

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



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

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

## 1. Ambition and the Female Talent

### 1.1 A Solitary Book

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

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

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

## 1.2 *The Hermaphrodite*

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

## 1.3 The Private Writer

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

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

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

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

#### 1.4 “The Celebrated Woman”

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

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

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

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

### 2.1 The Hermaphrodite as Hermit and Recluse

#### 2.1.1 *Laurence, the Outcast*

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

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

### 2.1.2 *Laurence, the Solitary Artist*

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

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



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

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

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

### 2.1.3 Laurence, the Hermit

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

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

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

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

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

## 2.2 Laurence’s Foils and Alter Egos

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

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

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

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

### 2.2.2 *The Marble Woman*

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

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

### 2.2.3 *The Hermit of the Alps*

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

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

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

## 2.3 Laurence's Female Fellow Recluses

### 2.3.1 *Eleonora, the Uncloistered Nun*

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

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

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

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

### 2.3.3 *Nina, the Beautiful Clairvoyante*

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

### 2.3.4 *Eva, the Solitary Lover*

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

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

### 3. The Female Solitary in American Culture

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

### 3.3 Solitude and the Ambitious Woman

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

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

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

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

## Notes

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

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

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Margaretta M. Lovell

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

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

## 1. Solitude and Community

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

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

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

## 2. Solitary Viewers

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

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

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

### 3. Involuntary Solitude

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

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

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

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

#### 4. Solitaries in Nature

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

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

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

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

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

## 5. The Man of Imagination

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

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

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

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

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

## 6. Poet/Philosopher/Painter/Wanderer

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

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



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

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## Figures

Fig. 1. Sanford Gifford, *Kaaterskill Falls*, 1871, oil on canvas,  $14\frac{3}{4} \times 12\frac{1}{2}$  in ( $37.5 \times 31.8$  cm). Detroit Institute of Arts, Gift of Katherine French Rockwell, 56.185; Bridgeman Images.



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



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



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



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



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



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



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



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







Hélène Quanquin

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

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

## 1. Isolation and Reform

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 2. (Self-)Imposed Isolation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 3. Cliques and Circles

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

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

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

#### 4. The Home as Political Space

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Notes

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

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

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