Solitude

Apocryphal Posts From Distant Archives

by

Djelal Kadir

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Table of Contents

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Preface

Solitude is among the most common human conditions. Yet, it is by definition an individual experience. While privately experienced, the predicament is defined by its opposite, by what it is not and yearns to be, namely, the shared presence, company, sociality, togetherness whose lack or felt absence makes for solitude. As a universal phenomenon, at times sought after, but often a difficult predicament not of one's choosing, what does solitude reveal as a common human condition? Looking into the mythological, historical, religious, scientific, and literary traditions, we often encounter protagonists who found themselves in the most extreme conditions of solitude. Delving into the mythic, dramatic, historical, and poetic narratives, and into the scholarly and documentary archive that has accrued to those narratives, the prefatory reflections and the letters in this volume are an attempt to capture the critical moments of dire solitude and give voice to those who endured those moments, often in their critical final hours.

The thirty-nine letters in this volume are not imaginative fabrications conjured out of thin air. Each letter is, rather, a dramatized exposition of the particular experience of solitude as it has been depicted in our philological, scholarly, philosophical, literary, and historical narratives. Based on diligent research, each letter is an attempt to give voice to solitude's protagonists through language and demeanor that corresponds to each of the principals as we have come to know them through the legendary, textual, archival, and documentary evidence that has accrued to our

collective memory and cultural formation (see selected Bibliography). Our knowledge of these figures and the particular conditions of their solitude is by no means exhaustive or definitive. Like any human experience, solitude and its effects are knowable only through the broad spectrum of accrued human insight and understanding. The letters in this collection are an attempt at capturing the phenomenon of solitude at a critical moment in the life of the protagonists. Voiced in epistolary form in the pages that follow, where possible those moments are cast in paraphrases of the protagonists' own words (e.g., Anthony of the Desert, Letters 18 and 20; Saint Augustine, Letter 22; Michel Montaigne, Letter 29; Giordano Bruno, Letter 30; Alexander Pope, Letter 33; Friedrich Hölderlin, Letter 35; Fernando Pessoa, Letter 38; Marguerite Yourcenar, Letter 39). Because each solitude is by definition singular and particular, each has an individual fate that must be voiced in its own unique way. The individuality expressed in each letter is based on what mythical, historical, poetic, and performative characteristics have accrued to each of these figures in narratives, legends, dramatic characterization, and archival history. Each of the letters in this volume, then, is an apostrophe, an address directed at solitude, in solitude, by a solitary figure in his or her own voice as we have come to know, through our cultural history, what that voice sounds like and what it might express under the circumstances.

Who are these figures of solitude? Whether we recognize them or not, whether we knew and have forgotten their names, they are protagonists that often have formed and continue to shape our understanding of who we might be as individuals. Their critical solitudes are often the chronic conditions we live with, consciously or unaware of doing so. Often, perhaps more often than not, what

is most common is the least noticeable. And solitude could well be one predicament we most have in common. The figures written and writing in this book are exemplary protagonists of our commonality, though on the spectrum of solitude their predicaments are in the extreme. The critical intensity of their dire condition makes them more overtly legible, more demonstrative, and more instructive. In myth, in epic, in religion, in history, or in science, these figures often embody moments of humanity's leaps of mindful enlightenment, or expose human lapses into mindless violence. Many of these figures have experienced both, enlightenment and violence, often simultaneously.

Though most common, solitude remains a conundrum. Like many conundrums, solitude, in its perennial contradictions, remains an intractable mystery even for those who appear to have solved its enigmas. The classical example of this paradox is the predicament of the fifth-century BC protagonist in Sophocles' eponymous tragedy *Oedipus the King*. Having solved the riddle of the sphinx and become king of Thebes, Oedipus remains ignorant of the enigma he himself embodies. And when, in the end, he recognizes who he is, his enlightenment leads him to self-inflicted blindness. (See the letter by Oedipus' daughter/sister Antigone to Jocasta, her mother, Letter 10, below). As in the case of Sophocles' work, paradox turns out to be an integral part of solitude.

At once private and particular, with a single turn, a "verso" in Latin, what is a solitary, unique phenomenon turns out to be *universal.* This is not merely a turn in language. It is an empirically verifiable worldly reality of lived, recorded, and narrated human experience. The paradoxical universality of solitude, at once unique and common, through time and across geography, is an

undeniable fact of human life, even though it is experienced individually and in culturally determined particular ways. And while recent diligent scholarly endeavors such as David Vincent's *A History of Solitude* (2020) and Fay Bound Alberti's *A Biography of Loneliness* (2019) date the origins of solitude as historical phenomenon to the eighteenth century, the purview of these admirable scholarly endeavors is focused on modern Europe, particularly as solitude manifests itself in British social and cultural history. David Vincent takes as point of departure the four-volume seminal work of the German scholar Johann Georg Zimmermann, *Über die Einsamkeit* (1784-1785), rendered, as Vincent points out in his Introduction, into an abbreviated English translation in 1791 as *Solitude Considered with Respect to its Dangerous Influence Upon the Mind and Heart*. Fay Bound Alberti, for her part, focuses more precisely on loneliness as "gendered emotion," for which a critical/political language, she avers, did not exist prior to 1800. Is there any "gendered emotion" that is more intense than that of Antigone trapped between her devotion to her family and the dictates of the state as dramatized by Sophocles' eponymous tragedy (see Letter 10, Antigone to Jocasta, her mother), or in the history of Artemisia of Caria to her brother/husband Mausolus (Letter 14, below), or, for that matter, in the predicament of any of the female figures included in this volume? The phenomenon of solitude as human condition, of course, exceeds the boundaries of modern European and British history, and its experience has left ample traces in pre-historical and historical narratives from around the world. And we certainly find those traces in the earliest acts of writing and reading, activities often associated with solitude. Lives of solitude, over the centuries, have found their expression through writing, and they have encountered their self-recognition in reading.

An integral part of tales that humans tell about themselves, solitude is inherent to human narratives. It is an intrinsic element of myth and history, and an essential component in the production of literature and of the other arts. Whether as fateful predicament or as elective circumstance, solitude has proved an enduring part of human life, certainly since humans began to reflect on their existence and to tell their own story. Given what myths, sung epics, historical narratives, literary works, biographies, autobiographies, and confessions tell us about those who have experienced solitude in the extreme, what might they say to us, "in their own words," in their most dire moments? And how do those expressions of solitude teach us to read this phenomenon, universal and particular at once, across time and cultures? The thirty-nine letters in this collection, whose range extends widely across epochs, geographies, languages and cultures seek to understand these questions and, in the process, illustrate the universality of solitude and its diverse forms across time and cultures. They seek to do so by dramatizing diverse cases of this predicament by giving voice and expression to those who have experienced extreme forms of solitude.

The soliloquy, the human utterance in solitary circumstances, is the most obvious expression of and in solitude. But while the soliloquy might be the expression of language in solitude, language as deliberate and directed form of expression has, by definition, a direction and a purposive aim to communicate beyond the solitary speaker or writer, to be "overheard" by gods, fates, kings, tribal kin, or theatrical audience. Shakespeare dramatizes this projection of soliloquy beyond solipsism in *Hamlet* by having his protagonist dramatize, in turn, the power of language and what he calls "words, words, words" (Act 2, Scene2).

The intractable predicaments of solitude dramatized here date from earliest mythological time and extend into modern historical life of the twentieth century. And for the sake of narrative progression, the present volume begins where human narratives usually have their beginnings, namely, in myths, and extends into our era of boundless and instant communication.

While unprecedented advancements in communication technologies and enhanced mobility across geographies have altered the nature of solitude, the challenges of solitary experience seem to have outpaced the attempts to mitigate solitude's effects. The frenzied capitalization of communication services and social media attests to the intensification of this perennial predicament. Even as they purport to bridge distance and isolation, the relentlessly pervasive technologies on a global scale have made the possibilities of elective, meditative, creative solitude more challenging than ever. Thus, the paradoxical nature of solitude takes on new forms, with ubiquitous networks of connectivity exacerbating the less felicitous effects of solitude, rather than assuaging the vicissitudes of its experience.

For humans, as social creatures with a natural propensity for conviviality, the experience of solitude, whether as predicament or as desired pursuit, has always proved a challenge. Hence, the earliest quandaries of solitude and their trials have been attributed to the fates, or to inscrutable gods. Mythological narratives are often forms of explanation of inexplicable causes that thwart sociability and harmonious conviviality. The displacement of those supernatural causes by natural and human-made quandaries has not ameliorated the predicament of solitude or eradicated its plight. And much of the energy of creative endeavors and the focus

of historical and artistic narratives have originated in the condition and predicaments of solitude. This has been the case for solitude as a sought-after condition in Francesco Petrarca, that key figure of European literary history that served as pivot for the transition from Europe's Medieval culture to what he termed "Rinascimento," a lexical legacy we have inherited as "Renaissance" (see letter 24, below). Petrarch yoked the solitude of religious contemplation to the solitude of what Cicero had termed *otium,* or leisure. Thus, his treatise *La Vita Solitaria,* written during the decade of 1346 to 1356, casts solitude as an indispensable condition for an authentic, creative life. And Michel Montaigne (see letter 29, below) heeds Petrarch's counsel two hundred years later as he withdraws to the *arrière boutique* ("the backroom of the shop") in his eponymous mountain tower to write his essay "On Solitude." And solitude has also served as site and condition of creative production when annealed, as in the acerbic irony of Ambrose Bierce and his definition of solitude ("alone and in bad company" in his *Devil's Dictionary*); or when idealized, as in Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance" (shared title of an essay and a poem); or when celebrated, as in Henrik Ibsen's 1882 play *The Enemy of the People* ("The strongest man is he who stands most alone").

These are exemplary instances of reflections in solitude on solitude, reflections that engender cultural and literary works that we read, prize, and teach. The letters in this collection, based on thorough scholarly research, are written through the voices of mythological, literary, or historical figures as the documentary record allows us to understand them in their respective crises of extreme solitude. They attest to the perennial attempts to deal with the paradoxes of solitude as timeless, universal human condition,

a condition most shared, yet one that must be experienced alone. Yet, in the solitude of the mythological, literary, and historical figures in this collection, we are reminded of the possibility that even the most extreme solitary predicaments can be communicated, especially through writing. Since its invention, the technology of writing has served as instrument against the ravages of solitude, even while writing has also depended on solitude for its most original and most enduring creations.

Each of the thirty-nine "apocryphal" letters in the present collection (or in the constellation of letters where the writers, ostensibly, address each other) is introduced with an explanatory context—philological in the case of mythological figures, and historical when writers from the annals of history are purported to be writing. That background identifies the individual writers and aims to explain their contextual significance in the cultural narratives and history of their origin, always with an ear to the resonance in and with an eye to their significance for our time. An attempt has been made in each instance to echo the voice and intonation of the writers to whom the letters are attributed, according to what we know about them through received narratives of myth, history, and their detailed documentation.

If this book were being written in Ancient Greek, or in any of the languages that possess a similar grammatical capability (Bengali, Fula, Icelandic, Tamil, Sanskrit, Swedish, Albanian), it would be written in the middle voice. The grammatical middle voice that combines the active voice and the passive voice, making the verb reflexive, at once transitive and intransitive, where the action of the verb redounds to and affects the subject, rendering the subject both agent and object of the verb's action. The closest one could come to

this in English is called "mediopassive": She died. The glass shattered. The door slammed. The night echoes. He writes. Strung together, in the manner of Ernest Hemingway, these short declarative sentences could well constitute a micronarrative, a cosmic tale called solitude. Had the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges been writing in one of these languages, he might not have found it necessary to pen his essay/story "Borges and I," questioning, in the end which of the two wrote the text we read. The 2024 Nobel Laureate, Korean novelist Han Kang, reminds us of this possibility in her 2023 novel *Greek Lessons* which begins by invoking Borges by name. The second chapter, "Silence," of Kang's novel, was excerpted for the January 30, 2023, issue of the *New Yorker* with the title "The Middle Voice." The writing of and in the letters gathered in this collection should be read in the middle voice, as texts that implicate their writer, the purported authors to whom they are attributed, and you, the reader, the ultimate recipient of these epistles. Thus, the condition of solitude lived, documented, scripted, and conveyed attains its timeless universality.

This book is dedicated to those absent whose absence made the writing of the book an inexorable necessity.

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Introduction: A Meditation on Solitude

1. Writing Solitude—Ghostlier Demarcations

As a universal human condition, solitude is writ large. And reading what is written compounds solitude's ironies, especially since the time reading turned into a silent, solitary act performed by and for oneself (see letter 22, Augustine's Last Confession, below). Writing is a solitary activity. Our western mode of writing begins somewhere in Mesopotamia around 4000 BC as a vertical line on an earthen tablet, scored and baked into clay, as a ledger of how many sheep or goats someone owned. I am referring here to the Mesopotamian origins of writing in whose tradition we continue to write and through which I am addressing you now. The Chinese, the Egyptian, and Mesoamerican civilizations had their own beginnings in the technologies of writing. That Mesopotamian mark of tabulation transmutes from "count" into "an account," moving beyond enumeration to a tale that recounts the status of property and ownership.

The aggregate of those counting lines eventually will form the rudiments of what will be called an alphabet, brought to Attic Thebes, according to Greek mythology, by Cadmus, the prince of the kingdom of Tyre in search of his sister Europa, as we shall see shortly in Europa's letter to her mother, Telephassa (letters 1 and 2, below). And, by now, that single vertical mark, "I," becomes the singular first person pronoun in the language in which I am writing and you are reading, a proxy of the one writing this sentence on an iPad next to an iPhone, open to a distant voice from

somewhere that could affect the solitude of the act of writing. The distances traversed by those marks now reach ever farther than the far-reaching light of Telephassa's name, "the far shining." In the twenty-first century, teletechnologies bridge the farthest distances in simultaneous and simulated immediacy and, at the same time, they intensify actual distance as they remind us of the illusionary nature of virtual proximity.

To write as an "I" on account of a solitary someone else is to compound the solitude of the act of writing, a predicament the Bulgarian novelist Giorgi Gospodinov dramatizes in the embedded narratives of his 2011 novel *The Physics of Sorrow*. The vertical line of the "I," then, is transformed from its original score of counting to an act of recounting that redoubles the solitary predicament of writing. That account of compounded solitude reiterates the narratives—mythical, legendary, epic, and historical—that have accrued to posterity through the ages.

From our most venerable myths (Europa and her mother Telephassa, letters 1 and 2; Ariadne and Theseus, letters 4-5) to Greek antiquity's eighth-century BC epics by Homer (letter 3) to Aeschylus' and Sophocles' fifth-century BC Attic tragedies (letters 8-10), and through the first-century BC foundational epic of Rome (letters 11-13), the defining narratives of these ancient cultures are marked by the implacable predicaments of solitude. The foundational written records of Chinese history (letter 15), of early Christianity (letters 16-20), of the Medieval period (letters 21-25), and of early modernity (letters 26-34) pivot on solitary crises, especially for those doing the writing, often under extremely parlous circumstances. Our knowledge of these cultures derives in good measure from the writing endeavors of those who defied the

adversities of dire solitude and transformed catastrophe into solace and historic insight (see, for example, Atahualpa to Future Incas, letter 28, and Giordano Bruno to Galileo Galilei, letter 30).

In our own historical era, when communication technologies are capable of virtually breaching any form of solitary existence, the paradox of solitude becomes compounded by the multitude of singularities in isolation, or by the plurality of isolates in remote sites of distanced "co-existence." Virtual connectivity as communion is lived remotely, after all, rather than in actual togetherness. The insurmountable absence in virtual proximity displaces actual presence. The "real" in virtual "real time" connection is a cybernetic illusion, no less remote in actuality than distant letter writers, or the solitary predicaments of the would-be correspondents writing the letters attributed to them in this collection.

Since its invention, the technology of writing has proved a most common recourse in the attempt to breach solitude. A number of literary traditions (the Egyptian, the indigenous Mexican) depict the impulse to write as extending beyond the natural duration of mortal life. In Western cultures this is dramatized by certain literary masterpieces such as François-René de Chateaubriand's (1768-1848) *Memoirs d'outre-tombe* (*Memoirs Beyond the Grave),* posthumously published in two volumes between 1849 and 1850, and in *Memorias postumas de Bras Cubas (Posthumous Memoirs of Bras Cubas),* the 1881 novel by the Brazilian Machado de Assis (1839-1908). A number of letters gathered here (see, for example, letters 4 and 5, Ariadne and Theseus; letter 8, Clytemnestra to Cassandra; letter 11, Creusa to Dido, and letter 21, Hypatia of Alexandria to Synesius, her student) form part of this tradition. Yet, writing,

intended to close distance, itself becomes a record of futility, of the impossibility to breach the solitude that in myth and history proves to be such a perennial human condition (letters 1 and 2 between Europa and her mother Telephassa; and letters 17-20 between Saint Anthony and Ammonaria, among others). When that impossibility of breaching solitude happens to be surmounted, it becomes a boon for posterity, as in the case of China's primal historiographer, the second century BC Sima Qian, often referred to as the Chinese Herodotus. Sima Qian's 526,500 Chinese characters on over 700 bundles of bamboo scripts entrusted to his daughter Sima Ying that accompany his letter (number 15, below) form the base of the historical record that preserves the millennial memory of a people and its culture.

Oblivion is often the dreaded correlative of solitude. The threat of forgetting and being forgotten is a powerful force that, in the case of the apocryphal epistles of our collection, drives old Laertes to write to his son Odysseus (letter 3). That fear also compels the American indigenous "princess" Pocahontas to write to her daughter Ka-Okee (letter 32) in her desperate attempt to ensure that she and her daughter are not erased from the annals of history, which is often the ghostly fate of a conquered people.

Even when the dispatched missive does not reach its destined recipient, it leaves a record of that futility and of the writer's implacable solitude, a record for yet-unknown future readers whose own solitude might find some solace in the recognition of a common predicament. Reading, then, becomes no less significant than writing, especially when solitude becomes dire, as is the case, for example, of Astrolabe in the 12th century, reading the letters between his parents Héloïse and Abelard and writing to them

(letter 23), or, even more extreme, the case of Fernando Pessoa, the 20th-century Portuguese poet, reading his apocryphal writings he attributed to his more than eighty heteronyms and writing, in compounded solitude, back to them (letter 37); or Candide, a castaway washed up on a distant shore, reading the 18th-century novel with his name as its eponymous title and writing to his author Voltaire (letter 34).

To write and attribute what one writes to someone else on whose account one is writing is said to render what is written *apocryphal.* The term *apocrypha* and its adjectival form have an intricate itinerary. The original Greek apocrypha (plural) have been enervated, grammatically by being rendered a collective singular affiliated with the Christian Bible, and semantically by the erasure of the term's resonant plurality of meanings. Most egregious in this process has been the reduction of the prepositional prefix "apo-" to a univocal, one-way proposition. That reductionist process began as early as the late fourteenth century with Middle English and its derivative term "apocrive." The transformation was accelerated and codified into official church doctrine when in 1538 an Augustinian monk by the name of Martin Luther in Wittenberg, Germany, took it upon himself to determine that certain books of the Christian holy book would be called "Apocrypha" and excised from the Bible. The King James New Testament in English followed suit in 1611, and, with that hygienic baptism of a classical lexis, what was suggestive, denotative, and polyvalent was reduced to a singular and pejorative connotation of spurious and inauthentic.

The *crypha* of apocrypha originates in the verb *kryptein,* to hide, to secret away. The prepositional prefix "apo-" in its original Greek

etymology is bidirectional, equivocal, ambiguous, and ambivalent —qualities that tend to be viewed as an insufferable bane in times of crises, of belligerent orthodoxy, dogmatic polarization, and bellicose strife. Such was the case in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe of Luther and of the redactors of the King James New Testament, a time marked by endless religious wars; and such is the case in our own war-riven historical era and its contending dogmatisms. Echoing Ancient Greek's grammatical middle voice, *apo-* translates simultaneously, and alternately, as "from away" and "away from." The object in question, whether holy scripture or a private letter, originates in a hidden elsewhere in the first instance (from away); and, in the second (away from), it originates in the writer that engenders the mysterious or secret object of writing. *Apo-* as a locative, or spatial, preposition oscillates between here and there, much like the Greek temporal adverb *opiso* swings between the past and the future, an equivocal significance captured in the English adverb *then* that could be pointing to the past or to the future. The 19th-century French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé would capitalize on the ambivalence of the Greek term ("then," "therefore") by taking its Latin translation, *Igitur* (1925), as the title of one of his works founded on a primordial solitude he dubbed "*neant*." In any case, paramount is the mystery of the *crypha,* the hidden. And solitude is the natural place of the apocryphal, whether as object of apprehension or as object predicate of solitary subject agency. To say, then, that certain writings or letters are apocryphal is to assert the rich ambiguity and resonant bivalence of what is written. The letters in this collection are delivered in this spirit, intended to be read with the evocative intensity implicit in the terms solitude and apocryphal, especially when the two terms come together.

Solitude has evolved from that singular first person whose graphic trace, the single line, dates from the beginning of writing as a mark scored on a clay tablet in Mesopotamia in the fourth millennium BC. Well before our current era of rampant and algorithmically encoded technographic virtuality, the early twentieth-century French novelist Marcel Proust foregrounded the problematic nature of "I" ("*Je*," in his case). He did so by expressing his profound regret at having begun his seven-part opus in the first person singular (See Proust, *Journées de lecture,* and in Manguel, 1997, pages 314-315). Proust's *`A la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time)* was published between 1913 and 1927. He composed his voluminous novel in the confines of his isolated, insolated, cork-lined room, despite which he could still hear in the distance the whistle of passing trains. Taking his predecessor's regrets to heart, the French novelist Michel Butor would narrate his most famous work, *La modification* (1957), in the second person, its narrative unfolding on a moving train, rather than within the solitary stillness of a cork-lined room. The Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes would emulate Butor, only to have the protagonist of his nouvelle *Aura* (1962) start his narrative in the second person but end up falling into lost time and become subsumed by his first-person precursor of whom he discovers himself to be an avatar that he embodies as revenant.

Ever the protagonist of singularity, today's "I" as grammatical pronoun and sign of individual person moves to the forefront, Proust's regrets notwithstanding. Prefixed, in lower case, to all manner of apparatuses, "I" designates less and less a sovereign subject and progressively becomes a prosthesis to the devices that reach back to subsume pronoun and personhood into their operating systems and cyberworld. Independent individuality

becomes a function of the virtual reality forged in the crucible of cybernetic phenomena and their cultural and transactional norms. Purportedly an instrument of connection and communion, the iApparatus (the iPhone, the iPad, the iWatch, the iIntimate, the iWhatever), deludes the subject of the "I" into simulated togetherness, into an illusion of unity, into virtual filiation that masks actual iSolation. Solitude may have never been so real, nor has the reality of togetherness been more akin to myth.

It all begins with myth, because myth is perpetually in the present, especially in the virtual worlds of our current human habitation. Having their beginnings in myth, historical narratives return to their mythical origins as history is lived by the myths it reinvents, transforms, and perpetuates. The present becomes the precarious here and now, the continuously fabricated home of even those who would rather live in the past, or of those who believe that they themselves already embody the as-yet unrealized future. As Saint Augustine avers in Book XI of his *Confessions*, the past is now no longer, and the future is now not yet. This "now," then, is the precarious fulcrum that teeters between the virtual and the actual, the virtual often taking precedence, despite its ephemerality, or precisely because of it, an attribute that makes virtuality more pliable, more manageable, more marketable, and more easily transactional.

Our historical present demonstrates virtual reality's greater potential in the political and economic arenas, its material profitability seemingly unlimited when plumbed on an industrial scale. Who, after all, are the 21st century's most notorious billionaires, and what do they produce and purvey? And despite the precarious illusoriness of the virtual that wavers on the edge of

unreality, the human impulse of the present rushes toward the illusory simulation of presence that shades into the lived mythical. Historically, the impulse toward the edge between reality and alternate realities becomes exacerbated in times such as the present—times of political instability, economic insecurity, pandemic, and intractable social discord when alt-reality and deep fakes emerge as paramount, and they do so with consequences that are no less nefarious than the blatant, banal, and actual fakes that govern the world. Under such circumstances solitude takes on greater significance as refuge and as implacable fate. And felt absence might well exert greater determination than sentient presence. In certain traditions, absence itself emerges as the driving force at the beginning of history.

Solitude is not empty. It is not now, nor has it ever been vacant in the past. The absences that haunt solitude ensure that there could be no vacancy there. The predicaments of Europa and Antigone, the case of Anthony of the Desert, and the passionate intensities of Héloïse and Abelard, as with the history of all instances recorded in the present collection of letters, attest to the urgency of absence. And felt absence might well press with greater determination than sentient presence. Even when solitude might be voluntary, its ramifications at the extreme edge moot any distinction between elective and imposed solitude. For even when solitude might have been voluntary, its effects prove unpredictable, its consequences unforeseen. More often than not, there seems to be an inexorable convergence of dire circumstances and solitude, especially when conditions turn desperate and solitary existence becomes critical in the extreme. Most dire human circumstances tend to be countenanced alone, not necessarily because solitude is the cause of those predicaments, but because, more often than not, dire

conditions tend to isolate one and become commensurate with solitude.

Faced with such circumstances, "sending a message," as the Greek etymology of "epistle" and "epistolary" has it, proves a common recourse. That reflexive impulse dates from the earliest stages of human history. Whether as smoke signals, broken branches, or messages in a bottle, that instinctive urge has been a constant in human life, an impulse seized upon and capitalized on an industrial scale in our own era of wired and remote teletechnologies. As to whether the multiplication of messages allays solitude or leads to an exponential intensification of it, defies clarity. Since the more messages dispatched, the greater seems to be the need to send more messages, a boon to the industry that has achieved capitalization of that impulse. To what extent this quantum leap in messaging might assuage the condition of solitude, then, remains uncertain. Written messaging, whether in its original epistolary posting, or in the current variants of textual and voiced cybernetic modes that ultimately translate into writing, has been the preeminent method of attempting to reach the addressee whose felt absence constitutes solitude.

Writing to those absent and attributing authorship to others by absenting oneself from the scene of writing, an alibi, literally, is a tactic that dates from antiquity. The *Heroides* (or *Epistulae Heroidum*), the fifteen Latin epistolary poems in elegiac couplets, which the first century Roman poet Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso. b. 43 BC—d. 17 AD) attributes to aggrieved Greek and Roman heroines, serves as an early example. The eighteenth-century English poet and essayist Alexander Pope, who translated Ovid's work, brings that ancient tradition into early modernity with his

own apocryphal letter he attributed to Héloïse addressing Abelard (see 33. Alexander Pope to Alexander Pope, and 23. Astrolabe to Héloïse and Abelard, his parents, below). And, in the twentieth century, Belgian French-language novelist Marguerite Yourcenar appropriates the life and dying words of second century Roman Emperor Hadrian, writing his *Memoirs* and attributing authorship to him (see 39. Yourcenar to Emperor Hadrian, below). Authorial attribution is a form of displacement, the alibi that seeks to shift authorship and responsibility for an act of writing unto someone else. It could be a preemptive attempt at self-absolution, but it could be, just as well, an acute form of empathy that seeks to allay the predicament of the writer through the misdirection of identifying the writer's vicissitudes with the plight of others. The precedents of Ovid, Pope, and Yourcenar invoked here certainly suggest as much.

A conundrum that has often vexed philosophers—"what is the sound of a single hand clapping?"—might well have its metaphorical response in the epistle of solitude. Solitude's letter is the single hand, the writing hand, reaching after its complement and the corresponding echo of its solitary sound. It is the keening sound of phantom pain for/of a severed limb by a limb seeking to repair its impaired pair (see, for example, letter 14. Artemisia of Caria to her brother-husband Mausolus; 29. Michel Montaigne's silent letter to Etienne de La Boitié; 32. Pocahontas to Ka-Okee, her daughter; or 36. Manuela Sáenz to Simón Bolívar, below). The clamor of a single hand writing is an attempt to make absence present, to render silence articulate, to give sound to stillness and voice to muteness. It is a poetic act, in the ancient sense of *poiesis*--to make, to produce something that is not yet, or that is no longer there, or something that is and waiting to be consummated and

expressed. The twentieth-century American poet Wallace Stevens marked such transformations of absence in his 1921 poem "The Snow Man" as a reaching after the "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." A dozen years later he would refer to such acts as "ghostlier demarcations" ("The Idea of Order at Key West," 1934). And like the keening sound of the single hand clapping, reaching for what it is not, or where it is not, the poem shares the aim and yearning of the epistle of solitude. In both cases, at work is the persistent human impulse to turn the virtual into the actual and absence into presence.

A compendium of solitudes such as Ovid's, for example, might assuage, however temporarily, the solitude of its compiler. But, just as easily, it becomes an echo chamber that compounds and magnifies the voices of silence and exacerbates the solitude of one who undertakes such a compilation, as was the case with Ovid, Pope, Pessoa, and Yourcenar. There is no guarantee, then, that composing predicaments of solitude necessarily allays one's own solitary plight. Casting such a compilation into the unpredictable tides of print and circulation might be no different from the act of those who posted their desperate missives to addressees at uncertain or unknown destinations. Publication itself is an act of optimism, and publishing is an industry of hope. In the end, both aim to close the chasm between the solitary writer and the solitude of reading, first detected as silent and solitary act, as already noted, in the fourth century by Augustine of Hippo Regius, whom we now know as Saint Augustine (see 22. Augustine's Last Confession, below). In calamitous times of war, political pestilence, and viral pandemic, especially, there has been an intensification of hope that such bridging between the acts of writing and reading might in some measure rescue solitudes from

the ravages of corrosive silence and mitigate the risks of implacable disassociation.

2. Reading Solitude: Language, Silence, Absence

Solitude is an immense geography, its prospects as unlimited as its perils. Traversed often by currents of loneliness and despair, solitude is potentially also an endless horizon for discovery and *respair*, a term coined in the fourteenth-century as the recuperative riposte to despair. In solitude desolation and consolation coexist as converse corollaries. At its most dire moments, when the solitary self, in bare life, has nowhere to turn but self-ward, solitude reveals its self-salvaging potential through what defines the human as human: the transmissible, transportable, and transactional capability called language. As Shakespeare's Hamlet, in ironic exasperation in response to Polonius' question, "What do you read my lord?", would have it, "Words, words, words." (*Hamlet,* act 2, scene 2, lines 208-210). Words they may well be, yet, as the linguistically prodigious Shakespeare clearly knew (see letter 31, Ophelia to Anne Hathaway Shakespeare), the transformative possibilities of language have served as self-saving recourse for the human condition in myth, in history, and in the face of the most dire predicaments of mortal peril. From earliest antiquity to the present, the antidote to human despair, more often than not, has been the banishment of solitude's most common correlative—silence. That task is achieved through language, even when deployed in the silent act of writing, as in the letters in this collection.

Cognizant of language as the signal attribute of what it means to be human, those who would engage in (in)human acts of dehumanization have often targeted the faculty of speech. Among

the most egregious in this regard is the fate of the mathematician Hypatia of Alexandria and of the polymath Giordano Bruno, the first having had her tongue torn out by the Christian zealots that mutilated her body during Easter week in 415 AD; the latter, gagged with his tongue immobilized as preliminary act to his being burnt at the stake in Rome by the Catholic Inquisition in 1600 (see their respective letters, 21 and 30, below). In the modern era, it is at such extreme solitude on the precarious edge between life and death that 24-year-old Primo Levi, an Italian inmate in a German concentration camp, discovered this lifesaving capacity of language and writing in his native tongue as remedy against forgetting and death.

A few years after that discovery, Levi, having survived Auschwitz, would record the experience by questioning a hypothesis: *Se questo è un uomo* ("If This Is Man"). Chapter eleven of that reflection records the moment language and writing emerged as instrumental passage from despair to self-preservation. It was the moment when a fellow inmate, the Frenchman Jean Samuel, expressed his wish to learn some Italian and Levi was jolted into the realization that Italian was his native language, that it was the vulgate language in which Italy's famous literary work, Dante's *Commedia* (begun ca. 1308, completed in 1321), was written from a starting point of exilic solitude. He felt urgently compelled to recall and recite from the first book of that trilogy, the "Inferno," a tale of fall and redemption whose protagonist sets out on his pilgrimage in the triple solitude of "I," "myself," "alone." And from that poem, Levi recalled Dante's treatment of another literary work and its hero in Canto 26.

Having taken his Roman precursor Virgil (Publius Virgilus Maro, 15 October 70-21 September 19 BC) as guide, in "Inferno," Canto 26, of the *Commedia* Dante recalls Homer's *Ulysses,* as Dante knew the *Odyssey,* whose wily hero he detects as a shimmering flame, along with his companion Diomedes, King of Argos, who conspired with him in the ruse that resulted in the defeat and sacking of Troy. From that victory, according to the tradition followed by Dante's Canto, the Homeric hero, after twenty years absence would return home to Ithaca. Un-assimilable to life at home, (see letter 3. Laertes, Odysseus'/Ulysses' farther, to his son, below), Ulysses/Odysseus set out to compound damnable transgression by venturing beyond the Pillars of Hercules, the frontier of the known geographical world, in pursuit of the far side of human knowledge. The defeat, sacking, and burning of Troy would also result in the founding of Rome, with the Trojan hero Aeneas's flight to Carthage and to Latium, as rendered by Virgil in Rome's eponymous founding epic, the *Aeneid* (19 BC; see letters 11-13, by Creusa, Dido, Lavinia, below). With this desperate attempt at recollection and recitation, Primo Levi escapes, for the moment, the infernal dehumanization of the death camp. While he was able to survive the concentration camp and its horrors, Levi endured, for forty-two years, the vicissitudes of the lifeworld and its un-bridgeable solitudes that ensued, finally succumbing on April 11, 1987, at age 64, when he plunged down the stairwell to his death from his third floor apartment.

In a work that is part historical novel and part prose poem that dramatizes the devastating solitude of the delirious final eighteen hours of Virgil's mortal life, the Austrian writer Hermann Broch has Rome's epic poet claim that the dead hold no communion, that they have forgotten each other (*The Death of Virgil*, 1945, p. 151).

Broch, who had already begun his treatise on Virgil when he was imprisoned by the Nazis in 1938 as they invaded Austria, elicits a number of questions with the claim he attributes to Virgil: Does the absence of communion and the relentlessness of forgetting mean that the solitary and forgotten in this world are, in that sense, also dead? The question shades into more complicated issues at our own historical moment in which "to ghost" has become a transitive verb. Are the absence of communion and the state of being forgotten indicative of a form of death in life? What, how, does one remember and, in doing so, allay the deadly ravages of solitude? A number of the letters in this collection respond to such questions in different ways.

The still living part of those who have known death contests the claim Broch attributes to Virgil, wishing to believe that the reason we might not sense that communion among the solitary, in this or in the afterlife, could be because we are thoroughly consumed by our own struggle with solitude, too preoccupied with the shrouded memory of a past and the inevitable shades of an undecipherable future. But, might there be a possibility that, somehow, those absolute solitudes could be mitigated, if not allayed altogether? Might there be a repository where that communion and its record are deposited, a "dead letters office" of eternity, where, if we listen intently enough, we could hear, in the writing and reading, what the archive of that ongoing communion contains? In their own unique way, the letters gathered in the present collection might be responding to such persistent queries.

Humanity's history invariably begins with the story of transitioning from silence to deliberate and directed sound, which is to say from solitude to sociality or communion. A third element,

in addition to silence and sound, is invariably implicated in that transition—absence. And this is why narratives of human beginnings tend to be mythological, as the origins of the term myth imply. The word "myth" itself, in its suggestive etymology, denotes both muteness and the lowing sound of cattle. *Mythos* is what the ancient Greeks called an onomatopoeia, a word whose pronunciation sounds like its meaning. Its Latin analogue, no less an onomatopoeic, is the verb *mugire,* to low or to moan. At once muteness and mooing, solitary silence and sound of articulation(s) that bind together the couple, the herd, the flock, the drove, the crowd, and the assembly, myth is the breaking point of solitude and of silence. No understanding of human communion, community, and human history can begin without reckoning with the rupture of solitude and silence by mythical and mythological beginnings. But as myth is by definition always in/on time and ever-present, that threshold of *mythos* is also a toggle point at the cusp of muteness, absence, and isolation. The precariousness and unpredictable fragility of the human condition, as history repeatedly demonstrates, finds humanity perpetually at the edge of recidivism, on the verge of falling back into the primordial predicament of muted lowing, of silence, solitude, and absence—the absence of conversation, of co-existence and communion.

The measure of solitude is the measure of silence and absence that define it, what the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa calls, in his unmistakable Symbolist lexicon, "the clamoring of silence and the pullulation of inconsolable absence." (See # 38, his letter to his avatars, below). But while silence can be interrupted (through one's scream, song, music, or soliloquy), absence can be implacably irremediable, especially when it is, or threatens to be, definitive. Sentient presence, whether in invocation or in memorial