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The Powers and Perils of Solitude: Perspectives from Eighteenth-Century French Literature, Religion, and Medicine

As Fay Bound Alberti has recently emphasized, "loneliness" is a modern term and a modern emotion: the word itself was not mentioned much in English published texts before the end of the eighteenth century, and when it did occur, "it meant simply 'oneliness', which was less a psychological or emotional experience than a physical one".[1] The absence of modern-day notions of loneliness from the lexicon and mindset of eighteenth-century English speakers is equally true of the period's French speakers. Of the two terms that are typically used today to translate "loneliness" into French, *isolement* and *solitude*, the first did not appear in dictionaries until 1835, when it was defined simply as "state of a person who lives isolated".[2] As for s*olitude*, its connotations were more physical than psychological: the 1762 edition of the *Dictionnaire de*

[1] Fay Bound Alberti, *A Biography of Loneliness: The History of an Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 18. See Bound Alberti's incisive distinction between the history of solitude and that of loneliness in chapter 1, 17–39.

[2] "ISOLEMENT", in: *Le Dictionnaire de l'Académie française. Sixième édition*, vol. 2 (Paris: Didot, 1835), https://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/content/dictionnaires-dautrefois. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

l'Académie française defined it simply as the "state of a man who is alone, who has withdrawn from social commerce" or as "a place removed from the commerce, sight, and practice of frequenting men".[3] According to the first of those definitions, solitude was the deliberate act of choosing to be alone, separate from other human beings, a choice that was largely associated with contemplation; in the second, solitude was a place. Read together, these definitions could evoke several possible settings well-known to eighteenth-century French readers, including the monastery, the natural world, and the scholar's private study.

Although useful for getting a general sense of attitudes toward solitude in this historical context – and of the term's spatial connotations at the time – the terse entry "Solitude" in the 1762 DAF edition does not give a full picture of the complex role that seclusion played in the identity of those who pursued the contemplative life in eighteenth-century Europe. In the secular realm, such people belonged to the general category of intellectuals, a group that had greater social prominence than in the preceding century, and thus greater pressure to adhere to the conventions of polite sociability. Despite the widely diffused idea that intellectuals of the Enlightenment era were smoothly integrated into fashionable society, there existed a powerful counterimage which held that the true intellectual yearned for retreat from the world, either into nature or to the quiet of a private study.[4] Moreover, contemplation in the still influential theological sense was widely understood as an exercise best carried out in unworldly seclusion. As the Benedictine monk François Lamy insisted in *De la connaissance de soi-même* (1694–1701), "solitude

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[3] "SOLITUDE", in: *Le Dictionnaire de l'Académie française. quatrième édition*, vol. 2 (Paris: Brunet, 1762), https://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/content/dictionnaires-dautrefois. According to the *Trésor de la langue française*, the first occurrence of *solitude* in French dates back to the thirteenth century, and denoted simply the "state of a uninhabited or sparsely inhabited place". http://atilf.atilf.fr/dendien/scripts/tlfiv5/advanced.exe?76;s=3526220835.

[4] The sociable image of the Enlightenment intellectual is promoted in the article "PHILOSOPHE", in: *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, ed. Denis Diderot, Jean le Rond d'Alembert, in: *ARTFL Encyclopédie Project (Autumn 2022 Edition)* ed. Robert Morrissey, Glenn Roe, https://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu, 12: 509–511, access 15.01.2023. Partial retreat from the world was central to the group habitus that developed when fifteenth-century northern European scholars first moved from university or monastic settings into urban family households, creating cloister-like spaces within them that functioned, as Gadi Algazi has put it, as a "shield for a scholar's vulnerable self". Gadi Algazi, "Scholars in Households: Refiguring the Learned Habitus, 1480–1550", *Science in Context* 16(1–2) (2003): 26.

is the infirmary of the mind [soul/ *âme*]", by which he meant, first, that solitude remedies the mind's ills by removing us from the "contagious, morbid air" of worldly social commerce; and second, that solitude is the only means by which we can truly understand the misery of the human self and the need to turn to God, the divine Physician, to alleviate that misery.[5] A key benefit of solitude, in Lamy's eyes, was to protect the individual against the tumultuous passions of social relations which he, an ascetic Augustinian, abhorred.

Not surprisingly, a tension existed between the secular and religious conceptions of solitude in the period's French-speaking context, where the emerging "philosophical" movement challenged longstanding religious notions of human nature and society.[6] That tension is neatly illustrated by the back-to-back entries on solitude which Louis de Jaucourt contributed to the *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*: "Solitude (Religion)" and "Solitude, *état de* (Droit naturel)", both published in 1765. In the first, Jaucourt cited Lamy as a "very wise" source and followed him in praising solitude's capacity to calm the mind and "quell the tumultuous passions that the disorder of the [social] world has created".[7] However, Jaucourt also underscored that retreat, even when impelled by religious belief, should not be so absolute as to preclude all involvement in society: Christian faith did not, he insisted, require believers to withdraw into "the horror of a solitude", in the sense of an isolated place.[8] In the second article, Jaucourt

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[5] François Lamy, *De la connoissance de soi-mesme: Traité premier-[second]. Des secours que le bon usage de la solitude et de ses principaux exercices donné aux solitaires, pour l'étude de soi-mesme* (Paris: André Pralard, 1694), 3, 21–24. See Pieter Verstraete, "Savage solitude: the problematisation of disability at the turn of the eighteenth century", *Paedagogica Historica* 45(3) (2009): 274–275. Michael Moriarty aligns Lamy's view of the alienating effects of social commerce with Pascalian *divertissement*: that is, the desire for escape from the self; Michael Moriarty, *Fallen Nature, Fallen Selves: Early Modern French Thought II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 332.

[6] Various perspectives on the relationship between religion and the Enlightenment are provided in Stewart J. Brown, Timothy Tackett ed., *Enlightenment, Reawakening and Revolution, 1660–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). For a detailed survey of religious attitudes toward solitude in 17th and 18th-c. France, see Pierre Naudin, *L'expérience et le sentiment de la solitude dans la littérature française de l'aube des Lumières à la Révolution: un modèle de vie à l'épreuve de l'histoire* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1995), 55–200. Esp. parts I and II.

[7] Louis de Jaucourt, "SOLITUDE (Religion)", *Encyclopédie*, 15: 325, access 15.01.2023.

[8] It is worth noting that Jaucourt's family, while nominally Catholic, was "secretly Protestant" and that he wanted in his youth to become a pastor; "Jau-

defined solitude as the state "opposed to that of society" and sketched a grim picture of the life of a man "abandoned to himself and deprived of all commerce with his peers".[9] Seen from that perspective, solitude was a state to be approached with caution.

As in English, the use of the French term *solitude* rose markedly in the second half of the eighteenth century.[10] There were undoubtedly several reasons for that increase, ranging from the celebrity of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the century's most famous solitary, to the appearance of medical works addressing solitude from the perspective of health. Key figures in the latter development were the Swiss doctor Johann-Georg Zimmermann, the Enlightenment's major theoretician of solitude's moral and physical effects, and his friend and compatriot Dr. Samuel-Auguste Tissot, well-known for his work on a range of topics including inoculation, the health of working people, and nervous maladies.[11]

This article is designed to contribute to the history of solitude in eighteenth-century Europe, with emphasis on French thought and culture (notwithstanding the presence in my corpus of Zimmermann, who wrote principally in German). It will consider three fields in which solitude featured prominently: literature, religion, and medicine. Part I is a survey of literary representations of solitude and contemplation that culminates with a short reading of Denis Diderot's novel *La Religieuse* (published in 1796 but written earlier). The scope of Parts II and III is more limited and focused. Part II is devoted to the Jansenist *convulsionnaires*, Catholic dissidents who took part in a larger appeal against the

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court, Louis, chevalier de (1704–1780)", in: Frank A. Kafker, Serena L. Kafker, *The Encyclopedists as individuals: a biographical dictionary of the authors of the Encyclopédie* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation,1988), 175–180.

[9] Jaucourt, SOLITUDE, *Encyclopédie*, 15: 325.

[10] "Solitude" in: *Dictionnaire vivant de la langue française*, access 15.01.2023, https://dvlf.uchicago.edu/mot/solitude.

[11] Tissot was arguably the most successful medical popularizer of the French-speaking Enlightenment. Although he is best known today for his role in pathologizing masturbation, he also responded to many of his era's more serious debates, ranging from inoculation to Rousseau's famous attack on the corrupting effects of the arts and sciences. Moreover, Tissot made an important contribution to the humanitarian campaign to bring learned medicine to the people; this was through his influential *Avis au peuple sur sa santé*, initially published in 1761. Trained in Montpellier and closely affiliated with many major scientific figures of the Enlightenment, he attracted patients from all over Europe to his home city of Lausanne. See the introduction to Samuel-Auguste Tissot, *De la santé des gens de lettres*, ed. Anne Vila, Ronan Chalmin (Paris: Garnier, 2018), 9–52.

repressive *Unigenitus* Bull of 1713, which was one of the measures by which Louis XIV tried to stamp out Jansenism toward the end of his reign. Although the convulsionary movement sought to attract crowds and publicity, it was also grounded in a Jansenist tradition of spiritual retreat that was emulated by the movement's de facto patron saint, the appellant deacon François de Pâris. In Part III, I examine selected writings by Zimmermann and Tissot, who medicalized solitude for three reasons: their belief in the Enlightenment ethos of sociability, their concern over the pathogenic powers of the imagination, and their suspicion towards the passions that drove some people to fix their minds on certain ideas to the exclusion of all else. To illustrate the last idea and show solitude's harmful consequences for those who spent too much time absorbed in ideas, they made some intriguing connections between secular knowledge-seekers and the religiously devout. Interestingly, the Jansenist *convulsionnaires* were one of the dangerously zealous groups whom they cited to illustrate their arguments.

A brief overview of solitude and contemplation in eighteenth-century French literature

Literature was one of the principal fields in which eighteenth-century French authors reflected on solitude and contemplation, including the ambiguities of those conditions.[12] Retreat was, of course, fundamental for Rousseau, who famously declared in *Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (1782) that his hours of solitude were the only ones "when I am fully myself and for myself, without diversion, without obstacle, and during which I can truly claim to be what nature willed".[13] As Lawrence Klein notes, the solitary turn which Rousseau took after breaking with the *philosophes* was, in part, a "polemical gesture" designed to mark his re-

[12] The most comprehensive study of solitude as a literary theme in eighteenth-century France is Naudin 1995.

[13] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* [1778], ed. M. Raymond (Lille: Giard / Geneve: Droz, 1948), 18. Rousseau declared his resolution to live as a solitary in his 1761 correspondence with Malesherbes, discussed by Erik Leborgne in "Le Portrait clinique de Rousseau dans *De la solitude* de J. G. Zimmermann", in: *Annales Jean-Jacques Rousseau* 48 (2008), 244–248. See also "Solitude de l'homme célèbre", in: Antoine Lilti, *Figures publiques, l'invention de la célébrité, 1750–1850* (Paris: Fayard, 2014), 153–219; and Barbara Taylor, "Philosophical Solitude: David Hume versus Jean-Jacques Rousseau", *History Workshop Journal* 89 (2020): 1–21, https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbz048.

jection of the conventions of polite society.[14] At the same time, however, Rousseau's solitude-seeking was grounded in temperamental leanings with which many intellectuals identified. Although far more convivial than his erstwhile friend Rousseau, Diderot spoke of his own deep love for prolonged periods of solitary writing and reflection in letters to his mistress Sophie Volland. As he described himself there, he was gripped with an intense penchant for study and "life with himself", exhibited externally by his neglected beard and the nightclothes he wore when venturing out for a social dinner.[15] Moreover, in an addendum to the *Encyclopédie* article "Contemplation (Théologie)", Diderot posited an analogy between the mystic's search for perfect communion with God's truth and the *philosophe*'s practice of fixing the mind's attention on one idea or object in order to "acquire an exact and deep understanding of things, and advance toward the truth".[16] Even the highly sociable Voltaire counted "ardor for study" and "love of solitude", alongside "the taste for friendship", among his greatest passions.[17]

Self-seclusion was also attractive to learned women. As Emilie du Châtelet wrote regarding the quiet existence she shared with Voltaire at Cirey: "My predilection for solitude in good company does nothing but grow and become more attractive".[18] Echoing that sentiment in the realm

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[14] Lawrence E. Klein, "Sociability, Solitude and Enthusiasm", in: *Enthusiasm and Enlightenment in Europe, 1650–1850*, ed. Lawrence E. Klein, Anthony J. LaVopa (Pasadena: Huntington Library Press, 1998), 156.

[15] As Diderot wrote in October 1765, "Tomorrow, it will be eight days since I last left my study […] I've taken such a keen liking for study, application, and life with myself, that I'm tempted to stick to them"; and, again in November: "My taste for solitude increases by the moment; yesterday, I went out in my dressing gown and nightcap to go dine at Damilaville's house. I've taken an aversion to dress clothes; my beard grows as much as it likes"; Denis Diderot, letters to Sophie Volland, October 20 and November 21, 1765; "Correspondance (1742–1784)", in: *Oeuvres de Diderot* (Paris: Ed. Robert Laffont, 1997), vol. 5, 541–542, 556.

[16] Edmé-François Mallet, Denis Diderot, CONTEMPLATION, [Théologie], *Encyclopédie*, 4: 111, access 15.01.2023.

[17] "God of thinking beings, God of fortunate hearts, Conserve the desires you have given me, This taste for friendship, this ardor for study, This love of fine arts and solitude: Those are my passions, my soul has at all times Tasted consoling pleasures from their attractions"; Voltaire, "Discours en vers sur l'homme" (1738); cited in Emmanuel Bury, *Littérature et politesse: l'invention de l'honnête homme (1580–1750)* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1996), 215.

[18] Letter to Maupertuis, 10 December 1735; cited in Huguette Krief, "Retraite féminine et femmes moralistes au siècle des Lumières", *Dix-huitième siècle* 48 (2016): 97.

of fiction, the transplanted Peruvian Zilia of Françoise de Graffigny's *Lettres d'une péruvienne* (1747/1752) resolves in that novel's conclusion to live out her life in contemplative retreat from the salons of Paris.[19] For these authors, solitude was an ordering principle, a means of maintaining a space apart from the noisy agitations and frivolity of worldly social life: it was something to be "enjoyed and savored" before resuming one's social duties.[20] In short, despite the eighteenth century's valorization of sociability, many sorts of writing stressed the coexistence of community and solitude, of "participation in society and distance from the world".[21]

However, this period's literature also abounds with negative depictions of solitude, particularly for women. Above and beyond the common literary trope of women abandoned or neglected by a lover, novelists and playwrights often cast imprisoned or cloistered women as their heroines.[22] Some of the French-language works produced in this vein were harem fictions like Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721), but many were set in convents – and it was there that worries over solitude's pathogenic potential were most pronounced. One of the period's best known convent fictions was Diderot's *La Religieuse* (*The Nun*; begun in 1760, and published posthumously), which combines an anti-clerical satire of the power dynamics of convents with sympathetic portrayals of cloistered victims.[23] To demonstrate the thesis that a "strange metamorphosis" occurs in the minds of those who dwell in religious seclusion, Diderot's

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[19] See letter 41 of Françoise de Graffigny, *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1993), 165–168. Benedetta Craveri argues that emphasis on internalization and solitude in this period's novels served as "an antidote to the ever more tyrannical demands of eighteenth-century *sociabilité*"; *The Age of Conversation*, transl. Teresa Waugh (New York Review Books, 2005), 353.

[20] Fay Bound Alberti, "This 'Modern Epidemic': Loneliness as an Emotion Cluster and a Neglected Subject in the History of Emotions", *Emotion Review* 10(3) (2018): 246.

[21] Jean-Noël Pascal, "Du cabinet du sage à la chaumière des amants: variations poétiques sur la retraite (1760–1810)", *Dix-huitième siècle* 48 (2016):104.

[22] Alberti, "This 'Modern Epidemic'", 247. French writers exploited the convent setting for licentious as well as philosophical purposes – and sometimes, both at the same time. See, for example, the novel *Thérèse philosophe* (1748), ascribed to Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, marquis d'Argens, and discussed in Mita Choudhury, *The Wanton Jesuit and the Wayward Saint: A Tale of Sex, Religion, and Politics in Eighteenth-Century France* (College Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016).

[23] Jacques-Marie Boutet de Monvel popularized this term through his Revolutionary-era drama *Les victimes cloîtrées* (Paris: Lepetit, 1792).

novel presents a gallery of nuns suffering from various sorts of psychic distress or disorder, including religious melancholy, the vapors, fanaticism, and sexual obsession.[24] Its narrator-heroine, Suzanne Simonin, falls into a prolonged stupor when she is obliged to take monastic vows, after which she spends several months in a state of "alienation" and memory loss.[25] Yet Diderot makes Suzanne as lucid as a *philosophe* when it comes to diagnosing the source of these disorders:

> Such is the consequence of seclusion. Man is born for society. Separate him from his kind, place him in an isolated state, his ideas will become distorted, his character will be reversed. [...] Place a man in a forest, and he will become savage; in a cloister, where the idea of compulsion is combined with that of servitude, and it is still worse. He may quit the forest, but the cloister he can never abandon. [...] It perhaps requires more strength of mind to withstand solitude than misery.[26]

There is one genuinely contemplative character in *La Religieuse*: the kindly mother superior Madame de Moni, who possesses the gift of experiencing transports of ecstatic communion with God as she prays, "sweeping along" all the nuns who pray alongside her.[27] However, the good superior is so distressed by the deep melancholy Suzanne feels because of her forced claustration that she loses her talent for mystical communication. After Madame de Moni passes away, Suzanne finds herself at the mercy of the tyrannical, superstitious Mother Superior Sainte-Christine, who whips her acolytes into a frenzy against Suzanne after she tries to have her vows publicly rescinded. Suzanne endures a series of ritualized mortifications directed by sister Sainte-Christine. In one, a group of nuns force Suzanne to lie down in a coffin in the middle of the choir, cover her with a shroud, and throw cold water on her while reciting the office for the dead; in another, the entire convent com-

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[24] Denis Diderot, *La Religieuse*, in: Denis Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Herbert Dieckmann et al. (Paris: Hermann, 1975–), vol. 11, 160. See also Jaucourt, "Melancholie religieuse", *Encyclopédie*, 10: 308.

[25] "I heard nothing of what was being said around me. I had become practically an automaton. I was aware of nothing, save that from time to time I had a kind of small convulsive fit"; Diderot, *La Religieuse*, 123–124. For a fuller analysis of the function of such episodes of oblivion in this novel, see Anne C. Vila, "Going Cataleptic: Ecstatic Extremes and 'Deep' Thinking in and around Diderot", *Philological Quarterly* 93 (2014): 95–115.

[26] Diderot, *La Religieuse*, 225; Idem, *The Nun*. vol. 2 (London: printed for G.G. and J. Robinson, Paternoster-Row, 1797), 41–42.

[27] Diderot, *La Religieuse*, 119.

munity tramples on her as if she were a cadaver.[28] Finally, sister Sainte-Christine enters Suzanne's cell with three particularly ferocious assistants, who tie Suzanne up, drench her with holy water, and convince her that she is about to be strangled for her supposed apostasy.[29]

The episodes of mortification that form the darkest moments of Diderot's *La Religieuse* are not simply the imaginings of an anti-clerical *philosophe*. Rather, they bear a certain resemblance to practices of a real-life group that greatly preoccupied him from the 1740s until the end of his life: the Jansenist *convulsionnaires*.[30] Some adepts of that movement combined militancy in defense of their beleaguered faith with violent forms of penitence called *grands secours*, mortifications that were graphically described in the "Dossier des convulsionnaires" which Diderot compiled around the time he began writing *La Religieuse*.[31] The contents of that dossier are virtually identical to the eyewitness reports of recent convulsionary *grands secours* assemblies which the scientist Charles-Marie de La Condamine and the playwright and ex-Oratorian Dudoyer de Gastel had written, and which Frédéric Melchior Grimm, assisted by Diderot, featured in the May 1759, May 1760, and June 1760 issues of the *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique*, an elite cultural newsletter read by European royalty.[32] *La Religieuse* is not anti-Jansenist, *per se*.[33] Rather, it reflects Diderot's intense concern over the power of religious isolation to warp people's minds and turn them into fanatical, inhumane monsters.

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[28] Ibidem, 159–162.

[29] Ibidem, 169–172.

[30] Denis Diderot first critiqued this group in *Les Pensées philosophiques* [1746], where he called the famous male convulsionary the abbé Bescherand a "deceiver"; *Œuvres philosophiques*, ed. Paul Vernière (Paris: Garnier, 1964), 43.

[31] See Denis Diderot "Le Dossier des convulsionnaires", in: Denis Diderot, Oeuvres complètes, édition chronologique (Le Club Français du livre, 1970), 4: 764–788.

[32] See Anne C. Vila, "The *Convulsionnaires*, Palissot, and the Philosophical Battles of 1760", *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*,48 (2019): 227–243.

[33] Mita Choudhury argues that when faced with the hostile, anti-Jansenist Sister Sainte-Christine, Suzanne adopts a Jansenist position of resistance; *Convents and Nuns in Eighteenth-Century Politics and Culture* (Ithaca–New York: Cornell University Press, 2004), 26.

Solitude and seclusion in the service of religious zeal: the Jansenist Convulsionary Movement and its early repudiations

It may seem paradoxical to evoke solitude in relation to the Jansenist Convulsionaries, who were arguably the most vocal and visible group of religious dissenters in eighteenth-century Europe. However, this movement was rooted in traditions of separation from the secular world dating back to Jansenism's origins as an austere reformist movement within seventeenth-century Catholicism.[34] Its adherents styled themselves as the defenders of the essential truths of the Christian faith; Augustinian in spirit, they insisted on the sinfulness and corruption of man and society. Jansenism in seventeenth-century France was largely defined by the purist spirituality of the convent of Port-Royal and the distinguished *solitaires* who retreated there, like Antoine Arnauld, Pierre Nicole, and Blaise Pascal. Although those thinkers took part in numerous doctrinal controversies, they stayed out of political agitations.[35] All of that changed in the waning years of the reign of Louis XIV, who had long been exasperated with Jansenists: they were, as he put it, a "party of innovators", a sect "inimical to all domination, whether temporal or spiritual".[36] In 1709–1711, the King closed and then demolished Jansenism's symbolic center, the convent of Port-Royal-des-Champs; and in 1713, he persuaded Pope Clement IX to promulgate the *Unigenitus* Bull

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[34] This summary of the history of Jansenism and the convulsionary movement is indebted to B. Robert Kreiser, *Miracles, Convulsions and Ecclesiastical Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), Catherine Maire, *Convulsionnaires de Saint-Médard* (Paris: Gallimard Julliard, 1985) and *De la cause de Dieu à la cause de la nation: le jansénisme au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998); and Ephraim Radner, *Spirit and Nature: The Saint-Médard Miracles in Eighteenth-Century Jansenism* (New York: Herder & Herder, Crossroad, 2002).

[35] Politics, as Jean-Louis Quantin emphasizes, is "a major discontinuity between seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Jansenism, Port-Royalists and appelants"; "A Godly Fronde? Jansenism and the Mid-Seventeenth-Century Crisis of the French Monarchy", *French History* 25 (2011): 489. There were, however, substantial continuities between seventeenth- and eighteeenth-century Jansenism at the level of pessimistic world view: see, among other works, Marie-José Michel, *Jansénisme et Paris, 1640–1730* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2000).

[36] Cited in Robin Briggs, *Communities of Belief: Cultural and Social Tension in Early Modern France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 349.

or Constitution, which denounced certain Jansenist writings and pointed out this doctrine's similarities to Calvinism.[37]

Jansenists in the Paris Parliament viewed *Unigenitus* as an assault on Gallican liberties, whereas lower clergy objected to the papal and episcopal "despotism" which they detected in it.[38] Yet bishops around France were pressured to sign and enforce the Bull. Clergy who resisted or appealed, known as *appelants*, were subjected to harsh penalties that included exile, demotion, and the threat of excommunication. In reaction, appellant theologians studying under the eminent theologian Jacques-Joseph Duguet at the Saint-Magloire seminary invented historical figurism, a system for discerning symbols through the Bible to support the idea that *Unigenitus* and other disastrous events happening to the true Church in the present day had been prophesied in the Old Testament.[39] One of Duguet's students was deacon François de Pâris, the appellant around whom the convulsionary movement took shape.

Pâris devoted the last decade of his life to embodying Jansenism in various ways: selfless devotion to his poor Parisian neighbors, charitable assistance to exiled co-religionists, and, most importantly for the saintly myth that came to surround him, extreme forms of penitential self-mortification which "figured" the ills of the Church.[40.] Solitude was central to the mode of life he embraced: as described in biographies such as Pierre Boyer's *La Vie de M. de Pâris, diacre* and Barthélemy Doyen's *Vie de Monsieur de Pâris* (both published anonymously in 1731), Pâris made many pilgrimages to remote hermitages, seeking out ever more obscure places of retreat. The models he imitated included Dom Claude Léauté, an appellant Benedictine monk of the congregation of St. Maur who ab-

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[37] Dale K. Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560–1791* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 73. The theologians who orchestrated the creation of *Unigenitus* may have included the (in)famous French Jesuit and Royal confessor Michel Le Tellier, who coauthored with Jacques-Philippe Lallement the anonymous work *Le père Le Quesnel séditieux et hérétique* ([s.l.]: [s.n.], 1704–1705). See Lucien Ceyssens, *Autour de l'Unigenitus. Recherches sur la genèse de la constitution* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1987), 323–400. Esp. 349.

[38] Kreiser, *Miracles*, 22.

[39] Figurism produced "a conception of grace that, as periodically manifested in history, at once enlightened the pure of heart and blinded the hard of heart, as well as a conception of the church as the body of Christ that found itself condemned – or rather predestined – indefinitely to reenact or 'refigure' the world's rejection of Christ in historical time"; Van Kley, *The Religious Origins*, 93. See also Kreiser, *Miracles*, 246–248; Maire, *Convulsionnaires*, 81–83.

[40] Maire, *De la cause*, 141.

stained from eating anything other than Communion bread for eleven Lenten periods (and many days the rest of the year), asking God to give him the strength "to withstand such extraordinary fasts to confirm the justice of the cause" he was defending, the appeal of *Unigenitus*.[41] Pâris visited Léauté in his monastic "solitude" in 1722 and decided thereafter to fast during the forty days of Lent.[42]

When Pâris was about thirty, he moved to the notoriously poor faubourg Saint-Marcel in Paris to form a small community of reclusive ecclesiastics on the model of the *solitaires* of Port-Royal. Employing the *topos* of solitude as a place, Pâris' biographers underscored the exceedingly humble and physically remote qualities of the house on the rue de Bourgogne where he and his companions settled, with no servants and no superior.[43] According to Doyen, Pâris wrote down this summary of the community's key tenets:

> The life we lead consists above all in three exercises, namely: prayer, retreat, and the mortification of the body, exercises that are so intertwined that it does not seem possible to acquit oneself well of one if one neglects the others. The mortification of the body subjugates it and prevents it from revolting against the mind. Retreat drives away distractions, thoughts, designs, and everything that diverts the spirit [mind]; when the spirit is collected, the heart is more disposed to lift itself toward God through prayer.[44]

Pâris followed an austere dietary regimen, eschewing anything except the simplest, most tasteless and often fetid vegetables. He rarely left his room and used a hairshirt and other instruments of penitence for additional self-punishment.[45] Those privations, along with Pâris' many acts of charitable service, fueled the admiration his impoverished neighbors felt for him: they venerated him like a saint even before his death. When he succumbed in May 1727, exhausted by illness, fasting, and self-mortification, news of his passing spread immediately. People flocked to his residence to get a piece of Pâris' belongings: a lock of his hair, a strip of the shirt he had been wearing at his death, or a sliver of the "bed where this victim of penitence for the Truth finished his sacrifice".[46]

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[41] [Barthélemy Doyen], *Vie de Monsieur de Pâris, diacre du diocèse de Paris, nouvelle edition* (en France [s.n], 1733), 43–44, 51.

[42] Ibidem, 49.

[43] [Pierre Boyer], *La Vie de Monsieur de Pa^ris, diacre* (Brussels: Foppens, 1721 [sic for 1731]), 75–76; [Doyen], *Vie de Monsieur*, 82–83.

[44] Ibidem, 71.

[45] Boyer, *La Vie de Monsieur*, 81.

[46] Doyen, *Vie de Monsieur*, 12.

For Deacon Pâris, solitude was a means not simply of attaining spiritual purity, but also of lamenting the state of the Church in the wake of *Unigenitus*: when the deacon took up residence in the obscure little house in the faubourg Saint-Marcel, he did so as if he "were entering a grave where he was going to bury himself, to think about nothing henceforth except the eternal years, and about ways to make the anger of God against himself and the Church relent".[47] Pâris' manner of dying to the world was, in other words, driven by the conviction that God was angry at the mainstream Catholic Church for persecuting Jansenists: "The main reason for his fasting, his prayers, his tears, was the present state of the Church, over which he never ceased to lament and plead for God's mercy".[48] Writing four years after Pâris' death, Doyen declared that God was now intervening in his place of burial, the obscure Parisian cemetery of Saint-Médard, to display this holy recluse to the entire French kingdom and Christian people: "The more he [Pâris] had sought solitude and obscurity to hide himself from the eyes of the world, the more God [now] takes pleasure in showing him in full light in the Capital of the Kingdom [...] He [God] reserved him as a spectacle for the entire Christian people".[49] Believers in the cult that developed around Pâris invested the space of this cemetery with a symbolic value akin to that of the demolished cemetery of the Port-Royal monastery, contending that it was endowed by God with the power to produce conversions and miracle cures in those who stepped onto its grounds.

These texts were part of a very deliberate propaganda campaign designed to popularize the humble deacon's reputation as a faith-healing saint and martyr to the cause of resistance to the *Unigenitus* Bull.[50] Boyer's and Doyen's hagiographies were reprinted and imitated by other pro-convulsionist writers in both handwritten and published form. Another influential publication was the clandestine *Nouvelles ecclésiastiques, ou Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la constitution 'Unigenitus'*, an inexpensive, widely read weekly newspaper which made regular reference to the miracles that Pâris supposedly worked from beyond the grave at Saint-Médard.[51] The posthumous mediatization of deacon Pâris also involved images, like those that depicted him seated alone at the loom he had purchased in order to carry out manual labor by making socks for

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47 Ibidem, 51.
48 Ibidem, 68.
49 Ibidem, 226.
50 See Maire, *De la cause*, 141–147 and Kreiser, *Miracles*, 193–194.
51 Van Kley, *The Religious Origins*, 94–96.

the poor.[52] They, too, were designed to turn his life of reclusive suffering and "heroic unworldiness" into a myth, a means of fostering belief in the miracle cures attributed to him posthumously.[53] Among Convulsionaries, Pâris became a model to emulate, ritually – just as Pâris had explicitly modeled his existence after that of the Port-Royal *solitaires*. Within this religious community, solitude and the penitential practices that accompanied it were gestures laden with symbolic meaning: they marked one's faith and one's commitment to the Jansenist appellant cause.

After Pâris' death in May 1727, pilgrims and others soon started gathering around his tomb in the Saint-Médard cemetery, some hoping to be cured through proximity to his remains. From 1731 on, the miracle cures attributed to Pâris were increasingly accompanied by convulsions, wild contortions, and trance-like states. Unseemly behavior abounded among female Convulsionaries in the eyes of the movement's adversaries: they were scandalized by the spectacle of women and girls who allowed their bodies to be handled by men as they trembled, thrashed, and contorted themselves while enraptured. In January 1732, the authorities closed the cemetery, hoping to stamp out the mystical cult surrounding Pâris. That did not, however, subdue the movement, any more than the arrests and imprisonments of multiple Convulsionaries: the number of participants grew, and some adopted a millenarian, apocalyptic mindset.

Defenders of the Work of the Convulsions (as they called it) were persuaded that God was expressing His will directly through the plethora of miracles that they saw happening to and through believers. When skeptics within the circle of Jansenist appellant theologians began publishing works that questioned the Saint-Médard convulsions on the grounds of moral propriety as well as religious orthodoxy, hard-core believers escalated their claims and their practices. After the closing of the cemetery, Convulsionaries gathered in private to practice increasingly violent forms of bodily mortification called *grands secours* ("great relief") or the oxymoronic *secours meurtriers* ("lethal relief"). These mortifications took various forms, including beating Convulsionaries with logs, piercing them with needles, nails and swords, trampling them, ap-

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[52] The widely diffused "worker image" of the deacon was intended to tie him symbolically to Port-Royal, where manual labor had been highly valorized, and to create the idea that the high-born Pâris had made himself the equal to his working-class neighbors in the faubourg Saint-Marcel; Nicolas Lyon-Caen, "Un «saint de nouvelle fabrique» Le diacre Paris (1690–1727), le jansénisme et la bonneterie parisienne", *Annales: histoire, sciences sociales* 65 (2010): 613–642.

[53] Kreiser, *Miracles*, 84.

plying nail-studded crowns and other devices, setting them on fire, and crucifying them.[54] The idea underlying them was that Convulsionaries required "relief" in the form of violent blows and wounds to the body, to stop their spasms; the true miracle, apologists now argued, lay in their divine invulnerability to those blows. Yet they also drew on the longer tradition of dolorism in Christian contemplative literature, declaring that Convulsionaries who received *grands secours* were a new kind of victim, chosen by God to communicate His wrath and desire for justice.[55] The anonymous 1733 *Coup d'œil en forme de lettre sur les convulsions* praised the "touching" spectacle of ecstatic Convulsionaries undergoing prolonged *secours* and called it a tragedy that foretold an imminent upheaval.[56]

The people who contributed to this reinterpretation of the "Work of the Convulsions" were, as Maire emphasizes, improvising theologians inspired by the figurist doctrines that emanated from Saint-Magloire: Convulsionaries used their bodies to mimic state and ecclesiastic persecution of their cause and of the true Church, intermingling prayers and speeches with applications of *grands secours*.[57] Their speeches often dwelled on matters like the imminent conversion of the Jews, the return of the Prophet Elijah, and the impending doom of Babylon – by which they typically meant Paris. Many of the women who spoke during *grands secours* did so in baby-talk. This behavior illustrates the practice of certain adepts to specialize in "convulsions of childhood" in which they requested cakes and sweets while under trance, or play-acted rituals like

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[54] Maire, *Convulsionnaires*, 140–148.

[55] [L'abbé Saint-Jean], *Lettre d'un ecclésiastique de province à un de ses amis, où il lui donne une idée abrégée de L'Oeuvre des convulsions* ([s.l.]: [s.n.], 1733), 15. See Antoinette Gimaret's analysis of the calculation of pain and suffering in texts from the Christian contemplative tradition, in: *Extraordinaire et ordinaire de la croix: les représentations du corps souffrant, 1580–1680* (Paris: Champion, 2011), 344–346.

[56] [Julien-René-Benjamin Gennes], *Coup d'œil en forme de lettre sur les convulsions, où on examine cette œuvre dès son principe* (Paris: [s.n.], 1733), 24. Similar language appeared in the anonymous *Plan général de l'oeuvre des convulsions* (1733), probably also written by Julien-René-Benjamin Gennes. God, this author declared, was using the Convulsionaries' speeches and somatic displays to make a deep impression on the hearts of their spectators: watching a Convulsionary instilled "striking astonishment, intense feelings of piety, compunction and fervor", prompting "sensitivity to the woes of the Church in good people, and solid conversions in great sinners"; *Plan général de l'œuvre des convulsions, avec des reflexions d'un laïc, en réfutation de la réponse que M. l'abbé de L. a fait à ce plan* ([s. l.]: [s. n], 1733), 2–3.

[57] Maire, *De la cause*, 291.

feeding gruel to a wax baby Jesus.[58] This, too, was a mode of figuring: it represented mystical purity and innocence, while also reinforcing the familial relationship the Convulsionary had with her spiritual director, whom she called "Papa". Some Convulsionaries figured scenes from the life of deacon Pâris by imitating him shaving or knitting socks.[59]

Starting in the 1730s, some Convulsionaries took to emulating the Christian body par excellence: that of the crucified Christ.[60] One of the most notorious practitioners of *grands secours* was a man who went by the name Papa La Barre; he performed real crucifixions on various women in private homes around Paris in 1759 and 1760. These crucifixion sessions were observed by several witnesses, including a "very sensible" Frenchman named M. de Saint Aubin, who told Tissot about them in 1760, as Tissot reported in a letter to Zimmermann of that year, where he also mentioned La Condamine.[61] La Condamine, whose accounts of these sessions appeared in the *Correspondance littéraire*, alluded to the Convulsionaries in a letter he wrote to Tissot dated 2 June 1762.[62]

Opponents of the movement called it an epidemic; this was a way of denying its putative divine origins while also linking it to earlier cases of collective religious enthusiasm.[63] Three Jansenist appellants, Dr. Philippe Hecquet and the theologians François-Hyacinthe De Lan and Louis de Bonnaire, seem to have worked in unison in 1733 to "naturalize" the so-called Work of the Convulsions by attributing its phenomena to bodily conditions, agitated imaginations, and imposture.[64] In the

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[58] Maire, *Convulsionnaires*, 211–212; Monique Cottret, "La cuisine janséniste", *Dix-huitième siècle* 15 (1983), 107–114.

[59] Maire, *Convulsionnaires*, 115.

[60] Maire, *De la cause*, 301; Daniel Vidal, *Miracles et convulsions jansénistes au XVIIIe siècle: le mal et sa connaissance* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1987), 250–253.

[61] Samuel-Auguste Tissot, Johann Georg Zimmermann, *Correspondance 1754–1797*, ed. Antoinette Emch-Dériaz (Geneva: Slatkine, 2007), 167–168.

[62] "Charles Marie de La Condamine to Samuel Auguste André David Tissot, Wednesday, 2 June 1762", access 15.01.2023, https://www-e-enlightenment-com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/item/rousjeVF0110105a1c.

[63] The venerable appellant theologian Duguet launched one of the earliest public attacks against the Saint-Médard convulsions--and the "epidemic" interpretation of them – when he declared in 1732: "I regard them as maladies, or as a contagious disorder of the imagination, or as a bad imitation of involuntary convulsions through a very unworthy artifice"; Jacques-Joseph Duguet, *Lettres sur divers sujets de morale et de piété*, vol. 5 (Paris: Guillaume Cavelier 1735), 228.

[64] [François-Hyacinthe De Lan], *Réponse à l'écrit intitulé 'Plan général de l'oeuvre des convulsions* (n.p., 1733); [Louis de Bonnaire], *Examen critique, physique, et théologique des convulsions, et des caractères divins que l'on croit voir dans les ac-*

most influential of their tracts, *Le Naturalisme des convulsions* (1733), Hecquet emphasized that there was nothing more natural to the human body than convulsions, "especially in those whose nervous system is more tender, sensitive, or easy to shake, whether by nature, accident, disease, or some weakening of the nerves created by study, mental exertion, or meditation"[65]. The spasmodic fits of Convulsionaries had, he contended, spread contagiously for various reasons: hysteria or the vapors, which he defined as a disorder of the entrails that weakened the nerves and affected both sexes, but girls and women in particular (vol. 1, 7); effluvia; erotic desire; and the human proclivity for imitation (vol. 1, 28–39).[66] Impressionable people were easily enthused by the example of so many "supposedly miraculous convulsions", and by the praise that Convulsionaries received from "respectable people of both sexes and all conditions"; this inflamed their imaginations and made them want to see themselves as miraculously convulsionary (vol. 1, 10, 14–15).[67] Hecquet attributed the willingness of women to be trampled and beaten by men to sexual attraction (vol. 1, 160–161) and to the effects of "overly rigorous fasting and excessive vigils", which tended to trigger the vapors (vol. 3, 48). The Convulsionaries, he declared, resembled earlier "hysterical-enthusiastic" groups like the Camisards, millenarian Protestants in

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cidents des Convulsionnaires (n.p., 1733); Hecquet, *Le naturalisme des convulsions*, vol. 3 (Soleure: chez Andreas Gymnicus, 1733). On these works, see Maire, *De la cause*, 339–344 and "Les querelles jansénistes de la décennie 1730–1740", in: *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie*, access 15.01.2023, http://journals.openedition.org/rde/297; and Alain Sandrier *Les Lumières du miracle* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015), 70–80.

[65] Hecquet, *Le naturalisme*, vol. 1, 2. All further references to this work are made in the body of the article.

[66] Hecquet, who had been the last physician to Port-Royal-des-Champs before its destruction believed in the appellant miracle of Anne la Fosse but wrote several works in the 1730s to refute those of the Convulsionary movement (Maire, *De la cause*, 339, 341). See L.W.B. Brockliss, "The Medico-Religious Universe of an Early Eighteenth-Century Parisian Doctor: The Case of Philippe Hecquet", in: *The Medical Revolution of the Seventeenth Century*, eds. Richard French, Andrew Wear (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 191–221. For analysis of the works that Hecquet devoted to the convulsionary movement from 1733 to 1736, see Jan Goldstein, "'Moral Contagion': A Professional Ideology of Medicine and Psychiatry in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century France", in: *Professions and the French State, 1700–1900*, ed. Gerald L. Geison (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 181–222.

[67] Speaking in similar terms, De Lan accused pro-convulsionists of churning out texts designed "to entice people into wanting to have convulsions"; *Réponse à l'écrit*, 1–2.

the Cévennes who experienced convulsive religious enthusiasm a few decades before the Pâris cult (vol. 1, 106).[68] He also aligned their conduct with examples specific to convents: the diabolically possessed nuns of seventeenth-century Loudun (vol. 1, 145–148); the contagious, acrobatic erotomania that once affected residents of a Flemish convent (vol. 1, 94–95); an eruption of convulsive, barking hiccups among nuns in New France in 1695 (vol. 2, 113–116); and the outbreak of imitative meowing that had overtaken a large Parisian convent, an anecdote which Hecquet attributed to the Port-Royal luminary Pierre Nicole (vol. 2, 30–32). Hecquet clearly selected these spicy stories for polemical reasons: his aim was not to make a statement about religious claustration, per se, but to impugn the Convulsionaries by associating them with bizarre examples of nuns gone wild.

Hecquet was particularly incensed by the faith-healing claims and "indecent" behavior of some of the people who gained fame as Convulsionaries, like the middle-aged working-class woman Charlotte La Porte, who claimed to accomplish miraculous healing by sucking on scrofulous wounds.[69] However, he also reproached the "skilled Theologians" who orchestrated the movement for insistently reading spiritual meaning into the strange, indecent figures acted out by the Convulsionaries (*Le naturalisme,* vol. 1, 12). For example, he castigated the author of the *Essai d'un Plan général de l'oeuvre des convulsions* (1733) for encouraging the "fanaticism" of Convulsionaries through "sublime" divinizing interpretations of their figuring or symbolic enactments (I, 136–137); and he devoted several pages of Parts 2 and 3 of the *Naturalisme des convulsions* to denouncing the "shameful" practices dubbed *secours* (vol. 3, 8). In the ultimate, three-volume version of this work, which Hecquet augmented over the course of 1733, he lamented the excesses to which the "impure *convulsionnat*" had gone in their efforts to combat the "Naturalist" (that is, the author of this work) by making ever more extreme claims for the Work of the Convulsions (vol. 3, 11), like seeing miracles in phenomena like the insensibility or apathy which Convulsionaries displayed while undergoing *grands secours* (vol 1, 125–126; vol. 2, 14). Far from being mi-

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[68] On the Camisards and their descendants the "French prophets", see W. Gregory Monahan, *Let God Arise: The War and Rebellion of the* Camisards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), and Lionel Laborie, *Enlightening Enthusiasm: Prophecy and Religious Experience in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2015).

[69] Philippe Hecquet, *Lettre sur la convulsionnaire en extase ou la vaporeuse en rêve* ([s.l.]: [s.n.], 1736) and *La Suceuse convulsionnaire, ou La Psylle miraculeuse* ([s.l.]: [s.n.], 1736).

raculous, those states were due to the melancholic humor typical of ecstatics, a category that, in Hecquet's estimation, included men of letters who applied their minds so completely to a certain idea that they lost all awareness of their bodies. Here, he cited the historical examples of the sixteenth-century Italian poet Torquato Tasso, whose "poetic ardor" bordered on madness, and the mathematician Jerome Cardan, who could make himself insensitive to gout when he was intent on completing an intellectual project (vol, 1, 119–121). He also referred with greater insistence to the possibility that fakery or stagecraft was the underlying cause of these so-called supernatural operations (vol. 2, 17). At the end of his 1736 pamphlet *Le naturalisme des quatre requêtes*, he suggested that the best remedy for the Convulsionaries' extreme religious behavior was to make them the object of mocking public spectacle.[70]

In short, whereas proponents of the Convulsionary movement viewed it as a sacred drama, Hecquet declared it to be a risible but nonetheless dangerous farce. Continuing a discursive tradition created by theologians and physicians in the previous century, he pathologized this group's ecstatic behavior and attributed it to physical, psychological, and social causes, rather than to genuine religious revelation.[71]

Zimmermann and Tissot on the dangers of contemplative seclusion

Decades later, the Swiss physicians Zimmermann and Tissot reiterated some of Hecquet's examples of psychic disorders tied to isolation and retreat from civil society. They also built on the analogies he had made between two sorts of insalubrious contemplative absorption, describing

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[70] Drawing on the *Letter concerning Enthusiasm* (1708), where Lord Shaftesbury [Anthony Ashley Cooper] had proposed the "Bartl'emy Fair Method" for dealing with enthusiasts like the French Protestants, Hecquet remarked: The English were successful in arresting a [moral] contagion that was overtaking the common people. They had marionettes at the [Bartholomew] fair act out the scenes of fanaticism of the [refugees from] the Cevennes. A worthy subject for the Saint-Germain Fair [in Paris]! Thus will end the triumph of convulsionism and its miraculous operations"; *Le naturalisme des quatre requêtes*, cited and translated in Jan Goldstein, "Enthusiasm or Imagination? Eighteenth-century Smear Words in Comparative National Context", in: *Enthusiasm and Enlightenment in Europe* (Pasadena: Huntington Library Press, 1998), 45.

[71] See Michael Heyd, *Be Sober and Reasonable: The Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1995).

the seclusion it entailed as a risk not just for the religiously devout but also for scholars who closed themselves off in their studies. Concern over the latter group was central to the syndrome known as "diseases of the learned", which enjoyed a peculiar popularity during the eighteenth century, and to which both authors made important contributions.[72] What Zimmermann and Tissot pathologized when they discussed these disorders was not loneliness, understood as the psychological experience of being lonely; rather, it was solitude, conceived as a voluntary or involuntary withdrawal from social commerce.

Zimmermann is largely known today for his book on solitude, *Über die Einsamkeit*, published in 1755–1756 and then expanded in 1784–1785.[73] This book's first French translation, by J-B. Mercier, appeared in 1788 under the title *La solitude considérée relativement à l'esprit et au coeur*. This was the source of the most popular English-language translation, published in 1791: *Solitude considered with respect to its influence upon the mind and the heart*.[74] As Frederick H. Wilkens emphasizes, this was a flawed version of Zimmermann's *Solitude* because it was based on the French adaptation of Mercier, who "confined himself to the portion treating the advantages of solitude" and deliberately omitted the parts of the original German work that addressed its disadvantages.[75] Mercier explained the reason for that omission in his translator's preface: he wanted to avoid

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[72] See Anne C. Vila, "Medicine and the Cult of the Thinker, 1750–89", in: Anne C. Vila, *Suffering Scholars*: *Pathologies of the Intellectual in Enlightenment France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 20–45.

[73] Hamilton Beck notes that Zimmermann's monumental, four-volume work *Über die Einsamkeit* "established his reputation as a philosophizing doctor and brought him into personal contact or correspondence with many of the luminaries of his age, including Catherine the Great, who knighted him"; it also led him to become "a favorite doctor of the nobility"; entry on J.G. Zimmermann, *The Bloomsbury Dictionary of Eighteenth-Century German Philosophers*, ed. Heiner F. Klemme, Manfred Kuehn (London–New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 880. See also David Vincent's discussion of Zimmermann in the introduction to *A History of Solitude* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2020), 1–30; Gloria Flaherty, *Shamanism and the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 100–103; Alberti, *A biography*, 22.

[74] Johann Georg Zimmerman, *Solitude considered with respect to its influence upon the mind and the heart: written originally in German by M. Zimmermann. Translated from the French of J. B. Mercier,* transl. J.B. Mercier (London: C. Dilly, 1791). The 1791 English translation features on its cover a flowery excerpt from La Fontaine's fable "Le songe d'un habitant du Mogol" praising the sweetness of solitude.

[75] Frederick H. Wilkens, "Early Influence of German Literature in America", *American Germanica* 3(1) (1899): 149–150.

shocking French readers by exposing them to Zimmermann's lengthy polemic against monastic solitude.[76] The second French translation was the more complete and faithful rendering produced by A.-J.-L. Jourdan in 1825, whose title conveyed the ambivalence of Zimmermann's views on solitude: *De la solitude, des causes qui en font naître le goût, de ses inconvenénients, de ses avantages et de son influence sur les passions*. A corrective English translation appeared in 1798, entitled *Solitude considered with respect to its dangerous influence upon the mind and heart*. However, Mercier's translation, or English translations based on it, were the most widely reprinted versions of Zimmermann's *Solitude* during the nineteenth century, when its admirers included the Scottish poet and novelist James Hogg, the American essayist Henry David Thoreau, and landscape architect Frederick Olmsted.[77] It seems likely, given this translation history, that some of those fans did not read Zimmermann's intertwined warnings about studious and religious seclusion, because those had appeared in the parts of the book omitted by Mercier.

Zimmermann did, of course, note the therapeutic value of certain forms of solitude;[78] however, he was clearly intent in *Solitude* on pointing out the darker side of contemplative life as some pursued it. In the chapter devoted to the "mischievous influence" of solitude in some circumstances, Zimmerman commented: "There are many scholars who live absolutely alone [...] and who find themselves out of their element when they leave the study. Their mode of life is like that which one leads in cloisters, and that is why there is something monastic in their

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[76] See Mercier's preface to his translation of Zimmermann, *La solitude considerée relativement à l'esprit et au coeur* (Paris: Leroy, 1788), 11, and the explanation provided by Xavier Marmier in the introduction to his translation, *La solitude par Zimmermann* (Paris: Charpentier, 1845), xxxvi.

[77] See Gillian Hughes, "Robert Wringhim's Solitude", in: *James Hogg and the Literary Marketplace: Scottish Romanticism and the Working-Class Author*, ed. Sharon Alker, Holly Faith Nelson (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 71–80; Grant Loomis, "Thoreau and Zimmermann", *The New England Quarterly* 10 (1937): 789–792; and Elizabeth Stevenson, *Park Maker: A Life of Frederick Law Olmsted* (New Brunswick–London: Transaction Publishers, 1977), 27.

[78] Andreas Rydberg, "Johann Georg Zimmermann's Therapeutics of Solitude in the German Enlightenment", *Emotions: History, Culture, Society* 5(2) (2021): 259–278. Moreover, the legacy of Zimmermann's theories within medicine largely emphasized solitude's benefits more than its dangers: see Julien-Joseph Virey, "Solitude", *Dictionnaire des sciences médicales*, vol. 51 (Paris: Panckoucke, 1821), 551–562.

manners".[79] While recognizing the benefits of a retired life for some "men of studious and scholastic habits",[80] he warned that only those who possess great force of mind could withstand the ill effects of complete retreat:

> We must allow that there are certain cases in which Solitude can scarcely fail to produce a tribe of prejudices and absurdities; nay, even to engender some vices. It cannot be otherwise than detrimental to the peace, ease, and temper of him, who without the strong and steady impulse of a great passion, shuts himself up in a seclusion, where, day and night, he chains his reluctant mind to the contemplation of some uninteresting and ungrateful subject. If it will sometimes contract the mind, and harden the manners, it will not unfrequently contaminate the morals […] When we scrutinize its calamitous operation in the cloister and the desert, we shall revolt with horror from the lamentable and hateful spectacle; and acknowledge ourselves fully persuaded, that, if the proper condition of man does not consist in a promiscuous and dissipated commerce with the world, still less does he fulfil the duties of his station, by a savage and stubborn renunciation of their society.[81]

Only those impelled by a noble intellectual passion could, in his estimation, withstand the unfortunate moral effects of sustained contemplative seclusion: the shrinking of the mind, hardening of manners, and corruption of morals. The cloister, in this lamentable scenario, was the metaphorical equivalent of the desert, an uncivil space incompatible with the "proper condition of man".

Interestingly, in the next chapter, "The Ill Effects of Solitude on the Imagination", Zimmermann reflected at length on fanaticism, one of the major banes of thinkers associated with the French Enlightenment.[82] In the early modern period, fanaticism was a notion tied specifically

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[79] Johann Georg Zimmermann, *De la solitude, des causes qui en font naître le gout, de ses inconvénients, de ses avantages, et de son influence sur les passions, l'imagination l'esprit et le cœur*, transl. A. J. L. Jourdan, nouvelle éd. (Paris: J.-B. Baillière, 1840), 95. Jourdan's rendering is more forceful on this point than the corrective 1798 English translation, *Solitude considered with respect to its dangerous influence upon the mind and heart. Selected and translated from the original German of M. Zimmerman. Being a sequel to the former English translation* (London: C. Dilly, 1798), 66–67.

[80] Zimmermann, Jourdan translation, *De la solitude*, 66.

[81] Zimmermann, *Solitude considered* (Dilly, 1791), 87–88; Zimmermann, Jourdan translation, *De la solitude*, 94.

[82] See, for example, Alexandre Deleyre, "FANATISME", in: *Encyclopédie* 6: 393–340; Voltaire, "Fanatisme", *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764), in: *OEuvres complètes de Voltaire / Complete works of Voltaire*, vol. 36 (Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1968–2022), 105–111. Philippe Buc discusses Voltaire's article in *Holy War, Mar-*

to Christian dissenters suffering from a theologically driven pathology, a blind zeal for a particular religion or doctrine that spread contagiously within a population of like-minded enthusiasts.[83] As Zimmermann described it, fanaticism was fostered by the "despotic dominion" which the imagination gained over the other mental faculties in the uniformity and quiet of monastic seclusion.[84] The power of the imagination was, he contended, stronger in women, "as their feelings are keener and more exquisite […] than those of men", which made them more susceptible to delusions caused by the "injurious influence of solitude". To illustrate that effect, he cited a case he had read "in a medical writer of considerable merit" of epidemic, cat-like mewing "in a large French convent of Nuns"; he also cited the case, reported by Cardan, of an "infectious" folly of biting nuns that had spread through cloisters in fifteenth-century Germany (102–103).[85] Although he did not name the "medical writer of

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tyrdom, and Terror: Christianity, Violence, and the West (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 112–115.

[83] James Renton, "The Figure of the Fanatic: A Rebel against Christian Sovereignty", *Ethnic and Racial Studie*s 41(12) (2018): 21–68.

[84] Zimmerman, *Solitude considered* (1791), 101.

[85] Dr. Justus Friedrich Carl Hecker cited Zimmermann at length on this point in the "hysteria" section of the part of his discussion of dancing mania in *The Epidemics of the Middle Ages* (original German version 1832): "The imaginations of women are always more excitable than those of men, and they are therefore susceptible of every folly when they lead a life of strict seclusion, and their thoughts are constantly turned inwards upon themselves. Hence in orphan asylums, hospitals, and convents, the nervous disorder of one female so easily and quickly becomes the disorder of all. I have read in a good medical work that a nun, in a very large convent in France, began to mew like a cat; shortly afterwards other nuns also mewed. At last all the nuns mewed together every day at a certain time for several hours together. The whole surrounding Christian neighbourhood heard, with equal chagrin and astonishment, this daily cat-concert, which did not cease until all the nuns were informed that a company of soldiers were placed by the police before the entrance of the convent, and that they were provided with rods, and would continue whipping them until they promised not to mew any more. But of all the epidemics of females which I myself have seen in Germany, or of which the history is known to me, the most remarkable is the celebrated Convent-epidemic of the fifteenth century, which Cardan describes, and which peculiarly proves what I would here enforce. A nun in a German nunnery fell to biting all her companions. In the course of a short time all the nuns of this convent began biting each other. The news of this infatuation among the nuns soon spread, and it now passed from convent to convent, throughout a great part of Germany, principally Saxony and Brandenburg. It afterwards visited the nunneries of Holland, and at last the nuns had the biting mania even as far as Rome. Zimmermann on Solitude, vol. 2. (Leipsig. 1784)

considerable merit" from whom he drew the first of those cases, Zimmermann likely took it from Hecquet's *Naturalisme des convulsions*.

Zimmermann reiterated those warnings in *Von der Erfahrung in der Arzneykunst*, or *Treatise on Experience in Physic*, first published in German in 1763 and quickly translated into French and English. There, he declared that "all profound meditation, whether in science or religion, is hurtful to health".[86] After evoking poets who had become the victims of their artistic enthusiasm, he turned to patients who had been "devoted from their earliest life to a mode of life for which man certainly is not intended" and who, obsessed with the idea of a "pretended spiritual love", had become "hypochondriacal, hysterical, stupid, and even maniac".[87] The results of excessive religious devotion were sometimes fatal, as he had observed in a nun he had treated: "One patient after raving with this love, and burning with an inward fire, was sometimes attacked with the most painful spasms, and sometimes with stupor, till at length she spit blood, became blind, dumb, and soon after died".[88] Almost as dire were the historical cases of excessive intellectual meditation he cited: his list ranged from Archimedes to Isaac Newton, and many of his examples had fallen into stupor or debilitating melancholy because their minds had become dangerously absorbed by a single thought.[89]

Tissot presented similar ideas about the health effects of spending too much time in private contemplation in his best-selling book *De la santé des gens de lettres* (1768; definitive edition 1775), where he drew liberally on Zimmermann's earlier writings on the subject. His basic physiological thesis was that prolonged mental application "impresses too strong an action upon the brain" and acts like a "ligature" applied to all the nerves at once, thereby causing catastrophic effects throughout the organism.[90] Although Tissot wrote this book mainly as a health manual for scholars, he also used the case of a religiously devout woman to illustrate the harmful effects of excessive meditation. This patient had been of sound mind up to the age of twenty-five, but she then joined the Moravian sect and got so obsessed with the idea of loving Jesus Christ that she became an imbecile – uttering nothing but "Jesus, my sweet

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cited in Justus Friedrich Carl Hecker, *The Epidemics of the Middle Ages*, transl. B. G. Babington (London: George Woodfall and Son, 1844), 127.

[86] Johann Georg Zimmermann, *A Treatise on Experience in Physic*, vol. 2 (London: J. Wilkie, 1778), 309.

[87] Ibidem, 306–308.

[88] Ibidem, 308.

[89] Ibidem, 310.

[90] Tissot, *De la santé*, 80.

lamb" for the six months that Tissot spent visiting her daily.[91] A similar fixity of mind haunted the many famous thinkers whom he evoked throughout the book. His advice *to gens de lettres* was to engage in study moderately, eat prudently, and venture out of their studies often enough to give their bodies some exercise.[92] At bottom, it all came down to sobriety, broadly construed: intellectuals had to learn to control their extraordinary appetites for knowledge-seeking and resist the lure of complete contemplative retreat. Citing Cicero, he declared: "Men were created to be men; their mutual commerce has advantages that one cannot abandon with impunity, and it has rightly been observed that solitude leads to languor. Nothing in the world contributes more to health than the gaiety which society animates and which retreat kills".[93]

Tissot returned to these subjects in his magnum opus, the *Traité des nerfs et de leurs maladies* (1778–1780). In "Des effets de la tension de l'âme, et de l'imagination", part of a long chapter in volume 2 on the moral causes of nervous ailments, he intermingled secular and religious examples to show that long-sustained meditation is one of the activities that "most greatly destroys" the nervous system.[94] These included a case reported by Pechlin of a woman who had gone into convulsions after a few hours of attentive reading; Galen's account of a "grammarian who had an epileptic fit every time he meditated deeply or taught with intensity"; Dr. Mead's case of a 28-year-old woman who had succumbed, fitfully, to "religious madness"; and the "very well confirmed" case, reported by Dr. Philippe Hecquet, of a man of letters who, when he thought intensely, fell into a trance, started convulsing, and lost all feeling.[95] Tissot also cited Hecquet when evoking the cases of Archimedes and the mathematician François Viète, both of whom became so deeply absorbed in meditation that they entered a state of sensory oblivion.[96]

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[91] In 1775, Tissot appended to this anecdote a footnote citing a remark by his English translator James Kirkpatrick about the upsurge in suicides tied to the "fanaticism of sects" in England; Tissot, *De la santé*, 83–84.

[92] Ibidem, 125–128.

[93] Ibidem, 108.

[94] Samuel-Auguste Tissot, *Traité des nerfs et de leurs maladies, par M. Tissot*, vol. 2, part I (Paris: Barrois, 1779), 285.

[95] Ibidem, 287–310.

[96] Ibidem, 313; Archimedes and Viète were often cited in tandem by eighteenth-century physicians and moralists to illustrate the dangerous detachment of mind from body triggered by excessive mental exertion; see Vila, *Suffering Scholars*, 58. Tissot also aligned zealous thinkers and the religiously devout in chapter XXI of the *Traité des nerfs*, which pertained to catalepsy, ecstasy, and "anesthesia" or insensitivity to pain – conditions for which the Convulsionar-

Tissot combined these cases with stories of collective convulsive nervous illness, starting with an epidemic of convulsive hiccups observed in New France in 1698 and Nicole's account of a "fit of vapors" that had spread through a large community of nuns, whose continuous mewing caused quite a scandal; he attributed these historical cases very precisely to Hecquet's *Naturalisme des convulsions*.[97] He also cited Herman Boerhaave's famous case of the contagious convulsions that had overtaken many of the young people living in a Harlem house of charity; the story recounted by Plutarch (and cited by Hecquet) of the "epidemic" madness that suddenly afflicted the women of Miletus, all of whom were seized with a desire to commit suicide;[98] and the possessed nuns of Loudun.[99] Such outbreaks were, in his view, most extreme among religious enthusiasts, whom he described as weak-minded people with ardent imaginations who became the dupes of their credulity or misplaced confidence in a persuasive figure (310). This, Tissot maintained, was the root cause of the Jansenist Convulsionary movement. Echoing the remarks he had made about it in 1760 in a private letter to Zimmermann, he commented: "By combining these possible effects of an exalted imagination with what is made possible by cunning, vanity, and interest, one can easily explain these so-called miracles produced by cult mentality [*esprit de secte*], which for the past fifty years have scandalized all sensible people, and amused the jeerers [*rieurs*], not simply in Paris, the theater of the farce, but in all of Europe" (314).

Tissot thereby joined Hecquet in judging the Convulsionary movement to be something of a travesty. However, writing fifty years after the events that founded this movement in the cemetery of Saint-Médard, he also worried about its disturbing endurance. For him, the Convulsionaries embodied various ills: fixity of mind, excessive separation from civil society, cunning on the part of the sect's leaders, and a form of fanaticism that was continuing to unfold in real time. It is worth noting that clandestine provincial branches of the Convulsionaries were active in the Lyon area (closer than Paris to Tissot's home city of Lausanne) from the 1770s on, led initially by Michel Pinel, a defrocked Oratorian,

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ies would regularly serve as a point of reference in nineteenth-century French medical discourse. This and related chapters were published separately as *Traité des nerfs et de leurs maladies: de la catalepsie, de l'extase, de l'anœsthesie, de la migraine, et des maladies du cerveau* (Geneva: Fr. Grasset, 1785).

[97] Ibidem, 300 n. p, 301 n. q.

[98] Ibidem, 302–304; Hecquet, *Le naturalisme des convulsions*, vol. 2, 180.

[99] Tissot, *Traité des nerfs,* vol. 2, 312–313.

and then by the brothers Claude et François Bonjour, who carried out crucifixions.[100]

The reputation of the Jansenist Convulsionaries as a strange but distinct type of contemplative had a long afterlife. It was perpetuated in intriguing ways in the *Dictionnaire des sciences médicales* (1812–1822). In the article "Contemplatif" (1813) of that influential dictionary, Antoine-François Jenin de Montègre reiterated the comparison of religious and secular contemplatives which had been popularized by Zimmermann, Tissot, and Hecquet – while also contributed to the emerging (and pejorative) expansion of the term "convulsionary" to include not just adepts of the Saint-Médard cult, but also those who underwent the magnetization treatments popularized by Franz Anton Mesmer starting in the 1780s. Montègre also wrote the article "Convulsionnaire" for this dictionary, which was largely a denunciation of mesmerism for which he instrumentalized the Jansenist Convulsionaries.[101]

Up to the present day, theorists have used the Jansenist Convulsionaries as touchstones to diagnose all sorts of phenomena, including mesmerism, monomania, hysteria, hypnotic suggestion, spirit possession, the dispossession of the self in states of ecstasy, and the eruptions of collective irrationality that have periodically marked human history.[102] Those retrospective diagnoses have dwelt persistently on the "mischievous" effects of solitude and reclusion – but not in ways that can be mapped onto modern-day issues of personal loneliness.

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[100] See Jean-Pierre Chantin, *De sectes en hérésies: Étapes d'une réflexion sur la dissidence religieuse à travers les âges.* New edition [online]. Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2018 (generated 26.01.2023), https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pul.3267.

[101] Antoine-François Jenin de Montègre, "Contemplatif", in : *Dictionnaire des sciences médicales*, vol. 6 (Paris: Panckoucke, 1813), 80–90; "Contemplation", DSM vol. 6, 91–96; "Convulsionnaire", DSM vol. 6, 210–238.

[102] On "retrospective medicine" as applied to the Convulsionaries and related groups, see Kélina Gotman, *Choreomania: Dance and Disorder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 139–167.

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Summary

This article examines various meanings of solitude in eighteenth-century Europe, with emphasis on French thought and culture. Part 1 is a survey of literary representations of solitude and contemplation. Part II is devoted to the Jansenist *convulsionnaires,* Catholic dissidents who took part in a larger appeal against the repressive *Unigenitus* Bull of 1713. Although the convulsionary movement sought to attract crowds and publicity, it was also grounded in a Jansenist tradition of spiritual retreat that was emulated by the movement's de facto patron saint, the appellant deacon François de Pâris. Part III features writings by Zimmermann and Tissot, who medicalized solitude for three reasons: belief in the ethos of sociability, concern over the pathogenic powers of the imagination, and suspicion towards the passions that drove some people to fix their minds exclusively on certain ideas. To show solitude's harmful consequences for those who spent too much time absorbed in ideas, they made intriguing connections between secular knowledge-seekers and the religiously devout. The Jansenist *convulsionnaires* were one of the dangerously zealous groups whom they cited to illustrate their arguments.

Keywords: Contemplation, Convulsionaries, fanaticism, melancholy, reclusion, retreat, solitude