



Marya Hornbacher

Solitude Narratives: Toward a Future of the Form

Part 1: A Woman's Place

(A too-loud clot of WRITERS at a too-small table in a too-warm hotel bar. Lights up on COLLEAGUE and WOMAN WRITER. In a tone that drapes its patronization in syntax as subtle as a rhino sweeping past in a gauzy evening shrug, COLLEAGUE starts in.)

COLLEAGUE: You're an extremely independent woman.

WOMAN WRITER: As opposed to what?

It wasn't the first time I'd heard it, or the fifth, or the tenth; it was just the first time I blurted out what I always thought. We'd been discussing our current projects; I'd mentioned an extended period of research that had involved, among other forays, a road trip from Minneapolis to Oklahoma City to Fort Wayne. The trip, like most of mine, was undertaken for entirely practical reasons: I was doing research for a book, I had sources in several cities, those cities were close, or close enough, in the grand scheme of American geography, that I could drive from one to the next and spare myself the cost of flights and rental cars, live on gas station food, stay in cheap motels, and stretch my research funding out a few more months. When you "follow the story" for a living, all questions regarding logistics, preference, and personal taste are answered by the First Law of Freelancer Economics: Assume you will never get paid.

Why this struck my colleague as so independent that it warranted both an adjectival superlative and a reference to my gender was unclear. It wasn't exactly a daredevil maneuver, posed no great risk to life and

limb, resulted in good data and a one-off essay, and, at least as far as small talk went, involved no real danger, other than being seen and thought out of place in the world.

I have been itinerant for most of my life, and for a long time it didn't strike me as odd. I understood it to be a fundamental characteristic of who I am and how I live, but not one of particular note. Self-awareness, I think, inheres as much in an awareness of ways in which one is utterly unremarkable as in the ways one believes oneself to be "unique;" perhaps that's why I was well into my 40s before I realized *other* people saw my peripatetic way of life as curious, or perhaps indicative of some underlying trait—whether asset or flaw still seems to be up for debate. The questions are always the same: *Don't you get scared? Don't you get lonely? Don't you get bored?* And as I've gotten older, another question has frequently snuck in: *Aren't you ever going to settle down?*

The correct answers to these questions, I've learned, are not the ones I give; I've also learned that the line of questioning itself tells me more about the interrogator's own position in the world than it ever reveals about mine. The very premise of the inquiry is gendered, both overtly and covertly so. In a totally unscientific survey of my male-presenting colleagues, I've ascertained that when they're traveling solo on assignment, strangers do not give them the Sad Face™ and ask, sotto voce, if they get lonely or scared. More subtly, the questions assume that there is another kind of life available to me *as a woman*, a life that naturally would be preferable to me *because I am a woman*, a life that, however surprisingly, does not involve fear, loneliness, or boredom (all feelings that, *as a woman*, it's assumed I must wish to avoid). It seems these colleagues of mine are allowed to live and work largely unhindered by the assumption that at some unspecified future date (when they grow up, perhaps?) they will stop this madcap driving about and settle into their assigned—fixed, domestic, familial—place.

I'm not the only single woman I know, nor the only female-identified single writer—and here it may be worth noting an increasing preference for the term "solo" over "single," since the latter word seems to function as a red-herring alert, given its colloquial association with words like "available" (for

purchase? for hire?) and “looking” (for our misplaced keys? our purpose in life? our missing parts?)—nor am I even the only lady writer of a certain age who is single by choice; I’m by no means a rare breed. But that element of choice, and its correlate processes of deliberation, intention, decision, and design, are critical to the subject of my inquiry in this piece.

Like any other nonfiction project, this one began with a question: why does everybody seem to think my habit of wandering around and writing stuff down is *weird*? As habits go, it seems reasonable enough; and there’s certainly a long, rich, and fairly well-established literary tradition of people doing exactly that. The language of that tradition had long since infiltrated not just literary and cinematic parlance but common use; from the Hero’s Journey to every varietal of epic, odyssey, and narrative quest, from *On the Road* to *Wild*, from Bill and Ted to Thelma and Louise, the narrative of wandering off—which provides an almost irresistibly seamless structure, to say nothing of motive, momentum, character, warrant, and voice—is deeply embedded in both literary and popular consciousness.

That it also describes the way I live, which is largely a function of my line of work, seemed incidental to me until I was struck with a one-two punch of a plan: I would write two things. The first would be a collection of loosely linked essays written from the road—travel essays, sort of, but less the glossy-mag place-based wow-cool-town-what-jewel-toned-scenery-and-quirky-locals sort of thing than a sustained narrative about the specifically American iconography of movement, which is inextricably linked to the American mythology of individualism. Turn those things over, of course, and you’re looking at a cultural self-concept, an iconography, and a literary and cinematic history that are fundamentally delusional in nature; you’re looking at the colonialist underpinnings of not just the American mythos but of the country itself, in both historical and present-day fact. I wanted to write about the specific relationship that I have with that iconography and that mythology—a relationship that is both a de facto participation in and a resistance to them both, and which is complicated by the fact that I am a woman, and I travel alone.

The second would be a critical overview of what I'd mentally started calling "solitude narratives" by women, in which I would examine the ways in which women wrote about the experience of being alone.

I defined my terms as such: a narrative of solitude was narrative nonfiction in which the author wrote, in the first or third person, about being alone. Literary works that were religious in nature, which in many cases involved solitary experience (such as meditation, prayer, or retreat), but for which the condition of solitude was either a) not experienced as absolute, due to a theistic framework and the presence, at least textually, of a relationship with a deistic figure, or b) was not a central concern, lay outside the scope of my inquiry. My focus was on the relationship—in some cases oblique, in others almost dialectical—between the narrator and the experience of solitude itself. The authors share an awareness of the fact that they are, to some degree and for some span of time, without human companionship. The absence of others is palpable in these works; the authors are often acutely aware that they must navigate the presence—whether one sees it as condition, character, setting, or state—of solitude itself.

The first part—essays about, from, and on the road—went ok. The second turned out to be harder than it looked.

As I dug through the annals of American literature looking for nonfiction narratives of solitude by women—for precedent, perhaps, or proof—I found myself wondering lots of things: for starters, where were they? Where was the body of critical work on the form? Where was the taxonomy of types and subtypes I'd assumed were a mere JSTOR search away? No dice. Instead, I found unpublished diaries by pioneer women, a few written accounts of polar expeditions by women (none of them American) who had accompanied male teams, various apocrypha, and the handful of full-length narratives that I've come to see as the precursors to a genre that has yet to be defined or explored. I began to realize that the narrative history of women's solitude has yet to be written, for the simple reason that women have not historically had the means to—or been allowed to—live solitary lives.

While narratives of solitude have enormous breadth of scope in some ways, they also share at least three core characteristics: the foregrounding of solitude as a literary subject in itself; the use of the first-person voice, and the correlate presence of narrative persona; and the centrality of physical place and/or movement through space to the work as a whole.

The emergence of solitude as a literary subject follows, historically, its emergence as a psychological concept. In this article, I provide only a broad overview of that movement in order to establish the tradition of literary attempts to define, describe, and perhaps navigate the experience of solitude from the classical era to the present.

I explore two core characteristics of solitude narratives that are directly inflected and complicated by the gender of the author, both in concept and in practice. One of these is the centrality of place and territory. Narratives of solitude share an extraordinary depth of focus on the natural landscape, often employing exhaustive, detailed description; I argue that this authorial habit may be reflective of a Hegelian impulse to name, to record, to catalogue, and in some ways to claim or master the phenomenal world within these spaces of adventure or retreat.

The second characteristic of solitude narratives that I explore in detail is the use of the first-person point of view, and by extension the construction of a specifically gendered narrative persona. The first-person speaker—the I-persona—may be as mythic and idealized as the cultural history from which he is derived; the narrator, many contemporary authors would argue, is a character formed at the intersection of authorial imagination and the author's projection of self. The American canon was largely written by a class and race of men whose freedom was assumed and nearly absolute. The cultural mythos upon which American writers draw—and the literary tradition by which we are created and which in turn we create—show the imprimatur of those authors even now. When that mythology is peopled by characters who are categorically distinct from the reader, and further, when that reader's existence is denied within the heuristic logic of the myth, and the maintenance of the mythos relies upon a purposeful denial of the

reader's difference (Otherness), the reader must choose between wresting herself out of her own subjectivity and into the imagined position of Self, or rejecting the entire premise of the myth.

Finally, I examine practical questions of nonfiction craft that I encounter—some of them repeatedly—in writing from a position of solitude, and about the influence of solitude on my writing life. These questions—how does one write of a woman's solitude? Is there need, or warrant, or room, for such a narrative at this time? Is there meaning to be made from the way a woman perceives, traverses, and understands the social and physical landscapes of a place, and is it materially different from the meaning drawn from those experiences as they are chronicled by men? How might a woman trace the influence, on both herself and her work, of the fictions, delusions, myths, and indeed the facts, of American life?

Part 2—The Literary Origins of Solitude

You who I don't know I don't know how to talk to you

The uses of solitude. To imagine; to hear.
 Learning braille. To imagine other solitudes.
 But they will not be mine;
 To wait, in the quiet; not to scatter the voices—

—Jean Valentine

The literary history of solitude narratives has evolved along two paths, each with its own history, intention, and formal traditions: the religious narrative of solitude, and the naturalist.

The first turns its attention inward, mapping the metaphysical terrain of spiritual experience, typically taking the narrative form of a search for or an encounter with a Judeo-Christian God. The second, which follows in the long tradition of the explorer narrative (which in turn follows from an even older tradition of explorers' and naturalists' diaries, letters, and journals, as well as ships' logs), turns its perspective outward, observing and detailing the phenomenal world. The two types, however, are linked by

both their formal and textual similarities, and, more loosely, by the philosophic premises from which they set out.

Writing that explores the religious pursuit of solitude carries a different intention than does the non-theistic solitude narrative, or at least it seems to at first glance. Religious solitaries, as they even now call themselves, ultimately seek an emptying out of self, or *kenosis* (self-outpouring), that is intended to make way for a mystical union with God. In a typical passage describing this desire, the nineteenth century contemplative monk Charles de Foucauld writes in a letter to an aspiring ascetic that one must

cross the desert and spend some time in it to receive the grace of God as we should. It is there that one empties oneself, that one drives away from oneself everything that is not God and that one empties completely the small house of one's soul so as though to leave all the room free for God alone...It is indispensable: the soul needs the silence of it, the inward retirement, this oblivion of all created things. (cit. Maitland 191)

By contrast, solitude narratives that are not overtly religious, or that do not take religious questions or religious experience as an end in themselves, turn instead to a search for something one might call transcendent, or at least meaningful, in the physical world. In the late eighteenth century, there was a boom in the popularity of such solitude narratives, most of which were written by explorers, pioneers, prospectors, and lone adventurers.

These early explorer narratives evolved ultimately into the nature writing of the modern period and into the present day, which has gradually transitioned away from a preoccupation with discovering, conquering, and possessing the natural world, and toward encountering, observing, and describing it. These writers sought ownership not in the sense that the material world was overtly seen as property or commodity, but in the Hegelian sense; the commodity, the desired quantity, the thing of value that the seeker would possess was not physical object but knowledge, not phenomena but phenomenological experience. In these works, the writer attempts to obtain mastery and, perhaps, ownership of what he sees

by giving it a name. “Through naming comes knowing,” writes Edward Abbey in *Desert Solitaire*. He continues:

We grasp an object, mentally, by giving it a name—hension, prehension, apprehension, And thus through language create a whole world, corresponding to the other world out there. Or we trust that it corresponds. Or perhaps, like a German poet, we cease to care, becoming more concerned with the naming than with the things named; the former becomes more real than the latter. And so in the end the world is lost again. No, the world remains—those unique, particular, incorrigibly individual junipers and sandstone monoliths—and it is we who are lost. (256-57)

Solitude narratives, by their nature, require a singular, solitary, speaker; they are predicated upon the concept of the existence of self. In literary iconography, this manifests first in the form of the Romantic individual, and eventually, in the form of the American individualist. But before either of those figures could be sketched onto the page, the idea of self as distinct from society, and the possibility of a self with agency choosing to separate *from* society, and ultimately the concept of solitude at all, had to emerge.

The first classical writings that explicitly explore solitude as a valuable human condition—rather than as merely the condition to which one defaults in the absence of other humans—come from China. In roughly the sixth century B.C.E, two predominant philosophies of an ethical life developed—Confucianism and Taoism—and while both philosophies held that serenity and self-confidence were essential to the good life, they parted ways on the question of how those qualities were to be obtained. Confucianism understood the basic human virtue to be *jen*, or the expression of one’s humanity through doing right by one’s fellow human. Confucius held that knowledge was to “know man,” and wisdom was to “attend to the welfare of the people.” This ethical system was inherently social in nature, and drew on the clearly defined, highly reciprocal nature of social relations present in traditional Chinese society. (trans. Lau 429)

But it is in Taoism that we find the earliest textual precedent for the idea of solitude as a virtue, even as a way of life. Though probably apocryphal, the figure of Lao-Tse is said to have composed the *Tao te Ching*, which is in many ways a manifesto of a solitary life. In this ethical system, all things social—status, organization, participation, relation—were seen as an impediment to the freedom and therefore the proper development of the individual. The Taoist holds that solitude is the healthiest condition for the human being, because it removes us from the warping influence of society and exposes us to the healing influence of nature. The highest good, in this philosophy, is humility, often symbolized by water in visual arts; water best expresses the principle of *wu wei*, the paradox of action without action.

The *Tao te Ching* gathers, in more poetic form than narrative, a fragmented group of ethical principles that had been in existence in China long before this text was created—the rejection of aggression, acquisitiveness, prosperity, and ambition, and the cultivation of humility, poverty, independence, and self-knowledge—and which would go on to inspire lives of solitude for thousands of years.

Roughly contemporaneous to this philosophical consideration of solitude in China, the Greeks were emerging from a Homeric culture in which the individual was defined, and valued, solely on the basis of the respect and honor he could win from society; the human was significant only insofar as she was seen, and praised, by the social world. Aristotle famously calls man a political animal, in the sense that Aristotle believed the human's natural habitat was the *polis*, the community. He taught that humans could achieve their full potential only by working for the common good, and that the drive to do so—work for the larger benefit of society—was innate. Even early Greek religious observance was a communal activity; worship, ritual, and prayer were as social in nature as feast and war.

But the individual was poised to emerge. Those who practiced the cult of Orpheus, and later, the more intellectualized Pythagoreans, banded together into ascetic brotherhoods of continence, abstinence, and, in some cases, silence. These groups and their religious observances—particularly their withdrawal

from society, and their insistence upon the individual's duty to work toward his own salvation—provided the first religiously based ideological justification for solitude.

The tipping point came with Socrates, and the philosophical exploration Plato gives him in the *Dialogues*. Socrates was, granted, a voluble, argumentative, and highly sociable fellow, but he lived a largely ascetic life, claimed that his most valuable possession was his leisure, once said happily in the crowded marketplace, “How many things there are that I do not want!” and was fond of noting that to be content with little is to approach the divine. More pertinent to the question of solitude, however, is Socrates' argument that the approval of society was not, and could not be, the only nor even the most important catalyst for human behavior or the measure of one's worth; instead, Socrates argued—long before Emerson did—that conscience, not society, ought to be the driving force behind an ethical life. The wise man should not aim for the praise of the masses, Socrates said, but for *autarkeia*—self-sufficiency.

When Socrates died, his followers, later called the Cynics, including the most famous of them—Diogenes and his student Crates—carried his query to its logical conclusion: they rejected society outright. They claimed that—contrary to Aristotelian opinion—the polis was by no means the natural environment for the development of the individual; indeed, it was a corrosive, distorting force, and would be man's downfall.

At about this time, in the first few centuries C.E., another philosophy was rapidly taking hold; Christianity and the Cynics found a common enemy in the Greco-Roman civilization. The emergence of the ascetic orders of early Christianity—especially the eremitic monks, often called the Desert Fathers—was a direct result of the Socratic rejection of society as a valid source of ethical standards. But where could one go to escape the warping influence of the polis? Into the desert, of course.

Here, at the historical (and probably geographic) intersection of Greco-Roman religious mythologies, Gnosticism, Judaism, and the early Christian Church, we find the bridge between ancient and modern ideas of solitude, society, and self.

The sayings of these desert fathers (and, later, the desert mothers) and the stories of their lives and deeds exist as apophthegmata, rather than as written works by a single author. The apophthegmata were collected towards the end of the fourth century, and they form the oldest record of early Christian monasticism that we have. It is clear, in these fragments and stories, that solitude was now seen as a valuable state unto itself, a recurrent subject of consideration and speech; no longer just an escape from society, or a negation of it, solitude instead is a presence that the eremitic must, in some ways, study, navigate, interrogate, and understand; this understanding is seen as a fundamental part of his spiritual development. In his study of several historical periods of eremitic life, Peter France writes,

For the Desert Fathers, solitude was not merely an escape from distractions; it was a teaching presence. To remain silent and alone is to be open to influences that are crowded out of an occupied life. These influences, some felt, were enough to bring about spiritual health. We may well have a duty to our fellow humflosean beings, and good works are praiseworthy; but self-knowledge can only come through solitude. (26)

In one of the more famous sayings, a monk travels to Scete to ask for a word from Abba Moses. The famous Desert Father tells him, “Go and stay in your cell; your cell will teach you everything.”

Before I dive into contemporary narratives of solitude, I should look back at the rash of seventeenth and eighteenth-century American and British essays on solitude. As a group tackling a relatively new cultural concept, one that would further evolve post-Freud, these essayists appear as tiny figures trying to cast their net over a behemoth creature that can never be captured in its totality—an obvious example of the attempt, of course, is Emerson’s wonderfully titled essay “Experience” (hearkening back to Montaigne’s much earlier “Of Experience”). Even in discussion of what would perhaps be considered a “personal” subject such as solitude, many of the older essays are written from a vantage point of purported

objectivity, examining their subject from the exterior, rather than writing with the interiority endemic to today's personal essays.

Alice Meynell writes with pity, and in the third person plural, of those who are unable to find “the enormous solitude which is the common, unbounded, and virtually illimitable possession of all mankind... a space inviolate, a place of unhidden liberty...the solitude that has a sky and a horizon they know not how to wish” (18). William Hazlitt’s “On going on a journey” occupies a middle distance somewhere between a description of solitude in theory and in fact, a balancing point between the interior and exterior experience of the thing. While his language insists upon a greater remove of writer from reader, he sets out upon that journey on an affable, personable note: “I like solitude, when I give myself up to it,” he writes, and continues shortly that he must “absent [himself] from the town for a while, without feeling at a loss the moment I am left by myself” (71-73).

Where Meynell and several of her contemporaries describe solitude as an ideal condition of the mind, Hazlitt often writes of its practical application: “I in a manner forget myself,” he writes in “On the love of life” (9), which, though it expresses the same notion, is very different from Meynell’s description of an “un-self-consciousness [that] is absolute: it is to the wild degree. They are solitaires, body and soul; even when they are curious...they are essentially alone.” (17-18) This *they* of which she speaks is an abstraction in itself; she, as the author, stands apart and observes.

The common thread that runs through these essays is the depiction of modernity—which modernity is dependent on the essayist’s era—as insane. Curiously, this insanity is evoked more than it is described; while it is explicitly stated at points in nearly every one of these essays, the more striking fact is that most of the authors use sentence construction to evoke it. Meynell describes modernity using a repeated construction of semi-colons that give pause but do not stop the train of thought:

If there is a look of human eyes that tells of perpetual loneliness, so there is also the familiar look that is the sign of perpetual crowds. It is the London expression, and, in its way, the Paris

expression. It is the quickly caught, though not interested, look, the dull but ready glance of those who do not know of their forfeited place apart; who have neither the open secret nor the close; no reserve, no need of refuge, no flight nor impulse of flight; no moods but what they may brave out in the street,”

with, she writes, “no hope of news” from their solitary minds (18).

While the tone of voice varies, when these solitary authors write about the thickly peopled world they’ve willingly left—from wariness to disdain to outright rejection—the very premise of secular accounts of solitude arises from a modern—specifically, a post-Enlightenment—sense of an identifiable, discrete self.

The character of Self—indeed, the very notion of a first-person narrator (“Call me Ishmael”)—is Western, and modern, at its core. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, “the idea of individualism, freedom and change replaced community, authority, and tradition as core (European) values,” writes Sarah Maitland. Romanticism’s critique of the perceived falsity of the eighteenth century involved a sharp turn inward, as writers began to focus on the emotional and subjective experience of the individual. “That which was not divisible into further constituent parts,” Maitland writes, “was the *self*—the individual in whom innate human rights and self-authenticating emotions could reside” (232).

Solitude and silence—in fact, the entire idealized concept of Nature that was cultivated during the Romantic period—allowed the individual to “escape the coils of social convention and slip back into primal innocence so that he would be able to access his deepest emotions,” Maitland writes. “And so the Romantics sought out solitude and silence in order to ‘find themselves,’ just as the desert hermits sought out silence and solitude to ‘lose themselves” (18).

In Wordsworth’s 1850 poem “The Prelude,” written as the introduction to his never-completed philosophical epic *The Recluse*, the poet describes his escape from society as the portal to the natural self, and, by extension, to the source of poetry:

I breathe again!
Trances of thought and mountings of the mind
Come fast upon me: it is shaken off,
That burthen of my own unnatural self...

Amid the fretful dwellings of mankind
A foretaste, a dim earnest, of the calm
That nature breathes among the hills and grooves
...thus from my first dawn
Of childhood didst thou intertwine for me
The passions that build up in our human soul;
Not with the mean and vulgar works of man,
But with high objects, with enduring things—
With life and nature

And I was taught to feel, perhaps too much,
The self-sufficing power of Solitude.

Stories of solitude—both religious and secular—are often recognizable as quest narratives, in which the speaker explores some given terrain, whether it is physical or metaphysical; and at the heart of the quest narrative is the character of the seeker. This character, in solitude narratives, is driven not by the medieval tropes of conquest or triumph (princess, dragon, kingdom, war), nor by the classical motivation (and recurrent structure) of voyage and return, but on an encounter with solitude itself.

The forward momentum that propels the seeker through the solitude narrative is a powerful longing for what theologian Martin Buber called the I/Thou encounter. This desire, expressed in some

way in virtually every solitude narrative I have found, is a longing for an absolute clarity of vision, unmediated by the misperceptions we acquire as social beings, a desire for “pure” experience, unmitigated by worldly concerns.

Maitland argues that a clear distinction can be made between secular and spiritual solitudes, writing that “there [is] something profoundly different between the silence of the hermits and the silence of artists...[T]he two projects are, in a number of ways, inherently contradictory.” I don’t agree; I would argue that the choice of silence and solitude, whether made for spiritual or creative purposes, inevitably invites the altered perception associated with what we describe as mystical experience, and with what we call creative or intellectual inspiration. Maitland herself describes the heightened nature of experience that solitude engenders when she writes of the “extraordinary view of nothing” around her home on a moor in Galloway:

It isn’t ‘nothing,’ actually—it is cloud formations, and the different ways reed, rough grass, heather and bracken move in the wind, and the changing colours, not just through the year but through the days as the clouds alternate and shift—but in another sense...it is the huge nothing that pulls me into itself. I look at it, and with fewer things to look at I see better. (1-2)

The entire Transcendentalist project could be described as a concentrated effort to see and experience the world and its aspects more clearly. Thoreau’s journals, to say nothing of his more famous meditations on solitude, experience, and self, in *Walden* and other works, were shot through with this desire for an intimate, accurate experience of the world:

In the streets and in society I am almost invariably cheap and dissipated, my life is unspeakably mean...But alone in the distant woods or fields...I come to myself, I once more feel grandly related, and that cold and solitude are friends of mine. I come home to my solitary woodland walk as the homesick go home. I thus dispose of the superfluous and see things as they are.
(Journal, 1 July 1857)

And in an entirely different context, but stemming from the same narrative tradition, American explorer Richard Byrd writes of his choice to spend a solitary winter in the Antarctic:

I wanted to go for experience sake: one man's desire to know that kind of experience to the full, to be by himself for a while and to taste the peace and quiet and solitude long enough to find out how good they are...I wanted something more than just privacy in the geographical sense. I should be able to live exactly as I chose, obedient to no necessities by those imposed by wind and night and cold, and to no man's laws but my own. (3-7)

But there is an intriguing complication embedded within every solitude narrative, one that goes to the heart of the enterprise of writing about solitude at all. One of the things that solitude narratives share—this may be tautological—is the assumption of a reader. The narrating character, however solitary he or she may be at the moment of inscription, is utilizing language; this is, by definition, a communicative act; the solitude narrative itself is a form of direct address. This implies, of course, an object of address: a reader, an audience, an ear. The act of inscribing reveals the assumption that the text that will be, could be, or is being read; this assumption in turn reveals an authorial awareness of *authorship*, of the made-ness of the text; and that awareness gives rise to these works' narrative personae: the characterization of the first-person Self.

Part 3—Precursors and Possibilities

The hallmark of the narrative of solitude is its singular first-person voice. The narrating character and the story they tell—in which solitude itself is a primary focus—are starkly foregrounded, rather than woven into the context of a larger narrative web that involves other characters, stories, voices, and points of view. The *dramatis personae* of these works are but one name long, unless you count the frequent cameo appearance of an animal sidekick (usually a dog). Things exist only if and as they are perceived by the speaker. The speaker—who is at once the subject and the object of the authorial eye—has the power to

name, and in this way to author, the world. This feeds the self-mythologizing nature of the first-person point of view; in these narratives, the speaker/storyteller/explorer attempts an *a priori* creation myth, inventing himself and the world as he goes.

The speaker and subject of the solitude narrative is cast in sharp relief against the backdrop of the larger world. Because of this, the narrative of solitude lacks at least one dimension that most works of nonfiction prose possess. Perspective is inevitably skewed; there is no way to maintain a sense of proportion; nothing is to scale. One minute the speaker looms cartoon-huge, and then the whole vast world reels up, massive and sudden, revealing the speaker as little more than a speck. The solitude narrative cannot escape—and at its best, it plumbs—the perceptual flaw endemic to the human mind: both collectively and as individuals, we cannot seem to maintain anything like a right relation to the world.

In American solitude narratives, as in many American novels, the speaker is often defined by characteristics we associate with the iconic (and, as such, metaphoric, and fictive), American figure of the individualist: self-reliance, bravery, independence of thought, freedom of movement, a purposeful lack of ties that bind. The American mythos is bound up in this character: the self-made man, explorer, mapper and namer of the furthest frontier.

Perhaps every culture has a mythology of itself, a narrative in which it stars and by which its character is defined. If so, the mythology upon which many American writers draw, and which they necessarily keep inventing, is a creation myth, one which posits a kind of a priori country, divorced from and unsullied by all the mythologies that precede it. In this mythology, the reader encounters, again and again, a character who is not so much a Self as a persona, a projection of cultural ideals: self-reliant, individualistic, independent, unfettered, entirely free. These ideals are ones that are, denotatively or connotatively, associated with masculinity; even their Latinate etymology fixes them as masculine, the antithesis of that which is dependent, contingent, or trapped.

The spaces and landscapes that have been assigned to women in literature are, by and large, bounded, enclosed, and, in not a few instances, locked; humble or grand, they are most commonly domestic spaces, their walls intended both to hold things in and keep things out. (A related line of inquiry, though outside the scope of this work, might more precisely break down the nature of those social spaces. Beyond the familiar domestic and, less commonly, professional spaces occupied by women in literature, one thinks also of institutional spaces, which have their own ethos, dictums, rights, assumptions, and laws, and where individual identity is collapsed not only into relational status but further obscured by externally imposed descriptors such as “patient,” “prisoner,” et al.) Furthermore, the spaces women have historically occupied—both in literature and in life—are almost entirely social spaces, places where their identity is collapsed with their social position and relational role, rather than defined by individual characteristics. Literature has also tended to assign gender to ways of existing in time and space. It could be argued that, conceptually, the body in motion is masculine (wild, untamable, independent, free), while the body at rest is feminine (domestic, tamed, fixed, in her place). One thinks of the laws of physics—a body in motion tends to stay in motion (entropy), while a body at rest tends to stay at rest (inertia).

But the seeds of such a literary legacy are particularly evident in four books published by American women over the course of 20 years, running roughly from the high point of the first wave of feminism (early 1970s) through the high point of the second wave (mid-late 1990s). Interestingly, none of these books could even remotely be called “feminist” in nature; they do not take an advocate stance of any kind, instead maintaining a careful—and clearly intentional—silence on matters of gender. For that matter, it might be argued that not all of them are about Wordsworth’s “self-sufficing power of solitude,” either; the solitude these authors claim is much more limited than the lengthy, near-total isolation chronicled by Abbey in *Desert Solitaire*, or even Thoreau’s relatively sustained periods of solitude at Walden Pond. Indeed, there are distinct dusty traces of the era all over these books; of the four authors, two wrap their narratives

up with nearly Shakespearean nuptial neatness by abandoning solitude in favor of love, and one is in a relationship that waxes and wanes over the course of the book.

Still—these were women writing about what was then, and perhaps still is today, a radical choice: to be away from society, on purpose, for reasons almost identical to that set forth by Thoreau: “to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life” (58).

May Sarton’s 1973 *Journal of a Solitude* is—or is drawn from—a journal the author kept during a year of living alone at a country home in Connecticut. During this year, she has frequent visitors, sends and receives a great deal of mail, goes into town most days, travels the country giving lectures and readings; hers is not solitude in any strict sense. This journal of solitary time, like those of both Thoreau and the contemporary contemplative monk Thomas Merton, allows the reader direct access, unmediated by literary devices, to the raw material of thought, the running commentary of mind considering mind. Sarton’s journal is not a literary masterwork, but its publication marks a new era for female authors (or, as they were still called, “lady writers”). The very idea that there was a readership for such a book—which records nothing more than an average woman’s day-to-day grappling with consciousness and creative practice—was radical in itself, as was the idea that such a woman might choose the company of herself, and her work, over society and its demands. This book, like Sarton’s other journals, stood as evidence—rather than argument—that women’s interior lives were meaningful; that, indeed, women had interior lives. As all writers of solitude do, Sarton states her intentions early on: “I have made an open place, a place for meditation... Now I hope to break through into the rough rocky depths, to the matrix itself” (1-2).

Five years later, ecologist and conservationist Anne LaBastille published *Woodswoman*, the first in her trilogy of accounts of living alone in the Adirondack Wilderness. These books are direct descendants of the eighteenth-century naturalist narrative, and the nature writing is lovely; the books are irrevocably dated, however, by the (probably editorial) decision to impose superfluous romantic subplots on otherwise

beautiful descriptive accounts of the natural world and the extraordinary independence the author's life requires. After she's done away with the interruptive romantic interest (he goes to Alaska without her; he invited her, but didn't propose), she settles into the naturalist's lyrical rhythms of observation and description:

[M]y existence here has not been, and never will be, idyllic. Nature is too demanding for that. It requires constant response to the environment. I must adapt to its changes—the seasons, the vagaries of weather, wear and tear on house and land, the physical demands on my body, the sensuous pull on my senses. Despite these demands, I share a feeling of continuity, contentment, and oneness with the natural world, with life itself, in my surroundings of tall pines, clear lakes, flying squirrels, trailless peaks, shy deer, clean air, bullfrogs, black flies, and trilliums...Slipping over the star-strewn surface of Black Bear Lake, I'm gradually imbued with the ordered goodness of our earth. Its gentle, implacable push toward balance, regularity, homeostasis. This seeps into my soul as surely as sphagnum moss absorbs water. Surely the entire universe must be operating this way. (276)

Almost an aside: in 1981, Alice Koller published *An Unknown Woman*. I found it in a used bookstore in 1984 (I was 10) and, hungry for books with brave female leads, I devoured it. In my memory, it is the story of a woman so brave she spent a whole year in a windswept seaside cabin alone, but more importantly, a stunning philosophical treatise on the necessity of being ruthlessly independent, living on an island, and having a very good dog. Lost to the vagaries of memory include all other details, such as the actual storyline—the book is in fact about a bored, wildly successful, *but still unmarried* (!) woman nearing 40, who spends a brief winter on Nantucket, applying her doctorate in philosophy to a Socratic consideration of all the men she's loved. When I returned to this text—which was obviously formative for me—I was stunned to think that my younger self could have seen something to admire in this (perhaps it was the dog?). I thumbed through my old copy—urgent underlinings, neat asterisks, tiny marginalia in my

childhood cursive—and laughed out loud at one of the review blurbs, from the *Charlotte Observer*: “A woman’s *Walden*...Seldom has any writer written so compellingly about what it means to be a woman and of the importance of choices.” But I still like this, and I can see how a girl of that era might find it brave:

Earrings, necklaces, bracelets, and other decorations go into the bottom drawer of the bedroom bureau. All makeup goes into the medicine chest. What will I look like now that no one I know will see me? Can I dress without following anyone else’s rules?...Each thing I do during the course of a day is something I’ve been told to do, or taught to do. I have to replace all of it with what I choose to do. I have to learn how to choose one thing over another, one way of doing something over another way.....My stomach tightens. Want one thing more than another? What will I use as criterion? I don’t know. I know only that I have to uproot all of the old...Tear out every habit, every way of responding to people or to things. Or to ideas. Look at it without mercy and ask: Is this mine? Mine as the specific human being that I am. (20-21)

The Solace of Open Spaces, Gretel Ehrlich’s 1985 collection of linked essays, is one of the finest solitude narratives ever written, easily as powerful as (and more beautifully crafted than) Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire*. Like Abbey, she opens with a preface that sets out the reasons for her decision to go to, and then stay in, Wyoming, and tells us a little bit about the origins of the book: “Beginning in 1976...I had the experience of waking up not knowing where I was, whether I was a man or a woman, or which toothbrush was mine...but I wasn’t losing my grip. As Jim Bridger is reported to have said, ‘I wasn’t lost, I just didn’t know where I was for a few weeks.’...The detour, of course, became the actual path; the digressions in my writing, the narrative” (ix-x).

A quiet, commanding storyteller, Ehrlich neither avoids nor confronts the question of a woman’s place in the world; the world is her place. She joins the ranch hands and the farmers in their work and life without pausing to explain her presence, either to the reader or to the characters scattered over the sparsely

populated pages of this book. Her tone and her language are economical and understated, directly echoing rather than describing her environment:

The solitude in which westerners live makes them quiet. They telegraph thoughts and feelings by the way they tilt their heads and listen... Sentence structure is shortened to the skin and bones of a thought. Descriptive words are dropped, even verbs; a cowboy looking over a corral full of horses will say to a wrangler, "Which one needs rode"? People hold back their thoughts. Language, so compressed, becomes metaphorical....

I've spent hours riding to sheep camp at dawn in a pickup when nothing was said; eaten meals in the cookhouse when the only words spoken were a mumbled "Thank you, ma'am" at the end of dinner. The silence is profound. Instead of talking, we seem to share one eye. Keenly observed, the world is transformed. The landscape is engorged with detail, every movement on it chillingly sharp. The air between people is charged. (6-7)

Similarly, the seasons are integrated into both the narrative structure and the narrative consciousness, functioning as a means by which Ehrlich navigates her vast terrain; the elements, water in particular, create both narrative and metaphorical structure for the work. She writes, "Everything in nature invites us constantly to be what we are. We are often like rivers: careless and forceful, timid and dangerous, lucid and muddied, eddying, gleaming, still. Lovers, farmers, and artists have one thing in common, at least—a fear of 'dry spells,' dormant periods in which we do no blooming, internal droughts only the waters of imagination and psychic release can civilize."

Unlike most narrators of solitude, Ehrlich's authorial persona is not foregrounded, appearing at times to be deliberately de-centered or kept entirely out of the frame. This blurs the line between self and other, between internal and external landscapes, in a very literal sense:

The seasons are a Jacob's ladder climbed by migrating elk and deer. Our ranch is one of their resting places. If I was leery about being an owner, a possessor of land, now I have to understand

the ways in which the place possesses me. Mowing hayfields feels like mowing myself. I wake up mornings expecting to find my hair shorn. The pastures bend into me; the water I ushered over hard ground becomes one drink of grass. (90)

Ehrlich's strategy, by which the speaker becomes a part of her environment, stands in stark contrast to the tropes and devices employed by the traditional solitude narrative. An innovative approach to first-person point of view—one of the core elements of the form—it also provides a point of departure for the critical consideration of another core element: the centrality of place to solitude narratives. Further, Ehrlich's deliberate destabilization of the balance of power between the individual(ist) narrator and the physical and iconographic landscape of the American West can inform the framework for narratives of solitude still to come.

The history of solitude narratives, American and otherwise, tilts ineluctably toward the idea of territory—of places, of spaces, of property, of natural resources, largely land or things drawn from or made possible by land. This is a tradition of work in which the narrative movement is predicated on conquest; it is a plot driven by the will to power over something, and often someone. The narrative is constructed of plot points in which the protagonist beats back resistance and overcomes obstacles on the path to his ultimate triumph over X, where X = places, people, phenomena. The drama, the tension, the reader's engagement in the narrative at all, are predicated on the assumption that this will to power, this desire to conquer, is not merely valid, but the value of which is assumed to be both inherent and understood. In the American literary tradition, that value is embodied, writ large, given both agency and license, in the narrative character of the individualist.

The literary tradition of both the solitude narrative and the American road narrative rests on assumptions about the author's positionality and status as "free" in the larger world. For example, the Green Book stands as a historical document that makes those assumptions clear by its very existence; in

modifying and adapting a given form—the travel guide—for a specifically Black readership, it highlights the original form’s assumption that its audience would be white.

Every literary tradition, every genre, every form, carries with it the weight of cultural history and the connotative power of all that it assumes; the solitude narrative is not unique in reflecting, and in many ways perpetuating, the oppressive whitewashing of American literary history, as well as the class bias, heteronormativity, and misogyny. Necessarily, the act of writing from, toward, or and about an experience that lies outside the narrow confines of what was once, laughably, described as the “universal” experience—which is in fact the experience of a clear numeric minority of Americans: white men—raises, for the author, the question of how to confront that cultural history, whether to address that connotative weight. A response to those things, whether direct or oblique, is necessary; at the same time, an acknowledgement of the tradition’s limitations—which is also a de facto acknowledgement of the tradition’s importance, even if one’s effort is to write against it, or against aspects of its shaping force—may give them credence and power.

In examining the history of solitude narratives, it’s critical to look not only at what lies within the frame of the genre—the texts, the authors, the tradition from which they emerge and upon which they draw. It may be more important, at this point, to think about all that is excluded, elided, and erased, all the historical facts that are pushed out of the frame. Any consideration of American literary work about the American landscape needs to also consider the history of this country’s relationship with territory, conquest, and ownership; critical and creative works about movement into, out of, and through that same space must also consider the author’s impetus, as well as their freedom of movement or lack thereof. And if we are to discuss key questions of craft in this form—particularly point of view, narrative persona, and narrative voice—there is no way, and no reason, to avoid addressing the role of the actual author’s embodied existence, not in the abstract but in fact.

Part 4—Implications

You're wondering if I'm lonely:
OK then, yes, I'm lonely
as a plane rides lonely and level
on its radio beam, aiming
across the Rockies
for the blue-strung aisles
of an airfield on the ocean.

You want to ask, am I lonely?
Well, of course, lonely
as a woman driving across country
day after day, leaving behind
mile after mile
little towns she might have stopped
and lived and died in, lonely

If I'm lonely
it must be the loneliness
of waking first, of breathing
dawns' first cold breath on the city
of being the one awake
in a house wrapped in sleep

If I'm lonely
it's with the rowboat ice-fast on the shore
in the last red light of the year
that knows what it is, that knows it's neither
ice nor mud nor winter light
but wood, with a gift for burning

—Adrienne Rich

Solitude narratives seem likely to become more common in the post-pandemic era. Not only will we see narratives about the experience of isolation due to pandemic and quarantine, this period is already marked by such a level of roiling global unrest—social, political, environmental, and economic—that I suspect it will give rise to a significant body of nonfiction examining both individual experiences of that unrest, and the role of the individual within society—and, perhaps, without.

The existing tradition of solitude narratives—particularly the subgenre of solitude writing by women, nascent as it may be—can inform the writing on solitude that will emerge in the coming years.

Even (especially?) close on the heels of a period of isolation and confinement, the idea of solitude seems anathema to our hyper-social, hyper-attenuated sense of self. We are endlessly connected, we use the word “network” to describe both human and electronic interactions; we communicate constantly, using a huge array of media, generating an inconceivable amount of text and hypertext; we do not shut up, and even when we are alone—as increasingly we are, and report an escalating level of damage and distress from the effects—we are also never alone.

A recent piece in the *New York Times* acknowledges the growing role of solitude in many people’s lives, particularly in the wake of a global pandemic; Covid has had and will continue to have a significant impact on the nature of social interactions of every kind, limiting, disrupting, and in some cases eliminating the possibility of human companionship for periods of time. The article quotes Virginia Thomas, an assistant professor of psychology at Middlebury College, as saying, “How we feel about time alone is largely dependent on whether we’ve chosen it.” It goes on: “People who pursue solitude of their own volition ‘tend to report that it feels full — like they’re full of ideas or thoughts or things to do,’ Dr. Thomas said. In this way, it’s distinct from loneliness, a negative state in which you’re ‘disconnected from other people and it feels empty.’”

That characteristic—choice—is also that which distinguishes “solitude from solitary,” as Abbey puts it in *Desert Solitaire*. The narrator finds himself strikingly, and unexpectedly, lonely; though he’d been alone for some time, he is overwhelmed by a terrorizing self-awareness, an awareness of, literally, himself—to scale. Whether it is solitude that plays games with perspective or, in fact, society that sets our sense of proportion and self-concept askew, the distinction—between what it means to have solitude versus to be solitary—is one with which more readers may be familiar now than once there were.

The aspect of choice goes some way to explain why people like me—already solo, often living in alone, however small and modest that meant our solitary spaces had to be, our days already filled with more silence than noise—found quarantine to be as jarring, and in many was disorienting, as everyone else.

The solitude I had long chosen was replaced by enforced isolation; the silence I preferred was suddenly cacophonous; the option of vanishing at will from highly visible social spaces and returning to the pleasant invisibility I enjoyed within the cloister of my rooms was gone, leaving me aware that I was, for all intents and purposes, a ghost.

The factor of choice, which is what prevents each of these conditions from becoming, in an instant, its inverse, has implications for the solitude narratives we have yet to write. While it is not possible to write within or against a literary tradition without acknowledging the inherent limitations, fallacies, and flaws of that tradition, the sociocultural wreckage from which its authors arose and the equal or greater damage they left behind, it is also true that every literary tradition contains its own opposite; stored away in the structural foundations of every form are the tools required for tearing it down and, one hopes, building something new.

There are at least three expressions of the element of choice that might be drawn out in future narratives about the experience of being alone; each of these holds significant potential for not only creative production but also scholarly investigation and critical analysis, particularly for feminist and post-colonial writers and scholars:

- Solitude vs. imposed/forced isolation
- Active (act of) silence vs. being silenced
- Elective “invisibility” (removing oneself from public/social spaces), vs. being erased.

The first distinction—solitude vs. isolation—is one with which many people are more familiar now than even a few years ago. Choosing to be alone is a categorically different experience—and arises from equally distinct causal factors—than having restrictions placed on one’s social access. Solitude is elective; isolation is imposed.

The second distinction—the choice to be silent vs. being silenced by external forces—is a long-standing and not infrequently contentious matter in critical inquiry. As it pertains to a future examination

of solitude narratives, I am particularly interested in questions of whether silence must always be conceptualized as a binary act (e.g. silence as resistance/silencing as punishment, which assumes a prior and primary conversation or dialectic from which an individual is barred, against which her silence resists, or to which her silence responds). Further work is also warranted on how to navigate or perhaps redefine the concept of “silence;” this work might investigate the actual meaning of “silence” within solitude narratives, which are, by definition, linguistic acts, and whose very existence implies the possibility of a social dialectic by virtue of its assumption of a future reader for the work.

The third distinction—“invisibility,” or the decision to remove oneself from social spaces vs. being erased—seems rife with opportunities for a discussion of motive, impetus, and warrant in the solitude narrative; there are, for example, different motives behind “running away” and “running toward,” just as there are meaningful differences between separation and separatism, giving up society v. giving up *on* society. More broadly, the question of visibility, invisibility, and even the supposed possibility of “choice” is complicated in important ways by authorship: any given author’s ability to “choose” invisibility is contingent upon their position, and the limits placed upon on their mobility, within the social world.

Each of these more subtle distinctions has implications for narratives of solitude. But the overarching question of choice—whether the author holds the power of choice, in any of these areas, or does not—determines the directionality and, ultimately the narrative movement of the book. The distinction shapes narrative structure, informs persona and tone, and often determines the outcome of the work. While any solitude narrative describes and traces an interior trajectory of some kind, one—the narrative of a chosen solitude—participates in the tradition of the quest narrative; its movement is forward, and its narrative momentum, its plot, is driven by a process of voluntary transformation and change. The choice to be alone gives rise to a narrative of interior discovery, often followed by a decision on the part of the narrator to make some kind of exterior change as well. The other—the narrative of solitude imposed—chronicles an unexpected, disruptive, and often unwelcome event. Its narrative

movement is reflective, and often retrospective; the narrator experiences the period of solitude as exceptional, and as a loss. Narratives of (en)forced isolation may also include elements of discovery and change, but the distinction is palpable in the narrative character and the tone of the piece. Choice, again, is the element that creates the shift: is the author experiencing solitude willingly, voluntarily, with expectation, navigating what she encounters as she goes? Or is she forced to resist or reclaim the experience, struggling to maintain selfhood and sanity, and attempting to carve out and claim some aspect of experience as her own?

Is it only solitude if you are well and truly isolated from the social world? With no people, no billboards, no books or papers or magazines, no crowded trains, no throng of bodies catching you up in its wake? Is it only true solitude if you are faced with the wild, whether hostile or indifferent, hard winters or droughts? Does solitude in a hotel count? Or is that too much of this world? Room service, the tightly made bed with white sheets, whether linens of 1000-thread count percale, or threadbare and riddled with bedbugs and cigarette holes. The anonymity; the averted gaze. The patterned carpet, the plastic drapes. Is it only solitude if it seems dangerous, even insurmountable? If there is some external force against which you must throw all your weight? What if there is nothing to fight? No clear threat to life and limb? What if it is not a matter of life or death? What if the crisis is not an encounter with danger, but an encounter with silence?

Which is not, on the face of it, even an encounter at all; in solitude, there is no Other with whom we can come face to face. There is only the raucous, clamoring self, the flotsam and jetsam and junk of which we mostly consist. Tenzin Palmo, a British Buddhist nun, spent three years in radical silence in the Himalayas. The only thing she ever said publicly about the experience was, “Well, it wasn’t boring.”

The very existence of the solitude narrative—the fact that people have for hundreds of years seen value not only in *being* solitary, but in *writing* about it—implies a certain human struggle with the experience

of solitude itself. Using language to grapple with the nature of being alone requires that one imagine that one is *not* alone; one must cast oneself into some imagined future tense in which the first-person, experiencing, subjective self—the speaking, writing, communicating I—has been joined by a second person: the listener, the reader, the Other, the You.

Adam Faber writes,

A time comes, ideally, when the child discovers the pleasures of her own solitude. One of the things that a child might do with this solitude is read. What kind of exchange goes on between a book and its reader? What can a book give us that a person can't? One possible answer might be 'the experience of a relationship in silence.' (373-375)

That exchange between book/author/narrator/I—however one conceives of the creator of a given text—and the reader presents an ontological problem for the writer (and reader) of solitude narratives: what is solitude, if the reader is—imaginatively or in future fact—right there? What is the influence of that reader on what the author records? If there were no intended reader, might the author write in a different way? Or, in that case, would the author bother to write at all? If she did, whom would she address? Without a reader, does the author exist? Does the text? Or is the person formerly known as the author, deprived of pen and paper, laptop, iPad, Kindle, stylus, overly intelligent phone, et al, just a person sitting somewhere alone?

Works Cited

- Abbey, Edward. *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*. New York: Touchstone, 1968.
- Buber, Martin, trans. Walter Kaufmann. *I and Thou*. New York: Scribner, 1971.
- Burns, Holly, and Madeline Cass. "You Can Learn to Love Being Alone." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 24 Feb. 2022.
- Confucius, trans. Lau, D.C. *The Analects*. New York: Penguin, 1998. Originally published as *Lun Yu*, c. 429.
- Ehrlich, Gretel. *The Solace of Open Spaces*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1985.
- Faber, Adam. *Promises, Promises*. New York: Faber and Faber, 2000.
- France, Peter. *Hermits: Insights of Solitude*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996.
- Hazlitt, William, ed. Geoffrey Keynes. *Selected Essays of William Hazlitt 1778-1830*. New York: Random House, 2010.
- Koller, Alice. *An Unknown Woman*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981.
- LaBastille, Anne. *Woodswoman: Living Alone in the Adirondack Wilderness*. New York: Dutton, 1978.
- Maitland, Sara, *A Book of Silence*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2008.
- Merton, Thomas, ed. Jonathan Montaldo. *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and a Writer; The Journals of Thomas Merton Volume 2, 1941-1952*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996.
- Meynell, Alice. "Solitude." *The Spirit of Place, and Other Essays*. London: Lane, 1899.
- Montaigne, Michel, trans. Donald Frame. "Of solitude." *The Complete Works of Michel Montaigne*. New York: Everyman's Library, 2003.
- Sanders, Scott Russell. "Stillness." *Orion Magazine*, Spring 2001.
- Sarton, May, *Journal of a Solitude*. New York: Norton, 1973.
- Swan, Laura. *The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, Lives, and Stories of Early Christian Women*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001.

Storr, Anthony. *Solitude: A Return to the Self*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988.

Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*. New York: Dover Editions, 1995. Originally published
Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1954.

—, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer. *I to Myself: An Annotated Selection from the Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*. New Haven,
CT: Yale University Press, 2007.

Valentine, Jean. *Door in the Mountain: New and Collected Poems 1965-2003*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University
Press, 2004.

Wadell, Helen, trans. *The Desert Fathers*. New York: Vintage, 1998. Originally published in Latin as *Vitae
Patrum*, 1623.