

SOLITARY CONFINEMENT: VOLUNTARY AND INVOLUNTARY PSYCHIC INSULATION

THOMAS P. WILKINSON*

Abstract: *Models or habits of solitude have a long tradition. In Western Christendom, it comprised a niche strategy as one of two means toward salvation, the other being collective labour. The Romantic movements of the late 18th and 19th centuries turned solitude into a means for enhancing creative potential by escaping the «noise» of society. In the 20th century, the «self», a banal but commercially lucrative model of human behaviour, became a cliché for the 19th-century ideal: mass individualism. While the Romantics had turned the «self» into a source of the divine, the absorption of the semi-secularised «self» into mass industrial culture has produced an ironic relationship between the fiction of the individual, i.e., solitary, creativity and the collective activity upon which it relies. Whereas the Romantics sought a liberated personality, the 20th and 21st century Self is in fact its opposite, conformism displayed with the decoration of nostalgia and anachronism. Institutions of State and Commerce have turned the Self into a technology for mass control.*

Keywords: *Solitary confinement; Psychological warfare; Romanticism; Individualism; Christian salvation.*

Resumo: *Os modelos ou hábitos de solidão têm uma longa tradição. Na Cristandade ocidental, constituíam uma estratégia de nicho como um dos dois meios para a salvação, sendo o outro o trabalho coletivo. Os movimentos românticos do final dos séculos XVIII e XIX transformaram a solidão num meio de aumentar o potencial criativo, escapando ao «ruído» da sociedade. No século XX, o «eu», um modelo banal mas comercialmente lucrativo de comportamento humano, tornou-se um cliché do ideal do século XIX: o individualismo de massas. Enquanto os românticos transformaram o «eu» numa fonte do divino, a absorção do «eu» semissecularizado na cultura industrial de massas produziu uma relação irônica entre a ficção da criatividade individual, isto é, solitária, e a atividade coletiva da qual depende. Os românticos procuravam uma personalidade libertada, enquanto o Eu dos séculos XX e XXI é, na verdade, o seu oposto, o conformismo exibido com a decoração da nostalgia e do anacronismo. As instituições do estado e do comércio transformaram o Eu numa tecnologia de controlo de massas.*

Palavras-chave: *Confinamento solitário; Guerra psicológica; Romantismo; Individualismo; Salvação cristã.*

At least as one response to the perceived failures of the French Revolution, some of what became the Romantic movements in the 19th century turned away from social interaction, especially collective activity, and toward individual isolation. Such a reaction was not peculiar to this period. In fact, withdrawal from social contact was an established

*CEAUP. Email: dr-wilkinson@language-logistics.de. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4390-5953>.

niche strategy throughout Latin Christendom. There were two broad views in the Church as to how sin was to be encountered. One was collective labour. The other was solitary penitence.

Solitude for the Romantic movements emerged as a process of disengagement. By withdrawing from the noise of society artistic (creative) potential could be enhanced. Contemplation was often focused on nature or introspection. The work produced in the process, whether in literature or visual arts, created an iconography for human isolation and alienation. At the same time, nature served as a source of potential redemption from all those sources of alienation found in society. Nature in various forms also became a repository of the divine. The paintings of Caspar David Friedrich are well-known examples of this process in the visual arts. *The Prelude*, by William Wordsworth, is certainly exemplary in the literary arts.

Wordsworth began *The Prelude* in 1799 and finished it in 1805, although he made several revisions in the course of his life. The poem can be understood as a literary investigation into the forces and events that shaped the personality of the author and his poetical labour. In Book Four he wrote:

*When from our better selves we have too long
Been parted by the hurrying world, and droop,
Sick of its business, of its pleasures, tired,
How gracious, how benign, is Solitude;
How potent a mere image of her sway!
Most potent when impressed upon the mind
With an appropriate human centre: hermit,
Deep in the bosom of the wilderness;
Votary (in vast cathedral, where no foot
Is treading, where no other face is seen)
Kneeling at prayers; or watchman on the top
Of lighthouse, beaten by Atlantic waves;
Or as the soul of that great Power is met
Sometimes embodied on a public road,
When, for the night deserted, it assumes
A character of quiet more profound
Than pathless wastes.*

Wordsworth began as a great supporter of the French Revolution and ended greatly disappointed by it. The poem examines the path that transformed him into a revolutionary and led him away from revolution in the end. The revolution had promised to reorganise

society along principles of equality as articulated in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*. Wordsworth and others felt it had failed. The dictatorship and imperial ambition of Napoleon Bonaparte were proof that it was impossible to create a society based on New Testament equality by removing the divinely ordained monarchy.

It is important to add here that these judgements were based on reports scarcely more circumspect than found in today's mass media. Wordsworth would not have been able to see the results of the Jacobin societies in the provinces or to measure the violence with which the changes introduced were opposed by the counter-revolution with its foreign supporters. The rejection of the French Revolution by much of the English intellectual caste and England's emergent cultural power in the 19th century constitute a bias which still overshadows the appreciation of the 1789 revolution beyond the English-speaking world. Even today, very little attention is given to the counter-revolution and foreign intervention. Almost all school and university texts focus on the Jacobins and the so-called Terror, although the «White Terror» killed substantially more people.

At the same time, the foundation of what we once recognised as modern science, evolving as it did from the same cultural context, emerged as the product of solitary investigation. In fact, by the end of the 19th century, the image of the scientist and the artist merged as solitary investigators, discoverers and innovators were ranked among the upper strata of Western society and the artistic creator/scientific genius became clichés.

The solitude, whether in science or the arts, was in many ways a recovery of the penitentiary tradition in the Latin Church. In order to discover god and attain grace it was necessary to exercise as close to purity as possible. If artistic or scientific truth approached that of the divine or substituted for it, then it was also to be obtained by the investigator isolated from sources of corruption thus able to perceive pure data. The scientist sought this isolation in research performed in private laboratories that were sometimes associated with university faculties. The concept of academic freedom — a secularisation of monastic privileges — was interpreted to assure the necessary solitude for unbiased research and the pursuit of truth. Thus, although scientific research is inevitably a collective activity, the fiction of solitary research was created by formally isolating the university from daily political and commercial interests.

The artist sought places in the countryside or abandoned his native land for a self-imposed exile or quest. George Gordon Byron's death in the Greek War of Independence in 1824 is only the most notorious.

By the end of the 19th century, the literary-artistic and scientific-scholarly caste was endowed with its own ethic and processes for transforming the pure into the true. This ideal was based on a critique of society's corruption and the striving to transcend it. The bearer of this ideal was to become the autonomous self, solitude incarnate.

Following the defeat of Napoleon, the Congress of Vienna not only restored the monarchical system, if somewhat «embourgeoised», it reinstalled the deification of truth and knowledge as something otherworldly in origin. As Nietzsche observed at the end of the century, god was restored in all but name, while the name of «god» became an empty category, a mere symbol of the will to power.

The emergence of the autonomous Self, whose access to identity and truth is derived from exercises in solitude, and from two traditions. One, already mentioned, was the penitentiary. The individual withdraws from society as a source of sin and by contemplation, absorption and submission to God attains a higher degree of grace and eventually redemption from the sins with which society has soiled him.

The other tradition is that of natural divinity. The individual withdraws in order to contemplate and then engage the creative forces of nature. By comprehending them the artist becomes an agent of creation. Like nature he becomes capable of producing exemplifications of truth. The truth-value of these exemplifications is claimed by virtue of the method applied to create them. This is sometimes called «scientific method» or «artistic creativity». Until recently it has been assumed that the integrity of the respective methods was essential to the value of the product.

The Romantics found that solitude created the conditions by which they could contemplate the problems with which they had been confronted in society. The psychic isolation of the countryside or a foreign environment permitted them to focus on what remained in them when they were no longer influenced by daily social interaction. The longer the isolation continued the more they were exposed to themselves. In some cases, this resulted in a «stripping» of their personalities down to the basics, e.g., the interaction of the human with nature unmitigated by social instructions. At some point, the artist or scholar would arrive at an essence from which his personality could be redesigned, primarily through the creative or investigative work. The principle can be illustrated simply enough. If anyone has been left alone with a problem long enough, especially one which is highly conventionalised but for which there is no external solution available, there is at least a tendency for the person to use whatever means are at his disposal to solve the problem — even if they are unconventional. If a person is left in a group with the same problem and attempts to use that unconventional method, he will likely feel enormous pressure to abandon it in favour of the approach used by everyone else in the group.

One of the additional products of this solitude, voluntary psychic isolation, is to develop the strength of persona necessary to reproduce the solution created even under social pressure. Thus, solitude is not only a strategy for stripping but for clothing the Self. There is certainly enough anecdotal evidence to justify statements like «he is too head-strong because he has been working alone too long». One of the Romantic contributions

to cultural transformation has been the adaptation of solitude to the modern scientific construction of the Self.

The Self as envisioned by the Romantics was a liberated personality, freed from the oppressive social structures and thus able to act as an agent of social transformation. However, another Self was developed in response to the revolutionary impulses.

In 2002, British filmmaker Adam Curtis produced a television documentary, roughly based on a book by Stuart Ewen, titled *PR, A Social History of Spin*, called *The Century of the Self*. Curtis' central thesis is that the nephew of Sigmund Freud, Edward Bernays, initiated and for a while led a movement that would turn the concept of the Self into the central instrument of social control in the West. In his study of public relations, the euphemism for propaganda Bernays introduced after World War I, Ewen explains how the culture of the Self was appropriated and exploited by corporate and political communications actors (Business and Government) to produce a society of individuals who believe themselves to be autonomous but are in fact manipulated in their every thought and move. Bernays drew on his uncle's theories of the unconscious to show that control could be exercised over people by speaking to what they «really» thought and felt as opposed to what they actually said.

Instead of individuals — as the Romantics imagined — creating an authentic Self and entering society to act on the basis of this authenticity, Bernays and his successors devised methods they believed would suggest to the masses of isolated individuals ways they could reconstruct themselves in the interests of those who rule society. This presumed that one could create individuals in isolation who could be sufficiently alienated to engage in searching strategies. The aim was to exploit industrial and especially postwar psychic distress among the masses of people whose lives had been irreversibly affected by the world war. These people would be encouraged by their sense of alienation. That alienation would be labelled individualism. The emotional duress would be sustained by graduated fear. This fear was sublimated in the reconstitution of groups of alienated individuals.

Curtis's film first emphasises commercial activity. Edward Bernays argued that if he was able to produce advertising that would persuade people to go to war and fight, he ought to be able to do this to sell products. After World War I ended the US was faced with massive overproduction. There were just too many goods that had been produced just to be wasted in war and now the plant lay idle and the goods collected dust in warehouses. Modern advertising was initiated to move those goods and restore the enormous profitability of wartime industrial manufacturing. He shows that creating desires and fears were complementary aims. On one hand, the individual has to be freed from inhibitions like thrift, morality, social responsibility, or just a realistic assessment of his financial condition. The objective impositions of society are to be stripped from him so that he can feel his true nature as a desiring subject. Then he is intensively exposed to the prefabricated

objects he ought to desire. This process is stimulated by fear, either the inability to satisfy those desires or the injection of ever more desires for which he has not yet the means of satisfaction. Dissatisfaction and fear are the constant state in which the individual is to be confined. Society does not offer him comfort, whether as routine or sustenance. Instead, it exposes him to continuous competition for the satisfaction of the desires cultivated in him during his enforced isolation. Society becomes a machine for enforcing the private desires and the cycles of satisfaction — dissatisfaction, safety — and fear that are translated into spending and consumption.

This process of alienation could not have become industrialised without political force. At the same time as individualism was being encouraged, Business and the State were waging a vicious war against any genuinely autonomous collectivities like labour unions and popular movements, especially communism in the industrialised world and anti-colonialism/nationalism among the peoples subjugated by colonial and imperial rule. Although Business was certainly enamoured with Bernays's approach to the mass marketing of products and services, there was also great demand for technologies of the «Self» by state actors.

The State's interest in the Self, as opposed to the citizen, has not ceased. Curtis shows how the CIA and other covert agencies of the State promoted large-scale experimentation with the technology for creating or modifying the «Self». One of the most notorious was the work of Dr. Ewen Cameron at the Allan Memorial Institute in Montreal during the 1950s and 1960s. There experiments were performed on people who were subjected to pharmaceutical treatment in combination with electro-shocks and various degrees of sensory deprivation. The principle driving this work was that humans could have their consciousness erased and be «reprogrammed» on demand.

Although the Allan Memorial was eventually closed and Dr Cameron's work denounced, there is no evidence that this kind of involuntary psychic isolation for political and social engineering goals has discontinued. The rudimentary descriptions available of programs run by the CIA and US military at the Guantanamo Detention Center, US Naval Base Guantanamo, Cuba, since the beginning of the century bear similarities to those run by Dr. Cameron so great that they ought to be equally disturbing. Yet despite numerous pledges this centre remains in operation with some 700 persons incarcerated at last count.

The mass incarceration, appropriately denoted with prison jargon as «lockdowns», organised and enforced to varying degrees from March 2020 to the end of 2021 has been excused by medical grounds discredited almost as soon as the public health authorities proposed them. Studies are only beginning to emerge that raise the question: what were the real reasons for these forced isolations, in innumerable cases, solitude and involuntary psychic isolation?

One of Dr Cameron's experiments was to use covert media, e.g., hidden audio recordings, to introduce thoughts and verbalisation to the brain of his presumably erased subject. The recordings would be played during the sleep sessions.

When the first reports and complaints about torture in Guantanamo Detention Center became public there was frequent mention of forced exposure to loud music and audio-visual material that the prisoner would presumably find offensive. Sensory deprivation was combined with saturation exposure to foreign stimuli.

During the so-called «lockdowns» I was particularly struck by the closures and domestic incarceration in Portugal. In 2005, I was in Fatima for the first time. My friend and I were amazed at the people assembling there. Cripples of all sorts, people visibly disfigured or disabled by every conceivable illness made their way to the sanctuary. They were on their way to ask for the blessing and healing power of the Holy Virgin, Mother of God. Who knows if any of them had infectious illnesses? The power of the Almighty was present and able to heal. Yet during the mass incarceration the Shrine of Fatima was closed. Had I still been a practising member of the Latin Church I would have been in uproar. How could the State presume to be more powerful than Our Lord and the Mother of God? How could anyone presume to keep me from the omnipotent divine?

To end, again with Wordsworth:

*Oh, yet a few short years of useful life,
And all will be complete, thy race be run,
Thy monument of glory will be raised!
Then, though (too weak to tread the ways of truth)
This age fall back to old idolatry,
Though men return to servitude as fast
As the tide ebbs, to ignominy and shame
By nations sink together, we shall still
Find solace — knowing what we have learnt to know,
Rich in true happiness if allowed to be
Faithful alike in forwarding a day*

*Of firmer trust, joint labourers in the work
(Should Providence such grace to us vouchsafe)
Of their deliverance, surely yet to come.
Prophets of Nature, we to them speak
A lasting inspiration, sanctified
By reason, blessed by faith: what we have loved,*

*Others will love, and we will teach them how;
Instruct them how the mind of man becomes
A thousand times more beautiful than the earth
On which he dwells, above this frame of things
(Which, mid all revolution in the hopes
And fears of men, doth still remain unchanged)
In beauty exalted, as it is itself
Of quality and fabric more divine.*

(The Prelude, Book fourteen, pp. 430-454)