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Solitudo

Spaces, Places, and Times of Solitude in Medieval and Early Modern Cultures



Editor(s): Karl A. E. Enkel, Christine Göttler

Intersections

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Review

Various chapters of *Solitudo*, edited by Karl A.E. Enkel and Christine Göttler, chart the destiny of the idea of solitude as it was practiced, expressed, and articulated in the late medieval and early modern periods. Writing and reading, poetry and painting, meditating and praying were practices that came to invest the places and spaces of solitude with meaning. The book, therefore, is also an interesting introduction to the history of “imageries and imaginaries” (17) of solitude, about its genesis in antiquity, rediscovery and appropriation in the middle ages and its transformation up to the early modern period.

Göttler’s introductory chapter succinctly summarizes various sections and individual chapters of the book. The discussion of the drawings of St. William of Malavalle by an unknown Netherlandish artist of the 16th century offers a conceptual preview of the subsequent chapters. The drawings attempt a unique framing of the desert or wilderness landscapes against the distant town or city. This framing of distance itself reveals the tension within the space of solitude with respect to the inhabited world of culture.

Furthermore, the chapter discusses with much insight and brilliance the far-reaching consequences of the rediscovery of patristic solitude in the artistic, literary, and scientific imagination of the late medieval period. The drawings by this anonymous artist are speculated to be belonging to the period when the stories and artworks related to the Desert Fathers were enjoying popularity in the Netherlands and the nearby German speaking areas. This obsession with the themes of solitude in the lives of Desert Fathers would significantly influence the renaissance culture of Europe as discussed in chapter 9 of the book. The artists of the time, Durer and Bellini among many others, imbibed the very notion of patristic solitude into their artistic practice. The journey of a solitary spirit in the desert or wilderness corresponded to the lines drawn by the artist on paper (5). Subsequent chapters in the book, while discussing various aspects of the late medieval cultures of solitude, frame them against the solitary habitus of early Christian fathers and Greco-Roman antiquity.

I shall approach this book’s content by way of a few theoretical vantage points. One interesting conceptual framing of the content of the book may be Western European inheritance of solitude in its classical and ecclesiastical articulations. Chapters 2 and 3 on Petrarch and Cornelius Musius, respectively, are insightful in bringing out this dual orientation and spatiality of their sacred solitude. Whereas Petrarch presents his solitary life modelled upon the artists and writers of Greece and Rome, Musius embodies a properly Christian monastic attitude towards the world. Petrarch’s *De Vita Solitaria* is a literary construction, conjuring a habitus the contours and features of which are borrowed from the histories and mythologies of classical antiquity (41). The ideal place for Petrarch to cultivate solitude and seek creative inspiration is under the open sky of nature, away from the corruption and crowd of the courts and the cities.

Despite appropriating biblical motifs in his book, Petrarch is evidently more faithful to the spirit of his classical progenitors. Musius, on the other hand, is thoroughly Christian, despite being well versed in the classics. The chapter on Musius embarks upon a critical and in-depth reading of his poem *Vita Solitaria*. The poem, the author argues, must be read in context of the transformations that the Low Countries were subjected to in the middle and

later part of the 16th century. The said time period saw the culmination of effects of Luther's and Calvin's criticism of monasticism and intensification of iconoclasm in which numerous monasteries were destroyed and looted. The literary work of Musius, therefore, is read and interpreted as a form of resistance against the anti-monastic reformation and celebration of the space of *Vita Monastica*: a solitary life modelled on the early figures of Christian monasticism. The notions of solitude in the late medieval period were thus intricately shaped by both classical and biblical traditions. Leo Strauss described Western civilization as coming together of Athens and Jerusalem, of Greek thought and biblical faith.

The late medieval period, according to the book, however, also witnesses a subtle transformation in the experience of solitude. The ascetic solitude of the desert fathers is already accepted, practiced, and enacted in the heart of human settlements and societies via the medium of art. Chapter 12, for instance, discusses how the studio of da Montefeltro at Urbino, invokes the solitude of the Petrarchian variety, by putting the owner (a bibliophile and a patron of arts) in conversation with the portraits of the great spirits of antiquity, long dead.

Moreover, the set-up of such a studio—its interior decoration, illumination, portrait gallery—the author argues, is an exercise in self-portrayal. The portrayal already assumes a spectator. This “externalization” in the long run will be definitive of the visual cultures of modernity. With the onset of early modernity, the strict desert solitude of antiquity, using the crutches of art and architecture, becomes a solitude of engagement, a solitude of sociability (406). Such a transformation is better elucidated in chapter 13 of this book, in which the author attempts to trace the genealogy of the institution of modern museum back to the Roman villa via the hermitages of early modern period. The act of contemplation, which was at the heart of solitary life in antiquity, is now enacted in public, as the distinction between the spatiality of villas and hermitages is blurred. The villas and hermitages of the late medieval period have already become repositories of art and opened their gates to the public. The proto-museum has arrived on the scene.

One cannot help but notice this transformation as desacralization and secularization of solitude effectively mediated by art. This volume, or at least its theoretical underpinning, has much to say to us who are modern and far removed from the “solitudes” of antiquity and middle ages. Our contemporary life, despite the mass culture and digital connectivity, is after all much inclined towards the solitude of screen time. A different solitude, but solitude nonetheless.

This edited volume is indispensable for anyone pursuing research in the formation of the cultures of modernity. The students of the history of culture, literature, art, and architecture of late medieval and early modern period of the West will equally find this book an important addition to their resources.

About the Reviewer(s):

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