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Introduction

Solitudes

Abstract This introductory essay gestures toward some of the ironies of solitude—and the places where those ironies become paradoxes, even promises—beginning with the grounding questions of this collection: What does it mean to speak of solitude together? How does one solitude speak to, or with, or for, another? Can our aloneness—note the irony of the first-person plural—ever be said to be shared? Can it be *said* at all? Medieval theologians, especially Gregory the Great, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Meister Eckhart, serve as guides in the wilderness here, alongside various voices from the history of North American popular music. Solitude, they show, is a richly mixed terrain, where we may get lost in our self-atomizing pride or, just as easily, open ourselves to the world’s (and the divine’s) endlessly unpredictable self-disclosure. To cultivate solitude is something like a game we play with the present and the past, with ourselves and one another. Being alone is complicated.

Keywords solitude, irony, Bernard of Clairvaux, Gregory the Great, Meister Eckhart

I can think of no better place to begin a collection of essays on solitudes—always paradoxically plural—than a fifteenth-century poem by Christine de Pizan, the Franco-Italian noblewoman of letters, in which she famously transforms the tropes of erotic suffering into a statement of solitary persistence. “Seulete suy et seulete vueil estre” (I’m all alone, and alone is what I want to be), she begins, and the reader can never quite figure out whether, or to what extent, to take Christine’s speaker at her word. A long string of descriptions of sorrow and bereavement are broken up with glimmers of something almost like satisfaction, performed or presented in a kind of emotional interior architecture. “Seulete suy a huis ou a fenestre, / seulete suy en un anget muciee” (I’m all alone at the doorway, at the window / all alone, hidden away in a corner): the speaker is theatrically alone, at the threshold of visibility, the solitary equivalent of telling someone you’re naked under your clothes. But the line that sticks with me is this one: “Seulete suy,

riens n'est qui tant me siée" (I'm all alone, and nothing suits me so well) (Altmann 155). We'd be unwise to assume that Christine's speaker is incapable of irony, especially given that, over the course of the poem, the weight of grief accumulates across a series of adjectives, each poised at the end of a line, until the poem practically bows and swoons—and yet there is a sense in which, for the poem, sorrow suits her. Sorrow and solitude, both. Sometimes Baby wants to be put in a corner.¹

Sometimes Bernard of Clairvaux wants to be put there, too. In the twelfth-century Cistercian preacher's third sermon on the time of harvest, he begins by staging his own retreat: "Worn out by all sorts of crowds seeking all kinds of things, how gladly do I come to this little corner to refresh my spirit!" (Bernard, "Harvest" 7). The life of thought, like the life of religious devotion, has often been figured as a life of crowd-fleeing—think Montaigne, think Jesus—but Bernard, like Augustine before him, manages to write little scenes of solitude against a background of turbulence. Here, alone with his monks, he exhorts them as one for whom they are the fulfillment of a prophecy and themselves also prophets: "Great indeed is the kind of prophecy I see you are dedicated to! Great is the pursuit of prophesying I see you have surrendered yourselves to! What kind? Not to observe the things that are seen but those that are unseen is, according to the apostle, without a doubt to prophesy" (11). Bernard, who has just finished commending his monks for their celibacy and its angelic echoes, seems to me to be saying that monastic life, with its constitutive dialectic of community and solitude, presents a phenomenological problem akin to prophecy: when reality isn't limited to the visible—when, in fact, things unseen are, if anything, more real than their visible counterparts—what are we to make of our ostensible solitudes? How alone, in such a world, can we ever be or become?

Dante Alighieri gives a famous answer to this, insofar as his vision of hell is one of being excruciatingly alone even when others are all around (or, as it happens, beneath) you. Take, as just one instance, the crammed tombs where Farinata and Cavalcante appear, and where, in Farinata's words, "Qui con più di mille giaccio" (I lie here with more than a thousand others) (Dante 92; translation mine). And if you think about it, you can probably summon a scene of your own, a place or moment when the company of others has made you feel more alone, or less alive. For me the quintessential place for this always sobering, often saddening solitude is the ersatz conviviality of a work-related social hour, where I never fail to feel like a fraud *and* an asshole at the same time—*forza* and *frode* both, lucky devil—not only during the painful proceedings but even as I duck out, usually a few minutes later than I should have done. Here, too, someone beats me to the door—another poet and singer, Patty Griffin, whose song "That Kind of Lonely" diagnoses the problem: "Everyone in this room wanted to be somewhere else." Her speaker then "find[s] the key" and drives off, swearing, "It's the last

time I want to be / That kind of lonely.” (She does this over her own percussive guitar playing and Byron House’s heartbreaking bass. Again, the song is at once a performance of loneliness and, as performance, a gesture toward what loneliness might yet become: unlonely, a solitude shared but not shattered.)

Like this essay collection, my music collection is apparently an archive of solitudes. Emmylou Harris says it as well as anyone when she sings, “I’m a lonely girl in a lonely world / I never thought my life would be like this.” Here, loneliness figures itself as a kind of defiance of expectations: it’s a word for what I “never thought” my life would be, or be like. And yet here I am. Here it is. Disappointment and persistence, surprise and something all too familiar thread themselves together against interwoven multitracked vocals and multiple guitars: one and many, lonely but not alone.² Rose Cousins, a Canadian singer-songwriter, cannily performs two versions of “The Benefits of Being Alone” to open and close her 2020 album *Bravado*: the first jauntily narrates all the things the singer can do on account of her singleness; the second, the album’s closer, sings the same words, the same melody, more slowly, more ambivalently. There is, too, a sense that to sing of solitude is always to cite, always to recycle a trope. The Texan country singer Lee Ann Womack points out, in the title track to her 2017 album *The Lonely, the Lonesome, and the Gone*, how much the world has changed since the days of Hank Williams’s genre-defining 1949 torch song, “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry,” even as she emphasizes that three qualities, those of the title, have persisted:

I don’t know why no one sings about
Drowning in pitchers and half-price wings
And trying to wish back everything they’ve lost
Yeah the only way this heartache
Is like an old Hank Williams song
Is the lonely, the lonesome, and the gone.³

The decor of solitude, like the decor of suffering, might change—it might be a question of chicken wings and a Camry, the song says, rather than old trains and night birds (or, in Christine’s case, blackberries)—but, living in the midst of that solitude and that suffering, we’re invited to find our situation, like the singer’s, both like and unlike the templates we’ve been given. Something about solitude, like suffering, is shareable; and something, instead, is absolutely mine: there is, after all, no person more present in Christine’s ballad than the first person.

And then there’s Judy Garland, whose album cover for *Alone* (1957) features Garland standing, black-gloved hands clasped, against a fog-shrouded beach roughly the color of her cape: alone at the edge of the world—or, at least, of California; not that Garland is ever really anything other than isolated, liter-

ally or figuratively spotlighted, on her album covers. When, on her final studio album, *The Garland Touch* (1962), she sings the already-classic Rodgers and Hammerstein anthem “You’ll Never Walk Alone,” I can’t escape the sense that she doesn’t really mean it: walking alone is what Judy Garland does; it’s what we all do, paradoxically, when we listen to her, which of course means that we’re walking *with* her, complicating our solitude with hers. (A later bard, Cher, reverses the irony: in the video for her 1988 power ballad “We All Sleep Alone,” she sings while gyrating on a bed whose canopy hangs in tatters around her, and it’s hard to believe that she *ever* sleeps alone.)

These complications—these ironies—are the stuff of this collection. Bernard articulates this doubleness with his characteristic finesse when he interrupts—or continues—his explanation of how it’s only possible to seek what you’ve already in some sense found: “For no one is able to seek except the one who already possesses, because *no one comes to me unless the Father draws him* [John 6:44]. The one who draws is present and yet in some way not present, for he draws nowhere else but to himself. For at no time and no place is the Father present by faith without the Son, so that he may attract by beauty [*ut ad speciem trahat*]” (Bernard, “Harvest” 9). At least two things draw me here: first, the intuition that what attracts us—what sets us in motion—in literature or in life has to be present to us in some way, present yet not, for all that, *exhaustively* present; it must remain “in some way not present,” in Bernard’s words. This is his dynamic language for what could be more statically described as the distinction between God as absolutely transcendent of the world (including such worldly categories as presence) and God as implicated, inherent, really present in this world, “by faith” or otherwise—although surely it is, for Bernard, only by faith that God can be apprehended as God. Faith may just be a way of saying that, within the world, something more than the world gives itself *as* the world.

But the second thing, for me the more precious and startling thing, is this: God’s pull on our leash, God’s magnetic appeal to our little iron hearts, takes the form of *beauty*. This is both the mark of his presence and, if we follow Bernard as far as he’ll drag us, the token of what lies beyond his presence, as all beauty (from that of a beloved mouth to that of a beloved book) appears to exceed its appearance, its pure phenomenality. You, phenomenally beautiful, tug me in your direction; but I’ll be damned—no, I’ll be blessed—if what draws me toward you isn’t in fact more, or other, than any specifiable set of beautiful characteristics. Simone Weil’s words are better than mine: “Le poème est beau, c’est-à-dire que le lecteur ne souhaite pas qu’il soit autre” (The poem is beautiful, which is to say, the reader doesn’t wish that it were other than it is) (168–69). She says this, in part, in opposition to the very practices of critical reading that most of us have at some point been trained in, or cherished, or fostered:

you can't explain beauty, she says; and if you can pinpoint the effect of a poem (or any beautiful thing) as a particular rhythm, a particular lexicon, a particular shot or sequence—then something, there, has fallen short of the beautiful. Meanwhile, back to you in your self-exceeding beauty, there is, ultimately, something beyond (yet also within) your radical specificity that discloses a greater, ungraspable *species*: another paradox or another irony.

The vocabularies of solitude are fraught ones: you don't need me to tell you that merely translating "seulete" in Christine's ballad demands that I decide *for* a kind of solitude, one emotional texture ("all alone") against others. We qualify our solitary adjectives almost without thinking: *tout seul* exaggerates my solitude into a momentary, if ironic, completeness; *solo*, meanwhile, suggests the bareness of being alone. Solitude can be thought spatially—I am alone in this room, or at this window, at least if you don't count the spiders—or it can be thought, let's say, existentially or emotionally, politically or ontologically; or, as in Bernard, all of these at once. For Simone Weil, the challenge of her solitary life is something prior to any physical separation or lonely feeling; she says, in one of her letters, "Je sens qu'il m'est nécessaire, qu'il m'est prescrit de me trouver seule, étrangère et en exil par rapport à n'importe quel milieu humain sans exception" (I feel it's necessary for me, it's foreordained for me, to be alone, a stranger, in exile, in relation to whatever kind of human situation, without exception) (26). Weil is excluded from every human "milieu," every situation or context or in-between place, in a way that feels aboriginal, non-negotiable; and yet this sense of absolute exclusion (or, in her words, exile and foreignness) is also always a feeling: "Je sens . . ." Once again, the solitary situation—or, better, the solitary's resistance to being situated—is shot through with ironies.

And just as every catachresis, in the right hands, can become a metaphor again (can't it?) so, too, are these ironies ultimately paradoxes-in-waiting. To say this more slowly: when I find myself insisting that solitude, to be spoken at all, must in some sense be shared, must have always been something other than utterly alone; when I linger with that abiding irony—the irony that grounds this collection, insofar as here you'll find multiple adjacent and occasionally overlapping solitudes, alone together—I wonder whether the distance between an irony and a paradox isn't perhaps akin to what takes place (or doesn't) between a catachresis and a metaphor. (A catachresis and a metaphor or—if you prefer—a cliché and a koan.) You have to decide, finally, whether to opt for what undermines or what holds in tension; whether to choose the taut wire or the sprung string. (And is faith—of whatever kind—mostly a word for that choice: the decision *for* metaphor, *for* paradox?)⁴

Another irony—another paradox, if you choose—in many accounts and experiences of solitude is that it can be a means of defending ourselves from

what is most pernicious in the world, from society's endless competitions and assessments, even as it can be a temptation to a false grandeur, not the hermit's undoing of a socially sanctioned ego but a proud reinforcement, in isolation, of just that ego. One spokesman for the first sense of solitude is (again, ironically) G. K. Chesterton, who in a brief essay called "The Case for Hermits," writes, "The reason why even the normal human being should be half a hermit is that it is the only way in which mind can have a half-holiday" (82). Chesterton is responding to what he considers a fundamental human need to be, and to be left, alone; and to the increasing difficulty of certain kinds of aloneness in his early twentieth-century England, where, he notes, there are the "same feelings of mutual love and tenderness" between two rivals for a seat on the tram as there would have been "between two men trying to get a seat in the Colosseum." Hermits thrive in late antiquity, he says, because they are "more of a human being; not less." Notice, if you will, the scandal of suggesting that the height of the British Empire would be, socially and as it were spiritually, akin to the rubble of the Roman one; but notice, too, that the hermit's problem, and promise, for Chesterton is at once spatial and temporal:

For the best things that happen to us are those we get out of what has already happened. If men were honest with themselves, they would agree that actual social engagements, even with those they love, often seem strangely brief, breathless, thwarted or inconclusive. Mere society is a way of turning friends into acquaintances. The real profit is not in meeting our friends, but in having met them. (82)

Not only do we need distance from people to appreciate them, Chesterton argues; we need time. It's not so much that we need to recollect our friends in tranquility as that we need to experience friendship in the mode not just of presence but of longing—which is to say, in the mode of desire. The problem with too much exposure to anyone isn't that it demystifies them (e.g., it's not that I risk falling out of love with you the minute I walk in on you sitting on the toilet); it's that it makes it difficult for me to engage with anything other than this present moment (e.g., to remember you in more noble postures). There may, in other words, be a reason why our society, very much including academic society, has become relatively comfortable with encouraging us to be more *present*, with fostering what it borrows (and bastardizes) from certain Buddhist traditions as *mindfulness*. Presence may not be, may never have been, the problem. What I may need instead is enough time to remember you. What I may need instead is enough distance to put you in the perspective where your beauty unexpectedly breaks out, all over again. Those who want to save their mind (or their love) will lose it.

In contrast to the hermit's opportunities for remembering and desiring anew, Chesterton observes, "the man in the modern salon, in his intellectual hospitality, generally serves out wormwood for wine" (83). Reader, I have been that purveyor of bitterness, that intellectual man; perhaps for that reason I am keen to cut him at least a little slack. It may not be his fault, exactly: he may have imbibed certain professional or social expectations; he may be unremittably lonely; he may be like the small child (the small child in each of us) who fights falling asleep exactly when he needs it most. (Chesterton makes this exact comparison, when he notes that the forces in favor of productivity—forces even more active in today's universities than in Chesterton's England—may one day seek to dispense with sleep altogether, as time wasted, or immorally inaccessible.) The point is that our social bitteresses might be sweetened, our social bindings might be loosened, in solitude.

Nonetheless, solitude has other ways of feeding, as well as figuring, just these socially driven superiorities and anxieties. The sense that I need to leave the party *not* because the endless professionalizing speech over lukewarm wine is eroding the topsoil of my soul but because, instead, I'm too good for these folks, too noble, too original, too smart, finds a valuable riposte in Bernard of Clairvaux (as most things do). In his sermon "On the Deceptions of This Life," Bernard glosses a verse from Psalm 106 as follows:

They have wandered, says the prophet, in a lonely place, in a place without water; they have not found the way to a city in which to dwell. This lonely place is that of the proud, that is, they suppose themselves to be solitaries, and they seek to be regarded as such. If the proud are well educated, then they hate their peers. If they are clever in worldly affairs, then they hope to find no one like themselves. Though they be wealthy, it tortures them to see others grow rich. They may be strong or handsome, but give them an equal and they wither. They are solitaries in that they have gone astray. They wander in their solitude, for one cannot dwell alone on the earth. (4)

Bernard is unequivocal: "one cannot dwell alone on the earth." It is therefore both a mistake and a sin, both an error and a vice, to claim to be without peer; and not just to claim it, but to wish it: "they hope to find no one like themselves." I'll admit that this hits a little closer to home for me than I want it to; how easily, I wonder, does the shunned weirdo's defense of his unusual way of being, or writing, or loving, go astray in this wilderness of pride? (And is one of the functions of our literary companions—of people like Bernard—to remind us that we are neither as odd nor as alone as we might have thought?) A little later, after Bernard has explained that the waterless places of such wandering make these solitaries not only dry but dirty, he adds a geography lesson:

They have wandered in a lonely place, in a place without water; they have not found the way to a city in which to dwell. They wandered in a trackless waste and not on a road. For the broad road is not really a road. Indeed straightness pertains to a road; broadness pertains more to a plain than to a road. The lonely place is a way within the broad road, and where there is no road, the whole region is the road. Such a life is exposed to vices because it has the widest limits, or rather it has no limits. (5)

The whole region is the road: in a version of what we might later call, with Dante, a *contrapasso*, a literally fitting punishment, the proud solitary becomes not a paragon of difference but subject to radical undifferentiation. His road, it turns out, is no road at all. Bernard urges his monks, in this way, to appreciate the value of limits, not just for any itinerary that hopes to arrive somewhere but for any solitude that would not dissolve, or more precisely dry up, into something absolutely indistinguishable from its surroundings. That is to say, I am only as alone as the limits—physical, social, temporal, bodily, spiritual—that mark off this aloneness, that mark it off as one aloneness among others. Should those limits disappear—should the road become a region—I would be alone no longer, yet not in the sense of having transcended solitude: proud to be unique, my unicity would fall apart for lack of coordinates. I would not be one; I would be legion: I would be something like a decomposed or decomposing thing, only as singular, and as multiple, as the scurrings that carry off what I used to be.

Solitude, in this way, figures what is both best and worst in our inner and outer lives. And sometimes the difference between, say, a good solitude and a bad one, or a true solitude and a false one, is as slender as the difference between two kinds of imitation of God; or, if God-talk gives you the creeps, say ground instead of God, say sacred, say source, say what sets you in motion. Call this the difference between a copy and a forgery, or between two dialectically related, yet fundamentally opposed, modes of mimicry: the first, according to which I seek to honor what is set apart—the sacred, the ground, the Holy Toledo, the Whole Shebang—by setting myself apart (or, better, to one side); the second, according to which I arrogate that sacredness to myself, I seek to appropriate it, I become a lonely little godlet (or—and this is practically the same thing—a very sleepy toddler).

Meister Eckhart, the fourteenth-century Dominican preacher, describes a solitude that honors the divine through imitation—the good kind of solitude, so to speak—in one of his sermons on the command given by Jesus, in Luke's Gospel, to the dead or dying daughter of Jairus, a synagogue leader. The daughter is said to be dying at the beginning of an intricate passage in which her healing—or resurrection—frames another story of the healed female body, that of a grown woman whose lifelong hemorrhages cease when she touches the hem

of Jesus's clothing. By the time Jesus reaches Jairus's house, his daughter is dismissed by her neighbors as dead; Jesus corrects them: "She is not dead but sleeping." And when they scoff, he commands her: "Child, get up!"⁵ In Eckhart's Sermon 85 (Sermon 26 in Oliver Davies's translation for Penguin) this command to get up is addressed to the soul:

If the soul is to be united with God, she must be separated from all things and must be as solitary as God is solitary. A work which God performs in an empty soul is more precious than heaven and earth. It is for this that God created the soul, that she should be united with him. One of the saints says that the soul is created from nothing, and that God created her himself, with no one else present. Had anyone else been present, God would have been afraid that the soul might be drawn to them and not to himself. Therefore the soul must be alone, as God is alone. (*Writings* 230)

Solitude is, first, a separation. And not just any separation: a separation that is a matter of life and death; a separation poised at the threshold of the human and the divine. So much is compressed into the "as" by which an analogy between the soul and God is wagered: that is, the rising up of the dead or dying girl is, for Eckhart, an account of the necessary solitude, figured by death, through which the soul makes herself empty and available to that God by and for whom she has been made; and she becomes, in that solitary availability, *like* God. There is something nearly Kierkegaardian, I find, about this sermon's commitment to the way in which only extreme relinquishment pares the human being down to the basics that, all along, have been sufficient for its purpose and destiny: just as the soul is created from nothing, it is to that nothing—or to the closest to nothing it can be or become—that the soul must return if it is to become revivable, if it is to become susceptible to the divine life that may otherwise be occluded by what passes for human living.

Eckhart says, "The soul must be alone, as God is alone," and when he says this, he says a couple of things at once. Yes, death marks that place or point where no human being can accompany me any farther; and yes, that aloneness figures the closest thing we have to something like the unknowable solitude of God, the number that God is, or has: the one that isn't one. At the same time, this side of death or dying, the place of radical availability to God, and therefore of radical enlivening—what we might more ordinarily call resurrection—is a place where my solitude both calls to and answers God's solitude: the strange number that I am—the number occluded by the ego-driven stories I tell myself about who I am—is called out by, even as it calls to, the divine one who is always also more, or other, than one. Called out, I'd say (though Eckhart does not), in much the way that, for the psalmist, deep calls to deep; or, better, one deep to another; deep one to deep one.

Eckhart highlights something similar in an adjacent sermon (adjacent, I presume, in the German edition of his works, as it's numbered Sermon 84, although I found it in an entirely different collection) on the same passage from Luke. There, he gives four "reasons" why the soul "should 'arise' and dwell above itself." Eckhart explains, "The first is because of the many and various joys it finds in God, for God's perfection cannot contain itself but lets pour forth from him creatures with whom he can share himself, who can receive his likeness. Such immeasurable numbers flow out as though he were completely emptied" (*Teacher* 335). Here, God is the one emptying Godself: the kenotic work is on his side, before it was—or before it will ever be—on ours. More important, "God's perfection cannot contain itself": the radical solitude that Eckhart locates in God—and in the soul—does not obviate, in fact absolutely requires, this thought of God's infinite creativity, his outpouring into, and as, the world. To be alone as God is alone, then, does not mean to count one's money (or monographs) in one's gilded castle. It might mean, rather, to "share" oneself, likewise, with this world of creatures: when the girl of Luke's Gospel is brought back to life—or, if she were only dying, to fuller living—it is not so that she can remain in some kind of catatonic trance or solipsistic swoon. *Puella surge* says: *Girl, get up*. I hear this with a snapped finger and a drag queen's imperative: *Girl, get up*—and get back to the world, this world you've been given again.⁶

After all, solitude doesn't make the world *less* compelling; at its best, it doesn't forsake but rather enriches that world—at a distance, with its distance. Not that solitude's worth lies in the good it does; not that it should be touted as appropriate or—to use the now-obligatory word—"relatable." The ironies of solitude were on full display in the early months of the coronavirus pandemic, when monastics of various traditions were extolled for their wisdom as the world suddenly shrank, for many people, to the size of their houses, and solitude became a default, though largely unchosen, way of life for a while, for some; while monastic communities, so often composed of the elderly, were themselves shown to be heartbreakingly vulnerable to the virus.⁷ But if the tiny creatures that viruses are can remind us that our walls are never as impenetrable as they seem, we might also wish to remember, with Bernard and Eckhart, that we have never been absolutely alone, especially when we have devoted, and even when we have resigned, ourselves to solitude. As Bernard says, we can only seek what we have (imperfectly) found—and only to the extent that we have ourselves *been* found. There's no little corner where we can hide away forever. (And this is, in part, why we hide there at all.)

Moreover, if we are always on the cusp or in the aftermath of discovery, this is not just in relation to some deadly new microorganism but—more truly, more abidingly—in the shadow of some deeper life, some company that does not

disrupt our solitude but, precisely, confirms it. (To bring Emily Dickinson into this for a second: God is nobody; who are you?) “No one is alone,” the Stephen Sondheim lyric would tell us, with its characteristic melancholy, its sense that this not-aloneness is both what makes us die and what makes us live.⁸ Solitude, however, isn’t a fiction (not even an elegiac one) so much as a figure for what, in us, retreats from the world so that the world might happen—might, indeed, be *felt* to happen. Solitude lets something, perhaps it lets everything, be. (In that way, the soul also imitates God at the moment of the world’s creation.) “No one” responds to “alone” as nothing responds to a world of isolated things: and God, the quintessential nobody, calls us out there and keeps us—paradoxically, ironically—company. This may not be reassuring, exactly, but it does emphasize Eckhart’s point: to be solitary as God is solitary is to be alone as no one is.

The problem, of course, with many discussions of solitude is that they seek a practical, therapeutic end: is solitude going to help my mental health (as we say), or my career, or my culinary skills?⁹ The medieval thinkers I’m dwelling with here, like the figures who will appear in many of this collection’s other essays, are not primarily interested in telling you why solitude is good for you. Rather, they take it for granted—which is to say, they seem drawn to how solitude grants *itself* as a good, how solitude isn’t something one can confidently claim for oneself so much as a corner one can hide in, pretending that one doesn’t notice who is looking on. (Solitude is also a game.)

In the second of his *Dialogues*, Gregory the Great tells the story of the life of his near contemporary, Benedict of Nursia, the founder in many ways of Western Christian monasticism. Gregory has just recounted how Benedict was nearly assassinated by a group of monks who chafed at his stricter standards for monastic living; departing from them, Gregory says, “he returned to his beloved place of solitude, where he lived alone with himself but under the gaze of the Heavenly Spectator” (22). This prompts Gregory’s deacon, Peter, to request a clarification:

PETER: I don’t quite know what it means to “live with oneself.”

GREGORY: If the holy man had wished to dominate long over those plotting against him, who had a very different way of life, it may have exceeded his strength. And the eye of his mind may have lost the light of contemplation. Worn out by the daily undiscipline, he would have neglected his own soul; he would have lost himself without finding them. For every time we are drawn outside ourselves by too much mental agitation, we are not “with ourselves,” even though we think we are. Because when we wander here and there we do not see ourselves. (22)

First, Gregory makes it clear that sometimes the only way to preserve “the light of contemplation” is, like Patty Griffin’s key-wielding party-leaver, to step away from the circumstances, including the circumstantial people, who are impeding it. (You can only struggle with colleagues for so long before it takes a toll.) Solitude heals the rifts internal to the self incurred in the course of social battle. Gregory’s gloss on Benedict’s behavior is also a reminder that God is not the only one who can draw us beyond ourselves; “too much mental agitation” can do this, too. In fact, he will make this doubleness explicit shortly afterward, when he says, “We are led out of ourselves in two ways, Peter. Either we sink beneath ourselves by a mental lapse, or we rise above ourselves by the grace of contemplation” (23). Both the best and the worst things can lead to our self-loss; and to return to this self, from spiritual heights or desolate depths, is the ongoing work of human living. No one can stay rapt forever; conversely, there is a point at which even the best-intentioned reformer has to cut his losses and know, in the words of another famous song, when to walk away.¹⁰ To “live alone with ourselves” in this way, then, is both to experience our solitary selfhood as a relation (as, in other words, an ongoing project of finding and losing the self that I nonetheless always also am) and to understand this relation as bound up with two other, and differently opposing, relations: the relation to a world that can enrich as well as deplete our living; and the relation to a God (or, again, a ground) who seeks only to intensify that living. To live with ourselves is, in part, to stay alert to which experience of self-loss is on the horizon.¹¹

At the beginning of his book about art and solitude, *At the Center of All Beauty*, Fenton Johnson affirms, “To write about solitaries and solitude is to be required to invent or repurpose language” (9). Johnson is thinking in particular about the relative poverty of our modern Western vernaculars when it comes to telling, and thinking, those lives whose coordinates, very much including coordinates for love, fall outside the scripts of marriage, family, and other forms of social organization. Richard Rodriguez shows how Johnson’s frustration is not unique to solitaries; in *Darling*, he writes of the equally inadequate lexicon for queer relationships: “Is my partner a husband? Is my husband a partner? We are not a law firm. Is my partner my ‘friend,’ a wreath of quotation marks orbiting his head? Lover sounds sly. Boyfriend sounds fleeting. Husband sounds wistful” (116). What the essays in this collection demonstrate is that the Middle Ages, in particular but by no means exclusively, had richer vocabularies than many of our modernities for the continual renegotiation, the loss and receipt and gift, of selfhood and otherness through practices of withdrawal. *With-drawal*: the word says already that what draws me on, divine or human, animal or artifact, world or otherworld, draws me with it; and

only in that tug and embrace, that tussle and drag, am I restored somehow, paradoxically or ironically, to myself. We wrestle with the angel alone.

This would be the time to tell you that the writers in this collection have been angels to me, in different ways, over the years: messengers, sparring partners, revelators,¹² folks who make me feel less alone, even as they occasionally challenge me to get off my ass and go. Each of these voices has a unique timbre; each, a particular note to strike: some are philological; some, philosophical; all of them are literary in the largest sense. Some speak directly to, and with, the traditions of the Latin and Romance-speaking world; others give that world a set of new, or old, insular and Mediterranean interlocutors to bring back to their continental (not to mention postcolonial) cloisters. Autobiography waits frequently in the wings; sometimes it flaps those wings, and the stage buckles. Again and again, we're asked what it means to be alone, and why reading is at once what assuages our aloneness and what stokes it. Again and again, we're made to reckon with how the past calls to us, and how something beyond every past and present calls us when it does.

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NOTES

1. I've altered Barbara Altmann's translation to fit my greater sense of Christine's theatricality here. "Nobody puts Baby in a corner" is, for the uninitiated, a line made famous by Patrick Swayze as Johnny Castle in the 1987 American film *Dirty Dancing*.
2. Another singer-songwriter, Mary Chapin Carpenter, makes this distinction explicit—if repeatedly questioned—in "Alone but Not Lonely," from *time*sex*love** (Columbia, 2001).
3. The songwriters here are Jay Knowles and Adam Wright.
4. Something similar is stirring in Fenton Johnson's observation, "I imagine and propose solitaries as models for the choice of reverence over irony" (224).
5. My summary quotes from the New Revised Standard Version; this interlaced narrative of healed female bodies occurs in Luke 8:40–56.
6. A drag queen—or Dolly Parton. The latter says it, characteristically, better than I can in her song, "Better Get to Livin'," from *Backwoods Barbie* (Dolly Records, 2008).
7. For one article among the many that translated monastic practices for a global audience during the pandemic, see Freeman. For one of the many articles documenting the devastating toll that the virus took on enclosed communities, see Forliti, Gash, and Crawford.
8. The song "No One Is Alone" appears in *Into the Woods*, Sondheim's 1987 musical with a book by James Lapine. Sondheim's oeuvre returns again and again to solitude and its limits.
9. For an unusually thoughtful example of the genre, see Crane.
10. These are, of course, Don Schlitz's words in "The Gambler," as made famous by Kenny Rogers and Johnny Cash on their 1978 albums *The Gambler* (United Artists) and *Gone Girl* (Columbia).
11. Gregory says, "I would say that this venerable man [Benedict] 'lived with himself' because he was always on guard and watchful" (II.III.7, 23). See, too, Johnson's comments on

James Baldwin at the end of *At the Center of All Beauty* (241–42), where reading and writing become ways of “revealing my self to myself.”

12. I can’t use this word without thinking of Gillian Welch’s artfully ambiguous “Time (The Revelator),” cowritten with David Rawlings, from the album of the same name (Acony Records, 2001).

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