature of English Romanticism, called solitude a research topic for the Humanities in its best sense, as it partakes in the most diverse fields (1). In the present collection, an array of distinguished North American and European scholars from a wide range of subdisciplines of American Studies broaden and pave the path Leisering pointed out. They explore representations of retreat, withdrawal, and isolation in American culture and thereby investigate the liberating and limiting aspects of solitude. Many of the contributors have already distinguished themselves in the field (Achilles and Bergmann, "Greenberg"; Cohen; Cope; Coplan and Bowker; Dowdell, "Withdrawing, "American"; Larsen; Lewis; Roorda; Rubin and Coplan; Slovic), are internationally and nationally renowned experts in their respective areas of American Studies,

or are younger, emerging scholars, who nevertheless already bring a particular expertise to the project. The contributors approach cultures of solitude in the US from the perspective of their particular disciplines, among them Cultural Studies, Literary Studies, Media Studies, Film Studies, Art History, History, Religious Studies, Sociology, and Psychology. Among their subjects of scrutiny are novels, short stories, poetry, drama, (auto-)biography, nature writing, letters, ephemera, movies, television shows, paintings, popular music, and social media. The collection covers a time frame of American cultures of solitude ranging from the eighteenth century to today. The authors critically approach their subjects through the lens of established as well as cutting edge theoretical approaches such as Gender Studies, Women's Studies, Body Studies, Studies of Affect, Cultural Narratology, Gender History, Cultural History, Studies of Space and Place, Comparative Studies, Transatlantic Studies, Social Media Studies, Performance Studies, Intermediality Studies, Visual Culture, and Ecocriticism. The topics and issues the contributions cover include sex and gender; race and ethnicity; religion and spirituality; space and place; pathology and illness; poverty, unemployment, and social disadvantage; identity, childhood, and development; ageing and old age; community and communality; domesticity and privacy; marriage and love; creativity, art, and literature; new technology, the internet, and social media; politics and reform; lifestyle and dietary trends; and ecological concern and environmentalism. Overall, they scrutinize a wide variety of representations of withdrawal and retreat, which mainly fall into two categories: hermits in nature, individuals who seek solitude away from society, retreat to the wilderness and dwell in a cave or cabin, and urban recluses, who withdraw within civilization, experience aloneness, lonely- or lonesomeness in society or retreat to a digital space. All of them suffer from the limitations of isolation and alienation. But many also experience the liberating effects of their enforced seclusion or deliberately seek solitude for its releasing quality.

The first three essays in the collection approach 'early solitude' from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century in transatlantic and transhistorical perspective while focusing in particular on aspects of language, body, and gender. Svend Erik Larsen explores solitude in "'Alone, Without a Guide': Solitude as a Literary and Cultural Paradox" in transatlantic dialogue, including discussions of texts such as Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* (*La Divina Commedia*, 1321), Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker* (*Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, 1782), Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), Henrik Pontoppidan's *Lucky Per* (*Lykke-Per*, 1898–1904), and Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934) and focusing on the paradox that through language, solitude becomes part of a collective universe. Kevin L. Cope considers the portrayal of early-American hermits such as James Buckland

and John Fielding's *A Wonderful Discovery of a Hermit, who Lived Upwards of Two Hundred Years* (1786), Amos Wilson's *The Sweets of Solitude!* (1822), and Voorhis's *The Life and Adventures of Robert, the Hermit of Massachusetts* (1829) with regard to an Enlightenment interest in sustainable life-support processes and the attainment of unusual goals such as longevity in his paper "The Enigmatic and the Ecological: American Late Enlightenment Hermits and the Pursuit of, in Addition to Happiness, Permanence." He then traces their tradition into the present by contemplating twentieth-century hermits such as Gypsy Boots (1914–2004), situation comedies like *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962–71), and reality shows such as *Alaskan Bush People* (2014-present). Coby Dowdell further expands his previous studies on ascetic practice and American hermits, extending his examination to aspects of gender and applying these to a reading of Hannah Webster Foster's seduction novel *The Coquette* (1797) and its European precursors such as Eliza Haywood's *The British Recluse* (1722) and Marchioness de Lambert's novella *The Fair Solitary; or, Female Hermit* (*La femme hermite*, 1749) in his essay "'The Luxury of Solitude': Conduct, Domestic Deliberation, and the Eighteenth-Century Female Recluse."

Three contributions concentrate on a crucial period for the American nation and the shaping of cultures of solitude in the nineteenth century, dealing with issues such as gender, politics, and poetics. In my contribution "Away to Solitude, to Freedom, to Desolation!': Hermits and Recluses in Julia Ward Howe's *The Hermaphrodite*," I focus on the depiction of diverse types of female hermits and recluses, in particular their mental withdrawal and their bodily asceticism as well as the liberating and limiting aspects of their retreat, as a form of critique of the prevailing gender norms in an exceptional work of nineteenth-century women's writing. Margaretta M. Lovell ponders the dichotomies and contradictions of the idea of solitude in nineteenth-century paintings by American artists, among them Sanford Gifford, Winslow Homer, John Singer Sargent, and John Frederick Kensett, with regard to Thoreau's meditations on solitude in *Walden* in her contribution "Thoreau and the Landscapes of Solitude: Painted Epiphanies in Undomesticated Nature." Hélène Quanquin focuses on the main paradox in the cultural history of nineteenth-century abolitionists, who fought for liberty for others while they themselves were living a life of limitation and withdrawal in "'The World to Each Other': The Joint Politics of Isolation and Reform among Garrisonian Abolitionists."

A set of two contributions traces cultures of solitude from the nineteenth to the twentieth century from a literary, sociological, and cultural perspective, focusing on society, spirituality, and religion. Ira J. Cohen explores solitary withdrawal from the nineteenth through the twentieth century as a sociological phenomenon which is always shaped by cultural circumstances and biographical situations. He

identifies “Three Types of Deep Solitude: Religious Quests, Aesthetic Retreats, and Withdrawals due to Personal Distress” by focusing on Thoreau, Thomas Merton, and May Sarton. Kevin Lewis aims at a differentiation of solitude, loneliness, and lonesomeness by offering, in his essay “American Lonesome: Our Native Sense of Otherness,” an interpretation of lonesomeness as an example of an implicit religious or spiritual expression. The essay covers ground from the nineteenth to the twentieth century by tracing expressions of lonesomeness in poetry by Walt Whitman and Dickinson, fiction by Mark Twain, Sherwood Anderson, and Jack Kerouac, paintings by Hopper, and songs by Hank Williams, among others.

Three contributions cover representations of solitude in the twentieth century in a wide variety of media, with a focus on space, gender, and ethnicity. Randall Roorda focuses on a key element to narratives of retreat in nature, the ‘cabin scenario,’ in his contribution “‘Mind Is the Cabin’: Substance and Success in Post-Thoreauvian Second Homes.” His analysis specifically concentrates on Henry Beston’s *The Outermost House* (1928), Edward Lueders’s *The Clam Lake Papers* (1977), and Charles Siebert’s *Wickerby: An Urban Pastoral* (1998). Nassim Winnie Balestrini explores the dramatic representation of the reclusive artist in plays such as Susan Glaspell’s *Alison’s House* (1930), William Luce’s *The Belle of Amherst* (1976), K. D. Halpin and Kate Nugent’s *Emily Unplugged* (1995), and Edie Campbell and Jack Lynch’s *Emily Dickinson & I* (2005) in her essay “Socially Constructed Selfhood: Emily Dickinson in Full-Cast and Single-Actor Plays.” Jochen Achilles studies shifting representations of ethnic reclusiveness in a female *Künstlerroman* from the 1980s in his paper “Changing Cultures of Solitude: Reclusiveness in Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*.” Female eremitism is here presented as both a form of repression and the precondition for the battle against it.

Two contributions focus on cultures of solitude from the twentieth to the twenty-first century and center on space, identity, and pathology. Clare Hayes-Brady analyzes expressions of solipsism and alienation across the author’s oeuvre in her paper “‘It’s What We Have in Common, This Aloneness’: Solitude, Communitarity, and the Self in the Writing of David Foster Wallace.” In his contribution “Alone in the Crowd: Urban Recluses in US-American Film,” Rüdiger Heinze concentrates on characters in turn-of-the-century films who lead a reclusive life at or even beyond the fringes of society, but whose hut is a tenement apartment and whose wilderness is the ‘urban jungle,’ with specific emphasis on *Finding Forrester* (2000).

In the last section, three contributors discuss representations of solitude in the twenty-first century, with particular focus on the issues of technology, community, and identity. The contributions examine issues as diverse as the contemporary literary scene, social media, university programs, and psychological states. In his

contribution “Solitude in the Digital Age: Privacy, Aloneness, and Withdrawal in Dave Eggers’s *The Circle*,” Stefan Hippler offers a close reading of a recent novel, thereby highlighting topical as well as controversial issues such as social media surveillance and diminishing cultures of privacy. Scott Slovic presents the unique social and pedagogical experiment of the University of Idaho’s ‘Semester in the Wild’ program, which sends a dozen undergraduate students into the largest wilderness in North America for three months to study various aspects of wilderness, including literature and writing. His paper “Going Away to the Wilderness for Solitude . . . and Community: Ecoambiguity, the Engaged Pastoral, and the ‘Semester in the Wild’ Experience” emphasizes the combination of solitary wilderness experience and rather intensive exposure to community that occurs among the participants of this program. Robert J. Coplan and Julie C. Bowker review and synthesize psychological perspectives in the study of solitude, with a particular focus on the positive and negative effects of spending time alone in their essay “Should We Be Left Alone? Psychological Perspectives on the Implications of Seeking Solitude.”

## 10. An Emergent Research Topic

This edited collection provides the first interdisciplinary study of American cultures of solitude. It offers a broad diachronic consideration of the diversity and variety of cultural forms and representations of social withdrawal and isolation in American culture, which also reflects upon the transhistorical and transatlantic significance of this issue and highlights its particular topicality at the present time. What evolves is a profounder understanding of this anthropological constant that is at the backdrop of both currently pressing social challenges and popular contemporary lifestyle trends. The research offered here will introduce solitude as a topical and pertinent research issue across the Humanities and beyond.

## Notes

1. Some examples are Alger; Andre; “Askese//L’Ascèse”; Assmann and Assmann; Dames; Davis et al.; F. Ferguson, “Malthus” and *Solitude*; Fitzell; Gösweiner; Höbel; *Isolation*; KNA; Leenen; Macpherson; Mettler-von Meibom; Mills; Möhrmann; de Montaigne; Peplau and Perlman; Riehle; Welge.

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## **II Early Solitude: Language, Body, and Gender**



Svend Erik Larsen

## “Alone, Without a Guide”: Solitude as a Literary and Cultural Paradox

**Abstract:** Solitude is an individual experience. Yet, it exists only in a collective cultural universe. As language is a medium of a collective nature, the literary manifestations of solitude are as paradoxical as solitude itself. This essay focuses on this paradox both as an individual experience and in its historical vicissitudes in literature.

### 1. Standing Alone?

In the very last lines of Henrik Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People* (*En Folkefiende*, 1882), Thomas Stockmann announces his great discovery to the family: “It is this, let me tell you – that the strongest man in the world is he who stands most alone” (act V, n. pag.).<sup>1</sup> Stockmann is the idealistic hero who tries to reveal how public mismanagement of the local bath facility poses a risk to the health of both visitors and locals. Yet, the facility also represents a major source of local income. So, the local dignitaries, a greedy and scheming lot, declare him an enemy of the people. Only the family show their solidarity in spite of the aggressive attacks they have been exposed to from the local population. Nonetheless, Stockmann stays firm and stands alone in an ethical and political dilemma.

In a performance I attended some years ago, Stockmann, although standing alone, placed himself in a chair during his bold statement. Gathering the family around him while sitting down, this is Ibsen’s ironic gesture to the audience and it has two effects: first, without himself realizing it, we see that Stockmann’s self-proclaimed solitude is a self-asserting recourse to some kind of collectivity, even with a self-righteousness that is not without similarity to that of his opponents. Second, like all irony, it forces audience and readers to reflect upon the nature and the meaning of human solitude beyond the individual horizon of Stockmann. We can be hit by irony entirely by our own doing, but irony itself is a communicative act that only works in a collective universe of shared meaning production. Couched in irony, Stockmann’s acclaimed solitude presents his own limits of understanding as well as those of the community he is part of. Thus, the irony adds a paradoxical twist to the connection between communality and solitude that is translated into language. When Stockmann shares his solitude with others he also contradicts it, simply by telling them. But he has to share it: otherwise he would just have been a loser, not a solitary hero.

Paradoxically, language includes solitude in a collective universe and, equally paradoxically, when used for this purpose the collective nature of language is undermined in ambiguities like Ibsen's staged irony or in other forms of indirectness like metaphors, broken narratives, fragmented subject formation, multilevel discursive strategies, or even silence (Engelberg). In their entanglement language and solitude mark the limits of culture in two ways. If solitude through language marks the limits of what humans can share, then the ensuing ambiguity of language hampers its capacity to reflect on precisely these limits. As Michel Hannoun remarks, it is hard to turn solitude into a concept (46–48, 59).

More recently, Paul Auster in his *The Invention of Solitude* (1980) has added the self-reflection Stockmann ignores and further intensifies the paradox:

What he experienced, *perhaps*, during those few moments on Christmas Eve, 1979, as he sat in his room on Varick Street, was this: the sudden knowledge came over him that even alone, in the deepest solitude of his room, he was not alone, or, more precisely, that the moment he began to try to speak of that solitude, he had become more than just himself. Memory, therefore, not simply as the resurrection of one's private past, but an immersion in the past of others, which is to say: history. (139, emphasis added)

The self-reflection of the protagonist A.'s liminal condition does not dissolve it. By way of language, solitude turns into a subjective reality, his solitude, and, paradoxically, transforms into a shareable quality of human life, even on the limits of language, society, and culture. He becomes "more than just himself" and enters a world of collective memory and history.

We are not dealing with a paradox according to the principle of contradiction from formal logic. Epimenides's paradox that 'the Cretes say that it is true that all Cretes are liars' can both be explained and avoided. Here, language works on two levels: a metalevel where truth value is decided and a denotative level where claims are made. In Epimenides's dictum, nothing is wrong with the two levels taken separately, only with their combination, which we can just avoid. But when it comes to language and solitude, we cannot help producing the paradox that solitude transformed it into its opposite simply by being verbalized. Hence, this paradox is not a paradox in the formal sense but more in the sense offered by Gilles Deleuze and Karl-Otto Apel.

According to Deleuze, "[t]he principle of contradiction is applicable to what is real and what is possible, but not to what is impossible from where the principle itself emerges, that is to say not to the paradoxes or rather to what they represent" (102, my transl.). The phrase "what they represent" is most important here, not the paradoxes *per se*. What they represent is the boundary of a shared culture and its identity formations. Yet, a paradox only represents its existence without being



able to provide it with a straightforward meaning. As Umberto Eco has pointed out, this kind of paradox is essential in the hermetic tradition where it represents the highest attainable knowledge and thus the limits of human recognition, an understanding also cultivated in Zen-Buddhism. Hence, solitude is not just an individual state but also a phenomenon that enables a culture to see and question its own horizon from within.

If Deleuze underlines the representational dimension of paradox, Apel points to its performative nature. A's discovery does not grow out of language as such, but only in the moment he uses it, that is to say as an enunciation. This is what Apel calls a 'performative paradox' in the context of an extended speech act theory. A performative paradox occurs when a speech act does not respect the conditions that are necessary for the speech act to be what it claims. If it appears to be a statement that should be verifiable, a constative, then it is a performative paradox if the utterance in itself contradicts its truth claim. When I, for example, say 'I am alone,' even in complete isolation, then the very fact that I do so in a common language contradicts the truth claim. In terms of speech act theory, the utterance moves from the area of constatives to the area of performatives and becomes a performative paradox (Apel). Rather than provoking questions on the feeling of solitude itself, it generates questions concerning the boundary of human culture and identity and of the means we have to approach it, language in particular (Larsen, *Speak*).

This dynamics of paradoxical representation and enunciation is central to literary production, not least when solitude is at stake. This is so because representation through language is always situated, even for a short amount of time, as in Auster's text: A. is just briefly in his room on Varick Street at the end of 1979. Without being situated somewhere at a certain point in time, there can be no enunciation and hence no human subjectivity. What the protagonist experiences is precisely a situated condition that enables him to speak and thus to turn his solitude into human identity on the limits of a collective space.

Being situated is always a matter of embodiment. Auster's protagonist is still physically present in the "deepest solitude of his room" when this recognition hits him. Stockmann is encircled by his family when he makes his statement. Apparently, A.'s own reflection only concerns the emergence of language and its collective implications, not its situated embodiment. The discrete "perhaps" in the Auster-quotation above reveals the limits of his understanding.

When Octavio Paz opens *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (*El laberinto de la soledad*, 1950) with an image of the myth of Narcissus, he comes a step closer to the embodied complexity of solitude:

The adolescent ... is astonished at the fact of his being, and this astonishment leads to reflection: as he leans over the river of consciousness, he asks himself if the face that appears there, disfigured by the water, is his own. The singularity of his being ... becomes a problem and a question. (9)

Ibsen's Stockmann, Auster's A., and Paz's young person, all three recognize their solitude in a sudden glimpse of bodily presence. The level of their reflection is different, and the self-awareness of the situated embodiment only belongs to the male teenager. He is led to self-reflection by the perception of his own body in transformation. It is at the same time 'his' body and 'not' his body and must actively be re-apprehended as 'his,' in spite of its new foreignness. Although the body is the ultimate sign of our individual uniqueness, it only becomes 'mine' by bridging these two positions as mediated solitude.

As the phenomenology of perception points out, we can never perceive our own body as a whole when completely alone (Merleau-Ponty). We can neither see nor scratch our back without the mediation of mirrors, prosthetic tools, or the hands of others. It takes the eyes of other bodily human beings to allow the totality and particularity of 'my' body as a whole to be transmitted to me as the foundation of 'my' identity, equipped with a name. Even the most solitary body has been shaped as a human subject through the mediation of other human bodies, if only an imagination of others in a mirror.

Paz's young man does not say anything, but having a body also enables him to be a linguistic subject. His solitary and reduplicated body becomes "a problem and a question." An utterance is uniquely ours when we speak, yet in the collective medium of language. However, this collectivity is not part of his immediate situated embodiment, but works on another discursive level, addressing the readers through the narrator's evocation of the myth of Narcissus. The youngster re-enacts the age-old myth and, like Auster's A., he enters the domain of "memory" and "history." If the body marks the boundary of a shared human life world from the perspective of the solitary human, language marks the same boundary from the perspective of the shared life world.

Each of the three texts I have referred to above points to one important component of solitude: its collective, its self-reflexive, and its embodied nature. Yet, they do not regard solitude as one complex totality in the life of individual human beings and during the course of cultural history. This is where Henry comes in.

## 2. The Changing Sense of Solitude

Henry "went to his hut and crawled through the intricate hole that served as a door. He wished to be alone with some new thoughts that had lately come to him"

(Crane 4). Henry, an eighteen-year-old Unionist volunteer, is the protagonist in Stephen Crane's classical war novel *The Red Badge of Courage* (1899) set during the American Civil War. Yet, war is only the surface and solitude is really at the core of the novel. Faced with the reality check of the camp, Henry realizes that the heroism of great epics that enflamed him when he enlisted does not match the reality of war. Alone in his hut, he now contemplates the possibility of deserting. When he left home, Henry's schoolmates saw him as unique and he had "felt the gulf now between them and had swelled with calm pride" (8). There are two different kinds of solitude here: the former is a public form of solitude, the sense of being one of a kind elevated above the ordinary lot. The latter is a private version of solitude and it is only addressed shamefully in a withdrawal from other men. Eventually, Henry does manage to escape in the general confusion of battle, but ends up getting a blow to his head and falls unconscious. When he is coming back to his senses, he finds his regiment again and is, surprisingly, received as a wounded hero of war by his awestruck mates. They ironically see in him a hero of mythological proportions. Only Henry knows he is lying, but continues to pretend that he has returned to the elevated status he imagined for himself back home.

The narrator occupies a position on the limit of Henry's consciousness and addresses the reader in an irony shaped by the double perspective from both inside and outside. The use of free indirect discourse renders Henry's vacillating thoughts while the keen external observations partly contradict them. This position makes the limit a moving boundary that constantly requires Henry's re-interpretations of himself and, consequently, the readers' re-interpretation of him and also of the larger meaning of his changing take on solitude as imagined hero, as deserter, and as fake hero. This change activates four aspects of solitude that embrace the complete individual experience of solitude.

One is the 'psychological' solitude, Henry's own feeling of not belonging to the collective life of the camp, first by being alone with his ideas about running away, and later when he lies about his escape: "He felt alone in space when his injured comrade had disappeared ... *He was a mental outcast* ... Furthermore, he was much afraid that some arrow of scorn might *lay him mentally low* before he could raise his protecting tale" (18–19, 65, emphasis added). In both cases the psychological solitude occurs in a confrontation with linguistic and bodily limits: he cannot find a tale to represent his solitude, and he feels the spatial and thus bodily absence of the departed comrade.

To this solitude is added the 'social' solitude when Henry's solitude is reflected in the eyes of others. On the one hand, he isolates himself, uneasy with the other soldiers' boasting comradeship: "The youth, considering himself as separated

from the others, ... *kept from intercourse with his companions* as much as circumstances would allow him" (17, emphasis added). But on the other hand, when he returns wounded, the tables have turned. From being below everybody else, he is now above everyone else, a mythological monster slayer, "a war devil" (92). Also, the social solitude is articulated through liminal experiences of language and body. When null and void, he silences himself by moving his body out of sight; when admired, he creates a distant sense of awe, readable in the bodily demeanor of his admiring mates. At the same time, his status cannot be contained in the everyday chatter of the normal conversation.

A third level has to do with the impracticability of 'mediated' solitude. Some experiences leave Henry completely alone with a faltering sense perception face to face with a threatening unknown or a naked inhuman materiality. Repeatedly, the view of the battlefield is a muffled perception of smoke, movements, and sound with no clear origin or cohesion. A similar experience is his encounter with a dying soldier. Henry is at a loss for words and becomes absorbed by death itself. He can only call "Jim – Jim – Jim" while his "face had been twisted into an expression of every agony he had imagined for his friend" (55–56). Here Henry does not only experience a psychological and a social solitude, which he may be able to overcome. He is faced with a limit for what is humanly possible to shape in words and ordinary bodily behavior.

At this point, Henry is close to the ultimate aspect of solitude, the 'ontological' solitude. He frequently feels that he is outside humankind, even dehumanized: "He was an unknown quantity" (10), "an automatic affair" (33), only a knot or bolt in the huge machinery of war – a frequent metaphor (see, for example, 48). He also imagines the non-human in the shape of monsters and animals, both identifying with them and being confronted by them. Throughout the novel other soldiers, the enemy, the army as a whole, and the war itself are called dragons, monsters, serpents, buffaloes, and other animals of various kinds (see, for example, 6, 19, 24, 31, 33, 39, 60), culminating in his own identification with a non-human creature, "a war devil" (92).

The three stages of his development from the imagined heroism at home via his downfall during the war and his resurrection as a hero beyond human proportions are a re-enactment of the classical *katabasis*, the roundtrip, as it were, to the realm of the dead. Before the descent the person is just a human among humans, after the return s/he is both monstrously non-human and sublimely human. Henry is such a person, he is one of a kind. After being struck unconscious he is like dead among the dead, in retrospect it seems as if he had "been asleep for a thousand years" (76). By returning to his regiment, his solitary status turns him into a collective symbol.

This myth is more complex than the Narcissus myth used by Paz, but the textual strategy and cultural effect are the same.

### 3. The Cultural Changes of Solitude

Henry's changing positions of solitude transform him from a solitary individual into a typological character inscribed into a broad cross-cultural perspective. Throughout cultural history such characters have impersonated certain forms of solitude that outline important changes in the perception of human identity over time. I will briefly touch upon four such characters from European cultural history, embodying solitude by selection, as outcast, by choice, and by circumstance, all of them using body and language to mark the horizon of the meaning of solitude.

#### 3.1 Selection

In the opening of *The Divine Comedy* (*La Divina Commedia*, 1321) the I-protagonist – let us just call him Dante – has lost his way and is now alone, away from his social world. Shortly after, during his symbolic wanderings through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise he is also beyond the world of human experience, all the while he is still a man of flesh and blood: “I did not die, and I alive remained not” (Inf, 34, v. 25). Here, he is completely alone. However, he is selected to assume a singular role with a double function. On the one hand, he is supposed to represent the living and their fear, hope, and ignorance among the dead, and time and again the spirits and shadows react to his body (Pur, 14, v. 1–21; 26, v. 12). On the other hand, he is supposed to represent the impossible experience of the entire cosmos to the living. He is told to learn the right words, although he admittedly does not have words enough for this task (Pur, 33, v. 136). He is faced with the paradox of squaring the circle (Par, 33, v. 133–41). In a sense, upon his return he will no longer be a representative for the living, but placed in a solitary category of his own as all persons returning from *katabasis*.

The circles shaping Dante's cosmos correspond to levels of bodily experience, ranging from the extreme sufferings in Inferno and the final sliding down Lucifer's ghastly body (Inf, 34, v. 70–81) to the bodiless visions of Paradise which, however, are rendered in sensual imagery. But the circles also correspond to embedded levels of communication (Inf, 2, v. 39–60). Maria speaks to Lucia who speaks to Beatrice who speaks to Virgil who speaks to Dante. For Dante, the trajectory runs in the reverse order, beginning with Virgil who is almost dumb due to lack of speech training (Inf, 1, v. 64) and ending with Beatrice who is able to read his mind and to respond even before he asks (Par, 1, v. 85–87).

In line with the overall cognitive paradigm of the Middle Ages, the relation between this solitary position and any communality is based on representation (Zimmermann). The moment a person, a situation, or an experience is singled out as unique, it is made exemplary and thereby representational. Hence, when Dante gets off the road he is midway through “the journey of our life” (Inf, 1, v. 1), on Good Friday in 1300, and he meets a series of strange animals which, however, possess allegorical meanings. Moreover, all the characters he encounters are placed on various levels of the three transcendental regions, each with their particular punishment or reward which provide them with an exemplary status. Further, Dante’s apparently accidental detour in the forest is framed with a historical necessity by his ancestor Cacciaguida who explains that the transition between the old and new Florence has made people go astray. Therefore, there is a great need to establish an exemplary meaning of things through a comprehensive representation of them (Par, 15–16). Finally, Dante is not only confronted with the history of his family and his city, but more importantly with the origin of humankind and the universe weaved into both the doctrine and open questions of scholasticism.

The limits paradoxically pointed to by body and language represent the limits of the representational abilities of the chosen person. He is not only allowed to view God as a trained mystic in his solitude, but to remember and understand as much as possible of what he has seen and then, against all odds, to transmit it to his fellow humans. However, his range of vision is determined by his bodily limitations: he is blinded by the light (Pur, 32, v. 1–12; Par, 14, v. 37–42) and his terrestrial ear cannot grasp the heavenly music (Par, 14, v. 118–26; 31, v. 41–42). He is also tired, cannot find his way, and needs guidance to understand what he perceives, first from Virgil and later from Beatrice, and more and more so the closer he gets to the center of Paradise. But at the end of the day, he is left with his own fragile understanding and limited language (Par, 33, v. 136).

However, Beatrice also invites him to rely solely on his own creative powers:

Therefore my Lady said to me: Send forth  
 The flame of thy desire, so that it issue  
 Imprinted well with the internal stamp;  
 Not that our knowledge may be greater made  
 By speech of thine, but to accustom thee  
 To tell thy thirst, that we may drink. (Par, 17, v. 6–12)

In bodily imagery she encourages him to express his singularity beyond the representational function and first and foremost to show his highly individual and solitary passion. In a surprising appeal to perform the paradox of his solitary experience in order to manifest his own incomparable identity as a poet, Beatrice

invites him to downplay the representation of the cosmos. In this way, *The Divine Comedy* uses solitude to point forward to the amalgamation of individualism and solitude in later periods, such as the eighteenth century.

### 3.2 The Outcast

In Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* (*Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, 1778) things are turned around. Chosen and unique Dante is part of the universe he represents, the entire cosmos, while Rousseau is expelled from a society he does not want to represent. The good citizens of Môtiers have ousted him and the court has condemned him. He explicitly refuses to assume a public, let alone a representational role and, yet, he cannot avoid to be positioned in relation to the community he wants to leave. In contrast to Dante's vertical metaphysical journey Rousseau is engaged in a horizontal everyday solitary *promenade*.

The leisure walk came into fashion in the eighteenth century among the bourgeoisie and the intellectuals, an echo of the old peripatetic practice of the academy in Athens and the monasteries (König; Wallace). It is a way of reflection on human life and nature under unconstraint conversation, while the body follows its own natural rhythm. Later the national landscape or the sidewalks set the scene for the *flâneurs*. So, to label oneself a 'solitary walker' in the title amounts to the same as staging one's solitude as a social phenomenon, although the opening lines try to convince us otherwise: "Here I am, then, alone on the earth, having neither brother, neighbor, friend or society but myself" (145).

The ten chapters of Rousseau's unfinished book pursue two lines of thought. One is the reflection on solitude, the horror of expulsion, and the comfort in the approach of a vegetative state of life similar to the plants he studies in line with Francesco Petrarca's *The Life of Solitude* (*De vita solitaria*, c. 1350). Rousseau wants to ignore all bodily concerns and to converse with his own soul, not with the outer world. The other line of thought leads him to the boundary of this assimilation with vegetative nature, marked by body and language. This liminal experience reinscribes him in the society that rejects him, and vice versa, and forces him to submit to its uncontrollable influence on his solitary life. The more the first narrative line emphasizes the solitary sovereignty in his immersion with nature, the more violent the confrontation with the limits of this state of subjectivity appears.

This clash with material and social reality occurs suddenly. One day, when he drifts along as usual in silent inner contemplation, a large Grand Danois runs crazy in front of a coach. Rousseau is too late to jump aside, falls to the ground, is run over by the huge dog, and almost as well by the coach. He is struck unconscious and does not feel or remember anything, only what other people tell

him gives him access to this truly vegetative state of body and mind. After being nursed by kind people, he wakes up covered in bruises. The whole incident is “too singular in its description to be passed over” (161). However, what he relates is not the accident as such, but the surprising and ecstatic re-appropriation of his bodily senses, his acute sense of being present in the world. The body has, behind his back as it were, through his meditative solitude reinstalled him in the physical and social world of humans.

Together with this return to a sense of situated embodiment, also the joy of and need for language come back in order to qualify his solitude as specifically his. Yet, to maintain his solitary pleasures the immediate flow of thoughts and words from the beginning (152, 156) will no longer suffice. It becomes a “project” (177) to describe “the habitual state of [his] soul, in the strangest position any mortal can possibly be found” (156) in, although this is only meant for himself, as he says repeatedly in the second promenade, which is mainly preoccupied with the incident. But when language is introduced, one can never just write for oneself, and in the third promenade, he is more hesitant. The clear intention of solitary writing is now reduced to wishful thinking in passages with expressions of doubt and rhetorical questions. Yet, already the episode with the dog has exposed the problem. The story, he claims, is completely credible (163), but being both unconscious for a while and ignorant of details, Rousseau can only establish his self-address by way of paraphrases of what others have related to him and also to a larger public. Hence, it is beyond his control to decide what is credible or not. He is unable to control all kinds of gossip about the event that now circulate in Paris, even assumptions about his death which are forcing him to show up to prove the contrary.

The oscillation between two incompatible positions is experienced with the same amount of joy and woe: embodiment and spiritual solitude, silence and the proliferation of language. If Dante’s symbolic journey uses solitude to represent the paradoxical encounter with boundaries of the human life world within the cosmos he is part of, Rousseau’s ambulating solitude represents the paradoxical encounter with the boundaries of the social life world he cannot escape, presented in an inward-looking contemplation, which is to flourish later during Romanticism.

### 3.3 Choice

The next example concerns a more modern figure, solitary by deliberate choice, not forced out of the community like Rousseau. Per Sidenius, the protagonist in Danish Nobel laureate Henrik Pontoppidan’s novel *Lucky Per* (*Lykke-Per*, 1899–1904) heads for Switzerland as part of his education at the Technical University. At the same time he needs to come to terms with his doubts about the relationship



with his rich fiancée and his future career as an engineer. Against advice from the locals, he sets out one day, “[alone], without a guide” (219)<sup>2</sup> into the solitude of the Alps. What Per experiences is neither an organized cosmos he can represent like Dante or a vegetative nature he can dream about like Rousseau, but the foreignness of the sublime landscape of ice and stone, beyond human proportions (Ferguson).

And yet, he is silently comparing himself to the age-old tradition of hermits: “the old prophets, in moments of doubt and weakness of will, sought out the isolation of the wilderness” (220; Naudin). Like Paz’s narcissistic youngster, Auster’s A., and Crane’s Henry, Per in his absolute solitude also immerses himself into the broad tradition of transforming a solitary person into a shared symbol. The ascent to the summit is his own choice, but the culturally charged symbolic meaning of his gesture automatically follows suit. Up there, he does not speak a word, but the higher he gets the emptier, more silent, and non-human the landscape becomes. Precisely when he is pushed to the limits of human language, it imposes itself on him as an interior dialogue, mirroring his existential doubts. Questions to himself in his own words blend in with the discourse of the Old Testament. Linguistically, his solitude on the margins of a human life world is a tightrope walk between his absolutely solitary inner world and the large cultural stock of terms for precisely this situation with a general perspective:

Per remembered how one of the pastors who spoke over his father’s coffin had called the stillness in nature “God’s voice” ... No, the truth was that face to face with the empty and soundless universe the mind was seized by the “horror vacui” which the ancients saw behind everything ... Time seemed to shrink so amazingly at the sight of these stiff clumps of rocks resting in eternal indifference, so naked and untouched, just as they were a few millions years when “issuing,” as they say, “from the Creator’s hand.” The Creator? You mean the burning cloud and the dissolving solar system? And behind that? Emptiness! Emptiness! Ice cold – the stillness of death. (220–221)

The dialogue with himself is turned into a dialogue with collective meanings of solitude from cultural history of which he cannot opt out, even in the desolated mountains.

His body also touches its limits. He loses his breath and, similar to Crane’s Henry, his perception becomes unclear preventing him from finding the right terms to capture what he sees. Instead, he both recurses to mythological meanings and relies on his modern calculative language of science, measuring the age of the stony terrain to four million years (220). The self-chosen solitude generates two experiences that touch the margins of body and language. On the one hand, an increasing feeling of emptiness beyond humanity related to death and other expressions of a sense of void. Yet, on the other hand an equally increasing proximity to religion and mythology inadvertently manifests itself, not as faith,

but as a reintegration into a larger collective cultural universe beyond his individual choice and control. When he descends again into the daily life of his Swiss village, he carries this collective vision with him as a paradoxical component of his self-chosen solitude in tune with the culture of European individualism (Bauman; Watt; Taylor). Per is obviously contemporary with Ibsen's *Stockmann*, which might very well be attributable to the fact that Pontoppidan was an avid reader of both Ibsen and Søren Kierkegaard.

### 3.4 Circumstance

One place where this paradox of individualism is alive is the metropolis, which, since the eighteenth century, is a *topos* in modern literature. Already René Descartes, the father of solipsism (Dunn), took note of the city in his *Discourse on Method* (*Discours de la méthode*, 1637): "amidst this great mass of busy people who are more concerned with their own affairs than curious about other people's, I have been able to lead a life as solitary and withdrawn as if I were in the most remote desert" (14). The paradoxical solitude of the modern city is obvious: here, one is alone because there are many people and because other people vanish into an anonymous mass. This situation is a recurring theme in modern literature as the paradox of solitude in the twentieth and twenty-first century. In contrast to the previous three types, the particularity of this solitude is its circumstantial contingency, a general condition for human life which can be experienced accidentally by everybody, anywhere, at any time in trivial situations of everyday life.

The protagonist of Henry Roth's novel *Call It Sleep* (1934), young David Schearl, finds himself in one such situation. The Schearls are Jewish immigrants, arriving in New York City in 1907 from Galicia, present day Ukraine. Eventually, they end up in the urban hustle of the ethnically diverse Lower East Side. David is profoundly scared by the city, but he also, somewhat hesitantly, seeks out the company of other kids from the streets which are reverberating with a variety of languages. Broken English is the *lingua franca* of everybody. In David's home Yiddish and Polish are the first languages, although David does not understand Polish. For David the safest place on earth is next to his gentle and patient mother Genya, away from his grumpy father Albert. She filters for him what he has to know about their past of which he has no memories of his own. Here he belongs, while outside he is on his own in a profound but unarticulated state of solitude which eventually also takes over his domestic life.

One day David, now aged five, is in the kitchen as usual, sitting on the floor near Genya and her sister Bertha. His presence is forgotten by the two sisters who talk about painful memories from Galicia. These memories also involve David,

although he only vaguely intuits what the conversation is all about, in a lack of comprehension exacerbated by the women's mix of Polish with Yiddish. David is the eyes and ears of the narrator, but as the narrator also offers fragments of the conversation in direct speech, which David does not quite apprehend, the adult reader has no difficulty in grasping what the women are talking about. The topic is Genya's love affair with David's biological father, a Christian organist, a *goy*, which released an unspeakable shame in the Jewish community. This, the reader understands, was the reason for Genya's marriage to Albert and their emigration.

David only understands that something about him and his beloved mother is hidden, and this secret now alienates him even from her, his sanctuary, simply because he happens to be in a place where he should not have been at that moment, without having the courage to make his presence known. All alone, he has to make a combined linguistic and conceptual translation beyond his abilities, his language breaks up and his solitary bewilderment takes over: "With the same suddenness as before, meaning scaled the horizon to another idiom, leaving David stranded on a sounding but empty shore ... It seemed to him, lying there almost paralyzed with the strain, that his mind would fly apart if he brought no order into this confusion" (197). Accidentally, David's usual safe place in the kitchen is transformed into an alienating embodied solitude. He can only watch the estranged bodily reaction of his beloved mother while talking but he cannot move or talk for fear of being discovered. The general solitude of the city is now extended to his small collective safe haven, amplified by his united bodily and linguistic inability.

#### 4. Human Solitude as Performance

Even withdrawn to a hut or to the high Alps, both Henry and Per, while speaking to themselves, shape their speech acts as an address to someone, just like Paz's young man addresses himself through the mirror, and Auster's A. in his enclosure enters a larger field of memory and history. Dante and Rousseau are no exceptions to this performative imperative, and also young David enters a common world by performing his solitude in a relentless self-questioning which generates no answers. In his world all are solitary, like scattered television viewers watching the same show in the billions, but each "alone together" in their own cubicle (Todorov). None of them can avoid performing the paradox of solitude in body and language as a social and cultural experience of the boundary of a shared human existence (Larsen, *Desert*).

To avoid the paradox, there are two options: leave human society altogether or return back from the fringes of society to its center. Young Chris McCandless makes the first choice, Romulus Ledbetter the second. In 1992, McCandless vanished in Alaska in a search for absolute solitude, in a vain escape from a world

with ubiquitous human footprints. Had it not been for Jon Krakauer's book *Into the Wild* (1999), which was turned into a movie of the same title by Sean Penn in 2007, only few people would have learned about the young man's disappearance. He seems to have been an intelligent and sociable fellow but at a certain point he sought absolute solitude, which eventually led to his death. Nevertheless, and in order to carry out his plans, he needed first to write a few notes to friends and relatives, to buy a car, fuel, and food, scribble a diary, and also at the end send an SOS from the great snowy void. In his gesture of ultimate solitude, he could not avoid performing it for others, leaving social traces behind.

Romulus Ledbetter is the weird protagonist of George Dawes Green's novel *The Caveman's Valentine* (1994), which was also adapted to film by Kasi Lemmons in 2001. Ledbetter is a mentally disturbed loner, who has left a family and a career as a pianist behind. Physically he lives in a cave in Inwood Park in New York, mentally in a world of angels, demons, and strange beings, obsessed by the idea that an imaginary financier haunts him and the entire society. One day he finds a dead body of another homeless frozen stiff on the threshold of his cave. Spurred by a surviving sense of moral obligation, but mixed with his obsessive ideas of spurious scheming everywhere, he gets involved in a search of the murderer through the ordinary social world. Paradoxically, with the crime as trigger, the investigation is Romulus's passage back to a kind of normality he will not be able to escape again. In front of the entrance to his cave, and blocking his access to it, a crowd has gathered, including journalists and cameramen. He has involuntarily, but by his own doing, become public property. The media are ready to perform his solitude for the general public.

In a society penetrated by global interconnectedness, the cultivation of individualism and particularism proliferates and presents us with the increasingly astute paradox of solitude. There is permanent oscillation between complete withdrawal and the return to society, without the possibility of making a clear choice between them. McCandless and Ledbetter both represent the hope that a choice is available, but ultimately this is exposed as a pipe dream. In modern culture, each of us is alone with this shared predicament. Contemporary literature across the world is a global reflection on and of that condition.

## Notes

1. All quotations are checked with versions in the original languages and quoted from the English translations listed in the bibliography, in some cases with a few modifications.
2. 'Alone' is added here from the Danish text to underline the radical nature of Per's solitude.

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Kevin L. Cope

# **The Enigmatic and the Ecological: American Late Enlightenment Hermits and the Pursuit of, in Addition to Happiness, Permanence**

**Abstract:** The ‘happiness’ following ‘the pursuit of’ included hermits. This essay examines the mix of stereotypes and values comprising the ideal of the recluse. The linking of secluded life with happy old age is viewed through the window of treatises on life extension. A coda addresses the persistence of the healthy geriatric hermit into the present.

## **1. High Ages and Low Populations: Assembling the Idea of the Hermit**

Age and isolation are about numbers. For those aspiring after longevity, adequate aging involves amalgamating numerous years of life. For hermits and other isolated persons, numbers are small. Unless one counts the occasional visiting squirrel, the population in an anchorage seldom exceeds one. “Numbers,” an infrequently quoted biblical book, looks at the contrast of high and low numbers – at the convergence of age, durability, individuality, and loneliness – in the person of the long-living Moses. Asked to restrain rampant growth in the population of scriptural commentators, Moses exclaims, “would God that all the LORD’S people were prophets” (“Numbers” 11:29), calling, in exasperation, for everyone to become a lone voice in what promises to become a busy wilderness. Prophet, leader, sage, elder statesman, orphan, food service expert, hydrodynamics engineer, and short-term hermit (in virtue of his stay atop Mount Sinai with only occasional visits from Yahweh), Moses epitomizes the cliché linkage between robust old age, singularity, talent, exiled living conditions, and status as a sage, prophet, or saint. The connection among these attributes would seem to fall somewhat short of what Immanuel Kant would deem an analytic proposition. There is nothing inherent in age that confers wisdom, nothing inherent in wisdom that guarantees longevity, and nothing inherent in any of these that requires residing in remote grottos. The coalescing of interlocking stereotypes about wise, old, vigorous, isolated persons required many centuries and involved many metamorphoses. Some of the most interesting of which occur in the American ‘long eighteenth century.’ As American exceptionalism took root in the post-revolutionary mind, old notions about wise, old, vital solitaries enjoyed a new lease on life. The extreme yet

admirable lifestyle of backwoods prophets suggested that something novel and unprecedented, whether an odd character in the woods or the entire American nation, might become eternal (*per novus ordo seclorum*) – that a small number of colonists might create a nation vastly larger than the mother country. If so remote a phenomenon as eremitic life could have a background, that background would surely include some of the grander ideals of the American Enlightenment, including the mandate, inspired by John Locke (II.xxi.51), for the pursuit of happiness, a pursuit that took a very literal form as displaced or distressed or simply disoriented persons pursued permanent if modest felicity in far-away hovels. The great public culture of the Enlightenment, after all, did not include specific quantitative goals or achievement metrics. Perhaps calm pleasure and orderly life for one loner in the outback would prove more congruent with Enlightenment goals than would the partial satisfaction of ten thousand citizens on the streets of Paris.

America's early hermits embodied the hope for permanence and sustainability: for perpetual, harmless, and small-impact productivity. This aspiration lingers with us in the contemporary environmentalist movement and in the practices of recent recluses. This essay will look at the first days of the coordinated stereotyping of hermits: at the associating of extreme old age with remote dwellings, exclusion from human conversation, commitment to ecological stewardship, and status as visionary. The essay will also review an assortment of eighteenth-century literary discourses about health and longevity that underwrite the early American interest in hermits. It will conclude with a look at the persistence and transformation of old, eccentric, vigorous, and wise hermits in twentieth- and twenty-first-century American popular culture.

## **2. Inadvertent Antiquity: The Artful Ecology of Accidental Anchorites**

Not every long-living person in the eighteenth century elicited admiration. Richard Graves, an English poet who prematurely billed himself as a nonagenarian and who set himself up as an advisor on life extension, mentions a certain “Father Macaire” who, “aged 108, in good health, walked upright, smoaked tobacco, drank a glass of brandy every morning, in the latter part of his life” (140). A character such as Father Macaire does many naughty but simple deeds. Hermits, by contrast, evidence complex virtue or novelty while also minimizing merit. Despite their multidirectional resourcefulness, hermits get by on very little, doing a few things very well. That very obscurity, that ability to lay down a big footprint with few resources, positions the hermit on the line of discovery for an expansionist nation preoccupied with efficiently exploring frontiers.



The premier hermit discovery of the revolutionary period occurred in late 1785, when Captain James Buckland and Mr. John Fielding set out from Virginia on a pedestrian journey of exploration into the uncharted western outskirts of America. In the published account of their journey, *A Wonderful Discovery of a Hermit, who Lived Upwards of Two Hundred Years* (1786), the narrator affirms that hermits are made for discoverers, that, like the laws of nature or the economies of an ecosystem, hermits lie in wait for finders. An undiscovered hermit, after all, does little good, either for those who would learn from his or her example or for those who would profit from publishing travel narratives. Most of the Buckland-Fielding account centers on preparation and equipment for the adventure – on the set-up for the surprise discovery. Planning to “explore the regions which belong to these United States, which are yet unknown to us” (4), Buckland and Fielding probe regions that are newly incorporated American territory and yet also mysterious vacancies. Into this mixture of the planned and the preternatural, the forensic and the foreign, they enter heavily laden, bringing along two “hearty slaves, armed with muskets,” an understanding of “Trigonometry,” and a compass (4). Buckland and Fielding wander in a purposive, guided fashion, as if making a beeline to the precise point where a discovery will occur. Their habit of partial preparation for the fully unknown extends even to provisioning, which centers less on food than on procedures – on seasonings suitable for cooking whatever might come along. Their journey mixes the natural and practical with the fantastic and visionary. En route, Buckland and Fielding “made several important discoveries of Gold and Silver mines, an account of which will be published soon” (4). Neither mineralogy nor dreams of wealth, neither material greed nor forward-looking imagination nor any other distractions, can slow their compass-guided walk of “73 days without the least appearance, or even tract of any human being” (4) into a supra-temporal world beyond both cartography and normal human endurance. The narrator repeatedly stresses the ecological abundance of a scene festooned with “trees of all kinds and sizes” and “amazing thickets of small pine, hemlocks, and ivies” populated by “wild animals of almost every kind” as if to demonstrate, epochs before the invention of the political and scientific meanings of the term, “diversity” (4–5). Working their way through this somewhat overgrown version of the garden of Eden, the two explorers reach “the summit of an high mountain ... it was the most beautiful prospect imaginable: On every side as far as they could possibly see, they beheld the green groves waving by the gentle gales of wind” (5). Buckland and Fielding cross this elevated boundary between the familiar and the unexpected, descend through verdant fields for no less than two and one-half miles, and come across a narrow path leading to a cavernous dwelling and a soon-to-be-famous hermit.

Whether or not they attempted to find subject matter for a thirty-year bestseller, the Buckland-Fielding narrative reveals that this hermit is stage-set and ready for performance, in large measure owing to his divergence from set patterns for classic, saintly recluses. The anchorites of Catholic legend prayed, hoped, and lived on alms or miracles. The secular, American hermit that Buckland and Fielding discover has devised a survival system that combines the picturesque with the practical and the aesthetic with the ecological. The lead-up to the discovery, in which Buckland and Fielding slip over a high ridge into the visionary world of expanding America, is only one hint that their hermit is a lead player in revolutionary environmentalist theater. Either by plan or default, the hermit frames his work so as to direct attention to the systematic, ecologically correct character of his procedures while also displaying the aesthetic merits of his picturesque lifestyle. The title-page woodcut illustrates not the hermit's life as expounded in the text, but, rather, his initial shipwreck (fig. 1). This rough illumination positions an iconic representation of normal social life, the (now wrecked) ship, in the distance. In the foreground stands a Robinson Crusoe-like figure who has salvaged survival equipment (guns, swords, knives) and who seems to be looking out of the frame toward a future destination and a new (non-)social order.<sup>1</sup> The path to the hermit's lair nestles, as if framed, "between two high ridges of rocks"; aligned "high trees" amplify this framing effect; painterly light arising from "the sun being in the western hemisphere" ensures dramatic illumination; the hermit's "Cave," an "arch which gave a small light," suggests planned, gothic architecture rather than telluric upheaval; and the "ornamented" "outside" of the dwelling emerges from a *ciarscuro* shading (Buckland and Fielding 5–8). As I have argued elsewhere, both the theory and practice of environmentalism operate within a museum mentality: through the careful selection and studied highlighting of aesthetically appealing subsets of natural systems that, in their wondrous complexity, remain beyond the powers of human science (312–15). So with the hermit's tale, the immensity of the landscape counterpoints an artful rendering of an attractive but small, local, and solitary survival system.

From this artful systematicity arises the secular, enlightenment character of the 'wonderful hermit.' Old-fashioned, religious anchorites such as Julian of Norwich or Robert of Knaresborough depended on alms and the grace of god for life support. Their narrative and aesthetic interest abides in their spiritual endeavors. The modern wonderful hermit regards survival itself as a good and as a goal, derives wisdom from sheer durability, and extracts beauty from environmental stewardship. A traditional saint achieves immortality by ignoring the flesh and spurning the system that supports it; a modern hermit lives a long time and draws applause by enshrining environmental management. Living "alone in contemplation of the

works of nature” (Buckland and Fielding 10) like some misplaced Royal Society virtuoso, the hermit situates himself in a naturally occurring, self-organizing orchard (8). Necessity and the quasi-providential direction of nature together impose an innovative diet rich in fiber: “bark, roots, acorns, and several kinds of fruit unknown to them” (8). To this diet, the hermit attributes his “long life” which otherwise he “cannot account for,” crediting the nutritional plan to “the blessing of Heaven” but also noting that his own veterinary diplomacy allows for a detente with the animal kingdom, which never “offers violence to him” (10). This tacit appropriation of supernatural providence through subtly systematic action is a mainstay of modern ecological thinking, which rejoices in the godlike immensity of nature while calling for modest, helping interventions – for human-directed sustainability programs that allegedly assist the bewilderingly sophisticated operations of nature on a local level.<sup>2</sup> The hermit, after all, seldom takes nature at face value. Although surrounded by prey, “he *chose* not to eat any flesh” (9, emphasis added). Through his pluck, the hermit always ends up on the winning side of providence and always finds his way into life-support systems that improve on the normal capacities of nature. Although not a sailor and although completely at nature’s mercy when his ship founders, he and his mates somehow make the right decision to let the shift drift; going the currents one better, ‘Heaven brought me [the hermit] to the place where you found me” (10). The hermit, it turns out, is a respectable member of the middle class whose social ambitions led him into an ennobling affection for a “Nobleman’s daughter” (9). The hermit, in sum, has a record of beating the odds and of going providence one (but only one) better: of converting what appears to be circumstance into rudimentary systems for advancement of one kind of another. The modest if wonderful hermit, who has not even bequeathed his name to history, marks a turning point in the history of both culture and science. He dwells at a strange moment of both confidence and modesty when those living in an increasingly secular society begin to recognize the unexpected complexity of nature while continuing to imagine that they could ramp up its productivity – that they could create, if not personal immortality, at least an environment that would run efficiently and nearly on its own forever.

### **3. Physicians for Freaks: The Medical Basis of Hermit Longevity**

‘Forever,’ unfortunately, was not fully operational in the wonderful hermit’s medical or social vocabulary. Shortly after the Buckland-Fielding expedition, another erudite wanderer, Dr. Samuel Brake of Boston, set out in search of the 228-year-old hermit. Dr. Brake induced a quick conclusion to the hermit’s long story by offering

the healthy codger a swig of rum, which mortally inflamed the constitution of a loner accustomed only to simple fare. Dr. Brake's ill-fated visit was not without its spin-off benefits. As if to illustrate the long-range improvements wrought by the hermit's inadvertent management of nature and providence, Dr. Brake "discovered a certain Root never before known nor heard of before, which proves a remedy for all diseases" (*An Account*). Dr. Brake adds certain details concerning the hermit's lifestyle, including the hermit's habit of walking with a special gait, "in a slow and grave manner" and the increasing familiarity of the hermit with visitors (*An Account*). From Dr. Brake, we learn that the hermit is not quite so simple as seems, that he plays up the convergence of nature and art by writing his compositions on natural media such as "barks of trees" and "skins made into a kind of Parchment" (*An Account*). This para-literary activity has been aided by a small collection of books rescued from his ship. A sequel probably intended to reap extra profits from the market for the Buckland-Fielding account or perhaps to promote medicaments decocted from the newly discovered "Root," Dr. Brake's story amplifies the incipient ideological elements in the original discovery narrative. It focuses on the ways in which the hermit, in a naive or unconscious fashion, pushes the system of nature to higher levels of scientific import, economic productivity, and aesthetic power. Dr. Brake's continuation of the Buckland-Fielding tale introduces a climactic component to the story and tightens the frame around this odd picture. The pre-modern notion of a divine order of nature subsides into a nature-ordering, philosophically secular individual: a hermit who, by industry and accident, has milked nature for all that it is worth.

The wonderful hermit would surely have been surprised to find his long tale coopted into a climactic advertisement for science and medicine. The hermit's strange elegy was not, however, all that far off key in a period that regularly intoned verse lays about not only the power of science or the wonders of medicine, but about the regimens by which ordinary persons could maximize the gifts of nature by way of promoting longevity. Treatises on health with an emphasis on longevity abounded in the American book trade. A review of popular books on health published in America in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth century reveals a striking similarity between the hermit lifestyle and physicians recommendations. British medical literature abounds in quacks and mountebanks promoting assorted remedies or pushing panaceas – one thinks, for example, of Dr. Solomon and his tablets against sexually transmitted diseases or of Bishop Berkeley and his enthusiasm for tar water – but American audiences favor volumes that endorse spare, clean, uncluttered, outdoors living as a means of extending life.

Popular American medical treatises fall into two categories: encyclopedic volumes reviewing the history and success rate of assorted medical regimens, and verse expositions of the medical and life improvement potential of sundry lifestyles. The most comprehensive of these volumes expatiated on practices that formed the core of American hermit life. The American edition of Swiss physician Samuel Tissot's *Advice to People in General, with Regard to their Health (Avis au peuple sur sa santé, 1761)*, with notes and commentaries by Dr. Kirkpatrick, focused on the nervous disorders that emerged from overly cultured life; George Wallis's *The Art of Preventing Diseases, and Restoring Health, Founded on Rational Principles, and Adapted to Every Capacity (1794)* lauded self-discipline and suggested that every man or woman could live according to health-inducing philosophical principles; *Concise Observations on the Nature of our Common Food, so Far as it Tends to Promote or Injure Health (1787)*, published under the pseudonym Gentleman of the Faculty, promoted and damned the various simple or over-refined foods that today elicit similarly favorable or adverse medical judgments. Some of these tomes include details that, in their original, British context might have been but one passing recommendation but that, in the context of the nascent American enthusiasm for the simple life, come to the center of attention. For medical advisor and melancholy maven George Cheyne, the spotlight falls on wardrobe reduction and temperature hardiness. Cheyne's *An Essay on Health and Long Life (1813)* advises that "[t]he fewer cloathes one uses, the hardier he will be. Flannel and great loads of cloaths by day or night, relax the fibres, and promote only sweating, instead of natural and beneficial perspiration" (188). A.F.M. Willich's *Lectures on Diet and Regimen (1800)* delves into the deep history of life extension with special emphasis on lifestyle adjustment and healthful comestibles. Willich offers a taxonomy of treatments and regimens proposed by theorists and practitioners from Plutarch and Paracelsus to Böhme and Boerhaave. He provides an array of exemplary tales such as that of Cornaro the Venetian, who flourished on twelve ounce of food per day until his friends insisted on supplementary rations. In contrast to the wonderful hermit, Cornaro recovered from the overload, returned to his austere diet, and lived into his hundreds (xxii–xxiii, 94–98). In Benjamin Grosvenor's *Health: An Essay on its Nature, Value, Uncertainty, Preservation, and Best Improvement (1761)*, we find a similar cache of didactical anecdotes, including an account of King Louis XIV's obsession with life extension, an anecdote which shows the centrality of longevity to eighteenth-century high culture (24–25). Far and away the most spectacular effort in this genre is Sir John Hill's *The Old Man's Guide to Health and Longer Life (1775)*, a book-length account of multitudinous measures that geriatrics may take to prolong their lives. The loquacious Hill, whose six-decade lifespan seems on the

short side for an advisor on longevity, recommends a regimen of fresh air, exercise, nourishment from the bottom end of the food chain, and remaining, after retirement, in familiar circumstances. The highly urban Hill, who spent his life writing primarily for the London market but who developed European and transatlantic followings, joins with the publishers of the wonderful hermit accounts in portraying a ridiculously detailed simple life – Hill’s cascading recommendations address everything from the choice between pineapple and cucumbers to the best hour of the day for horseback riding – that is best seen and understood from afar, in the same way that readers in Boston admired the clean lifestyle of a frontier hermit positioned at the end of a grueling seventy-three day march.

The easy confluence of medical advice, lifestyle suggestions, low-key philosophy, and wonder narrative that occurs in the hermit stories results from the expectation, among eighteenth-century audiences, that all of these are as much matters of aesthetic as of scientific or moral admiration. Looking at a hermit from far away or gazing in awe at healthy centenarians or marveling at the design of nature requires a degree of aesthetic detachment and even hypocrisy. Audiences for both hermit stories and medical treatises take an intense interest in lifestyles or regimens or treatments that they never intend to practice. A second sub-genre of longevity literature features verse appreciations of healthy long lives as seen in the long view. In these compositions, healthy life becomes ornamental in the same way that the wonderful hermit’s beard becomes a museum display (*An Account*). Anti-masturbation crusader John Armstrong’s *The Art of Preserving Health* (1745) converts medical recommendations into evocative pictures of far-away paradisaical environments. Recommending “the choice of water” over corrupting beverages, Armstrong quickly moves from the specific health benefits of this most elemental fluid to a veritable landscape painting of a revitalizing (and distant) mountain stream:

The lucid stream,  
 O’er rocks rebounding, or for many a mile  
 Hurld down the pebbly channel, wholsome yields  
 And mellow draughts; except when winter thaws,  
 And half the mountains melt into the tide. (II: 406–19)

Another Britisher with a long-term American following, Edward Baynard, extends his own poem “Health” (1719) with a cosmological perspective on water, which he also regards as the beverage of choice:

Cease then, vain Search! Let that alone,  
 Hid, with all Essences unknown;  
 But be content that the *Creator*,  
 Has blest the World with so much *Water*.

It works itself (as being thin)  
 Int' all the Pores and parts within;  
 Helps all the *Secretions* [sic] in their Uses,  
 And sweetens sharp and sowre Juices. (signature C3)

The remarkably flexible Baynard moves rapidly up and down the scales of abstraction and distance, rendering water as everything from the primeval outpouring of the great creator to the solution for pH-unbalanced secretions. This rapid change of scale, a transformation so instantaneous that it at once astonishes and seems to pass unnoticed, is exactly the same technique employed in hermit narratives, in which grand topics such as longevity, panaceas, morality, and the comparative value of social and solitary life weave in and out of crazy yarns about quirky recluses with bald heads, creaky physiques, and bizarre lodgings. Formally and procedurally, there is little difference between a long-living lunatic in the woods who fancies that he has decrypted the universe and a modest, low-lying liquid that can account for everything from the early days of creation to the immediate disposal of bodily wastes.

#### 4. Democracy and Easy Access to the Extreme: Nearby Hermits and Growing Audiences

The relation between eighteenth-century hermits and eighteenth-century health-and-longevity theorists is reciprocal. The time-absorbing regimens prescribed by medical theorists lead to unusual lifestyles that tend to isolate their increasingly fanatical, eventually unbearable practitioners. Like Daniel Defoe's fictional castaway Robinson Crusoe, those living in isolation must do more and more in order to meet their needs and to function as full-service societies of one. Those committed to unique life-extension programs get pushed beyond the margins of society; conversely, solitaries on the margins of society find ways to make their quirky lifestyles function like the complex life-support system of civilization.

Residing at a great physical distance from populated areas is thus less crucial to the attainment of hermit status than is the somewhat paradoxical aspiration to what might be called 'simulated totality': to creating the impression, illusion, or possibly reality not only of self-sufficiency, but of a high degree of complexity in economic, agricultural, and cultural organization, all while lauding isolation. Civilization is an icon of immortality – for the survival of cultural legacies beyond individual lives. The simulated totality of hermits' domestic and cultural economies expresses in condensed form the full range of amenities, whether durability or safety or variety or productivity or medical proficiency, that civilization provides in less concentrated forms.

Two of the most famous hermits of the post-revolutionary period, Robert Voorhis and Amos Wilson, lived in close proximity to populous communities, indeed occasionally moved their rough lodgings owing to growing crowds of visitors, advisees, and curiosity-seekers. Voorhis lived on the estate of a philanthropic planter and enjoyed tenant farming privileges on his own plot of land, all of which gives a mixed impression of both self-sufficiency and tenuous membership in society. Yet the bizarre agricultural regimen that Voorhis followed, which involved careful planting followed by premature “plucking” of produce from the earth and then frenetically flinging baby vegetables to casually calling cattle, baffles bypassers and marks Voorhis as an outsider (7–8). As is the case with the wonderful hermit, interior design, especially passively managed lighting, insinuates that the hermit’s commitment to long-term self-sufficiency is partly intended to instruct an audience:

In winter he seldom emerges from his solitary mansion, but silently and patiently waits for time to introduce the vernal Spring, and to bring about that joyful season, when once more he can move around the adjacent woodlands and meads. The rays of the sun never enter the portals of his domicile [sic], and at mid-day it assumes all the darkness of mid-night. Content with his situation, and at peace with all, he quietly looks forward to the arrival of that day, when he shall “bid the waking world good night,” and find in countries unexplored, that happiness which life has denied him. (8)

Living in a setting that recalls an illustration from an emblem book or an environment from a gothic novel, Voorhis presents himself as a living lesson for an implied set of students. Born of one African and one “pure white Englishman,” Voorhis incorporates the mixture of dark and light while also savoring of the supernatural. “About 60 years old,” certainly a respectable age for a freed slave with a hard life behind him, the apparently timeless Robert’s “features” are “perfectly regular,” although his complexion has darkened over the years owing to the smoke in his cell, where light and shadow, star-measured time and unknown eternity, routinely reconcile. Voorhis manages to do precise if offbeat needlework, patching together clothes that, despite their irregular origins, parodically resemble the uniforms of his majesty’s military (27–28). Burlesque exaggeration to the point of successful imitation is Voorhis’s fundamental pedagogical strategy. His wacky farming and ranching practices underline his unexpected success at getting his living; his appearance suggests that his dangerously healthy lifestyle – his commingling of intense if bewildering farming and dietary practices with a low-stress lifestyle that verges on the dark silences of eternity – is something to which everyone might aspire.

Wilson, “the “Pennsylvania Hermit,” goes even farther than Voorhis when it comes to solitary simulation of a society from which he has excluded himself and when it comes to attainment of provisional immortality and hypothetical audience through interlocking eccentric regimens. Wilson, who withdrew from the



world following a tragic story in which he delivered a pardon for his condemned sister only a few seconds too late, finds his way to the exact boundary between civilization and frontier: to a cave dwelling circa twelve miles from Harrisburg, neither so close to populations as Voorhis's cell nor so miraculously remote as the wonderful hermit's distant lodging. Wilson takes advantage of his rocky resources to set up a miniature manufacturing industry, "making millstones which were disposed of by the writer [his biographer], and the proceeds expended for such necessities as his situation required," although "much of his time was, however, devoted to reading and writing," especially of "the bible and other religious works" (20–21). All by his solitary self, Wilson holds together an array of contradictions, engaging through an intermediary in the industrial economy while focusing on eternity and while running a factory out in a dent in a distant rock wall. Wilson's demise continues the theme of immortality through hard work within time but away from other people: "His exit must have been very sudden: as he was left, the evening before in tolerable health, by the writer. In a corner of his cave was found a bunch of manuscripts, among which was that of which the contents of the following pages is an exact copy" (23). Although Wilson seems to have vanished in a flash, his mixed material and spiritual production systems have continued posthumously. The means of literary production remain engaged; "the writer," who is also Wilson's millstone wholesaler, continues the post mortem editing and distribution of Wilson's compositions. Wilson's final jottings became a late-release book, *The Sweets of Solitude!* (1822), in which Wilson enthuses over the joys of a solitary life but takes a pragmatic approach to the extension of his lifestyle to humanity in general: "In my solitary abode, secluded from the society of mankind, what pleasures have I enjoyed in contemplating the goodness of the Almighty; and should my life be prolonged to double the number of years which I have already passed, I would prefer a secluded life to that of mingling with the inhabitants of a world producing so many temptations" (22–23). Yet "[t]o talk of abstracting ourselves from matters, laying aside body, and being resolved, as it were, into pure intellect is proud, metaphysical, unmeaning jargon; but to abstract ourselves from the prejudices and habits and pleasures and business of the world is no more than many are, though all are not capable of doing" (24). Always seeking the middle ground even from his improbable situation in a cave on the edge of the wildwood, Wilson domesticates the metaphysical dimension of anchoritic life while identifying a small subset of the general population that could benefit from "the sweets of solitude." Wilson claims a moderate immortality through a quasi-saintly, assumption-like disappearance and through the release of long-living advice to a part of the population. Secular and yet mysterious, economic and yet isolated, healthy and yet deceased, present and yet absent, Wilson summarizes the American isolation experience

while setting the stage for the not-so-isolated pop hermits who both delight and dismay the subcultures of our time.

## 5. Coda: The Modern Media-Savvy Solitary

By the twentieth century, some aspects of the anchoritic life had grown familiar, having been invisibly integrated into the continuing evolution of American expansionism and exceptionalism. A typical case of the fusion of extreme oddity with cultural centrality is Gypsy Boots, a pseudonym for Robert Bootzin (fig. 2). Beginning in the 1930s, Boots began an irregular career of highly publicized outdoor residences in haystacks, canyons, and public parks around California, especially in the media-saturated Los Angeles area. For a time, he dwelled in Tahquitz Canyon, south of Palm Springs, living off the land, preaching a natural diet, and attracting several followers or “tribesmen” (“California’s”). Like the gregarious hermits of earlier times, Boots advocated for a generically natural diet by way of extending life. He published two books, *Bare Feet and Good Things to Eat* (1965) and *The Gypsy in Me* (1993), the cumulative renown of which established him as a regular figure on the television talk show circuit and procured him occasional minor roles in Hollywood films. Taking as his slogan ‘don’t panic, think organic,’ Boots conducted regular back-to-nature tours of quasi-natural urban recreational sites such as Griffith Park and the Hollywood Hills, thereby realizing a new and somewhat unexpected version of American egalitarianism in which everyone could live an eremitic lifestyle for a short and convenient time, with easy access to automobile parking near the would-be anchorage. Boots stands out among the many *Naturmenschen* who populated west coast metroplexes during the mid-century (Barragan) owing to his remarkable ability to pass as a solitary despite being a media phenomenon – Boots even served as the topic of a hit pop song, “Nature Boy” (1948) by superstar singer Nat King Cole – and owing to his aggressive yet buoyant reaffirmation of the old American hope for clear correlations between diet, longevity, isolation, and rural, even forest life.

The success of Boots as a professional, celebrity hermit – as a lone figure who demolished the notion that solitary life necessarily means living alone or far away and as a cult leader who vended the image of healthy solo lifestyles without much of the substance or inconvenience attending them – arose from his skill in assimilating elements of difficult ideological positions and acting out those simplified ideas in a simultaneously comical and fanatical way that large audiences found novel, amusing, and partly convincing. Boots thus updates the slightly awkward mix of lunatic theology and pop psychology that animates the writings by and about early American hermits such as Voorhis and Wilson.

Updating never ends. For the last half century, the tropes composing the hermit idiom have been re-amalgamated in assorted ways, many of which stress even more fervently than Boots and his contemporaries' low-demand American values such as ease, convenience, simplicity, and accessibility. Among the most popular of contemporary recluses is Eustace Conway, who, while a teenager, retreated into the Appalachian mountains. Unable or unwilling to hide his concealment, Conway became the topic of a slick biographical reflection by Elizabeth Gilbert, the best-selling author of *Eat, Pray, Love* (2006), picked up a reputation as "the last American man," and appears as a cast member in the History Channel series *Mountain Men* (2012-present). Conway runs a website where hermit lovers may schedule the superstar recluse for public speaking engagements or may arrange horse-and-buggy rides through his isolated dominion. Robert Harrill, the Fort Fisher Hermit, who philosophized from a bunker on the North Carolina coast, fell short of Conway's level of publicity owing only to living before the internet age. Harrill earned emoluments posing for pictures and ended up as the subject of the celebrated documentary film *The Fort Fisher Hermit: The Life and Death of Robert E. Harrill* (2004). Harrill, who began his eremitic life in his sixties, played on longevity and vitality themes at the same time that he reversed the usual process of seclusion, having descended from his former mountain habitat to take up residence in a more accessible beachside hovel. Specialist solitaires have also colonized niches of the hermit market. Leonard Knight retreated into the remote corners of the southern California desert to construct a polychromatic mountain celebrating the synonymy of god with love. Although Knight died at an old age in 2011, Salvation Mountain has persisted, has earned the patronage of a charitable foundation, attracts tourists, and supports a website. At Salvation Mountain, longevity and remoteness dramatically converge in a gargantuan monument to immortality that points up the absence of the loner who built it. Dominique LeFort retreated from a career as a clown in French circuses to settle in a small hut in remote Key West, from which he and a tribe of trained cats bicycle each day to island market squares to perform for tourists. Key to LeFort's appeal is his apparitional quality: his appearance, seemingly from nowhere, aboard a comical cat conveyance followed by his equally precipitous disappearance. LeFort markets souvenirs that emphasize his bizarre and yet readily observable lifestyle.

The case of specialist, often comical solitaires such as LeFort reminds us that suppressed comedy always attends the hermit idiom. Secretly, if impolitely, recluses, in their eccentric attire or amidst their unconventional daily rounds, strike viewers as slightly, if sadly, funny. That humorous strain has not gone undetected in mass media appropriations of the hermit idiom. The long-running situation comedy *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962–71) centers not only on one oddball, but on an entire isolated family: an ensemble of four mountain people or 'hillbillies' who,

having struck it rich, move to the west coast glamor community of Beverly Hills, where they attempt, farcically, to adapt their backwoods ways to modern conditions. Socially disintegrated, asexual, and far from the ideal American nuclear family, the Clampetts – an uncle, a grandmother (‘granny’), and two indefinitely related young people (‘cousins’) – live together in a somewhat jumbled family unit. Longevity and diet are central concerns: aging Uncle Jed is charged with “shootin’ for some food” (Flatt and Scruggs) while elderly Granny follows old-time, traditional cooking traditions and dispenses herbal medicines. Accessibility of the hermit family is also key insofar as the wealthy Clampett family not only lives at the center of fashionable culture but also drives the economy of Beverly Hills. A more sober but nonetheless tacitly comical updating of the isolated, long-living, mountain family appears in the recent Discovery Channel series, *Alaskan Bush People* (2014–present), in which the colorful Brown family struggles to maintain its lifestyle against natural challenges and encroaching modernization. Although the series is played very seriously, as a reality-show documentary about the rigors of the cold bush, the camera work emphasizes the picturesque character of the experience, inundating viewers with image after image of the patron, a relentlessly healthy bearded old hermit, performing feats of heavy labor or ingenuity that would daunt an ordinary person of half his age. Similar observations could be made about contemporary reality shows concerned with survival, whether *Survivorman* (2004–present) or *Dual Survival* (2010–present) or *Naked and Afraid* (2013–present) or *Fat Guys in the Woods* (2014–2015) or *Survivorman and Son* (a recurring subseries within *Survivorman*) or *Man vs. Wild* (2006–2011). In all these series, either one or a very small number of socially disconnected persons (for example, a pair who have never met one another), many of whom have exotic or extravagant backgrounds (for example, as special operations commandos), give those audiences a sense of participation in stories of solitary or near-solitary survival. In a remarkable example of the suspension of disbelief, these series induce an optical amnesia in which the viewer forgets that the protagonists are surrounded by cameras, producers, and helpers who tag along with the surviving parties in the same way that audiences tagged along with early American hermits. Like the scribbling Wilson or Voorhis, these series invoke a pedagogical sanction, suggesting that anyone who watches can learn skills that can transform that viewer into a solo survivor. Nevertheless, the theme of the freakish and the comical persists, whether in the oddity of the participants or in the voyeuristic amusement with ordinary people stripped naked in the wilderness or in the sense of detached superiority to that poor slob who is stuck, under-dressed, in a cold stream in Slovakia (or worse). The comical diminution of otherwise heroic characters facing immense challenges reinforces the democratic dimension of the hermit phenomenon: the

notion that even an inadequately talented normal person can become one of these laughably durable solitaires. And so it is that, two-hundred and thirty years after Buckland and Fielding's discovery of the wonderful hermit, access to the full range of hermit experience, including the modern recasting of longevity in the form of perpetual re-running of installments in the hermit's life, requires only a connection to a television cable and a receptivity to the kind of long-distance, remote engagement with singular, extreme experience that every candidate anchorite, in our somewhat democratic and globalized world, should understand.

## Notes

1. Coby Dowdell has explored the adaptation of the Robinson Crusoe myth to early American culture (132).
2. Contemporary sustainability studies finds itself in a dilemma: describing and protecting as well as showing the human relevance of a colossal, complex, dynamic natural order in comparison to which the human component seems small, isolated, and even invasive. Gillen D'Arcy Wood has authored an article lamenting the failure of sustainability studies to embrace the voluminousness of nature and escape the incipient human presence implied by literature and the revealingly named humanities. The contemporary sustainability movement can thus be seen as an extension of the eremitic drive to minimize human presence while also achieving global or even cosmological awareness within the invincibly individual human mind.

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## Figures

Fig. 1. Title-page illustration for *A Wonderful Discovery of a Hermit* (1786). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

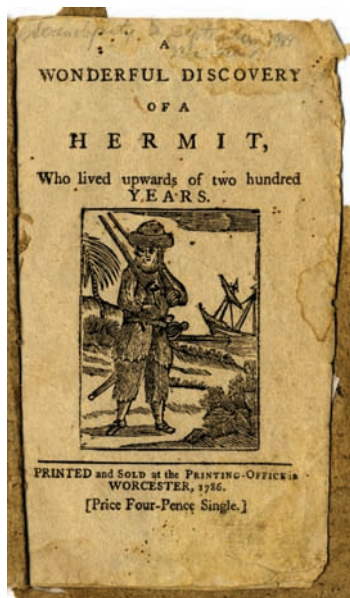


Fig. 2. Leonard Ashmore, "Mr. [Gypsy] Boots Warms Up for his [59<sup>th</sup>] Birthday" (1970). Courtesy of the Photo Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.





Coby Dowdell

# “The Luxury of Solitude”: Conduct, Domestic Deliberation, and the Eighteenth-Century Female Recluse

**Abstract:** This essay considers the cultural relevance of fables of female reclusion during the post-revolutionary period, and it argues that these fables reinforce the enhanced status of republican femininity during the period by offering the useful fantasy of the single woman who voluntarily practices the domestic reclusion expected of the republican wife.

## 1. The Inevitability of Female Reclusion

Hannah Webster Foster’s popular seduction narrative, *The Coquette* (1797), predictably concludes with Eliza Wharton’s seduction, pregnancy, and death in an isolated tavern. While seemingly conventional in its presentation of coquetry and seduction, Foster’s novel repeatedly redirects the reader’s attention to discourses of confinement and reclusion. The repeated trope of reclusion figures both physical and epistemological confinement, twinning the spatial confinement of the post-revolutionary wife within the home with the epistemological confinement of women’s intellectual freedom to questions of courtship, matrimony, and maternity. While one is tempted to see the female recluse as a woman who valiantly resists the limited options afforded women during the period, eighteenth-century narratives of female reclusion reinforce conservative ideologies of femininity.

Social historians have focused much attention on the shifting conceptions of maternity and matrimony during the post-revolutionary period. Linda Kerber’s influential study of republican maternity explains the development of women’s enhanced domestic role as moral guarantors of civic virtue (229). Jan Lewis’s complementary study of republican matrimony argues that contemporary anxieties about political enthusiasm and civic disinterest encouraged a companionate ideal of marriage held together by the moderating affections and “self-abasing virtue” of the republican wife (714). And yet, the social conditions prompting these ideologies – shifting marriage patterns, improved educational opportunities, and increased expectations for female self-determination – produced an especially unsettling moral terrain for the single woman. Raised to expect greater possibilities than their mothers in terms of education, courtship, and matrimony, the post-revolutionary *feme sole*’s “rising expectation for self-fulfillment” sat uneasily with

“the isolation of married women within a separate domestic sphere” (Mintz 63). For women coming of age in the last decades of the century, anxieties about shifting perceptions of marriage and singlehood were exacerbated by the paucity of models encouraging single women to embrace “domestic retirement and conjugal-family intimacy” (Chambers-Schiller 157) over the circulatory freedoms of “fashionable sociability” (Cott 92). This essay argues that the narratives of female reclusion available to the American reader offered models of female behavior appropriate to the changing social expectations of post-revolutionary singlehood.

*The Coquette*'s nuanced attention to a duality of female reclusion delineates the model of femininity promoted by these narratives. Following her seduction by Major Sanford, Eliza declares that she is “now trying what a recluse and solitary mode of life will produce” (147). Forced to abandon the “company and amusements of the town” in disgrace, she proclaims that “the world is to me a desert [sic]!” (147). Foster's characterization of the fallen woman as recluse reiterates the generic conventions of the eighteenth-century seduction narrative, associating her protagonist with a long line of “pale, emaciated” heroines who, like Samuel Richardson's Clarissa Harlowe and Susanna Rowson's Charlotte Temple before her, patiently resign themselves to beatific extinction as “poor solitary being[s], without society” (Rowson 106, 67). In this regard, the reclusive demise of Foster's protagonist appears to caution women against the potential dangers of “fashionable sociability.” However, Foster insists that female reclusion is not a fate limited to the fallen woman; the *feme covert* or married woman is similarly fated to exclusion from public life. As early as her fifth letter, Eliza considers the inevitable domestic confinement attending marriage to the text's stalwart minister, Rev. Boyer. “You are not so morose,” she asks her friend, Lucy Freeman, “as to wish me to become a nun, would our country, and religion allow it?” (39). In a subsequent conversation with Mrs. Richman, the text's archetypal Republican Mother, Eliza explains that she “despise[s] those contracted ideas which confine virtue to a cell. I have no notion of becoming a recluse” (44). Her resistance to the “contracted ideas” (44) of matrimony appears to reinforce Cathy Davidson's reading of *The Coquette* as a didactic meditation on “the legal liabilities of the *feme covert*” (199). However, by figuring both the fallen woman and the *feme covert* as recluses, Foster complicates the didactic assumptions of the seduction narrative.

Readers cannot avoid the fact that, by dying alone in an isolated tavern, Eliza becomes “what she once dreaded above all things, a recluse!” (126). The irony of Eliza's demise is that she becomes a recluse despite her resistance to marital confinement. While she “recoil[s] at the thought of immediately forming a connection, which must confine [her] to the duties of domestic life” (126), her avoidance of matrimony through the imprudent encouragement of a known libertine results

in a reclusion similar to that which she fears from marriage. By insisting that the ultimate outcome for both the coquette and the married woman is reclusion, Foster stresses that the primary cause of Eliza's fall is neither coquetting past her prime nor encouraging the attentions of a known libertine, but rather a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the *feme sole's* social independence. Rather than offering readers a didactic warning against either the dangers of seduction or the "legal liabilities" (Davidson 199) of married life, Foster attacks the root cause of Eliza's fall: the misguided assumption that single life is markedly distinct from married life.

Foster's interest in discourses of reclusion highlights Eliza's misunderstanding of premarital social circulation. Because Eliza understands matrimony as diametrically opposed to the ostensible freedoms of singlehood, she is understandably reluctant to sacrifice social independence for what she perceives to be the circumscribed existence of the *feme covert*. Foster's novel attempts to correct this misunderstanding by insisting that the *feme sole's* social independence only exists to secure an economically advantageous and morally beneficial marriage, not to pursue individual desires outside narratives of courtship and matrimony. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg is certainly correct that Eliza's susceptibility to seduction arises from a "gendered misprisioning of the political and economic discourses of its time" (169). I would argue, however, that Eliza's misunderstanding stems from her naive polarizing of the "pleasures which youth and innocence afford" the *feme sole* and the "contracted ideas" which govern the *feme covert* (Foster 44).<sup>1</sup> Locating individual liberty exclusively in the capacity to circulate freely in the public sphere, Eliza misunderstands domesticity and matrimony as the sacrifice of such autonomy.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to the "scene of constraint and confinement" that Eliza imagines marriage to be, Mrs. Richman argues that "the glory of the marriage state [is] to refine, by circumscribing our enjoyments," to produce a "little community which we superintend" (123). The *feme covert's* management of the domestic sphere is, accordingly, "quite as important an object; and certainly renders us more beneficial to the public" than the *feme sole's* superficial sociability (123). Crucially, Richman understands a woman's "little [domestic] community" as a micro-community situated across the conventional division of public and private domains. The social benefit of the *feme covert* as superintendent of this "little community" paradoxically depends on her ability to expand the influence of domestic morality across the threshold of the private realm, bringing the virtues of female reclusion into the public arena. By emphasizing the *feme covert's* social obligation to circulate beyond the bounds of the domestic sphere while paradoxically remaining physically and morally separate from the public world, Richman trumps Eliza's view of matrimony as the curtailment of female autonomy.

Troping matrimony and coquetry/seduction as differential forms of female reclusion, Foster aims to discourage women from exaggerating the distinction between the freedoms of singlehood and the constrictions of matrimony. Stressing the inevitable exclusion of women from public life, narratives of female reclusion such as *The Coquette* recommend that women confront the challenges of single life by cultivating a love of domestic confinement prior to marriage. If the sentimental heroine of Foster's seduction narrative must shamefully withdraw from society for exceeding the bounds of feminine propriety, Foster's second novel, *The Boarding School; Or, Lessons of A Preceptress to Her Pupils* (1798), insists that female reclusion might also represent an intellectually and morally vibrant space consistent with the social expectations of republican matrimony and maternity. By reframing the single life as a preparatory training ground for married life, Foster encourages women to enter the public sphere only occasionally, for the express purpose of finding a husband. Rather than dramatizing the possibilities of intellectual and social independence ostensibly afforded by single life, narratives of female reclusion offer the useful fantasy of the single woman who voluntarily practices the domestic reclusion expected of the republican wife *ex ante*. Lucy's anxiety about her friend's increased withdrawal from society highlights Foster's awareness of the duality of female reclusion: "Avoid solitude," Lucy cautions Eliza, "[i]t is the bane of a disordered mind; though of great utility to a healthy one" (128). Lucy's attention to both the positive and negative consequences of solitude clarifies the didactic utility of the female recluse during the late eighteenth-century.

For readers and writers of the post-revolutionary period, the term 'reclusion' conveys the dualistic and often ambiguous nature of female isolation more effectively than its synonyms. Accordingly, I follow the preference of contemporary writers such as Foster, who privilege reclusion over related terms such as 'seclusion,' 'retirement,' 'isolation,' and 'withdrawal.' Etymologically, reclusion denotes voluntary withdrawal from society for religious, moral, or philosophical reasons. Late eighteenth-century usage, however, augments this meaning with the additional sense of "being confined as a prisoner" (*OED*). The term 'reclusion' effectively captures the nuanced difference conveyed by modern distinctions between solitude as voluntary withdrawal and isolation as forcible exclusion. To speak of female solitaires or hermits as recluses captures the ambiguous sense of voluntary and involuntary solitude shared by Foster and her contemporaries.

This essay offers an inquiry into discourses of female reclusion during the post-revolutionary period, one that attempts to explain Foster's nuanced appreciation of solitude and isolation in terms of larger narrative traditions of female reclusion popular at the time. A comparison of representations of female recluses in fictional

and nonfictional advice literature of the period reveals the extent to which narratives of female reclusion reimagine domestic confinement as a voluntarily chosen lifestyle. The first section of the essay situates Foster's ambiguous representation of female reclusion within a dual narrative tradition of punitive reclusion, adopted from the eighteenth-century seduction narrative, and deliberative reclusion, adopted from early modern humanism and Protestant devotional practice. The second section pairs fictionalized accounts of female recluses with contemporary conduct literature to illustrate how both the punitive and deliberative traditions are subsumed into the fable of the female recluse. The essay concludes by assessing the didactic utility of such fables for reinforcing the enhanced status of republican singlehood during the post-revolutionary period.

## 2. Punitive Reclusion

The provenance of post-revolutionary fables of female reclusion can be traced to Marchioness de Lambert, Anne-Therese de Marguenat de Courcelles's well-known novella, *The Fair Solitary; or, Female Hermit*. Originally published posthumously as *La femme hermite* (1749), Lambert's French tale first appears in translation in *The Works of the Marchioness de Lambert* (London, 1749). British booksellers saw little of interest in Lambert's novella to warrant separate publication; by contrast, American booksellers honored *The Fair Solitary* with multiple standalone editions. Beginning with William Spotswood's Philadelphia edition (1790), the decade witnessed the publication of two additional editions of Lambert's text by booksellers in Boston (Samuel Hall, 1794) and New London, Connecticut (James Springer, 1797).<sup>3</sup> Lambert's novella is advertised for sale by American booksellers as late as 1803, while circulating libraries as late as 1819 list the book among its esteemed collections. On the one hand, the uniquely American interest in Lambert's text speaks to a sustained interest in the figure of the hermit during the post-revolutionary period. On the other hand, Lambert's popularity as an author of conduct literature offers an important additional context for evaluating post-revolutionary interest in the female recluse. The latter point highlights a repeated pattern during the post-revolutionary years of supplementing advice on female conduct with demonstrative fables of female hermits.

Generically speaking, Lambert's *The Fair Solitary* owes much to Eliza Haywood's *The British Recluse or, The Secret History of Cleomira, Suppos'd Dead* (1722).<sup>4</sup> Both Haywood and Lambert's texts adhere to the conventions of the male hermit's tale, which rose to prominence during the post-revolutionary period (Dowdell 130–31; Slauter 215–40). In these highly formulaic narratives, travellers discover an old hermit in a secluded cave or grotto. After a hospitable welcome

and a hearty organic repast, the travellers demand an account of the hermit's rationale for retiring from the world. Constituting the narrative core of the hermit's tale, the hermit's backstory invariably involves his self-delusion or betrayal by the false pleasures of urban society, pleasures including unchecked social climbing, an unhealthy adherence to social status, libertinism, and seduction. The generic alignment of the hermit's tale with the eighteenth-century seduction narrative is not an aberration, and the backstories of Haywood and Lambert's tales follow suit, populating the recluse's tale with the imprudent maidens, wily libertines, and unwanted pregnancies typical of the genre. If the male hermit is often an erstwhile libertine, rake, or bigamist, the female hermit is most often a coquette or an imprudent maiden who, refusing the council of parents and friends, ends up in a dangerous game of seduction with a predatory libertine.

Haywood and Lambert's texts amplify the topographical costs of seduction implied by typical seduction narratives of the period. Disgusted by a world governed by libertine duplicity and publicly shamed by her own actions, Haywood's Cleomira fakes her own death and retires to a rooming house where she assumes her identity as the titular recluse. The topography of social ostracization stressed by the female recluse's tale has the additional effect of reorienting the generic focus from the elaborate machinations of the libertine to questions of the heroine's culpability. The self-denigration of Lambert's eponymous hermit highlights this reorientation:

I lose an accomplished Prince, said I; I have not loved him when his Passion meeting with a Return from mine might have made us happy ... I have been the Victim of [a libertine's] Vanity. My Life, my Reputation, all is to be enveloped in the Odium of Guilt ... Why do I fly? It would be too happy for me to be sacrificed to their just resentment ... shame getting the better of my desperate resolution, I could think of nothing but hiding myself from [those of my sex], and seeking some forlorn cave, where I might spend the remainder of my days. (55)

By connecting the ruined reputation of the fallen woman with the female hermit, Lambert insists that diverging from the narrow limitations of female propriety results in punitive exclusion from society. Weighed down by recognition of her own imprudence, the Lady "went out early in the morning ... and perceiving a hut," which was once "an hermitage," removed herself where no body would "interrupt [her] solitude and grief" (56–57). As a fallen woman bereft of viable options for the future, the "fair solitary" is sentenced to physical banishment by a society governed by double standards of sexual propriety. Crucially, while the male hermit's backstory invariably hinges on the hermit's critique of societal flaws, the female hermit's backstory consistently turns inward to judge the woman's behavior against conventional gender norms.

“The Hermitess; or Fair Secluder,” appearing in *The Massachusetts Magazine* (November 1790) under the pseudonym Lavinia, replicates the punitive reclusion of Haywood and Lambert’s female solitaires.<sup>5</sup> Meandering through the “sweet musing silence” of an isolated grove, the speaker’s “meditation [is] interrupted by a voice more harmonic than the melody of Philomel” (689). Distracted by a woman named Hermitessa, upon whose countenance “[g]rief had left [its] traces” (689), the speaker watches as the titular hermitess “entered a gloomy grot” (689). Crucially, the presence of an ambiguous urn, “the sad, mausoleum of some hapless youth, who doubtless had fallen like the fragrant floweret, once the valley’s pride; but nipt in the bloom, ere the dew of life has left its leaves” (689), suggests Hermitessa’s solitude be read as punishment. Although she is vague about the nature of her crimes, Hermitessa’s self-conscious warning to “the volatile and young, who dance in the giddy circles of gaiety” (689) is clear. Addressing those “who now bow at the shrine of pleasure, and think felicity their own” (689), the fair secluder aligns herself with contemporary representations of the coquette to suggest that the urn’s ashes belong to a child born out of wedlock. Just as Haywood and Lambert stress the culpability of their female recluses, Lavinia’s hermitess insists that her presence in the woods is both punitive and didactic:

[T]hy will be done with cheerfulness by those whom thou hast taught the lesson. This have I learnt at thy benignant hand – thou hast clothed me with affliction and her power hath drawn me to this solitude, where misfortune keeps the school of wisdom. (689)

Connecting female reclusion with the consequences of coquetry, “The Hermitess” exemplifies contemporary cultural fascination with the story of the female recluse as a fable of affliction and penance. In her monumental study of early American pedagogy, Gillian Brown argues that “the forming of Americans depended upon the activities of associative thinking that fables instill” (59). America’s preference for the didactic authority of the fable is further investigated in Sarah Emily Newton’s study of American conduct literature, “Wise and Foolish Virgins: ‘Useable Fiction’ and the Early American Conduct Tradition” (1990). Newton argues that conduct literature of the period typically rehearsed the fable of the wise virgin and the foolish virgin: a “dual female model” of two girls with identical socio-economic, educational, and physical characteristics who, entering a social world, are tested by identical temptations (“Wise” 140). The wise virgin “conforms and is safe and happy; the foolish virgin disobeys and is miserable and punished severely” (145, see also 156).<sup>6</sup> Much like Foster’s Eliza, the foolish virgin’s choice to disobey social convention invariably derives from her unwillingness to forego the pleasures of social circulation for matrimonial confinement. Texts such as *The British Recluse*, *The Fair Solitary*, and *The Coquette* reinforce the moral proscriptions

of these fables, transforming the foolish virgin into a recluse who is punished by forcible physical expulsion from society.

The didactic utility of such fables is not, however, limited to its dramatization of the punitive reclusion of the fallen woman; rather, the fable of the female recluse flexibly dramatizes both the punitive reclusion of the foolish virgin and the prudent retirement of the wise virgin, a woman who “knows her place – the domestic sphere – which her heart (if it is true) and her training make the object of contentment” (Newton, “Wise” 144). Fables of female reclusion specify that the terms of the young woman’s training entail her contended acceptance of both matrimony and social retirement. In much the same way that fictional advice narratives oppose the wise and foolish virgin, fables of female reclusion juxtapose the punitive reclusion of the seduced maiden and the voluntary reclusion of the contented domestic lady. In the latter body of fables, the potentially foolish virgin avoids punitive reclusion only by cultivating an early love for solitary retirement, a goal achieved by accepting domesticity as the only safe haven in which her intellectual independence and moral rectitude can flourish unthreatened by libertine advances.

### 3. Deliberative Reclusion

If the tragic fall of *The Coquette*’s heroine exemplifies the punitive reclusion of the foolish virgin fable, Foster’s lesser known conduct novel, *The Boarding School*, recommends the voluntary deliberative reclusion of the wise virgin. Where *The Coquette* explains the real life ambiguities surrounding the meaning of female reclusion, *The Boarding School* clarifies the religious and moral benefits of voluntary retirement by organizing the school’s curriculum around various fables of solitude.<sup>7</sup> Foster’s promotion of voluntary reclusion derives from two interrelated traditions: protestant closet retirement and humanist philosophical retirement. A letter from Caroline Littleton, one of the school’s pupils, exemplifies the first tradition by stressing the ability of James Thomson’s *The Seasons* (1730) to draw readers “to the contemplation of nature’s God” (293). For Caroline, Thomson’s imagery exemplifies the extent to which a contemplation of the seasonal transformation of the natural world causes “our hearts [to] beat response to the sentiments of gratitude” for the “glorious Being arrayed in love” (292). Nature’s ability to elicit a sympathetic correspondence between humanity and the deity is matched by its capacity to awe the human observer into humble self-awareness. Of particular interest to Caroline are Thomson’s remarks on solitude from “Summer”:

And yet was every faltering tongue of man,  
Almighty Father! Silent in thy Praise;  
Thy Works themselves would raise a general Voice,



Even in the Depth of solitary Woods,  
 By human Foot untrod, proclaim thy Power,  
 And to the Quire celestial Thee resound,  
 Th'eternal Cause, Support, and End of all! (qtd. in Foster 293)

Caroline's attraction to Thomson's poetry stems from the latter's affirmation of Nature's ability to teach "every faltering tongue of man" to humbly acknowledge their "own weakness and dependence" and "to adore and to fear that Divine Power, whose agency" is poignantly exhibited in "the Depth of the solitary Woods" (292). Following Thomson, Caroline understands that voluntary reclusion paradoxically expands as it contracts, and that confronting the sublimity of Nature shrinks the human ego as its enlarges one's awareness of their place in God's universe.<sup>8</sup>

The humble self-scrutiny celebrated by Caroline, what Karen A. Weyler rightly terms the "self-regulating virtue" of Mrs. Williams's pupils (67), completes the central message of the female recluse fable by offsetting punitive reclusion with voluntary devotional retirement. "The Hermitess" similarly highlights this opposition succinctly, framing the story of Hermitessa's punitive reclusion with the perspective of a narrator named Lavinia who willfully withdraws from the social world to enjoy the devotional effects of solitude identified by Caroline. Exemplifying Thomson's beatification of the natural world, Lavinia finds the rural landscape to be a "lively picture of sympathetic benevolence": a "sweet musing silence reigned" in the grove and "hushed the murmuring noise" of worldly cares (689). By voluntarily withdrawing to the woods, Lavinia presents a version of female reclusion distinct from Hermitessa's punitive withdrawal, one that acclaims the capacity of occasional solitude to encourage humble self-reflection. The narrative tension between the frame and backstory of "The Hermitess" encapsulates the didactic aims of the female recluse fable. Hermitessa is doomed to contemplate the imprudence of her actions after the fact because she neglects to withdraw from the "giddy circles of gaiety" before the fact, to humble herself as Lavinia does before the "lively picture of sympathetic benevolence" expressed by Nature (689).

Lavinia's solitary engagement with the divinity of the natural world turns her attention inward and highlights the extent to which retirement, by the start of the eighteenth century, aligned itself with protestant endorsements of closet retirement as "a tool for managing [and focusing] the attention" towards moral self-regulation (Edson 22). It is no coincidence that Foster's boarding school is similarly isolated in the "peaceful shades" of Harmony-Grove (182). "In the shady bower," one pupil insists, young women can "enjoy the luxury of solitude," a luxury that gains value precisely because of its physical detachment from the "hurry and bustle" of social life (261). In much the same way that Lavinia's peaceful grove "hushed the murmuring

noise" (689) of worldly cares, the solitude of the boarding school encourages its pupils to redirect their minds from "dissipating pleasures" to their "own dignity and improvement" (251). The bucolic reclusion of Mrs. Williams's school accentuates Foster's support for closet retirement as way to ameliorate women's domestic existence by redefining physical confinement as intellectual and spiritual expansion. As Mrs. Williams insists, the "confinement of the body" inevitably demanded of the *feme covert* during the eighteenth century "must be a state of inexpressible wretchedness" without the intellectual emancipation encouraged by devotional retirement and rational education (296).

Closet retirement encourages the kind of vigilant self-monitoring characteristic of the humanist's rational detachment from the world. As I have argued elsewhere, the political significance of the American male hermit derives from the unique constellation of democratic freedom, hermitic reclusion, and rational deliberation. The post-revolutionary politics of the American hermit's withdrawal inheres in his capacity to delay decision-making, to indefinitely defer taking sides and, in the process, define republican liberty as the freedom to rationally deliberate. Michel de Montaigne, in his essay "Of Solitude" (c. 1580), exemplifies the humanist tradition of philosophical or deliberative retirement underwriting post-revolutionary representations of the hermit, a tradition that privileges a "cultured retirement" conducive to "the pleasures of the mind" and the "dignity of human life when free from the drudgery of mundane toil" (Barbour, *Value* 80, 44).<sup>9</sup>

The individual who retires from the world, Montaigne insists, must "model his new life on the rules of reason, order it and arrange it by premeditation and reflection" (219–20). By insisting on solitude's epistemological autonomy, Montaigne grounds individual liberty in the freedom to rationally deliberate upon the world, detached from the partisan views of others.<sup>10</sup> Viscount Bolingbroke, in "Of the True Use of Retirement and Study" (1736), similarly celebrates retirement's capacity to "abstract ourselves from the prejudices, and habits, and pleasures, and business of the world ... to elevate [our] souls in retreat to higher station, and ... take from thence such a view of the world" (514).<sup>11</sup> Montaigne's assertion that, in physically withdrawing from the world, "we must bring [the self] back and withdraw it into itself" (214) anticipates Bolingbroke's lofty call for rigorous self-governance "in a state of freedom under the laws of reason" (513). "It is not enough to move" away physically, Montaigne argues, "we must get away from the gregarious instincts that are inside us, we must sequester ourselves and repossess ourselves" (213). Bolingbroke's insistence on "contemplat[ing] ourselves, and others ... through the medium of pure, and ... undefiled reason" (513) redoubles the central imperative of Montaigne's conception of solitude, that one must repossess the self through

a leisured rational examination sequestered from the opinions of others. Both Montaigne and Bolingbroke insist that rational scrutiny of both the self and the world requires the time (if not the space) for studied deliberation.

A comparison of the fabulist narratives of *The British Recluse* and *The Fair Solitary* with nonfiction advice written by Haywood and Lambert underscores the repeated supplementation of religious retirement with the kind of dilatory rational deliberation articulated by Montaigne and Bolingbroke. Offering guidance on navigating the public world, Lambert's popular conduct manual, "Advice of a Mother to a Daughter" (1729), advocates reclusion as the guarantee of moral propriety: "I think it best to avoid the world and making a figure ... and be contended with being one's own spectator" (177).<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, Lambert's focus on her daughter's self-spectatorship accentuates reclusion's encouragement of the kind of moral self-management characteristic of closet devotion. For Lambert, however, it is the cultivation of a woman's rational capacities, rather than her piety, that will protect her from "the testimony of men [who] only deserve credit in portion to the degree of certainty which they have acquired by examining into facts" (189). While religiosity has its place, Lambert insists that women must learn to think rationally for themselves, extending their ideas beyond the opinions of others in the manner suggested by Montaigne and Bolingbroke: "Take not up with the sentiments of the people," Lambert advises, "Form your own judgment without giving into received opinions, and get over the prejudices of your infancy" (190–91).

Paired with *The Fair Solitary*, Lambert's maternal advice stresses the implicit moral of her fable: the fair solitary fails precisely because she neglects to incorporate periods of deliberative retreat into her life. As the fair solitary's governess reflects: "An active hurrying life had indeed, encroached" on her ability to rationally deliberate. "Most women," she insists, "void of thought or design of action, are hurried away by the first sentiment that pleases them" (27). Crucially, Lambert insists that independence of thought is possible only when you "secure yourself a retreat and a place of refuge in your own breast; you can always return thither, and be sure to find yourself again. When the world is less necessary to you, it will have less power over you" ("Advice" 191). For Lambert, the capacity of epistemological reclusion ("a place of refuge in your own breast") to free women from the social authority of public scrutiny, by replacing external validation with rational self-judgment, depends upon physical reclusion from society. When you "use yourself to solitude," she advises her daughter, when you "from time to time retire from the world to be alone," you carve out a physical space of intellectual autonomy detached from the fickle world of social reputation, visitations and courtship ("Advice" 191–92).

The necessity of forging a solitary space for independent thought is redoubled by Haywood, who insists that *The British Recluse* is “a sad example of what Miseries may attend a Woman, who has no other Foundation for Belief in what her Lover says to her, than the good opinion her Passion has made her conceive of him” (2). The punitive reclusion suffered by Haywood’s recluse results from the same inability to rationally deliberate on the events of her life that hampers Lambert’s hermit: “If we could bring our selves to depend on nothing but what we had Proof for, what a world of Discontent should we avoid!” (1–2). In her eminently popular serial, *The Female Spectator* (1745), Haywood accents the moral of her fable, dedicating the entire fourth book to a discussion of voluntary reclusion.<sup>13</sup> Perceiving a “Vacuum in the Mind” of her female contemporaries, Haywood argues that the cultivation of “a proper Love of Solitude at *some Times*” ameliorates the dangerous “*Want of Thought, or ... Thought misapplied*” (200, 203, and 239). Temporary reclusion from the public world provides women with the time and space for self-scrutiny. “All kinds of Regulation and Management,” she suggests, “require some small Reflection and Recess from Company” (205). By sanctioning temporary “Recess from Company,” Haywood mirrors Lambert’s insistence that physical and intellectual withdrawal from the world permits women to “view [their] own imperfections” with clarity and “examine [their] own nature ... [to] make the best of [their] defects” (“Advice” 194). Taken together, Lambert and Haywood’s texts argue that women who refuse to retire from the world to deliberate upon their options, to evaluate their own actions, and to scrutinize those of others expose themselves to men who prey on the harried thinking of women constantly in the public eye.

#### 4. Domestic Deliberation

Haywood’s later *Epistles for the Ladies* (1750) offers a fabulist complement to the *Female Spectator*’s premise, arguing that women who cultivate temporary “Recess[es] from Company” are better able to avoid seduction. Writing to her persistent urban suitor, Lothario, “Gloriana in the Country” insists that one “must forget all Business, – forgo all Pleasures, – throw off all Desires, all Inclinations relating to this World” (281). “Having taken into [her] Head to study Philosophy,” Gloriana assumes the contours of masculine deliberative retirement by “retir[ing] into a little Cell ... which just holds myself, and my Books” (278). Conscious that her reader may have “never heard of a Female Hermit, nor even imagined there was such a Thing” (278), Gloriana qualifies the apparent anomaly of female philosophical retirement by stressing that, while she appropriates the humanist tradition of masculine deliberative retirement, she employs this luxury of solitary thinking on the socially-acceptable female concerns of courtship and marriageability.

Much like Montaigne and Bolingbroke before her, Gloriana's "little Cell" depends upon a mental separation from "destructive Pride and Vanity" of urban life (281). Unlike Montaigne's confident claim that "real solitude ... may be enjoyed in the midst of cities and the courts of kings" (214), the female hermit requires a protected physical space in which to freely deliberate. Women who expect the time for leisurely deliberation require a hut of their own, separate from a world that views them primarily as sexual commodities. By making Lothario's visitation conditional on "never mention[ing] one Word of Love, Gallantry, or Politics," Gloriana achieves a degree of control over the courtship process by slowing down Lothario's persistent wooing and excluding such topics from conversation (281). Gloriana's hut appears to exclude the social world of ceremony and courtship, affording its inhabitant a space removed from conventional gender expectations; more accurately, her hut ensures a physical and temporal recess from which she can rationally deliberate upon her future marriage prospects at leisure, while protecting herself against seduction. The woman who can suspend the forward momentum of courtship by temporarily retiring from the scene greatly reduces her chances of being seduced.

The female hermits and recluses who populate the texts of Haywood, Lambert, Foster, and Lavinia insist that a woman's successful navigation of pre-marital life depends upon having a cloistered space of her own in which to "maturely weigh every consideration for and against, and deliberately determine with yourselves, what will be most conducive to your welfare and felicity in life" (Foster, *Boarding School* 229). Given that Mrs. Williams's pupils are "young and inexperienced," and therefore easy prey for "mere pleasure-hunters" preying on young ladies' "false pride" and "fondness for flattery" (228), Mrs. Williams's "plan of conduct" provides her pupils with the skills to "think and act more for" themselves while in the "single state" (202). As Weyler usefully observes, Mrs. Williams privileges "self-knowledge as a cultural cure-all, able to deflect flattery, resist seduction, and prevent private disappointment" (66). And yet, the acquisition of self-knowledge that Mrs. Williams's "rational and discrete plan of thinking and acting" hopes to achieve is often too difficult to manage amidst the flurry of social engagements (229). Just as the boarding school's pedagogical strength derives from its physical separation from the world, the self-knowledge of Harmony-Grove's pupils derives from the protective isolation of their environment, an isolation that offers the luxury of leisurely contemplation. By encouraging women to carve out a hut of their own from which they might cultivate and hone their rational faculties, conduct writers refashion the inevitability of domestic confinement as informed choice.

Ostensibly 'freeing' women from enslavement to external validation, narratives of female seclusion encourage intellectual independence only insofar as it fosters a

desire for matrimony and domestic confinement. Like Gloriana's cell, Mrs. Williams's curriculum insists that voluntary reclusion provides the *feme sole* with a time and space apart from the aggressive courting of libertines in which she can cautiously deliberate between "professions of sincere regard" and equivocal tokens that "a blind and misguided fancy paints in such alluring colours" (229). Harmony-Grove's primary goal is "to domesticate" women and "turn their thoughts to the beneficial and necessary qualifications of private life" (180). Cultivating a love of reclusion prior to marriage renders domestic confinement not only manageable but preferable, by "seasonably inur[ing the single woman] to the sphere of life which Providence assigns" (289). Offering a model of prudential femininity suitable to both single and married life, fables of female reclusion encourage single women to model their behavior on the cloistered and contracted existence of the *feme covert*.

## 5. A Singular Reclusiveness

The cultural authority of republican matrimony and maternity during the post-revolutionary period presupposes a morally sanctioned republican model for the *feme sole*. Fables of female reclusion fill an important gap in the contemporary narratives of female moral maturation, by modeling the republican identity of the American single woman. The particular relevance of these fables is their capacity to simultaneously figure the two narrative possibilities available to the post-revolutionary single woman, encouraging the necessity of deliberative reclusion while warning against the inevitable punitive reclusion attending women who transgress conventional gender roles. By dramatizing differential forms of female reclusion, these fables locate the autonomy of the post-revolutionary woman along a continuum between voluntary and involuntary reclusion. Encouraging the *feme sole* to voluntarily choose reclusion prior to marriage, narratives of female reclusion re-conceptualize matrimony as an easy transition from one form of confinement to another by overwriting the perceived opposition between single freedom and married confinement. Moreover, these fables afford post-revolutionary society a convenient fantasy for imagining a woman's willful acceptance of domesticity as an intellectually and morally vibrant space separated from a public sphere generally unreceptive to the learned woman. Judith Sargent Murray, in her influential essay, "On the Equality of the Sexes" (1790), similarly insists that, by "retiring into ourselves," women may "indulge in all the refined and sentimental pleasures of contemplation" (224). "[T]hus filled" with rational subjects, the female mind would, according to Murray, "have little room for the trifles with which our sex are, with too much justice, accused of amusing themselves" (134). Murray's support for the intellectual autonomy afforded by reclusion relates directly to women's matrimonial

future. By retiring from the public sphere, women “would become discreet,” she insists, “their judgments would be invigorated, and their partners for life being circumspectly chosen, an unhappy Hymen would then be as rare, as is now the reverse” (134). Recasting eighteenth-century domesticity not as a limiting confinement but as an autonomous and self-supporting intellectual protectorate, fables of female reclusion encourage women to exercise their rationality in ways suggested by Murray.<sup>14</sup> In a private sphere withdrawn from the frivolities of the public realm, the post-revolutionary single woman is offered the luxury of solitary contemplation, albeit a luxury that confines rational contemplation to questions of sexual reputation, matrimonial choice, and maternal duty.

In stark contrast to the misanthropic recluse who turns away from the world in disgust or the sexual outlaw who refuses to abide by societal standards of female propriety, fables of female reclusion recommend withdrawal as the necessary prerequisite for the single woman’s socially proscribed domestic existence. As with the male hermitic tradition of the post-revolutionary period, the female recluse’s withdrawal from society entails a conscientious turn back to society from a privileged vantage point, bringing the insights of an abstracted rational deliberation to bear on her socially-expected role as wife and mother. As one eighteenth-century lady’s comments on the pleasures of retirement attest to, female reclusion “is certainly better for yourself, and more for the Security of Mankind, that you should live in some rural Abode, than appear in the World.” While “A Hermit’s Life might be tolerable . . . a more distant Retreat, in the full Pride of your Charms and Youth, would be very extraordinary.” When women retire from the world of “Belles and Beaux . . . for the sake of [both self-improvement and] heavenly Contemplation, the World will be reformed” (Kimber 160). Whether hermitic existence encourages humble religious reflection – to know thy place within God’s plan – or descends into obsessive self-denigration and unflagging penance, physical reclusion from the bustle of the world insists on a woman’s capacity to think long and hard on her place in society.

## Notes

1. For a related discussion of Eliza’s naiveté regarding the distinction between public and private standards of behavior, see Weyler 153–54.
2. On Eliza’s understanding of individual liberty, see Gardner 749 and Stern 131–32.
3. Spotswood published two distinct versions of Lambert’s text in 1790: a standalone text and a supplement to the novel *The School of Virtue*. References are to Samuel Hall’s 1794 edition.

4. First published as a standalone text, Haywood's *British Recluse* is later included in *Secret Histories, Novels and Poems* (1725), a four volume collection of Haywood's novels readily available to post-revolutionary American readers from at least 1755–1803.
5. To my knowledge, the only other discussion of "The Hermitess" is Slauter's brief assessment (220).
6. On the use of anecdote in conduct literature, see also Weikle-Mills 149–60 and Newton, *Learning* 63–96.
7. Pettengill's suggestion that *The Coquette* and *Boarding School* function as "a two-part argument for the practical value of female friendship," is equally germane to Foster's interest in solitude and reclusion (189). On the relationship between Foster's two novels, see also Weikle-Mills 51–54, Newton, "Wise" 149–60, and Weyler 63–68.
8. On the religious and psychological implications of outdoor experience, see Barbour, "View" 571 and Slovic.
9. On the larger tradition of philosophical retirement extending back to Socrates, see France 4–7.
10. For an excellent overview of Montaigne's various remarks on solitude, see Barbour, *Value* 53–68.
11. The relevance of Bolingbroke's view of epistemological retreat for the study of the post-revolutionary American hermit is indexed by the willingness of Amos Wilson, the early nineteenth-century Pennsylvania Hermit, to plagiarize Bolingbroke's remarks verbatim in explaining his own rationale for withdrawing from society (19–20).
12. Originally published in 1729 in London, Lambert's "Advice" appears in numerous American anthologies of British conduct literature (Newton, *Learning* 183). See, for example, *The Ladies' Pocket Library* (1794), from which references are taken.
13. On the popularity of *The Female Spectator* in America, see Hayes 69.
14. Murray's relevance to fables of female reclusion is further enhanced by the fact that her essay appears in the *Massachusetts Magazine* only months before Lavinia's "The Hermitess" is published in the same serial (Slauter 220).

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### **III Solitude in the Nineteenth Century: Gender, Politics, and Poetics**



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# “Away to Solitude, to Freedom, to Desolation!”: Hermits and Recluses in Julia Ward Howe’s *The Hermaphrodite*

**Abstract:** Howe’s text portrays the gender-ambivalent position of ambitious women and their struggle to defy the traditional female role in the male-dominated creative sphere of the nineteenth century. The resulting female reclusiveness evolves out of limiting situations and comes at a cost, but also provides freedom from social restraints.

## 1. Ambition and the Female Talent

### 1.1 A Solitary Book

Julia Ward Howe is today mainly remembered as the author of the Civil War poem “Battle-Hymn of the Republic” (1862), which on its publication instantly brought her literary recognition. She is also recognized as a women’s rights activist and the founder of Mother’s Day. Her other literary achievements, such as her first book of poetry, *Passion-Flowers* (1854), have almost fallen into oblivion. And her most outstanding work of art was never even published while she lived: the Laurence manuscript, a fragmentary fictional (auto)biography of an intersexual hero/ine, which Howe presumably wrote in the 1840s, was published only in 2004 as *The Hermaphrodite* (Bergland and Williams, “Introduction” 1–2; Williams, “Speaking” x).

The Laurence manuscript is a “solitary book,” to borrow a term coined by Elaine Showalter for Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899) (“Tradition”). Similarly to the late recognition of Chopin’s novel, although due to other circumstances, Howe’s *The Hermaphrodite* can only now, more than one and a half century after its creation, take its place in literary history (Klimasmith 106). Its importance for studies of American culture in general and for the study of nineteenth-century American women’s writing in particular cannot be overestimated.

My reading of *The Hermaphrodite* will concentrate on the significance of solitude, loneliness, and isolation. I will focus on aspects of eremitism and reclusiveness and especially on their liberating and limiting facets, thereby illuminating the multitude of cultures of solitude presented in the text and how they tie in with one of Howe’s key topics, the confinement of women’s lives.

## 1.2 *The Hermaphrodite*

As the title of Howe's text already reveals, its protagonist, Laurence, is an intersexual character, physically male as well as female, but raised as male. The setting of the fragment is Europe, not America: Laurence is English, but he mainly lives in Germany, Switzerland, and Italy. Attempts at dating the novel's fictional events have established the period from 1825 to 1829 as a possible time frame (Luciano 218–19). In episodes, which are either a result of the fragmented status of the text or a basic structure intended by the author, the I-narrator, Laurence, gives an account of his family background; of his life as a male student; of his failed relationship with Emma, a young widow, her death, and his subsequent flight to solitude; his erratic travels and his isolation as a hermit; his redemption through a relationship with a young man, Ronald, and the disastrous end of this friendship; his mentoring by a Roman aristocrat, Berto, and his life as a woman named Cecilia, among Berto's sisters; his reunion with Ronald; and finally, his own death. Howe's text describes an education, a development, a quest, and an awakening (Elbert 231; Saltz 78): it is thus a *Bildungsroman* or, more specifically, a *Künstlerroman*. *The Hermaphrodite* is an artist's novel in which the narrator-protagonist is depicted as a poet, an actor, and a singer who tries to find his place in the world. It can also more specifically be read, as I will show, as what has been labeled a female novel of development or a female *Künstlerroman* (DuPlessis; Fraiman; Huf).

## 1.3 The Private Writer

The reasons for the fragmentary status of the Laurence manuscript remain a mystery (Bergland and Williams, "Introduction" 3; Luciano 218; Williams, "Speaking" xxxvi, xxxviii). Howe herself called the text a "stranded wreck of a novel," not "a moral and fashionable work," and doubted whether it would "ever be published" (qtd. in Williams, *Hungry* 81, "Speaking" xi). As the text covers taboo subjects, especially questions of sexual identity, and transgresses boundaries, it could not have been published without the risk of a scandal (Elbert 230; Grant, *Private* 121; Sánchez-Eppler 26; Williams, "Speaking" xxxvi). Howe obviously never attempted to publish it and she may have never even shown it to anyone (Bergland 159; Williams, "Speaking" xi, xxxvi, *Hungry* 81). The Laurence manuscript was a project she pursued secretly.<sup>1</sup> Its concealment gave her greater creative independence. Yet, the price for this freedom was to be no longer "associating with the world" (Howe, *Hermaphrodite* 3) through her writing, a state that she replicates in her artistic protagonist's isolation (Sánchez-Eppler 26). *The Hermaphrodite* is thus turned into a "projection of begrudgingly reclusive female authorship" (26).



The manuscript indeed served private ends for Howe (Ashworth, “No” 27). It can be read as a psychological self-analysis and may have even functioned as self-therapy and a means of recovery (Bergland 157; Borgstrom 321; Williams, “Speaking” xi, xxvii, xxxvii). Already as a young girl, Howe was torn between the nineteenth-century male and female spheres. She received an excellent education, but her father disapproved of “ambition and artistic freedom for women” (Showalter, *Jury* 75). She felt limited like a fairy tale princess in an enchanted castle, with her father as her jailer. But there was also a liberator, her older brother Sam, who encouraged her to read from his personal library and who supported her aspirations of a literary career (Howe, *Reminiscences* 47–49; Showalter, *Jury* 75–76; Williams, “Speaking” xii–xiii, xxviii). Later, when she had had early literary success, yet had also become a wife and a mother, this conflict grew even more intense. The writing of the Laurence manuscript may have helped her to come to terms with her own difficult situation as an artist and as a wife and mother. These concepts were not easily merged during the first half of the nineteenth century in American society, and especially not in her marriage with Samuel Gridley Howe (Ziegler 38–40; Elbert 230). Solidifying gender roles generally turned “wives and mothers” into “prisoners in their own temples,” and “those who forsook normative roles . . . would be branded as having failed in their mission as women” (Godbeer 338). Howe’s personality contained traits culturally ascribed to both genders (Williams, “Speaking” xxvii). The effect of this self-recognition isolated her emotionally, while the home(s) of the early years of her marriage, especially the Perkins Institute for the Blind, where her husband was director, served as spaces of her physical isolation. In *The Hermaphrodite*, she covertly explores her “resistance to and deviance from contemporary heteronormative definitions of womanhood” (Warren 109).

The Laurence manuscript can be read as an autobiographical work that allowed Howe to explore her own hermaphroditic nature (Bergland and Williams, “Introduction” 7). Howe was “cramped by convention, profoundly alone at times, and worn down . . . by domestic cares” (Grant, “Meeting” 19; see also Ashworth, “Spiritualized” 212) and she felt “desexed, unappreciated, and imprisoned by prescribed social roles” (Elbert 230–31). The Laurence manuscript enabled her to speculate about issues otherwise inaccessible for American women at her time (Williams, “Speaking” xxxvii). Laurence, as Howe’s alter ego, impersonates her feelings of androgyny and of isolation as a female artist within a patriarchal culture (Elbert 231; Noble 49; Sánchez-Eppler 29; Showalter, *Jury* 76, *Civil* 88; Williams, *Hungry* 240, “Speaking” xxvii). As Howe has Laurence act out as poet, singer, and actor, she herself would “borrow the disguise of art” to voice the “internal fire” that consumed her (Howe, *Hermaphrodite* 121).

The solitary activity of writing the Laurence manuscript “gave her freedom and, within that freedom, an extraordinary amount of power” (Grant, “Meeting” 21). It paved the way for the publication of her very daring book of poetry, *Passion-Flowers* (Elbert 230; Noble 70; Sánchez-Eppler 29; Showalter, *Jury* 76–80; Williams, *Hungry* 240). And it advanced her work from “feminine” to “feminist” writing (Elbert 230; Noble 48, 65; Showalter, *Jury* xvi–xvii). Yet, in the Laurence manuscript she would likewise give expression to her notion that a gender-ambiguous person was doomed to loneliness (Grant, *Private* 123; Showalter, *Civil* 88). Howe’s writing of the Laurence manuscript during the early years of her marriage, when she was “cloistered” (Ashworth, “Spiritualized” 211) at the Perkins Institute for the Blind, was an inward excursion. As such, it is paralleling and resembling Henry David Thoreau’s solitary sojourn at Walden Pond from July 1845 to September 1847, where he started writing *Walden* (1854) (Elbert 229).<sup>2</sup>

#### 1.4 “The Celebrated Woman”

Howe’s text is obviously a product of her literary erudition and her cultural knowledge. The hermaphrodite is a common cultural trope, especially in the nineteenth century (Ashworth, “No” 26–27; Busst 1). And the Laurence manuscript is heavily inspired by numerous and diverse literary and cultural influences which are concerned with hermaphroditism, androgyny, and cross-dressing, such as Plato, Ovid, William Shakespeare, Emanuel Swedenborg, George Sand, Théophile Gautier, Margaret Fuller, and Charlotte Cushman.<sup>3</sup>

I would like to briefly draw attention to only one literary model here, because it is axiomatic for my reading of the text. Howe was fluent in German since her late teens, and as an adult she was a reader and reviewer of contemporary German literature and philosophy (Saltz 74; Williams, “Speaking” xviii). She was most probably familiar with the polemic poem “The Celebrated Woman” (“Die berühmte Frau,” 1789) by Friedrich Schiller (Williams, “Speaking” xxxix–xl). In the poem a husband describes his wife, whom he finds changed to the worse by her success as a writer, as “[a] spirit strong with a body weak, / Hermaphroditic, so to speak” (qtd. in Williams, “Speaking” xl). Intellectual and creative aspirations were generally seen as masculine in Howe’s time. By being ‘literary,’ unmarried women diminished their chances in the marriage market (Williams, “Speaking” xiv). Nineteenth-century female writers who overstepped socially accepted boundaries were frequently ostracized as unwomanly, and their work was seen as unfeminine, vulgar, and monstrous (Warren 109–10). Thus, Schiller’s poem describes the quite common practice of viewing a female author as a “man-woman” (Robert Bonner qtd. in Warren 110). The “most hermaphroditical of nineteenth-century beings”

was “a woman of genius” (Bergland 184). Following Schiller’s identification of the ambitious wife with a hermaphrodite, my interpretation aims at reading Howe’s text as a document that portrays the gender-ambivalent position of ambitious women and their fight to defy prevailing gender conventions in the male-dominated intellectual and creative sphere of the nineteenth century. I will show how these gender restrictions give rise to a variety of female cultures of solitude.

## 2. Hermits and Recluses in *The Hermaphrodite*

### 2.1 The Hermaphrodite as Hermit and Recluse

#### 2.1.1 *Laurence, the Outcast*

The initial information the hermaphroditic Laurence gives the reader about himself describes the cultural inscription of his gender. His parents’ choice to raise him as male destines Laurence to perform the gender role of a man. Thus, he has, on the one hand, more options in life than he would have as a woman. For example, he may freely choose a profession and be independent (Klimasmith 97–98). On the other hand, his physical deviation condemns him to loneliness. The patriarchal society with its separate spheres for men and women demanded that women submit to the prevailing, culturally and historically constructed oppressive paradigm, namely the cult of true womanhood, consisting of the four cardinal virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (Welter). If they cherished ‘unwomanly’ ambitions, they might be perceived just as ill-suited for their prescribed role as Howe’s intersexual creation (Daniele; Williams, “Speaking” xxvii; Saltz 79, 83).

The young Laurence is a very good and eager student. But aspects of his otherness are already perceptible during childhood. His physical and mental characteristics are described as a combination of the stereotypical gender binaries, the traditionally feminine and masculine attributes. When Laurence has grown up, women as well as men feel attracted to him, but to him, this proves only a burden. He has been warned by his father to “avoid all unnecessary intimacies” (Howe, *Hermaphrodite* 4). Also, he seems to have no sexual desires and is a strangely asexual person, or is forced to be so by the circumstances. His difference and his fear to be found out isolate him. He feels he has to conceal his real nature. Laurence’s body alienates him from “citizenship in relational worlds” (Ashworth, “No” 30). Persistently, he perceives of himself as “the exile, the outcast, the repudiated of God and man” (Howe, *Hermaphrodite* 119). The episodes of the fragment alternate between Laurence’s attempts at engagement with the world and his retreats into seclusion (Saltz 73).

### 2.1.2 *Laurence, the Solitary Artist*

At his graduation, Laurence competes for the university prize for the best poem. Laurence's poem is a composition that reflects upon his feelings and his own situation, putting emphasis on the topics of otherness, alienation, and isolation. He wins the poetry contest,<sup>4</sup> but after the recital, he overhears two strangers noting his "striking resemblance to the lovely hermaphrodite in the villa Borghese" (Howe, *Hermaphrodite* 16). Clearly, Laurence's self-revealing art betrays his intersexual nature. And the audience's "gaze ... can unmask, reveal, and ruin" (Livengood 42). Laurence flees from the scene to privacy and seclusion, which equals freedom for him: "Once alone, in my own room, I could breathe more freely" (Howe, *Hermaphrodite* 16). But a surprise visit from Emma von P., a young widow who has long been sexually attracted to him, yet has also sensed his indifference – she constantly compares him to marble – culminates in a catastrophe. Beautiful Emma, courted by every man except Laurence, pleads with him to give her "but this one night, but this one hour" (18). When he refuses to have intercourse with her, she suddenly seems to really 'see' him for the first time and calls him a "monster!" (19). The aftermath of this shock of recognition kills Emma, and it prompts Laurence to further withdraw from society. It is noteworthy that Emma is cast as a "sexually experienced, financially independent, and free" woman (Klimasmith 100). Her death may be read as a clue that her lifestyle is unacceptable to society. She is the "antithesis of the passionless, nonsensual woman of idealized womanhood" (Livengood 51). In this respect, Emma von P. has also been read as Howe's alter ego (Williams, "Speaking" xxv, xxvii).

At another instance, when Laurence lives with Ronald in a German university town, he distinguishes himself as an actor. He is extremely convincing as Juliet in Shakespeare's famous play, feeling an indifference that liberates him, "a nameless pleasure in being something other than [him]self" (Howe, *Hermaphrodite* 81). An onlooker claims that "Juliet is a woman" (82) and Ronald fights a duel to defend, as he says, "a lie ... [Laurence's] manhood" (86). Laurence's art, again, becomes a catalyst for a revelation. When Ronald returns wounded from the duel, it becomes clear that for him, too, the performance has been a disclosure of Laurence's femininity. The very fact that he, instead of Laurence himself, settles the affair of honor reduces the latter to feminine passivity. Outraged, Ronald tries to force Laurence to have sexual intercourse with him. Like Emma, Ronald finds Laurence "so cold and so still" and mistakenly believes that he can "turn marble itself to molten flame" (87). Like her, he is appalled by Laurence, whom he calls a "[s]orceress! murderess!" (88). And finally he, too, falls into "the stupour of ... seeming death" (88). Laurence knows no other way out than to flee from the scene, "away to solitude, to freedom, to desolation!" (89).

Another scene shows Laurence “in a new guise,” “in feminine masquerade” (130), living as the woman Cecilia, displaying her musical talents as a singer. Again, an artistic performance has liberating as well as revelatory effects. Cecilia’s soul breathes “a wider, purer atmosphere” while she sings, and she is “lost in the impersonality of art” (149–50). She forgets her inner turmoil. Simultaneously, her art again uncovers her intersexual nature. Some members of the audience compare Cecilia’s voice to that of “Uberto ... the famous Contraltiste” (150), a castrato in the Pope’s choir. Again, this drives Cecilia into reclusion and retreat. She resolves to sing “no more in Rome” (150).

Taking into account the episodes discussed so far, one can assert that art, be it poetry, singing, or acting, gives the artist freedom to express him- or herself, to uncover his/her real identity, his/her soul. Art becomes a sort of meditation, a vehicle to retreat into oneself. It creates an “inner solitude” (Balcom 283–85) that liberates from the restraints and expectations of society. Laurence/Cecilia enjoys the freedom of art as opposed to the constraints of the very confined society s/he lives in.

Laurence’s musings during carnival season are apt expressions of the function of his art: “So intolerant, so incomprehensive is society become, that fervent hearts must borrow the disguise of art, if they would win the right to express, in any outward form, the internal fire that consumes them” (Howe, *Hermaphrodite* 121). Masking one’s feelings becomes a means of self-protection. Having to hide one’s real nature inevitably leads to alienation and isolation. Laurence would like to “[shrink] into obscurity” (5). His fear of being found out by being looked at can be read as “scopophobia” (Colegate 244), an anxiety disorder often afflicting solitaries. To the intersexed character especially, “vision may be violence” and “the policing power of the gaze of others” (Young 247) may trigger further withdrawal.

### 2.1.3 Laurence, the Hermit

*The Hermaphrodite* can be read as a variant of what Coby Dowdell calls “the American hermit’s tale” (130). The generic formula is as follows: an old, usually male hermit lives in a cave or a hut, secluded in wilderness. His diet is simple, often vegetarian, and he explains to visitors his reasons for withdrawal, which underscore his critique of society. The visitors insist that the hermit returns with them to society, but in most cases he declines. Finally, there is the discovery of the hermit’s manuscript which tells the hermit’s story and spreads his wisdom (130–31).

Laurence feels the liminality of his state and chooses solitude, which liberates him from social and gender expectations (Elbert 232): “Let us have solitude and silence to deal with these vast themes” (Howe, *Hermaphrodite* 35). He erratically

travels until he comes across a “Lodge in the Wilderness” (36), which seems to be the right place for his withdrawal. He is instantly fascinated by this place, “the very beau-idéal of a hermitage” (36), which is remote, in the midst of nature, with a little garden and a natural spring.

But it is not Laurence’s aim to live in and with nature. He moves into the hermitage excitedly and buries himself in studies. He lives more and more isolated from the outside world. Laurence also willfully neglects his body, which has become a burden to him. He adheres to his own rules of asceticism and frugality. And his self-hatred leads to self-castigation: “the spirit was now lord absolute, and ... the flesh had at last learned its place” (46). This episode of “spiritual masochism” (Luciano 237) is about disembodiment. Like so many hermits, Laurence aims at transcending his physis. In shame, he isolates himself in the hermitage, seeking spirituality in order to become oblivious of his deviant body (Crowley 76–77; Elbert 232; Noble 61). When Ronald finally frees Laurence from his self-inflicted imprisonment and literally saves his life, the latter cries out: “I have been buried long enough with the dead forms of things” (Howe, *Hermaphrodite* 47). What before had seemed to him the perfect hermitage has now almost turned into his “tomb” (50). In retrospect he reevaluates his temporary life as a hermit: “I had clung savagely to my solitary life – I was glad now of the sympathy and companionship” (66).

This hermitage chapter obviously calls for balance between the spiritual and the physical life. In a later text, Howe would argue that “man remains incomplete his whole life long. Most incomplete is he, however, in the isolations of selfishness and of solitude” (qtd. in Elbert 243). Staying away from society in order to study and giving in to one’s inclinations is presented here as an “unnatural mode of life” (Howe, *Hermaphrodite* 46), a form of death-in-life. The episode also underlines the Laurence manuscript’s topic of coming-of-age or awakening, when the story is read as a symbolic death and rebirth (Elbert 231).

## 2.2 Laurence’s Foils and Alter Egos

### 2.2.1 *The Late Count, an Eccentric*

*The Hermaphrodite* also gave Howe “the opportunity, through a variety of different characters, to encounter different worlds of experience” (Grant, “Meeting” 21). There is, for example, the story that is related about the former tenant of the hermitage, “the late Count –, an eccentric” (Howe, *Hermaphrodite* 37), which parallels Laurence’s own retreat: “The Count had ... distinguished himself in public life, but often retired ... from the cares and tumult of the great world, to enjoy the silent companionship of books. He had done so too often for his own good” (37). This explains why “the solitary abode” is mainly “fitted up as a study,” with “well filled

bookshelves [and] a massive writing table” (37). It is “a place specially devoted to religious study and devout contemplation” (39). The late Count had obviously observed a transcendentalist lifestyle (Elbert 231). Now, whoever wants to do so may live freely in the hermitage, as long as s/he follows the deceased Count’s conditions of piety, purity, frugality, self-reliance, isolation, vegetarianism, sexual sublimation, abstinence, only basic physical hygiene and so forth, rules recorded in verse on one of the walls of the lodge (Howe, *Hermaphrodite* 40–41). Laurence takes this “transcendentalist oath” (Elbert 232). He follows and mirrors the Count’s example.

This episode is strongly reminiscent of traditional European garden practices. Since the Renaissance, it had been popular to adorn stately gardens with an *eremitage* (Leisering 63). Most prominently, the eighteenth-century revolution in garden design brought follies like hermitages into landscape gardens (Campbell v). It even became *en vogue* to employ so-called “ornamental” or “garden hermits” to live in these abodes (Leisering 64; see also Campbell). Often, they were bound by contracts that regulated aspects of their diet or hygiene. It was also among the hermit’s duties to converse with guests and share his life story and his wisdom. A common variety was to put a manuscript into the hermitage in order to acquaint the visitor with the fate of a supposed former resident (Leisering 63–67). The Count’s verses resemble such a manuscript as does his narrative of Eva and Raphael, which Laurence comes across in another episode.

### 2.2.2 *The Marble Woman*

There is another important aspect to the hermitage episode. The central room of “the whole anchoritic establishment” is a “chapel” (Howe, *Hermaphrodite* 37) which holds a piece of art that strangely fascinates Laurence, a marble sculpture of a female figure which features one peculiarity: “a marble veil covered the face, as hopeless as the grave” (38). The resemblance to Laurence’s own situation is remarkable. Continuously, he has to hide his real gender identity and inner conflict. This lets him appear as “the poetic dream of the ancient sculptor” (194), as if he himself was made of stone.<sup>5</sup> Laurence’s intersexuality, the physical pathology, symbolizes his psychological state, his anxiety disorder. The veil, which is here associated with the hopelessness of the grave, again evokes death-in-life.<sup>6</sup> It is a device akin to the metaphorical mask that Louisa May Alcott implies in her feminist story “Behind a Mask, or, A Woman’s Power” (1866) (Fetterley). But while the mask is empowering and bestowing Jean Muir with agency, the veil is stifling and dooming its bearer to tomblike passivity. Both devices impart solitude, yet while Howe stresses loneliness, Alcott focuses on privacy.<sup>7</sup>

When Laurence isolates himself from society in the hermitage, he is probably most himself, but at the same time the depiction of this period as death-in-life proves that an individual cannot exist away from society and needs social acceptance. The impossibility of ever being able to fully disclose his real identity forces Laurence into mental and physical isolation and turns him into a hermit.

### 2.2.3 *The Hermit of the Alps*

When Laurence attends a performance of a ballet entitled "*L'eremito degli Alpi*" (Howe, *Hermaphrodite* 108), he observes that the scene on stage is "not altogether unlike [his] sometime Alpine residence," the central character of the piece being "the tenant of ... [a] mysterious hut," a "magician-hermit" (109) who is "wearing on [his] face a black mask" (108–09). The hermit is under the influence of an evil spell, but is rescued by a girl, Rösli. She delivers him from doom because of her "strange love for the strange being" (111). Consequently, the "black mask drops from the face of the hermit," but Rösli must pay with her own life "for the rescue of her lover" (112). The hermit of the ballet is obviously just another version of Laurence, who is rescued by Ronald. But while the hermit here is released by Rösli, who accepts his real self and loves him, Laurence, like the marble statue in the chapel of the hermitage, must remain veiled or masked when he is in society.

### 2.2.4 *Cecilia, the Student of Woman*

It is very revealing that Ronald, when he first sees Laurence at the hermitage, takes him for a woman. And when given a mirror, Laurence himself has to admit: "I looked a woman" (51). His feminine side seems to be the dominant one when he is free of the expectations of society. When Laurence lives in Rome, he is tutored by his mentor Berto, a Roman aristocrat, who suggests that Laurence should undergo a study of women "[t]o learn their high capacities, and to appreciate the wrong done them by education and position" (99). Berto asserts: "It is important that you should see men as women see them, and no less so that you should see women as they appear to each other, divested of the moral corset de précaution in which they always shew [sic] themselves to men" (133). Thus, the reader finds Laurence "hanging out the veil, that feminine banner of deceit" (130). Temporarily, he takes upon him "the bondage of this narrow life" (131). Laurence experiences womanhood as confinement, he learns that women are "kept under lock and key" (131). During her "days of ... feminine seclusion" (158), Cecilia encounters a variety of fellow recluses.



## 2.3 Laurence's Female Fellow Recluses

### 2.3.1 *Eleonora, the Uncloistered Nun*

The first example Berto gives Laurence is that of a young girl named Eleonora, a former love interest of his, who is driven to a cloistered life as a nun by her family. Berto and Laurence attend her investiture. There are references to a pall she seems buried under, to her disappearance under a nun's veil, and to "living death" (106). The scene depicts religious reclusiveness as death-in-life. It ends, as drastically as consequentially, with the girl's actual "momentary death" (107). Reclusiveness, here equaled with the (prospective) neglect of the physical needs of the body, especially the sublimation of sexuality, in favor of the mental or the spiritual, is criticized harshly. But it is also shown that women who would not succumb to the gender norms of society, to matrimony and motherhood, could only choose solitude, either pious retreat or reclusive spinsterhood.

### 2.3.2 *Briseida and Gigia, the Reclusive Artists*

Other examples of female recluses are Berto's three sisters, Briseida, Gigia, and Nina. The two elder sisters, Briseida and Gigia, are "neither married, nor likely to be so," although they are engaged in romantic affairs (136). They are "too enlightened and too expansive to doom themselves to the narrow ropewalk of Conventual life. They are, on the other hand, too proud to present themselves as candidates for selection in the great woman market of society" (136). The sisters transcend traditional gender expectations (Klimasmith 102). One sister is an author, the other is an artist. They live in "a dilapidated palace ... somewhat aloof from the more frequented parts of the city" (Howe, *Hermaphrodite* 140). Berto promises Cecilia: "These ladies will indulge you with solitude" (146). And he asks his sisters to "[g]ive Cecilia the freedom of ... [their] house and hearts" (146). Briseida, the sister who has a "literary reputation" (152) and leads a "life, embellished only by literature and by friendship" (154), holds revelatory ideas about female choices: "A woman ... may choose between the three alternatives of a life like mine, a convent, or marriage" (153–54). It is made clear that following a creative vocation and thereby defying traditional gender norms makes reclusiveness inevitable. Yet, this secluded state also offers a certain amount of freedom not available to nonconforming women within society (Williams, "Speaking" xxxi). Briseida is Howe's mouthpiece (Bergland and Williams, "Introduction" 7) for her critique of a society which makes ambitious women's "moral imprisonment" (Klimasmith 105) inevitable, although she might not be read as a "forward-thinking emblem of an eventually-realized future" (Luciano 234). In *The Hermaphrodite*, the household of Berto's sisters is a limiting

as well as a liberating space: “While Berto’s sisters are to some extent free to arrange their time just as he has, the spatial constraints placed on women continue to limit the ways they may take in life” (237). Their Roman palace is “a cloistered world in which women may escape their moral roles, if only privately” (Klimasmith 105).

### 2.3.3 *Nina, the Beautiful Clairvoyante*

The most fascinating example of a female recluse in the Laurence manuscript is the youngest of Berto’s sisters, Nina. When her fiancé, Gaetano, is exiled to America, Nina wants to accompany him, but Berto forbids her to go. Upon his leave-taking, Nina promises Gaetano: “my soul goes forth with your soul, and wherever you may be, I shall stand beside you” (Howe, *Hermaphrodite* 137). At first, Nina follows Gaetano’s journey by referencing his frequent letters with “maps, charts, and books of travel” (137). But when his letters cease, a strange illness befalls her. She enters into a catatonic state, in which she maintains spiritual communion with Gaetano (Bergland 195; Saltz 85). The only possibility to briefly bring her out of this autistic condition is to speak to her about her lover. Only in these moments, it is “as if the mask of death ... suddenly” lifts (Howe, *Hermaphrodite* 141). In this state of spiritual liberation, her soul is “enfranchised and soaring free,” emancipated from “its human prison” (141; see also Ashworth, “Spiritualized” 212). In these conversations, Nina claims to have made Gaetano’s whole journey with him, and, surprisingly enough, when the family finally hears from Gaetano again, the incidents of his journey mentioned by Nina did really occur.<sup>8</sup> The “beautiful clairvoyante[’s]” (143) state is described as an “abnormal condition” (139) of the mind, it is believed to be “madness” (142), “somnambulism,” or the possession by an “evil spirit” (143), which even prompts a futile exorcism, undertaken by the family confessor. Nina’s condition is dominated by the dichotomy of body and mind: “Nina, so deaf, dumb, and blind of body, so far-seeing and intelligent of soul. Dream-rapt, isolated from the actual world, half corpse, half angel” (158). Her existence is death-in-life. Briseida asserts, “[w]ere it marriage, death, or madness, it were a relief that it should come” (185). These possible destinies for women are interchangeable, obviously. What comes, of course, is Nina’s death (196). Her incorporeal condition is as unbalanced as Laurence’s sojourn in his hermitage. It is equally “not sublime, but unnatural, even pathological” (Saltz 86).

### 2.3.4 *Eva, the Solitary Lover*

A story within the story, about a retreat from society, is read by Laurence to Berto’s sisters from an old manuscript. The document is a “singular German manuscript ... by the good Count –” (Howe, *Hermaphrodite* 146), Berto’s uncle.

It is revealed that he is exactly “[t]he illuminatist, the solitary ... [t]he proprietor of a hermitage” (146) into which Laurence had retreated before. This is thus another “hermit’s manuscript,” a significant element of the “American hermit’s tale” (Dowdell 130–31). The story is that of a female solitary, the tale of the eternal love between Eva and Rafael entitled “Ashes of an angel’s heart” (Howe, *Hermaphrodite* 166). Eva, who has lost her beloved Rafael, does not leave his remote tomb, which significantly is described like a hermitage, as it is situated “in a deep and beautiful dell, shaded by overhanging rocks and thickly interwoven trees – near it was a small quiet lake, softly sunken in the rocks” (167). The female hermit argues with various angels who want to terminate her vigil over her beloved’s grave and return her to the living world: “Death comes not to thee as yet, and yet art thou buried in thine affliction, as in a tomb” (170). But Eva remains steadfast in prayer and in a death-in-life state, alone beside the grave. She lives there, only fed with honey by “a solitary dove” (167) that is described as equally widowed. She does not waver: “Rafael has departed on a far journey, and I am to follow him” (170). Time passes, Eva’s hair turns gray, and she continues to appeal “to the God of heaven for freedom” (178), freedom for her meaning death and her reunion with Rafael in heaven, which is ultimately granted. The manuscript has not only an important function within the text because it comes from the original hermit who inspired Laurence’s sojourn in the hermitage, but it is also seen as crucial by Berto’s sisters, who believe that it, at least to a certain extent, prompted Nina’s illness (164). Nina and Eva have been read with regard to Swedenborgianism. To Emanuel Swedenborg, the celibate and the solitary – “those who choose a life outside of the conjugal [sic]” – are relegated to “the sides of heaven” and “they become sad and troubled” in their isolation (qtd. in Ashworth, “Spiritualized” 208–09).

### 3. The Female Solitary in American Culture

#### 3.1 The Reclusive Female in *The Hermaphrodite*

Laurence’s last vision before his death consistently gives an image of him as a martyr who has to die on a cross, torn by conflicting forces, personified by a man and a woman. Renée Bergland and Gary Williams note that “Romanticism valorized androgyny, framing artistic genius as a perfect blend of masculinity and femininity” (“Introduction” 10). But there was a double standard: while men with feminine qualities were perceived as extremely attractive, masculine women were perceived as monstrous, tending to “frighten those around them” (Fuller 91). No wonder Howe held the belief that “superior women ought to have been born men” (qtd. in Richards, Howe, and Hall 263). The haunting tableau of Laurence on a cross fittingly

depicts the dilemma of ambitious women, torn between the binary gender conventions, between social expectations on the one hand and vocation and profession on the other. The deep inner conflicts, the internalized anxiety of being unwomanly, and the feelings of isolation, of otherness, of difference, made them perceive of themselves as outsiders, freaks, and monsters (Elbert 231, 244; Ziegler 112; Livengood). Their self-perception resembles the dichotomy observed by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their seminal study *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). They argue that women in nineteenth-century literature are either presented and perceived as ‘monsters,’ rebellious, unwomanly women, or as ‘angels,’ pure, saintly women who fit the social expectations. And the woman writer had to define herself as “a mysterious creature who resides behind the angel or monster or angel/monster image” (17). Showalter similarly argues with regard to *The Hermaphrodite* that “the woman artist is not only a divided soul but also a monster doomed to solitude and sorrow” (*Civil* 89). The women in Howe’s Laurence manuscript either seek seclusion voluntarily or feel themselves driven to it. Always, eremitism and reclusiveness point to a “central critique of society” (Dowdell 131). Female seclusion from society is an – albeit passive – critique of or resistance against the prevailing gender binary, the ideology of separate spheres, and the cult of true womanhood.

For Howe, Laurence, and the women characters in Howe’s manuscript, the withdrawal has liberating as well as limiting aspects. “[F]reedom” might be “understood as that which exists in retirement from society” (Dowdell 130), but liberation from the traditional women’s role by way of withdrawal from society is for most of the reclusive characters in *The Hermaphrodite* only an ambiguous and, above all, temporary affair. As Laurence so aptly verbalizes in the title-giving quote for this essay, freedom in solitude is always accompanied by desolation. Reclusiveness has side effects such as mental disorder or premature death. The liberation has limiting aspects, it does come at a cost.

The only two women who survive are Briseida and Gigia. The two of them shun social expectations and conventional gender roles. They make the best of the liberating and limiting aspects of their existence as outcasts, finding an alternative way of life, a third option, other than marriage and death, as Briseida so fittingly but not exactly positively, communicates. Especially Briseida follows her vocation as an artist and lets her young toyboy Pepino warm her heart and body. But a conciliation of her independence and social expectations, of her ambition and marriage, is impossible within society. Her alternative lifestyle can only exist in seclusion, on the margins of society. Howe’s text thus protests the binary understanding of femininity and masculinity and calls for an ideal of human beings who are truly androgynous, who are “combining in the spiritual nature all that is most attractive in either sex” (Howe, *Hermaphrodite* 194).

### 3.2 The Solitary Woman in Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing

Following my reading of the fragment, I want to finally point out the exceptional-ity of this “unclassifiable work” (Bergland and Williams, “Introduction” 1), which has been described as “literally like nothing else in nineteenth-century American literary history” (2). I aim at giving *The Hermaphrodite* credit as a “solitary book” (Showalter, “Tradition”) about solitary women. With regard to Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Showalter argues that “it can be a very serious blow to a developing genre when a revolutionary work is taken out of circulation” (“Tradition” 34). This also holds true for the Laurence manuscript, which “offers a strong instance of the transformation of the literary landscape achieved by including unpublished texts in the conception of mid-nineteenth-century American literature” (Sánchez-Eppler 24).<sup>9</sup> Implementing these considerations, I will conclude my thoughts here by reinserting the Laurence manuscript into the tradition of the nineteenth-century American hermit’s tale, particularly in its female version. Although unique, Howe’s Laurence manuscript anticipates many later female hermit’s tales. *The Hermaphrodite* is a text that opens itself forward, generating “worm-holes to the future” (Linda Charnes qtd. in Luciano 221).

Howe’s autobiographical hermaphrodite Laurence is a precursor of Louisa May Alcott’s autobiographical tomboy Jo March in *Little Women* (1868). Jo wants to become a writer and seeks and needs solitude for her art, as writing is a solitary activity. She can be read as a temporary female recluse, resembling Briseida.<sup>10</sup> In Sarah Orne Jewett’s “A White Heron” (1886) young Sylvia rejects the option of the traditional female role, in favor of the preservation of her environment. Her passive rebellion against the (male) exploitation of (female) nature in the end equals a definite decision for a hermit-like existence, free of confining gender expectations but coming at the cost of isolation in nature (Bergmann 139–68). Howe’s Nina is a European version of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman’s “The New England Nun” (1891), Louisa Ellis, who waits for long years for her fiancé to return from a foreign country and throughout develops pathological traits or neuroses. Louisa finally opts for independence instead of marriage, but the ambiguity of the story also points out the downsides of female reclusiveness and spinsterhood. Chopin’s “The Maid of Saint Philippe” (1892) features a tomboy character, Marianne, who rejects the promises of love and luxury and strives for freedom by lighting out to the wilderness, in a pattern typically reserved for male characters in American literature. Her critique is overtly directed against her suitors who want to turn the avid hunter, who seems to be an American variant of Joan of Arc, into a housewife, and thus covertly against the prevailing gender norms (Bergmann 139–68). The central episode of Jewett’s

*The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) is the narrative of the hermit Joanna. Rejected by her fiancé, Joanna commits the unpardonable sin of directing wicked thoughts towards God in her disappointment. As penance, she signs away her property and retreats to a shack on a small island to live out her life in solitude. Joanna's hermitic life can be read as a denial or a fulfillment of her female selfhood.

The trope of the female hermit or recluse questions gender norms and critiques social limitations for women. Ann Romines argues that “[t]he best-known fictional portrayals of female solitaries . . . suggest the possibility that withdrawal mutes and diminishes the woman who chooses it” (147–48). But with regard to Howe's *The Hermaphrodite*, I also wonder, just like Bergland and Williams, whether Laurence's “status bring[s] him mainly sorrow, loneliness, and deprivation” or whether it is also “instrumental in emancipating him from strictures that others take for granted and can't see beyond,” whether Howe's text is “a sign of her entrapment in her age's conventions regarding gender roles” or “mark[s] a stage in a steady movement toward progressive feminist consciousness” (“Introduction” 11–12)? Marianne Noble argues that it is “[o]ne of the values of creative writing” to enable an author “to work on several competing ideas at the same time” (48). Liberation can be found alongside limitation in the text, and both may be found in solitude.

### 3.3 Solitude and the Ambitious Woman

It is part of Howe's literary legacy that the Laurence manuscript anticipates prevailing themes and motifs of American Women's Writing and in particular the nineteenth-century female hermit's tale. The hermaphrodite can be read as an image of “creative women's psyches, hinting that the great woman artist is a divided and emasculated man, a monster doomed to solitude and sorrow” (Showalter, *Jury* 77). Howe's text is pointing towards the dehumanizing consequences of a cultural insistence on rigid gender norms which prompt voluntary withdrawal or forced isolation. Even more so, Laurence is representative of all individuals disenfranchised by cultural restrictions of gender dualism (Borgstrom 320; Crowley 79). Howe reflects on crucial problems and raises important questions, but may not present straightforward solutions or answers (Sánchez-Eppler 29; Warren 118). Thus, Howe's work provides what Jane Tompkins has labeled “cultural work,” although during her lifetime it was lacking timely circulation due to its unpublished status.

Howe's Laurence manuscript is a solitary book by an author who felt isolated and confined due to her ambition and gender. The solitary activity of writing about the “solitude of self” (248), to use Elizabeth Cady Stanton's dictum, or, as Howe herself would describe it, the soul's only “two possessions, itself & God” (qtd. in Williams, “Speaking” xxxv) served as an autobiographical vent. But even more so,

Howe's fragment is a unique document of cultures of solitude generated by stiff gender expectations. The Laurence manuscript is today seen as Howe's "greatest masterpiece" (Bergland 184), and it has brought about a "seismic shift" (Bergland and Williams, "Introduction" 9) in studies of antebellum America. Above that, *The Hermaphrodite* also "remains timely" in its urge to "reiterate the truth of repressive gender constructs" (Noble 49).

Hillary Clinton's failed run for the presidency in 2016 – which, at least to a certain degree, can be accredited to American society's deeply felt mistrust and suspicion of ambitious women – prompted her to withdraw from society to her upstate New York home. This retreat earned her the jocular sobriquets of "fabled, elusive forest dweller of upstate New York," "Forest Matriarch," and even "flaxen-haired Sasquatch of Chappaqua" in the press. The mantra ascribed to this fictionalized female hermit was, of course, a feminist dictum: "Do not give up" (Hutto). This contemporary news story emphasizes that the female cultures of solitude presented in Howe's Laurence manuscript still strongly resonate with American culture today.

## Notes

1. *The Hermaphrodite* was a "closet" or "closeted" manuscript (Ashworth, "Spiritualized" 187; Williams, "Speaking" xlv). On the implications of "outing" Howe's manuscript and "using" the figure of Laurence, see Borgstrom 320–23.
2. For discussions of *The Hermaphrodite* and Transcendentalism, see Daniele; Elbert; Saltz; and Williams, "Speaking" xx–xxi.
3. See Ashworth, "No" 35–36; Ashworth, "Spiritualized"; Bergland 182; Crowley; Daniele; Klimasmith 94, 96; Luciano 220; Noble 49; Schneider 140–42, 145–49; Williams, "The Cruellest" 123–35, "Speaking" xii–xx, xxvii–xxxvi, xli–xlili.
4. The description of Laurence's creative process very much resembles Howe's later account of her composition of "Battle-Hymn of the Republic" (Howe, *Reminiscences* 275; Young 243).
5. Joseph von Eichendorff's *The Marble Statue* (*Das Marmorbild*, 1819) may have been an inspiration for Howe. Howe's poem "To a Beautiful Statue" (1849) may have been composed around the time she worked on the Laurence manuscript (Sánchez-Eppler 46). For a discussion of *The Hermaphrodite*, the statue motif, and sculpture, see Ashworth, "No" 36–37; Bergland; Daniele; and Williams, *Hungry* 95–96, "Speaking" xxviii–xxix.
6. For a link between the veiled marble woman and a sculpture of Laura Bridgman, the celebrated blind, deaf, and mute student of Howe's husband, see Bergland.

7. For a discussion of similarities between *The Hermaphrodite* and Alcott's *A Long Fatal Love Chase* (1866/1995), see Warren. Alcott's *Diana and Persis* (c. 1879/1978) also parallels Howe's text. Like *The Hermaphrodite*, Alcott's fictionalized life of her deceased younger sister, the painter May Alcott Nieriker raises the question of the compatibility of marriage and artistic self-fulfillment in a woman's life.
8. There are similarities between this episode and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie* (1847) (Sánchez-Eppler 46). A possible factual source may have been the story of the explorer Sir John Franklin (Noble 71).
9. For a discussion of *The Hermaphrodite* as a problematization of the conventions of the Victorian novel, see Bedenbaugh.
10. For an apt analysis of the gender-ambiguous relationship between Laurence and Ronald, see Schneider. Their relationship anticipates the one between the tomboy Jo and the feminized Laurie in Alcott's *Little Women*.

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Margaretta M. Lovell

# Thoreau and the Landscapes of Solitude: Painted Epiphanies in Undomesticated Nature

**Abstract:** This essay explores attitudes toward solitude embodied and endorsed by nineteenth-century landscape painting, works that equate spiritual and aesthetic experience. Nature-viewing in wild places by the charismatic man of imagination is described as solitary, optically pleasurable, and deeply moving, a source of insight and wisdom.

## 1. Solitude and Community

The idea of solitude is replete with dichotomies and contradictions: urban/rural, temporary/permanent, voluntary/involuntary, punishment/salvation. In the antebellum period in the United States solitude was theorized and modeled most memorably in the withdrawal of Henry David Thoreau from the village and intellectual milieu of Concord to the shores of a small nearby pond. Indeed, the book that memorialized his withdrawal and the meditations enabled by that venture, *Walden*, pivots on a pair of chapters entitled “Solitude” and, because solitude always conjures its opposite, “Visitors.” Thoreau’s was a rural, temporary, voluntary withdrawal from sociability, conversation, and companionship, a solitude deliberately engaged to foster careful observation of his surroundings, and, equally, to nourish insights and wisdom derived from his meditations on those observations. And these, then, it should be remembered, became public, conversational, and social in their publication in 1854.

As in John Milton’s prototypes, “Il Penseroso” and “L’Allegro” (1645), Thoreau’s essay endorsing the solitary contemplative life, “Solitude,” competes on seemingly equal terms with the acknowledged pleasures of social intercourse in “Visitors.” These opposed incompatible terms vibrate against one another in poetry, prose, and in social performance. In “Solitude,” Thoreau states boldly: “I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude ... I am no more lonely than ... the northstar, or the south wind or an April shower ... [in] the indescribable innocence and beneficence of Nature” (131–33). Yet, a few pages later, he begins “Visitors” with “I think that I love society as much as most ... I am naturally no hermit,” (135) as though, like Milton, his disposition was torn between a contemplative life and an active life among, and dependent on, other men (Emerson 474). But, like Milton, he tips his hand. Most of his visitors are described in a terse epic catalogue (“Restless committed men; ... ministers; ... doctors, lawyers,

uneasy housekeepers,” Thoreau 147) and the majority of the chapter dwells on his intercourse with a wood chopper who is more committed than Thoreau to the solitary (and in his case, permanent) life in nature. Thoreau’s solitude at Walden Pond was not permanent nor was it uninterrupted, but, as he describes his choices, his solo residence at Walden served as an indispensable catalyst to his thoughtful penetration of natural history and his philosophical ruminations on historic process, ethics, and much else.

## 2. Solitary Viewers

Thoreau was not alone in his (temporary) embrace of solitude. Like Thoreau and unlike their predecessors in the eighteenth century and their successors in the twentieth, artists who painted the American landscape in the nineteenth century tended to picture their ventures into nature as solitary, optically pleasurable, and deeply emotionally moving. Sanford Gifford’s *Kaaterskill Falls* (1871) is characteristic. We find ourselves deep in a golden autumnal trackless forest beside a small stream that tumbles over a low ledge of rocks at eye level in the foreground (fig. 1). The highest value in the work, the white *impasto* paint that describes water in motion, also draws our eye to a higher waterfall in the middle distance, and then, in the upper, further, reaches of the scene, embowered by arching branches, to a remarkably high long stream of silver-bright water tumbling down by semi-invisible processes – in the narrative of the painting – toward the dark enclosure of our own position. That we can see not only the sparkling forms of the nearby rocks and leaves but also this spectacular distant ribbon of glimmering water streaming over the edge of a formidable escarpment, so out of scale with human bodies and concerns, suggests insight into, and understanding of, the whole complex visual event as meaningful and epiphanic for the viewer. The single, spot-lit human actor introduced into the scene does not yet see the prospect that he may soon discover. Indeed he may never leave the tangle of the dense forest floor and cross the ledge damming the stream to catch the breathtaking scene the artist has prepared for us, but we imagine that he will. We urge him on to the moment when his solitary wandering pays off in the visual gift of, metaphorically, insight that succeeds careful, meditative, contemplative retreat into nature (Buell 657).

Just as books of poetry or philosophy in Thoreau’s day were understood to be read silently by a solitary reader, reenacting and re-experiencing the poet’s feelings or the philosopher’s ever-deepening understanding, viewers of artworks were understood to be singular re-animators of the artist’s narrative as they scrutinized such landscape paintings (fig. 2). Even when they were placed in the newly-established urban museums or hung in domestic parlors, paintings solicited solitary,

thoughtful viewing. Capturing a woman deeply engaged in this concentrated act of studying a landscape painting, Frank Waller's *Interior View of the Metropolitan Museum of Art when in Fourteenth Street* (1881) is a record of such private isolated viewing, even in a public space. It models the kind of intense solitary 'looking' that natural landscape invited, and that landscape art presumed, in the mid-nineteenth century. Although Waller describes portraits, history paintings, religious works, ceramics, ceremonial plate, and beckoning galleries beyond galleries, his painting is about the twenty inches of imaginative space between the intent visitor's eyes and the turbulent landscape painting that has seized her attention. Waller's painting is about focus, concentration, and, ultimately, the potential for insight inherent in solitary deep engagement with nature and its simulacra. We ourselves are positioned as unobserved observers of intense communication between artist/artwork and viewer, learning about how we ourselves should respond to these particular works of art. This essay explores landscape painting in the mid-nineteenth century with a view to understanding the attitudes toward solitude (and communication) that they embody and endorse.

### 3. Involuntary Solitude

Framing the voluntary, temporary, contemplative solitude of Thoreau at Walden and the secondary solitude of those reading texts and viewing paintings that described and prescribed solitude were other artistic and social experiments concerning a related – but also rather different, because involuntary – solitude. The permanent popularity of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), for instance, and its reincarnations into our own day in films such as *Cast Away* (2000) and *The Martian* (2015) suggest that involuntary solitude can floresce into a compelling heroic narrative of ingenuity, perseverance, and self-reliance. Expulsion from society by the accidental marooning of a resilient, creative man (and these seem to be generally gendered tales) is the occasion for triumphant overcoming of seemingly insurmountable obstacles to achieve reintegration into society. The suggestion is that the involuntary isolate, equipped with a few tools and an extreme form of self-reliance, can embody the very best in terms of human fortitude and creativity. The right education, intrepid resilience, and a positive outlook prepare such individuals to use the focus provided by solitude to achieve the seemingly impossible: triumphant and public reintegration into communities that recognize their achievement. 'Crusoe tales' do not allow their protagonists to embrace permanent solitude, to acquiesce to a hermit fate with calm misanthropic acceptance. They are fundamentally about the high value of social reintegration and social embeddedness.

A second, but not unrelated, form of involuntary solitude was the result of an important social and psychological experiment in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. During this early national period, American reformers embraced radical changes in the treatment of malefactors adopting regimes and structures that, instead of incarcerating prisoners in large open rooms where they were expected to labor to support the institution, they were placed in single cells, modeled on the architecture of social retreat long familiar from the monastery. This form of involuntary solitude was theorized as beneficial, as an opportunity for the felon to reflect on his past actions, to be penitent, to resolve to be better, and to avoid character contamination from other prisoners. While those who had violated society's mandates in the eighteenth century tended to receive physical punishment (the clipping of the ears, for instance, for counterfeiters), public humiliation, and/or enforced servitude within the authority of patriarchal households and immediate reintegration into the community, treatment in the early nineteenth century focused on incarceration where the convicted malefactor either labored to support the institution (the Auburn system) or passed his days in solitary contemplation intended to rehabilitate the felon's soul, to make an honest citizen out of him (Halttunen; Meskell 841–42). Pennsylvania's singularly influential experiment in solitary confinement grew out of the tradition of progressive, increasingly humane treatment of malefactors in that state. The Eastern State Penitentiary, designed by John Haviland in 1821, offered solitary cells equipped with heat, daylight, indoor plumbing, and individual attached exercise yards, as well as encouraging visits by well-meaning citizens, and infinite opportunity to reflect and self-improve (fig. 3). In the words of one theorist of this system, Elisha Bates, "solitude is the proper condition in which to place criminals, whether we regard it as punishment, to operate as a terror and prevent crimes or as placing those who have violated the laws of morality and of their country in the most favorable situation for that kind of retrospection which leads to penitence and reformation" (qtd. in Adamson 48). The adoption of solitary confinement regimes of incarceration resulted in radically different physical structures, paradigmatically Eastern State Prison, where extended ranges of small isolated cells rather than task-efficient large halls dominate the design of imprisonment.

In sum, then, solitude in the early national period had a peculiar status. It was simultaneously understood to be a punishment and a means to profound insight, social reintegration, and individual salvation. At the extreme positive end of this broad spectrum we find Thoreau's embrace of solitude at Walden and a rich body of landscape paintings produced by Gifford and others in America and Europe during the early and mid-nineteenth century. In these cases, human solitude is



mitigated by the myriad sensory events of nature which become the platform on which an ample kind of very active mental intercourse is built. Nature, in other words, becomes the field of exchange, even a kind of sociability for the receptive soul. But it must be remembered that both the essay and the artwork were conceived as audienceed, that is, as social agents of the creative soul, venturing out through publication and exhibition as letters sealed in bottles sent forth from the lone thinker or painter with human receptors in mind. The Thoreauvian man and the wandering artist are not inert, and thus are unlike the classic hermit who is, by definition, not productive, not participating in ameliorating human society through aesthetic and rhetorically persuasive works that, however solitary their production, are, by design, fundamentally social.

#### 4. Solitaries in Nature

Unsurprisingly, the figure of the hermit (although important in political discourse) is rare in American painting, but the figure of the solitary wanderer, temporarily withdrawn from society but purposeful in his intent to rejoin society, is everywhere (Slauter 31–66). The hermit in American painting during the long nineteenth century associates closely with the creatures of the wilderness but he does not observe nature, directing his gaze either downward in prayer or heavenward in supplication. Washington Allston's *Elijah in the Desert* (1818), for instance, pictures the praying prophet in an overwhelming barren landscape while generous crows attend to his meager needs for sustenance. John Singer Sargent's *The Hermit (Il Solitario)* of 1908 portrays a mostly naked man physically so passive and still, and well-integrated into his surroundings, that both the viewer and the local fauna are scarcely aware of his presence (fig. 4) (Herdrich and Weinberg 36–37). By contrast, the solitary wandering figures that populate most nineteenth-century landscape paintings tend to be either local folk pausing in their labors, or travelers whose clothing and mien suggest town life and a temporary excursion into rural surroundings, pausing in a purposeful journey, as the viewer's surrogate, to carefully observe and contemplate the aesthetic and philosophical meaning of wild nature.

Paradigmatic is the tousle-headed urbane gentleman who commands a crag in Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog (Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer)* of ca. 1817 (fig. 5). Neither the summit which he has achieved nor the landscape that he observes are productive rural properties. Indeed the ideas of property and productivity (crops, houses, fences, village cluster) are decisively set aside in these works. Our surrogate, walking stick in hand, has clambered alone with difficulty to this inhospitable peak to have a spiritual and aesthetic experience, and to instruct us concerning the value of this use of skills, education, and

effort. The agitation of his hair suggests the tumultuous activity of his mind. It is important that the excursion of this halted traveller – whether figured as hunter, forester, or poet-philosopher – is undertaken as voluntary and temporary solitude with an enormous payoff (Koerner 179–210). It is a condensed sublime form of the Thoreauvian project at Walden Pond. Our proxy directs our gaze with his own hidden gaze toward the sight that cannot help but provoke contemplation of the enormity of nature, and thus provide insight into the relative brevity and humbling inconsequence of human and personal concerns.

An American counterpart of Friedrich's scene, Gifford's *The Artist Sketching at Mount Desert, Maine* (1864–65) records a similarly dark, solitary figure positioned on a rocky prominence against a misty far-reaching view (fig. 6). But Gifford's surrogate is reduced in scale and pulled to the side, excavating the center of the image for our eager engagement with the distant depths into the view. Friedrich's wanderer stands squarely in the center of the image so our eyes must dodge by his looming silhouette on either side to achieve their distant mountainous goals. Gifford's *plein-air* painter, on the other hand, holds a bright white academy board that draws our eye and allows us to imagine that, in the narrative of the painting, having finished the one oil sketch we see safely tucked into the underside of his paint box's lid, he has begun a second painting of the view, perhaps paradoxically, the one we are also viewing with him. Here the mountain-climbing isolate shows us, with the authenticating detail of his own person, that the scene we see was a recorded fact, not a fabrication of artistic imagination. Eschewing his campstool and shadowing umbrella, he perches perilously at the edge of a precipice that signals exhilaration rather than danger or loneliness in this eagle's nest view of the island estuary and the majestic Atlantic Ocean. The excursion has been a solitary one but also one populated with sublime views and careful study of the minutia of nature, here recorded and packaged for delivery within an urban and social context.

Gifford's *Hunter Mountain* (1866), by contrast, depicts what could be called domestic solitude (fig. 7). A lone house and small cowshed accommodate a figure bringing the cows in for milking as the sun sets and a sliver moon rises. This pasture is a rough patch of land, still filled with the stumps of a recently cleared opening in a vast forest. A thin ribbon of smoke, miles away at the dead center of the image, indicates a neighbor in an otherwise uninhabited and uninhabitable expanse of forest and mountain, receding, as if infinitely, into the distance on the right. The cow herder knows he is solitary but we, on a rise above the clearing, see the extent of his isolation better than he. Far from melancholic, however, this isolated farm is full of New World promise. We read it from our elevated vantage point as a stage in the conversion of wilderness into productivity, prosperity, and, eventually, community.

## 5. The Man of Imagination

Images that include solitary local figures, such as farmers, going about their routine tasks, are usually not positioned by the artist as perceivers. Like Gifford's cow herder, they are too embedded within the view to understand it as, in Alexander Jackson Downing's terms, a man of imagination could and would (263). Friedrich's isolated poet figure is a solitary wanderer whose experience of nature leads to philosophical and aesthetic insight both for himself and for the painting's viewer. Gifford's cow herder is equally isolated but too concerned with cattle to gain insight from his isolation. In this painting, as in *Kaaterskill Falls* (fig. 1), the ideal perceiver is actually external, the painting's viewer, while the pictured figure has a lesser relationship to the physical and psychological potential of the scene. In the Friedrich painting the standing youth, and in Gifford's *Artist Sketching* an urbane seated figure turns away from us and, silhouetted against the scene as our proxy, shows us what to value about both nature and solitude.

It is not their (invisible) faces that clue us in to their unique value as model perceivers but their mien and their relationship to the natural scene that gives their 'thinking' postures context. Within vernacular contemporaneous theory of personality and perception, the man of imagination has an unusual consciousness; he is hyper-aware of his physical context and unusually adroit at synthesizing disparate threads of thought and perception. He is characterized by "aspiration ... originality, boldness, [and] energy" (Downing 263). These are admirable men, individuals characterized by depth of character. Their virtues are those of solitary rumination and action; they are associated with "the eagle's nest," not with the virtues or locale of the socially adept, gregarious urbane man-of-the-world (Downing 263). Thoreau, Friedrich's wanderer, Gifford's *plein-air* artist, and Milton's "Il Penseroso" are men of imagination, men whose perceptions and creativity blossom in solitude, their souls incessantly absorbing, their minds turbulent with creativity. They are alter-egos for the artist, poet, and philosopher, and they are models for the viewer or reader who understands their admirable and charismatic solitude.

On rare occasions we do find a local figure cast as our surrogate, a potential perceiver – a mariner in the case of Fitz Henry Lane's *Owl's Head, Penobscot Bay* (1862), who pauses in his labors and directs the viewer's gaze to the pearlescent wonders of a dawning day in rural Maine (fig. 8). Isolated from the small settlement and dramatized by his red sleeves and silhouetted form, this mariner, or perhaps fisherman, wielding an eel spear, stops and takes in the transient ethereal beauty of a quiet coastline with the same absolute focus as Friedrich's urbane wanderer or Gifford's *plein-air* painter on their respective mountaintops. All of these perceivers are immobile, silent, and – with their invisible eyes – intently looking, a skill

Waller's young woman is also demonstrating for us in the earliest galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, as she models how we might look intently and insightfully at a landscape painting (fig. 2). Their solitude is contemplative, enabling, and it has a tone of yearning, desire, and, indeed, achievement and reward, about it.

Rarely, but in a few cases, the artist invokes the intensity of solitary emotional response to nature at its most wondrous with no proxy at all, indeed, without the visual incident that usually prefaces the grandest, highest, most chromatically distinctive gestures of nature. John F. Kensett's *Sunset on the Sea* (1872) strips the scene of rocks, trees, summits, and positions the viewer as the man of imagination, a singular perceiver of a singular visual event – the great glowing oculus of a setting sun (fig. 9). Lapping wavelets suggest the ocean's extent but no bracketing features, diagonal pathways, or proxy viewers gesture us to this epiphany. In this and similar paintings the artist crafted during the last summer of his life, Kensett asks the viewer to relinquish not only human sociability but also the mists and crags and waterfalls that other artists use to suggest contemplation of infinite space and infinite time.

## 6. Poet/Philosopher/Painter/Wanderer

In sum then, these paintings, which are exemplary of many similar works, exhibit a wide range of possibilities concerning the solitary wanderer/viewer/perceiver confronting the wild places of the planet and finding in that exercise aesthetic, philosophical, and spiritual rewards. Solitude, the paintings seem to postulate, is a pre-condition for insight. Ralph Waldo Emerson said that walking and intensely observing nature was the precondition of Thoreau's writing and imagination (483; 485). What both this comment and the landscape paintings that are so plentiful in this period are pointing to is the importance of solitude as a precondition of observation, insight, and, in the end, the production of an artwork or essay that memorializes, creatively interprets, and valorizes the exercise – in short, an act of communication. Thoreau's essay "Solitude," then, and "Visitors" abut because they support one another. They point to the two polarities of social experience that the essay and the painting bridge: personal, individual solo experience on the one hand, and communication (in publication and exhibition) on the other.

Both the poet-philosopher and the artist are motivated to share their solitary insights, to export their visual, moral, and philosophical engagement with non-productive mountainscapes, oceanscapes, and forestscapes to the sociable, productive lives of viewers and readers embedded in quotidian experience. They take on the role of emissaries from the periphery, bringing a rich harvest of thought from

the waste spaces of crags and beaches – where there is no material harvest, and no community – to the productive center, the village homes and urban institutions of mid-nineteenth-century western culture (Ferguson 114; 130). There they seek to launch their community of readers and viewers on valuable proxy journeys to those peripheral locales and those heightened emotional, hyper-conscious readings of nature. The presumption is that nature is legible and that its lessons are valuable for the individual and for the community. Its syntax is composed of given universal elements: mountains, cliffs, water, and especially, the sun – not just illuminating the view but the thing itself a participant in the scene, a solar eye looking back at the receptive human eye. Instrumental in the translation of unproductive nature observed in solitude into highly valued cultural statements read or viewed in solitude, but within community, is the aesthetic power of the instruments of communication – the Thoreauvian essay and the landscape painting. Solitude, then, of the sort exemplified by Thoreau’s “Solitude” and Kensett’s *Sunset*, is rural, temporary, voluntary, and directed toward aesthetic production that is, above all, social as well as invaluable.

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## Figures

*Fig. 1. Sanford Gifford, Kaaterskill Falls, 1871, oil on canvas, 14 ¾ × 12 ½ in (37.5 × 31.8 cm). Detroit Institute of Arts, Gift of Katherine French Rockwell, 56.185; Bridgeman Images.*



*Fig. 2. Frank Waller, Interior View of the Metropolitan Museum of Art when in Fourteenth Street (formerly known as Second Floor of 128 W. 14<sup>th</sup> St in 1878), 1881, oil on canvas 24 × 20 in (61 × 50.8 cm), Metropolitan Museum of Art 95.29. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.*



Fig. 3. *After a Drawing by Convict No. 2954, Samuel Cowperthwaite, The State Penitentiary for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania [designed by John Haviland in 1821], 1855, lithograph by P. S. Duval & Sons, Philadelphia, 6.5 x 10 in (17 x 25 cm). Library Company of Philadelphia.*



Fig. 4. *John Singer Sargent, The Hermit (Il Solitario), 1908, oil on canvas, 37 3/4 x 38 in (95.9 x 96.5 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1911, (acc. no. 11.31). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.*





Fig. 5. *Caspar David Friedrich, Wanderer above the Sea of Fog (Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer), ca. 1817, oil on canvas, 94.8 × 74.8 cm. Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany (acc. no. 5161); Photo Elke Walford, Art Resource, N.Y.*



Fig. 6. *Sanford Gifford, The Artist Sketching at Mount Desert, Maine, 1864–65, oil on canvas, 11 × 19 in (17.9 × 48.3 cm). Courtesy, National Gallery of Art, Gift of Jo Ann and Julian Ganz, Jr. in honor of John Wilmerding 2004.99*



Fig. 7. *Sanford Robinson Gifford, Hunter Mountain, Twilight, 1866, oil on canvas, 30 5/8 × 54 1/8 in (77.8 × 137.5 cm). Terra Foundation for American Art, 1999.57; Photography © Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago.*



Fig. 8. *Fitz Henry Lane, Owl's Head, Penobscot Bay, 1862, oil on canvas, 15 3/4 × 26 1/8 in (40 × 66.36 cm). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Bequest of Martha C. Karolik for the M. and M. Karolik Collection of American Paintings, 1815–1865. 48.448; Photography © 2016 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.*



Fig. 9. *John Frederick Kensett, Sunset on the Sea, ca. 1872, oil on canvas, 28 × 41 1/8 in (71.1 × 104.5 cm). Metropolitan Museum New York, Gift of Thomas Kensett (acc. no. 74.3). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.*





Hélène Quanquin

# “The World to Each Other”: The Joint Politics of Isolation and Reform among Garrisonian Abolitionists

**Abstract:** This essay investigates the support system implemented by Garrisonian abolitionists during the antebellum period, which articulated both isolation and reform. Isolation in that context did not mean complete separation but rather the constitution of a space on the margins of society and politics.

## 1. Isolation and Reform

When the members of the American Anti-Slavery Society met for their thirty-second annual meeting from May 9 to 11, 1865, the future of the organization was on everyone's mind. The Confederate Army had surrendered in April, thus opening the door to the abolition of slavery with the expected ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution.<sup>1</sup> The context led abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison to suggest they “close the operation and the existence of this society with its anniversary.” Faced with the opposition of other activists, who argued that they should continue their fight until equality of rights between blacks and whites was reached, he pleaded that “[i]t is not for Abolitionists to affect exclusiveness, or seek isolation from the great mass of the people, when the reasons which compiled them to take the position no longer exist.” “We are no longer alone,” he exclaimed, “we must mingle with the millions of our fellow-countrymen” (“The Anti-Slavery Society” 2).<sup>2</sup> For Garrison, withdrawal from mainstream politics, which he and his fellow activists had embraced before the Civil War, was no longer a valid position in a context where the majority of the population had come to share their views.

Garrisonians were members of the American Anti-Slavery Society who stayed in the organization when it split in 1840. They believed that it was possible for abolitionists with differing “religious, social, and political views” to unite in order to put an end to slavery (Kraditor 8).<sup>3</sup> Because of that, they were “a diverse lot,” who however shared “a hope that nonviolent agitation would change society in the future, and a set of experiences that made them feel embattled in the present” (McDaniel 89).<sup>4</sup> Despite divergences, they agreed that, for their cause to succeed, it had to be agitated from a moral high ground situated outside of mainstream

politics – the position Garrison called “exclusiveness” in 1865 (“The Anti-Slavery Society” 2) – and supported by a close-knit circle providing a support system best described by abolitionist Wendell Phillips in his 1876 eulogy of Garrison’s wife, Helen Benson Garrison. He recalled then “the large and loving group that lived and worked together, the joy of companionship, sympathy for each other – almost our only joy – for the outlook was very dark, and our toil seemed almost in vain.” “The world’s dislike of what we aimed at, the social frown, obliged us to be all the world to each other; and yet it was full of life,” he added (qtd. in Garrison, *Helen Eliza Garrison* 39). Solitude as a group experience was thus seen both as a consequence of Garrisonians’ political opinions and as a source of emotional benefits in the face of public opprobrium.

Historians have offered several illuminating analyses of the different spaces of Garrisonian abolitionism, be they fictional, as in Martha Schoolman’s *Abolitionist Geographies* (2014), political or domestic, local, national, or transnational. W. Caleb McDaniel has investigated its advocates’ belief in “constant *agitation* by at least some citizens *outside* of political institutions” as the very condition of true democracy (10; emphasis added) and the creation of “transatlantic ties” that helped them sustain that position (75). In an essay entitled “The Boundaries of Abolitionism” (1979), Ronald G. Walters has highlighted the “pattern ... of eternal testing and factionalization” which helped them protect the integrity of their fight in the face of opposition (19). In his study of “antislavery marriages,” Chris Dixon has explored Garrisonians’ “efforts to merge public and private reform” (84) as well as the role of domesticity in the “reshaping of the public sphere” that they undertook (204).

These approaches provide partial answers to the paradox of Garrisonians’ activism in that their absolute engagement with the world depended on the creation of a safe space away from this very world, which allowed them to wage a war against slavery for more than three decades. This essay investigates the support system implemented by this group of activists that so effectively articulated “social isolation” as the very condition of reform (Fanuzzi 40). Isolation in that context did not mean complete separation and withdrawal but rather, to use the words of Barbara Taylor, the creation of a “border country” (651), in keeping with French thinker Michel de Montaigne’s description of solitude as a “room at the back of the shop” in his 1572 essay “On Solitude” (qtd. in Taylor 644).

Garrisonians’ isolation was a response to the violence and the perceived inherent corruption of a political system that allowed slavery to flourish. It was based on a support system that involved emotional attachment and centered on friendships and family. This made the home, which played a crucial part in sustaining Garrisonians’ activism, a hybrid space, both private and political.

## 2. (Self-)Imposed Isolation

When the American Anti-Slavery Society was founded in Philadelphia in December 1833, the belligerent language of its declaration left no doubt as to the determination of the delegates who were present. Their position was one of “moral absolutism” (McDaniel 9), which they knew would put them at odds with public opinion in the South, but also more importantly in the North, where the population condoned the policy of compromises and complicity implemented by their politicians. The signatories of the *Declaration of Sentiments of the American Anti-Slavery Society*, which was adopted in 1833, thus declared their support for “the opposition of moral purity to moral corruption – the destruction of error by the potency of truth – the overthrow of prejudice by the power of love – and the abolition of slavery by the spirit of repentance” (1).

This position, coupled with blatant racism in the North, explains why abolitionist activities were regularly disrupted by mob violence throughout the antebellum period. In 1860, Garrison argued that “[e]very great reformatory movement, in every age, ha[d] been subjected alike to popular violence and to religious opprobrium” and abolitionism was no exception (*The “Infidelity” of Abolitionism* 3). Thirty-five riots targeted antislavery activists during British abolitionist George Thompson’s lecture tour in the United States in 1835 (McDaniel 53). In October of that year, a group of men attacked the black and white women of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society and nearly lynched Garrison, with the complicity of city officials. It was the topic of numerous articles published in the abolitionist press and of letters exchanged by activists that denounced the “noble army of gentlemanly savages” and “heartless and unmanly persecutors” who had participated in the riots (Thompson 109; 116). Its memory was so vivid among abolitionists that, forty-five years later, Phillips exchanged bitter letters with the son of Theodore Lyman, the Mayor of Boston, over his father’s role in the violence against abolitionists (Lyman). During the antebellum period, this kind of violence was so common that “[e]very year, the antislavery press published a litany of similar horrors that Garrisonian orators and editors could conjure up at any time with barely a word” (McDaniel 100).<sup>5</sup>

Violence took its toll on abolitionists and their families. When, in 1840, American abolitionist George Bradburn met Thompson’s son, who was born in the United States during his father’s tour in 1835, he described him as “a feeble child, owing, doubtless, to the perpetual alarm and excitement of Mrs. Thompson caused by the mobocratic assaults on her husband” (Bradburn 118). The mobbing of the second Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women in Philadelphia in May 1838 made such a strong impression on Boston abolitionist Maria Weston

Chapman that she suffered “a debilitating bout of ‘brain fever’” and withdrew from the movement for a few months (Chambers 123). Lee V. Chambers notes that violence created “a prolonged sense of endangerment” for her and other abolitionists’ children (246–47, n. 27).

Although they all experienced mob violence, or the “reign of terror,” abolitionists “learned different lessons from it” (McDaniel 72–73). “Memories of mob violence,” McDaniel suggests, “encouraged ‘Garrisonian’ loyalists to insist on unfettered freedom of speech and agitation at a time when others believed abolitionists should focus on slavery and avoid other controversial topics – creating a tactical gap that proved impossible to bridge” (66). This accounts in part for the split of the American Anti-Slavery Society at the end of the 1830s, leading to the creation of a rival organization, the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, in May 1840. Although Garrison’s opponents also disapproved of his advocacy of women’s participation in abolitionist societies on an equal footing with men and his criticisms of the churches’ failure to condemn slavery, they also strongly disagreed with his promotion of non-resistance, i.e. the rejection of any participation through voting or elected office in a political system that “rested on the violence of slavery, capital punishment, a standing army, and militias” (Faulkner 83). Garrison had come to embrace the doctrine of non-resistance in the 1830s, under the influence of both Quakerism and Perfectionism, the theory advocated by John Humphrey Noyes (Bacon 276; Garrison and Garrison 144–48).<sup>6</sup> Non-resistants shared the belief “that human efforts would bring about the full realization of the kingdom of God on earth” (Ziegler 70). Gathered at the Peace Convention in Boston in September 1838, Garrison and his allies thus claimed to “voluntarily exclude [them]selves from every legislative and judicial body, and repudiate all human politics, worldly honors, and stations of authority” and “profess[ed] to belong to a kingdom not of this world, which is without local, geographical, or national boundaries, in which there is no division of caste, or inequality of sex, and which is destined to break in pieces and consume allover [sic] kingdoms” (“Proceedings of the Peace Convention” 54). This platform earned them the name of “No-Government men” (Birney 8). One of its corollaries was ‘comeouterism,’ which led some abolitionists to disaffiliate themselves from established churches on the ground that they were complicit in the continuation of slavery (McKivigan 237). As mentioned by Margaret Hope Bacon, “[t]he commitment to nonresistance was not, however, wholly academic,” as it proved to be an effective strategy when dealing with mob violence (282). It also had a particular appeal for female abolitionists, who were deprived of the right to vote, “plac[ing] ultraist women and men, at least in theory, on an equal level vis-à-vis the state; neither could justifiably participate in the electoral process or bear responsibility for the violence which would result” (Ginzberg 20).<sup>7</sup>



Even if not all Garrisonians were non-resistants, they all saw the validity of agitation from the margins, as the example of Phillips shows. A member of the Boston aristocracy and the son of the first Mayor of Boston, he had been expected to follow in his father's footsteps. He, however, chose to give up a conventional political career to fight against slavery from outside of a system he knew very well. His fellow activists, who were deeply aware of his sacrifice, wrote him in 1839:

[Y]ou turned your back upon the blandishments of a seductive world, repudiated all hope of political preferment and legal eminence, made yourself of no reputation for the benefit of the perishing bondman, and became the associate of those, who, for seeking the abolition of slavery by moral and religious instrumentalities, are up to this hour subjected to popular odium, to violent treatment, to personal insult. (Board of Managers)

Despite the hostility that targeted abolitionists and his family's history, Phillips made the conscious choice of relinquishing the important role in mainstream politics he had been expected to play and of relying instead on work from the margins. This proved to be rewarding, both politically and emotionally.

Abolitionists rejected "the use of all carnal weapons" (*Declaration of Sentiments of the American Anti-Slavery Society* 1), i.e. the use of physical force, but they were not immune to self-generated, mostly verbal, violence within and outside of the movement. Garrisonians did not hesitate to use "inflammatory language" against their enemies (Bartlett 515). Walters also shows that they "formulat[ed] strict standards of fidelity to the cause," which led to "interminable quarrels, disagreements, and retreats into smaller, more restrictive groups, ever in search of the more correct position" (18). When the movement split in May 1840 after the election of abolitionist Abby Kelley to the executive committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society, one of her opponents did "not hesitate to [compare her] conduct to that of old Mrs. Adam in [Eden], Delilah shearing Sampson, etc" (Pickard 253). When in 1847 black abolitionist Frederick Douglass decided to found his own newspaper, the *North Star*, and to become independent from Garrison and his supporters, he was turned into the target of gossip exposing his supposed infidelity to his wife and was called "an apostate" (Garrison qtd. in McFeely 178). Another example is the tactic used by abolitionist Stephen S. Foster, Kelley's husband, and others in the early 1840s, which consisted in interrupting church services. This cost Foster several nights in prison and the remonstrances of the clergy. He was excommunicated by the Church Committee of Dartmouth College, which called him a "disorganizer" and accused him of "fanaticism," a criticism that was leveled at him throughout his career (Church Committee). His own fellow activists disapproved of "his aggressive mode of operation and violent rhetoric" (Bernard 335).<sup>8</sup>

The divisions and the violence surrounding Garrisonians account for their strong sense of a split existing between the public image which they offered to the outside world and their private selves, which only their close friends and relatives had access to. We find numerous references to contemporaries' surprise when they met Garrison for the first time. British writer Harriet Martineau recalled that she "was wholly taken by surprise" when she met him for the first time (qtd. in Villard 14). His son-in-law, Henry Villard, also noted:

Mr. Garrison's exterior was a complete surprise to me. His public character as the most determined, fearless Anti-Slavery champion had so impressed me, as it did most people, that I had supposed his outward appearance must be in keeping with it. In other words, I had expected to see a fighting figure of powerful build, with thick hair, full beard and fiery defiant eyes. It seemed almost ludicrous to behold a man of middle size, completely bald and clean shaven, with kindly eyes behind spectacles, and instead of a fierce, an entirely benignant expression. He appeared, indeed, more like the typical New England minister of the Gospel than the relentless agitator that he was. (qtd. in Villard 13)

Aileen S. Kraditor claims that Garrison's outside persona "resulted from a consciously adopted tactic, one which he carried out further in practice than most – the tactic of always stating the principle toward which public opinion must be educated, no matter how far ahead of present public opinion it might be" (29–30). But the dichotomy also structured Garrisonians' lives and social interactions. Garrison called himself "a strange compound." "In battling with a whole nation," he wrote to his future wife, "I am as impetuous, as daring, and as unconquerable, as a lion; but in your presence, I am as timid, and gentle, and submissive, as a dove" (Letter to Helen Eliza Benson). Garrison was not the only one to experience this sense of division of self. Garrisonians often described the feelings and experiences of the besieged, which required them to develop systems of protection from the outside world. Before they got married, Kelley once confided to her future husband: "My heart is covered by a glass window to the world, but to you the glass has been removed and the only way I can account for your not looking in, is that your eyes have had so many other objects on which to fix themselves that imperatively required particular observation." The two examples of Garrison and Kelley show the importance of the group as well as the couple in Garrisonians' political expressions.

Alienation from society was both an endured condition and a conscious choice for Garrisonians, who found paradoxical strength in their position as a "persecuted minority" (McDaniel 15). In a letter written to Kelley in August 1840, in the midst of the rift within the American Anti-Slavery Society, abolitionist and co-editor of the *Pennsylvania Freeman*, Charles C. Burleigh, expressed his sympathy for her. "I know something of what it is to be among strangers, the object of prejudice & misapprehension & hostility, menaced & slandered for doing what

I thought my duty – with almost none to speak a friendly word in my ear – to sympathise with my feelings & encourage my exertions –,” he wrote, “& I know how sweet & cheering at such times is a letter from a distant friend whose heart throbs in unison with mine.” This shows that Garrisonians were deeply aware of the necessity of a strong support system to ensure their emotional well-being and the success of their political enterprise.

### 3. Cliques and Circles

Burleigh’s letter to Kelley is evidence of the way “[a]ffection cemented the Garrisonian community and provided the emotional support necessary to challenge the social order” (Yacovone 86). The regular interactions between men and women within the abolitionist movement contributed to building strong relationships that led to friendly and romantic attachments. In her study of friendships between elite men and women in the early American Republic, Cassandra A. Good notes that such connections were unique in that they “offered men and women entry into independent, egalitarian relationships that epitomized the values of the early republic” and “escaped the bounds of gender roles inherent in family, marital, or same-sex relationships,” and abolitionist friendships conformed to this model (6; 188). Same-sex relationships were equally important. Constance W. Hassett thus speaks of “the politics of female friendship” in abolitionism (379), while Donald Yacovone has shown the importance of “fraternal love” among male Garrisonians (85). Friendships were cemented by letters, gifts, as well as symbolical gestures. For instance, Garrison named most of his children after fellow abolitionists, including Thompson, Phillips, Francis Jackson, Charles Follen, and Elizabeth Pease, a choice which aimed at strengthening ties among friends to the cause. Among Garrisonians, friendships were a crucial component of the support system on which activists relied in order to make isolation from mainstream society and politics the effective political strategy that it was.

Garrisonians, however, were not part of one united group. Rather, they belonged to sometimes overlapping circles, in which they found the different kinds of support that they needed. An example is the ‘Boston Clique,’ which was formed by female and male “elite Garrisonians” (Robertson 108) and represented for Garrison and other members a “familylike” structure (Friedman 49). But it was also an exclusive group, about whom some abolitionists like Douglass and Parker Pillsbury “felt a sense of discomfort” due to their “inadequate educational background and social status” (Robertson 108). It however provided Garrison with both emotional and financial support. Throughout his life, he was dependent on other people’s wealth. When he was imprisoned in 1830 for libel, it was Arthur

Tappan, the wealthy trader, who paid his fine. It was also Tappan who agreed to fund *The Liberator* in August 1830, calling it “a noble enterprise and worthy of having consecrated to it the best talent in our land” (qtd. in Portlette 187). *The Liberator* did not generate profit and Garrison was never able to make a decent and stable living from it. Instead, he was dependent on the generosity of his fellow activists, notably the members of the Boston Clique.

#### 4. The Home as Political Space

The home was central to Garrisonians’ joint politics of isolation and reform. In the early nineteenth century, it “became synonymous with ‘retirement’ or ‘retreat’ from the world at large” (Cott 57) and it was increasingly viewed as “a bulwark against the instabilities and moral decay of the marketplace” (Sánchez-Eppler 345–46), associated as it was with the purity of woman’s power. However, Amy Kaplan has shown that, in the first half of the nineteenth century, it was also a space intimately connected with the politics of “national expansion,” in which “the boundedness of the home [fused] with the boundedlessness of the nation” (588).

In the midst of violence, the domestic sphere provided “a refuge” (Dixon 82), which frequent absences from home led activists to idealize. Garrisonians were often away, giving lectures and attending conventions, which made them long for a safe, less hectic space. On June 14, 1840, a few hours before he landed in England to take part in the World’s Anti-Slavery Convention, Garrison wrote to his wife that “[he] ha[d] never absented [him]self one hour from [her] as a matter of choice, but only as duty and friendship imperatively demanded the sacrifice” (qtd. in Ruchames 642–43). For him, the home came to represent a haven away from the outside pressures of activism, due to the feminine and stabilizing powers of his wife, whom he called “the all-powerful magnet of attraction, and the focal point of domestic enjoyment” (*Helen Eliza Garrison* 30). His contemporaries agreed on the crucial role that the domestic sphere played in his life. “So Garrison, from the serene level of his daily life, from the faith that never faltered, was able to say to American hate, ‘You cannot reach up to the level of my home mood, my daily existence,’” Phillips claimed in his eulogy of Garrison (*William Lloyd Garrison* 10). It was Garrison’s wife’s steady and nurturing presence that guaranteed that their home would offer him a safe space.

The Phillipses’ home in Boston offers another interesting example of a place away from the violence of the abolitionist world. Like Helen Benson Garrison, Ann Greene Phillips was mostly confined to the domestic space, but it was because of a life-long affliction which affected her until her death in 1886. Because of her condition, the Phillipses very rarely entertained guests and maintained an

exclusive relationship, which was apparent in their interactions with their relatives and neighbors. They for instance asked Phillips's brothers and sisters to have the "sole use" of the family house during the summer, which prompted one sister to accuse them of "selfishness" (Blagden). In 1857 and 1858, they also hired street musicians to play outside of Ann's window every morning. Despite numerous complaints, they refused to stop the music and suggested their neighbors "abandon . . . the front of the house, and secur[e] [themselves] by treble windows" (Hall). What outsiders (mis)took for selfishness was in fact an awareness that, in order to agitate unpopular causes in the outside world, exclusive spaces were needed to provide the necessary emotional strength. This is evident in reformer Thomas Wentworth Higginson's description of Phillips's home. "It was in his wife's sick-room, where strangers were rarely admitted, that you saw Wendell Phillips at home," he wrote, adding that "it was the concentration of a life" (Higginson 73).

Abolitionist homes were often deeply political spaces in several ways. Despite their attachment to privacy, the Phillipses often discussed politics at home, as Ann Greene Phillips was also an abolitionist and had converted her husband to anti-slavery agitation. Letters and newspapers also proved crucial means of information to Garrisonians as well as "aids to the imagination that enabled distant friends to cope with long separations" (McDaniel 78). The political significance of the home was also visible in the choice of the name for the Garrisons' first house, Freedom's Cottage, and the Fosters' farm, an Underground Railroad Station which they called Liberty Farm. For Garrison also, the home was "a sort of hotel," where fellow abolitionists were constantly entertained (Helen Benson Garrison). His son also recalled that "he would strew the floor with his exchanges, or he would leave table or desk covered with heaps of clippings and manuscripts" (Garrison and Garrison 329). Garrison's newspaper, *The Liberator*, dominated his family's life:

My father rarely came up from the *Liberator* office without a roll of exchanges under his arm, which had their interest for his boys, as a source both of reading and of pocket-money, being salable in the stores of wrapping-paper. On Saturday evenings he brought the proofs of the first and last pages of the *Liberator*, and his jocose inquiry after supper – 'Come, boys! who wants to get the *Liberator* in advance of the mail?' – was the invitation for one of us to "follow copy" while he read aloud from the proof-slip and corrected the typographical errors, which were apt to be pretty numerous. (Garrison and Garrison 330)

On Wednesdays, the day when *The Liberator* went to press, the whole family mobilized. Garrison's daughter remembered that, when she was a child, she brought her father lunch on those days – "as my father was then so busy that he did not take time to leave the office for luncheon, it was my privilege to carry a lunch to him. On such occasions he would always say: 'Now you have brought it to me, my

darling, I must eat it” (Villard 7). Her father then made “a long day at the office,” and “returned thoroughly fatigued from the culmination of the week’s work,” adding that “[t]he next day his wife would try – often with success – to take him off with her for an excursion into the suburbs or a round of calls” (Garrison and Garrison 340).

For more than thirty years, the Garrisonians relied on a complex support organization that allowed them to sustain agitation from outside of the system with great success. In the Garrisonian world, the home and politics were not separate spheres. The Garrisonians’ position, however, was not without its ambiguities. Non-resistance was challenged by the widening division between North and South in the 1850s, and when the Civil War broke out, many abolitionists had become convinced of its necessity to put an end to slavery. Garrison’s own son, George Thompson, enrolled in the Army when the war broke out, despite his father’s misgivings (Villard 19). The interactions between the different spaces of Garrisonian abolitionism and the different circles that sustained it were also complex, sometimes antagonistic, as the resentment created by the Boston Clique shows.

This system, however, proved so powerful that Garrison deemed it one of the reasons why his fellow activists were reluctant to dissolve the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1865. “Let us not attempt longer to affect superiority where we are not superior. The desire to keep together is natural; but let us challenge and command the respect of this nation, and of the friends of freedom throughout the world,” he urged them (“The Anti-Slavery Society” 2). In his eyes, isolation was commendable and necessary when the cause was not accepted; it was however unwarranted pride in a context where it had become “respectable” (Walters 7).

## Notes

1. The House of Representatives passed the Thirteenth Amendment on January 31, 1865. It was ratified in December of the same year.
2. Garrison was eventually defeated. He resigned from the presidency of the organization and ceased the publication of his newspaper, *The Liberator*, in December 1865. The American Anti-Slavery Society continued its activities until 1870.
3. Garrison thus asked one of his opponents: “Why, then, in the name of humanity and of brotherly love, should we fall out by the way, and insist upon a separation, because we are not all united in opinion on political or theological points?” (qtd. in Birney 21).
4. McDaniel mentions a third characteristic, “a habit of reflecting on and critically discussing their ideas and their experiences” (89).

5. For instance, in 1842, riots targeted black abolitionists in Philadelphia for three days (McDaniel 100).
6. John Humphrey Noyes founded the Oneida Community in New York State in 1848, advocating the doctrine of 'complex marriage,' the rejection of any exclusive relationship among members.
7. Out of the forty-four signatories of the Constitution of the New-England Non-Resistance Society, twenty were women (Bacon 289).
8. Nancy Burkett mentions that Foster "had a very uneasy relationship with the Garrisonians" (19). She also claims that Maria Weston Chapman, the soul of the Boston Clique, disliked him. Stacey M. Robertson describes the same "alienation" from the mainstream of the abolitionist movement in Pillsbury. "Even among abolitionists," she writes, "he considered himself second-tier because the leaders of the movement hailed from Massachusetts and most boasted wealthy and cultured backgrounds" (24).

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## **IV Solitude from the Nineteenth to the Twentieth Century: Society, Spirituality, and Religion**



Ira J. Cohen

# Three Types of Deep Solitude: Religious Quests, Aesthetic Retreats, and Withdrawals due to Personal Distress

**Abstract:** Deep solitude is defined by prolonged withdrawal and intense passion. Three types of deep solitude are discussed in this essay: religious quests, aesthetic retreats, and withdrawals due to distress. Though these three deep solitudes share little in common, all three depend on prosaic routines to forestall psychic anomie.

## 1. Solitude and Deep Solitude: Conceptual Issues

The concept of solitude, as Ludwig Wittgenstein might say, is a grouping of activities that share only a family resemblance. The school teacher or sales clerk who disengages for a brief solitary respite from the stress of fulfilling her duties to others shares nothing more with the prisoner forced into solitary confinement for weeks, months, or more than the bare fact of being alone. Likewise, the author or composer who repairs to a room of her own for intensely focused creative work enters a solitude far removed from the peripatetic rambles of the bird watcher alone in the woods. Motives matter, too. Indeed, almost every solitude may be entered for a variety of reasons. An author may write alone for money and/or fame or simply to solve a problem or discover the story she has to tell. Even prisoners, if given the choice, may choose solitary confinement with all the risks of loneliness, boredom, and psychological anomie over the improved circumstances they might obtain by violating their principles or betraying a friend. In social scientific terms, the contexts and practices that constitute these solitudes form a Venn diagram with only a crescent of overlap at the center of all circles.

Given the great variety of social situations and personal circumstances in which individuals may end up on their own, there is no practical way to discuss solitude at large. In order to make cogent observations about solitude one must specify in advance just what type or category of solitude one has in mind. Given this consideration, I propose here to limit myself to the rarest sort of social withdrawal that occurs only when individuals voluntarily disengage from interpersonal activity for extended periods of time. I call this category of withdrawals 'deep solitude.' The adjective 'deep' here implies the passion that moves individuals to disengage from others for prolonged retreats. Deep solitudes are uncommon because it is not in

the nature of human beings to live alone all of the time. But then, it is not in the nature of human beings to socialize continuously throughout the day. Most of us strike a balance in which we circulate in and out of solitude and sociability during the course of our schedules and routines. It takes a rare set of powerful emotions and compelling motivations to abandon one's web of social relations and concomitant social identities to engage in deeply personal pursuits. And it must be said that even those who withdraw into deep solitude do not keep to themselves all of the time. Most choose habitats not too far removed from communities where they occasionally travel to restock provisions and catch up with family and friends. But then, those fully committed to deep solitude quickly return to life on their own.

But how far does the notion of deep solitude carry us? A social theorist immediately would look for common denominators and intrinsic variations that treat deep solitude as a genus that divides into a number of more specific species. Thus, in my book, *Solitary Action: Acting on Our Own in Everyday Life* (2016), I identify a general process of behavior that is present (or in one case absent) from things people do by themselves. Thereafter, I differentiate that generic process into four specific categories of solitary action: reflexives, peripatetics, regimens, and engrossments. But deep solitude resists being theorized in this way. Why? Because beyond the compulsion of deeply experienced emotions, deep solitudes share no common denominators and passion is too polymorphous in itself to serve as a common denominator. What does the ascetic religious hermit share in common with the recluse who luxuriates in the rustic beauties of the wilderness? And what do religious hermits or aesthetic solitaries share with individuals who withdraw from intercourse with others to experience, absorb, and calm intensely painful emotions that disrupt their lives? Like briefer and less intense periods of solitude as indicated above, deep solitudes comprise a family of language games whose properties barely overlap at all. Nonetheless, if there is no overarching process or general quality that all deep solitudes share, there are several different kinds of deep solitude, each of which involves its own set of motives, meanings, and solitary ways of life. In this essay, I discuss three categorical types of deep solitude as distinguished above: ascetic religious quests, aesthetic retreats, and withdrawals to confront disruptive emotions. Thereafter, I briefly return to note one prosaic element that all deep solitudes share.

## 2. Ascetic Religious Quests

Those who withdraw to the monastic cell, or more often in earlier times the desert cave or the wilderness hut, enter deep solitude in its most extreme form. They are in fact, a species of what Max Weber memorably termed "religious virtuosi"

(287), a species marked not only by withdrawal, but by self-imposed asceticism as well. If, as sometimes happens, solitude is referenced with an aura of mysticism or mystery surrounding the term, the solitude of the religious anchorite or hermit is an obvious source of the aura we detect. Saints Anthony and Jerome as well as Paul of Thebes left such a deep impression on early Christian culture and such an enduring legacy in monastic orders that it may seem anachronistic to speak of such spiritual vocations today. True, they are rare, but then we cannot be sure how common or rare were the solitudes of early Christianity, or for that matter, the solitudes of pre-Christian mystics or the solitary vocations undertaken by members of Eastern religions in the past or in more recent times. In any event, the spiritual call to solitude has not been completely extinguished in modernity. This much is evident from the life and works of Thomas Merton (1915–1968). Late in life Merton withdrew into solitude as a religious hermit. However, many publications from his large output of writings prior to that point not only make clear that he felt the call to a solitary vocation, but also that he possessed a subtle understanding and appreciation of what is at stake in the sacred pursuit and the challenges that confront the individual who accepts this vocation. Merton's "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude" (1960) presents one of his most thoughtful and acute examinations of the spiritual vocation to solitude. I shall rely on Merton's insights here as a guide to this reclusive way of life. A number of principle themes in Merton's essays are summarized in the following passage:

The true solitary is not one who simply withdraws from society. Mere withdrawal, regression leads to a sick solitude, without meaning and without fruit. The solitary of whom I speak is called not to leave society but to transcend it; not to withdraw from the fellowship with other men but to renounce the appearance, the myth of union in diversion in order to attain union on a higher and a more spiritual level – the mystic level of the Body of Christ. He renounces that union with his immediate neighbors that are apparently achieved through the medium of the aspirations, fictions, and conventions prevalent in his social group. But in so doing he attains to the basic, invisible, mysterious unity, which makes all men "one Man" in Christ's Church beyond, and in spite of natural social groups by which their special myths and slogans keep man in a state of division. The solitary then has a mysterious and apparently absurd vocation to supernatural unity. He seeks a simple, spiritual oneness in himself which when it is found, paradoxically becomes the oneness of all men. (181–82)

Merton's sweeping dismissal of "mere withdrawal" underscores the qualities of Weber's religious virtuoso to which, in effect, Merton implies every true solitary must aspire. The solitary renounces the superficial "diversion" (and self-deceptions, self-gratification, social myths, illusion, and even the kind of simple faith that prevails among Christians in everyday life), as Merton makes clear at various points

in the essay. The solitary seeks a mystical, mysterious union with the divine, but a union he experiences within himself as an oneness with all humanity as well. There is what Merton calls an “absurd” quality in this quest, but not the absurdity that might occur to the uncomprehending bystander. The absurdity comes with the solitary’s “anguish of realizing that underneath the apparent logical pattern of a more or less ‘well-organized’ rational life there lays an abyss of rationality, confusion, pointlessness, and indeed chaos” (179). Merton goes on to condense this interior sense of life’s absurdity in a trenchant way. This absurdity involves a special kind of renunciation, a renunciation of “the seemingly harmless pleasure of building a tight self-contained illusion about himself and his little world” (180).

It is not out of place to notice here how far removed the ascetic, spiritual quest of Merton’s solitary is from the way ordinary solitary actions are performed in everyday life. Most forms of mundane solitary action proceed via processes of contextually reflexive moves in which each step in a sequence finds its place in the context of the nature and results of preceding moves and simultaneously creates and forecloses opportunities for the next move in the sequence (Cohen 75–76). But the religious recluse is called upon to abjure context formation of any kind. It is quite clear that Merton leaves no place for the individual on a spiritual vocation to follow a sequence of action as if writing a novel, playing solitaire, or preparing a household budget. Even those ordinary activities that call for internal discipline because they lack much context formation (e.g. assembly line work, household chores) bear little resemblance to the solitary, ascetic religious quest. Whereas assembly line workers or students memorizing items for an exam may need to discipline themselves for several hours at a time, the spiritual vocation is a continuous affair. So long as the individual persists in the quest, the self-imposed discipline is an unremitting integral aspect of every moment of daily life.

In a sense, the absurd renunciation of the construction of illusions would make it seem as though in the early stages of a solitary vocation the individual creates a condition of anomie. Indeed, Merton devotes a substantial section of his essay to what he terms a “sea of perils” (184–200), many of which resemble the confusion, insecurities, and doubts that victims of solitary confinement struggle to avoid with great feats of cognitive ingenuity (Cohen 183–88). Though Merton finds that certain individuals are, in a sense, destined from an early age for a solitary life for which they may be well-suited by temperament and character, many others reach the spiritual vocation of solitude the hard way, and it is these individuals who face the perils of what I here suggest are the effects of anomie. The torment of these experiences is described in remarkably vivid imagery toward the close of the essay, when Merton writes of the plight of the solitary who finds “he cannot pray, to see,



to hope,” and Merton suggests this circumstance may not be rare. At such times the solitary individual may experience “[n]ot the sweet passivity which the books (that supply popular versions of solitude) extol, but a bitter, arid struggle to press forward through a blinding sandstorm. The solitary may beat his head against the wall of doubt. That may be the full extent of his contemplation ... a doubt that undermines his very reasons for existing and for doing what he does” (202).

Nowhere in everyday life will one encounter the extraordinary struggle of the spiritual vocation. Indeed, Merton’s candor about the perils of the solitary spiritual quest seems intended to disabuse those who might have romantic notions about the pleasures of this extraordinarily intense and trying way of life. But the vocation, of course, is not about asceticism and the renunciation of mundane illusions. It is rather about the transcendent experience of unity with God and humanity. Here Merton, as befits a religious mystic, leaves us with a mystery. The tortuous existential doubt ultimately ends in silence, and with silence comes an end to all existential questions. But when the questions end, a spiritual certitude arrives, “the only certitude he knows: The presence of God in the midst of uncertainty, and nothingness” (202). This experience is so distant, even from the lives of the devout laity, that to frame this reception of certainty in the divine as a matter of sociological interest necessarily and inevitably misses the point. And, indeed the experience of mystic union may emerge in a flash as a transcendent spiritual epiphany.

But what comes then? Merton tells us that “the solitary man says nothing, does his work ... He knows where he is going, but he is not sure of his way” (22–23). Hence, even beyond the moment of spiritual illumination, the religious ascetic steers clear of the kinds of ordinary context formation that, as Merton would have it, produce the illusions with which most of us live in our ordinary ways of life.

Now for a coda: There are hints that mystical epiphanies may not be confined to the religious realm. Simone Weil, a deeply spiritual essayist suggests the possibility that both science and art may in rare instances be undertaken as sacred (or perhaps, quasi-sacred) solitary quests:

Truth and beauty dwell on this level of the impersonal and the anonymous. This is the realm of the sacred ... What is sacred in science is truth; what is sacred in art is beauty. Truth and beauty are impersonal ... impersonality is only reached by the practice of a form of attention which is rare in itself, and impossible except in solitude, and not only physical but mental solitude. (318)

Weil, of course, means to refer here only to the heroic artist or the scientific genius. The mystical sense of the truth and beauty to which she refers perhaps alludes to the kind of epiphany I discuss in *Solitary Action* (173–82).

### 3. Aesthetic Retreats

To shift from the life of sacrifice and tribulation of the religious anchorite to the temporal solitude described by poets and essayists since ancient times is to create a disjunction so sharp that it justifies in itself the need to treat deep solitude as a series of different realms. But there is something illusory at times about this second realm of deep solitude. We know of this solitude primarily because well-regarded members of literary elites have sung its praises beginning in ancient Rome. More to the point, most of these authors employ romantic voices that create ornately stylized images of a kind of carefree solitude that seems too much of an ideal to be true in all respects. Romantic images can be illuminating and edifying in their own right. At their best, they distil the essence of a solitary habitat or experience. But one wonders if they gloss over the less than ideal realities of solitary settings or ways of life. Certainly there have always been some folks, who, like Michel de Montaigne in his essay "Of Solitude" (1580), have opted to retire from public life to enjoy time by themselves, reading and enjoying the fine fruits of a life well-lived. But the pool of individuals prepared to live this life must be small. For one thing, people must possess the financial resources to support themselves or the full set of skills necessary to live off the land. For another, they must possess the free time to leave society behind for an extended period of seclusion. Moreover, they must possess peace of mind, a rare commodity indeed, at least in our anxious and troubled times. But as Montaigne cautions readers of his essay, those burdened with troublesome feelings and desires cannot enjoy this kind of solitude (177–78). In saying this, Montaigne draws a line that distinguishes this tranquil realm of solitude from the two tumultuous realms discussed above and below. Emotional turmoil seems all but inevitable in the spiritual solitude of the ascetic anchorite and the experience of turmoil is at the heart of the deeply troubled solitarist to be discussed in the next section. The solitude here is that of an individual whose mind is already relaxed.

No matter how rare the aesthetic realm of solitude is in practice, it occupies a special hold in the popular imagination today. This is because the aesthetic quality of literary accounts of this solitude has settled on an idyllic image of solitary life in nature. Beyond Romantic literature, this image has grown with the advent of entire genres of paintings and photographs of beautiful landscapes and seascapes that imply the joys of a prolonged rustic retreat. A few illustrious landmarks can provide a glimpse of how this aesthetically refined image of solitude evolved.

The culturally refined connotation of solitude began with the authors who first described the practice in the later period of the history of ancient Rome. As Robert Sayre suggests, the taste for solitude emerged as land for rural second homes became available to successful public figures (20–25). Sayre does not say how popular the

idea may have been, but we know it mainly through the writings of Roman authors, including Horace, Seneca, and Pliny the Younger, whose influence survived their time. The following excerpt from a poem by Horace illustrates the refined sense of enjoyment in solitary retreat in its classic Roman form: “O rural home: when shall I behold you! When shall I be able. Now with books of the ancients. Now with sleep and idles hours. To quaff sweet forgetfulness of life’s cares” (qtd. in Sayre 22).

The Roman idea of solitude resurfaces much closer to modern times. One of the best expressions of this continuation comes in the “Ode on Solitude” (1700) by Alexander Pope, who may have written it at a very precocious age. Be this as it may, it is worth mentioning that Pope was a life-long student of ancient Roman poetry, ultimately composing a set of works entitled *Imitations of Horace* (1733–37). It may be that Pope’s poem may thus directly expand upon Horace’s Roman appreciation of solitude:

Happy the man, whose wish and care  
A few paternal acres bound,  
Content to breathe his native air,  
In his own ground.

Whose herds with milk, whose fields with bread,  
Whose flocks supply him with attire,  
Whose trees in summer yield him shade,  
In winter fire.

Blest! Who can unconcern’dly find  
Hours, days, and years slide soft away,  
In health of body, peace of mind,  
Quiet by day,  
Sound sleep by night; study and ease  
Together mix’d; sweet recreation,  
And innocence, which most does please,  
With meditation.

Thus let me live, unseen, unknown;  
Thus unlamented let me dye;  
Steal from the world, and not a stone  
Tell where I lie. (265)

The poetic form already suggests the refined quality of the solitary retreat. We observe as well that while Pope does not require a large estate for his solitude, he does ask for an inherited farm, a property that only prosperous English families could expect to pass along to their offspring at the time. Unlike Horace, Pope longs for the self-sufficiency that a working farm affords. But it is not at all clear that he would prefer to do any farm work himself. Instead, as in Horace, we find Pope

eager for the tranquil life of alternating between periods of reading and sleep. This is not the life of an active aristocrat or businessman. It is rather an ideal for a certain kind of cultural aesthete. It is, of course, also a romanticized ideal rather than a reality. There may have been landowners with inheritances sizeable enough to provide them with an abundance of leisure time. But it is doubtful that even among this highly advantaged elite, life was as idyllic as Pope imagined it to be. The notion of solitary retreats has attracted other romantics as well. For example, as Wolf Lepenies observes, a sense of melancholy was introduced to the notion of solitary retreat in the late Middle Ages and early modern times (29–86). Here solitude was seen as a refuge for second-level aristocrats and bourgeois *arrivistes* who found themselves cut off from any real access to power. Confined to superficial rounds of social relations fleshed out with gossip and rumor in literary salons, members of this frustrated stratum found meaning in life and opportunities for emotional release in a new Romantic ideal of solitude, an ideal composed of heterogeneous elements such as the love of nature, a sensitive appreciation of literature and the fine arts, and above all, a bias in favor of emotion over reason (Lepenies 66).

The frustrated Romantics of whom Lepenies writes may have amplified and refined the aesthetic appreciation of nature that was a more implicit than explicit quality of the classical sense of solitude as it advanced from the Romans to Pope. This is not to overlook the melancholy note they also introduced, a note of sadness bordering on self-pity epitomized, if not hyperbolized, in various remarks of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1782), remarks in which he laments the rejection and estrangement he felt from the literary circles whose acceptance he desired. But as we approach modern times, the Romantic (or at least romantically rendered) experience of living alone in harmony with nature has flourished to a greater extent.

One can cite any number of poets, essayists, and artists who have contributed to the aesthetic appreciation of nature. But a smaller number recounted how it actually felt to withdraw into nature for a considerable period of time. One author who did, Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), brought with him a literary talent, a Romantic sensitivity, an aversion to town life, and an abounding love of nature that makes his *Walden* (1854) a beautiful statement of the small joys and tranquil pleasures of absorbing the atmosphere and the detail of encountering nature by oneself. Consider only the first sentences of the section devoted to solitude:

This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirt-sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually congenial to me. The bullfrogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whip-poor-will is

borne on the rippling wind from over the water. Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; yet, like the lake, my serenity is rippled but not ruffled. These small waves raised by the evening wind are as remote from storm as the smooth reflecting surface. (87)

One can find many passages of this kind in *Walden*. But one of the most interesting things about this selection and about the section of *Walden* on solitude at large (87–94) is his emphasis upon serenity, which like the lake in the breeze is “rippled but not ruffled.” Another selection from the chapter on solitude expands upon this peace of mind in a straightforward way:

I experienced sometimes that the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object, even for the poor misanthrope and most melancholy man. There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature and has his senses still. There was never yet such a storm but it was Aeolian music to a healthy and innocent ear. Nothing can rightly compel a simple and brave man to a vulgar sadness. While I enjoy the friendship of the seasons I trust that nothing can make life a burden to me. (88)

Though Thoreau leaves no literary hint, it may be that he here means to dismiss the Romantic belief that solitude is a time for melancholy or dark moods. In any event, he is quite clear about his own peace and joy living alone in the woods. It should be said that Thoreau did not spend all of his time simply soaking in these good feelings. Not only did he keep busy working his rented woodland plot and writing chapters of *Walden*, but during the course of *Walden*, Thoreau mentions recurrent visits to his many friends in Concord, Massachusetts, a town situated about two miles from his solitary retreat. Perhaps his physical and intellectual labors provided a prophylactic to the dull boredom of a frightening anomie with which he otherwise might have been forced to contend. Still, Thoreau does not entirely overlook the difficulties of rustic solitude. He is perhaps more aware than many of his admirers that not every individual is as fit for solitude as he is (89). This point, which echoes Merton’s sense that some are better fit than others for the rigors of a solitary vocation, also provides an instructive contrast with the discussion that follows of deep solitude in times of distress.

#### 4. Deep Solitude in Times of Distress

In all likelihood circumstances of emotional distress, more than any other condition, induce people to withdraw from interpersonal routines. Distress with this kind of power comes in many different forms. The prototype here is grief over the loss of a loved one. But people may also feel the need for a solitary retreat after receiving a frightening medical diagnosis, after the dissolution of an intimate

relationship or the disintegration of a family, following the trauma of being fired or otherwise suffering a severe setback in one's finances, occupation, or career. These are instances of what Anthony Giddens terms "fateful moments" (113–14), moments when unavoidable circumstances force life-altering choices upon individuals. It is a time when one's narrative of self-identity and relationships with others that may have been taken for granted for many years may need to be reframed, reinterpreted, and revised. Such questions are almost inevitable in times of personal crisis. This is not to say that everyone beset by existential problems withdraws into deep solitude. Some people are more adept at self-reflection than others. Some may prefer to discuss their adjustments in times of crisis with a trusted confidante or a psychotherapist. Nevertheless, as the late British author and psychologist Anthony Storr observes, it is better at times for others to set aside the impulse to comfort or support the troubled until we are sure they may not prefer to be alone (29).

Beyond fateful moments, a variety of other strong feelings may compel particularly sensitive individuals to retreat into solitude for significant periods of time. Emotions such as fear, remorse, and shame may accumulate while in public, to the point where the individual withdraws into solitude to allow the feelings to emerge. These are periods of catharsis. Released from the proprieties of interaction, the individual is free to absorb the brunt of feelings without concern that she may embarrass herself or anyone else. Having experienced her feelings, she may also try to make sense of them no matter how inconsistent or guilt-provoking they may be. To ventilate one's feelings is seldom easy or comfortable. But, catharsis in itself is widely recognized to end up having a calming effect even if the source of the painful feelings will always remain in view.

What is it about catharsis that offers emotional relief? The conventional answer, and persuasive one as well, is that people simply need to purge their feelings much as a steam kettle whistles to permit the pent-up steam to escape. But perhaps catharsis offers comfort in another way as well. Storr describes a folk theory held in some parts of rural Greece (31). The local custom requires widows to withdraw from society for five years before returning to their regular social life. The rural Greeks hold that by recurrently feeling the loss (e.g. during daily visits to the husband's grave) the widow experiences her grief many times over until she has absorbed it to the point where she dulls her pain and then comes to terms with it in her life. Though five uninterrupted years of grief may be more time apart from society than most people can bear, extended periods of solitude may help people to manage all kinds of distressing feelings, some chronic and others acute. It may take many nights alone in bed before one begins to diminish the pitch and frequency of the

waves of fear stirred up by a threatening medical diagnosis. Likewise, exceptionally self-critical individuals may need to withdraw periodically to bank the fires of self-reproach in the ashes of regret.

Such is the case for May Sarton (1912–1995), a talented, and in the late stages of her career, a widely acclaimed poet and novelist. She was also a person with the courage to expose her deepest criticism of herself in print, and though her candid and dignified voice speaks well for her, her self-criticisms were often painful and harsh. Though Sarton led a very busy social life, complete with travel, friendship, and love, to accommodate her feelings, she periodically retreated by herself to a small house she kept for the purpose, first in New Hampshire and then in Maine. In 1973 she published a memoir of one of these visits entitled *Journal of a Solitude*, which is one of the best examples I have seen of catharsis put into words. Consider several lines from the opening entry in the book:

For a long time now, every meeting with another human being has been a collision. I feel too much, sense too much, exhausted by the reverberations after even the simplest conversation. But the deep collision is and has been with my unregenerate, tormenting and tormented self . . . I feel like an inadequate machine that breaks down at crucial moments and grinds to a dreadful halt . . . or, even worse, explodes in some innocent person's face . . . I live alone, perhaps for no good reason, for the reason that I am an impossible creature set apart by a temperament I have never learned to use as it could be used, thrown off by a word, a glance, a rainy day, or one drink too many. My need to be alone is balanced against my fear of what will happen when I enter the huge, empty silence if I cannot find support there. I go up to heaven and down to hell in an hour. (12)

Sarton provides in other entries more specific events she regrets along with commentaries on her worries and anxieties. She knows herself well enough to know that she has an “impossible” temperament. So, while she does strive to make sense of her feelings, one does not get the sense that she is engaged in some kind of self-therapy. It appears more likely that Sarton needs these times alone in rural New England to simply absorb feelings of the burdens of being with other people, of the harms she feels she has inflicted on some, and for her own continuing dissatisfaction with herself. Unlike the widow, or the newly divorced, or the fired, Sarton can never come to grips with these feelings once and for all. Her recurrent retreats are better understood as episodes when she allows herself to register and recognize her feelings about herself for what they are. Though she wrestles with her sense that she must try to improve, it also seems that by releasing the full force of her feelings she is able to keep them from overwhelming her as well. Thus, Sarton's solitudes are the way she copes with her emotions and this, in turn, enables her to return from solitude with the ability to fully engage in her social life again. As in the Greek folk theory, she enters her solitudes to rehearse feelings she already knows well. Perhaps she found

these episodes necessary to absorb, and then, through repetition, to dull the cutting edge of her self-criticism and thereby her self-inflicted pain.

## 5. Coping with Anomie: Prosaic Activities in Passionate Pursuits

Deep solitude appeals to individuals driven by transcendent passions. Anchorites, aesthetes, and the distressed share this much in common. Yet time and again in accounts of solitary retreats authors mention their prosaic activities. As I have indicated above, they do so to forestall the dangers of anomie. But this is not the sociological condition of anomie as famously conceived by Emile Durkheim in *Suicide* (1895). Durkheim drew attention to anomie as a collapse of cultural regulation following economic crises, wars, and other sudden breakdowns in social order (241–77). The individual experiences this anomie as a psychic chaos, an all-consuming flood of disconnected impulses, emotions, and thoughts that destroys all sense of self-control, agency and personal identity. Deep solitude creates a self-induced form of social disorganization that threatens the individual with psychic anomie just as much as a social catastrophe.

The question all solitaries must confront is how does one forestall losing control of one's mind? Alcohol and drugs do not really provide much relief. The individual might just as well return to the outer world as to dull and cool the passions that inspired the retreat. What is needed is a way to organize daily life in a manner that provides at least a minimal sense of order and self-control. It is not coincidental then that so many accounts of prolonged solitude refer in some way to recurrent forms of mundane activities that contribute nothing substantial to any given solitary pursuit. Merton advises those on a solitary vocation to keep to their daily work even as they remain uncertain of where they are bound. Thoreau devotes an entire chapter to the work he did while he was alone at Walden Pond. But Sarton brings to life her struggles to keep to the ordinary chores that anchor the order of her days in a particularly vivid way:

[A]s a prisoner does (and in winter my life is imprisoned much of the time), I know it is essential for me to move within a structure. The bed must be made (it is what I hate doing most), the dishes washed, the place tidied up before I can get to work [her writing] with a free mind. There must be rewards for hard tasks, and often a cigarette had been the reward for putting out the rubbish or cleaning Punch's [her pet bird's] cage. (83–84)

Both Merton and Thoreau suggest that it takes a certain kind of person to lead a solitary life. Sarton suggests that among other qualities the solitary must possess the inner strength to maintain a kind of everyday discipline even against her own



resistance. Thus, in a broad sense, even in deep solitude Durkheim was right. As human beings we seem to need some organization to regulate our lives lest our minds run wild and we are lost. For most of us, our rounds of sociable and solitary activities and our moral commitments to others provide sufficient regulation. But when one retreats into prolonged solitude one leaves behind the social elements of this support. Only those with the wisdom and will to maintain prosaic order are able to engage in solitary, passionate pursuits.

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# American Lonesome: Our Native Sense of Otherness

**Abstract:** Herewith a plea to take seriously, for once, the uniquely American cultural significance of the feeling state expressed throughout our literature, music, and fine art: lonesomeness. Ignored for too long in treatments of American culture, it deserves overdue considered critical reflection.

## 1. Lonesome: A Distinctly American Feeling-Perception

I invite the reader to consider a focus supplementary to those upon imposed or freely chosen conditions and implications of solitude in America. Could we move to the side, as it were, away from solitude as a continuing physical and elementary mental state of being, that is, as an alternative lifestyle. Hermeticism and reclusiveness are indeed conditions or life paths worth reckoning with. But here I would direct attention to a particular, usually fleeting subjective feeling state commonly varying in description, if amenable to description, among Americans who claim to be visited (or would appear to be visited) by it. I draw attention to the experience of 'lonesomeness,' to the feeling or perception of 'lonesome.' And I propose that Americans, of liberated individualism and (historically) open spaces, have been formed by our culture to employ this evocative term, to recognize its appeal, perhaps because its attractive, relatively open-ended meaning or meanings defy limited definition.

## 2. The Difference Between Lonely and Lonesome

I am unaware of any previous academic or journalistic attempt to address American lonesomeness with the intent to describe and define what it has meant and may mean today – to Americans occasionally prompted in moments of personal, reflective experience to so identify it. Impossible as it is to define narrowly, I think Ina Bergmann's opening conference introduction, invoking her childhood memory of attraction to Thom Pace's song "Maybe" with its opening line "Deep inside the forest there's a door into another land ..." would seem to express a kind of lonesome feeling of the sort I will address. Fleeting experiences such as Bergmann's in response to these evocative lyrics help us direct attention to the yet unexamined function and meaning of the term 'lonesome' in our historical, North American culture, as I will indicate.

Let us remedy this neglect – I am aware of only one previous, scant mention of this particular term’s function, and only with regard to our blues popular music tradition, by critic T.S. Eliot in 1932 in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*: “Loneliness is known as a frequent attribute in romantic poetry, and in the form of ‘lonesomeness’ (as I need not remind American readers) is a frequent attitude in contemporary lyrics known as ‘the blues’” (132). Eliot offers nothing by way of definition or comment. I address this neglect in my *Lonesome: The Spiritual Meanings of American Solitude* (2009).

Let us address a critical distinction between ‘lonesome’ and ‘lonely.’ Clearly attempts at dictionary definition are of no help, at least not yet. First, I will therefore provide a correcting distinction, and then examples. ‘Lonely’ is to be understood as commonly meant: a depressive state of varying degrees of intensity, experienced by the all-too-solitary individual. By contrast – here we move to the particularly North American, ingrained, historical cultural understanding of the term – ‘lonesome’ combines to a significant, predominating degree pleasurable feeling and perception lifted, as it were, from gratifying inward-looking solitude, with smaller measures of lonely distress momentarily balanced or well overcome. The key to the American ‘lonesome’ is that the memorably positive, the fleeting enjoyable, triumphs over the negative in the moment. The positive uplift, the momentary high, will vary in description from individual to individual, from setting to setting, from circumstance to circumstance. Nor need it occur under conditions of the hermetic or the reclusive. Examples in American poetry and fiction will help to focus on the issue.

### 3. The Poetic Imagination of Lonesomeness

“There is another Loneliness” (502), Emily Dickinson wrote in poem #1116, crafting the insight in her hushed and forceful way. “Not want of friend occasions it,” she observes, “But nature sometimes, sometimes thought” (502). Our distinctively lone and lovely poet of the nineteenth century, American to the core, testifies that “whoso” this other loneliness “befall / Is richer than could be revealed / By mortal numeral” – “by any earthly measure” (502). Here she is distinctly a prophetess of lonesomeness. And in poem #1370, she evokes again the unknowable and unnamable in the figure of “That lonesome Glory / That hath no omen here – but Awe –” (590). She had earlier rejected the appeal of evangelical Protestantism, of course. And ‘lonesome’ is a Dickinson term for pursuit of spiritual vision not available to her through that local sectarianism. In her poem #777, “The Loneliness One dare not sound,” she had earlier reflected “I tried to think a lonelier Thing / Than any I had seen,” and found herself among “The lonesome for what they knew not What” (379).

Walt Whitman also speaks, in his own way, for a luminous lonesome, provoked in part by the experience of the opening westward migration in the nineteenth century. Lonesome roads and valleys proliferate and a spiritual dimension of these utterances, doubtlessly drawn from revival songs, is easily detected – as in the later country music examples I note below. He gives voice to a capacious feeling-perception, American to the core, and I will return to this spiritual dimension of country music. In characteristic expansiveness of imaginative response to his world Whitman offers these lines from “A Song of Joys” (1860): “Yet O my soul supreme! / Knows’t thou the joys of pensive thought? / Joys of the free and lonesome heart, the tender, gloomy heart?” (153). He continues, invoking “Joys of the solitary walk” that balance “the ecstasies, joys of the solemn musings” with “The agonistic throes” (153). Whitman, as Dickinson, is a crucial forbear in American poetry, and not least for the respective ‘selves’ reflected in their poetries. ‘Lonesomeness’ in each is profound and appealing, if in different ways descriptive of open-ended, suggestive, perhaps fugitive spiritual states of feeling-perception.

Whitman is indeed a master poet of loneliness transfigured and redeemed in characteristic dilation of the spirit and the wide embrace of his yearning and illumination. He is an iconic master of our loneliness transfigured and redeemed. In “From Far Dakota’s Canons” (1876) he invokes “Lands of the wild ravine, the dusky Sioux, the lonesome stretch of silence” (395), and in “Recorders Ages Hence” (1860) he portrays himself as one “Who often walk’d lonesome walks thinking of his dear friends, his lovers” (104). In “Proud Music of the Storm” (1869) he concludes his first section of the poem asking of transfiguring stormy images interrupting his sleep, “Entering my lonesome slumber-chamber, why have you seiz’d me?” (333–34).

Other American poets following have mined this vein. Wallace Stevens now seems lonelier in his career solitude and legendary self-reserve than we can imagine in any other well-known American poet. The woman in the well-known “Sunday Morning” (1923) knows we live our lives in “island solitude, unsponsored, free” (198), so many free of and uncomforted by traditional religious myth. Its concluding lines redeem the loneliness of her spiritual “island solitude” (198) in a hymn to natural beauty. “Divinity must live within herself” (198) she reflects, and the feeling conveyed by the poem is that of transfiguring lonesomeness. In his “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon” (1921) Stevens pushes what he first describes as “The loneliest air” into, by reflection, a fulsome, oceanic possession of himself: “I found myself more truly and more strange” (123).

Theodore Roethke also does not employ the word ‘lonesome’ to describe his Romantic high ‘lonely’ when evoking moments of visitation by beauty almost too

beautiful to bear. But his evoked moments of personal rapture in solitude suggest the lonely lifted into the lonesome, as in the love poem "She" (1958) when he observes of the woman: "She makes a space lonely with a lovely song. / She lilts a low soft language, and I hear / Down long sea-chambers of the inner ear" (12).

One more illustration of the poetic imagination in American poets moving from lonely to lonesome, though not always using either specific term, is James Wright of the Midwest. His poetry is often depressive, touching darkly upon the tragic. But now and then he lifts out of flattened loneliness into the gift of lonesomeness, as in "A Blessing" (1963) where he observes of two ponies in a field "There is no loneliness like theirs" (143). He then writes when one of them walks over to him to nuzzle his hand and he caresses her ear, "Suddenly I realize / That if I stepped out of my body I would break / Into blossom" (143).

#### 4. Lonesomeness in Fiction

Moments like these in American fiction are there for the finding, when suddenly provoked by landscape, light, or the course of solitary reflection. One such stands out from all the rest, in its simplicity and because it occurs in one of the few agreed greatest texts in the tradition, *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) by Mark Twain. Ernest Hemingway, in *The Green Hills of Africa* (1936) observes: "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*, ... the best book we've had. All American writing comes from that ... There has been nothing as good since" (22). The moment comes when Huck and his companion, the runaway slave Jim, rafting together down the Mississippi at night to avoid contact with anyone who might threaten Jim's bid for freedom, tie up at the river bank, fish, swim, and Huck observes:

Afterward we would watch the lonesomeness of the river, and kind of lazy along, and by and by lazy off to sleep. Wake up by and by, and look to see what done it, and maybe see a steamboat coughing along upstream, so far off towards the other side you couldn't tell nothing about her ... And then for about an hour there wouldn't be nothing to hear nor anything to see – just solid lonesomeness. (114)

Huck, the boy, is not without personal issues, of course. But we read his recounted experience of the river with Jim as symbolic of the original, archetypal American experience. Here the rebellious, spirited boy captures the youthfulness of the young nation's psyche mediated in the hopeful myth of the New Adam in the new Eden (R.W.B. Lewis). Huck feels a rapt attunement to no particular thing and to no particular transcendent Being or order of things, but simply to the immediate fullness and splendor of morning dawning on the big river. It seems like unobstructed

integration into the plenitude of being, as nourished by the arresting natural scene. This moment of lonesome plenitude occurs, importantly also, in the company of buddy Jim.

When we think of a natural setting for American prose, we automatically think of Henry David Thoreau. But he does not express the lonesome that we embrace in other writers. On every page Thoreau presents himself as a serious, reflecting intellect in his responses to nature, but never as a feeling, sentient being. He is a chronicler of neither loneliness nor lonesomeness: "I have never felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude but once [when, for an hour he doubted] ... if the new neighbourhood of man was not essential" (57). He never recorded a moment of lonesomeness of the kinds we are treating here.

But American fiction writers, like Laura Ingalls Wilder in *Little House on the Prairie* (1935), have touched upon the lonesome not infrequently, as in the passage when Laura, lying awake at night, listens to the mournful lowing of cattle, their "high, lovely, wailing songs ... wandering in the night ... [which] seemed to be crying for the moon. They made Laura's throat ache." (35)

The young character George Willard in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1922) experiences lonesome-like, epiphanic moments, too. In the chapter "An Awakening" he ventures into a dark vacant lot off a quiet street at night, "in a fervor of emotion ... uttering words without meaning, ... words full of meaning. Death, ... night, the sea, fear, loveliness" (145). He returns to the sidewalk, and "felt that all of the people in the little street must be brothers and sisters to him" (145).

We read something similar of Eugene Gant as a paperboy in Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* (1930), as he wakes alone before light to go his route: "strange aerial music came fluting out of the darkness, or over his slow-waking senses swept the great wave of symphonic orchestration. Fiend-voices, beautiful and sleep-loud, called down through darkness and light, developing the thread of ancient memory, as he was born anew" (295). This is a lonesomeness unnamed as such, but akin to the other transfiguring moments experienced by characters in American fiction in their lonely solitude.

In the examples cited, and in others, like James Agee's meditation "Knoxville: Summer 1915" (a chapter in *A Death in the Family*, 1957), where bittersweet nostalgia seems to buoy a father comforting his child, singing him tenderly to sleep, bittersweetness balances the sweet with the bitter. Agee pushes toward expressions that emphasize the sweetness momentarily visiting a characteristically lonely character in his solitary life. What unifies these examples above is the experience of the American lonesomeness experienced in albeit different ways and degrees, leaving the generalized experience beyond any adequate, comprehensive definition. We

continue then to trace the ultimately description-begging experiences of lonely melancholy rising or dilating into a fleeting sense of unexpected plenitude and splendor produced in the drama of the character's elicited response to his or her surroundings, mediating and immediate. The lonesome is expressed, in another way of putting it, when from nowhere a sense of unreflective, spontaneous joy rises in consciousness, breaking through depressive reverie.

One more example: in Jack Kerouac's *roman-a-clef* *The Dharma Bums* (1958), his alter-ego is climbing in the Sierras and is experiencing this moment:

The woods ... always look familiar, long lost, like the face of a long-dead relative, like an old dream, like a piece of a forgotten song drifting across the water, most of all like golden eternities of past childhood or past manhood and all the living and dying and the heart-break that went on a million years ago and the clouds as they pass overhead seem to testify (by their lonesome familiarity) to this feeling. (61–62)

Lonesome wonder and reverie can open up long vistas of comforting memory. In Oedipa, the intuitive pilgrim of Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965), we meet solitary moments of epiphany that reinforce her chronic sense of disconnection from others. For example, there is the "religious instant" in which she looks down in her car from a high road on her southern California home city: "a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding ... she and the Chevy seemed parked at the center of an odd, religious instant. As if, on some other frequency, or out of the eye of some whirlwind rotating too slow for her heated skin even to feel the centrifugal coolness of, words were being spoken" (14). But we will move away from examples in fiction to American painters, one in particular, of lonesome vistas and to the clamor of lonesomeness in country music.

## 5. Edward Hopper's and Country Lonesomeness

Finally, let us have a look at examples from the fairly well-known later work of the painter Edward Hopper, and then from the equally well-known lonesome lyrics of American country music of the last century and a half.

Hopper's images are of course everywhere, in galleries, on posters, in reproductions, in tributes paid to him by critics and followers of twentieth-century American art. His singular version of American urban ennui and alienation, its haunted spaces and penchant for nostalgia, and most of all its brooding loneliness is so distinct that his work has taken on an iconic status. Response to his body of work has given us the term "Hopperesque," coined by an appreciative critic, Peter Schjeldahl. Another critic, Gail Levin, assures us that Hopper "read Emerson assiduously and sought to express the Emersonian vision" (109). The wistfully



affirmative spiritual component of the Hopperesque, especially communicated in the later work, in his handling of light and the arrangement of human figures, confers our lonesomeness on his solitary figures haunted in their solitude.

His works we enlist include *Early Sunday Morning* (1930), *Rooms by the Sea* (1951), *Morning Sun* (1952), *Sunlight on Brownstones* (1956), *Second Story Sunlight* (1960), *People in the Sun* (1960), *Woman in the Sun* (1961), and *Sun in an Empty Room* (1963). Other works could be added. The above, however, come forward assuredly in their wistful, lonesome character. The critic Deborah Lyons observes that Hopper is a “master portraying our ultimate loneliness,” adding that his figures in these paintings seem subsumed by his mature vision in which the mundane “suddenly becomes cause for epiphany” (xvii). In the poem “Sunday A.M. Not in Manhattan” (1971), a lyric tribute to Hopper, John Hollander addresses the dimension of the something extra and beyond in Hopper’s vision. He focuses on the mysterious shadow in *Early Sunday Morning*, seeing it as the single element in the work that most encapsulates the mystery of the “something more” (70) with which Hopper has infused the painting as a whole.

The critic Barbara Novak helps us sense a linkage between Hopper, the quietist conceptual painter, and the nineteenth-century heritage of Luminism found in Fitzhugh Lane, Martin Heade Johnson, and John Kensett (262–88). The Hudson River Valley School of painters, including these, created large canvasses depicting beautiful, unspoiled landscapes of the young nation, with perhaps a tiny figure in the foreground, arguably expressing something of Ralph Waldo Emerson in his celebrated essay “Nature” (1836). In that essay Emerson recommended that his reader look upon unspoiled nature “with a supernatural eye” (82). Hopper’s isolated single figures in the later work would seem to be looking and listening for the numinous moment the description of which, as theorized by the German religious scholar Rudolf Otto, we will touch upon below. The later Hopper is a visionary painter. His figures give themselves to the light of the otherness beyond them physically and to be approached, as possible, through studied lonesome vision. But let us move on – to country music.

Cecilia Tichi, in *High Lonesome: The American Culture of Country Music* (1994), writes: “If country ‘owns’ one American theme above all others, then that theme is surely ground-level loneliness” (82). It remains true that ‘country’ is the contemporary popular cultural form in which, more than any other, the continuing recourse to lonely-and-lonesome on the part of song writers begs notice and appreciation. The styles and tastes of the diverse, evolved forms of country by a rich, motley heritage befit a populist people’s music. The short career of Hank Williams is remembered for both the sadness of his too-early, sudden death and by perhaps the most famous verse in all of country music:

The silence of a falling star  
 Lights up a purple sky,  
 And as I wonder where you are,  
 I'm so lonesome I could cry.

To get the lonesome sound right on a banjo or fiddle, a performer of Appalachian Mountain music will re-tune his or her instrument to achieve the tonal mode of appropriate melancholy. Most Americans know the intended instrumental lonesome sound when they hear it. It is there in gospel, hillbilly, western, ballad imported by early Scottish and English settlers, in Tin Pan Alley songs, not to neglect the blues of both white and black cultures – co-existing, inter-mingling, especially in the South. Williams's song is an elegy in which the writer-singer (and hearer) is rescued from a passing depressive loss of the 'will to live,' in the process transfiguring loneliness into lonesomeness.

To mention just a few ensuing examples of country lonesome, note first George Morgan's 1955 song "Lonesome Road," with its repeated chorus:

Oh, play you lonesome record, play,  
 You're trying to break my heart.  
 Oh, play you lonesome record, play,  
 And let the teardrops start.

These will be tears of gratitude, even of joy, as well as tears of grief. Country lonesome feeds greedily upon itself to meet a large market demand for these savory, solacing "teardrops" – healing, renewing, attracting. Larry Cordell and Jim Rushing's tribute, "Lonesome Standard Time" (1992), following well over two hundred and fifty different, preceding lonesome songs, celebrated this popular feeling state, paying tribute to its country heritage, as they revisit its unclarifiable spiritual dimension:

Do you feel a kindred spirit,  
 To the sound of pouring rain?  
 Does your heart start to yearnin'  
 When you hear a distant train?

They play on the self-consciousness of the tradition:

When you hear them old sad songs,  
 Do you hang on every word?  
 Do you swear a cryin' fiddle  
 Has the sweetest sound on earth?  
 If you shudder at the music  
 Of a hoot owl in the pines,  
 You're on lonesome standard time.

The cleverness of play upon the notion of differing time zones across America, of which notoriously rootless Americans are well aware when traveling, is striking.

The projection of an emotional 'zone' cutting across these time zone's divisions, to be accessed anywhere and everywhere lonesomeness strikes, touches a chord in the American imagination of ever-possible, redemptive self-recovery. In that experience we can 'zone out' temporarily away from our troubles. An American folk culture substratum of dreamy lonesomeness, responding to the opened landscape of our early history, was born in coping with the ever-present hazard of depressive loneliness. Witness are the many lonesome road or highway songs. These and other country lonesome songs are too many to name here. The reader will doubtless remember his or her favorites.

My own favorite is Johnny Cash's "Cold Lonesome Morning" (1980), a song worthy of Williams. The singer's girl pains him but he cannot stop loving her. He may have "gone past any good to cry," but he predicts he will wake one morning to find her gone for good:

One of these cold, lonesome mornings  
 Dark and early  
 Before a wild bird sings, I'm gonna fly,  
 While it's dark and I'm still reaching for you,  
 I'll wake up and I cannot cry.

The Cash touch here is evoking the flight of the soul (see also his "I'll Fly Away," 2002). The feeling of that line, if not the explicit statement, suggests the ubiquitous transfiguring moment in the native American lonesome.

## 6. Numinous Therapeutic Lonesomeness

So what can we conclude of this phenomenon, this recurring but consistently ignored heightened moment in the experience of Americans in solitude? What to make of these accounts of timely personal comfort, of occasionally illuminating and restorative solitude, of loneliness redeemed in the elevating, integrative experience of a lonesome otherness by something more?

First, we owe to the comparative religionist Rudolf Otto, in *The Idea of the Holy* (*Das Heilige*, 1917), an influential descriptive-analytical study of the non-rational dimension of religion. This work became an indispensable resource for the new and evolving academic enterprise of formal Religious Studies in the twentieth century. Otto urges us to re-balance the two major elements of rational conceptuality on the one hand, and the non-rational, trans-conceptual on the other. In modern times, he notes, the rational-conceivable element had increasingly deformed its object of study, religion, by displacing the other element of raw, pre-conceptual, subjective experience of encounter with an unnamable "wholly other ..." (199). For Otto, the

“harmony of contrast” (31), the appreciation of these balancing elements in genuine religious experience, must be restored. For him, *homo religiosus* is marked by the recurring experience of a *sui generis* core state of mind or consciousness which precedes division into subject and object. Both this wholly other experienced and the capturing/captured state of mind for which he invented the term “numinous” (208) have subsequently been employed for generations of religion scholars. It continues to evoke the mental state merging elements of cognition and feeling in expressing raw, primary, individual experiences of inexplicable “otherness” (xix) beyond the self. In response to the numinous, then, one may, as predisposed, conceptualize the experiencing of visions and of voices, and the encountering of such spirits and gods and mysteries as one’s personal spirituality may suggest.

Otto, at first, may seem wedded to assumptions about the experience of traditional religion. But in his epoch-making text, he does briefly step away from implied theistic preoccupations to observe generally of the ‘whole’ person: “Beneath it lies even in us, that ‘wholly other,’ whose profundities, impenetrable to any concept, can yet be grasped in the numinous self-feeling by one who has experienced the deeper life” (208). It is the “numinous self-feeling” (208) in the various expressions of the American lonesome that, when we identify it, enables a useful grasp of our special lonesomeness both comprehensive and penetrating. American lonesomeness, that is, would seem to play a variation upon Otto’s feeling-perception of overaboundingness. Lonesomeness would be a culturally influenced, reflexive, secular expression of Otto’s flooding, calming experience of the numinous. Suggestively, he helps us conceptualize the numinous dimension of lonesome understood as a personal experience qualitatively different from lonely.

The philosophical-anthropological writings of scholars such as John Macquarrie, Eugene Long, and Ian Ramsey, among others, have created a receptive climate for proposing the numinous character of lonesome, as we do here. Each in respectively different ways has wanted to weigh evidences for “finding the *locus* of transcendence in the human existent rather than in God,” as Macquarrie puts it (25). We cannot pursue further his observation here, but we note in passing that readings of the ontological character of transcendence as a fundamental component of human life are rich, relatively numerous, and fascinating. Relevant here is the thought that a sense of personal mind-expanding transcendence, into a larger self, experienced even if only for a moment, qualifies indeed as at least a spiritual if not a traditionally understood religious experience. For example, our lonesomeness experienced as an open-ended hierophany, as we have seen, will not exactly be a tradition-related, divine “wholly other” (208).

A more recent but equally helpful commentator for our purposes is Giles B. Gunn, especially in his work *The Interpretation of Otherness* (1979), in which he recommends:

[I]t is now necessary to widen the terms in which [discussions of the relations between literature and religion, between culture and belief are] conducted ... to reconstitute the discussion on the plane of the hermeneutical rather than the apologetic, the anthropological rather than the theological, the broadly humanistic rather than the narrowly doctrinal. (5)

Gunn observes that the ‘other’ projected by the Puritans and their followers in subsequent generations shifted, in American life, to the otherness “of their own innately human (though for some simultaneously divine) capacities to redefine and regenerate themselves” (190). The solitary self may encounter an unanticipated, self-redefining, self-recreative experience of an otherness eluding practical description. In Gunn’s terms, our dilating moment in which loneliness lifts into an elevated lonesomeness is to be described as an inspiring intimation of an inviting otherness, even an otherness that draws the self beyond itself, even, as he writes, “over against” (15) the self. And he quotes R.P. Blackmur’s take on the other as “the numinous force, the force within the self, other than the self, greater than the self, which, as one cultivates it, moves one beyond the self” (201).

Similarly, Romain Rolland, in a famous letter to Sigmund Freud in 1927 cited by William B. Parsons in his *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling* (1999), is objecting to Freud’s pathologizing of religious mysticism and claims legitimacy for what he describes as a *sui generis* oceanic feeling, which he likens to a “spontaneous religious sentiment” (36):

What I mean is: [this sentiment is] totally independent of all dogma, all Credo, all Church organization, all Sacred Books, all hope in a personal Survival, etc., the simple and direct fact of *the feeling of the “eternal”* (which can very well not be eternal, but simply without limits, and like oceanic, as it were). (36)

Rolland’s “feeling of the ‘eternal’” is certainly analogous to what Americans feel or know as the spiritual component of transfiguring lonesomeness. The oceanic and our lonesome in its overabounding register are well-related.

To adduce finally another helpful precedent support for our claim that American lonesomeness has a religious-like character, we turn to the testimony of the sociologist of religion who, in the 1960s and subsequently, more than any other scholar in the field, has instilled the interpretive concept of civil religion in America – Robert Bellah. The character of the lonesomeness for which we have drawn for support from Otto, Blackmur, Gunn, and Rolland is not that of a civil religious phenomenon in the sense that the earlier Bellah and Sydney Mead, and others have meant

that term, harking back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's political theorizing. Nor does it quite come within the purview of scholars in Britain and elsewhere who discern implicit religiousness in specific routinized non-formally-religious behaviors of individuals and communities. To reiterate, lonesomeness is effectively the umbrella expression for a hardly describable if not actually inchoate momentary sense of contact with an otherness if not actually some other quite beyond but also within the individual self. We might call it a fleeting sense of being filled with a calming, unbidden, supervening presence, potentially restorative of harmony and completeness. As he typically puts it, this is not so much a conventional belief as a perception comprised of feeling perhaps and an unverbalizable wondering consciousness of self integrated with the surrounding manifold beyond the self.

Bellah proposes that in reflections upon religious experience (generally, as now understood) we must avoid an "objectivist fallacy," namely, as he puts it, the "confusion of belief and religion" (220). Hence our lonesomeness as defined above can indeed be regarded nicely as fundamentally religious. But we must dispense with the overly rational, Enlightenment-driven fallacy, seductive as it is among Western communities of traditional faith wedded to a literalistic hermeneutic. Bellah observes this hyper-rationalism is to be found "only in the religions deeply influenced by Greek thought" (220) and hardly at all in non-Western religions. His argument, that of a sociologist addressing the function rather than the content of claimed experiences or symbolizations of transcendence, is for that very reason fundamentally supportive of our exploration. For Bellah, religious experience, regarded as one of "the most fundamental cultural forms," is "neither objective nor subjective, but the very way in which the two are related" (220). Hence his proposal that a structural analysis provides "a more phenomenologically accurate understanding of ordinary religious experience than the assumption that it is primarily a matter of cognitive belief" (222). The deficit condition of loneliness – loneliness is the term he employs throughout – is structural in the human condition itself, one that can and does give way, in privileged moments, to the structural experience of transcendence as immanence, the potential of which, so he argues, is "deeply embedded in man's existential situation and a part of the very structure of his experience" (222). Such privileged moments are to be likened, functionally, to those described by the traditional mystics in the Western tradition. As he puts it: "The crux of the issue, as it has always been in mystical religion, is the relation of this self, myself, and other selves, the universe itself" (224).

In our skeptical, secular modernity, where appeal to traditional, transcendent sources of authority and worship are questioned and, by many, discredited, the need for a serviceable symbolism for what Bellah calls "higher values" (208) persists.

Individuals and societies, we would add, do need symbols, implicit if not always explicit, to help express need to mark occasional experience of grasping a greater reality in its otherness, as suspect in the realm of materialist skepticism as this may be. Many, that is, need a symbolic language which, while it does not reach so far as to name transcendence as such, still manages to express what Bellah calls the overcoming of the dichotomies of ordinary conceptualization, e.g., the ‘subjective’ vs. the ‘objective’, and that “brings together the coherence of the whole of experience” (202), even if only, we would add, for that privileged moment. The varieties of American lonesomeness would seem to perform this function.

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## **V Solitude in the Twentieth Century: Space, Gender, and Ethnicity**



Randall Roorda

## “Mind Is the Cabin”: Substance and Success in Post-Thoreauvian Second Homes

**Abstract:** This essay explores how the core story of solitary retreat – an instance of what Kenneth Burke terms “the paradox of substance” – is enacted in cabin books from three historical junctures, books that are ‘post-Thoreauvian’ in how they adhere to or thwart expectations as to the framing and success of the endeavor.

### 1. A Portent

Into a container of takeout Kung Pao tofu the slip from a fortune cookie has dropped. I pull it out oily and orange and read: “Now is a good time for a bit of solitude.”

This is fortune indeed. It’s always now when you read this “now,” isn’t it? And “now” is always a “bit,” succeeded by further bits when what is here is taken as now: we champ at such bits. As for “solitude”: isn’t that the essence of “now”? “Now is a good time for a bit of company”: is that even a fortune? What among others would seem incidental – this wayward paper slip – figures as a portent since I happen to be alone. Now is a good time to begin that piece about solitude.

Longing for solitude is a fortune-cookie nostrum: What is it that makes the urge to be alone the stuff of mass production? Chinese takeout means dishes to pass, but a fortune cookie is yours alone. You might look around you at family or associates in half-spoken pecking order, read your fortune and say, yes, a bit, now is a good time. And if not now (I’m busy now) then soon.

When you say this, what do you imagine? Perhaps your home, your quarters (you’re drawn in quarters) but with others evacuated. But don’t they still impinge? Your home is a midden-heap mob scene rolled into a ball that like a scarab you roll about. Sisyphus in a circus ring. It’s what Henry David Thoreau said you drag down the road. Your home won’t do. Neither will a walk, if your route is a yoyo’s ambit from home, from that kitchen where takeout awaits, those containers. Granted a taste, you want to feed. A bit makes you greedy for a bite, a helping, the whole dish. You may feel you could go into solitude and never come back, never, except to say, see? It was a good time! I was fine alone. Then tell the others just how fine you were.

What you imagine is a cabin.

## 2. Second Homes

The cabin scenario is perennial in appeal – perennial, not eternal, like a plant that speciates, propagates, and eventually goes extinct. From its taproot in Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), it swells and insinuates. These days, it's flourishing. We could say it's a big moment for cabins: note the tiny house movement, the Cabin Porn group with its web presence and picture book (Klein, Lessart, and Kalina), popular solo cabin books in the US (Axelrod) and Europe (Tesson) alike. Yet when since William Wordsworth has it not been a big moment for cabins? Their past shadows their present, their solo valence shades into social formations.

Post-Thoreau and through the turn of the nineteenth century, a rash of instantiations of the urge to retreat took shape, second-home cabins prominent among them. The flush subsided before World War I but never ebbed altogether: “the myth remained as a significant part of American culture” (Schmitt 188). “Besides a second bathroom, a second telephone, and a second car, many American families either own or are planning to acquire a second home away from home” (Walton 13). So opens a book on cabins I have, a how-to guide from the Sixties. It was the time of the A-frame, which this guide contains plans for. This stripped-down structure was all the rage, the most basic imaginable. Fortune indeed: first letter and first structure coinciding, such that making this frame spells going back to Go.

The cabin is Go, what you look back to – Thoreau, Arcadia, last weekend – back to point A. Back to a second presence felt in the second home, if you follow your fortune, go alone, and return to tell. Post-Thoreau, that's in the plans.

## 3. Post-Thoreauvian Cabins

I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. (Thoreau, *Walden* 323)

What might ‘post-Thoreauvian’ mean? Not that the *Walden* script, the second home in nature, is obsolete: it's going strong. It could mean that since *Walden*, cabin tales are self-evidently post-Thoreauvian, just because they come afterward. For genre, this ramifies. Each member of a genre is a study of conditions that give rise to it, yet Thoreau's account does not just study genre conditions, it doubles back to comprise them, part and parcel thereof. *Walden* sets terms for how we read these books, acknowledged or not. By post-Thoreauvian, in part I mean just this.

But if conditions shift, so genres do, by adaptation as it were, as finch beaks get selected for stoutness given nuts tough to crack. Some cabin books turn post-Thoreauvian in that the retreat scenario gets tougher to crack. Recipes for success

can't be followed, ingredients can't be found, the dish doesn't turn out like it did. What are these post-Thoreauvian concoctions, these latter-day tales of solo second homes? How are they made? What successes, unexpected or not, do they portend?

This essay will take up solo cabin books from three junctures over the twentieth century. First, there's Henry Beston's *The Outermost House: A Year of Life on the Great Beach of Cape Cod* (1928). From the post-WWI trough of the fin-de-siècle nature wave, it stands for that era in nature writing canons: post-Thoreauvian in adherence to type. Then there's *The Clam Lake Papers: A Winter in the North Woods* (1977) by Edward Lueders, coincident with the post-Earth Day back-to-nature movement, from which issued canonical nature-solitude books by Annie Dillard and Edward Abbey. Once touted for its Thoreauvian temper, the book has left print and turned obscure for reasons (I'd say) concerning its turns from Thoreauvian protocol. Finally, Charles Siebert's *Wickerby: An Urban Pastoral* (1996) postdates the ozone hole and anticipates the 'anthropocene' – dents in prospects for human-free nature retreat. All three depict solo figures in second homes, vacation places turned to other than leisure use – not unlike *Walden*, since the pond-side cabin was effectually a time-share, a hiatus from family home.

#### 4. Substance and Retreat

In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line. (Thoreau, *Walden* 17)

Here are premises I want to develop through these books – a bare scheme, like an A-frame.

“[T]o front only the essential facts of life” (90): this is *Walden*'s statement of intent. “Front” is outside, “essential” is within. The core story of retreat in nature is this: “fronting the essential facts” of what's not you will expose what includes you and so disclose what is you. The story is perennial as an instance of what Kenneth Burke calls the “paradox of substance.” Says Burke, “the word ‘substance,’ used to designate what a thing *is*, derives from a word designating something that a thing is *not*.” What's “*intrinsic*” to something – its “*substance*” – is defined by what is “*extrinsic*”: its sub-stance, what it stands upon. Burke deems this “an inevitable paradox of definition, an antinomy that must endow the concept of substance with unresolvable ambiguity.” Trafficking across antinomies produces “a strategic moment, an alchemic moment, wherein momentous miracles of transformation can take place” (23–24). It is especially telling in discourse on ‘nature,’ senses of which encompass both ends of this antinomy: nature as great outdoors, nature as innate disposition.<sup>1</sup>

Transformation attending a strategic moment: “the nick of time,” followed by “notch.” This suggests plot, if only of one moment succeeding another. Like fractals, nick-to-notch micro-plots play out at macro-levels as well. Thoreau’s core plot is what I have called a “narrative of retreat,” its logic consonant with the paradox of substance. John Muir encapsulates it: “I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in” (qtd. in Wolfe 439). Go out as far as you can, and transformation ensues, a “going in”: a recognition of such, something found. This recognition constitutes “success unexpected in common hours.” Thoreauvian retreat is a success story: you find what you left for.

The cabin scenario is key to narratives of retreat. Materially, the cabin enables solitude requisite to ‘fronting’: shelter and sustenance. Rhetorically, the cabin is synecdoche for the heightened interior, the ‘finding’ sought in retreat. Narratively, the cabin is the site of its staging, its performance. You follow the plot, the outcome. You see how you might do it yourself: make time for a bit of solitude.

The cabin is in practice rarely and in principle never a primary residence. It’s a second home, in fact and as synecdoche. Practically, the cabin orbits the family home: A-frames proliferate once the frontier closes and cabins are something to look back on. In principle, the cabin drama is necessarily punctuated, for it depends on the break from solitude – recognition, not cognition – enacted in verbal performance. The cabin as first home implies hermits, and hermits are bores. Those who don’t emerge don’t report. The second home is a scene of writing, its subject a second presence not found in common hours. The punctuated character, the secondness of solitude is crucial to the cabin scenario – permutation of a doubleness that Thoreau, in *Walden*’s chapter “Solitude,” remarks. How success at this works out in post-Thoreauvian cabins, we shall see.

## 5. Beston’s Success

Beston constructs his dream house, advances confidently in the direction of a builder, and has it made to his specifications. It’s the utmost, the outermost house, like Walden as Thoreau imagines it: “Solitary and elemental, unsullied and remote, ... the end or the beginning of a world” (1–2). It’s understood these qualities are ones this writer would acquire, this nick of time (end or beginning) one he’d stand on and notch with his pen.

His specifications bespeak his desire. He’s nuts about windows, crams ten into a two-room place. He gives the place a name: “the Focastle” (6). The name (which means site of a ship’s pilothouse) is suggestive: this cabin is trig like a yacht’s; the dune is a craft steered through trackless seas. The house tropes the occupant’s



presence, a head with windows as compound eyes. The cabin is synecdoche for heightened interior, 'substantiated' through outside prospects. For this, "fo'castle" is exact.

His personal history is incidental; this is fronting, not backing up. We don't learn how the writer finds leisure to frequent Cape Cod: "it came about that I found myself free to visit there, and so I built myself a house upon the beach" (6). "It came about": that's like "once upon a time." He vacations there, then stays put:

I lingered on, and as the year lengthened into autumn, the beauty and mystery of this earth and outer sea so possessed and held me that I could not go. The world to-day is sick to its thin blood for lack of elemental things ... The longer I stayed, the more eager I was to know this coast and to share its mysterious and elemental life; I found myself free to do so, I had no fear of being alone ... presently I made up my mind to remain and try living for a year on Eastham Beach. (10-11)

He only went out for vacation, and concluded to stay out all year. He is "possessed": an "outer sea" holds from within. His motive for staying is to "share" what's "elemental" with deprived moderns eager for A-frames. This is Thoreauvian, a gentler version of rousing desperate masses.

Like *Walden*, Beston's book observes the conceit of a year unfolding by seasons, crossed with topical discussions. It is episodic, not cumulative, and so has no climax as such, rather a concluding anthem in which themes are re-invoked and morals ascribed. Time's depth, expanse, and suspension are foremost, nick and notch of eternities: "*Creation is here and now*." Alchemy of substance pervades retrospection: "And because I had known this outer and secret world ... reverence and gratitude greater and deeper than ever possessed me" (220).

It's a success story, like Thoreauvian retreat in general. *Walden* is retrospective – an account after the fact – and what's looked back upon, never in doubt, is the outcome. Success is heralded from the outset, the writer's purpose to answer neighbors clamoring with questions on his return. Just one episode bespeaks the least uncertainty: the moment from "Solitude" in which a tinge of loneliness is perceived "as a slight insanity in my mood" (131), arising just after he's missed visitors to his cabin. The crisis passes, and what follows is rapture and communion, "an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me" (132). It is "success unexpected," in the nick of time: the Thoreauvian script in fine.

Beston adheres to it. His book is introduced as an outcome, a success. He too has undergone a trial associated with visitors – coast guard patrols who drop in most days. He is more forthcoming about both solitude's difficulty ("It is not easy to live alone") and its degree ("I made no pretence of acting the conventional hermit") (95). But he does not dwell on this hardship, and in his account, too,

the mood is succeeded by rapture and communion: “I lived in the midst of an abundance of natural life ... and from being thus surrounded ... I drew a secret and sustaining energy” (95). The word “sustaining” occurs in both paeans, an image of substance: what’s outside supporting what’s vital within.

If success is predictable, how is it unexpected? For one thing, it comes all of a sudden. The nearest thing to a climax in *The Outermost House* comes in its best known chapter, “Night on the Great Beach,” with the writer reporting a literally exceptional sensation during a storm viewed through cabin windows:

[T]hat night there came over me, for the first and last time of all my solitary year, a sense of isolation and remoteness from my kind ... Under the violences of light the great dunes took on a kind of elemental passivity, the quiet of earth enchanted into stone ... I felt, as never before, a sense of the vast time, of the thousands of cyclic and uncounted years which had passed since these giants had risen from the dark ocean at their feet. (187)

If this is a climax, that’s because it’s a onetime event in a round of recognitions that are “cyclic,” habitual. Moreover, it’s climactic in that the logic of retreat attains closure – the expected outcome to a tale of unexpected success. Retreat to nature is a quest to lose the human, and in “remoteness from my kind,” that is fulfilled.

Further, while the script has precedent, the sentences surprise. He couldn’t have seen them coming. They are of a sort liable to happen to a person alone in a shack on a beach – a windowed scene of writing. We know they happened there because the author says so, in his foreword to their twentieth-anniversary reprinting: they are “set down in long hand on the kitchen table overlooking the North Atlantic and the dunes” (xxvii). The book met with success unexpected in hours of its composition. It proved key to preservation of that beach. Built on sand, the house was moved twice before it washed away in a storm. A reconstruction has been made, a tourist site and shrine, like the cabin replica at Walden Pond. Yet like the house, the book *The Outermost House* is a vulnerable landmark. Its sentences erode in collective estimation. They’re inscribed in what Siebert in *Wickerby* calls “ledgers of impermanence” (13). In the storm, apprehending deep time, their maker would have felt this coming. We see *Walden* headed there, too – try teaching it to freshmen. That too is foreseen and accepted by its maker: “One generation abandons the enterprises of another like stranded vessels” (Thoreau, *Walden* 11). Like wrecks at Cape Cod.

## 6. Lueders’s Doubleness

I am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another ... When the play – it may be the tragedy of life – is over, the spectator goes his way. It was a kind of fiction. (Thoreau, *Journal* 146)

Lueders quotes this passage from Thoreau's *The Journal* (a version of one in "Solitude") as an epigraph to the epilogue of *The Clam Lake Papers*. Its pertinence depends on knowing how the volume is framed. Epilogue is one support, a prologue another. A narrator, presumably Lueders, claims to be "the editor of this book," his intent "to blend into the landscape of the work . . . , to disappear." A professor, he owns a cabin in Wisconsin which he flees to seasonally for Thoreauvian ends, "a retreat to the self." Here, he reports, "an author who needed to write got to do so because I provided him the place . . . in which he could follow his concerns wherever they might lead" (3-4). Where they have led, he alleges, is to this book, written by someone else.

This is the conceit of discovered papers, used in some novels to establish persona – "a kind of fiction." "Disappear" indeed: this is clearly Lueders's own book. In this prologue he concocts a story about arriving at the cabin and finding that, like a scribbling Goldilocks, some unknown party has contrived to enter and winter there. Evidence is twofold: exhausted food stores and a table full of papers. A persona, then. But this persona does not declare itself, leaves no trace of personal identity in the papers or the three letters addressed to Lueders likewise deposited, placed at the volume's start, middle, and end: an A-frame.

The first letter declares the intruder's motive: "I have some business here or, rather, a need to be apart from business anywhere else – to balance out an account or two. If nothing else, I should have myself to myself for a spell, with insulation" (18). Thoreauvian strains prevail, in the trope of the solitary's "business" (a running gag in *Walden*) and in the suggestion of doubleness, a self having itself to itself, with ambiguity as to whether "insulation" envelops or intervenes in this relation. Yet there is also a departure attendant on this framing conceit. In Thoreau (and Beston) the cabin experience, reported in retrospect, is declared a success from the start. Success warrants the reporting: why report if it's failed? In the scenario of the *The Clam Lake Papers*, by contrast, there's suspense. The conceit of the intruder makes this writing a clue. It is remarkable the effect this has: you know this is a set-up by the professor, that it's his solitude, his sentences the *The Clam Lake Papers* contain, and still you read them as if they'd been left by a trespasser. As per another epigraph (from Wallace Stevens), we "know that it is a fiction and . . . believe in it willingly" (2).

The book is composed in sections – most shorter than a page, some just moments or aphorisms – separated by snowflake characters like intricate asterisks. Outdoor incidents, topical observations, abstract inquiries: a scrapbook with through-lines. Sections seem composed consecutively, yet that effect is circumstantial, unbacked by chronology, human encounters, any regime besides writing

alternating with walks. The figure of the cabin as windowed scene of writing is distilled: it is a book not about but made of the moments of its making.

A prevailing through-line concerns metaphor (the metaphorical imperative) in contrast with analogy:

*Analogy:* My mind is like the cabin I am living in; my thoughts are like its furnishings.

*Metaphor:* My mind is the cabin I am living in, furnished by my thoughts. (38)

Analogy spells reason and “metrics,” metaphor relatedness and “rhythmics” (40), to speak broadly. In posing resemblances, there is such a thing as false analogy; a metaphor cannot be false, just better or worse, since it is a fiction from inception: “Metaphor trades in belief. In the middle of *belief* is *lie*” (47). Intruder is a lie for mind in solitude; mind is the cabin; cabin is locus of transformations of substance, rhythmics between interior and exterior, figured repeatedly in attention to states of awareness, which is acute:

The longer I go through my solitary rounds and days here, the more the focus of my activity blends with what seemed at the outset an inhospitable setting. My isolation in this winter fastness presses my consciousness back upon itself ... I become a society of one, but the isolation also turns my attention and sentimental attachments outward in new ways ... I am joined to the society of sounds that accompany all my movements ... the sharp consonants of the typewriter’s clacking response as I fix these very remarks on the page, alternating the open vowel silences between the words with the strokes of the keys. (52–53)

Under winter’s motive stillness, opposition of interior and exterior (“inhospitable setting”) gives way to relatedness and “society,” through turns at once “outward” and “back upon” self. There is a rhythm of typing sounds with “vowel silences” – outer and inner voice. “Society” is a figure of doubleness, the cabin’s sounds assuming speaking parts, making theater of sensation. Doubleness is solitude’s hallmark, what differentiates it from loneliness, as Thoreau insists: “I never found the companion so companionable as solitude” (*Walden* 135). It’s a paradox this writer confirms: “In solitude I become sociable and candid. I converse quite successfully” (23). The intruder persona – the second home’s second presence – dramatizes this doubleness.

Doubleness as alchemical, effecting transformation: at a certain level of generality, all narratives of retreat enact such moments. Still, the intensity with which it pursues consciousness “pressing back,” and the conceit of the second presence as metonymy for solitude, make *The Clam Lake Papers* an outlier: post-Thoreauvian. Dust jacket comparisons to *Walden* and Dillard mislead. The book has their earmarks but confounds expectations – as strange to readers as to itself.

Back to suspense: the other shoe dropping, another way *The Clam Lake Papers* is post-Thoreauvian. Its opening – papers on a table – conjures a mystery, inviting

return to (doubling back on) the scene of the crime. It's a scene of writing – a trespass bent on enacting some private (non)business, no word on what that might be: hence suspense. What transpires is not that riveting: the conceit contrives mystery from what is mainly a stack of papers. Yet there's suspense as to where, in its accumulation, this writing is headed. The writer feels it: "If I keep it up, where will it go? ... Along what paths will my wondering take me?" (23). The entries do not describe but rather constitute those paths, and there is lambent suspense in tracing their motion, their relatedness: what happens next.

Do they lead to success? Toward the book's end, that's still unsettled:

Am I really doing anything these days? I largely ignore the place, the shifts of weather, the snow-still woods, and the hidden life in it ... The more I move into abstract conjecture ... the less I am concerned with what pleased me most when I first arrived ... Am I occupied or merely preoccupied? Am I any closer to knowing what I came for, or am I somehow losing ground? (129)

There's creeping anomie, intellectualized cabin fever. Substance rides herd over sub-stance: he's losing touch. Are paths trailing into dead ends? Where is the way out?

As the book closes, a way opens – recovery of ground. The writer is "awakened by a mysterious confluence of sounds in the night and words in my mind," sounds coextensive with the place, its creatures and elements, the words a reverberating phrase: "*Common ground*." He rises with alacrity and writes "to follow that unbidden calling, the promise, the peculiar mandate" that roused him. It "is elusive and pulls back," but he retrieves what he can. Chiefly, he's possessed by "the compelling echo of wholeness in the phrase that held my mind," that "revelation" – occupied, not preoccupied thereby (138–39).

After abstraction and preoccupation, there's conversion after all, one that does not surpass but crystallizes around words – wolf-howl, wind-rise, coalescing about a phrase, like snowflake with dust mote. An apotheosis of ground, sub-stance to substance. An exterior recognition follows the interior, the writer walking outside and finding a bear – or rather, "a faint mist of steam" from the den where one hibernates (141). He's suspected and sought it all along, so its appearance is both portent and device, a sign of closure.

Success, then: post-Thoreauvian in deferment, arch-Thoreauvian in upshot. In his last letter, the intruder confirms, "I have about finished what I came for, that is I have found it cannot be finished" (143). But the editor claims the last word. Failing to locate the trespasser, who has "returned to his anonymity and oblivion," he muses that even were he to "meet him face to face," he could not say: "I should

not know him from Adam" (148). This recalls *Walden's* first page, how it's "always the first person that is speaking" (3) – first person, face to face in a second home.

## 7. Siebert's Nature

In adapting to genre conditions, *The Clam Lake Papers* is not really the stout beak I promised, more a needle-nosed instrument extracting deep seeds. It's endangered. The tough nut for nature retreat these days is 'nature' itself, its celebrated end, whether bemoaned (McKibben) or espoused (Morton). My last book takes a crack at that.

*Wickerby's* provocation appears on its dust jacket, a selling point: "There is no such thing as nature ... There is just the earth and us, the name-callers, standing upon it, calling those places without us, nature." A divide is imposed between terms of antinomy: interiorized "name-callers" and exterior earth, what we are "standing upon." Warrant for nature's nonexistence is found in identity between human and non-human creations, skyscrapers and trees both "habitable outgrowths of the same skyward longing" (80). This is *Wickerby's* prevailing note.

It is skyscrapers inciting Siebert as he writes: that's what he's looking at, a view of Manhattan. Like Thoreau, Beston, and Lueders, Siebert frames his book retrospectively. But where the first two look back on entire success and the third contrives suspense before affirming success, *Wickerby* is different. The book is framed by an encompassing conceit, as if the whole thing were written in a single present-tense stretch: the evening of the writer's return to Brooklyn after five months alone at *Wickerby*. In cabin sections there's not a present-tense episode anywhere, even though all he did there (besides wander and get soused) is write. The device is as much a fiction as is Lueders's double (no one writes two hundred pages in one evening) yet differently inflected, its effect to announce not success or suspense but essentially failure. Not *Walden's* "Solitude" but "Contact!" (71) in *The Maine Woods'* "Ktaadn" is tutelary, and the bifurcations in an entry from *The Journal* from which Siebert draws his epigraph: "We soon get through with Nature. She excites an expectation which she cannot satisfy" (263). From an opening report of terror experienced not from tangible danger but from "too much time alone" (4), to a closing tour of "places where I got so roundly outwaited, so gently rebuked" in solitude (211), success is arrested in *Wickerby*; alienation and melancholy prevail.

This is one feature that makes *Wickerby* post-Thoreauvian: its upending of the script of solitude's solace. Another concerns personal history, not effaced but foregrounded here. The cabin called *Wickerby* belongs to his fiancée, her family's second home. Bex left for Africa and has been gone longer than expected. Missing her dreadfully, his Brooklyn street dug up and impassable, Siebert is anxious, resentful,

and desperate. He has no choice; he'll ditch the ditch and show her. It's revenge retreat, a Foreign Legion of one. His exterior, the cabin, proves decrepit. His interior, his consciousness, "begins to contract, harden, to form a protective shell around the altogether unnatural condition of loneliness" (5). His mind is the cabin: a carapace around vacancy. It's a thwarted doubling, consciousness hard-pressed on itself.

He soon gets through with Nature but not with Bex. His account of the cabin is addressed to her. The conceit is that it's handwritten in "the ledgers of impermanence" (13): the so-called *Wickerby* diary, found in the cabin and removed to the flat, where his time without her can be recounted to Bex before it evanesces, along with collapsing cabin and other castles in air. His sentences, incidentally, are a glory: though presented as post facto, they show virtues of having been entered on site by an eloquent solitary with time to kill, albeit time he finds trackless and estranging.

Impermanence, castles in air: these are leitmotifs of this book and its moment.<sup>2</sup> Thoreau says it's fine to build castles in air, just put foundations under them: enact them in practice (324). Yet nature's demise makes theatrical extremity or facile primitivism out of retreat: a tough nut. The cabin's foundation is crumbling, its ruin portended; it could be gone already as he writes, its phone ringing to an empty field. Interpenetration of country and city is figured in images of structures both built in and founded on air: longed for, imaginary, evanescent. One analog to the collapsing cabin is the man with the house of refuse – a homeless guy who has concocted a dwelling on the sidewalk below Siebert's flat, with furnishings, jury-rigged perimeters, a floor space he scrupulously sweeps. On rooftops above are pigeon mumblers, who build sheds next to the roosts, cabins of sorts, and spend hours releasing their flocks to points beyond telling, then awaiting their return, waving them in. Such portents abound.

Mumblers are isolates but comprise a community as well. They instantiate what Patrick Murphy takes as moral from *Wickerby*: that "the experience of retreat" need not be "a solitary discovery," might rather be "a family experience," attainable "in Brooklyn as well as anywhere else." Murphy adduces the book as corrective to Thoreau, whom he faults for neglecting "the fundamental physiological nature of human beings as interdependent social creatures" (21–22). There is something to this, of course. It is true that Siebert hopes to return to *Wickerby* with Bex, as family. And I have read of scientific research that deems loneliness physical pain, selected through evolution to chase singles back to the fold. Yet talk of what's "fundamental" should give pause. Thoreau himself is no fundamentalist on this score. Jane Bennett is defter on him, finding Thoreau's evoking of 'nature' to be "mobile, deceptive, and complex," his unilateral pronouncements (such as Siebert's epigraph, "We soon get through with Nature") undercut by insinuation with ethical import (22). "Through

with Nature” comes in the midst of *The Journal* – a watershed moment, not conclusion. Nature has more lives to live in his work.<sup>3</sup>

Antinomies of definition, Burke cautions, “will be discovered lurking beneath any vocabulary designed to treat of motivation by the deliberate outlawing of the word for substance” (24). So it is with ‘nature’: if it’s proscribed, equivalents crop up unbidden and circulate, working alchemy. They work as what Bennett calls “crossings,” spun off when plying “pure categories of nature and culture” produces “strange and mobile complexes of the given and the made” (96). *Wickerby* is rife with such crossings, generated by pure proscription of nature rather than pure Thoreauvian approbation. It is not anti- but post-Thoreauvian this way.

This goes for retreat as well: proscribed, solitude resurfaces in crossings, in transitory moments and figures. The ascetic imperative impelling retreat is not foreign but proper to culture. It “*raises the issue* of culture,” disclosing how “an integral part of cultural experience is a disquiet, an ambivalent yearning” for some extracultural state (Harpham xii), some sub-stance. It structures an opposition of temptation and resistance. When Siebert recoils from solitude – finding no purchase in its blank expanse, no nick to notch on his stick – its temptations surface as portents across the cityscape. They circulate through rhythmic, figurative ingenuities, verbal extravagance. “*Extra vagance!* It depends on how you are yarded” (Thoreau, *Walden* 324). What is “extra vagance” if not portent-making? Resistance to how you are yarded, gesturing toward the ulterior. Portents get formulated from happenstance in solitude – what distinguishes solitude from loneliness, that moments come to portend.

For solitude Siebert was ill-prepared, we might say; it wasn’t a good time and it was more than a bit. Yet he succeeds at last, on terms consistent with his premises. Going out, he finds what he went for, only he finds it back in Brooklyn: all there, but “all in the margins” (214). Only among others can he comprehend solitude, only in solitude apprehend the city. It’s a dilemma which alchemical crossings of substance both bear out and belie, in words that do not describe but comprise occasions. To Siebert, language and consciousness are a fall inscribed on our DNA, “that one catch, squiggle, snag” that spurs invention yet ropes us off from the rest of creation (143). He laments this incessantly. Yet snags work two ways: to trip you up or fix you to larger things. Purifying a rift between substance and sub-stance, Siebert spins crossings that belie the divide. Such portents are fortune indeed. “Belie” approaches “believe.” What you take out, you eat in.

## 8. Words About the House

“We soon get through with Nature.” The contention is echoed, not without irony, in expressions prevailing in environmental criticism these days: ‘post-nature,’ ‘ecology



without nature,' 'post-human,' 'Post-organism,' we might as well say. For the *pas de deux* of individuation in context, of container with thing contained, is perennial.

Take "ecology without nature" (Morton). However striking as a slogan and program for environmental action, it amounts to a strategic recasting of the paradox of substance. 'Ecology' comes from *oikos*, the Greek word for 'house': 'words about the house,' roughly speaking (Worster 192). Put everything into the house, all of creation, and up crops some *hors de oikos*, an outside-of-house, a sub-stance to reckon with. A second home, as it were, surpassing while turning back upon the first. Something like 'nature' is bound to entitle this dynamic, this shuttling between 'apart' and 'a part.' It's what stories of cabin solitude, early and late, enact. We don't soon get through with that.

## Notes

1. This holds true for 'wilderness' as well, see my "Antinomies of Participation in Literacy and Wilderness" (2007). The "narrative of retreat," in the following paragraph, is elaborated in my *Dramas of Solitude: Narratives of Retreat in American Nature Writing* (1998). The "cabin as windowed scene of writing," also below, is discussed there, too. I run a small herd of key terms which I am circling up here.

In language of nature, we crisscross poles of substance, featuring one or another by turns: language on or as exterior or interior:

on	exterior
as	interior

On exterior = natural history. On interior = phenomenology.

As exterior = amanuensis. As interior = idealism. Airtight.

2. Additionally, its moment – since designated the anthropocene – informs this book. Imperiled biodiversity, climate change, human-machine interrelations, genetics as entelechy and more, all crop up as topics while inflecting its temper.
3. It's worth noting that what Siebert adduces as epigraph leads, in Thoreau's entry, to reflection expressly on antinomies of definition with 'nature,' traffic between inside and out: "This earth which is spread out like a map around me is but the lining of my inmost soul exposed. In me is the sucker that I see" (Thoreau, *Journal* 264).

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Nassim Winnie Balestrini

## **Socially Constructed Selfhood: Emily Dickinson in Full-Cast and Single-Actor Plays**

**Abstract:** In plays on Emily Dickinson, dramatists depict how contrasting cultural imaginaries interpret the nineteenth-century poet's reclusiveness. These imaginaries range from justifying her transgressions against cultural norms to acknowledging problematic reading practices determined by theories of the socially constructed, relational self.

### **1. A Reclusive Poet's Theatrical Career**

Emily Dickinson's withdrawal from society has been the source of numerous myths about her love life and her psychological well-being. Writers of biographical plays about the nineteenth-century New England poet necessarily confront the question as to how a dramatic work – to be put on stage to engage an audience – can convincingly depict reclusiveness. How, in other words, do playwrights dramatize and stage Dickinson's perceived social invisibility in plays with casts comprising more than one actor? Does the form of a one-actor play/performance solve the problem of addressing and/or depicting such a life on a stage peopled with the ostensible recluse's social circle? Even more poignantly, how can a one-woman show feature a poet reputed to be a shy loner, played by an actor who seemingly confides in an audience consisting of strangers?

The inconclusive knowledge about Dickinson's reasons for deciding to remain single and to restrict her social ambit to a few relatives and friends with whom she regularly interacted and corresponded has spawned a sizeable body of stage works in which snippets from her poems and letters merge with the respective writer's imagination, filling in numerous intriguing gaps and blanks in Dickinson's biography.<sup>1</sup> In spoken drama, Dickinson's inscrutable biography has inspired numerous playwrights over the past roughly ninety years. At least twenty plays have been published or staged since Susan Glaspell's *Alison's House* was first performed at the Civic Repertory Theatre, New York, on 1 December 1930 (Balestrini 226). William Luce's *The Belle of Amherst: A Play Based on the Life of Emily Dickinson* (Broadway premiere: 28 April 1976) is the earliest one-actor drama about Dickinson. More recently, K. D. Halpin and Kate Nugent produced *Emily Unplugged* (Sleeveless Theater, MA, premiere in 1995), and the British-American couple Edie Campbell and Jack Lynch published *Emily Dickinson & I: The Journey of a Portrayal: A One Woman Play about Writing, Acting, and Getting into Emily Dickinson's*

*Dress* (2005).<sup>2</sup> In 2014, the Emily Dickinson Museum in Amherst presented John Bechtold's "Before You Became Improbable: An Immersive Theatrical Journey Inspired by Emily Dickinson's Poetry and Letters to T.W. Higginson," which is a dramatic rendering of the poet's communication with her editor.<sup>3</sup>

Broadly put, this essay will show that the two selected authors who opted for a cast including multiple actors dramatize, first, notions of why Dickinson came to lead a secluded life; second, the impact the solitary poet exerted on her contemporaries and on posterity; and, third, how the myths related to Dickinson's reclusiveness have affected her reception as a poet. By contrast, the three selected dramas that rely on a single female performer – that may impersonate more than one character – either present a highly agentic woman that metaphorically pokes out her tongue at people who consider(ed) her a curiosity and that, simultaneously, enlists the audience members as her allies in defying her critics. Or they foreground Dickinson's timeless relevance for contemporary artists and other readers who are engaged in self-finding processes and who invoke the nineteenth-century poet's relative social isolation as a naive shibboleth meant to convey and celebrate the notion of the secluded creative artist. As a result, such performances of single performers assume a high level of meta-poetic reflection. The solo act can thus portray a thought process focused on individual approaches to understanding Dickinson, her legacy, and her role in another artist's development. Paradoxically, staging this internal course of contemplation requires an immensely externalized and vocal form of communicating with audiences.

Before exploring this paradox, I will introduce selfhood theories developed in social psychology which will provide the basis of my analytical approach to the dramatic characters in plays with a multiple-actor cast and in plays with a solo performer. Establishing definitions of singular/independent versus social/interdependent selves is a crucial prerequisite of contemplating character development as well as diverging notions of singular/independent or social/interdependent selves because they frame selfhood as necessarily positioned within social relations. Long-standing assumptions that human beings are inherently socially oriented and that their self-understanding depends on social relations (Swann and Bosson 589–90, 594, 599–601) allow us to interpret implications regarding seclusion in a more nuanced light, as a matter of degree and as a phenomenon that must be discussed within a cultural-historical context that defines social roles and certain expectations regarding social interaction in a time-, place-, and culture-specific manner.

Juxtaposing early Dickinson plays that feature casts of roughly a dozen characters each with more recent plays for a solo performer reveals a marked shift in focus, even though overlap between earlier and later, full-cast and one-actor

biographical plays exists. The main difference lies in two contrasting tendencies: first, the seeming need to justify the poet's reclusiveness by highlighting her socially acceptable reasons and suggesting that her reclusiveness – either in itself or through the resulting poetic oeuvre – benefited others and thus actually reflected a deeper social concern; second, the interrogation of myths about Dickinson either with the result of depicting a proto-feminist poet or of foregrounding Dickinson as a figure of artistic identification that allows late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century characters to self-define. Metaphorically put, whoever dons the mantle of Dickinson's historicized solitude does so with the help of a garment designed and created in the wearer's own image.

## 2. Social and Relational Constructions of Selfhood

Numerous concepts of selfhood drawn from the field of social psychology stress “the fundamentally interpersonal” (Swann and Bosson 610) and, thus, the “socially constructed” (603) nature of the fluid and processual individual self. This so-called interactionist view of the self focuses on how human beings gain an understanding of who they are by constantly checking whether and how their idea of themselves coheres with their perceived social norms and with their ideas of how others see them (612). From this theoretical vantage point, extreme forms of solitude appear potentially pathological because any notion of selfhood requires a social context. Cultural psychology, a field that has gained influence since the 1990s and that contemplates the “cultural foundation of many psychological phenomena” (Heine 1423), reminds us, however, that the nature and extent to which self-construction depends on social interaction may, in fact, not be a clear-cut matter, as different cultures encourage individuals to position themselves in culture-specific ways within the spectrum between “independent” and “interdependent self-concepts” (1429; see also Plaut and Markus).

This cultural gray area between independent and interdependent selfhood helps us make sense of problems related to the reclusiveness with which the characters in Dickinson plays struggle. Can an individual self be truly independent and content? And at which point does a person's distance from others become discomfiting or a sign of imbalance or illness? Is a person's sense of isolation from society an essential, given trait, or is it a result of adapting to a specific socio-cultural environment or predicament? And how is a person's self-image related to or different from perceptions by others? In particular, two concepts apply to dramatic ways of presenting Dickinson and those trying to understand her. First, the idea of “relational value” (Leary 874) implies the process of assessing one's standing within a group by fathoming other group members' attitudes towards one's own

self; the resulting assessment will then affect one's self-esteem (874–75). In the dramatic works, the concept of 'relational value' allows us to understand how each play depicts Dickinson's view of herself within a social context. Second, the concept of "parasocial relationships" (884) facilitates discussion of how the plays deal with Dickinson's reception in literary criticism and in the cultural imaginary. While Mark R. Leary defines such a parasocial relationship between a fan and a famous person primarily for the era of television, the concept works well in the context of a canonized author who has become an iconic figure. The finding that parasocial relationships "may provide comfort and a sense of social connection even though the 'relationship' is distal and nonreciprocated" (884) also holds for dramatizations in which association with the secluded poet virtually enhances a dramatic character's sense of self-worth.

In light of these theories of socially constructed and relational selfhood, the analysis of selected plays will demonstrate that the relationship between the imagined Dickinson and the dramatis personae changes from a parasocial connection based on heightening one's own sense of self-worth through association with a specific version of the revered author to a reciprocal one, i.e., a relationship rooted in a sense of what I call 'dialogic selfhood,' according to which the poet and her seclusion can be neither unequivocally explained nor simply imitated.<sup>4</sup>

I use the terms 'reclusive' and 'solitary' interchangeably as designating the circumstance that Dickinson withdrew from social relations such as marriage and church membership that were deemed central to a woman's life in her social environment. The terms do not imply that Dickinson had no contact with others, as she obviously lived with her family and interacted with a small circle of friends and acquaintances, be it personally or by correspondence (Messmer; Wolff). How the poet felt about her lifestyle remains largely outside the purview of this essay. Instead, my analysis of selected dramatic works will focus on how myths and conceptualizations of Dickinson as a recluse participate in promoting various notions of selfhood.

### 3. Evoking Dickinson's Selfhood in Full-Cast Dramas

In Glaspell's *Alison's House*, for which Dickinson's family denied the dramatist the use of Dickinson's name and of her works (Guerra, "Dickinson Adaptations" 389), the titular character has been dead for 18 years when the play opens. The deceased poet is, naturally, physically absent but overwhelmingly present through memorabilia, her poems, and the conversing characters' recollections. While the poet's siblings, niece, and nephews share fond memories of Alison and disagree regarding how rumors about the reasons for Alison's reclusiveness affect the family's standing



within the local community, characters outside the family circle are split between curiosity regarding her unconventional biography and the value of her poetic oeuvre for posterity. The central conflict of the play is whether restricting access to Alison's biography and poems is tantamount to imprisoning the poet (Gaspell 25) and, by implication, making her reclusiveness permanent.

The concept of self-imprisonment in Gaspell's drama coheres with the mid-nineteenth-century gendered concepts of propriety upheld by the fictional poet's brother, John, and his daughter-in-law, Louise. According to John, Alison's self-imposed isolation expresses her acceptance of social norms that disallow the consummation of her love for a married man. While a person unaware of this reason may read the woman's spinsterhood as a psychological illness, the same person would possibly interpret male acts of self-isolation within a different tradition of thought. As Coby Dowdell argues, in post-revolutionary America the figure of the hermit became an emblem of individual liberty rebelling against oppressive majority rule (123). By the 1840s, the hermit was read not as an apolitical entity but rather as a particularly deep thinker that attempted to transcend party strife (143–44) and reconfirmed the nation's commitment to "deliberative democracy" (147). Yet the defenders of propriety in Gaspell's play do not promote such a philosophical reading of Alison's relative seclusion (rather than full-fledged hermitism), which they attribute solely to personal reasons. Analogously, Emily Dickinson's retreat not only from her studies at Mount Holyoke but also from her local church community and her avoidance of most interaction in public did not – for lack of extant records arguing otherwise – lead to a reputation as a female Thoreau in search of her Walden Pond. Rather, she came to be seen as an oddity precisely on account of her avoidance of normative social interaction.

According to Gaspell's rendering of the poet, her seclusion does not imply an entirely independent self-concept in the sense that she completely broke with social norms regarding her choice of a partner, but the poet becomes independent to the extent that she rejects fulfilling mid-nineteenth-century notions of white middle-class womanhood. Alison's poetic works, however, transcend her personal practice in the sense that not her biography but her oeuvre determines her long-term significance. Gaspell thus distinguishes between various ways of relating to Alison: family members cherish memories that imply Alison's superior powers of empathy; on top of that, those who have experienced the desire for or actually indulged in socially unacceptable love relationships feel a secret bond with her both through knowledge of her life story and through encountering hitherto unknown poems that address her suffering. Furthermore, outsiders engage in a range of parasocial relationships: Alison's nephew Ted provides insight into the sensationalist tendencies

of his Harvard professor who supposedly promised Ted a passing grade if he were to provide previously unknown details about Alison's recondite personality. The journalist Knowles, who visits the family's house in order to see where Alison wrote her poems, argues that the poet's works – which metonymically stand for Alison herself and for her life story – are not family property but rather “belong . . . to the world” (5; see also 19, 144–48). These perspectives merge when family members and others conclude that Alison's poems comfort those who experience pain and possibly ostracism as a consequence of feeling desires that were unfulfillable because they were incompatible with the social norms governing intimate love relationships (139, 141, 145, 147, 149–53). The fictional world of the play then extends the idea of comfort found through a parasocial relationship beyond earthly life, as the empathetic link to Alison transcends death, which is the most extreme form of physical separation. When family members who have only now understood Alison's suffering say, as if speaking to her, “Never mind, Alison. We have found you” and “You will never be alone again” (141; see also 154–55), they imply that their willingness to empathize may soothe the deceased's suffering. The belated act of consoling the poet's soul acknowledges an awareness of Alison's ordeal, but it is obviously only a figurative gesture. Although the conflict between propriety and fulfillment persists in *Alison's House*, the family patriarch's decision to make his sister's poems about this painful conflict available in print represents a step towards rapprochement between the contending parties.

Dorothy Gardner's *Eastward in Eden*, which premiered in Boston and New York in November 1947, casts posterity's parasocial link to Dickinson as being based on the poet's ability to suffer stoically and to affirm traditional family values. In this case, instead of having other characters verbalize their admiration for Dickinson, the play stages the poet's vision of emotional fulfillment. Gardner's strategy implies that Dickinson's emotional attachment to a married man was beyond reproach. The play repeatedly invokes the conventional metaphor of earthly life as a prison (32, 48, 72, 77) only to set a surreal dream sequence in a “cottage in eternity” (64) as the locus of an afterlife. In this scene (63–72), Dickinson experiences a marriage-like union of two minds and souls rather than bodies. Right after this scene of emotional fulfillment, the second act closes with the spectacular effect of Dickinson's return to reality and to the earth-shattering awareness of her loss. Gardner's Dickinson thus embodies the ideal of an interdependent female self within the alleged safety of middle-class domesticity, even though her life story as we know it contradicts this impression. As a result, Gardner's play explains and justifies rather than pathologizes the poet's loneliness. Even though the third act of Gardner's play is set twenty years after Dickinson's loss of her true love, it shows Dickinson's lively interaction

with family members and friends. She and her sister, Lavinia, also discuss their lives with a sense of resigned acceptance (94–96), which is confirmed by closing words that imply Dickinson's reliance on God. Observing the first stars in the night sky, she says: "The lamp is lighted. God is very punctual" (100).

Glaspell's and Gardner's plays suggest that the female poet's self-imposed seclusion bestowed upon her an aura of irreproachability as a socially aberrant, gifted poet. Both plays negotiate the poet's seclusion as a personal issue during her lifetime. Although Glaspell's *Alison* inspires her unconventional relatives and thus casts her as a potential reformer, the play goes beyond the personal only in hindsight, characterizing the poet's secluded self as socially constructed and as socially relevant because Alison's works are potentially therapeutic for posterity.

#### 4. Dialogic Selfhood in One-Actor Plays

While traditional biographical plays – works that showcase the biographed individual through the depiction of momentous events, steps in personal development, tell-all revelations, artistic output, and responses by contemporaries – continue to be written, a growing number of playwrights have responded to postmodernist and new historicist critiques of historiography that foregrounds great personages and their ostensible achievements as objectively accessible. Playwrights instead spotlight the biographer's function as a lens, that is, as a person contemplating another person's life – possibly through reflection on her/his own life, by depicting the process of engaging with the biographed individual's life, personality, and legacy, and by commenting on metadramatic features related to producing the very play one is watching.<sup>5</sup>

Selecting the one-actor format to represent a historical personage known for her secluded lifestyle raises questions regarding the dramatic possibilities inherent in using the theatrical form of an extended monologue as a *mise-en-abîme* for interpreting the solitary protagonist. In the plays discussed in this section, the solo actor breaks through the fourth-wall illusion and communicates with her audience. In the earliest play, Luce's *The Belle of Amherst*, this results primarily in undermining long-standing myths about Dickinson as a secluded and extremely shy individual. The focus on the multiple Dickinsons constructed by recipients in different historical contexts, as depicted in two later plays, namely in Halpin and Nugent's *Emily Unplugged* and Campbell and Lynch's *Emily Dickinson & I*, rather indicates that any attempt at revealing what could be regarded as the poet's essential selfhood is doomed as each recipient has an agenda and can do no more than enter into a dialogue regarding perspectives on the nineteenth-century poet.

The first one-woman play on Dickinson, Luce's *The Belle of Amherst*, claims to be – as the subtitle says – *A Play Based on the Life of Emily Dickinson*. Its central concern is to revise the Dickinson cultural imaginary, replacing the cliché of a psychologically disturbed spinster with that of an agentic female artist who plays the role of the proverbial madwoman in the attic with relish (Luce 6) on account of her superior literary competencies. The monologue destroys the fourth-wall illusion by recruiting audience members as confidants. Luce's Dickinson asks "Oh, you agree with me?" as if the audience had indicated agreement, and she repeats "How do you spend your evenings [?]," as if someone had asked her a question (32). The character's verbal prowess, wit, and irony notwithstanding, Luce's Dickinson fails to transform into a clearly determined agent of her retreat from society. She inconclusively claims: "I don't regret my aloneness. I accept the pattern of life as it came to me – or as I caused it to be" (53). This dialectical relation between fate and agency relativizes the protagonist's defiant self-assertiveness throughout most of the play.

As the allusion to *MTV Unplugged* in the title of Halpin and Nugent's *Emily Unplugged* already implies, the play transfers the nineteenth-century poet into the present and chooses a format that supposedly allows access to what a recipient may consider the poet's authentic artistry and, possibly, self rather than presenting an engineered and polished version. More importantly, this one-woman show illustrates how processes of reception can be characterized by construing other people's motivations according to one's own wishes. Thus, the protagonist claims that people who feel "weird" (Halpin and Nugent) project their own social isolation onto Dickinson. As William B. Swann, Jr. and Jennifer K. Bosson point out, "[a]pparently, when people sense that they and others perceive the world through the same psychological 'lens,' their confidence in the validity of their own visions of reality is reinforced. Such 'I-sharing' may constitute a powerful antidote to the problem of existential isolation" (603). Eclectic scenes envision Dickinson in roles that undermine the cliché of the silently suffering solitary spinster – as in renderings of Dickinson as a rebellious teenager (with Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" as the soundtrack) and of Dickinson as a spoken word poet named Emmi D who recites the poem beginning with the verse "Wild Nights, Wild Nights," one of Dickinson's poems that has been read as depicting a woman's erotic fantasy (Reynolds 188–89). These ahistorical appropriations of Dickinson turn the poet into an icon that responds to contemporary versions of popularity and psychological compatibility.

The main title of Campbell and Lynch's *Emily Dickinson & I* introduces a drama that depicts the relationship between the single performer and her subject matter. The play's first subtitle, *The Journey of a Portrayal*, alludes to the topos of a travel

narrative and applies its extension in time and space to the process of artistic representation. The second subtitle, *A One Woman Play about Writing, Acting, and Getting into Emily Dickinson's Dress*, confirms the meta-dramatic dimension and closes with what will be revealed to be the crux of the protagonist's hybrid approach to auto/biographical drama and performance. As the play's main title indicates, Edie, the single performer, ponders the potentially significant similarities between Dickinson's and her own life. In tune with the subtitles, Edie narrates and acts out her fourteen-year-long attempt to write a Dickinson play that reveals the poet's essence rather than one person's perspective. When both projects come to naught in the sense that Edie rejects notions such as identifying with Dickinson and revealing her essence, the play uncovers expectations and reading practices that gain significance when considering Dickinson's reclusiveness.

The central motif that conveys Edie's journey towards distinguishing between the illusion of capturing another person's presumably stable self and the experience of creative process is Dickinson's emblematic dress. Edie questions not only the ways readers have been appropriating Dickinson, but also her own attempt at accessing the poet's psyche. At the opening of the play, the actor contrasts a bust of Dickinson by an unknown artist with a prototypical dress Dickinson may have worn (30).<sup>6</sup> Whereas the definitively shaped bust represents the poet as a monolithic icon to be admired in a pantheon, the malleable dress breathes softness, a domestic or at least everyday context, and the symbolism of a garment fitted to a specific human body. The idea of sharing the author's apparel becomes constitutive of merging the writer's experience, point of view, and sensibilities with the reader's. Similar to the situation in *Emily Unplugged*, "[s]uch 'I-sharing' may constitute a powerful antidote to the problem of existential isolation" (Swann and Bosson 603). As Campbell's play demonstrates, this sense of overcoming isolation is linked to understanding how artistic processes may include acts of projecting and constructing a psychological bond based on false premises.

When Dickinson's solitude within the ostensible world of protected spinsterhood is projected onto the solitary artist who emulates her, their shared psychological and artistic predicament reinforces the comforting effect of the time- and space-transcending parasocial relationship between the adored poet and the contemporary dramatist-actor. However, the dress becomes a treacherous object that ultimately leads Edie from being obsessed with Dickinson's life to focusing on her poetry. If we regard the dress as a nineteenth-century equivalent of today's mass-distributed images of celebrities, which Leary describes as constitutive of a parasocial relationship (884), it makes all the more sense that the dress has assumed such an iconic function among those who construct their selfhood through referencing their relation to a mysterious recluse.

In *Emily Dickinson & I*, Edie goes through various phases in her engagement with Dickinson's dress. In the first phase, she assumes that changing the dress will alter perceptions of the poet's character, but she rejects such an act as "putting words in Emily's mouth" (54). In the second phase, Edie reflects on her approach to acting as not "being" but rather "portraying" (59) a person (see also 60, 65). In the third phase, the dress as a work in progress gradually merges with Edie's coming to terms with Dickinson's writings as well as with her own verbal and dramatic creative process. In the fourth phase, Edie complicates the being-vs.-portraying idea by arguing that Dickinson's texts represent acts of posing and performing that must not be read as factual or unmediated (102–03).<sup>7</sup> As the dramatist-actor, thus, cannot access Dickinson, Edie tries on the dress, only to confirm that this, in fact, does not transform her into the poet (113). In the fifth and final phase, Edie imitates Dickinson's act of organizing and sewing sets of poems into fascicles (117). Edie thus completes her journey from seeking identification with Dickinson's elusive individual self to finding a satisfactory and, to her mind, non-falsifying method of acting in an auto/biographical drama.

On its meta-dramatic level, *Emily Dickinson & I* visualizes some of the dilemmas Campbell encounters, both as an individual with specific inner struggles and as an actor. The play's concern with the predicament of an early twenty-first-century artist simultaneously provides a perspective on Dickinson that offers an alternative to earlier readings of the poet's selfhood as primarily non-normative (41–42, 44, 48). Such readings imply that Dickinson's reclusiveness expresses something problematic. Edie's extensive counterarguments, by contrast, stress Dickinson's independence from society along with her interdependence with art, wondering whether "she withdrew from the world because of the richness of her inner life? Among her contemporaries Emily could find no one to match her intellectually" (49). By subsequently citing contemporary authors who desire solitude in order to think and work (51–52), Campbell implies that Dickinson assumed a right that artists are granted more readily today and that was accorded to male rather than female authors, as writers ever since Virginia Woolf have pointed out.

Finally, Edie explains that, whereas she finds comfort in assuming that Dickinson may also have suffered from panic attacks and that this could explain her inclination toward solitude (69), emulating the poet does not solve Edie's dilemma as an agoraphobic woman who wants to have a career as an actor. A poet may fulfill her task of writing poetry by retreating into the privacy of her personal space, but an actor like Edie needs a theater audience (69). Realizing this difference supports the play's move away from mere biography-based identification and towards the contemplation of artistic processes.

## 5. The Liberating Potential of Dialogic Selfhood

The plays discussed in this essay address contrasting attitudes toward reclusiveness along a continuum of interpretations ranging from reclusiveness as a tragically limiting condition that hampers emotional fulfillment to reclusiveness as a pathway towards liberation from prescriptive social relations and towards creative freedom. Historicizing dramas such as Glaspell's, Gardner's, and, to some extent, Luce's depict how Dickinson herself may have felt about being unconventional through remaining single, avoiding the full range of expected social relations, and writing equally unconventional poems. Dramatic characters that consider the domestic ideal as the *sine qua non* of a woman's happiness necessarily assume that the poet's seclusion primarily imposed limits on living a satisfactory life. Thus, these characters read Dickinson's poetic output as resulting from tragic circumstances whose origins must be explored because completely voluntary reclusiveness for the sake of artistic creativity would imply a non-prescriptive, independent selfhood not granted to a woman of Dickinson's cultural context. Whenever Dickinson is dramatically represented as a proto-feminist, either her lifestyle or her poetic output is understood as liberation from convention. In both variants, the plays imply that fathoming the poet's seclusion remains the central element in the endeavor to define her essential self.

By contrast, the more recent plays by Halpin and Nugent as well as by Campbell and Lynch demonstrate the impossibility of accessing anything that could be considered the monolithically real Dickinson. Rather, numerous versions of the poet reside in different cultural-historical contexts. Those characters who engage in a parasocial relationship with Dickinson use the perceived empathy between themselves and their object of admiration to enhance their self-worth. As *Emily Dickinson & I* illustrates, the transition from a parasocial interlinkage with a rigidly idolized personage to a dialogic relationship yields two insights: first, Dickinson fans and scholars will never conclusively know whether or to which extent the poet experienced her reclusiveness as limiting or liberating. Second, using Dickinson as a foil is only liberating for recipients of her works who are willing to grapple with differences between their own selfhood and the constructed selfhood that they project onto Dickinson. In the latter case, they enter a dialogic relationship that turns dependence into independence.

The plays about Dickinson discussed in this essay shed light on how concepts of socially constructed selfhood affect perceptions of the poet and her oeuvre as much as each perceiver's view of her/himself. Depending on their own cultural values and individual experiences, perceivers potentially construe Dickinson's solitariness in diametrically opposed ways. Whether the actual meaning of her reclusiveness

matters then depends on whether the perceiver sees her as an inflexibly contoured figure of identification or as a sounding board for her/his fluid, processual self.

## Notes

1. Only one play, David Starkey's *How Red the Fire* (premiere: 22 February 2007; as yet unpublished), combines Dickinson's texts with scenes imagining an alternate history in which she loses her poems and her sister in a fire. For the author's account of the genesis of his drama, see his "Adapting the Unreal: Composing an Alternate History for Emily Dickinson."
2. An earlier version of this play premiered in 1999.
3. For an overview of Dickinson-inspired plays, see the two essays by Jonnie Guerra listed in the Works Cited section of this paper. Information on Bechtold's "Before You Became Improbable" can be found online.
4. This coinage includes, of course, a nod to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogic discourse (1214, 1218).
5. A signature example of this method is Doug Wright's *I Am My Own Wife: Studies for a Play about the Life of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf* (Off-Broadway premiere: 27 May 2003). The play follows the journey of the playwright whose plan of producing a biographical play is thwarted by unexpected revelations, so that he eventually concludes that the biographed personage will remain inconclusive. The process of grappling with the biography is depicted through an actor who embodies the biographed person as well as about three dozen other characters.
6. The curators of the Emily Dickinson Museum in Amherst acknowledge the following: "As Emily Dickinson's writings have grown in popularity since her death, certain objects associated with the poet have become icons. Chief among them is the white dress thought to have been Dickinson's. The dress is a typical house garment of the late 1870s and early 1880s, worn when Dickinson was in her late 40s and early 50s. But the posthumous fame of the dress's owner has given the garment an extraordinary life of its own. For many of Dickinson's fans, the white dress embodies the essence of their beloved writer. The dress, made of a cotton fabric with mother-of-pearl buttons, is a style known as a wrapper or a house dress, worn by women as everyday clothing for doing chores and other activities inside the house. It was not a particularly unusual or expensive dress for its time" ("Emily Dickinson's White Dress"). Thus, the house dress neither implies the poet's virginity nor a misguided attempt at wearing bridal white as a spinster – or any of the other implications that may have been interpreted into this everyday item of clothing.



7. Diana Fuss argues that “Dickinson always had a finely tuned sense of the theatrical” (11) and that her posing invoked specific iconographic traditions (11–12).

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Jochen Achilles

## Changing Cultures of Solitude: Reclusiveness in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*

**Abstract:** In *The House on Mango Street*, hermitism can be both a form of repression and the precondition for the battle against it. Esperanza fights female incarceration mentally by a retreat into the imagination and performatively by seclusion in the monkey garden. This may in turn support and strengthen her search for both an identity and a home of her own.

### 1. The Liminal Quality of Solitude in *The House on Mango Street*

Like Denise Chavez's *The Last of the Menu Girls* (1986), Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984) can be considered a collection of initiation stories, a short story cycle, a *Bildungsroman*, “a portrait of the artist as a young woman,” that is, a *Künstlerroman*” (Eysturoy 90), or “a modified autobiographical structure” (Madsen 107).<sup>1</sup> In a series of episodes without closure, vignettes rather than stories, it describes the emancipation of Esperanza Cordero, its protagonist, narrator, and initiate.<sup>2</sup> Reminiscent of George Willard's intermediate position in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), Cisneros develops a narrative structure which positions Esperanza as both protagonist and observer of Hispanic society in the Mexican American *barrio* of Chicago where Mango Street is situated.<sup>3</sup> First and foremost, *The House on Mango Street* is a contemporary version of what Ina Bergmann has analyzed as forms of negative initiation in *And Then the Child Becomes a Woman: Weibliche Initiation in der amerikanischen Kurzgeschichte 1865–1970* (2003). Esperanza is what Bergmann characterizes as “a personality actively rebelling against the restrictions of the traditional woman's role, culminating in her emancipation” (“Stories” 310).

On the one hand, the houses on Mango Street, where Esperanza and her peers grow up, appear as so many prisons. On the other hand, a new and different home of her own is both Esperanza's and Cisneros's manifestation of ultimate independence. Cisneros's introduction to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *The House on Mango Street* is titled “A House of My Own,” like the penultimate vignette in which Esperanza claims “a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem” (108), suggesting a connection between the acquisition of a house and the production of poetry. In 2008, the real-life equivalent of the house on Mango Street has long been a thing of the past for Cisneros. On the strength of the success of her stories and poems she is meanwhile living independently in

a home of her own in San Antonio, Texas, which she describes with satisfaction (Cisneros xi-xxvii). But in her memories and the writing fed by them, Mango Street will probably always be present. Cisneros shares such dialogic liminalities not only with her protagonist Esperanza, but also with her readers, who have to negotiate past and present, too: the Mango Streets they come from and the San Antonios they want to live in, the memories of the lives they have lived and the hopes they aspire to.

As writing is a process of renewed identification and simultaneous distancing, leaving home and changing one's life converge with preserving the past. In "The House on Mango Street" and "Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes," the opening and closing vignettes of *The House on Mango Street*, these dialectics of home and a house of one's own, familiarity and otherness, repression and emancipation, stasis and movement, retention and protention, Spanish and English, living and imagining, lead to oxymoronic statements such as "the house I belong but do not belong to" (110) and "I have gone away to come back" (110). The dialectics of familiarity and otherness as well as the motif of the search for a house of one's own pervade *The House on Mango Street* (Bolaki 106–07, 121–22, 128–29; Eysturoy 90–98, 106–109; Madsen 127; Nagel 124; Veauthier 74–78, 162–72, 187–89.) The house is both humiliating presence and liberating agent (Bolaki 119; Jacobs 116; Madsen 127–28; Saldívar-Hull 93). In such processes of transition third spaces of isolated existence turn into sites of reflection and the articulation of alternative subject positions. These liminal spaces transform Cisneros's captivity tales into peripheral border texts, opening up perspectives of transgression and lasting change (Bolaki 94–102; Madsen 105; Saldívar-Hull 91, 87).

Like the identities of both Cisneros and Esperanza, the functions of solitude and the tendencies of reclusiveness in *The House on Mango Street* oscillate in liminal fashion. In *The House on Mango Street* solitude is, on the one hand, a result of either isolation on account of otherness or repression on account of paternalism. On the other hand, solitude can also become a catalyst for change. Forms of enforced hermitism can lead to a retreat into the imagination or temporarily open up heterotopic settings which enable the anticipation of further change and improvement. It is not least the treatment of reclusiveness and solitude that turns *The House on Mango Street* into an arena for questioning existential, cultural, national, and aesthetic certainties.

## 2. Solitude as a Result of Repression: The Fear of Men

In the universe of *The House on Mango Street*, the fear of otherness is frequently not only an interethnic but also a highly gendered element in the narrow confines

of the Hispanic family circle. A sequence of vignettes highlights the cyclical pattern of male violence and coercion breeding more male violence and coercion. Husbands represent domination and repression like fathers before them. The enforced hermitism of girls in their parental homes invariably continues once they are married. Concerning Esperanza's friend Sally, the vignettes "What Sally Said," "Sally," and "Linoleum Roses" depict stages of this vicious circle. Traditional *machismo* turns wives and daughters involuntarily into reclusive characters, imprisoned in the domestic sphere. Patriarchal Latino communities dominated by the ideology of *machismo* can be understood as what Gilles Deleuze has called "societies of control." Transforming the enforced hermitism of women into a sphere of independent reflection can be considered one of the few defense mechanisms against the pervasiveness of control that is being internalized in such communities.<sup>4</sup>

"What Sally Said" gives an impression of paternal mistrust, rage, and vigilance in Hispanic families. The vignette delineates the cycle of violence *machismo* brings about. It also indicates the submissiveness of girls and women who seem to consider habitual repression by fathers or husbands normal because it is so ubiquitous and universal. "He never hits me hard" (Cisneros 92), Sally's opening statement, which is repeated a few lines later, encapsulates both male violence and female acquiescence in a nutshell. Sally admits that she is routinely beaten by her father but also tones down her accusation by the suggestion that the beatings are not severe, although "her skin is always scarred" (92). Sally's mother assists in alleviating the consequences of the beatings by rubbing "lard on all the places where it hurts" (92). The father is afraid that, like his own sisters, Sally will bring disgrace on the family. Therefore, he hits her "like a dog," "like if I was an animal" (92).

When Sally visits Esperanza to stay for a couple of days with the Cordero family, her father appears and begs her to come back home with tears in his eyes, promising "this is the last time" (93). Sally follows her father home, thereby performing the same gesture of acquiescence which she verbally expresses in the statement that she is occasionally hit, but never hard. After a while Sally does not appear in school for several days, as her father saw her talking to a boy and again "forgot he was her father between the buckle and the belt" (93). The cycle of alleged female misconduct outside the home, the return home and imprisonment there, male violence, female acquiescence and, finally, regret on all sides goes into another round. The brutal male rage, evoked by any gesture within the family circle construable as female transgression, is a measure of the men's own desire for such transgression outside the family circle – maybe also inside the family circle as well. The father's merciless beatings can be considered a deferred realization of his own sexual interest in his daughter, a rationalization of "his own incestuous

desire” as Elizabeth Jacobs explains: “This psycho-social complex is fundamental to machismo and is used as a justification for sexism within the Chicano community” (115; see also Bolaki 109; Eysturoy 103; Nagel 121; Saldívar-Hull 98–100; Veauthier 90–92, 119–24, 180). The result is the hermitism of women in the domestic sphere, which is protected by physical force.

“Linoleum Roses” continues Sally’s story. To flee from domestic torture and paternal incarceration, Sally marries a marshmallow salesman while still in eighth grade. “She says she is in love, but I think she did it to escape” (Cisneros 101), Esperanza comments. Sally claims to be happy as she can go shopping “when her husband gives her money” (101). Not only is she financially dependent on her husband, he also has bouts of sudden rage and “once he broke the door where his foot went through, though most days he is okay” (101). He does not regularly beat her like her father but sentences her to solitary confinement. She can neither use the telephone, nor look out the window, nor receive visitors (102).

As other vignettes such as “The Monkey Garden” and “Red Clowns” show, Sally clandestinely explores sexuality early. She then tries to flee from paternal repression and violence by marriage but finds herself in the same cycle of repression she has known from childhood, condemned to even more complete domestic inertia: “She sits at home because she is afraid to go outside without his permission. She looks at all the things they own: the towels and the toaster, the alarm clock and the drapes. She likes looking at the walls, at how neatly their corners meet, the linoleum roses on the floor, the ceiling smooth as wedding cake” (102). Reduced to appreciating the rose pattern in the linoleum, Sally ends up in a situation reminiscent of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892). What turns Sally into an involuntarily contemplative hermit figure is not only her father and her husband but obviously the whole male-dominated, familial moral system that pervades her culture (Bolaki 117; Eysturoy 103–04; Madsen 113; Nagel 122–23; Veauthier 181–83).

### 3. Solitude as a Catalyst for Change

#### 3.1 The Return of the Repressed as a Writing Cure

Esperanza’s vignettes negotiate between a Mango Street neighborhood “filled with women imprisoned in the domestic space by patriarchal and economic constraints” (Saldívar-Hull 94) and Gilman’s and Virginia Woolf’s demand for a room of one’s own (Jacobs 116; Saldívar-Hull 93). In this context, the solitude generated by forms of imprisonment can become a catalyst for change. Understanding Esperanza as a Latina hermit explains such unlikely liberation in adversity. In an insightful essay

about the American hermit and the British castaway, Coby Dowdell claims that the hermit's situation consists in a temporary or permanent distancing from the cultural, political, or moral demands of the world (122; 127–28). As a liminal stage of independent deliberation, hermitism allows for a rethinking and reinterpreting of positions. It can therefore be considered a deliberate suspension of taking sides (139, 148). The essay brilliantly analyzes the paradigmatic relevance of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) with regard to the comprehension of both the function of text production in hermits' tales and the transformation of enforced isolation into voluntary reclusion. In Dowdell's view, the hermit's tale is "a highly formulaic genre" (130), in which the writing process itself is constitutive as well as often thematic. Thereby it links the reclusion of the hermit with his or her social relevance, with the "claim to exemplarity" (136). Robinson and many of his American successors consider themselves exemplary for others, a status that is tied to the fact that they lay their liminal reflections down in writing (138). Esperanza also sees herself as a model for her equally oppressed friends, who prove largely incapable, however, of emulating her method of publicizing dissent, namely, of writing themselves out of patriarchy and into a house of their own.

In *The House on Mango Street* Esperanza is marginalized but also temporarily marginalizes herself in order to adopt a distanced position of fundamental criticism with regard to the basic coordinates of the *barrio* community she lives in. If one somewhat inappropriately considers Esperanza's friends from the neighborhood Fridays, she can pass as what Elizabeth Cady Stanton in "The Solitude of Self" (1892) suggests all women are, "an imaginary Robinson Crusoe, with her woman Friday on a solitary island" (2). Like the creative writing of Cisneros herself, Esperanza's cure is a writing cure in the sense that her writing about her situation may render her independent in a house of her own. Like many hermits before her, Esperanza also manages to reinterpret enforced hermitism as intentional self-distancing, "the transformation of his or her forced exile into voluntary retirement" (Dowdell 135). Fulfilling this pattern, Esperanza turns outer-directed patriarchal imprisonment into a precondition for self-propelled emancipatory reflection, as some of the vignettes in *The House on Mango Street* demonstrate.

### 3.2 The Retreat into the Imagination

Some vignettes anticipate the house of her own that Esperanza dreams of and imagines Sally to dream of, too. These vignettes provide images which point in the direction of independent self-definition but do not share the concreteness of the house metaphor. The very haziness of these images indicates a desire which is unformed as yet. Friendless and isolated, Esperanza feels homeless at home in

“Boys & Girls” and sees herself as “a red balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor” (9). The balloon tied to an anchor may represent her desire for a different home but also the fear of drifting away without direction once one lets loose. This image adequately signals the ambivalence of being confined to the unsatisfactory status quo of Mango Street and the grounding this provides for an all-too formless and hazy desire for change. Reminiscent of Donald Barthelme’s story “The Balloon” (1968), Esperanza’s identification with a red balloon is a bid for reorientation. Like wishes, the balloon is both flexible and fragile. It may soar but also sag. In any case it is a counter-image to the fixity and stagnation represented by the linoleum roses Esperanza’s friend Sally stares at, locked as she is in her premature marriage.

As in the independent home Esperanza imagines in “Sally” “all the sky” (83) would come in through the open windows, in “Darius & the Clouds” the sky also represents the ultimate counter-world to the restrictive and sad realities of Mango Street (33). There may be a childlike arbitrariness and playfulness about the desire to overstep the boundaries of what is real. Nevertheless, both the red balloon and Darius’s fascination with the clouds are powerful signals of a dynamics of change which may liberate the involuntary recluses of Mango Street and cut to pieces the linoleum and its rose pattern.

The vignette “Four Skinny Trees” provides yet another counter-image to “Linoleum Roses.” While Sally watches a simulacral nature in the floor pattern of her marital abode, Esperanza regards the real trees outside her window as doubles. When she, too, feels as a “tiny thing against so many bricks” (75), Esperanza turns to the trees, whose striving for a more beneficial environment she shares (Nagel 118–19; Veauthier 96–97). While Esperanza’s loneliness and isolation are a passing mood in her room at night, Sally and her sadly sterile environment of linoleum roses demonstrate that it can become a permanent state, if one does not continue the fight. If linoleum is largely made from dead trees, the skinny but vital trees outside remind Esperanza of this fighting spirit: “Four who reach and do not forget to reach” (Cisneros 75). The four skinny trees provide Esperanza with a mirror image, an ecological objective correlative of her own position between restriction and transgression. As the trees are hemmed in and rendered skinny by urban traffic, Esperanza falls short of her potential on account of moral and social strictures. Like the skinny trees, Esperanza is resilient and determined to reach out for change and transformation. The balloon in “Boys & Girls,” the clouds and sky in “Darius & the Clouds,” and the four skinny trees are indistinct images of, and projection screens for, alternative visions of freedom and independence. Juggling these images in the enclave of her own imagination, Esperanza begins an initiation process as opaque as the significance of balloon, sky, clouds, and trees.



### 3.3 The Retreat into a Heterotopia

This spirit of change finds its most concrete manifestation in “The Monkey Garden.” This garden turns into a playground when it ceases to be a monkey garden. The adolescents from Mango Street take the garden over from an aggressive monkey, after the monkey moved to Kentucky and “took his people with him” (94). Even before Esperanza and her friends dare appropriate it, the garden is not just part of the neighborhood. It is an exterritorial realm, an uncivilized jungle, dominated by the monkey’s “wild screaming at night, and the twangy yakkety-yak of the people who owned him” (94). For Esperanza, the monkey garden allows for a reclusive detachment from the moral values that dominate her life, which enables novel ways of both reorientation and self-organization. In “Of Other Spaces” (1986), Michel Foucault singles out the garden as “the smallest parcel of the world and then ... the totality of the world ... a sort of happy, universalizing heterotopia since the beginnings of antiquity” (26). Esperanza’s visits to the monkey garden feature elements of both the separation from one’s group and the ambiguous experimentalism of the liminal period Victor Turner recognizes in very different contexts (Turner 94; Achilles and Bergmann).

In complex ways the monkey garden turns into a crisis heterotopia that mediates between tradition and rebellion, nature and civilization. It is a mixture of lush jungle and sewage disposal site:

This was a garden, a wonderful thing to look at in the spring. But bit by bit, after the monkey left, the garden began to take over itself. Flowers stopped obeying the little bricks that kept them from growing beyond their paths. Weeds mixed in. Dead cars appeared overnight like mushrooms. First one and then another and then a pale blue pickup with the front windshield missing. Before you knew it, the monkey garden became filled with sleepy cars. (Cisneros 95)

The pubescent children of Mango Street do not distinguish between, on the one hand, natural phenomena such as mushrooms or the aggressive monkey that disappeared and, on the other, civilizational phenomena such as the dilapidated cars. They do not see the monkey garden as a car cemetery or dumping ground, for example. For them, the natural and the civilizational sphere inextricably melt into each other. Their imagination is stimulated by, and feeds on, this wondrous terrain which seems to invalidate accepted norms. The adolescent acceptance of heterogeneity as natural converges with advanced ecological concepts such as Emma Marris’s rambunctious garden: “The rambunctious garden is everywhere. Conservation can happen in parks, on farms, in the strips of land attached to rest stops and fast-food joints, in your backyard, on your roof, even in city traffic circles” (2). Much earlier, the naturalist Leonard Dubkin explored the rambunctious

gardens of Chicago, especially in his last book, *My Secret Places: One Man's Love Affair with Nature in the City* (1972).<sup>5</sup>

The children turn the garden into a heterotopic zone which remains untouched and uninfluenced by their repressive parents. As Rip Van Winkle flees from his family to the Catskill Mountains, the children flee to their magic monkey garden. One of the children, Eddie Vargas, is almost forgotten by the other children when he falls asleep underneath a hibiscus tree, "like a Rip Van Winkle" (Cisneros 95). Like Eddie Vargas, all the children want to be forgotten by their parents and appropriate the garden like the monkey before them. In the monkey garden Esperanza and her friends feel immune to the pressures of their domestic environment. They enter a hermitage as it were:

This, I suppose, was the reason why we went there. Far away from where our mothers would find us. We and a few old dogs who lived inside the empty cars. We made a clubhouse once on the back of that old blue pickup. And besides, we liked to jump from the roof of one car to another and pretend they were giant mushrooms. (95–96)

For the children of Mango Street the monkey garden both distances and defamiliarizes pedestrian realities. It is an actual playground but, like the family closets in Chavez's *The Last of the Menu Girls* (17–35), also assumes importance as a magical container of past history both real and imaginary, a storehouse of half-remembered lore: "Somebody started the lie that the monkey garden had been there before anything. We liked to think the garden could hide things for a thousand years. There beneath the roots of soggy flowers were the bones of murdered pirates and dinosaurs, the eye of a unicorn turned to coal" (Cisneros 96). In the adolescent imagination of Esperanza and her friends, the hermit's den of the monkey garden fuses early stages of history and myth with the debris of contemporary society. Reality and its temporal dimensions seem miraculously suspended and magically transformed. In a fantasy version of Marris's notion of the rambunctious garden, which allows us "to see the sublime in our own backyards, if we try" (3), cars may become giant mushrooms, pirates' corpses may leave their graves, eyes of unicorns may stare from the underbrush. For the adolescent girls around Esperanza, such fairy-tale suspension of reality and its rules holds the equally magical promise of future transformations of Cinderellas into princesses, frogs into princes. The irresistible charm of the monkey garden derives from its Edenic suggestiveness. However, Esperanza and her friend Sally have different dreams, different ideas about the transformability of frogs into princes and, consequently, about what paradise looks like. While Esperanza wants to remain in the magical fairy tale-world of childhood, although she "may be getting too old to play the games" (96), Sally does not play "with the kids" (96) anymore, as she is afraid of soiling her

stockings in the monkey garden. She plays and jokes with the boys in eroticized ways Esperanza disapproves of (96). At a fair in “Red Clowns,” the conflict between Esperanza and Sally in “Monkey Garden” repeats itself: while Sally is interested in erotic adventures with boys, Esperanza feels assaulted and is violated. In “Sally,” Esperanza in vain suggests to Sally to go down her own road of setting up an independent household first (Bolaki 124–25; Eysturoy 99–101; Madsen 114–15, 116–17; Nagel 121–22; Saldívar-Hull 101; Veauthier 92–93, 146–50).

Alienated, not only from the grown-up world but also from her peers and her best friend, Esperanza flees to the other end of the garden: “And then I don’t know why but I had to run away. I had to hide myself at the other end of the garden, in the jungle part, under a tree that wouldn’t mind if I lay down and cried a long time” (97). There, in total isolation and reclusion, she believes she can maintain a quasi-Emersonian spiritual exchange with nature that will give her strength in her battle against male molestation and the world at large. Like Sylvia in Sarah Orne Jewett’s “A White Heron” (1886), Esperanza rejects the advances of young hunters and chooses the regressive path, clinging to childhood and to nature. She even wants to die and thereby to melt into nature, to become a part of it: “I wanted to be dead, to turn into the rain, my eyes melt into the ground like two black snails. I wished and wished. I closed my eyes and willed it, but when I got up my dress was green and I had a headache” (97–98; see also Bergmann, “Stories”).

As the white heron may not return Sylvia’s sympathies in Jewett’s late nineteenth-century story, the monkey garden declines Esperanza’s attempt to become part of it. Esperanza has to learn that there is no immediate leap into a less oppressive otherness, that identification with the garden cannot literally be a solution: “And the garden that had been such a good place to play didn’t seem mine either” (98), she observes. The jungle part of the garden as natural habitat is perhaps rather the domain of the monkey that, nevertheless, left for Kentucky. For Esperanza it is a transitional and liminal space, not the solution of her problems. But Esperanza’s utter isolation from adolescents and adults alike, the total reclusion which the garden affords her for a moment of crisis severe enough to lead to her wish of self-extinction, may have been the trigger for the search of more viable forms of identity.

The utter solitude resulting from the insight that “not even the monkey garden would have me” (96) may have shocked Esperanza into the less immature and more realistic search for a new home of her own. The experience that she cannot give herself up to nature in isolation may be the beginning of Esperanza’s resolution to fight *machismo* and male oppression openly and relentlessly. In “Beautiful & Cruel” she decides to rebel against what she perceives as universal oppression by men: “I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks

on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain ... I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate" (88–89).

#### 4. The Dialectics of Solitude in *The House on Mango Street*

In the world of *The House on Mango Street*, reclusiveness and hermitism can be both the result of *machismo* or, transformed into a willed stance, the precondition for the battle against it. The transitional images of balloon, clouds, sky, and skinny trees may mentally pave the way for Esperanza's performative interaction with the monkey garden. This may in turn either trigger or support and strengthen her search for a home of her own.

#### Notes

1. See also Eysturoy 85–88; Madsen 39; Nagel 107, 112, 115, 126; and Veauthier 88–94. For an extensive research report on *The House on Mango Street*, see Veauthier 17–58.
2. Cisneros xvi–xvii. On the historical and cultural background of Cisneros's fiction, see Jacobs 111; Madsen 6–13, 25–29, 34; and Saldívar-Hull 89.
3. On Cisneros's own intercultural biography, see Madsen 105–06, and Nagel 104–05.
4. See Deleuze. On Chicana feminism as a reaction to repressive family structures, see Madsen 10, 25–29.
5. I am grateful to Scott Slovic for informing me on this forgotten explorer of ecotopia. See also Bryson. For a history of the relationship between gardens and hermitism, see Campbell.

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**VI Solitude from the Twentieth to the  
Twenty-First Century: Space,  
Identity, and Pathology**





Clare Hayes-Brady

# “It’s What We Have in Common, This Aloneness”: Solitude, Communality, and the Self in the Writing of David Foster Wallace

**Abstract:** This paper positions Wallace’s persistent interest in connection and solitude at the heart of his project for contemporary literature. By looking at the solitude of Wallace’s characters, instead of their struggle for connection, it explores Wallace’s ideas about moral and mental wholeness and the ethics of disconnection.

## 1. “It’s What We Have in Common”

Talking about the alienation of the teenaged students at Enfield Tennis Academy, the hero of David Foster Wallace’s massive, era-defining *Infinite Jest* (1996), Hal notes “it’s what we have in common, this aloneness” (112). Taking that as a starting point to explore the many forms of solitude Wallace explored in his work, this essay examines his abiding interest in disconnection, alienation, and solitude, arguing that for him, solitude in the modern world is necessarily a common condition, and that the meaningful witnessing of one’s isolation offers a means to transcend it. In offering this exploration, the essay begins by outlining Wallace’s famous concern with solipsism and how it is made manifest at every stage of his career in a range of ways. Distinguishing solipsism from simple solitude, I highlight the significance of topographical symbols of solitude – deserts, hermit figures, liminal spaces, and so on – that punctuate Wallace’s writing and discuss the ways in which Wallace works to incorporate such symbols into landscapes that are largely urban or suburban, and always overcrowded. Finally, I argue that Wallace constructs a set of conditions under which isolation – either physical or emotional – is necessary for self-awareness, and that this solitude must, ironically, be witnessed. I examine the concept of unconscious communities, or arrangements of communality, as I suggest it may be useful to call them, as they operate in Wallace’s fiction, especially in *Infinite Jest*, looking at the embedded I/we dynamic of Alcoholics Anonymous, the drive towards isolation and solipsism in drug addicts, and the constant desire for communication and connection that drive all of Wallace’s characters, concluding that the connection that his characters seek is necessarily associated with and emergent from a sense of the crucial importance of solitude.

## 2. “No Conclusion Could Be More Horrible”: Wallace and Solipsism

Easily the most-canvassed of all the concerns of his career is Wallace's interest in the notion of solipsism, which he regarded as the worst of all possible worlds. Solipsism, the illusion of being the only mind in the universe, the unconscious generative impulse of everything you encounter or imagine, is depicted time and again as the loneliest of conditions. The antithesis of meaningful communication for Wallace is not miscommunication or even silence, but the short circuit of solipsistic communication, the condition of being permanently and irrevocably alone in “tiny skull-sized kingdoms” (*This Is Water* 117). Solipsism, closely associated with but distinct from narcissism, is the ultimate horror for Wallace and his characters, bringing with it the impossibility of meaningful connection or communication in a period of what he once referred to as “Total Noise” (“Deciderization 2007” 301).

One of the main ways in which Wallace investigated solipsism and narcissism was through the recurrent imagery of infancy, which he used to literalize the complex development of subjectivity. Babies and images of infancy are everywhere in Wallace's work, from the feral infant of *Infinite Jest* to the wailing child of “Incarnations of Burned Children” (2004). Stonecipheco, the huge company at the center of *The Broom of the System* (1987), makes its money – and creates havoc – through baby food. *Infinite Jest*'s Hal refers to himself on one occasion as “an infantophile” (16). At a broader cultural level, infantilizing images such as the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment and the Inner Infant Recovery Meeting (795–808) permeate the novelistic consciousness of *Infinite Jest*. Infancy in Wallace's work is perverse and unhomey, not the blissful, comfort-filled haven that narcissistic theory would suggest it to be. Specifically, it highlights the fear and horror of being unable to communicate one's needs coherently, and have those needs met. Mary Holland points to Wallace's early essay “A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again” (1996) as one of the founding texts of “the peculiarly postmodern angst of late twentieth century American culture” (63), arguing that the very purpose and stated aim of the cruise, namely “its obsessive desire to relieve the passenger of all decisions and duties,” promises to reduce us to “the bliss of the infant's narcissistic existence” (63–64).<sup>1</sup> This promise, made on the cruise ship as a promise of pleasure and seduction, is rendered horrifying in Wallace's deconstruction of it, and the infantilizing nature of the contemporary need for comfort recurs again and again through his writing. While the “infantilizing removal of responsibility for the self” (Holland 64) is evocative of *Infinite Jest*'s “Entertainment” (90), and the fear of society choosing death by pleasure, the same motif of infantilism ties in to the suspension of both ability and desire to communicate. In this sense, the infant

represents precisely the kind of isolation Wallace fears; not solitary, but rather trapped, howling, and incoherent, among a crowd, an almost urban gothic form of conspicuous invisibility more readily associated with writers like Edgar Allan Poe.

### 3. “We Are Ourselves Other”: Alterity and the Narrative Self

While the enforced isolation of the infant consciousness presents one kind of horror – the horror of the solipsistic subject – it is important to realize that Wallace’s imagined relief from this state also relied heavily on the separateness of the subject. With regard to the loneliness of the narcissistic or solipsistic self, Thomas Docherty explores a paradox that arises from Paul Ricoeur’s theory of dual identity in his *Alterities: Criticism, History, Representation* (1996), wherein to identify in the other a means by which to establish a coherent self – as Ricoeur’s theory would suggest is necessary – means to posit the other as existing only to satisfy that need: “it is as if they exist only for the present moment in which the subject identifies itself” (7). In other words, identifying the other as necessary to the self leads, paradoxically, to a form of solipsism: the belief that the other is in fact a projection of the self. Docherty evades the necessary conclusion of solipsism by positing the idea of alterity to supplant that of otherness. Alterity, by contrast with simple otherness, implies the inaccessible self that inheres within another, thereby protecting some element of the other from exploitation in reference to the self. Ricoeur’s theory of dual identity enriches the Wittgensteinian identity games that Wallace enacts in *The Broom of the System*. The definition of self by other is repeatedly addressed at a number of stages in the text, explicitly and comically by the Spaniards in their family drama, and at a more complex level during the Amherst conversation with LaVache. Lenore, the novel’s protagonist, according to her brother LaVache, has “decided that [she is] not real” (248), or that she is “really real only insofar as [she is] told” (249), charges which are borne out by any number of other passages in the text, most obviously Lenore’s “rap sessions” (135) with Dr. Jay, and indeed by Wallace’s own admission in the interview with McCaffery (142). On the basis of the two drawings, LaVache proposes that Lenore view the whole mysterious situation as part of a sinister game being played by Lenore Sr. Its outcome, he posits, is that Lenore Jr., by trying to consider her own existence, renders herself irrevocably other, and so, if we take the original premise – that “all Lenore is is her act of thought” (247) – to be the case, Lenore is nonsense, and as such cannot possibly exist. In a sense, he is treating Lenore’s search, and indeed life, as one of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s antinomies; by applying logic to a set of circumstances he arrives at a patently impossible conclusion: that Lenore is both self and other, both Lenore and not-Lenore, which maps directly on to Wittgenstein’s qualification for nonsense

(a proposition being both *p* and not-*p*). As we have said, this being the case leads directly to her non-existence, which is made ridiculous by the manifest fact of her (fictional) existence, in an absurdist reironizing of existential instability. In view of the above, the antinomies in this scene function as signposts to the unraveling of logical meaning, rather than as clues to the disappearance of the senescent philosopher Lenore Senior.

The self/other element of the paradox in LaVache's reasoning evolves the question to include a dynamic interdependence of isolation and connection that make up a central element of Wallace's philosophy of communication, tying it to the philosophy of Ricoeur. LaVache's argument that "we are ourselves Other" (248) is here pointing out the futility and ultimate self-destructiveness of relying too much on interpretation, as we have said, and if we apply Ricoeur's theory of identity to Lenore's quandary of confused selfhood, she emerges as lacking 'ipseity' in her character. In other words, her reliance on the stories of others is too strong, and she has not yet created a story for herself. Her confusion, in this reading, is perfectly natural: by means of the *idem*-identity we can use the stories and speech-acts of others to relate to our own experiences and further solidify our *ipse*-identity. However, the stories of others cannot be used to create an *ipse*-identity, and as such, over-reliance on external narratives renders a character one-sided and dysfunctional. Lenore, then, is in danger of over-identification, which Wallace repeatedly involved in his short fiction, and her progress through the narrative charts her movement beyond that essentially linguistic entrapment in solipsistic recursion.

In *Oneself as Another (Soi-même Comme un Autre, 1990)*, Ricoeur views the inevitable tension between *idem* and *ipse* as partially resolved by the use of narrative. The *idem* is the part of our identity that is given – cultural history, family, and so on – and so it appropriates and is mediated by other people's stories. The *ipse*, on the other hand, is unique to the individual, spontaneous, creative, and self-creating. It writes its own story and turns to the narratives of others for reference. We use narrative to create an ordered "human time" out of the inchoate, uncontrollable cosmic time, as well as to impose some commonality on "felt time" (i.e. the personal experience of the passage of time, which is by no means linear)<sup>2</sup> since "human lives become more intelligible when they are interpreted in the light of the stories that people tell about them" (188). Ricoeur goes on to argue that "self-knowledge is an interpretation; self-interpretation, in its turn, finds in narrative ... a privileged mediation" (188). What necessitates narrative identity, in his philosophy, is the inevitable discord between the discontinuity of the changing person over time and the permanent selfhood that means the child and the man are the same person in some way. This was a theory introduced in Immanuel Kant's

*Critique of Pure Reason* (*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 1781), but because it was not specific to identity, the inevitable tension of the permanent and the mutable self was not really addressed. For Ricoeur, this tension, and the tension of *idem* and *ipse*, necessitate the mediating influence of narrative, public and private.

Ricoeur is less forthcoming on the temporal experience of the *ipse*. In *The Course of Recognition* (*Parcours de la reconnaissance*, 2004), he refers to our ongoing struggle for mutual recognition, which is “a struggle against misrecognition of others at the same time that it is a struggle for the recognition of oneself by others” (258), in language that strikingly evokes some of the central ideas of Stanley Cavell’s philosophy. While this hints at an internal consciousness of the necessity of narrative to “the dialectic of order and disorder,” demonstrating an awareness of the way our identities engender “second-order stories, which are themselves intersections between stories” (Kearney 6), it remains focused on the public, interpersonal nature of these intersecting narratives. Importantly, however, another, altogether more private form of story-telling exists and is at least as important, that of the lonely person’s imaginative self-narrative. The ‘if . . . then’ paradigm associated with linear temporal experience is crucial to human behavior, which is, at survival level, based on a fairly rational analysis of necessity, cause, and consequence. Because anything above this survival level thought process involves reflection, memory, and an abstract awareness of the disjunction between inner and outer time, a discord arises. Narratives allow us to cobble together the inchoate episodes of our lives and fix them into a temporal span, lending them a basic, if illusory harmony. Wallace challenges this linear temporal inclination in the short story “Good Old Neon” from *Oblivion* (2004), in which the deceased narrator explains: “Words and chronological time create all these total misunderstandings of what’s really going on at the most basic level” (151). In a Ricoeurian paradigm, then, narratives are devised to impose a comprehensible order on otherwise troublingly scattershot lives. Story becomes the anchor of identity, and understanding of ourselves and those around us as characters stems from this basis. More importantly, by telling stories, we anchor ourselves in groups of others, and are witnessed by them. It is not sufficient to say that we tell each other stories in order to present ourselves. We tell ourselves stories in order to locate or delineate ourselves, without which process the *idem* gets into trouble because we cannot differentiate ourselves from others. In this way the two theories mentioned earlier, the conflicted self and the mediating function of narrative, work to strengthen and enrich one another by way of entry into an involuntary linguistic network.

Building on this theoretical construct, at which Wallace arrived very early in his career, he developed a working concept of connection that revolved around love

and separateness. In the early short story “Lyndon” from the early collection *Girl With Curious Hair* (1989), distance is described as a measure of love: love entails distance because love is always only of the other. In this vein, Mrs. Johnson says that she and her husband “do not *love* each other anymore. Because we ceased long ago to be enough *apart* for a ‘love’ to span any distance” (115). Paradoxically, then, we cannot love without the isolation that it is fiction’s job to rupture, because love – or connection – can only be between and never within. This concept was comically literalized in *The Broom of the System* by Norman Bombardini, and Wallace referred to it in relation to his admiration of Wittgenstein: what made Wittgenstein “a real artist [was] that he realized that no conclusion could be more horrible than solipsism” (McCaffery 143). That is to say, in the absence of the possibility of connection, isolation offers the ultimate horror. The absence of an other – solipsism – entails the loss of the self. In other words, the coherence of the self as a teleological imperative is in fact completely self-defeating, and can only be disrupted by love of or engagement with an other. The separateness of the author and the reader, and of the characters seeking connection, is necessary and absolute. It is in witnessing the distinct selfhood of another – in acknowledging, as Docherty offers, the alterity of the other, the unreachably foreign locus of the not-I self – that we might break the cycle of isolation and alienation amid crowds that characterize Wallace’s vision of the contemporary human condition.

#### 4. Hermits, Hauntings, and the Blasted Heath

Dealing as it does with the alienation of the contemporary self in a largely urban, always populous context, it is interesting to note the numerous classic symbols of isolation that permeate Wallace’s writing. The first novel, *The Broom of the System*, includes a kind of corporate non-space in which contemplation of the self is encouraged, a man-made black-sand desert called the Great Ohio Desert, or G.O.D. The novel also features a hermit figure in Lenore’s brother John (an obvious reference to John the Baptist), who wanders the desert, claims to eat locusts, and maintains an ascetic/frightening thinness throughout the text. Lenore’s great-grandmother, also named Lenore, disappears into a network of tunnels under the city, wholly isolated from the novel and all its characters. Later, in *Infinite Jest*, the United States and Canada have amalgamated to form the Organization of North American Nations, a name most significant for the acronym O.N.A.N., with its implications of excessive self-pleasuring, wasted potential, and isolation; the society is characterized not by overt destruction, but rather by excess. However, it is in this very excess that Wallace demonstrates the greatest destructiveness, most clearly figured in the substance abuse that permeates the novel. The wasted fecundity

implicit in the name O.N.A.N. is also mirrored in the large portions of the north-eastern United States and southern Canada that form an immense and dangerously fertile landfill, and the isolation that comes with the solitary nature of masturbation is reflected throughout the novel, but most particularly by reference to the preference of one of the novel's many addicts, Erdedy, for masturbation (solitude) over sex (companionship) when he is taking drugs (21). The novel's action is centered around a number of interconnected themes, including film (which we typically watch collectively, but experience in "primordial" darkness and seeming solitude, as Laura Mulvey has argued, 833), drug use, and tennis. Specifically, the Enfield Tennis Academy is a training ground for young athletes who live and work together, but whose goal is the decisively solitary pursuit of competitive tennis. Lyle, the sweat guru of the Enfield Tennis Academy, functions as a hermit or wise man figure, but lives in suburban Boston, in a boarding school – surely the least isolated place imaginable. In this sense, Wallace invokes the kind of fashionable hermit-in-the-garden figures of earlier American and European imaginations; Lyle is a hermit, yes, but he and his wisdom are also accessible, and so not truly solitary. Once again, in *Infinite Jest*, we encounter a desert space outside of Phoenix, explicitly invoking Wittgenstein's antinomies, and the space in which the majority of the novel's serious philosophy is expounded. The flatlands of Illinois are critical to the early story "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" (1989) and throughout *The Pale King* (2011), particularly in its evocative, still opening passage, and the motif of movement unites these and numerous other works in Wallace's oeuvre.

Liminal spaces, then, are fundamental to Wallace's creation of the tension between the alienated individual and the crowded, noisy reality of contemporary living. As well as these landscapes, images of infancy, and the comic specter of a man of infinite size, Wallace used drugs specifically and addiction in general as a way of dramatizing cataclysmic alienation and the drive to connect. *Infinite Jest*, in particular, has at its center the alienated self. Much of the novel's action evolves around the use of and recovery from drugs. The incapacity to communicate is exacerbated and highlighted by a shared drive towards isolation in the novel's drug users. Erdedy is waiting for "the woman who said she'd come" (17), but later it becomes clear that one of the common features of his drug binges is solitude (his habitual selection of masturbation over sexual intercourse during these episodes, 21). Hal is "as attached to the secrecy as he is to getting high" (49), and later reveals his "strong distaste about smoking dope with/in front of all these others" (329). Pemulis's connection with drugs is, as a dealer, altogether more sociable, yet the formality of his language – requiring his customers to ask him to "please commit a crime" (156) – imposes an immediate and conscious distance between

Pemulis and his interlocutors. The dialogue of drug users and addicts throughout the novel uses much of the same terminology, resulting in abject failures of communication because the speakers are so self-involved that they do not recognize alterity or other subjectivity. The Alcoholics Anonymous system in *Infinite Jest* is conceptually reflective of Wallace's conceptions of alienation and connection. It is also narratively and structurally center to the novel,<sup>3</sup> functioning narratively as a synecdoche of the addictive propensities of the novel's wider milieu, and structurally as another symbol of the poisonously recursive language of the postmodern apocalypse. The AA structure is grounded in collectivity and the inescapability of shared experience. Reaching "the fork in the road that Boston AA calls your *Bottom*" (347) is the novel's primary impetus towards the desire, or rather the need, to give, to connect in some way, even if that way has seemed and continues to seem insipid or inane. Again, it is the need to connect and not the success in connection that is represented as the first step towards redemption. This isolation-progression of an individual at the heart of a group is consistent with Wallace's vision of contemporary society, "taking it as axiomatic that the present is grotesquely materialistic," but recognizing "that we as human beings still have the capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections" (McCaffery 132). It is also, importantly, consistent with Wallace's approach to late postmodern literature as a complexly cyclical enterprise that resists progress as illusory, and with his vision for the future. Read in these terms, the end of the novel – particularly Don Gately's efforts to resist medication – is a distinctly ambiguous analogy for the plight of late postmodernism as Wallace represented it. In this, *Infinite Jest* again exploits the condition of the "contemporary extreme," in the way it "enact[s] an aesthetic that does not strive for harmony or unity, but, instead, forces the confrontation between irreconcilable differences, most notably the difference between reality and art" (Durand and Mandel 1), a description strikingly resonant with Wallace's larger resistance to closure. Taking the idea of the contemporary extreme as a guiding pattern, a clear connective path is discernible between the structure of the novel, the process and pattern of addiction and recovery, and the Entertainment at its core, still, always, resisting the sense of an ending and cleaving to ideas of beginning and process.

## 5. See and Be Seen: The Importance of Witnessing

The annularity of the AA system – a circle with no center, anti-hierarchical, and focused on process over achievement – echoes the annularity of much of the architecture of *Infinite Jest*, from the idea of annular fusion to the circular geography of much of the action. This connection of the literary topography with the structures of the central locus of action is mirrored in *The Pale King*, with the use of § to



designate chapters. In *Infinite Jest*, the AA structure could also be read as evoking the annularity of late postmodernist fiction, in its constant self-referentiality and complex internal order: as Ilkka Arminen points out, AA has succeeded without “professionalization of leadership or the emergence of a bureaucracy” (491). While it is true that the structures of AA itself contribute a narrative shape to *Infinite Jest*, there are also parallels between the addiction spiral and the spiral system of postmodern literature. The point of Arminen’s article is that part of the therapeutic work of AA stems not just from speaking about the addiction experience, but from the reciprocal work of relating the individual’s story to those of other addicts. “[M]embers, again and again, invoke and mutually display their newly found identities” and while the focus is largely personal, “they also repeatedly refer to co-contributors’ turns of talk in order to make their own experiences recognizable to, understandable to, and ‘shareable with’ the recipients” (492). The necessity not just of speech, but of active participation that is implicit in the idea of ‘co-contributor references’ mirrors once again the conception of communication and responsive witnessing expressed throughout Wallace’s work (491).

Importantly, too, the reciprocal nature of the “sharing” in AA encodes the sharer’s identity within a specific set of symbols. The obligatory phrase uttered by each contributor at the opening of their narrative – ‘My name is X and I am an alcoholic’ – fixes the speaker’s identity as part of a group, in the kind of community structure Andrew Warren identifies when discussing jargon. Particularly in the context of a narrative of addiction, the AA system works in concert with Wallace’s broader project of identity. That is to say, the identifying phrase both separates one (I) as an individual and integrates one as part of a network, functioning as a narrative analogue of Ricoeur’s *idem/ipse* balance. This performance of ritual speech, especially the articulation of the name, guards against the danger implicit in addiction throughout *Infinite Jest*, which is the loss of the self, a threat that is embodied in the nameless addicts – yrstruly, C., even Don, who was known as Bimmy – who are known only by nicknames within the immediate group of addicts, like the anonymized characters whose identities are subsumed into their primary characteristics. Indeed, the vanishing of the addicted self is a common theme of narratives of addiction and alcoholism. Alienation, anonymity, and community are explored through the AA sections of *Infinite Jest*, which positions its adherents in a metacommunicative system without the need for identification. Alcoholics Anonymous offers an iteration of direct narrative interaction on a micro level, but the participants are members of a larger system, too, the commun(al)ity that is the unconscious community of communal experience. One subchapter of the novel contains unattributed snatches of dialogue from Ennet House residents in which

they discuss various aspects of their illness and recovery. The anonymity of these passages – a key attraction of the AA system for the founder of the Ennet House program – means that the dialogue is abstracted from its speakers, so that the passage becomes almost a snapshot of the non-specific concerns of the inmates of the halfway house, reducing the identity of the addict to a series of isolated clichés. This, of course, is mirrored in the traditional AA procedure, which encourages anonymity both in its insistence on first names only and in its removal of individual autonomy, wherein the addict surrenders to a higher power to give them sufficient strength to overcome the addiction that has already suppressed their autonomy. The Ricoeurian balance of *idem* and *ipse* is central to the healing process offered by Alcoholics Anonymous, where it appears in the guise of shared experience therapy; again, the necessity of a responsive witness, encoded in the AA structure, reflects Wallace's conception of the asynchronously reciprocal dynamic between author and reader. Structurally speaking, AA permeates the narrative beyond its narrative relevance, falling in with the theme of annularity so central to the novel as a whole.

The central AA motto 'one day at a time' "a long time ago anticipated the 'post-modern wisdom' that the identity is never fixed" (Arminen 492), which is central to Wallace's work and late postmodernism generally. The working of AA is interrogated by Gately, who, as part of his job as a resident staffer, observes and encourages new inmates, who are convinced that "this slapdash anarchic system of low-rent gatherings and corny slogans and saccharin grins and hideous coffee is so lame you just *know* there's no way it could ever possibly work except for the utterest morons" (Wallace, *Infinite* 350). Gately's perspective is from the step after this one, where he has come through the cynicism of the disappointed addict and has spent his time praying to "a God you believe only morons believe in" (350) and has reached the point at which the clichés become meaningful and true.<sup>4</sup> The adherence to this greater system – even cynical adherence – marks those in AA as connected, even if they are unacquainted, members of the commun(al)ity I mentioned earlier.

AA, of course, is not the only instance of this kind of unconscious community; we might think also of sufferers of depression, as depicted in "The Depressed Person" (1999), of the many alumni of McDonald's advertisements, seen in "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," or of parents, tennis players, IRS agents, misogynists, wanderers in a corporate desert, all of whom appear in one guise or another throughout Wallace's writing. The importance to the self of being witnessed is also explored in a less edifying way by the recognition of the self as object of observation, which I have discussed at greater length elsewhere. For example, in *The Pale King*, awareness of the physical self is often presented as a response

to the gaze of some powerfully subjective other, whose mere observation of the self traumatically decenters it. Cusk's sweating arrives with puberty, when, as observed in a footnote, "psychodynamically, he was, as a subject, coming to a late and therefore traumatic understanding of himself as also an object" (92, n. 1). Cusk's sweating problem is related to his awareness of his self, not just as a self but as an other, echoing LaVache's estimation of Lenore's self-image. It becomes particularly pronounced when he is aware or afraid of the gaze of other subjects: relinquishing his subjectivity and becoming an object has made him lose control of his body. Here, then, the masculine subject is problematized by the awareness of the possibility that it may not only be a subject. This violent decentering is contrasted by both the dreamy self-othering of the boy in "Forever Overhead" (1999) and by the story of Toni Ware in *The Pale King*. The decentered self, of course, is not a specifically masculine experience, though it is here literalized in the masculine body; rather, it is one of the central characteristics of the postmodern, and one of Wallace's central concerns with respect to solipsism and living an authentic life. Warren's articulation of narrative modeling as fundamental to Wallace's ethical project is pertinent to a reading of both *Infinite Jest's* use of AA and *The Broom of the System's* reliance on narrative self-definition, offering membership of a narrative commun(al)ity as an anodyne against alienation; by extension, we as readers – "putting in our fair share of the linguistic work" (McCaffery 138) – become part of a similar commun(al)ity. In the end, solitude and solipsism function, for Wallace, as two sides of the same problem of isolation. Solitude is reparable, redeemable – frightening, perhaps, but not fatal – while solipsism rings the death-knell of self-hood. In either case, it is perhaps mildly ironic that separateness is the key. Throughout his work, teeming, deafening, lonely, Wallace offered the condition of the witnessed self in isolation as the solution to solitude.

## Notes

1. The story was originally published as "On the (nearly lethal) comforts of a luxury cruise" in *Harpers Magazine* (January 1996) and republished as the title essay of the collection *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (1997).
2. An important point here is that Ricoeur was writing in French, in which the words for 'story' and 'history' are the same, 'histoire'.
3. A number of critics have traced the structural significance of AA in *Infinite Jest*, including Burn and Carlisle in their companion volumes. While AA is narratively significant to swathes of the plot of *Infinite Jest*, its more pervasive influence is largely architectural.

4. The AA system as it is presented here contains an echo of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in the protagonist's injunction to his mother to "assume a virtue if you have it not . . . refrain tonight/and that shall lend a kind of easiness/to the next abstinence" (349), advice mirrored in AA's fake-it-till-you-make-it doctrine.

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Rüdiger Heinze

## Alone in the Crowd: Urban Recluses in US-American Film

**Abstract:** Filmic representations of urban solitude often depict it negatively; the urban recluse is a kind of threat to his or her environment. The reason lies in the particular constitution of urban solitude: because human contact is theoretically possible at all times and spatial distance minimal, the urban recluse is in a position of perpetual liminality.

### 1. Right Next Door: The Recluses Among Us

The bulk of studies of solitude, hermitism, and reclusion focuses on the withdrawal of a person to an isolated place like a hut in the forest, a cave in the desert, or some other place in the wilderness far away from urban hustle. To be sure, most critics acknowledge that solitude does not inevitably and exclusively mean significant spatial distance from other people; but most then go on to discuss – abundantly available – narratives of retreat into the natural wild. However, as Ina Bergmann points out in her introduction to this collection, reclusion and hermitism are also possible and indeed frequently practiced in an urban context. In fact, as she elaborates, both ‘natural’ and urban solitude have a long tradition. It is unsurprising, then, that at a closer look, US-American literature and fiction film should be full of urban recluses.

In fact, all of US-American literature is – and has been ever since it made sense to speak of ‘urban’ in an US-American cultural context – full of urban recluses. The short stories of Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, Harold Brodkey, John Cheever, Richard Russo, Joyce Carol Oates, and many more regularly feature urban recluses, not to mention the countless pieces of detective, crime, thriller, or horror fiction. Better-known novels would be Malamud’s *The Tenants* (1971), Bellow’s *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (1970), Oates’ *Zombie* (1995) or, it seems, every other novel by Paul Auster. The list could be extended to include plays by Tony Kushner, Suzan-Lori Parks, or Neil LaBute; poetry by Jorie Graham, Louise Glück, or Sharon Olds; and comics such as Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan* (2000) or the *Sandman*-series (1989–1996) by Neil Gaiman.

There are many more examples in US-American film of characters living a more or less secluded life in an urban environment and with a narrative that develops from the intrusion of the ‘outside’ into the mental and/or spatial reclusion of the protagonist. Entire genres more or less centrally feature an urban recluse: many

superheroes keep their ‘private’ identity secret and live in urban reclusion when they are not out to hunt villains; serial killer films and other thriller-staples frequently stage an urban recluse as an unknown threat right next door. If we take into account minor characters, the number of urban recluses in US-American film multiplies.

Interestingly, though, filmic representations of urban solitude frequently tinge this form of reclusion negatively; quite often, the urban hermit is a kind of threat – not necessarily physical – to his or her environment and its particular social/political/moral order, or portrayed as a more or less sociopathic outsider, though not necessarily violent. The key reason for this lies, I argue, in the particular constitution and dynamics of urban solitude, which are significantly different from those of ‘natural’ solitude, even though they share fundamental features. Because human and social contact is theoretically possible at all times and spatial/physical distance minimal, the urban recluse is in a position of perpetual liminality, of presence and absence, much more so than the ‘natural’ recluse, who is not as conspicuously ‘present while absent’ (and vice versa) in a social environment. The effect of this difference between urban and ‘natural’ solitude is compounded by the medial and narrative demands of fiction film and the particular US-American cultural context.

Accordingly, in this essay, I will discuss the representation of urban recluses in recent US-American film. Specifically, I will analyze and categorize their visual representation; the particular kind and degree of withdrawal, especially where and how they live, which kind of society they withdraw from for which reasons, and the degree and quality of interaction with other people, if at all; its ideological investments and repercussions; as well as the narrative, medial, and generic embeddedness of the reclusion. The aim is to identify, contextualize, and categorize recurrent and prevalent types of urban reclusion in US-American film and their cultural historical significance.

## 2. What is the ‘Nature’ of Urban Solitude?

Although there are numerous different definitions of solitude, most of them share a fundamental understanding of solitude as the withdrawal and disengagement from other people for some time that does not, per se, say anything about its spatial realization, physical absence of other people, and emotional and social charge. For example, Philip Koch, in perhaps the most detailed discussion of solitude and related concepts, defines solitude as “a time in which experience is disengaged from other people” (27). Later, he replaces “time” by “state” (43). Frances Ferguson defines solitude as “cultivated as a space for consciousness in which the individual is not answerable to others” (114). Christopher Long and James Averill define



solitude as the “disengagement from the immediate demands of other people” (23), a condition “in which a person is alone and unobserved but not necessarily separated by formidable barriers or great distance from others” (23). Svend Erik Larsen states that solitude is “an emotional state of singularity” (28), “of being absolutely detached, not just isolated from something specific or specifiable, but from everything in terms of space, meaning, value and identity” (27). Consistently, he distinguishes between ontological and emotional solitude. And Robert A. Ferguson asserts that solitude comes with a “different understanding of the self and its use of time and space” (1).

Note that all of these definitions characterize solitude as a mental state of more or less willing disengagement from the world and other people, while none of them necessitate the literal absence of other people (‘being alone’) or spatial distance (‘being isolated’). On the contrary, a “person can experience solitude while in the presence of others” (Long and Averill 23), or “[o]ther people may be physically present, provided that our minds are disengaged from them” (Koch 15). Moreover, as Robert A. Ferguson, Koch, and Bergmann emphasize, solitude does not inevitably go hand in hand with loneliness since it is often a “sought condition” that is experienced as liberating (Ferguson 1; see also Koch 15). Even where it is involuntary, it may be “deliberately constructed” (Koch 18). In other words, all of these definitions on principle allow for urban solitude (even if many of them do not expressly say so), and none of them require a retreat into the wild – what I have been calling ‘natural’ solitude. In fact, in his detailed discussion of solitude, Larsen points to the long tradition (Kierkegaard, Descartes) of being alone in a “densely populated place.” He calls it a “social paradox” that “crowded modern urban life, paradoxically and inevitably, generates solitude as in a desert” (25).

Furthermore, we have to be careful to distinguish solitude from related but incommensurate terms such as isolation, aloneness, privacy, and alienation. Koch defines isolation as a state of “being separated from other people” that is “not easily overcome” (34), but that is not necessarily lonesome. He defines privacy as a state with “no unwanted observers of one’s *rightfully* reserved thoughts, words, activities” (37). Lastly, he points out that the concept of alienation derives from a Marxist critique of the estrangement of people from other people and from society as the result of economic processes (43). It becomes clear that the terms/concepts of isolation, loneliness, aloneness, and privacy, while all potential correlatives of solitude, are not identical to it.

Most importantly for my argument, solitude is never complete (Cahir xiii), but rather dialogic and ambivalent. Apart from this, “the mental experience of solitude is ineluctably as social as any other psychological experience” (Long and Averill 22).

If we understand solitude as the more or less voluntary (mental) disengagement from other people for some time, then the preposition already entails some kind of negotiation and articulation (in the semiotic sense). Solitude requires a “permanent negotiation between need for the other and an opposition to the other” (Larsen 29–30) and is only one side of the oscillation between the “contradictory states of isolation and community” (Cahir xiii). There is, thus, always an ambivalent connection between solitude and the social world (Long and Averill 21). This interplay is a “recurrent subject through all of American letters” (Cahir xiii).

If this is generally true for solitude, it is all the more so for urban solitude. As I have argued above, for the urban recluse, human and social contact is theoretically and easily possible at all times, and the spatial/physical distance from other people is minimal. The urban recluse may also observe his or her surroundings and the social life of other people. Moreover, an urban context is, contrary to a wilderness context, fundamentally ‘social,’ its inherent potential for (desert-like) isolation notwithstanding. For urban reclusion to make sense, these urban spaces must be populated, so deserted cities (e.g. after an apocalypse) are not considered here, because they turn into deserts. In addition, they must be populated by humans, not vampires or zombies or some other such species. In other words, films such as *I Am Legend* (2007) are not included into this consideration. One does not ‘withdraw’ from zombies or vampires, one runs from them, and one does not refuse ‘interaction’ with them, one simply does not want to be eaten.

As a consequence, the urban recluse is – much more conspicuously and knowably so than the natural recluse – simultaneously present and absent, both mentally and physically, and thus in a position of perpetual liminality (as conceptualized by Victor Turner in his landmark study *The Forest of Symbols*, 1967) and potentiality. While I would hence agree with Larsen that solitude is a construction of the respective context, I would disagree that this turns it “into a readable sign we can interpret” (30). On the contrary, I would argue that the urban recluse is a signifier whose signified constantly eludes us, turning it into a sign we may want to (or feel compelled to) read, but cannot as long as liminality is upheld. This raises the interesting question of what the narrative attraction of urban reclusion is, in which there is little or no inherent interpersonal conflict (Roorda xiii), but instead constantly deferred signification and a high degree of ambivalence. This is a crucial issue for narrative fiction film, which, I argue, it deals with in particular and revealing ways.

### 3. Urban Solitude in Fiction Film

The medium-specifics and narrative demands of (conventional) fiction film inevitably shape its representation of urban solitude. As a medium, film typically creates

a three-dimensional fictional visual world, a space into which the audience looks through the frame of the shot as if through a window – at least that is the illusion. As a fictional narrative, film typically portrays transformation, conflict, and more often than not interpersonal relations (even if the ‘persons’ are animals or objects), all of which are usually resolved through some kind of closure. In these respects, it would seem that fiction film is less than ideal for the representation of urban hermits. Their solitude tends to be represented as predominantly spatial, focusing on the visible rather than the mental disengagement. In terms of narrative, most films spend little screen time on the actual solitude rather than on the backstory and the transformation and gradual renouncement of this solitude in the direction of the (return to the) social. Consistently, the liminality and ambivalence of urban solitude are eventually resolved through one of several possible closures. To make the liminality and ambivalence more palatable and ultimately ‘readable,’ films frequently employ genre frames such as the superhero who hides his ‘real’ identity, the serial killer who lurks in the shadows of the big city, the sage whose wisdom needs reclusion and who inspires the coming of age of an intruder, etc.

In other respects, fiction film is actually very well suited for the visual representation of urban solitude, because it is multimedial, and because its form can easily generate disjunction and conjunction at one and the same time. For one, *mise en scène* and cinematography can create a frame which places the urban recluse in immediate proximity and yet stark separation from society, highlighting simultaneous presence and absence. And second, sound, lighting, and editing may convey mental disengagement within even the shortest sequence. Thus, fiction film not only has an assortment of means to stage the liminality and ambivalence or urban solitude in general, but also to stage it in a host of different ways without resolving it. Theoretically, it could do justice to the many facets and aspects of urban solitude without imposing closure.

In effect, however, the majority of films stage the retreat from the social within an urban context as the result of a traumatic experience, as something that is mostly unwholesome, and as a state that should eventually and ideally be overcome. And while there are numerous different films that represent urban solitude in a variety of ways, it seems to me that most of them follow two ‘meta-narratives:’ the urban recluse as threat and the urban recluse as benevolent sage.

In the threat-version, reclusion means that the recluse is uncontrollable, unknowable, hard to discipline, and yet always close, always potentially present. He or she is a threat to society or to a particular part or members of society. The question, of course, is what or who exactly is threatened. This type appears in uncountable horror movies as a psychopath and/or serial killer, most notoriously in *Seven*

(1995), *The Collector* (2009), *Creep* (2004), *Maniac* (2012), and so on, but also as a more positive vigilante figure who threatens and sometimes even actively fights an immoral order/society, for example in *Ghost Dog* (1999), *The Equalizer* (2014), or *The Brave One* (2007). Typically, at the end, either the old order is reestablished or a new, 'better' order installed.

In the sage-version, the recluse is an enlightened genius, a potential mentor, 'unspoiled' by the toils and compromises of social life, a site and source of superior insight and knowledge. The narrative in these films usually has the recluse 'disturbed' by another member of society so that the recluse, at first reticently, interacts again, ultimately to become a productive (usually transformed) member of society, or at least a happier (paradoxically more 'social') recluse. The 'disturber' is also transformed and enlightened. Typical examples are *Smoke* (1995), *The Man Without a Face* (1993), *The Caveman's Valentine* (2001), and *Finding Forrester* (2000).

Notice that the sage can also be a threat to a certain order, and that the psychopath may also be a kind of sage. Because they share their reclusive position and its ontological, epistemological, and phenomenological consequences, they also share its fundamental function and signification upon which the filmic representation rests.

Just how different the filmic representation of urban solitude is from its sibling, the filmic representation of natural solitude, despite their shared foundations, is put into relief when we consider for a moment how natural solitude is usually rendered in fiction films such as *Cast Away* (2000), *Into the Wild* (2007), or *Wild* (2014). Here, a lot of screen time can be spent on the actual solitude, not only because the natural landscape can be exploited for breathtaking – often sublime – wide-angle extreme long shots (visually suggesting liberation, freedom, and voluntary disengagement more easily than the image of a confined space, if that is the aim of the film), but also because nature can become the second protagonist and a source of 'interpersonal' conflict. Just like in films about urban solitude, genre frames often prefigure the narrative of natural solitude films. These narratives, however, are substantially different: the natural hermit is neither a threat nor a sage but usually someone seeking enlightenment and liberation from the constraints of society (thereby occasionally becoming a sage). Where they are stranded, as in *Cast Away*, they typically seek their return to the safe and much more comfortable haven of civilization, even if their re-integration is bumpy. Liminality and ambivalence in these films occur mostly when the natural hermit returns to society, if at all, and they often last for a short time only before being resolved. Thus, while liminality and ambivalence form the core of urban recluse films, they are much less significant in natural recluse films.

#### 4. Urban Solitude in *Finding Forrester*: Recluse as Threat – Recluse as Sage

I have chosen *Finding Forrester* as an example because it contains elements of both the urban recluse as threat and as sage. It is also an almost prototypical example for the filmic staging of urban solitude. The recluse figure in this film is an elderly white writer who has not published any major work for decades, but whose debut novel once made him instantly famous. Among a series of newer tenement buildings on Manhattan Island, he lives on the top floor of an older apartment building, which he never leaves. No one in his – predominantly black – neighborhood knows who he is, but everybody seems scared of the unknown recluse among them. The other protagonist is a young black teenager who, it becomes clear, is not only an extraordinary athlete but also – unknown to everyone except his family – a brilliant student who reads and writes a lot and is awarded a scholarship to a prestigious private school on the basis of his intellectual and physical talents.

Dared by his friends, the boy illicitly breaks into the recluse's apartment one night, is discovered – and scared to death, one might add – by its owner, and forgets his backpack with all his notebooks as he flees the building. Up until this point, the film might very well be a horror movie; the recent *Don't Breathe* (2016) is based on a similar premise. The writer browses through the boy's notebooks, apparently finds his writing worthy, and taunts the boy back to his apartment, where they very slowly begin to build a cranky but obviously warm-hearted friendship. Over the course of the film, the writer teaches the boy to hone his talents, while the boy teaches the writer to go out into the world again. In the end, the writer dies, but not before having left his apartment for good as well as having finished his last book, to which the boy is supposed to write the foreword. This is a very abridged summary. The film contains various subplots and complications. In many ways, though, the film is a fairly conventional and straightforward coming-of-age story, albeit a double one: not only the boy, but the writer, too, experiences a kind of awakening, in which he makes peace with life before dying.

As I have stated above, the film, for the most part, almost prototypically stages the main characteristics and dynamics of urban solitude, both narratively and visually: liminality, ambivalence, and contrast/oscillation of presence and absence, and of disjunction and conjunction. The writer lives in an apartment building among other people in what is obviously a densely populated urban neighborhood. While he never goes out and is never seen, and, consequently, is an unknown entity to his neighbors, he does observe the outside and his neighborhood through binoculars. In a way, he is thus participating in their lives, if only passively. Also, his neighbors clearly know that he exists, although they do not know who he is and what he does.

As a result, he becomes a kind of ghost, a haunting absence and potential threat, metaphorically as well as in the Derridean sense. This contrast is exacerbated by the fact that he is old, white, educated, and affluent, as we later find out, while his neighborhood is predominantly young, black, poor, and without higher education. The contrast is also visually staged by juxtaposing the old building the writer lives in with the newer tenement buildings that surround it.

This initial set up is developed by the narrative. When the boy and the writer first meet, it is in the darkness of the apartment and under less than favorable circumstances: after all, the boy has just broken into the apartment. When we first see the writer, we see him from the perspective of the surprised and frightened boy: a (justly) outraged and ferocious man. But we also see, despite the darkness, massive amounts of books everywhere in an almost labyrinthine arrangement of rooms. This is, of course, no coincidence. In terms of cinematography and *mise en scène*, the apartment is shown as a dark, strange, and confusing space for the boy, who certainly did not expect a library, befitting of what we might expect of a recluse. One could argue that the apartment is almost cave-like. Even when the writer and the boy first meet during the daytime, the atmosphere is still ambivalent: the apartment is dark, the writer acerbic – though not violent – and sarcastic. He plays with the boy's, and the audience's, anticipations and stereotypes by insinuating that he might be a homosexual, a pedophile, and a racist.

It is only in the course of the narrative that the contrasts and ambivalences turn out to be irrelevant and indeed productive. Ironically, the boy is also an outsider and a kind of recluse. None of his friends know that he is brilliant and that he writes. Various shots show him alone in his room reading, disengaged from his surroundings. In fact, then, two different kinds of urban recluses meet and help each other through their shared love of literature and writing, which obviously – and that is one of the messages of the film – can overcome any kind of boundary and difference. Visually, this is accompanied by the apartment getting brighter and brighter and by long shots providing orientation around the initially confusing space.

Ultimately, and somewhat predictably, both writer and boy are transformed over the course of the film. The writer writes again, as we find out in the end, which is important because writing is an act of communication and participation. More importantly, he finally leaves his apartment, and we see him cycling through the crowded city on his way to publicly read a story in order to help the boy out. The point could not be more obvious: through the friendship, he becomes an active and productive member of social and cultural life again and can die in peace. With regard to the boy, he changes in that he – also publicly – embraces his intellectual talents and liberates himself from the expectations other people have of him. He,

too, becomes a productive and, more importantly, integrated member of society. What we have here is the perfect ending for a coming-of-age story.

The message, it seems, is that reclusion and solitude may be productive and acceptable for some time, even necessary for reflection. The film thus reiterates the idea that solitude is a “basic condition for individual and cultural self-reflection as an ongoing process, shaped as an imagined and constructed platform for a creative human contemplation of *la condition humaine*” (Larsen 26). But ultimately, temporary reclusion should be overcome because in the long run, participation in the social life is healthier, more auspicious, and more productive. Thus, the initial liminality and the ambivalence that the film sets up in the form of urban solitude are dissolved – indeed resolved – and the contrasts sublated. Therefore, while the film stands in the long tradition of American individualism understood as the right to solitude and privacy, in the end it supplants this idea by staging liberation through solidarity.

## 5. Urban Solitude Will (Usually) Not Hold

This kind of transformation narrative and its resolution are fairly typical of a majority of US-American films that have urban solitude as a central theme or which contain urban recluse figures. If the recluse is staged as a threat, this threat is removed and order reestablished. Alternatively, the necessity for the threat – some immoral order – is removed and a new order is established. In this case, the recluse ‘may live,’ but usually willingly withdraws somewhere else, presumably to continue his or her fight against the immoral order. If the recluse is staged as a sage/genius/mentor, reclusion may continue but is regularly alleviated by the adoption of a new mentee, which, in effect, ends the liminality and ambivalence of the reclusion because it has become functional and readable. It is arguable whether we can still speak of reclusion in this case. Alternatively, the reclusion ends through the reintegration of the recluse into society or his or her – reconciled – death. In some cases, the genre frame demands that liminality be upheld in order to allow for serial continuation. Reclusion here needs to continue because it is an essential feature of the protagonist. A good example of this would be the recent *The Dark Knight*-trilogy (2005–2012) by Christopher Nolan.

All scenarios share the idea that independence and self-reliance, liberty and privacy, which Bergmann identifies as typically American values in her introduction, only remain powerful and viable if they remain perpetually liminal. In the majority of cases, the social compact ‘wins,’ either by colonization, integration, or death. In the context of a discussion of privacy, Karsten Fitz and Bärbel Harju point out that, ironically and claims to the contrary notwithstanding, there is more of it, not less,

and that the public sphere is invaded by private matters. The result is, they argue, “the decline of the public sphere through its permeation with private matters, a lack of reticence, and a more general privileging of emotion and therapeutic sensibilities” (5). In light of this, the predominant representation of urban solitude – which, after all, is premised on the right to be alone – in fiction film as a state that should eventually be overcome for the sake of the social appears particularly fitting. If we agree that “more intentional solitude in society and, yes, more loneliness . . . might not only be inevitable in the modern world, it may be a good thing” because it allows for a “sense of perspective” (Balcom 276–77), then this is bad news indeed.

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## **VII Solitude Today: Technology, Community, and Identity**



Stefan Hippler

# Solitude in the Digital Age: Privacy, Aloneness, and Withdrawal in Dave Eggers's *The Circle*

**Abstract:** This essay investigates various forms of solitude against the backdrop of contemporary technological progress and social media. Taking Dave Eggers's critically acclaimed novel *The Circle* (2013) as the focus of argumentation, this paper shows and discusses how different experiences of solitude may be altered and shaped by new technologies.

## 1. Social Media as a Topic of Cultural Discourse

Today, social media have come to feature as an important aspect of many peoples' everyday lives. José van Dijck observes that “the widespread presence of [social media] platforms [has driven] people to move many of their social, cultural, and professional activities to these online environments” (4). By now, it is undeniable that the emergence of these new media has drastically altered the landscape of human experience. This development has been perceived in various ways by the broad public: as it is often the case with technological advancements, there are people who enthusiastically welcome all forms of social media into their lives and then there are those who are more critical of this trend. The latter group fears that being constantly connected to the internet will lead to nonstop surveillance and a loss of privacy, resulting in negative consequences for their private and ‘offline’ lives. This discourse has over time generated heated debates on the benefits and dangers of the internet and social media in particular, and has furthermore become the subject of many forms of cultural expression. Often, cultural products such as fiction contemplate how technological developments “reshape the ... experience of ‘being human’” (Yar 29).

Dave Eggers's novel *The Circle* (2013) is a highly controversial fictional rendering of how the ubiquity of social media might impact the makeup of human existence and social interaction on both an individual and on a more universal level. Set in a probable and “not-too-distant future” (Snow; see also Williams; Ludwigs; Tommasi 249), the narrative follows 24-year-old Mae Holland's rapid ascent in a fictitious company called the Circle. The third-person narrative perspective concentrates on Mae and turns her into “our fictional stand-in” (Williams). Through her experiences the readers can closely observe and simultaneously critically distance themselves from the projected developments. The novel's eponymous enterprise ranks as “the hottest company on the planet” (Eggers 72) and has secured itself a

steady position “on the forefront of social media” (185) through various innovations and the promise to perfect its users’ online presence. After having overcome some initial struggles to adapt to the pace, workload, and demands of her job, Mae quickly turns into an advocate for the Circle’s ideas (Tommasi 249) and puts her work above all other aspects of her life. Ignoring the skepticism and warnings from the people around her and regardless of any consequences, she makes it her mission to help the company reach all of its goals, even its ultimate one, namely to collect all the information in the world and to make all aspects of life transparent.

Despite some mixed reviews with regard to content, style, and technological accuracy, *The Circle* quickly turned into a bestseller, a fact that indisputably mirrors contemporary society’s widespread yet ambivalent fascination with social media. The novel ranks as an important cultural product, as it “[explores] a particular set of ideas and their implications” by showing how technology and social media might and even already do influence contemporary life (Galow 115). Presenting an enterprise that has the potential to shape and transform social structures and the overall experience of everyday life, *The Circle* contributes to the critical discourse on the possible impact of techno-scientific progress on society.

One of the most intriguing aspects of Eggers’s novel is the thought-provoking elaboration on the topic of solitude. Following recent appeals to study the importance of solitude in a technology-driven society that highly values constant connectedness to and participation on social networking sites (Neyfakh), this essay investigates diverse forms of solitude as presented in *The Circle*. I will show that Eggers’s novel engages in a timely and multilayered discussion of distinct shapes and understandings of solitude against the backdrop of an environment where privacy and aloneness have become nearly impossible.

## 2. Solitude and Aloneness in the Digital Age: Theoretical Considerations

Self-imposed solitude has often been the topic of philosophical inquiry and scholarly examination alike. In 1854, Henry David Thoreau stated that he “[finds] it wholesome to be alone” (180) in his endeavor “to live deliberately” (135), thereby alluding to the positive effects that spending time alone can entail. Generally speaking, solitude allows for undistracted “contemplation, exploration, problem-solving, introspection, and the escape of pressures” (Rubin xv). Moreover, being alone embraces restorative and recuperative qualities. Throughout history, individuals or groups of people have often chosen to consciously withdraw from society, be it only for a certain amount of time or entirely. They sought solitude in order to relax, reflect, enjoy privacy, or even to make political statements.

In the wake of the digital and technological revolution, with its side effects of permanent availability and connectedness, spending time alone has become increasingly difficult. Ever since the introduction of the internet, emailing, and cell phones, people feel the pressure to be available around the clock. In fact, it is nearly taken for granted that we are just one click, email, or phone call away. Social media have not only contributed to this trend but also actually intensified it. They have rendered “the worlds of online and offline . . . increasingly interpenetrating” (van Dijck 4), as they invite users to share their private and offline experiences online. Thus, social media promote being connected to the online community at any time. As a result, privacy and aloneness have come to be rare goods in our contemporary society.

These developments have elicited critical comments by both scholars and the concerned public. Of course, it is important not to lapse into polemic black-and-white thinking on the dangers and pitfalls of the internet. Yet, it is equally necessary to consider how technological progress affects the human experience. Robert J. Coplan and Julie C. Bowker, for instance, wonder “whether any of us will ever truly be *alone* in the future,” given the fact that “rapidly evolving technological advances intend to connect all of us – all of the time” (11). In the face of ever-expanding social media, it does not seem too far-fetched to assume that a continuous online presence may have negative by-effects, as it might distract users from their off-line lives and even deprive them of much-needed time for themselves. “[I]f we are always on,” Sherry Turkle comments, “we may deny ourselves the rewards of solitude” (3). Clearly, experiences of solitude are at least compromised, if not endangered, by the omnipresence of social media and the inherent perceived pressure to always be online. It can definitely be said that, thanks to new communication technologies, “the experience of being alone is being transformed dramatically” (Neyfakh). Thus, it is important to systematically and critically approach the question of how social media might shape and impinge on experiences of solitude (Amichai-Hamburger and Schneider 330). Considering *The Circle* a revelatory and elaborate contribution to this inquiry, this essay will illuminate and discuss Eggers’s implementation of different forms of solitude. It will thereby grapple with the overall question of how social media might play an important role in shaping forms of solitude in the future.

### 3. Privacy and Surveillance

The Circle’s policies concerning privacy serve as the basis for the shape and transformation of experiences of solitude in the fictional world Eggers envisions. Therefore, it is essential to first examine how the overall concept of privacy is imagined

in the narrative. Following Mae's development, which runs parallel to the gradual ramifications on privacy undertaken by the Circle, the reader gains insight into the ways in which the company interferes with users' private data and how it steadily tries to abolish privacy.

Though a relatively young company, the Circle has quickly developed into a vast enterprise. The company ranks among "the best-known [companies] in the world" (Eggers 2) and has already "subsumed" and eliminated all formerly popular social networking and media platforms (23; see also Atwood). Many people wish to work for this hip firm. At first glance, the Circle seems to offer its employees a utopian idyll (Grossman): situated on "soft green hills" (Eggers 1), the campus of the Circle's headquarters features not only various office buildings but also a plethora of leisure facilities that cater to every possible need and desire. The vision and mission of the company, too, evoke a utopian flair: it is the Circle's goal to revolutionize and facilitate people's online presence, to "[use] social media to create a safer and saner world" (446), and to establish "[o]ne hundred percent democracy" (386) through mandatory user participation. Other than monopolizing social media for themselves, the founders of the Circle, also known as the Three Wise Men – a label that playfully hints at the company's alleged "messianic" mission (Charles) – plan to make all aspects of life transparent and to collect all the information in the world. The megalomania behind the enterprise becomes apparent when Bailey Stenton, one of the heads of the Circle, summarizes the long-term goals of the company: "We will become all-seeing, all-knowing" (70).

These aims are to be achieved through numerous, seemingly harmless innovations. Although "[n]early all of the technological developments imagined in the book are meant to serve positive ends" (Galow 125) such as lowering crime rates and simplifying peoples' lives, exactly the same techno-scientific inventions largely affect all dimensions of privacy. For example, the Circle collects and saves all their users' information and data in a cloud where "[i]t can never be lost" (Eggers 43). Also, the company introduces SeeChange, a monitoring system that facilitates continual world-wide surveillance. The company and its proponents install small cameras all over the world in order to permanently record everything and to "have constant access" (63) to whatever place they want to observe. Notably, this is undertaken "with no permit" (62), yet tolerated by the users. Furthermore, the company encourages politicians and later also the broad public to go completely transparent by streaming their lives online by way of small cameras worn around their necks. Under the pretense of working for the users' benefits, the innovations and methods of the Circle promote "ultimate transparency" (69) and complete surveillance at the cost of users' privacy.



The Circle bears close resemblance to the concept of the panopticon (Axelrod; Charles), both in its virtual and real-life structures. Drawing on Jeremy Bentham's considerations of architectures that facilitate constant surveillance, Michel Foucault defines the panopticon as "a compact model of ... [a] disciplinary mechanism" (197). In more general words, panoptic structures empower certain individuals to constantly watch others and thereby to secure and institutionalize hegemonic order, all of which also holds true for the company presented in Eggers's narrative. At the Circle, these mechanisms are already part of the architectural appearance of the campus buildings: "the offices [are] fronted by floor-to-ceiling glass, the occupants visible within" (Eggers 7; see also Atwood; Tommasi 249). This design permits that the employees and their activities can be observed at all times. Also, the technologies used at the Circle record all of the employees' data, collect their personal information, and closely observe their online and offline activities. In its endeavor to make the world transparent, the company encourages and even tries to enforce such behavior also on a larger scale and uses technology to collect, store, and share all information world-wide.

As observed by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *The Circle* "raises disturbing questions about the end of privacy" (260), as it shows how constant surveillance renders privacy impossible. The Circle's tools not only capture incriminating material about people, but also make intimate information publicly known and easily accessible. In order to collect and provide "the accumulated knowledge of the world" (Eggers 302), the Circle introduces the motto "PRIVACY IS THEFT" (303), thereby insinuating that privacy is a concept that borders on the fringe of illegality. Having nearly eliminated privacy as a reasonable and rightful demand, the Circle's policies regulate how solitary and private experiences are shaped.

#### **4. Authentic Solitude Endangered by Social Media**

One way in which Eggers's novel contributes to the discourse on solitude in the digital age is through its critical examination of "authentic solitude." Generally understood to be "based on the decision to be alone" (Averill and Sundararajan 91), authentic solitude describes voluntary and self-imposed withdrawal. Mae's personal development as projected throughout the narrative illustrates how experiences of self-chosen solitude can be altered, endangered, and ultimately destroyed by techno-scientific progress and constant surveillance.

Early on, the reader learns that Mae has for quite a while been implementing a form of authentic retreat into her life. Having been introduced to the sportive activity of kayaking by her ex-boyfriend, Mercer, Mae has turned solitary kayaking trips into one of her hobbies. It becomes clear that she often seeks the solitude the

activity offers her in order to flee from the stressors in her life such as the pressure put on her through her new job at the Circle, her father's multiple sclerosis, and the strained and somewhat complicated relationship she has with Mercer. The time she has to herself during these trips gives her the chance and freedom to relax and recuperate. Only then can she be completely "free of thoughts" (Eggers 145) and temporarily forget her troubles and worries. Voluntary solitude offers "a respite from the stresses of life" and provides people with time "for quiet contemplation" (Coplan and Bowker 3). It is in this way that Mae has integrated self-imposed solitude in her life, at least up to the point where her job interferes.

Soon after starting to work for the Circle, Mae leaves the campus to spend the weekend with her parents after her father had a seizure. On her way back, she goes kayaking in order to unwind and have some alone time. A couple of days later, her work supervisors confront Mae with her sudden disappearance from campus and her failure to participate in the Circle's social activities over the weekend. After explaining her situation, her supervisors encounter that it is of course "very understandable" (Eggers 178) that she wants to spend time with her parents but that they find it problematic that Mae did not "post anything ... about this episode" (183) on the Circle's social networking in order to "share it" with other Circlers (184). Learning about Mae's kayaking trip, her supervisors become even more irritated and criticize her of being "selfish" (187) because she has kept her hobby private. They call Mae's conduct "*sub-social*" (189) and explain to her that this kind of behavior runs counter to the Circle's ethos: the employees' "online presence [is] integral to [their] work" (95) and to the overall mission of complete transparency. On a more abstract level, the novel here insinuates that spending time alone in a collective system that expects its members to be social both physically and virtually at all times might not only be frowned upon but also even reprimanded.

In the long run, the pressure to always participate and to expose all aspects of one's private life influences and shapes one's personal downtime. In *The Circle*, this is illustrated when Mae once again goes kayaking and is being caught in the act by the Circle's SeeChange cameras. This time, her kayaking trip is illegal, as she takes one of the kayaks onto the bay after the opening hours of the shop. Ironically as well as tellingly, Mae is not primarily reproached for her violation of the law but for the fact that she did not document and share her trip online. One of the company's heads, Eamon Bailey, explains to her: "the point is that there are millions of people who can't see what you saw, Mae. Does it feel right to have deprived them of seeing what you saw?" (300). In order to educate the broad public about their mantra that "PRIVACY IS THEFT" (303), the Circle uses Mae's misconduct as a strategic marketing trick. They put her on a stage where

she has to repent in front of a large audience. On the one hand, this act of public shaming and humiliation is of course installed in order to show that the Circle's surveillance system has already advanced to a point where there is a good chance that people are observed at all times. This should lead to people's modification of their behavior. On the other hand, putting Mae on the pillory should deter people from indulging in similar and seemingly selfish behavior and discourage them from yielding to their desire to be alone (Williams).

These disciplinary actions profoundly affect Mae's overall social behavior. After having been chided for her allegedly antisocial conduct, she starts spending more time on campus, directs her attention to her PartiRank – one of the Circle's tools that rates the employees' participation on the social networking site –, and “[uses] every available moment of downtime to quickly scroll through [the site]” in order to partake in online activities (Eggers 104–05). Simultaneously, she gradually neglects her social and private life off-campus and offline and eventually gives up her kayak trips. In his review of the novel, Lev Grossman observes that Mae “spends her nights plowing through drifts of emails and posts and zings and her days sleepwalking through her real-life interactions with one eye always on her phone” so as to never be completely disconnected. The fact that she later even decides to go completely transparent – meaning that she wears a small camera around her neck wherever she goes – is merely the final touch within her development into the automaton-like proponent of the Circle. Over time, Mae willingly waives nearly all of her privacy and gives up her private life completely in favor of her online presence and the “validation” it offers her (Eggers 233; Tommasi 250). Being praised for her good work and for her dedication to the Circle makes her feel good about herself. She enjoys the reputation she has among her colleagues and among the users of the Circle's network worldwide. What is presented here actually mirrors trends that were observed by scholars and critics in the recent past: fervent users of social networking sites often put more effort into their online presence than into their real life relationships. The virtual community consequently “[becomes] very important to surfers' identities and their self-esteem” (Amichai-Hamburger and Schneider 319). Mae receives appreciation and recognition for her continuous online activity; meanwhile, her offline life gradually recedes. She loses touch with her parents, hardly spends time completely alone, and has even given up the rare periods of solitude she used to allow herself for recuperation and contemplation. Mae rejects alone time in favor of perfecting her online life and meeting the Circle's requirements. Simultaneously, the reader can closely observe how she steadily turns into a less rational and less considerate person who blindly devotes her time to an enterprise that devours all of her time and energy.

Not only does this narrative trajectory confirm Mark Andrejevic's observation that "new ... communication technologies ... have had a powerfully transformative effect on ... social relations" in general (8), but it also alludes to the corrosive effects of recent techno-scientific progress on the time people used to voluntarily retreat. Thanks to both the opportunity and the pressure to be online all the time, people now rarely seclude themselves. And even when they are physically alone, they are often in one way or another connected to the world through technological devices that promote constant communication and data exchange and thus simulate human contact. As a consequence, "the distinction between 'alone' and 'together' has become hopelessly blurry" (Neyfakh) and authentic and self-chosen solitude is becoming harder to reach and enjoy.

## 5. Solitude Generated through Social Media

Whilst Eggers's narrative explains how contemporary communication technologies may very well pose a danger to authentic solitude, it also provides food for thought on how exactly these same technologies can create another experience of solitude, namely in the sense of loneliness. Defined as "the *painful experience of being alone*" (Galanaki 71), loneliness might actually be the result of spending too much time in virtual environments at the cost of maintaining real life relationships. Of course, the virtual connections provided through social media networks simulate the feeling of company and communality and purport to their users that they are connected to other human beings (Turkle 1; Amichai-Hamburger and Schneider 330). Still, recent studies show that these virtual relationships are oftentimes of a lower and less intimate quality than their real life counterparts and, moreover, that online social networking platforms might potentially distract and even alienate users from their offline relationships (Amichai-Hamburger and Schneider 319, 330). Consequently, devoting oneself to the care of online contacts at the cost of offline relationships may lead to involuntary solitude and loneliness.

This scenario is also elaborated on in *The Circle*. Mae grows more socially reclusive as she dedicates more and more time to her presence on the Circle's social network. At one point in the narrative, the reader gets a vivid description of how Mae tries to improve her PartiRank by the end of one of her workdays:

[S]he embarked on a flurry of activity, sending four zings and thirty-two comments and eighty-eight smiles. In an hour, her PartiRank rose to 7,228. Breaking 7,000 was more difficult, but by eight o'clock, after joining and posting in eleven discussion groups, sending another twelve zings, ... and signing up for sixty-seven more feeds, she'd done it. She was at 6,872, and turned to her Inner-Circle social feed. She was a few hundred posts behind, and she made her way through, replying to seventy or so messages, RSVPing to eleven

events on campus, signing nine petitions, and providing comments and constructive criticism on four products ... By 10:16 her rank was 5,342. (Eggers 190)

I am quoting in length from the novel here for several reasons: for one, this passage illustrates how Eggers's writing style perfectly captures and encapsulates the said "flurry of activity" and thereby mimics the hectic frenzy Mae works herself into in order to meet the demands of the Circle's policy for the employees' online interaction. For another, this episode grants insights into how the pressure to adequately perform online interferes with Mae's personal life. Rather than relaxing by herself or socializing with real life contacts, Mae spends her time after work connected to the social network till late at night, which in turn leaves her in a liminal state with regard to companionship. Whilst she is not completely alone due to the fact that she is virtually connected to a multitude of other users, she is still all by herself in her room. Notwithstanding the illusion of being in contact with other people, it soon becomes clear that her online activities do not provide Mae with the same quality of real interpersonal contact. Given the fact that "most of the communication [on online social networks] is shallow" (Amichai-Hamburger and Schneider 330), it stands to reason that depriving oneself of authentic companionship in favor of solely engaging in virtually simulated contact might very well entail emotional repercussions. "Yet, suddenly, in the half-light of virtual community, we may feel utterly alone," Sherry Turkle comments (11–12), and this is exactly what happens to Mae.

Coinciding with her increasingly excessive online activity, Mae often feels a "black rip" and "loud tear" opening up within her (Eggers 195). In the course of the novel, the tear and the therein projected emptiness gradually intensify, and it becomes clear that the tear symbolically mirrors "the uncompromising bleakness" of the future (Ludwigs) and, more specifically, the emotional impoverishment of Mae's life. What she herself defines as a "wave of despair" (Eggers 195) can be easily decoded by the reader as the effect of her online behavior, which results in loneliness. After all, there is an ever-growing gap between Mae and her parents and also between her and Mercer, mostly because they antagonize Mae on the grounds of her overweening activities on the social network and her fervent and naive promotion of the Circle's goals. For Mae, the only way to handle the tear is to "stay busy" (196) and to "[work] through it" (412) – a coping mechanism that catapults her into a vicious circle. In order not to have to face her loneliness, Mae buries herself in online activities for which she receives validation from her company and the online community, but which ultimately lead her to isolate herself even more. Close to the end of the novel, when Mae has lost touch with almost all of her former close relationships and "the tear [opens] up in her again, larger and blacker than ever before" (465), she finds solace in the shallow and virtually

simulated support from the online community. It becomes clear that she has now completely abandoned her offline life in favor of being a showcase Circler.

What Eggers presents here is an illustration of how spending too much time online and relying too heavily on online social networks, which are generally considered to “[fight] loneliness” (Amichai-Hamburger and Schneider 330), can in fact create a rather negative experience of solitude: Mae’s behavior leads her into a state of “solitary confinement” (Atwood) and alienates her from real life contacts and meaningful companionship. On a more general level, it can be stated that social media environments may produce a form of solitude that results in both social and emotional reclusiveness, which in turn nurtures loneliness. In this vein, Eggers’s novel warns of the possible dangers of disproportionate virtual activities at the expense of authentic offline experiences and points out that virtually simulated companionship does not prevent people from feeling isolated, solitary, or lonely.

## 6. Deliberate Withdrawal and Political Reclusiveness in the Digital Age

In another plotline, *The Circle* addresses the issue of withdrawal from society to political ends. Mercer, who represents the mouthpiece for critical concerns about techno-scientific progress and the pressure to participate online (Axelrod; Galow 119), sees his only way of escaping the society that is more and more shaped and controlled by the Circle in deliberately distancing himself both emotionally as well as physically from said structures. In his main function as “one of the most vocal critics of the Circle, the death of privacy, and the way that social media has changed personal relationships” (Snow), Mercer contributes to the discourse on the downsides of a techno-communication-based society and moreover exemplifies how resistance to such trends might be registered by an environment that willingly succumbs to such structures.

The novel introduces Mercer as a down-to-earth character, who maintains a modest and simple lifestyle and who seems content with his existence. He is not interested in new communication technologies and online social networking. Even more so, he actually disapproves of these developments as he considers them a threat to traditional, authentic human contact and communication. Already at an early point in the narrative, Mercer expresses his dislike for the obsessive use of virtual communication and explains how the new technology interferes with interpersonal relationships: “It becomes like we’re never alone,” (Eggers 131; see also Snow) he observes during a conversation with Mae, who is constantly checking her messages on her phone. He then voices his critical opinions of the Circle’s modifications of interpersonal interaction: “the tools you guys create ... *manufacture* unnaturally extreme

social needs. No one needs the level of contact you're purveying" (133). Apart from being concerned about the infringements on privacy, the constant surveillance, and the monetization of information exercised by the Circle, Mercer mostly bemoans the loss of genuine communication and intimacy. To him, new communication technologies produce "socially autistic" people (260) and thus destroy experiences of authentic and meaningful interaction. Considering Mercer's attitude towards techno-scientific progress, it becomes clear that he "delivers the diagnosis of ... [the] condition" (Ludwigs) of a society under the pressure to perform online. He criticizes and aptly predicts the hollowness and superficiality of such communication (Galow 119).

His resistance to give in to the pressures of participating online is perceived as unprogressive, undemocratic, and "antisocial" (Eggers 462) behavior. In the course of the novel, Mae more than once goes over his head and tries to persuade him of the advantages of online social networking, but to no avail. After Mae decides to go transparent and Mercer recognizes the consequences of this act on the lives of the people around her, he severs all contact with her. Using a seemingly old-fashioned medium, namely a letter, he informs her that he does not want anything to do with her and other Circlers anymore on the grounds of the inhumanity of "this [insidious] tool" (368). When Mae still does not stop intervening in other peoples' lives and when the influence of the Circle has become almost inescapable, Mercer sends Mae a second letter. He explains that he will hide out in order to flee from the society the Circle has created: "By the time you read this, I'll be off the grid, and I ... *know* others will join me. We'll be living ... like refugees, or hermits" (432–33). Mercer's social withdrawal can be seen as a form of political expression or statement. As observed by Coby Dowdell with regard to early American culture, citizens have oftentimes "expressed their critical voices through voluntary reclusion from society" (121) in order to "[engage] in public deliberation from a position of physical retirement" (130). This is exactly what Mercer does. His hermitism expresses his political conviction and functions as a practice of active, yet tacit rebellion against prevailing societal structures. The fact that this act is not only personal but also in fact decidedly public and political becomes clear when considering that he is aware that his actions will be observed. Knowing that the broad public will not only have access to his letters but also witness his withdrawal because Mae broadcasts her life, he addresses not only Mae but also her whole "audience" (Eggers 366), namely all the Circlers. His letters take on the function of what Dowdell calls "the hermit's manuscript" (130). Generally speaking, the hermit's written account "presents a transcription of the internal political contemplation of the retired citizen for public consumption" (130). Mercer's letters reveal

his meditations and his political attitude and thereby function as a manifesto of his convictions against complete surveillance and simulated communication. Here, solitude is then implemented as a political tactic that clearly positions a person or a group of people in the matrix of possible opinions on social structures. The act of deliberately opting out of a system turns social withdrawal and the resulting solitude into a radically political statement.

Mercer's reclusiveness and pursuit of privacy elicit derogatory comments from Circlers all over the world. He is being referred to as "*Bigfoot*" and "*Sasquatch*" (Eggers 433), which shows that his resistance to online participation is construed as unprogressive and backwoods behavior. Furthermore, his withdrawal also arouses suspicion and irritation. Kenneth Rubin explains that members of a society are "likely ... to think unpleasant thoughts about ... solitary individuals," as their behavior might be interpreted as "unacceptable" and "discomforting" (xiv). This can clearly be seen in Mercer's case. On top of this, his actions are even perceived as antisocial and therefore undemocratic in the light of the Circle's goal of an all-encompassing participatory democracy. For Mae personally, Mercer's withdrawal also poses an annoyance and a personal attack. She simply cannot understand that he does not want to see the alleged benefits the Circle offers in her opinion and takes extreme measures to convert her ex-boyfriend. Shortly after his venture to the margins of society, Mae and the online community make use of the Circle's latest technologies, highly accurate search tools and drones, in order to locate Mercer's exact whereabouts. The relentless pursuit results in Mercer driving his car off a bridge in a rush of "unmitigated horror" (Eggers 458). Written off by the heads of the Circle as an act of "madness and paranoia" (463), Mercer's suicide can be seen as a politically motivated action. Rather than succumbing to pathological societal structures he does not want to be a part of, Mercer follows his convictions and demands his right to privacy in the most extreme way. He manages to evade the Circle's reach by making himself completely unavailable through death. His rather emblematic demise can easily be seen as the advancing disappearance of privacy and aloneness in the digital age. It alludes to recent concerns as to how the omnipresence of the internet and the possible inherent surveillance pose a serious threat to privacy and deliberate solitude and how it may consequently lead to their complete extinction.

## 7. Solitude in the Digital Age

Eggers's novel can be understood as a dystopian parable that elucidates how human life may be transformed in the age of ever-progressing technology (Charles; Galow 125–26; Ludwigs; Snow; Smith and Watson 260; Tommasi 251). On the one hand,



the narrative points out potential dangers of techno-scientific developments on an individual level. It shows how excessive fixation on online presentation might negatively influence an individual's identity-development. After all, Mae steadily and inexorably turns into a rather shallow and one-dimensional character in the face of her online participation. Furthermore, the novel illustrates how surveillance prompted by social media might heavily infringe on people's privacy. On the other hand, *The Circle* focuses on how society at large might be altered by social media by showing how interpersonal dynamics and relationships might become superficial and how quasi-mandatory online participation might result in a society that resembles "a totalitarian regime" (Snow).

Imagining a setting in which social media surveys, controls, and even dictates private lives and social interaction, Eggers's novel chimes in with timely considerations of how experiences of aloneness and solitude might be altered by continuous availability and the pressure to participate in online interaction. Equipped with "a healthy dose of authentic alarm" (Axelrod), the narrative probes stimulating questions of how common experiences of authentic solitude are changed, if not even endangered and destroyed by techno-scientific progress and how social media environments may in fact create other forms of solitude in terms of loneliness. Moreover, it depicts how deliberate reclusiveness might not only be regarded as an irritation but even as completely unacceptable behavior that needs to be prevented in social structures that build on connectedness and communality. All in all, *The Circle* invites the reader to critically consider the implications of new technology. In our contemporary society, where aloneness has come to be a rare experience and where solitary activities steadily fade more into the background of human existence, there is good reason to ponder the question "if the experience of solitude is ... doomed to become an archaic remnant of a past era" (Coplan and Bowker 11). Rather than providing the reader with a concrete answer to this question, *The Circle* sketches out possible and rather unsettling scenarios of how the progress of technology might affect our lives. Striking an extremely topical chord, Eggers's novel not only critically comments on the promotion of complete transparency, but also engages in an intriguing and intricate discourse on possible future shapes of solitude.

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Scott Slovic

# Going Away to the Wilderness for Solitude ... and Community: Ecoambiguity, the Engaged Pastoral, and the ‘Semester in the Wild’ Experience

**Abstract:** We often associate wilderness experience with solitude. In reality, we go into the wild in order to think more deeply about society. This article considers ecoambiguity and the engaged pastoral in the context of world literature and the University of Idaho’s ‘Semester in the Wild’ program, which sends students into the wilderness for two months.

## 1. Ecoambiguity and the Engaged Pastoral

One of the first lessons of ecological experience is that of relationship. Try as we might to leave society behind, we always carry its intellectual trappings with us, and we forge new societies, new networks of interaction, no matter where we go. This is not a bad thing. The hermetic myth offers an alluring vision of simplicity and perspective and focused commitment in such narratives as Kamo no Chomei’s “An Account of My Hut” (“Hojoki,” 1212) and E.J. (Ted) Banfield’s *Confessions of a Beachcomber* (1908). In the American context, Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854) and his many-volume personal journal are among the literary icons of solitary retreat.

But relationship is the abiding motif in all of these works – Chomei could not fully abandon the political complications of urban Japan. Banfield and Thoreau established relationships with Dunk Island on the North Queensland coast and Walden Pond in suburban Boston, respectively – and they often thought about the behavior of fellow human beings even as they patrolled the woods and beaches of their isolated geographies. Ecocritic Karen L. Thornber uses the term “ecoambiguity” to describe this sense of relationship, of community, while in conditions of solitude – and to explain other forms of environmental irony. I tend to think about the social engagement that occurs when writers experience isolated places as examples of what I call the “engaged pastoral,” a mode of pastoral experience that enhances a sense of connection to society rather than emphasizing withdrawal from society.

These threads of ironic ecoambiguity and the engaged pastoral occur not only in the few examples mentioned above but throughout the field of environmental

literature. Joshua DiCaglio's article "Ironic Ecology" (2015) highlights irony as a central feature of recent American environmental narrative, pointing to such examples as David Gessner's adoption of the pose of wilderness adventurer when describing his experience of canoeing down the Charles River in urban Boston. DiCaglio argues ultimately that the function of irony in environmental narrative is to "disperse" isolated, individualized identities by blurring boundaries between wilderness and city, otherness and self:

[P]opular environmental rhetoric tends to describe the displacement of the human while struggling to describe the fragmentation implied by ecological dispersal. I can more easily acknowledge my role in a network of relations; I find it more difficult to see how that network of relations implies that what I consider "me" (and "human") cannot be limited by or contained within any clear boundary. However, the implications of ecology are not fully realized without both conclusions; in fact, ... the failure to acknowledge the second conclusion underlies much of the confusion currently facing environmental rhetoric .... Irony in recent nature writing functions to overcome the resistance that those familiar with environmental discourse have developed toward the deeper implications of the identity-dispersing reality of ecological thinking. (451)

What may seem at first glance to be comically ironic inconsistency in a literary narrative – the hermit who cannot leave behind his obsessions with political life back in the city, the urban recreationalist who fancies himself a heroic explorer in the dangerous wilderness – can also be viewed as experimentation with boundary-breaking, which may be an essential verbal and psychological process in pursuit of integrating the individual with the collective, the human with the non-human.

In this article, I would like to consider a form of pedagogical ecoambiguity and the engaged pastoral in the context of the University of Idaho's 'Semester in the Wild' Program, which sends approximately a dozen undergraduates deep into the wilderness of the American West, where they spend two and a half months living at a research station while taking a full schedule of classes, ranging from ecology to environmental writing. Many students are attracted to the program because of the allure of quiet solitude in a beautiful wilderness – they imagine themselves "front[ing] only the essential facts of life" (90), as Thoreau put it in *Walden*, and breaking through the buffers of twenty-first-century civilization to learn the realities of ecology. Some of this does happen. But the students and professors who participate in 'Semester in the Wild' also learn a lot about getting along (and sometimes not getting along) with other people, and about establishing other kinds of social relationships (including participation in the process of forming public policy), during the semester-long adventure in the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness. Careful reading of Chomei, Banfield, Thoreau, and other writers of exurban retreat could have predicted this. Keeping DiCaglio's notion of

“ironic ecology” in mind, though, may reveal that even in the surprisingly anthropocentric social experience that occurs during ‘Semester in the Wild,’ the students are experiencing boundary-blurring relationships that contribute to their newly open sensitivity to wilderness ecology and the role of humans within such systems.

## 2. Chomei and the Ironic Persistence of Community

Perhaps the most forceful demonstration of irony in recent environmental discourse is Thornber’s *Ecoambiguity*, her study of environmental crises in East Asian literatures. Swarnalatha Rangarajan, Vidya Sarveswaran, and I summarized this project as follows in our introduction to *Ecoambiguity, Community, and Development: Toward a Politicized Ecocriticism* (2014):

The opening example of “ecoambiguity” in Karen Thornber’s 2012 book ... describes a situation in contemporary Japan where a local tourism association at Shosen Gorge sought to cut down trees “so that people could have a better view of ‘nature’” (1). In the case of Shosen Gorge, an economically depressed region that relies on income from tourists, visitors are particularly keen to have unobstructed views of the spectacular rocky cliffs, so the natural vegetation has been targeted for cutting in order to facilitate an aesthetic or touristic experience. Essentially what Thornber is describing is a cultural tendency to selectively appreciate and resist the natural world, seeking to control our experience and the natural environment as a way of maximizing a desired mode of experience. In many other parts of Asia and the rest of the world, the irony of ecoambiguity is more painful and acute. (vii)

One of the strongest impressions conveyed by Thornber’s project is the idea that inconsistency in human relationships with the non-human world are nothing new. There has always been a human tendency to struggle with ambivalence, with conflicting impulses and concerns. She reveals this ironic inconsistency in copious examples, perhaps none more vivid than the case of Chomei (1155–1216), the author of the classic work of Japanese literature titled “Hojoki” (1212), which describes Chomei’s retreat to a ten-foot hut in the mountains outside of Kyoto after various disasters have devastated the city. Although Chomei declares his special devotion to nature, he also writes famously in “Hojoki”: “when I return and sit here I feel pity for those still attached to the world of dust” (211).

Again and again, the hermit Chomei turns his thoughts toward the city he has left behind, his physical solitude betraying an ongoing psychological attachment to community. We might refer to this tendency to retreat to a locus of rural solitude in order to contemplate the social concerns (and even political crises) of the urban community as a kind of engaged pastoral. Rather than using retreat as an opportunity to disengage and relish solitary peace of mind, just the opposite occurs – or

rather, in addition to the solace that might come with focused contemplation of one's immediate surroundings, stepping back physically from the complications of the urban setting facilitates clear-sighted analysis of society.

### 3. Thoreauvian Engagement

Centuries later, in the United States, Thoreau famously struggled to balance solitude and community during his two-year experiment in attentive living at Walden Pond on the outskirts of Boston (1845–1847) and throughout his life. In 1954, on the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *Walden*, E.B. White articulated Thoreau's profoundly contradictory devotion to private enjoyment of nature and to social engagement:

Henry went forth to battle when he took to the woods, and *Walden* is the report of a man torn by two powerful and opposing drives – the desire to enjoy the world (and not be derailed by a mosquito wing) and the urge to set the world straight. One cannot join these two successfully, but sometimes, in rare cases, something good or even great results from the attempt of the tormented spirit to reconcile them. (238)

What White describes here is essentially the paradox of Thoreau's engaged pastoral sensibility. It is true that Thoreau's social engagement emerges most prominently in distinct works such as "Resistance to Civil Government" (1849), which are clearly separate from his natural-history-focused journal and his nature-oriented essays. But in his best-known book, *Walden*, Thoreau does in fact display a twin sensibility, a simultaneous engagement with private life close to nature and with human society. Even when he is alone in the relatively rural setting of Concord, Massachusetts, Thoreau writes as if he has not abandoned society. So content was Thoreau in his solitary observations of nature in suburban Boston that he did not feel he was alone when he lacked human companionship. He devotes an entire chapter of *Walden*, titled "Solitude," to the idea of solitary community, which is akin to the ecoambiguity Thornber discusses in her book.

The following passage on lonesomeness and community suggests that Thoreau required no human company in order to feel at home in nature:

I have never felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude, but once, and that was a few weeks after I came to the woods, when, for an hour, I doubted if the near neighborhood of man was not essential to a serene and healthy life ... In the midst of a gentle rain while these thoughts prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood



insignificant, and I have never thought of them since. Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me. (131–32)

This feeling of infinitely vast friendliness seems to be a form of the dispersed identity DiCaglio describes in his recent study. The irony of being isolated from fellow humans but immersed in a community of fellow natural beings is perhaps different than the specific varieties of ecoambiguity Thornber identifies in *Ecoambiguity*, but it prefigures the communitarian experience of wilderness that occurs during the ‘Semester in the Wild’ program. Likewise, students in ‘Semester in the Wild,’ in learning to raise their voices to address the pressing issues of society, participate in the tradition of the engaged pastoral, retreating into the wilderness for a brief period in order to see and understand human culture more clearly.

Some two decades after the publication of *Walden* on the other side of the planet, the Australian nature-lover and author Banfield set out to live a solitary life in nature on one of Australia’s eastern barrier islands, inspired by the iconoclastic American. His biographer, Michael Noonan, records Banfield’s quest in *A Different Drummer: The Story of E.J. Banfield, Beachcomber of Dunk Island* (1986): “Thoreau wrote: ‘How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book.’ The book in Ted Banfield’s case was, of course, Thoreau’s *Walden* . . . , and he carried a copy of it with him when he set out from Arafat in the late 1870s . . .” (37). And states further: “After deciding that Tam O’Shanter Point, being still part of the mainland, just did not have the atmosphere of isolation he was seeking, Ted headed out to Timana . . .” (96). In the end, Banfield found the isolated, Thoreauvian locale he was seeking on Dunk Island, off the coast of Queensland in the northeast of Australia. But he also found the paradoxical combination of Thoreau’s hermetic naturalist lifestyle and his sensibility as an activist-writer whose pastoral existence included engagement in social issues. In some of his writing, such as “The Gentle Art of Beachcombing” (1913), Banfield waxed poetic about the “sweetness and satisfaction” of enjoying the sound of the wind in the trees, “humming accompaniment to the measured cadences of old ocean, and the tree of beautiful leave . . . will waft pure and refreshing scent from flowers of milk-white and gold” (155). At other times, as in his piece “Ruthless Collectors” (1912), the writer railed against people who went to the bush to collect birds for their colorful plumage, complaining that, “being destroyers of birds they should be regarded as the most direful pest of the country breeds” (146). As I have described in my article “Epistemology and Politics in American Nature Writing” (1996), it is in the solipsistic rhapsodies and socially engaged jeremiads of Banfield’s work that we can find traces of familiar epistemological and political tropes, transferred from North American literature, such as Thoreau’s work, to island writing in the Southern Hemisphere.

#### 4. Engaged Citizenship, the ‘Semester in the Wild’ Program, and the Idea of a Community of Students and Professors in the Wilderness

My own life as a teacher, literary essayist, and scholar working in the environmental humanities takes much of its combined emphasis on loving the world and fighting to address matters of concern from the tendencies I have inherited from intellectual ancestors such as Chomei, Thoreau, and Banfield. I have described these impulses at length in the essay “Savoring, Saving, and the Practice of Ecocritical Responsibility” in my book *Going Away to Think: Engagement, Retreat, and Ecocritical Responsibility* (2008):

What I want myself is to find some way to balance the urge to *savor* and the urge to *save*, the impulse to enjoy life and the commitment to do some good in the world. Looking back on years of writing and lecturing in the field of ecological literary studies ... it becomes clear to me that much of my own work wavers between these two poles of responsibility ... the responsibility (shared by every living organism) to be fully present in *this life* and the responsibility (of a privileged, empowered human citizen) to be involved with the transgressions and the opportunities of my community. My writing demonstrates a vacillation between various forms of engagement and retreat, all in pursuit of “responsibility,” in quest of meaningful *responses* to the world as I experience it and gather information about it. (3)

To a certain degree, my own effort to bring together savoring and saving is a familiar dimension of ecocritical praxis. Other scholars in the field, such as Lawrence Buell and Michael P. Cohen, have recognized that ecocritical research is “usually energized by environmental concern” (Buell 97) and that ecocriticism “wants to know but also wants to do. Ecocriticism needs to inform personal and political actions” (Cohen 27). More recently, Polish ecocritic Wojciech Malecki, building on the tradition of pragmatist philosophy and the writings of Richard Rorty, has argued in “Save the Planet on Your Own Time? Ecocriticism and Political Practice” (2012) that socially engaged ecocriticism of the type that I describe and demonstrate in *Going Away to Think* is an appropriate convergence of professional and political activity to achieve what Rorty describes as “‘real politics,’ i.e., participating in demonstrations, supporting financially the political organization or party you find the most useful, or writing letters of protest to officials” (49). In 2012, when I moved from the University of Nevada, Reno, to the University of Idaho, I began working with my new colleagues in Idaho to develop a special program for undergraduate students at the Taylor Wilderness Research Station in the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness of central Idaho, the largest wilderness area in North America south of Alaska, and one of my goals in the environmental writing class was, in a nutshell, to introduce my students to the experience of the

engaged pastoral, to help them appreciate their remote, solitary experience in a vast wilderness, and to empower them to use their writing and speaking voices to engage with matters that concern them back in society.

Located in the heart of the Frank Church Wilderness, a 2,366,757-acre roadless area that was established in central Idaho in 1980, the Taylor Wilderness Research Station is the former homestead of a hunter and trapper named Cougar Dave Lewis (1855–1936), who, as described in Pat Cary Peek's *Cougar Dave: Mountain Man of Idaho* (2004), could be labeled a mountain hermit. Lewis arrived in the Big Creek area, fifteen kilometers from the confluence with the Middle Fork of the Salmon River, in 1879 and lived there in almost complete isolation, with his dogs, until his death in 1936. Jess Taylor (after whom the property was named) purchased the ranch from Lewis in 1935. In the late 1960s, University of British Columbia mountain lion researcher Maurice Hornocker went to Taylor Ranch to conduct his doctoral research. When the property came up for sale as he was completing his thesis, Hornocker convinced the University of Idaho to purchase the land and the handful of rustic cabins as a future research station – this happened in 1970.

The University of Idaho had owned the Taylor Wilderness Research Station for more than forty years when I arrived in 2012, but it had not yet developed an actual curriculum for undergraduates. The facility had been used mostly by graduate students and faculty members to conduct research on bighorn sheep, elk, wolves, mountain lions, rattlesnakes, salmon and steelhead, and larger ecological topics. I worked with stream ecologists, specialists in wilderness policy and management, botanists, wildlife experts, historians, and literary critics to develop the curriculum for the new program that we called 'Semester in the Wild.' Our plan was for twelve to seventeen students to travel to Taylor for a full autumn semester each year (about two and a half months), where they would live in tents or cabins, cook together, and study a complete set of courses (fifteen to seventeen credits) in a range of disciplines. It would be similar to studying abroad, except that these students would need backpacks and hiking boots instead of passports. The program was launched in the fall of 2013 with eleven students, and as I write this article, we are preparing to welcome our fourth group of 'Semester in the Wild' students in for the Fall of 2016 semester.

As I have suggested above, this unique academic program reinforces Thornber's concept of ecoambiguity and my own idea of the engaged pastoral. Students may anticipate their 'Semester in the Wild' experience as being one of lonely isolation in the backcountry, but in fact they spend much of their time in a richly social environment, together with a group of fellow students who quickly come to resemble a large family of brothers and sisters. They also get to know their professors, who fly in to the research station on tiny bush planes each week to work, hike, and cook with them, much better than they know their professors back at the university.

When professors are not at the research station, the students are accompanied by the station managers, Pete and Meg Gag and their six-year-old daughter Tehya, who live in one of the cabins and keep track of all aspects of the station, including the comings and goings of researchers and students. There are certainly opportunities for solitude at Taylor, and students take advantage of the chance to climb nearby mountains and fish for cutthroat trout and whitefish in the Big Creek River that flows through the station. But most of the time they are immersed in a culture of solitude that consists of a community of students and professors living in temporary isolation from mainstream society. There is no telephone access to society and only limited internet capacity, but news still makes its way daily to the station and paper letters and packages arrive each Wednesday morning on the mail plane, along with groceries. The station is located some two hundred kilometers from the nearest small town and is not reachable by automobiles – only by plane, on horseback, or on foot. The students themselves hike in to the station at the beginning of their experience, studying river ecology along the way.

I teach a course on environmental writing each fall as one of the five courses in the program. We begin by working on the ‘building blocks’ of what I call ‘the personal essay of environmental experience,’ studying the work of Scott Russell Sanders, Wendell Berry, Annie Dillard, and Barry Lopez, among others, as the students practice small descriptive, narrative, and reflective writing exercises aimed at deepening their attentiveness to the place itself. Often I team-teach these early units of my class with colleagues who are ethnobotanists or ornithologists, and they lend their scientific expertise to our discussions about writing carefully and vividly about the natural world. In order to quickly ramp up my students’ awareness of the power of words, I engage them in an activity at the beginning of each day that I call ‘wrapping ourselves in language.’ We are not in a particular hurry because I have come to work with the students for several days (sometimes for an entire week), and ours is the only class happening during this time period. So we spend an hour or so each morning, reading a book aloud to each other as we sit on a mountainside, gradually warming up in the rising sun. One year we read Bruce Chatwin’s *In Patagonia* (1977) together, each student and teacher reading a paragraph or two and then passing the book to the next classmate. Last year we used Terry Tempest Williams’s *When Women Were Birds: Fifty-Four Variations on Voice* (2012) as our warm-up text. Even this reading-aloud exercise is a simultaneously individual and collective activity, each student projecting her or his voice alone to the community but also listening carefully to the voices of the other readers and to the words selected by the author. We learn the sound of our own voice and the sounds of our companions’ voices through such reading – and we develop the habit of listening deeply to language, which is a new focus for some of these students (fig. 1).

I typically visit the students in the wilderness for two week-long, intensive stints. The first week focuses on the personal essay of environmental experience, the second unit on writing vividly about abstractions (scientific, political, or philosophical ideas). The students, who entered the wilderness in late August at the beginning of our academic year, leave the wilderness in early November when winter begins in the mountains of the Frank Church Wilderness. We bring them up to Moscow, Idaho, in the northern part of the state, where the University of Idaho main campus is located. The university allows the 'Semester in the Wild' students to de-compress gradually from their wilderness isolation by giving them a house to stay in on Moscow Mountain, about twenty minutes' drive from campus. At the Twin Larch Retreat (the name of the house), the students complete their final projects for their various 'Semester in the Wild' classes, including the last few projects for our writing class. The third and final unit of my environmental writing class involves preparations for the group public presentation that the students will offer on campus on the last day of the program and also the writing of a 'personal testimony' on some topic of interest and concern (fig. 2).

I consider the personal testimonies to be a vital culmination of the 'Semester in the Wild' experience. The students and I begin talking about these while we are still in the wilderness, using our isolation in the wild mountains as an opportunity to think about matters of concern back in society. Free from the hectic pressures of daily life in the city, students seem able to reflect more deeply about what really matters in their lives. They come up with such topics as the importance of developing organic gardens on their home campuses (either the University of Idaho campus or the campus where they normally study – approximately half of the 'Semester in the Wild' students come from other universities in the United States or abroad) or the need to protect predators (such as wolves or sharks) in order to preserve the health of ecosystems. The most important thing, from my perspective, is that the students are learning to use their writing and public speaking in order to imagine themselves as engaged citizens. They can draw on their growing confidence as writers to craft letters to the editor for local or national newspapers or magazines or websites or to prepare oral testimony for public meetings on their campuses or in their cities. Only a few of the students may go on in their lives to be professional writers, but all of them have the potential to live their lives as engaged community members, making a difference in the creation of reasonable public policy by showing up at meetings and offering thoughtful opinions. But in order to make a difference in this way, they must have some confidence in their ability to write and speak publicly.

I see a direct intellectual through-line from Chomei, Thoreau, and Banfield to my students in the twenty-first-century American academic program that we call 'Semester in the Wild.' Thornber's ecoambiguity and my own concept of the engaged

pastoral point to the ironic revelation that learning to write and speak well while living in the remote wilderness is important to students' lives back in society. The relative solitude of the wilderness setting contributes to students' appreciation of the social purpose of their university education. In wilderness solitude, students develop not only a sense of the value of meaningful community, but a hunger to contribute to society through the careful exertion of their own writing and speaking voices.

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**Figures**

*Fig. 1. Scott Slovic teaching at the Taylor Wilderness Research Station in central Idaho.*



Photo: Sadie Grossbaum

*Fig. 2. An engaged student presents her personal testimony.*



Photo: Scott Slovic



Robert J. Coplan and Julie C. Bowker

# Should We Be Left Alone? Psychological Perspectives on the Implications of Seeking Solitude

**Abstract:** This essay reviews psychological perspectives on the costs and benefits of solitude. We conclude that solitude is more likely to be problematic when arising from a choice to avoid social interaction (e.g., social anxiety) and more likely to confer benefits when resulting from a preference to approach the desired state of spending time alone.

## 1. Psychological Views of Solitude

Psychology is the scientific study of human behavior. Psychology researchers explore a wide range of factors that may serve to underlie both normative and atypical behaviors, from emotions and unconscious processes, to cognitions and motivations, from genetics and the neurochemistry of the brain, to family and culture. In this chapter, we provide an overview and synthesis of psychological perspectives on the implications of the human behavior of 'seeking solitude.'

In many ways, the experience of solitude is an ideal topic for psychological inquiry. First, it is a ubiquitous phenomenon across the lifespan and across the globe. As well, our emotions, cognitions, and even our neurochemistry impact upon our desires, motivations, and decisions to seek out aloneness. Moreover, there is also a wide range of subjective reactions, responses, and consequences to spending time alone. This has made solitude a topic of interest for many sub-disciplines of psychology – which in turn reflect multiple and competing perspectives and approaches.

For example, developmental psychologists have considered both the costs and benefits of solitude from early childhood to adulthood (Rubin and Coplan). Social psychologists have emphasized that affiliation with others is a basic human need (Baumeister and Leary), and neuroscientists have shown that loneliness is not only bad for our well-being, but can also take a toll on our physical health (Cacioppo and Patrick). Notwithstanding, personality psychologists have identified individuals that are often happier when spending time alone (Leary, Herbst, and McCrary). However, the extreme pursuit of solitude is considered by clinical psychologists a symptom of mental health disorders (American Psychological Association).

We begin with a brief description of the definitions and key concepts that will set the scope of our review of the psychological study of solitude. This is followed

by a brief synthesis of the major psychological perspectives espousing both the costs and benefits of seeking solitude. We finish with a consideration of the critical importance of context, which serves to mitigate the implications of spending time alone and raises many questions for future research.

## **2. All Alone? Key Concepts and Considerations**

Given the enormous breadth and volume of psychological studies that can be broadly related to the concept of solitude, we begin this chapter by proving the definitions and key concepts that serve to set the scope for this essay. In this regard, we focus on three important definitional and conceptual distinctions: (1) physical vs. perceived experiences of solitude; (2) social withdrawal vs. active isolation; and (3) normative behaviors vs. psychopathology.

### **2.1 Physical versus Perceived Solitude**

In common conversation, the word ‘solitude’ may evoke images of being marooned on a desert isle or the lone occupant of a lighthouse shining a beacon to sea during a tempest. These descriptive exemplars emphasize solitude as a physical separation from others. In this essay, consistent with the conceptualization of solitude provided by Reed Larson, we focus instead on self-perceived separation (“Solitary Side”). This approach acknowledges that there will be occasions when although we may be in physical proximity with others, we will remain socially, communicatively, and emotionally detached (i.e., alone in a crowd). Accordingly, solitude is often construed, at least in part, as a function of an individual’s internal states, including cognitions, affects, and motivations.

For example, a young child in a crowded preschool playroom who is observed to be engaged in building a block tower but not paying attention to other children nearby, would be considered to be displaying solitary play (Coplan). Adolescents often report feeling alone and lonely even when they are in the presence of family or peers (van Roekel et al.). Similarly, in the study of solitude and isolation among the elderly, there is a growing call to move beyond objective criteria and assessments, such as living alone, to more subjective considerations, such as perceived social connectedness with family and community (Wethington and Pillemer).

Larson further points out that according to his definition, an individual would not be considered alone if they were at home by themselves but talking to someone on the phone (“Solitary Side”). Thus, just as we can sometimes be considered alone in the presence of others, physical separation from others does not always imply solitude. Larson also suggests that if the individual home by themselves

was watching television or listening to music, they would be alone because, under these circumstances, there would be no demands or expectations for social responsiveness. However, as we will discuss in a later section, rapidly changing contemporary technologies related to computer-mediated communication and social networking are challenging our notions of what it means to be alone (Turkle). Notwithstanding, our conceptualization of solitude would be best described as more akin to a state of mind than to a state of being.

## 2.2 Social Withdrawal versus Active Isolation

Timothy Wilson and colleagues conducted a series of studies where they asked college students to spend a short period of time (between 6 and 14 minutes, depending upon the specific study) alone in an unadorned room, without cell phones, writing implements, or any such additional materials. Participants were asked to spend the time entertaining themselves with their thoughts, and the only rules were that they needed to remain in their seats and awake. Afterwards, these students were asked questions about their perceptions of this experience (e.g., how enjoyable it was, how hard it was to concentrate) and then given choices between either repeating the experience or engaging in other potentially more positive or negative tasks. The results were unequivocal. As a group, participants did not enjoy being forced to sit alone with their thoughts, even for this relatively brief period of time. Not surprisingly, students reported a clear preference for engaging in a neutral or positive activity (e.g., reading a book, listening to music) rather than continuing to sit alone and unoccupied. However, the majority of participants also actually elected to receive electric shocks rather than sit alone again with nothing to do.

The design of this study confounds the physical context of being alone with a lack of external stimulation (i.e., the experience of boredom). Notwithstanding, it is a striking illustration of how we do not like having solitude forced upon us. With this in mind, our next consideration is whether the source of one's solitude is external versus internal. For example, one manner in which someone may end up spending considerable time alone is *vis-à-vis* social isolation, a process whereby individuals are forced into solitude because they are rejected and ostracized by others (Rubin and Mills). As a result of disastrous historical circumstances such as the tragedy of the Romanian orphanages, psychology researchers have demonstrated the profound and life-long destructive consequences of extreme social isolation, neglect, and deprivation (Nelson, Fox, and Zeanah). There is also a considerable body of research demonstrating that the day-to-day experiences of being socially excluded and rejected by one's peers is damaging to our psychological and physical

well-being, throughout childhood and adolescence (Rubin, Bukowski, and Bowker) and among adults (Williams and Nida). However, for our purposes, we are primarily concerned with social withdrawal, the process where individuals remove themselves (for one reason or another) from opportunities for social interaction (Rubin, Coplan, and Bowker).

Psychology researchers have examined a variety of reasons why individuals may seek out solitude, including the desire for privacy (Pedersen), the pursuance of religious experiences (Hay and Morisy), enjoyment of leisure activities (Purcell and Keller), and avoiding upsetting situations (Larson, "Solitary Side"). As we discuss in a later section, the implications of social withdrawal for our well-being are closely tied to our motivations for seeking solitude. For example, choosing to spend time alone can be restorative for individuals with an affinity for solitude (Hills and Argyle). In contrast, for those who desire social contact but retreat to solitude because of feelings of social fear and anxiety, being alone can lead to increased loneliness, worry, and depression (Brown et al.).

### **2.3 Normative Behaviors vs. Psychopathology**

Finally, from the perspective of clinical psychology, excessive solitude is often considered a behavioral manifestation of psychopathology. For example, extreme social avoidance is a behavioral characteristic of several clinically-diagnosed mental health disorders, including social anxiety disorder (Rao et al.), avoidant personality disorder (Westen and Shedler), and schizophrenia (Hansen et al.). For the purposes of this chapter, we focus primarily on the psychological study of solitude within the (still very wide) confines of normative behaviors.

## **3. Costs of Solitude**

As we have already indicated, being forced into solitude is not only an experience that few people enjoy, but such social isolation also has substantive negative implications for our well-being. However, it is also important to note that choosing to spend time alone does not always have positive implications.

For example, shy and socially anxious individuals may retreat into solitude despite strong desires for social interaction (Asendorpf). A shy child, for instance, may be motivated and interested in playing with others, but at the same time, these social situations also evoke feelings of social fear, unease, and self-consciousness. Thus, even when given opportunities to interact with peers, negative thoughts and feelings often cause shy and anxious individuals to avoid social situations and withdraw into solitude.

Unfortunately however, choosing to spend time alone appears to do little to alleviate shy and socially anxious individuals' psychological distress. Indeed, a degenerative cycle may ensue whereby shyness and social withdrawal lead to negative psychological outcomes such as loneliness and depression, which in turn exacerbate feelings of shyness and heighten social withdrawal (Gazelle and Ladd; Gazelle and Rudolph). Why might this be the case? Recall that although shy and socially anxious individuals are fearful and self-conscious about social interactions and relationships, they do generally want to interact with others. Thus, it is likely that their withdrawal into solitude interferes with the fulfillment of their social needs and desires, which in turn leads to increasing psychological distress (Baumeister and Leary). Moreover, when shy and socially anxious individuals do interact and form relationships with peers and romantic partners, such relationship experiences are oftentimes plagued by negative and challenging interactions. This, in turn, often further strengthens tendencies to socially withdraw and contributes to psychological ill-being (Oh et al.).

Indeed, extreme shyness in childhood is one of the strongest risk factors predicting later more serious mental health problems, such as social anxiety disorder (Chronis-Tuscano et al.). Also of concern are the strong linkages between shyness, social anxiety, and heightened feelings of 'loneliness.' Not only is chronic loneliness damaging to psychological well-being, but there is also a growing literature linking it to negative health outcomes (e.g., high cardiovascular activation, sleep dysfunction, obesity) throughout the life-span (Cacioppo and Patrick). In this regard, loneliness is conceptualized as a persistent form of social stress, which can lead to long-term negative physiological effects (e.g., increased levels of cortisol). Thus, it does not appear that shy and socially anxious individuals experience many benefits from spending time in solitude despite choosing solitude over social interaction.

In other cases, individuals may seek solitude because they desire and enjoy the experience of being alone (Coplan, Ooi, and Nocita). Such unsociable (or socially disinterested) individuals may not mind being with others (and will not specifically turn down or refuse attractive social invitations), but if given the choice, are often happy spending time alone. Thus, in this context, seeking solitude can be conceptualized as an affinity for aloneness (Goossens), rather than an avoidance of (stressful) social contexts.

It seems clear that we would be less concerned about the negative implications of solitude under these circumstances. Indeed, initial evidence suggests that as compared to those who seek solitude because of shyness and social anxiety, unsociability and an affinity for aloneness appear to be comparatively benign during childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood (Bowker and Raja; Coplan, Ooi, and

Nocita; Nelson). However, some psychological theory does suggest that excessive time spent alone, even under these relatively benign conditions, may still carry some costs. For example, it has long been argued that spending too much time alone in childhood may take away from important opportunities to engage with and learn from peers. Jean Piaget posited that peers provide a unique developmental context in which children and adolescents learn how to deal with conflict, how to compromise and negotiate, and how to perspective-take (or to understand the perspective of others). Other psychological theories emphasize the special importance of close relationships to fulfill social needs, such as the belongingness hypothesis (Baumeister and Leary) and the interpersonal theory of psychiatry (Sullivan). Extrapolating from this, the failure to satisfy our needs for intimacy, companionship, and acceptance is thought to lead to psychological maladjustment. Implicit in all of these theories is that individuals who fail to interact with others in meaningful ways (even if it is because they simply prefer to spend time alone) may miss out on important developmental opportunities and suffer psychologically.

#### **4. Benefits of Solitude**

Of course, a discussion of the potential costs of solitude should be balanced by a consideration of the positive aspects of spending time alone. Psychological researchers have highlighted theoretical perspectives, and provide some empirical support, for the unique affordances of solitude (Burger; Larson, "Solitary Side"; Long et al.). For example, it has been suggested that experiences in solitude can provide a unique context for self-exploration and self-reflection, both of which are considered necessary for psychological health (Goossens). It has also been argued that solitude affords a distinctive context in which individuals can develop (and excel) intellectually, creatively, and spiritually (Long et al.). As well, scholars have emphasized the restorative features of certain types of solitude (e.g., being alone in nature) that can allow individuals to experience stress reduction and self-renewal (Korpela and Staats).

In support of these notions, research has linked certain forms of self-imposed solitude to numerous indices of psychological health and well-being. For instance, Larson found that adolescents who spent moderate amounts of time in solitude reported more positive psychological adjustment relative to those who spent no time and those who spent large amounts of time alone ("Emergence of Solitude"). Conversely, an aversion to solitude has also been negatively associated with creative talents and pursuits, likely because some solitude is required for the free-flowing thoughts and ideas, as well as the development and practice of many musical and artistic skills (e.g., playing a musical instrument; Csikszentmihalyi).

In terms of the engagement in specific solitary activities, constructive forms of solitude (e.g., reading, writing, collecting) have been linked with higher levels of psychological well-being (Adams, Leibbrandt, and Moon; Tinsley et al.). Perhaps due to the well-documented relaxation, healing, and restorative benefits of communing with nature, spending time in outdoor recreation and alone in nature are also consistently associated with positive well-being (Nisbet, Zelenski, and Murphy). Finally, there is some recent evidence that solitary time spent on the internet and communication-devices is related to decreases in perceived stress and loneliness (Teppers et al.). Of course, it is important to emphasize that it has been suggested that certain individuals may benefit the most from solitary experiences, such as those with strong preferences for solitude and introverted personalities (Burger; Teppers et al.).

The aforementioned research focused on community (non-clinical) samples of adolescents and adults, but it is worth noting that there is growing evidence supporting the effectiveness of mindfulness-based interventions (which typically involve promoting a sense of psychological solitude and meditation) with clinical populations (e.g., those suffering from anxiety, depression, substance-use problems; Salmon and Matarese). Such interventions have also been found to be helpful in the treatment of and recovery from physical illnesses, such as cancer and fibromyalgia (Cash et al.; Tamagawa et al.). However, in recent years, mindfulness-based stress reduction techniques have also become increasingly recommended for the general psychological health of adults (Marchand) as well as children and adolescents (Parker et al.).

## **5. The Critical Role of Context**

With most research questions in the field of psychology, things always end up being quite a bit more complicated than we initially imagined. This has certainly been the case when we have tried to ascertain the answer to our basic question: What are the psychological implications of solitude? In this final section, we briefly discuss the critical role of context as a mitigating factor of the costs and benefits of solitude.

### **5.1 Developmental Contexts**

There are developmental factors to consider with regard to solitude. To begin with, the estimated percentage of waking time that Americans spend alone appears to increase substantially across the lifespan, from about 17% in childhood, to 30% in adults, to over 50% among the elderly (Larson, "Solitary Side"). There are also

developmental differences in our attitudes toward being alone. For example, although children generally have negative attitudes toward solitude (Coplan et al., "Understanding Solitude"; Galanaki), more positive attitudes steadily emerge over the course of adolescence and into adulthood (Larson, "Emergence of Solitude"; Maes et al.).

Relatedly, the experience of loneliness also appears to vary significantly across the lifespan (Qualter et al.). For example, in a recent study with a nationally representative sample of over 16,000 participants, Maike Luhmann and Louise C. Hawkley found a complex and non-linear pattern of self-reported loneliness from late adolescence through to retirement. After rising from late adolescence to a peak at around age 30 years, there was a down trend in loneliness until about age 40. This was followed by an upward pattern with another peak around age 60 years, and then a steady decline with the lowest rates of loneliness found at age 75 years. However, after this, loneliness rose dramatically until the highest levels were observed among the very oldest in the sample.

To further complicate matters, we argue elsewhere that the very nature of solitary experiences likely change with age. For example, whereas younger children's social experiences are more likely to be influenced by their parents and other external factors (i.e., attending school), adolescents and adults have greater personal control over and increased opportunities for self-selected solitary experiences. Notwithstanding, there may also come a time in the life of older adults where they are significantly (physically) impeded in their ability to actively seek out social contacts.

Perhaps the important developmental question is whether there are differential costs and benefits of solitude at different life stages. For example, spending too much time alone in early childhood may be particularly damaging because it deprives young children from important socialization experiences in the peer group, a critical context for social, emotional, cognitive, and moral development (Rubin, Bukowski, and Bowker). In adolescence, it appears to be particularly critical to spend time alone, in order to facilitate important developmental tasks such as individuation and identity formation (Goossens). Among the elderly, spending too much time alone appears to have a direct link with poorer physical health (Shankar et al.).

The debate as to when in development solitude might carry the greatest costs, or yield the greatest benefits, is yet to be resolved. It remains to be seen how these potential differences in the meaning and experiences of being alone across the lifespan speak to the relation between solitude and well-being.



## 5.2 Cultural Contexts

This volume focuses on cultures of solitude within the specific cultural context of the United States. However, psychology researchers have been increasingly interested in the similarities and differences in attitudes toward and implications of seeking solitude in other cultural contexts across the globe (Chen).

Western countries may value the desire to spend time alone as an autonomous expression of personal choice and independence, and as such, individuals who prefer to spend more time alone are not necessarily violating societal norms (Coplan, Ooi, and Nocita). However, many non-Western cultures place greater emphasis on interdependence and social affiliation. For example, in more collectivistic societies like China, an affinity for spending time alone may conflict with cultural norms regarding group orientation and be viewed as deviant and lead to exclusion and rejection by others (Liu et al., “Unsociability and Shyness”; Liu et al., “Shyness and Unsociability”). In Japan, the extreme seeking of solitude is viewed as a mental illness known as *hikikomori*. This culturally specific phenomenon among Japanese youth involves a prolonged period of self-imposed social isolation (Furlong).

In other cultures, seeking solitude is viewed more positively. For example, in Scandinavian countries such as Finland, the high positive value placed on ‘quietude’ makes the seeking of solitude a normative behavior, considered to be a “natural way of being” (Carbaugh, Berry, and Nurmikari-Berry 203). As well, solitary and unassuming behaviors in African countries such as Nigeria may be more strongly encouraged than sociable behaviors, which might be interpreted as self-promoting and self-asserting (Bowker, Ojo, and Bowker). Thus, the meaning and potential implications of solitary behaviors are very much imbedded within societal and cultural contexts.

## 5.3 Computer-mediated Contexts

As a final consideration, rapid advances in computer-mediated forms of communication have created new contexts for social engagement that have profound implications for those who may seek solitude (Prizant-Passal, Shechner, and Aderka). For example, according to the social enhancement (“Rich Get Richer”) hypothesis (Kraut et al.; Walther), those individuals with already developed high quality off-line social relationships will benefit most from the internet as a social medium. In this regard, sociable individuals who have good social skills and many friends will use computer-mediated communications to further strengthen their existing social networks in the real world. On the other hand, individuals who may seek solitude because of struggles with face-to-face interactions may end up further

worsening their real-world social relationships by retreating even more to virtual communications.

In contrast, the social enhancement (“Poor Get Richer”) hypothesis (Amichai-Hamburger and Hayat; Valkenburg, Schouten, and Peter) argues that individuals who are dissatisfied with their social relationships compensate by increased use of computer-mediated forms of communication. The internet can provide a less anxiety-provoking context for social interactions. Moreover, the anonymous nature of some internet-based communications may help such individuals explore their identity in a safe environment, work through feelings of self-consciousness, and hone social skills. These experiences might then translate into more successful face-to-face social interactions.

Of particular interest for our discussion, however, is how social networking technologies are challenging the very parameters of what it means to be alone. Recall Larson’s assertion that an individual would not be considered to be alone if they were engaged in a phone conversation with someone (“Solitary Side”). This definition clearly bears revisiting in light of new streams of computer-mediated social communications like texting and social networking applications (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter). If the individual in question was engaged in real-time verbal communication with a webcam (e.g., Skype, Facetime), this would clearly fall under Larson’s category of ‘not alone.’ However, in other instances (e.g., ‘liking’ or commenting on a Facebook post) this distinction may be less clear. Indeed, when being connected to social networks is as easy as reaching for your smart phone and is rapidly becoming the norm, it could be argued that we will soon reach a point in our society that we are never truly alone.

## **6. Seeking Solitude vs. Avoiding Social Interactions**

The psychological study of solitude indicates that there are complex and varying implications of spending time alone. Moreover, there is growing evidence identifying a wide array of factors that impact upon the links between seeking solitude and well-being. One key factor is the importance of agency (Chua and Koestner). When imposed, solitude is often an undesired state that comes at a cost for the individual; when chosen, solitude can be a desirable experience that affords a variety of important benefits. However, as we have seen, some individuals who choose their solitude may still experience being alone in a profoundly negative way. Thus, as a final thought, more than just a function of agency, we would assert that solitude is also more likely to be problematic when it results from a choice to avoid social interaction (e.g., because of social anxiety) – and more likely to confer

psychological benefits when it results from a preference to approach the desired state of spending time alone (e.g., affinity for aloneness).

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