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Stern, L. J. (2021) *The art, music and literature of solitude*. In: The Bloomsbury Handbook of Solitude, Silence and Loneliness. Bloomsbury, London, pp. 89-103. ISBN 9781350162174

This is the final, published version of a chapter published by Bloomsbury in its final form on 18th November 2021 at <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/bloomsbury-handbook-of-solitude-silence-and-loneliness-9781350162174/>

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The art, music and literature of solitude

Julian Stern

Introduction

Why might we look to art, music and literature, as well as to research-based, ‘scientific’, work for insights into solitude and other forms of aloneness? One reason is that art itself can be thought of as solitudinous. While art, like science, can be an intensely social process, there is also a solitudinous, often lonely, character to so much art and to so much research, that they can both illuminate solitude. For Peters, a work of art has the attribute of ‘essential solitude’, which in turn leaves the artist as ‘lonely’ (Peters, 2013: 34). Research too, and all forms of learning, have their solitudes, with Piaget describing the child as (often) learning as a lone scientist, typically responding to new circumstances as a scientist does, by trial and error (Piaget, 1950: 104).

A second reason for using art alongside conventional research to explore solitude is that art and research seem to involve similar processes. One of the most established definitions of research, provided by the UK’s main research funding body, says ‘research is defined as a process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared’ (DfENI, 2019: 90). The ‘investigation’ involved in creating a painting or novel or symphony may differ from, and may be less systematic than, the investigation carried out by researchers, but it is still a reasonable description of how artists come to be in a position to create. A number of artists have respectable careers as conventional researchers – with da Vinci (painter and scientist) and Sartre (novelist and philosopher) as two good examples of art and research feeding each other. But artists who are not investigators in those ‘scientific’ ways are still investigating before and while creating, surely? And artists are rightly praised for their ‘insights’, in visual arts, quite straightforwardly their ‘sight’, their ‘way of seeing’ (as described of Hockney¹). The final element of the definition of research, that the insights should be ‘effectively shared’, is in general much better done by artists than it is by conventional researchers. So art and research have many qualities in common.

There is a third, more personal, reason for using art and literature to explore solitude. When thinking about solitude, many people, myself included, find more insights in the arts than in the conventional research literature. There are numerous topics, especially those that are ‘odd’ or somewhat ineffable, that conventional researchers find difficult to describe. Solitude, along with

silence and loneliness, has such a character. For my own research on solitude and loneliness in schools (Stern, 2014), I could find very little conventional research on the topic: one professionally oriented book from the 1970s (Robert, 1974), and barely another mention. Yet there were plenty of artistic and literary resources on which to draw, including materials written for young children. I am not the only person to go to the arts to explore the topic, having been ‘failed’ by conventional research. Perrin, in a philosophical account of classical and modern solitude, says that ‘if there exists a whole *litteratura perennis* on solitude, it has no *philosophia*’ (Perrin, 2020: 15). He finds some philosophy on the topic, but claims that Arendt makes the ‘only truly conceptual distinction in philosophy on the subject of solitude – between *loneliness*, *isolation* and *solitude* first during the [nineteen] fifties’ (Perrin, 2020: 17). Like Perrin, I found many artistic and literary insights into solitude and loneliness, in art directed at children as much as at adults, and much less in the conventional research literature.

For these three reasons, especially, I have written this exploration of solitude in literature, music and art,² seeing the artists as themselves researchers, investigating solitude (through their lives and their arts), developing original insights and communicating those insights. In their own right, and when compared with the research of conventional ‘scientific’ researchers, the artists distinctively reflect and influence the societies in which they work, and their continuing influence is significant. This chapter is divided into pre-Romantic, Romantic and post-Romantic arts (even if the boundaries are inevitably fuzzy), as it is in the Romantic period that solitude and other forms of aloneness seem to play the most central roles. In all three periods, I follow Murdoch, herself a good example of artist-researcher as a novelist and philosopher, who says that ‘[a]rt gives a clear sense to many ideas which seem more puzzling when we meet with them elsewhere, and it is a clue to what happens elsewhere’ (Murdoch, 2014: 84–5).

Pre-Romantic solitude: Exile and ecstasy

In the pre-Romantic period, there are ancient and medieval accounts of exile, solitude and wandering, and there is an increasing recognition of the need for solitude in an ever-more connected economic and social world. In consequence, two themes related to solitude are described as characteristic of a great deal of pre-Romantic art: exile and ecstasy. Forms of exile are typically unpleasant, of course, with rejection from a community as dangerous in ancient and medieval societies as the worst of modern-day refugee crises. Ecstasies and other ‘quieter’ forms of solitude³ are often chosen, and are often – but certainly not always – experienced positively.

Starting with the Roman writer Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso, 43 BCE–c. 18 CE), a writer so brilliant and so well connected that his works on love and on mythology were not only enormously popular in his own day but also remain popular today. As Feeney describes him, ‘he was unquestionably the most famous poet in the empire’:

Rome was his oyster, and his poetry took the metropolis as inspiration and subject. His love poetry brought a cool passion to bear on the sophisticated life of the city, with its classy courtesans and new imperial pomp; his *Metamorphoses* . . . made Rome the magnet that tugged all Greek mythology and art towards itself as the new centre of the world. (Feeney, 2006: 13)

At the high point of his fame, the Emperor Augustus exiles him to Tomis on the Black Sea (now Constanța in Romania), on the edge of the empire, away from family, friends, and the culture of the empire's capital. It is not entirely clear why Ovid was exiled, although he assumes it is some offence taken at something he wrote, but Ovid spent the remaining decade of his life in Tomis and, the writer that he was, he created a body of exile literature (the *Tristia* and the *Black Sea Letters*) that – 2,000 years later – remains in print, exactly as he would have wanted. 'Look at me', he says in *Tristia* (Ovid, 2005: 52–3), 'I've lost my home, the two of you, my country, / they've stripped me of all they could take, / yet my talent remains my joy, my constant companion: / over *this*, [Augustus] Caesar could have no rights.' He writes with confidence that '[w]hen I'm gone, my fame will endure.' Making the most of his exile, he also writes eloquently, bitterly, about his experience in Tomis. As well as missing his family, he misses being in 'society', and the information he would be picking up from public events: 'in this distant exile / I miss all such public rejoicing: only vague / rumours get this far' (Ovid, 2005: 67, from *Tristia*).

Ovid's constant complaint is the exile itself, and Augustus as its cause – although he is understandably careful not to anger Augustus again. Green, in his introduction to the books, notes references 'not only to sickness, senility and lassitude, but also to sloth, depression, accidie: the fact that writing has become a mere wearisome chore to kill time' (Ovid, 2005: xxxiii). Ovid's writings from exile, he says,

offer an extraordinary paradigm of the fantasies and obsessions that bedevil every reluctant exile: loving evocations of the lost homeland, the personification of letters that are sent to walk the dear familiar streets denied to their writer, the constant parade – and exaggeration – of present horrors, spring *here* contrasted with spring *there* . . . , the wistful recall of lost pleasures once taken for granted, the slow growth of paranoia and hypochondria, the neurotic nagging at indifferent friends, the grinding exacerbation of slow and empty time, the fear of and longing for death. (Green, in Ovid, 2005: xxxvi–xxxvii)

Green even notes how Ovid's exilic situation is newly relevant since the twentieth century when

[e]xile has once more become, as it was in Augustus's day, if not a universal condition . . . , at least an all-too-familiar risk . . . [due to t]he ruthless demands of two world wars and, worse, a variety of totalitarian ideologies, [which] have made the exile, the stateless person, the refugee, the *dépaysé*, a common feature of our social awareness. (Green, in Ovid, 2005: xiv)

The punishment of Ovid was relatively 'comfortable', a 'relegation' that allowed him to correspond with family, rather than full isolation – and more comfortable, of course, than a death sentence, even if it is 'a living death' (Ovid, 2005: 85, from *Tristia*). He admits to these being 'snivelling poems', and to the irony of being regarded as barbarian by barbarians: 'Here, *I'm* the barbarian, understood by no one, / and these stupid peasants mock my Latin speech, / slander me to my face with impunity, on occasion / (I suspect) laugh at my exile' (Ovid, 2005: 100, from *Tristia*). The final line hints at the paranoia mentioned by Green, and stressed by Szykaruk (2020) in her account of Ovid's experience as close to modern forms of loneliness. But exilic literature since Ovid has tended to focus on what Green describes as loss of the pleasures of home, combined with bitterness, accidie (or depression, or sloth), and the fear of and longing for death, and not *loneliness* as we now understand it. This is seen in the Anglo-Saxon poem *Wanderer* (from the ninth or tenth century), which describes how the wanderer 'sat apart' (Hamer, 1970: 181). The

poet complains how ‘fate is relentless’ (Hamer, 1970: 175), and asks the Lord to ‘[c]omfort my loneliness, tempt me with pleasures’ (Hamer, 1970: 177). The word ‘loneliness’ in that line is a translation of the Anglo-Saxon ‘freondleasne’, elsewhere translated to the etymologically closer ‘friendless’ or ‘friendlessness’. Exile is once again a bitter and depressing separation from loved people and places. And yet ‘no man may be wise before / He’s lived his share of winters in the world’ (Hamer, 1970: 183). For Chaucer in the fourteenth century, solitude was best represented by the ‘exile’ to death. The dying Arcita in the *Knight’s Tale* asks, ‘What is this world? what asketh men to have? / Now with his love, now in his colde grave / Allone, withouten any compaignye’ (Chaucer, 1992: 74).

Shakespeare, one of the first writers to use the word ‘lonely’, still uses it to refer to exile. Coriolanus comforts his mother before leaving for exile, saying, ‘I’ll do well yet’, even though ‘I go alone, / Like to a lonely dragon, that his fen / Makes fear’d and talk’d of more than seen’ (*Coriolanus*, IV.iii). Yet in other plays, Shakespeare does indeed seem to create a modern sense of loneliness. Forms of solitude that are not simply painful places away from loved ones, but accompanied by complex emotions such as loneliness, seemed to develop considerably in the early seventeenth century. Dumm describes Cordelia, King Lear’s ‘principled’ daughter, as seeking ‘a new way out of her family’s drama of counterfeit love, a way into a sense of autonomy, which she tries to find through her attempt to establish a reasonable, rational, thoughtful division of love’. But as she is refused this by her father (and has no mother), she ‘becomes the first lonely self’ (Dumm, 2008: 13–14). ‘For Cordelia’, he says, ‘loneliness becomes a way of life’ and so ‘[s]he is . . . our first modern person’ (Dumm, 2008: 14). Shakespeare therefore looks back at the exilic literature of the ancients, in *Coriolanus*, and forward to the post-Romantic literature of self-judging loneliness in *King Lear*, where Cordelia experiences ‘lonesomeness and longing, marking a path toward . . . the isolated self of the modern era’ (Dumm, 2008: 15).

Along with accounts of exile in pre-Romantic arts are accounts of solitude as opportunities for more or less successful experiences of ecstasy. This is the ecstasy commonly described in religious traditions, the ‘going beyond’ or ‘getting out of oneself’ that is the origin of the word *ecstasy* (‘out of place’, OED, 2005). Accounts of visions and prophesies from ‘beyond’ (typically from God or gods) are common in many religious traditions, especially Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions, and these are often described as happening in solitude – in periods spent alone in exile and in prison (as with Jeremiah), in the desert (as with Jesus), living alone in a cave (as with St Antony), meditating in a cave (as with Muhammad) or as a hermit or anchoress (as with Julian of Norwich). Religious artists describe such scenes, and one of the finest artists of solitude is Dürer. Working in the early sixteenth century, he pictured *Saint Jerome in His Study*, the saint quietly alone in his room (accompanied by a dog, a lion and a skull) absorbed in his theological writings, with his saintly halo indicating his religious ecstasy. A kind of ‘failed ecstasy’ might be represented by his *Melencolia I*. In that picture, the melancholic figure is a winged woman (an angel?) looking miserably into the distance, suffering perhaps from something like the *accidie* also ascribed to Ovid. The central figure is surrounded by workshop tools of an artist of some kind, and is accompanied only by a similarly disengaged winged cherub. There are many interpretations of this scene, and no agreement on its symbolism, but the range of interpretations described by Merback (2017) includes insights into the therapeutic character of the work, the depression of bereavement, the delayed or frustrated creativity and ‘paralyzing gloom’ of an artist (Merback, 2017: 138), and a description of the ‘suffering of the artist’ (Merback, 2017: 186).

Seeing it as a ‘failed’ ecstasy, as an example of the ‘[s]olitude, despair, sadness, and greed’ that were ‘the melancholic’s birthright’ (Merback, 2017: 138), Dürer’s engraving also looks forward. To look so miserable and unengaged among all the necessary technologies of creativity: this is a modern solitude, whether the boredom of wealthy flâneurs in nineteenth-century Paris (Benjamin, 1999: 451), experiencing the ‘boredom [that] waits for death’ (Benjamin, 1999: 101), or the twenty-first-century people whose technologies leave them ‘interconnected loners’ (O’Sullivan, 2019: 173).

Literary solitude-ecstasies are well represented by Philips’s poem from the middle of the seventeenth century, *O Solitude! My Sweetest Choice* (Philips, 1710: 210–25, made famous by a song setting of Henry Purcell⁴). This poem, translated from the French poem *La Solitude* by Saint-Amant, describes solitude ‘Remote from tumult and from noise’ in a mountainous landscape which ‘th’ unhappy would invite / To finish all their sorrows here’ (i.e. a place for the suicidal). And yet it is a place the narrator ‘adore[s]’, as there, she encounters not only the natural world (pre-empting much Romantic solitude poetry) but also people (from times gone by, as well as more recent – perhaps suicidal – visitors, and the narrator’s lost lover) and mythical beings (demigods, Naiads, nymphs, Echo, Tritons). Pope’s *Ode on Solitude* from 1700 is less dramatically ecstatic, and yet that too seeks an escape, through a quieter death than is envisaged by Philips: hoping in the end to ‘Steal from the world, and not a stone / Tell where I lie’. Remarkably, Pope wrote this at the age of twelve, just as his lifelong debilitating illnesses were manifesting themselves (Pope, 1994: 1).

If Purcell’s musical setting of Philips’s poem made solitude almost fashionable, the solitude of religious ecstasy is perhaps better represented by later composers such as J. S. Bach. In his *St Matthew Passion*, Bach creates one of the great musical silences, an aural/oral solitude. *So ist mein Jesus nun gefangen* (‘behold, my Saviour now is taken’) gives an account of Jesus being taken from the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before his crucifixion. Two voices calmly express their grief (‘Moon and Stars, / Have for grief the night forsaken’), and the choir bursts in, furiously asking, ‘Have lightnings and thunders their fury forgotten? / Then open o fathomless pit, all thy terrors!’ Bach inserts a paused rest for the length of a bar, in between these last two lines. The silence seems to describe both the forgotten fury of thunder and lightning, and the opening of the fathomless pit. There are few better examples of the ecstatic power of silence in music, a remarkably ‘meaningful’ silence in the middle of a fury.⁵ Similarly, Rondeau refers to Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*, written as a cure for insomnia, as ‘an ode to silence’.⁶ (A century after Bach, Kierkegaard comments on how the lowing of cattle or the bark of a dog in the countryside ‘belongs to the silence, is in a mysterious and thus in turn silent harmony with the silence; this increases it’, Kierkegaard, 2000: 335.) Bach’s understanding of different forms of solitude is perhaps also evidenced in his ability to compose for solo instruments that were rarely – before or since – given entirely solitary opportunities. The unaccompanied cello suites, and the sonatas and partitas for solo violin, are distinguished by being written for a solitary performer. And they also exhibit Bach’s skills in achieving a ‘dense counterpoint and refined harmony’ (Grove Music Online⁷) – a multiple-voiced form of music, in contrast to a single melodic voice with or without accompaniment. A solitary musician with many voices, this is what the literary critic Bakhtin would later call *heteroglossia* (*raznorečie*) (Bakhtin, 1981: 263). That Bach can achieve the ‘links and interrelationships’, the ‘movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization’

(Bakhtin, 1981: 263) in pieces for a solo stringed instrument, rather than a novel (as envisaged by Bakhtin), is an impressive achievement in solitude. The solo violin music was described by Reichardt in 1805 as ‘perhaps the greatest example in any art of the freedom and certainty with which a great master can move even when he is in chains’ (Grove Music Online⁸).

Seeing Bach’s contrapuntal music as solitudinous voices speaking simultaneously, the twentieth-century Bach specialist Gould created his own solitude trilogy (Gould, 2003). But the eighteenth century was a highpoint of creative solitude – from Bach to the shipwrecked solitude described in 1719 by Defoe in *Robinson Crusoe* (Defoe, 2001), from the poetry of Pope to the artist Lemoyne’s 1728 picture of *Narcissus* (absorbed in his solitude by his own image). From Ovid to Bach, from exile to ecstasy, much of the art of solitude is relearned in the Romantic period with Romanticism clearly prefigured in the ecstatic art of Blake (such as his famous picture of Newton, from *Europe*) towards the end of the eighteenth century.

Romantic solitude: The artist and nature

Romanticism brought an elevated sense of the artist as solitary figure, and of solitude as *sought* away from home rather than avoided or imposed by a sentence of exile. Solitude was most often portrayed as being sought in nature. There were new ways of understanding the artist, and understanding nature, which went beyond the earlier craft- and service-oriented models of art, and the nostalgic idealized pastoral scenes of nature – even the troubled pastoral scene described by Philips. Instead, there were more individualistic accounts of the artist-as-outsider (but not in literal exile), and more holistic accounts of ‘Nature’ as the whole universe. The natural holism was influenced in part by philosophies such as that of Spinoza, who wrote in the seventeenth century of ‘God or nature’, that is ‘the eternal and infinite Being, which we call God or Nature’ (Spinoza, 1955: 188). Eliot, the late-Romantic novelist, was explicitly influenced by Spinoza, and translated the *Ethics* (Spinoza, 2020, and see Newton, 1981). But the whole of Romanticism was touched by the theme of the solitary-artist-in-nature. Here, some examples from literature, visual arts and music are given of different combinations of the solitary-artist and the artist-in-nature.

One of the most ‘typical’ artistic representations of solitary-artist-in-nature is given by Wordsworth. He wrote many accounts of solitude, with one of his late poems, *The Recluse*, explaining, ‘On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life / Musing in Solitude, I oft perceive / Fair trains of imagery before me rise’ (Wordsworth, 1994: 755). Most famous of all is his poem *The Daffodils* (Wordsworth, 1994: 187), best known as a poem for its use of the word ‘lonely’ (i.e. ‘I wandered lonely as a cloud / That floats on high o’er vales and hills, When all at once I saw a crowd, / A host of golden daffodils’). Although the word ‘lonely’ was increasingly used in Romantic poetry and prose, it generally to refer to *places* in which to find solitude, good or bad, rather than to an emotion. *The Daffodils* was clearly a celebration of solitude, not an exploration of the emotion of loneliness. The poem’s ending, incorporating lines written by the poet’s sister Dorothy Wordsworth, recalls the daffodils with ‘that inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude’. The poem moves from a disengaged aloneness (as the cloud is merely ‘alone’ and is disengaged not suffering from the emotion later called loneliness) to healthily engaged solitude – engaged, that is, with thoughts of the flower. It is the value of solitudinously engaging with nature (or Nature, as the Romantics tended to deem it) that excited the imagination of the poets who were themselves living through an intense period of urbanization and industrialization. Loneliness

was used of ('natural') places, not people, with Wordsworth writing of lonely yew trees, streams and primroses (Wordsworth, 1994: 25, 241, and 455). Clare, similarly, writes of a lonely thicket, glen, lake, tempest, shore, desert and fields (Clare, 2004: 20, 208, 212, 265, 285, 327 and 390, respectively), and Keats hears the 'surgic murmurs of the lonely sea' (Keats, 2007: 41). It is solitude of which they all write with (Romantic) passion.

More disturbing accounts of solitude come from Hölderlin. As his personal life was declining into more than three decades of isolation in a state of what would later be described as schizophrenia, Hölderlin wrote, '[t]ell me, is it a blessing or a curse, this loneliness which is part of my nature and which . . . I am . . . irresistibly driven back into?' (Hölderlin, 2009: 197, from a letter dated March 1801). He was describing a more emotional loneliness, and one that accompanied his increasing solitude. His situation was sometimes described as an archetypal Romantic withdrawal into silence. This is from Steiner's account:

By the age of thirty, Hölderlin had accomplished nearly his whole work; a few years later he entered on a quiet madness which lasted thirty-six years . . . Hölderlin's silence has been read not as a negation of his poetry but as, in some sense, its unfolding and its sovereign logic. The gathering strength of stillness within and between the lines of the poems have been felt as a primary element of their genius. As empty space is so expressly a part of modern painting and sculpture, as the silent intervals are so integral to a composition by Webern, so the void places in Hölderlin's poems, particularly in the late fragments, seem indispensable to the completion of the poetic act. His posthumous life in a shell of quiet, similar to that of Nietzsche, stands for the word's surpassing of itself, for its realization not in another medium but in that which is its echoing antithesis and defining negation, silence. (Steiner, 1967: 47–8)

Yet his visitor and friend, the younger poet Waiblinger – one of Hölderlin's few regular visitors other than the family that looked after him in his final isolation – described his situation as 'perdition' (Waiblinger, 2018: 32), and 'terrifying':

I once discovered amongst his papers a terrifying phrase replete with mystery. After honouring the renown of a list of Greek heroes and the beauty of the realm of gods, he says: 'Now for the first time I understand humankind, because I dwell far from it and in solitude'. (Waiblinger, 2018: 58)

The later isolation of Hölderlin's life is, as Steiner says, connected to his earlier life as a much more active poet, even if it is an odd interpretation of the situation to describe it as an eloquent poetic silence. One of his most quoted poems, written in 1799, is *The Root of All Evil*, which is just two lines long: 'Being at one is god-like and good, but human, too human, the mania / Which insists there is only the One, one country, one truth and one way' (Hölderlin, 1990: 139). The *attraction* of the One, a God-like singularity (like Spinoza's 'God or Nature') and the *danger* of the One, this is the tension under which Hölderlin lived, with solitude both an escape *from* the One and an escape *to* the position from which he could see all as One. In his isolated years, Waiblinger describes Hölderlin's visit to his home, where the older poet 'held a particular fascination for the pantheistic *One and All* inscribed in giant Greek letters on the wall above my work desk . . . [and] conversed at length with himself while observing this mysterious inscription so ponderous with thought' (Waiblinger, 2018: 50).

For Taylor, Hölderlin, like his mentor Schiller, represented the belief ‘that the human destiny was to return to nature at a higher level, having made a synthesis of reason and desire’, as, in the poet’s words, ‘all things separated come together again’ (Taylor, 1989: 386). In his major poem *Hyperion*, Hölderlin describes the hero’s ‘evocation of a lost oneness [that] suggests . . . we have been torn away from a vital, dynamic order of life coursing through nature, an order that was known to earlier experience but is now concealed by the detached stance of rational knowing and reflective awareness’ (Guignon, 2004: 53). *Hyperion*, for another critic, describes the hero’s ‘manic-depressive oscillations between nearly hallucinatory states of oneness with the other – nature, a friend, a lover – and states of complete and utter emptiness and abject isolation’ (Santner, in Hölderlin, 1990: xxvii). In his later life of isolation, this tension becomes pathological, as ‘[n]ow he is I and not-I, world and man, first and second person, high or highest’ (Waiblinger, 2018: 64). The solitude of, with, or against Nature, and the solitude of the artist, is voiced best by Hölderlin himself. In the following, the narrator begins at one with Nature, and then alone, apart and finally alienated from Nature:

To be one with all that lives! . . . On this height I often stand, my Bellarmin! But an instant of reflection hurls me down. I reflect, and find myself as I was before – alone, with all the griefs of mortality, and my heart’s refuge, the world in its eternal oneness, is gone; Nature closes her arms, and I stand like an alien before her and do not understand her. (Hölderlin, 1990: 4–5, from *Hyperion*)

A visual representation of the solitary-artist-in-nature is repeatedly given by Caspar David Friedrich. The man or woman alone in a landscape, with his or her back to the viewer, is an ideal Romantic solitude. Titles such as *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818) or *Woman before the Setting Sun* (1818–20) allow the viewer to identify with the nameless, solitary, figure. According to Cardinal, ‘[b]y inserting figures into his settings Friedrich seems less intent upon enlivening them or marking their scale than upon directing the viewer’s gaze towards their metaphysical dimension’ (Cardinal, in Murray, 2004: 388). Thus, ‘a solitary walker is absorbed by the vast craggy wilderness around him, his back turned to the viewer and in that way, isolating us too’, and ‘[b]eing ‘lonely’ in nature, he surrenders to feelings of awe, wonder and terror at its sublime majesty – all the petty worries of ordinary life, and even a sense of an independent self, ebbing away’ (Smith, 2015: 2578–2614). Friedrich is more than ‘the painter of stillness’ (Wolf, 2003); he is the painter of Romantic solitude, the painter, in a sense, of the more optimistic aspect of Hölderlin’s poetic vision. Later in his life, Friedrich, like Hölderlin, became reclusive, and his paintings that had during his rather brief marriage become a little more colourful and sometimes contained more than one person, became more and more dour. The late painting *Seashore by Moonlight* (1835), like some of his youthful landscapes, contained no people, and was almost completely black.

A musical score for this Romantic interpretation of solitude was provided by Friedrich’s and Hölderlin’s contemporary, Beethoven. Whether his popular image is accurate – a rather wild and moody unkempt character, an image popularized by portraits such as that of Steiler, isolated as a result of his temperament as much as his deafness – Beethoven’s music does have many of the features of Romantic solitude. His ‘nature’ music, such as his sixth (‘Pastoral’) symphony, portrays the storms of Friedrich, and he set hundreds of folk songs from many countries (Scotland, Wales, Ireland, England, especially, along with Germany, Sicily, Venice, Spain, Portugal, Denmark,

Poland, Hungary and Russia), at the height of his powers between 1809 and 1820 – with folk music being seen in Romanticism as going back to nature. Rosen, describing the ‘Romantic imagination’, says:

Folk music is always considered a good thing. There is a catch, however: it has to be ‘real’ folk music, anonymous, evoking not an individual but a communal personality, expressive of the soil . . . True folk music is produced only by farmers and shepherds; only this can guarantee its mythical status, its down-to-earth contrast with sophisticated urban music. Folk music, in fact, is not art but nature. The composer who turns to folk material is like the landscape artist who paints out of doors: they both reject the artificial for the natural; they start not with what is invented but with what is given by reality. (Rosen, 1995: 410)

Along with pastoral scenes and the settings of folk music, Beethoven’s late piano sonatas and, even more, the late string quartets seem to end in the ‘one eternal glowing life’, the oneness of nature (or God) which are the last words uttered by Hölderlin’s *Hyperion*. Beethoven’s late music is a music of such solitude that it can be described as ‘alienated’ (Said, in Barenboim & Said, 2002: 135), yet it seems to be a solitude of leaving the ordinary life to achieve oneness with the world, rather than the alienation of exile or even of ecstasy. Beethoven was one of the earliest musicians to be portrayed as an independent, Romantic, artist, but many others followed. It was the first half of the nineteenth century that created the image of the musician as creative artist and loner. The Romantic musician Liszt recognized the dangers of this position, which he projected back to his earlier Romantic forebears, and in passing created the possibility of a career as a popular solo (i.e. solitary) performer. Liszt wrote an obituary of his older colleague on the concert circuit, the violinist-composer Paganini:

As Paganini . . . appeared in public, the world wonderingly looked upon him as a super-being. The excitement he caused was so unusual, the magic he practiced upon the fantasy of hearer, so powerful, that they could not satisfy themselves with a natural explanation. (Quoted in Sennett, 1978: 200, original ellipses)

Liszt himself became just such a charismatic virtuoso performer, remarking, ‘The concert is – myself’ (quoted in Sennett, 1978: 199). Concert halls were built for these virtuosos to perform in, with all in the audience concentrating on the performers. These halls contrasted with the smaller rooms previously used, in which musicians might perform to an audience otherwise occupied in conversation – rather like cabaret venues or comedy clubs today, where performers are only part of a bigger social experience. The concert stage became a solitary mountain-top, with the virtuoso placed there like a Friedrich figure, illuminated by the spotlight while the audience remains in darkness. A penalty of this solitary-artist role created by Paganini and Liszt was a potential to fall into solipsism. Liszt’s obituary for Paganini continued:

this man, who created so much enthusiasm, could make no friends among his fellowmen. No one guessed what was going on in his heart; his own richly blessed life never made another happy . . . Paganini’s god . . . was never any other than his own gloomy, sad ‘I.’ (Quoted in Sennett, 1978: 202)

Sad or happy, the musical soloist as charismatic creative performer was born with Paganini and Liszt, not their twentieth-century successors in classical music or the popular music charismatic

performers such as Al Jolson, Bessie Smith, Frank Sinatra and onwards to Dusty Springfield and Freddie Mercury and beyond.

The solitary-artist and the artist-in-nature, sometimes combined (as in Friedrich), sometimes one (Liszt) or the other (Wordsworth), characterizes much of Romanticism to the extent that it could be described as the very heart of Romanticism. That is not to say earlier exilic or ecstatic solitudes were altogether absent, or that later forms of alienation and lonely self-rejection were not already being rehearsed. Yet the solitude of the Romantics still has a centre of gravity in a distinctive solitude that was not altogether rejected, but built upon and complemented by other forms in the post-Romantic period that takes us up to the present day.

Post-Romantic solitude: Lonesomeness, alienation and the rejected self

As high Romanticism faded, new solitude traditions emerged, both positive and negative. While pre-Romantic solitude often looked nostalgically back to a pastoral idyll, and Romantic solitude often lived in a stormy and emotional ‘Nature’, post-Romantic solitude mourned the loss of nature and the alienation of life in industrial cities. The emotion of loneliness developed further, and in the United States a parallel ‘lonesome’ tradition also emerged for cowboys, outlaws, and others in solitude on the ‘frontier’, glimpsed in the poetry of Whitman and Dickinson. Exilic literature made a comeback, with diasporas missing homelands. Sex and sexuality became more central to the tradition – from suppressed/oppressed sexualities leading to a sense of isolation, to the solitary vice surreptitiously celebrated by Larkin (see also Engelberg, 2001: 14–15). As communication technologies developed – from newspapers and the telephone to cinema, television and the internet – there was an increase in the sense of the interiority of solitude, solitude not so much as a place ‘out there’, but a place ‘in here’, contemplative (or dangerous) spaces and liberating (or terrifying) silences.

Early-nineteenth-century Romantic novels of solitude, such as *Frankenstein* (Shelley, 1999 [1818]), or a number of the novels of the Brontës (notably Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* or Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*), are powerful accounts of rejection and isolation turning to loneliness and anger in vividly described ‘natural’ as much as domestic settings. In *Jane Eyre* (Brontë, 2006 [1847]), some of the pain of lonely solitude is resolved; in *Wuthering Heights* (Brontë, 2003 [1847]), it is not at all resolved. But later in the century an apparently quieter, domestic, loneliness was more common. The heroine and her equally lonely husband in Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1965 [1871]) are good examples of such inward solitude. But it is Dickinson who writes most eloquently of the peculiarly complex emotion, referred to as loneliness, that emerges in the second half of the nineteenth century. Dickinson’s solitudinous way of life is well known. Restricting herself to her own house and rarely seeing visitors from outside the family, her solitude is richly described. She notes that the solitude of space or even of death is not as profound as that of a ‘soul admitted to itself’ (Dickinson, 1970: 691). Silence is dreaded because silence is ‘Infinity’ (Dickinson, 1970: 548). And her distinctive account of solitude is dominated by loneliness and the lonesome. She describes various forms of loneliness, including ‘another Loneliness’ (Dickinson, 1970: 502), which is closer to a positive version of solitude than to the negative forms of loneliness. Lewis writes of her poem as one promoting ‘lonesomeness’, in his ‘plea for recognition of the fecund “lonesomeness” of the greater American experience’ (Lewis, 2009: xiii). Dickinson describes this loneliness as being the result of nature or thinking, rather than lack of friends or bad luck, and the people who experience

it are 'richer' (Dickinson, 1970: 502). However, elsewhere, she writes of unambiguously negative forms of loneliness, full of pity. For example, 'I tried to think a lonelier Thing', she writes, such that the narrator could 'pity Him' and 'Perhaps he – pitied me – ' (Dickinson, 1970: 260). More terrifying than pitiable is the loneliness 'One dare not sound' (Dickinson, 1970: 379).

Along with Dickinson's touching on the lonesome, a number of other North American writers write of the lonesomeness of the American 'frontier' (a frontier, that is, only for the newly arrived populations). That lonesome tradition in literature and music was a more piquant, not entirely negative and sometimes creative, version of solitude. Whitman writes of 'where sun-down shadows lengthen over the limitless and lonesome prairie' (quoted in Lewis, 2009: 27), and Twain of Huck Finn's 'solid lonesomeness' (quoted in Lewis, 2009: 54). Lonesome cowboys ride through countless novels and songs, with lonesomeness only becoming wholly negative in the twentieth century with Hank Williams's 'I'm so lonesome I could cry' of 1949 (quoted in Lewis, 2009: 133), which Elvis Presley described as 'the saddest song I've ever heard in my life'.⁹ Negatively framed solitude is also described in the words and music of African American stories of the blues, such as the songs of Robert Johnson, which McGeachy (2006) compares to the Anglo-Saxon poetry of exile. African American culture is indeed exilic (McGeachy, 2006: 63), with blues music, drawing on West African traditions, being an outpouring of emotions associated with loss and loneliness specific to the African American situation. '[B]lues can be simulated, but blues feeling cannot, so its exponents contend' (Grove Music Online¹⁰). Lost love dominates blues lyrics, but the bigger picture is of an old exile, a current oppression and an unhappy future: 'Where Spirituals move the group heavenward (and northward), blues songs move the displaced individual hellward' (McGeachy, 2006: 87). In the mid-twentieth century, a British reinterpretation of the blues was composed by Lennon (copyrighted to Lennon and McCartney), whose *Yer Blues*¹¹ never mentions the blues in the lyrics, but, instead, complains of a suicidal loneliness.

Sexuality is a second post-Romantic theme. In the late nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries, novels were published that focused on the relationship between solitude, loneliness and sexuality – as exemplified in *The Well of Loneliness* (Hall, 1982). Hall's novel is described by Hennegan as being '[j]okingly, and not so jokingly, . . . known as "the Bible of lesbianism"' (in Hall, 1982: viii). This account of loneliness is described in terms of an 'unwanted being' (Hall, 1982: 205), a form of self-rejection. There is a portrayal of an 'unsatisfactory distinction between "real" lesbians and "real" women', and the heroine Stephen 'wrestles endlessly with the agonising contradictions it entails' (Hennegan, in Hall, 1982: xvi). In the novel, Stephen is an only child, and '[i]t is doubtful if any only child is to be envied, for the only child is bound to become introspective; having no one of its own ilk in whom to confide, it is apt to confide in itself' (Hall, 1982: 10). She meets a man called Martin and they talked: 'His youth met hers and walked hand in hand with it, so that she knew how utterly lonely her own youth had been before the coming of Martin' (Hall, 1982: 94). But this was not to be a sexual partnership. After her father's death, Stephen's mother discovers the 'scandal' of her daughter's sexuality.

Stephen went straight to her father's study; and she sat in the old arm-chair that had survived him; then she buried her face in her hands.

All the loneliness that had gone before was as nothing to this new loneliness of spirit. An immense desolation swept down upon her, an immense need to cry out and claim understanding

for herself, an immense need to find an answer to the riddle of her unwanted being. (Hall, 1982: 205–6)

This ‘unwanted being’, this self-rejection, is one that leads from a lonely childhood through to an adulthood of failed relationships and feeling a lack of a right even to exist, a kind of internalized exile. In the final words of the book, Stephen says, ‘[a]cknowledge us, oh God, before the whole world’, and ‘[g]ive us also the right to our existence!’ (Hall, 1982: 447).

Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1966, first published in 1890) is an account of a tragic gay figure, a ‘libertine’ who kills others and eventually kills himself. It describes the hero’s sensualism as a failed attempt to escape loneliness, having had a ‘lonely childhood’ of ‘stainless purity’ (Wilde, 1966: 99). Wilde’s lover, Douglas, wrote in 1894 of a dream of two young men in a garden, one, Love, was ‘wont to be / Alone’, but was joined by the other – ‘the love that dare not speak his name’.¹² In such ways, the solitude of exile is turned inwards. There were literary accounts of solitude, loneliness and LGBT lives well into the twentieth century, such as Oosthuizen’s *Loneliness and Other Lovers* (1981) or – with a more positive account – Nagata’s *My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness* (2017). Back in the 1890s, the artist Leighton painted *Solitude*, one of his most popular works. In some ways the picture looks back to a romantic contemplative solitude; in others it looks forward to a therapeutic view of healthy aloneness.

As the artist explained to his sister, the woman in the picture –who appears to be lost in her thoughts– depicts the emotions he felt when visiting Linn of Dee near Braemar, in Scotland. Leighton expresses that the place had ‘no sound, no faintest gurgle even reaches your ear; the silent mystery of it all absolutely invades and possesses you.’ This painting has become the embodiment of absolute self-consciousness.¹³

Yet it is also perhaps a portrait of late-nineteenth-century sexual repression, with Leighton’s own sexuality much debated. For all his public stature as president of the Royal Academy, he was fiercely protective of his privacy and yet, going back to a Romantic trope, he ‘remained to the end a child of nature’ (Barrington, 1906: 8).

Along with lonesomeness and sexuality, a third solitude theme of the post-Romantic period was that of alienation. In the early nineteenth century, alienation took a more central place in theology and philosophy. The philosopher Hegel, a student alongside Hölderlin in Tübingen, described alienation as one of the repeated ‘moments’ of the dialectic of separation and togetherness, including estrangement from God (Hegel, 1988: 447–9). Feuerbach, a student of Hegel, criticized his old teacher and instead turned alienation into an explanation of, and critique of, Christianity, and a critique of the state. People alienate themselves from their own species being, from their ‘essential nature’ (Feuerbach, 1855: 19), and from ‘Nature’ (Feuerbach, 1855: 183). But these largely Romantic formulations were rejected – or turned on their heads – by Marx. Marx moved beyond alienation as against ‘nature’. People and alienation are historically embedded in ‘the ensemble of the social relations’ (Marx, in Marx & Engels, 1970: 122). Modern capitalist industrial societies alienate labour (including taking the products of labour away from those labouring), and in doing that alienate people from each other and from themselves. Although far from a Marxist, Dickens also described the alienation of urban industrial life, with *Hard Times* (Dickens, 1955) concentrating on the alienation of children from their families through the new forms of mass schooling. Melville’s *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street*, published in 1853 (Melville, 2016), is a remarkable account

of a loner within a bureaucratic city, an almost Kafkaesque alienation written long before Kafka was born.

Thoreau, born within a few months of Marx, explained alienation in modern industrial society through his account of a retreat from it. He practiced and wrote about the solitude – and at times loneliness – of his time living in a hut by Walden Pond (Thoreau, 2006). This account of healthy solitude is powerful – and provides one of the most influential attacks on the alienation experienced in competitive crowds, a century before ‘the lonely crowd’ (Reisman, 2000) was coined:

I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude. We are for the most part more lonely when we go abroad among men than when we stay in our chambers. (Thoreau, 2006: 146)

Thoreau says others think he must be lonely, living in a hut away from the town, but he replies, ‘I am no more lonely than the loon in the pond that laughs so loud, or than Walden Pond itself’, for ‘[w]hat company has that lonely lake, I pray?’ (Thoreau, 2006: 148). In this, he is developing the earlier Romantic writing on solitude in nature, and arguing that loneliness is not to be described simply as ‘aloneness’ (as it seemed to be in Wordsworth), but as a more complex emotion that could be experienced in crowds as much as on one’s own. Thoreau was not antisocial, and writes of his time at Walden Pond as allowing for company (with nature, and also with people), as well as solitude: ‘I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society’ (Thoreau, 2006: 151). And yet he captured the value of healthy solitude, as well as the dangers of loneliness, better than the more sentimental Romantics managed.

Alienation was turned inwards, with the existential philosophy of Kierkegaard (1985 [1843]) and then the literary versions of Rilke’s *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* of 1910 (Rilke, 2009), Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* of 1915 (Kafka, 2008) and Sartre’s *Nausea* of 1938 (Sartre, 2000). These all described negative inward-looking solitudes, as Engelberg describes ‘the story of solitude as we move into the twentieth century’, which ‘relates how the solitary state moves from the Self’s removal from Society to, say, Nature to the Self’s opposition with itself’ (Engelberg, 2001: 2). Later in the twentieth century, the poet Larkin lamented the lack of healthy solitude and the presence of loneliness. In *Best Society* (dated 1951, Larkin, 1988: 56–7, referencing *Paradise Lost*’s ‘solitude sometimes is best society’, Milton, 1980: 211) he describes how as a child he had thought solitude was easily available, but that in adulthood it became harder to find and more ‘undesirable’. Those who do not like the virtue of sociability are deemed ‘vicious’, and so, viciously, he locks himself at home with his solitude (a slightly disguised reference also to masturbation). Larkin’s solitude is a form of alienation, if a long way from the tragic existentialist literatures of Rilke, Kafka or Sartre. The twentieth century was a high point of literary solitude focusing on loners and the lonely, like Larkin. Beckett’s *Trilogy* (Beckett, 2009, 2010a, 2010b) is a set of three novels of solitude and self-rejection, to the point of death (as with Chaucer’s Arcita, quoted above): ‘But what matter whether I was born or not, have lived or not, am dead or merely dying, I shall go on doing as I have always done, not knowing what it is I do, nor who I am, nor where I am, nor if I am’ (Beckett, 2010a: 53). Yates wrote short stories describing *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* (Yates, 2009), with accounts of a child new to school, patients in a TB ward, and a lonely taxi driver telling tales to his passengers. Another short story writer, O’Connor, suggests

that a short story is by its nature a ‘lonely voice’, and short story writers are typically lonely and try – as hard as they can – to escape that loneliness.

The saddest thing about the short story is the eagerness with which those who write it best try to escape from it. It is a lonely art, and they too are lonely. They seem forever to be looking for company, trying to get away from the submerged population that they have brought to life for us. Joyce simply stopped writing short stories. D. H. Lawrence rode off in one direction; A. E. Coppard, that other master of the English short story, in another, but they were all trying to escape. (O’Connor, 1968: 325)

Musically, post-Romantic solitude was first characterized by the technologies that made music less social. The first great ‘antisocial’ musical technology was the piano, an instrument capable of replacing whole orchestras. Liszt produced piano transcriptions of symphonies, operas and even the songs of Schubert. Hardy describes a single player of a cabinet-organ as replacing the group of men who sang and played violins and other instruments, in his first Wessex novel, *Under the Greenwood Tree or The Mellstock Quire: A Rural Painting of the Dutch School of 1872* (Hardy, 1989). That novel was the first of a series describing the loss of rural community in the face of urbanization and industrialization, and he leads with the musical solitude of the keyboard. The piano and similar keyboard instruments (such as the melodeon) were described in 1921 by the sociologist Weber as essentially bourgeois instruments (private, individualist) that were, therefore, more popular in North European homes than in South European public spaces (Weber, 1978: chapter 22).

Mechanical and later electronic reproduction of music from the late nineteenth century meant that music could be a very solitary hobby, without any performer present. It was in the 1950s that the popular music charts changed from being based on sales of sheet music (i.e. notations on paper that had to be performed live whether in homes or public places) to being based on sales of records (which required no live performer). And the charismatic solo performance popularized by Paganini and Liszt was critiqued by Cage in his most famous composition, ‘4’33” (i.e. *four minutes and thirty-three seconds*). In that piece, the pianist sits for that time without making any music. It is regarded by more conservative critics as something that ‘amuses the audiences and embarrasses the serious music-lovers’ (Hutcheson, 1975: 392). Kagge, a promoter of ‘silence in the age of noise’ (Kagge, 2017), is more positive. Cage has been an inspiration. ‘Audiences adore this piece of silence even today’, he says, ‘[o]r rather: the silence minus the noises that the audience makes as they try to stay quiet’ (Kagge, 2017: 105).¹⁴ Cage himself has a somewhat Romantic view of solitude in nature, writing of performing his silent piece not only in the concert hall but in what could be called ‘Nature’:

I have spent many pleasant hours in the woods conducting performances of my silent piece, transcriptions, that is, for an audience of myself, since they were much longer than the popular length which I have had published. At one performance, I passed the first movement by attempting the identification of a mushroom which remained successfully unidentified. The second movement was extremely dramatic, beginning with the sounds of a buck and a doe leaping up to within ten feet of my rocky podium. The expressivity of this movement was not only dramatic but unusually sad from my point of view, for the animals were frightened simply because I was a human being. However, they left hesitatingly and fittingly within the structure of the work. The third movement was a return to the theme of the first, but with all

those profound, so-well-known alterations of world feeling associated by German tradition with the A-B-A. (Cage, 2009: 276)

When Gould created his radio documentary on solitude (Gould 2003), he was regarded as one of the world's great pianists, but one who had stopped giving any public concerts in favour of the (relative) solitude and greater perfectibility of the recording studio. This concert silence was in its own way as eloquent – and as frustrating – as that of Cage's 4'33", and it is no surprise that his instrument was the bourgeois piano.

Conclusion

We have moved into an age where children and adults alike are in need of 'training' for solitude, apps to create artificial silences and therapeutic interventions for the lonely. And yet the ancient accounts of exile, the Romantic accounts of solitude in nature and the post-Romantic accounts of alienation and of lonely sexuality all still speak to us. Research with children and adults, using literary, visual and musical descriptions of solitude, brings out some themes that stretch across the centuries (Stern, 2014). The tension between solitude and sociability, and the wish to create a oneness that is both individual and universal, these are still experienced. And they are understood especially through artistic depictions of aloneness. The exile of refugees in ancient writings is complemented by new forms of aloneness, artistically engaged with now as much for therapeutic as political purposes.

Today, the art of solitude can be seen as a romantic gesture, or as a commentary on sanity. Yayoi Kusama paints what she describes as asylum art,¹⁵ living as she does, mostly, in a hospital for those who have mental health concerns. She puts on exhibitions with titles such as *Creation Is a Solitary Pursuit, Love Is What Brings You Closer to Art*.¹⁶ Children's books continue to speak directly to children about their joys and fears in solitude. Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963) and McKee's *Not Now, Bernard* (McKee, 1980) both describe the anger of enforced solitude or 'exile', even if exile is only to the child's bedroom, or the back garden of the house. Berry has a close-to-Romantic view of solitude among *The Peace of Wild Things* in his poetry (Berry, 2018). Music has become even more privatized, with headphones replacing the 'loud' playing of (electronically reproduced) performances, making 'silent discos' possible – where the participants may be listening to quite different music whilst dancing in a single room. Yet solitude has a renewed power as creative (Jones, 2019) and therapeutic (Lees, 2012), and as dangerous (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). There are many more solitary arts to be experienced.