

II Early Solitude: Language, Body, and Gender

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“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.).¹ 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)² 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 “heartly 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.¹ 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.² 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 paradisiacal 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 solitaries. 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 [59th] 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 coqueting 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).¹ 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.² 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).³ 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).⁴ 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; Slaughter 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.⁵ 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).⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸

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).⁹

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.¹⁰ 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).¹¹ 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).¹² 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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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