



# The Pleasures of Solitude

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Essay

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I thought how strange we grow when we're alone,  
And how unlike the selves that meet and talk...  
Siegfried Sassoon [1]

## Abstract

The significance and value of being alone – of solitude – can be seen in the productivity of Montaigne, Proust and anthropologists inventing new representations and writing. For example, it may seem paradoxical for solitude to be viewed as an important element in the making of ethnographies, but the conviviality of fieldwork is necessarily interrupted by intervals of solitude. In this essay, writing is understood as a mode of self-formation as well as a creation or evocation of worlds, with identity not being a fixed entity but a perpetual practice of self-characterization. Solitude enables a multitude of interpretations, of perspectives well beyond initial impressions. With the writing of ethnography, a boundless unfolding ensues.

**Keywords:** Writing; Self-fashioning; Wonder; Michel de Montaigne; Robinson Crusoe; Fernando Pessoa

## Essay

Entering a sphere of sociability, as we all do, may raise the possibility, prospect or even the desire to “go it alone,” taking a walk or sitting by the fire with a book. That may mainly be an agendum for the Westerner; many others remark on the oddity of such solitary occupations. Famously, Michel de Montaigne adopted solitude as a lifestyle. In 1571, he retired to a tower on his family estate and remained there more than ten years. He devoted his solitude (not loneliness or emptiness) to “drawing his portrait with a pen.” Kramer [2] “In the midst of the dance” Montaigne [3], he wanted to escape “the hustle and bustle” of the public affairs which had long made its demands on his attention (he was twice mayor in Bourdeaux). He may also have withdrawn to his tower in response to the death of his intimate friend, Étienne de la Boétie, who died tragically at age 32. Montaigne is credited with originating the essay as a literary genre; every French

schoolchild and many anthropologists read him; the “Myself” he invented in his writing is caught up in the “dazzling ramble” of his voluminous oeuvre. Desan [4], Montaigne’s solitude is a practice that reveals much about writing and about sociability, too. In this essay, I explore that practice as self-formation and as the creation of diverse worlds of memory and imagination, including the worlds created by ethnography. An impulse toward “the social” counterbalances and complements solitude; there is a significant dialectic between them.

There are numerous brands and modalities of solitude. In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray [5] refers to death as “the other solitude”, but that is at best an amusing metaphor in a novel in which everyone is busy fashioning their politics of status. None of Thackeray’s characters has the impetus or enough self-reflection to utilize solitude for considered thought. Self-aggrandizement is too important to these social climbers for



a practice of solitude to be valued or pursued. Virginia Woolf gives famously sage advice in *A Room of One's Own* [6], and a research-based how-to book counsels solitude in multiple variants as time-out for self-reflection and "cognitive reappraisal [7]." Stephen Batchelor [8] writes of a contrasting type of solitude, inspired by his long-standing pursuit of Buddhism, in Western terms resonant with stoicism. The solitude of a meditative life smooths the rough edges of consciousness and soothes, then silences the otherwise ceaseless, internal soap opera of the self. Mindfulness and mindlessness are paradoxically identified. While Thackeray's characters are too busy, too sociable for solitude, Batchelor embraces solitude as a *telos* beyond sociability. Montaigne pursues solitude as a counterbalance to engagement, thereby encompassing engagement at a distance. For him, writing mediates between solitude and conviviality, suggesting a dialectic between them.

Montaigne was already a best-seller in his own time, and English translations began even before Shakespeare plays. The *Myself* he claimed to be writing about was a fictional, "protean creature" [2] which the writer himself seems to have regarded with bemused detachment, so that he could pursue the vagaries of his thought, however wide-ranging and far flung, a "methodological flamboyance" [9]. Anthropologists in my day and since all read his essay "Of Cannibals" [10] in which Montaigne recounts his meeting with a Tupi chieftain, brought from Brazil for a royal visit. Jane Kramer says that Montaigne was more interested in "the genealogy of thought" than in big philosophical issues and suspected that "there may be no truths, only moments of clarity, passing for answers." He finds "nothing to which I can hold fast. The only things I find rewarding (if anything is) are variety and the enjoyment of diversity. He was interested in all things unfamiliar and exotic." Jane Kramer says, I think rightly, that "today, we would call him a gentleman ethnographer, more enchanted than alarmed by the bewildering variety of human practices."

For all his solitude, Montaigne is more interested in what is going on outside *Myself* than he is in his internalities. He is too busy looking about to be caught up in vanity or narcissism. In his writing, he finds a zone of incomplete self-involvement in which "my pen and my mind both go a-roaming", and in which "I distrust my present thoughts hardly less than my past ones." His overall orientation to his world is nothing if not contradictory, directing us to the Delphic dictum "know thyself". He understands that Socrates, for all his tentativeness and questioning, was among the best of men. Montaigne's perhaps unexpected turn is to teach that we are each "the seeker with no knowledge, the judge with no jurisdiction and when all is done, the gesture of the farce" (ibid.:40, quoting Montaigne). His essay "Of Vanity" [11] in which he ventures this prescription is one of his longest,

inspired by the time he spent in Rome and by his life-long emersion in the classics. (His father made him learn Latin as a child before French, and he was later known for his perfect Latin.)

There is a disingenuousness about his isolation in his tower, his solitude. He "claimed to have accepted emptiness [2]" not unlike another devotee of solitude, Portuguese writer, Fernando Pessoa. Both writers indulged in solitude, both writers making their writing a counterbalance and substitute for sociability. Smith [12] Paradoxically, relating to writing became another form of detachment in which no premises are settled, no propositions finalized. Montaigne did not see himself in the business of posing a "polished picture formed according to art." He adroitly sidesteps vanity or egotism, making little claim for his writing, calling his essays "monstrous bodies." If there are overstatement and a bit of melodrama in such a claim, his writing and his solitude seem to be caught up in an interminable cycle of creation and self-deconstruction. In the end, his *Myself* is no hermit, but a man of the world.

Fernando Pessoa is a fellow traveller with Montaigne in the realm of solitude. Like Montaigne's, Pessoa's work is a monument, a souvenir and an artifact of solitude. He lived a solitary life in Lisbon, working as a freelance translator and an agent at a financial firm as well as pursuing his writing *Zenith* [13]. He was a loan drinker and died at age 47 of alcohol-related problems. After his death, trunks full of hand-written manuscripts and fragments were found, and an unfinished novel *The Book of Disquiet* [14] was ultimately assembled by translators and editors [15]. The novel and his other writings do not create worlds, instead ethnographizing Lisbon where he was born and lived most of his life. The descriptions in his novel of the city are a montage of discrepant themes, a reverie on its microscopic self-transformations in all its layered, lapidary graduations. He was a participant observer of the urban scene, more observer than participant, seriously engaged in the process in an "I am a camera" sort of way, but also making a point of representing his emotions. Designating himself primarily as a spectator Pessoa [14], he takes recurrent pleasure in atmospheric descriptions of his locale:

The morning, half-cold, half-warm, winged its way over the scarce houses on the slopes at the outer edge of the city. On those drowsing slopes a faint mist, full of awakening light, was gradually dissolving into nebulous shreds.

In a more philosophical mode, Pessoa notes that "pleasure lies in splitting yourself into more than one Person Pessoa (2017), pp: 100." In his dialogues with himself, he engages "in weary twilight colloques in imaginary *salons*." Turning back from the poetic, his focus, like Montaigne's comes back to self-reflection: "By going deeper into myself,

I become many.... I am a different 'I'; I painfully renew myself in each indefinite impression "ibid". Throughout his novel, he insists on plurality, proposing multiple avatars of self. In this respect, Pessoa's orientation contrasts with Montaigne's elaboration of Myself, since fragmentation, instability and self-fluctuations purvey Pessoa's writing as self-repudiation and self-doubts show him to be working out new methods of self-making like the new ways of rendering the streets and rooms and venues in which he navigates his days and years. "I am nothing except an abstract center of impersonal Sensations Pessoa (2017), pp: 355." His portraiture of himself and of his city are sporadic and discontinuous, broken into moments of solitude and instances of pausing between other episodes of his life. His approach differs from Montaigne's continuous and unremitting residence in his tower, with his writing moving along, chapter after chapter, as a halting pathway to Myself. Though Pessoa, like Montaigne, indulges in what Proust [16] calls "the exhilarating virtues of solitude", they approach solitude in diverse ways, Pessoa between the cracks of the rest of his life, Montaigne giving his engaged life – and writing -- a respite. From these opposed approaches, both put their practices of solitude ahead of social involvement.

The frontispiece of *Writing Culture* [17] is a photograph of ethnographer Stephen Tyler sitting on a porch in India writing his fieldnotes. He has his back turned to the residents who are standing close behind him. No interaction, no participation or observation is going on at that moment. The ethnographer is absorbed in his writing pad, taking a time-out from the presumed intensity of fieldwork interaction. His presence implies involvement but at the same time denotes the necessary solitude during which the ethnographer's writing not only inscribes the scene he has been experiencing but also composes a trace of the writer's "I" within the writing in a Proustian gesture of assertion and implicit self-portraiture [18]; the "I" purveys the ethnographer's inscriptions, though his reflections upon it may be left unacknowledged, left out, implicit or reserved for later reflection.

Ethnographers produce plentiful, diverse materials on which to reflect in interpreting their research experiences. Ossman [19] When I interviewed Hopi elders about a political dispute they were having with outside corporate interests, I took no notes in order to give undivided attention to my interlocutors. Doing so was risky because my own political biases were on the side of the traditionalists whom I interviewed, and those biases could easily infiltrate the notes I constructed just after the interviews. I and a colleague retired to our motel room in the snowy desert of northern Arizona right after we finished our interviews. The surrounding landscape stretching to the horizon was a magical realm of lurid, picturesque colour, especially mesmerizing at sunrise

and sunset. The sky was cloudless day after day, and it was so cold that the snow covering the desert never melted and remained powdered sugar white. The winter view served to reinforce my idea that Hopi lands should remain untouched rather than turned over to corporate interests to strip-mine on the reservation. It was impossible to resist the effect of the landscape's untrammelled magic of my perspective. I could never be sure that my encounter with the Hopi did not suffer from a deficit in the ethnographer's alleged objectivity, giving a dream-like aesthetic to the people and their scene.

As we wrote our notes, I had an epiphany: My reaction to the desert's beauty was a sudden recognition derived also from a correspondence between my vision and the Hopi myth-based understanding of the sacredness of their land and culture [20]. Their cultural "take" on the value of their land and my own experience synergized each other. My realization and its attendant "bias" could not help being ingrained in our notes whatever our pretence of accuracy. The magic of the landscape was part of our writing, though perhaps not overtly in the moment. Our detailed narrative accounts remain as many typewritten pages as possible, an artifact for further ethnography or for further interpretation [21,22]. As representation of our encounters and the solitude we needed to produce them, our notes may be a deeper reflection of the resonance of Hopi culture than is evident on the surface. My suspicion of bias signals that representation and the layered richness that my suspicion implies gives me unexpected satisfaction and still piques my curiosity.

Later I did ethnography in the Blue Ridge mountains of Appalachia [23]. The documentary artifacts from those encounters take diverse forms: interview transcripts, narrative accounts, photographs and informal reflections that make up a veritable archive. But I think that my archive has blind spots. I heard what I took to be mountaineers' "native point of view" on a serious environmental issue that they were facing at the time, not unlike the issue the Hopi had faced. A large hydro-electric project was proposed involving a dam to be built that would flood many small farms in the area. I became an advocate in listening to their stories and their politics, but in the process, I neglected to hear, much less critique, their unquestioning patriotism and self-descriptions. I am disappointed now in my short-sightedness in this respect. How much richer – and problematic – my archive would have become had I taken a broader view or even a more reflective, critical view of the people's conservative politics. With more solitude, more detachment, I could have heard and retold many more stories of mountaineers who mythologized their past as a frontier history of developing an alleged virgin territory [24]. Local activism and government intervention stopped the hydro-electric project, but the mountaineers never seemed to realize how checkered their history really is; their locale

was never unoccupied. Their arrival as settlers in the North Carolina Blue Ridge was part of the radical displacement of native Americans. No fieldwork archive is ever complete or all-encompassing [25]. It is always selective; important issues can be elided no matter how effective the solitude of reflecting and writing at the time may be.

When I went to Morocco to study multiculturalism, I kept daily journals, again did photography, and I also made a transcript of some 400 pages of interviews offered without my asking by an eloquent Moroccan with whom I had a long acquaintance. My Moroccan archive is multiform and full of surprises. I was astonished when I recently found 242 single-spaced pages in my own handwriting, but I have no memory of having written it or even its subject! The ethnographer's archive, taking on the circumstantial form as *aide de memoire* is unbounded, rather than publishable, provoking a possible, plural interpretive practice. But even with all this material, I do not believe I took full advantage of what multiculturalism in Morocco had to teach about the degree to which diversity was induced as well as limited by a European presence. The Moroccans never asked for that presence and often did not appreciate it. I was wrong to have thought postcolonialism would come close to leaving colonialism behind. For every interpretation I ventured [26], I realize there are others I did not risk. Time and solitude enable a multitude of interpretations, of perspectives beyond the initial, immediate responses to ethnography; a boundless unfolding ensues. Like Montaigne's essays, they take the archive as an entry into what Roland Barthes [18] refers to as "the labyrinth of meaning" of ethnographic situations left in the past yet exfoliating into interminable refiguration [27]. Notwithstanding personal and political biases, ethnographies are always Proustian, always an expression of "the fluid spaces of the mind." The recurrent occasions for writing ethnography now allow me to travel nostalgically to where I liked to be but can be no longer [16].

The remembrance of things past is a critical aspect of writing ethnographies and ethnographic documents. The *aide de memoire* of fieldnotes provides cues and details to the writers of ethnographies, but memory itself, though not well theorized even in *Writing Culture*, is a subliminal subtext of the process. A telling, limiting case is the situation of Edmund Leach writing his masterwork, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*. Famously, Leach lost his notes and photographs on his trip home during Japan's 1942 invasion of Burma. He wrote his book without the cues and provocations of the "information" he had obtained during his residence in Burma. It is difficult to assess the "spin" or bias his materials had and those of the ethnography Leach produced without them, but the obvious work of memory has to be taken as accounting for his book's existence. The active solitude that writing entirely from memory must be acknowledged. It is easy to imagine the

active dialogues Leach must have had with himself during his writing. The art of memory in this zone of solitude that is an inevitable adjunct of writing is one of its prominent, Proustian features. I think Proust would have smiled at Leach's effort. Active memory is solitude's moniker.

Edmund Leach does not – cannot – tell the whole, "complete" story of his ethnographic adventures, and I doubt that Proust tells everything he learned in the Parisian *salons*. The perfectionist knows that a truly complete story does not exist. After all, the total, perfect story of even a single day in any locale, village, family or city, one that would include *everything*, would be infinite. A process of selection, perhaps more implicit than explicit, is inevitable for the writer of ethnography as for any writer, and so for the intrepid ethnographer like Leach or for a supreme novelist, like Proust. No wonder the reader always has questions for the writer. (Perhaps the writer often has questions for himself.) For every ethnography actually produced, an unbound number of additional, alternative ethnographies could be added, depending on the particular angle of vision in the moment, but likewise depending on the ethnographers' particular predilections. And they may write one ethnography, one interpretation at one time, and then later come up with another interpretation on further reflection.

Beyond the writer's art, there is the play of the first person of the writer with the "you" the writer addresses. There is a polarity of this "I" and "you", but also a subliminal interaction between them in the writers' solitude as they pursue their craft and the reader's solitude as he reflects on what he reads. As Barthes [18] contends, this dynamic involves the "I being interior to what is stated and the *you* remaining exterior to it; and yet ...I can always become *you*, and vice versa." The writer's solitude transcends itself.

What writing gives us is an exchange across solitudes, the reader's belated solitude, one step removed like an echo. The dialectic and distance between the writer's solitude and the reader with his book beside the fire can even so create an intimacy, the possibility of intersubjectivity as discrete subjectivities speak to one another, a possibility, but not automatically [28]. As Barthes [18] points out, "... intersubjectivity ... cannot be accomplished simply by a pious wish about the merits of 'dialogue', but only by a deep, patient, and often circuitous descent into the labyrinth of meaning". What I would call a will to intersubjectivity, the reader's considered reaching out to the writer, just as the writer reaches out in the act of writing, is what makes intersubjectivity possible. If it happens, if an intimacy and intersubjectivity are achieved in the dialectic of solitude and engagement, then as Louise Glück [29] poetically observes, "readers come singly, one by one." That intimacy may then become "conducive to an elegiac realism [28]."

Thus, the intimacy of solitude and of writing, its self-enclosure, is clearly not writing's whole story. Both the process and practice of writing undercuts itself by its continuous unfolding, its "ongoing-ness", since where it ends, where and when the writer stops is largely arbitrary and artificial. A writer may die or get tired or just say to himself, "time to go on to something else". The ethnographers' notes may contain pithy and quotable phrases and sentences of their own or from "informants", which may contain their own "truths" about a culture or a place and time. The larger scope and scale even of fieldnotes, as well as of Montaigne's essays or Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet* imply indefinite, infinite openings waiting, bidding interpretation by a reader whose interpretive practice expands or can expand writing's potential or plurality to an actual plurality which is only implicit as a kind of subtext, of the writing itself. No wonder Montaigne and Pessoa are both evasive and bemused by their own work, since they seem to know that what they have written does not simply "contain" specific, referential meaning, but constantly, insistently supersedes, deconstructs itself; they do not, dare not, cannot assign it a precise significance; their writing takes on an existence and animation in itself, like a living organism. The writer lets writing go, to travel off into another domain, or other domains that readers bring to it, inserting it into an alien zone, recreating it as a translated, interpreted idiom. In being interpreted, writing rewrites itself into plurality. Even if it sits in an archive unread, writing changes as the world changes around it. And like it or not, the ethnographer finds their ethnography reimagined by their readers and critics in often bewildering profusion. They may decide that they "did not mean that" when writing or when associates in the field speak. They should know better. Writers know about the tentativeness, indefiniteness, inventiveness and instability intrinsic to (their) writing; ethnographers should know that too.

Robinson Crusoe is an odd exemplar of solitude, which was of nearly thirty years duration [30], because it was not voluntary "exile", but enforced by circumstance. During his residence alone on his island, Robinson did not act like a desperate castaway. Far from it. He engaged in sustained self-fashioning, a practice that was gradual and incremental, driven both by chance and by his extant culture. When he left London, he had no focused aspirations beyond what he had learned from his father's home-grown wisdom which advised him to settle for the enjoyments of middle-class comfort. He certainly had no goal to become a plantation owner as happened in Brazil, much less becoming the "master" and captain that he became by the end of his stay on the island. Through Daniel Defoe's compelling storytelling, Robinson Crusoe becomes a guide through an ambulation through his own, singular history. By the time he was cast away on an otherwise uninhibited island, he was already a

good way toward becoming a cosmopolitan who would have been unfamiliar to his stay-at-home family in London. He had already become proficient in Spanish and Portuguese and expert in dealing with fellow colonialists and with sailors as he pursued the business interests on his plantation. By then, as slave owner and plantation czar, he had become more imperialist than cosmopolitan. Later on, he refers to slavery in thinking about his relationship with the "natives" who land on the island, "in order to oversee and direct their work". Colonialism encloses his cosmopolitanism.

During Robinson Crusoe's story, Defoe becomes the intrepid ethnographer. His recountings are meticulous. He shows Robinson Crusoe as the quintessential tool user; early in his stay on the island, Robinson becomes well aware of the necessity, indeed the indispensability of a knife, asking rhetorically, "what would have I done without any tools?" He refers to "the strange multitude of little things" that his adaptation to living on the island brings about, reinventing shelter, clothing and even foodstuffs, cheese for instance, or the grain he grows to make bread, and in the process, how he finds multiple means to get beyond the "mere state of nature". In that enterprise, he succeeds admirably. Defoe shows him to have investigated, perhaps researched, the entire range of human endeavours, from spirituality, in Robinson Crusoe's musings and intermittent desperation regarding the state of his soul, to his incessant pragmatism, requiring daily inventiveness, in order to give himself basic creature comforts.

While Robinson Crusoe's solitude may have been "the occasion for constant and intense loneliness", to Defoe, pp: xxii, it is also the case that the experience of being on the island is a means for him "to understand himself in a more complex way" to Defoe, pp: xxv". The island becomes Robinson's tabula rasa as well as a perfect representation of Rousseau's own unspoiled state of nature. His solitude releases a degree of creativity beyond that afforded by his adventures as a plantation and slave owner. I like to think that like Proust [15], he finds in his isolation "the fortifying thrill of solitude". Yet eventually, his idyllic, untouched island is contaminated by a larger human presence. He finds the "skulls, hands, feet and other bones of human bodies" [30], the remains of cannibals who have indulged their abhorrent feasting on the beach. No wonder Robinson takes readily to the necessity of "colonial" domination that he uses to relate to the "savages". Defoe shows him transforming a man he saves from the "cannibals", his man Friday, into a complaint, intelligent and quick-witted side kick. This final portrait of Friday is surely a counter-phobic representation.

Friday displays many of the sterling qualities of Robinson Crusoe's idealized, "civilized" man. Robinson fashions both himself and Friday into a replica of what, in Defoe's terms,

is a “civilized” potential in contrast to the “savages”. Friday’s transformation bridges the spiritual and the pragmatic, like Robinson Crusoe’s own. He embodies Robinson Crusoe’s imperial practice. He is a latter-day Prospero whose solitude supersedes itself as he comes to preside “over a new political order on his island”, (ibid.) an order that gives him the means to escape from his isolation, having imposed a form of domination that reproduces without critique his own culture. In this respect, Robinson’s productions of solitude are highly ambiguous.

Robinson’s fashioning of self, which remains well within the rubrics of his parent culture, is in stark contrast to that of Montaigne’s, who makes his primary subject “Myself” and then proceeds to lend otherness to that subject by moving from there outward into the world at large. Pessoa’s self-fashioning entails an endless, artful elaboration of the Lisbon cityscape, building a cocoon-like context for his everyday life. For these three diverse and colourful characters, solitude gives them latitude for their creation of worlds, wide and deep, and gives them considerable sustenance. Such worlds, substantive and imaginative as they are, exhibit distinctive styles of thought rooted in and afforded by solitude itself. Their writing undertaken in solitude is a stylization of both self and worlds. In provoking work upon the self in the act of writing, solitude shows itself to be a zone or site of thought in the work of Defoe, Montaigne and Pessoa, to say nothing of Proust. Defoe quotes Robinson’s journal at length, and Michel Tournier, in his novel *Friday* [31], a retelling of the Robinson Crusoe story, does likewise, noting that writing is critical in preventing Robinson from sinking into an “abyss of animalism” that his social isolation would otherwise have imposed.

Tournier’s frequent references to solitude are a catalogue of Robinson’s solitudes that together characterize his existential situation, delineating a problematic of solitary life. His overall situation indicates a devolution of his social being even a frank deterioration. Solitude grips Robinson even before he becomes a castaway, when the captain of his ship does a Tarot card reading and turns up the card of the Hermit, Tournier, pp: 8. Once he finds himself alone on his island, solitude dooms him to a “sobering melancholy Tournier, pp: 21” which becomes “intolerable” Tournier, pp: 209, an “affliction”, Tournier, pp: 231. Solitude’s “wretchedness” makes silence his “forced companion” Tournier, pp: 81, and Robinson is further distressed by what he perceives as a deterioration of his language, a demoralizing effect that destroys “the meaning of things” Tournier, pp: 55. Yet in this catalogue of solitudes, Tournier admits notable, even decisive exceptions to such negativities. Solitude affords a “transformation of his personality” Tournier pp: 37 and ultimately an epiphany that brings him to the island’s “beating heart and mind” Tournier pp: 99. When a ship finally appears

on the horizon and comes to the island, and Robinson has a chance to go home to England, he demurs his escape; at the end of Tournier’s novel, Robinson instead chooses to remain on the island, having achieved the equanimity of a new, deeply rooted self. In writing his journal, he finds a means of self-care. The therapeutic-ness of writing closely accompanies his solitude. Rehabilitation and recovery from isolation’s affliction and misadventures through writing are clearly evident. Self-enrichment is likewise pervasive in the work of Montaigne and Pessoa.

Each of these writers take advantage of solitude both to elaborate themselves and to expand their particular worlds and those of their characters, paradoxical as that may seem. Accordingly, I denote solitude’s productivity rather than its erosions, detractions, and devastations. These writers ponder and puzzle over not only their situations and project their narcissistic preoccupations into the space of writing but find there a pastime and venue for occupying, even entertaining themselves. Just as their thought demonstrates its inevitable contingency of what they know of the world, it also creates its own forms of instrumentality. They create worlds and in so doing, project distinctive forms of life.

There is not, however, a full consensus on writing as a medium for thought. In Plato’s *Phaedrus* [32,33], Socrates eschews writing in favour of dialogue. Plato has Socrates tell Phaedrus that writing is not an aid to memory but a means to “implant forgetfulness” Plato, pp: 157. He contends that writing does not contain wisdom but only “the conceit of wisdom” ibid. Writing can neither speak “in its own defense [n] or present the truth adequately” (Ibid.:159). Socrates prefers his own pastime, discoursing with others at a distance from the “majestic silence” (ibid.:158) of writing. *The Phaedrus* is famous for denigrating writing, for critiquing writing. But this dialogue, valorizing living speech and maligning writing, is itself a text written by Plato. This is a paradox that complicates writing, displaces writing from Socrates’ disclaimers and shows it to function for us as a means of remembering and knowing Socrates. Perhaps writing serves memory more than it does forgetting. In addition, writing allows itself to be revisited by writer and reader alike. In this recursive process of reflection in solitude, cues may provoke further thought on the thought that writing conveys. Writing multiplies itself, rather than ossifying thought or freezing it in place. Solitude can be seen as synergizing this process by means of its quietude. The alleged silence of solitude is in fact clamorous with reflection: “... what summons thinking, perhaps, is poetry or song in the air that makes it possible to cite sirens without seeing [or hearing] them [34]”. The vast archive solitudes have left us adds up to a demanding multitude that we can talk back to. And we do.

Gadberry suggests that this multitude, with its ups and downs, the complexities of texts come into being only when solitude is experienced with certain entailments or conditions. To be solitude, quietude must allow for sustained reflection, without undue distraction or interruption. Such a requirement makes possible the production of meaning, ephemeral or not, as well as the fashioning of self and subjectivity. It allows for the orchestration of conceptual possibilities that can be the substance of writing and then a response in “talking back.” Those productions are not about setting forth declarative sentences or stable premises or propositions, but “... the provocation and production of thought inherent in texts” themselves. (Ibid.:15)

That provocation is, I think, likewise inherent in solitude, particularly when wonder, Plato’s term from *The Theatetus* [35], is understood as a contingency or condition of thought, perhaps like Proust’s madeleines. Thought is never not contingent, as Grottenboer [36] contends: “art is a form of thinking”; art sets off a glimmer that opens “meditative itineraries” that “sends us floating” (ibid.:11), wonder being the drive that “sets off philosophical inquiry” (ibid.:168). Wonder “makes us stop in our tracks” and raises questions. In his book *Capturing Imagination: A Proposal for an Anthropology of Thought* [37], Carlo Severi [38] claims the same sort of contingency is in ritual objects in diverse settings, showing that there is no pure thought, no thought without representation. Writers who have had the luxury of solitude, like Montaigne, Pessoa and Robinson, produced texts that demonstrate a similar wisdom. (Writers need time to think, to ruminate, even to obsess.) They face *aporia* (impasses) that present questions that make their writing pathways into thinking differently. Then they sit down to write.

Their texts are not theses or treatises or even “truth”. Perhaps thought is already to think differently. Writers are compelled to play out thought interminably, perhaps seemingly infinitely, since sustained reflection necessarily discloses a plethora. Paradoxically, the apparent crystallizations of thought in writers’ productions during solitude show thought to be irreducibly unstable and fluctuating. When examined closely, their work shows itself to contradict itself: “Socrates articulates the principles of truth but admits of fiction in equal measure” Severi (2010), pp: 326.

From a position of solitude, even sustained reflection denies us fixed, propositional truths but teaches us to be seekers, travelers, nomads meandering along the footpaths through the garden of writing as we discover that the shape of thought itself is unbounded narrative rather than an algebraic table of certainties. Ethnographers too will tell you that their ethnographies can never be the whole story. As

Freud [39] writes, “the mind is a mystic writing pad”. It is therefore no surprise that writers whose work capitalizes on the sustained reflection of solitude are anything but succinct. After all, writing enfolds a “thinking process” that is “the essence of being alive” Gadberry (2020), pp: 21. What Freud teaches is that thought is situated in terms of processes such as open association, personalization, projection, condensation, displacement and transference. There may be only sporadic, approximate getting beyond these parameters, particularly as thinking in the pursuit of knowledge is resistant to being known itself.

These entanglements of writing cannot be solved or superseded; they are the *mise en scene* of thought itself. They can sometimes be “worked through” by (more) writing, leading to the possibility of ... (more) wonder. Responding to wonder, wonder attempts to astonish itself. Writing’s endless choreography may have a value in itself, a constructivist impetus that articulates riddles and questions rather than disclosing “truths” *tout court*. I have discussed writers whose work has capitalized on solitude, which is not to put forth anything dramatically new, but to suggest what adding solitude to the mix that makes writing projects possible and ongoing is to highlight elements of thought that continuously, continually unfold in writing. Truth, though veiled, may allow at most innuendo, presentiments of itself by successive approximation. What the ongoing-ness of thought engages us in is “... taxonomy and salience at the semantic level, codification and evocation at the mnemonic level; and power and expressivity at the logical level” Severi (2010), pp: 328. Describing thought like this shows that writing gives us an asymptotic revealing, a sharing of concept and viewpoint that is both self-enriching and a potential enrichment of others [38]. “Such is the space of thought – that intermediate territory between truth and falsehood – where object-persons are active, speak up, or exchange gazes with humans Severi (2010), pp: 332.” In its interminable projections, the perplexity and paradoxes inherent in writing, coming to the surface in solitude, may not only puzzle us but make us smile.

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