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The Art of Solitude from Modernism to Postmodernism and Beyond

Introduction

This article presents a philosophical anthropology of solitude, through an account of the art, literature and music of, around, and beyond Modernism and Postmodernism.[1] It is part of longer projects on the arts and the cultural history of solitude,[2] but the focus on Modernism and Postmodern is an attempt to demonstrate that these artistic movements present a culmination and ultimately a disintegration of the alienated individualist loneliness that grew out of European and North American industrialisation and colonisation, and in turn influenced a wide range of twentieth century philosophy such as that of Wittgenstein, Sartre, and Buber. That is, Modernism and Postmodernism are driven by their artistic account of what they describe as a fundamentally lonely world.

[1] Some elements of the text are derived from and are similar to elements of a book text currently published by Bloomsbury publishers: Julian Stern, *The Art, Literature and Music of Solitude* (London: Bloomsbury, 2024).

[2] Ibidem; Julian Stern, "The Art, Music and Literature of Solitude. Chapter 7", in: *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Solitude, Silence and Loneliness*, ed. Julian Stern et al. (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 89–103.

Presenting "the modern" and its artistic form in Modernism as the loss of the personal, a confident utopianism, and an obsession with death, the argument moves on to the decline of the modern and emergence of Postmodernism and its critics. Sitting to the side of Modernism and Postmodernism were less "on-trend" artists, from Arnold Bennett and Vaughan Williams to Philip Larkin, who by their very "outsider" status further illustrate the significance of Modernist solitudes, and who also point the way to how solitude might be "recovered" from its lonely Modernist and Postmodernist forms. The job of recovery, however, is started but remains incomplete.

The modern

This article was first drafted in 2022, the centenary of "ground zero" for Modernism. 1922 saw the publication of Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Woolf's *Jacob's Room* and Scott Fitzgerald's *Tales of the Jazz Age*.[3] Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* came out in the same year,[4] with paintings by Klee, Miró, Léger and Picabia, and Picasso's *Four Bathers*. Cocteau's *Antigone* was performed with sets by Picasso and music by Honegger, and Walton's *Façade* was performed with Sitwell's poems.[5] The Great War was over, and although it was said at the time that this was the war to end wars, an industrialised and, thanks to European colonialism, globalised conflict, this may have been a "decadent" time for some, but it was hardly settled. 1922 saw hyper-inflation in Germany, and the election of the fascist Mussolini in Italy, bad omens both – with growing inflation and a neo-fascist-influenced government in Italy evident during Modernism's centenary. Was Modernism a high point or a sign of terrors to come? No doubt it was both. And solitude was at its heart. If it had a heart.

What made Modernism distinctive? It marked itself out from what was "old", but every age does that. It was a generational shift, but again that is true of every generation. The OED defines it as "[a]ny of various

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[3] James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Penguin, 2000 [1920, 1922]); Thomas Stearns Eliot, *The Poems of T S Eliot: Volume I: Collected and Uncollected poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), 53–71; Francis Scott Fitzgerald, *Tales of the Jazz Age* (London: Harper, 2013 [1922]); Virginia Woolf, *Jacob's Room* (London: Vintage, 2022 [1922]).

[4] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961 [1922]).

[5] Tom McCarthy, in: *That Year Again: Writing About 1922 from the London Review of Books*, ed. Tom McCarthy (London: London Review of Books, 2022), 1.

movements in art, architecture, literature, etc., generally characterized by a deliberate break with classical and traditional forms or methods of expression", which reflects simply this "break".[6] Historically, after more-or-less a century of rapid industrialisation, urbanisation, and globalisation, the Great War was a kind of culmination, bringing much of the world together, albeit in bloodshed. Artists were making sense of this brave new world, or just as often, showing it to be nonsense. Eliot wrote of *Cousin Nancy* that "her aunts were not quite sure what they felt about it, / But they knew that is was modern".[7] The older generation knew the younger generation was modern. This gives an important clue to Modernism: it was self-conscious of its modernity and was self-consciously reacting against the last vestiges of the old. Every war gives people a sense of new times, even if, from a distance, it does not always look so new. The Great War gave an even greater sense of new times, and so the modern was capitalised into Modernism.

The loss of the personal in utopia and death: a lonely world

In other writing,[8] I argue that alienation developed in various ways and was, through the arts, developed in various *emotional* ways, notably the emotion known as *loneliness* that was developed and articulated in new forms. Modernism was in many ways the final outcome or culmination of both alienation and loneliness. This started with a loss of the personal in innovative art forms. The paintings of Mondrian, for example, were often of blocks of colour in a grid. The personal as representational was supressed. These were utopian innovations, utopian in seeing themselves as "final solutions" to artistic expression. It was Wittgenstein's disturbing boast that his *Tractatus* was philosophy's "final solution".[9] But

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[6] 'Modernism' in: "Oxford English Dictionary", access 3.10.2023, http://www.oed.com and http://dictionary.oed.com/.

[7] Eliot, *The Poems*, 24; It was Eliot who was "blamed" for Modernism, as the "American modernism" that was "introduced by Mr T S Eliot, following Mr. Ezra Pound"; *Listener, 848:1, 23 November 1961* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1961).

[8] Julian Stern, "A Self Rejected: Childhood Loneliness and the Experience of Alienation. Chapter 4", in: *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Culture and Identity from Early Childhood to Early Adulthood: Perceptions and Implications*, ed. Wills Ruth et al. (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 49–59; Julian Stern, "The Art, Music and Literature".

[9] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 4.

alongside such depersonalised utopianism and innovation was an individualism that, in its artistic forms, rarely hid how problematic the (usually lonely) individual was. The characters in Picasso's *Tragedia* stand on a beach by the sea. It is an example of his "blue period", following the suicide of his friend Carles Casagemas (after Casagemas attempted to murder a mutual friend). In *Tragedia*, two adults, male and female, almost face each other, but both look down at the ground and both cross their arms. A boy stands to the side, looking across and down, with his hands held out, one palm-upward, one palm-forward. Their unconnectedness seems worse because they look so much like a family group. When children in my empirical research were asked to add thought bubbles to this picture, their responses were fascinating. Cary (aged 8) thought the woman felt "sad, lost and cold", whilst Carol (aged 8) thought "She is sad she is thinking of the past". The man is described similarly, with Rian (aged 8) suggesting "Why are we out here, it's so lonley?", and Annie (aged 7) suggesting "I am cold and I don't want to die", with Alfie (aged 8) indicating him as thinking simply "I want to live". There are some more "active" suggestions for the boy. Jeremy (aged 7) says "he is Trying To xPlane something", and Kadir (aged 8) says "It looks like he wants to tell the man something". Amina and Ophelia (both aged 7) give him the words "please help me papa carry me I am cold", and "I don't have a mother could she be our's?" The older Terri (aged 16) provides a similar range of ideas, describing the woman as "cold and empty craving company", the man as having "let his self go" and "looks insecure", whilst the child "wants to be loved".[10]

The "blue period" pictures of Picasso, like the art of Munch (notably *The Scream*, in its various forms), have become so familiar it is difficult to see their original shock value, presenting alienated tragic modern figures without any of the Romantic softening of tragedy. So there is a tension between Modernist utopianism – seen in the perfect-seeming structures of *Ulysses*, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, the Modernist architecture of Le Corbusier, or *Bauhaus* design – and Modernist end-times alienation of Picasso's "blue period", Munch's *The Scream*, or Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Yet the tension is present in each of these works. For all its stylistic perfections, *Ulysses* is also filled with unheroic and variously "impure" actions and thoughts. Joyce plays with readers' intellects and their taboos. Wittgenstein's "final solution" to all of philosophy is also a demonstration (or attempted proof) that philosophy has nothing to say about beau-

[10] All reported in: Julian Stern, *Loneliness and Solitude in Education: How to Value Individuality and Create an Enstatic School* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014), 157.

ty, morality or religion: on those, we must remain silent.[11] Le Corbusier was so utopian, in contrast, that the real buildings he designed were sometimes less important than the perfection of his architect's drawings. There is in many Modernist works a combination of style, wealth, corruption and death. It is elegantly portrayed in Fitzgerald's writings, for example. Meanwhile, Cocteau's *Antigone*, like that of Anouilh and Joyce's *Ulysses*, pretended to ancient authority whilst being thoroughly modern.[12] All in their own ways are expressive of loneliness and related sadnesses. *Ulysses* is a sociable enough novel but one with as much of a stream of loneliness running through it as a stream of consciousness.

(Dis)solving Modernism: silence in the face of loneliness

Sartre wrote elegantly of this kind of tension, the tensions between utopianism and loneliness in Modernism, in all his novels as well as – with a somewhat more upbeat if hardly jolly character – in his philosophy. "Is this what freedom is?" asks the protagonist in *Nausea*. "I am free; I haven't a single reason for living left". He is "[a]lone and free", yet "this freedom is rather like death".[13] The victory of the modern world of industry, of political freedom, and of social advance, is rather like death. Such is Modernism, at least when looked at through a solitudinous lens. Perhaps the final stage of all these final solutions was the most appalling of all the achievements of the modern world, the Final Solution attempted to what Hitler's government referred to as the Jewish problem. The second of the wars to end all wars was also the period of the second culmination of nineteenth century industrial, social and economic development. And, much as art became impossible in the wake of the Shoah, a final twist to Modernism saw it drop all its elements of utopianism to express all the lonely despair of the modern world. There is no better representative of this late-stage, almost post-mortem, lonely Modernism than Samuel Beckett. "But what matter whether I was born or not, have lived or not, am dead or merely dying, I shall go on doing as I have al-

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[11] Rée notes "the fact that ethical and religious attitudes fall outside the limits of articulate thought was not [for Wittgenstein] their weakness but their glory"; Jonathan Rée, "The Young Man One Hopes For: Wittgenstein's Family Letters: Corresponding with Ludwig, edited by Brian McGuinness, translated by Peter Winslow", *London Review of Books* 41(22) (2019): 8.

[12] Jean Cocteau, *Antigone* (Paris: Folioplus 2015 [1922]); Jean Anouilh, *Antigone* (London: Methuen, 1987 [1944]).

[13] Jean-Paule Sartre, *Nausea* (London: Penguin, 2000 [1938]), 223.

ways done, not knowing what it is I do, nor who I am, nor where I am, nor if I am".[14]

Asking what exactly Beckett meant by this, is missing (some of) the point. Joyce was setting puzzles for his readers and for the professors who would spend years analysing his texts. Joyce played games and created huge, arcane, systems. Beckett recognised Joyce's genius but did-not ever attempt the same "pure" Modernist utopian task. He was still a Modernist, though, in pushing even further with the alienation, loneliness, and loss of the personal. In his trilogy of novels, by the third one, the protagonist was eponymously *Unnamable*.[15] Sartre's comparison of freedom and death seems positively neat and tidy when set alongside Beckett's "nor if I am". Beckett's is the *experience* of angst, more than a *description* of it. Perhaps this relates to Beckett's own experience, especially his lifelong experience of panic attacks. "Since the age of 20, Beckett had suffered from anxiety attacks which set his heart racing in panic",[16] and this condition, "so ambiguously poised between body and mind" led Beckett to consult "both physicians and psychologists".[17] Beckett draws on Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*[18] to write of the "fetid heart" in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*. [19]

The angst, panic, and/or anxiety are Beckett's own, and infuse his literature. Seeking treatment from medical doctors and from psychoanalysts, he also sought mitigation in religion and philosophy. His main religious source, according to Wimbush was Quietism, his philosophical source Schopenhauer, and these are complementary approaches.[20] Quietism was a Catholic tradition (later rejected by the church) initiated by Molinos in the seventeenth century. It is a tradition suited to, but not exclusively for, solitaries. There are spiritual exercises that attempt to avoid becoming fixed models. Molinos wrote a book saying that following books could never help you achieve the highest levels of spirituality: "You enter the mystical science of the soul not by hearing or by the continuous reading of books, but by the liberal infusion of the divine

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[14] Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010 [1951, 1956]), 53.
[15] Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010 [1953, 1958]).
[16] Andy Wimbush, *Still: Samuel Beckett's Quietism* (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2020), 52.
[17] Ibidem, 53.
[18] Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (London: Penguin Classics, 2021 [1621–1651]).
[19] Wimbush, *Still*, 55.
[20] Ibidem, 24.

Spirit",[21] and though "the soul itself may learn through some book that treats of these matters", one of "the signs by which one may recognize […] vocation for contemplation […] [is that] the soul finds reading spiritual books to be tedious because they do not speak of the interior gentleness that the soul has in its interior without knowing".[22] What was most important – and gave the movement its name – was staying quiet in the face of temptation or enlightenment alike. Rather than *fighting* temptation and *straining* for enlightenment, one should be, quietly, and God may be close. Or not. It is easy to see how this influenced the Beckett of "nor if I am".[23]

Avoiding or mitigating panic through a quietist approach to life may have helped Beckett, and certainly influenced a great deal of his writing. Quietism was sidelined in Catholicism and also by many modern writers on religion and philosophy, as being more nihilist and "hopeless" than even the most angst-ridden writers.[24] Beckett went further than most Modernists and other artists since the seventeenth century in his search for something-other-than-panic. (It was a search without a conventional end-point, a kind of anti-search, not so much a "solution" to Modernist tensions as a "dissolution" of them.) He also drew on the similarly unconventional philosophy of Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer treated his own philosophy as theoretical and untied to practice. According to Berman: "there is little connection between it and any practice".[25] Yet the "practical" wisdom in Schopenhauer is evident across Beckett's work. "Every breath we draw fends off death, the persistent intruder with whom we struggle in his way at every moment, and then again at longer intervals, through every meal we eat, every sleep we take, every time we warm ourselves, etc.", Schopenhauer tells us, yet "[i]n the end, death must conquer, for we fell into his clutches through birth, and he plays only for a little while with his prey before he devours it".[26] This could be put directly into one of Beckett's plays or novels. Beckett therefore treats Schopenhauer's philosophy, like Molinos' spiritual guidance, as practical rather than as "theories" or as intellectual exercises. (Within contemporary philosophy, Beckett could have found some comfort, perhaps, in

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[21] Miguel de Molinos, *The Spiritual Guide* (New York: Paulist Press, 2010), 51.

[22] Ibidem, 60–61.

[23] Beckett, *Malone*, 53.

[24] William James was said to be one of the few modern writers other than Beckett who recognised a value in Quietism; Wimbush, *Still*, 29.

[25] Berman, "Introduction", in: Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea* (London: Everyman, 1995 [1818]), xviii.

[26] Schopenhauer, *The World*, 197.

the "new philosophy" of the personalist Rosenzweig, who advises philosophers to avoid reading his philosophy, and accuses them of suffering from "acute *apoplexia philosophica*".[27] Schopenhauer describes human mortality as the greatest gift: who would want to continue suffering for ever? "In *Cinderella*", Berman writes, the protagonists "live happily ever after, and the story ends", but "why is so little space given over to their happy life ever after?".[28] Schopenhauer answers that it would be incredible, even to children; for life is not about happiness or satisfaction, but about desiring, striving, longing, craving, and hence suffering.[29]

Postmodernism: all worlds are lonely

If Beckett did an excellent job of pushing Modernism to its individualist, lonely, limits, providing Modernism's obituary and *dissolving* as much as *resolving* its tensions, he also seemed, through his disconnected, absurdist, confused and "untidy" style, to give birth to Postmodernism. In *The Unnamable* his protagonist says "you must go on, I can't go on, you must go on, I'll go on", flip-flopping through moods with a ghoulish humour. "[I]f it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on",[30] he says, the final words of the book. This goes beyond Modernism to the overflowing ambiguity of Postmodernism. Blandly defined as simply that which follows Modernism, i.e. "[t]he state, condition, or period subsequent to that which is modern; spec. in architecture, the arts, literature, politics, etc., any of various styles, concepts, or points of view involving a conscious departure from modernism", Postmodernism is yet a movement "characterized by a rejection of ideology and theory in favour of a plurality of values and techniques".[31] The Postmodern attitude adds irony to scepticism, and has difficulty holding on to truth and reality, and definitely (as much as it is ever definite) gives up on utopianism. We move from a lonely world to all worlds – each person's world – being lonely. Beckett himself distances his work from the

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[27] Franz Rosenzweig, *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy: A View of World, Man, and God* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999 [1921]), 59.

[28] Berman; Ibidem, 28.

[29] Ibidem. 28,

[30] Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 134.

[31] 'Postmodernism', in: "Oxford English Dictionary", access: 3.10.2023, http://www.oed.com and http://dictionary.oed.com/.

more neat and complete genius work of Joyce or Kafka. They may have their fair share of alienation and misery, but this is placed in an artfully constructed coherent – even if terrifying (in Kafka's case) and/or lonely (in Joyce's case) – world. Beckett breaks with coherence, even though each of his novels and plays are complete and stand alongside any writing of the twentieth century. His odd attitude to theology and philosophy helps explain the odd position he holds in literature. Very well read, he is a "user" of theology and philosophy more than a theologian-philosopher, and he is attracted to theology and philosophy that can be "used" rather than "understood".

The Postmodernism that Beckett helped birth is hardly a neat category. By its nature in rejecting "grand narratives", metaphysics, and comprehensive theories, it is more a cluster that a movement, it is many worlds, not one. One of the artists associated with Postmodernism seemed to have had a similar way into the approach as Beckett's. That is Yayoi Kusama.[32] Like Beckett, she describes her art as, in part, a way to mitigate her anxiety and fear. Experiencing hallucinations from her troubled childhood onwards, these fed into her art. A characteristic feature is polka dots, with "infinity nets" of dots and nets, and visions of flower patterns. Hers is a solitude at least as extreme as that of Beckett, and her visions are self-obliterating in intention, an escape from suffering. Her installations, combining art and sculpture and music – combinations being features of Postmodernism – create almost-worlds, without obvious meaning. Organising "happenings", including one at the Church of Self-Obliteration in New York, broke taboos of the time, and helped establish her anti-establishment credentials. However, whereas some artists and others were happily anti-establishment, Kusama has always appeared to be genuinely estranged and isolated. Estranged from Japan for much of the middle of her life, estranged from the establishment, yet never wholly accepted by the anti-establishment. Self-estranged and often suicidal, Kusama has for many years of her later life protected herself in a hospital in Japan for those with mental health issues, leaving only to set up and visit her exhibitions.

Kusama's installation *Chandelier of Grief* involves being in a room with a chandelier and mirrors, vertical and horizontal, leaving the viewer to look into the depths and heights of grief and, finally, darkness. *Walking Piece* has a series of photographs of Kusama walking around New

[32] Yayoi Kusama, *Give Me Love* (New York: David Zwimmer, 2015); "Yayoi Kusama", access 3.10.2023, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/yayoi-kusama-8094; "Yayoi Kusama", access 3.10.2023, http://yayoi-kusama.jp/.

York, on her own and out of place and time, in a kimono and carrying a parasol. Each piece expresses feelings and emotions, and each avoids any clear theory or narrative. These are models of Postmodern solitude. Kusama also seems to share with Beckett a sense of humour in such anxious and despairing emotions. Not just the slight, ironic, humour of less substantial artists, but real laugh-out-loud humour – in Kusama's case, for example, posing on a bed of polka dot-covered phalluses; in Beckett's case, for example, recommending comic actors for his plays, with distinguished Beckett actors including Buster Keaton, Steve Martin and Robin Williams.

A contrast with these Postmodern despairing artists might be a composer often categorised as Postmodern, but who expresses a much more meditative and calm solitude. Arvo Pärt began his career drawing on the neoclassicism of major composers of the early twentieth century such as Prokofiev or Shostakovich, before moving on to the serialism of Modernists like Schoenburg.[33] Becoming politically unpopular and creatively blocked, he fell into a despairing silence. Pärt broke his silence through his exploration of medieval Gregorian chant, and through a meditative engagement with his strongly-held Christianity. What emerged was a minimalist approach that is not making an intellectual statement about music,[34] but expressing emotions of contemplation, ecstasy (going beyond the self), and perhaps enstasy (being comfortable within oneself). It is remarkable that this dour classical composer should become as popular as he has, but he is one of the most played composers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Pärt combines features of medieval church music with avant-garde techniques from the twentieth century, along with "conventional" classical elements. It is this bricolage of styles that qualifies him as Postmodern, although he might well be expelled from the club for his consistent expression of the Christian grand narrative. One of his best-known religious works is *Litany*, a setting of the liturgy of the ascetic, eremitic, fourth century John Chrysostom, previously set by Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov, and many others. However odd it is that a quiet, meditative and deeply serious classical composer, who assiduously avoids fashions in music, should end up so popular, Pärt has managed that. His expression of, and his music's evocation of, a quietude – the quietness that Beckett, one might say, never found – may be part of the reason for his popularity. The pop-

[33] "Arvo Pärt biography", access 3.10.2023, https://www.arvopart.ee/en/arvo-part/.

[34] Which might be said of: Conlon Nancarrow, *Studies for Player Piano* (Mainz, Germany: Wergo B000031W5A, 1999).

ularity of Pärt's music and its postsecular explicit religiosity and spirituality takes Pärt somewhat beyond Postmodernism, rather as Beckett's extreme version of Modernism pushed him, and art, beyond Modernism and into Postmodernism. But before moving on to post-Postmodernism, it is worth considering some of the contemporary critiques of, and alternatives to, both Modernism and Postmodernism.

Beyond Postmodernism

No approach to the arts is universal, however much textbooks like to characterise each period as exhibiting a single, singular, style. One of the central philosophers of the twentieth century, Martin Buber, managed in his philosophy to critique both Modernism and Postmodernism. Both solipsism and hyper-rationalism are evidenced in Modernism. Both were characterised by Buber as impersonal, as examples of *I-It* relationships, typical of industrialisation and of capitalism.[35] This is a direct critique of the ahistorical utopianism, as well as individualism of art such as *Robinson Crusoe* along with the twentieth century Modernist arts. *Robinson Crusoe*[36] has, incidentally, had an odd and multi-layered life, as did its author. Defoe's chameleon-like novel appeared well before the Romantic period, yet seems to express a heroic Romantic model of spiritually-significant solitude. In the mid-nineteenth century, Marx reframed the novel as a model of the capitalist economics of possessive individualism,[37] in his attack on such "Robinsonades".[38] Into the twentieth century, Crusoe could be seen – and is seen by Engelberg – as a *Modernist* novel.[39] Its utopian, individualist, scientistic structure (Crusoe is an arch-experimenter, and "lone-scientist", in developing his island life) suits this interpretation. But now, there are postcolonial antiracist critiques of the novel, along with exploration of its queer subtext, that push it on through Postmodernism and beyond. Buber and even Defoe, in different ways, go beyond Postmodernism.

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[35] Martin Buber, *I and Thou: Second Edition With a Postscript by the Author* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958).

[36] Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (London: Penguin, 2001 [1719]).

[37] Crawford Brough Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), title and *passim*.

[38] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973 [1858]), 83.

[39] Edward Engelberg, *Solitude and Its Ambiguities in Modernist Fiction* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 1–2.

The critique of Modernist, capitalist, *I-It* relationships is only half of Buber's philosophy, as *I-It* relationships are complemented by *I-Thou* relationships. Many people write about Buber as though he *only* valued *I-Thou* relationships, and as though all *I-Thou* relationships are entirely positive. Both ideas are incorrect. *I-Thou* relationships include people trying to kill each other, as in a duel rather than a mere play-fight.[40] He even talked of demonic *I-Thou* relationships.[41] And a life of only *I-Thou* relationships is just as false as one of only *I-It* relationships. The modern world (modern, not just Modernist) tended to separate *I-It* from *I-Thou* relationships. Institutions, modern bureaucratic systems of impersonal structures were *I-It* places; homes where people relaxed in protected emotionally-charged but unconnected beyond the walls were *I-Thou* places. "Institutions are 'outside', where all sorts of aims are pursued, where a man works, negotiates, bears influence, undertakes, concurs, organises, conducts business, officiates, preaches", he said, and "[f]eelings are 'within', where life is lived and man recovers from institutions", but "the separated *It* of institutions is an animated clod without soul, and the separated *I* of feelings an uneasily-fluttering soul-bird".[42] Modern institutions, then, tend to be robotic and golem-like (with "animated clods without souls" being the translator's version of the Hebrew "Golem"), modern homes are occupied by uneasily-fluttering soul-birds. "Neither of them knows man: institutions know only the specimen, feelings only the 'object'; neither knows the person, or mutual life".[43] If Buber can be seen as critiquing Modernism in *I-It* formations, he can equally well be seen as critiquing Postmodernism for its having fallen into a false emotionalism of feelings without historical, social and political contexts or significance. In this way, Buber critiques the solitudes of both Modernism and of Postmodernism.

Buber's own novel, *Gog and Magog*,[44] is a good expression of his "artistic" attitude of Modernism and Postmodernism as it was emerging. A story nominally set during the Napoleonic wars when a number of religious people thought the end of the world (and therefore the biblical prophecy of a battle between God and Magog) was close at hand,

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[40] Martin Buber, *Between Man and* Man (London: Routledge, 2002 [1965]), 241.

[41] Hilary Putnam, Saito Naoko, Paul Standish, "Hilary Putnam Interviewed by Naoko Saito and Paul Standish", *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 48 (2014): 15.

[42] Buber, *Between Man*, 62–63.

[43] Ibidem, 63.

[44] Martin Buber, *Gog and Magog: A Novel* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1999 [1941, 1945]).

the novel was written in 1941, at another end-of-the-world moment. The two protagonists are rabbis and both have visions. One asks not to have such visions:

> Jaacob Yitzchak was called the "Seer" because in truth he "saw". It was told that, when he was born, he had been able to see from world's end to world's end. Thus had man been destined to see when on that first day of Creation, ere yet a constellation was in the firmament, God's Word caused to arise the Original Light. […] The child who "saw", however, was so dismayed by the flood of evil which he beheld engulfing the earth, that he besought the gift to be taken from him and his vision to be restricted to a narrower span.[45]

The other rabbi exploits his visions and gains fame for it. In an earlier essay, *The Man of Today and the Jewish Bible*, Buber contrasts a "freethinking" view of history as "a promiscuous agglomeration of happenings" and "meaningless hodgepodge", with a "dogmatic view of history able to 'derive laws' from which we could "calculate future events".[46] Both, he says, miss out "the vital living" that is "constantly moving from decision to decision".[47] This contrast – related to his *I-It*/*I-Thou* contrast – helpfully explains the significance of is two visionary rabbis. History is not clearly seen, and neither is the future, but people live and make real decisions to act in the world. Buber makes an artistic case, both in the essay and in the novel, to avoid a Modernist clear view *and* a Postmodern hodgepodge. The "monumental" Modernism and the "antiquarian"/collector Postmodernism are both to be replaced by a "living", critical, activist history, or rather, philosophical anthropology.

Both protagonists in *Gog and Magog* are struggling with these views of history and society, and end up subjects with a "living" critical present. It is as though aspects of Modernism/*I-It* and aspects of Postmodernist/*I-Thou* philosophical anthropologies are themselves worked out through the novel. The protagonists, despite being intensely socially engaged, are isolated by their respective philosophies, and left lonely. This is a remarkable artistic achievement, prescient (visionary, one might dare say) in its critique of mid-twentieth century history (the war and the ongoing systematic persecution of Jews and others, even if the Shoah was not yet as clear as it later became), but also critiquing the loneliness of historical, social, religious, and artistic expres-

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[45] Ibidem, 4.

[46] Martin Buber, *The Martin Buber Reader: Essential Writings* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002 [1908–1956]), 54.

[47] Ibidem.

sions of the two inadequate ways of being. In contrast to many publications about Buber, this is *not* saying that *I-Thou* relationships trump *I-It* relationships and should be central to all social relationships. Rather, I am claiming, alongside Buber, that people must live *at the same time* with both *I-It* and *I-Thou* relationships.

Solitude to the side of Modernism and Postmodernism

There is a sense, therefore, of Buber swallowing up both Modernism and Postmodernism, not dialectically but by drawing on the valuable elements of each. But through the twentieth century there were also writers, artists and musicians who, instead, *stood to one side* of Modernism and Postmodernism. Vaughan Williams, for example, was criticised by contemporary Modernist musicians as being part of the "cow pat school",[48] particularly for his folk-song arrangements. Arnold Bennett was insulted for his provincialism. Both Vaughan Williams and Bennett were outside the Modernist club, and both were nevertheless successful. (The public do not always agree with literary fashions.) A later example of someone who stood to one side of both Modernism and Postmodernism, and who relished his provincialism, was Philip Larkin. His place in an account of Modernism and Postmodernism is justified by his *curating* of poetry of these movements, as well as his poetry's contrast with that of the more "fashionable" poets – a kind of *apophatic* illustrations of them, by showing what they are *not*. And, well, he is one of the finest poets of solitude.

Larkin was brought up in Leicester, and spent much of his life in (equally provincial) Hull, as university librarian. His curatorial role in the library was complemented by his editing of the *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse*.[49] A loneful curator of literature, especially of the twentieth century, who was also a novelist and a part-time music critic, and collector of art related to the more vicious of his solitudes, makes a good conclusion to this article. Two poems to start with. one is about being at one, or more. *Counting* is perhaps the best poem on one-

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[48] Tim Rayborn, *A New English Music: Composers and Folk Traditions in England's Musical Renaissance from the Late 19th to the Mid-20th Century* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2016), 111.

[49] Philip Larkin ed., *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

ness since Hölderlin's *Root of All Evil*.[50] Counting to one is easily done, he tells us, one chair, one bed, one coffin filled. He has difficult, though, in counting up to two, because "one must be denied / Before it's tried". Oneness, or solitude, is weakened by addition. This is in stark contrast to the solitude of Thoreau, who had *three* chairs in his hut.[51] In *Dockery and Son*, Larkin writes of a college friend who had a child: "Why did he think adding meant increase? / To me it was dilution".[52] Being at one, for Larkin, was what he sought and was where he was trapped: one coffin filled, and too selfish, too, to love.[53] He had much in common with Hölderlin, finding himself wanting and hating solitude, and failing to achieve a successful "twoness".

It was not that Larkin lived the life of a Romantic poet like Hölderlin. He was sociable and humorous, he had many sexual relationships, and lived his last years with one of his partners. And unlike the stereotypical poet starving alone in an attic, he had a secure and well-paid job working with many colleagues and thousands of students. Indeed, another poet told Larkin how lucky he was, having a job to go to where he would meet people. "Yes", he apparently replied, "I wake up every morning wanting to kill myself; I go to work, and after ten minutes, I want to kill someone else".[54] So Larkin shared some suicidal feelings with some Romantic poets, but not the whole lifestyle or approach to poetry. He shared a thanatological obsession with Samuel Beckett, but not enough to be a nihilist or Postmodernist. He was modern but not experimental or utopian or a victim of alienation or exile. He enjoyed living in Hull because it was at the end of the railway line: he was not complaining of living at the end of the world, as Ovid did.[55] Larkin rather enjoyed being away from the temptations of the capital city. His was a small and undramatic loneliness. He once almost proposed marriage, and wrote to a friend:

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[50] Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (London: The Marvell Press and Faber and Faber, 1988), 108; Friderich Hölderlin, *Hyperion and Selected Poems* (New York: Continuum, 1990), 139.

[51] "[O]ne for solitude, two for friendship, three for society"; Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2006), 151.

[52] Larkin, "Dockery and Son", in: Larkin, *Collected Poems*, 152–153.

[53] Larkin, "Love", in: *Collected Poems*, 150.

[54] Tom Courtenay, *Pretending to be Me: Philip Larkin, a Portrait* (New York: Hachette, 2003), 18–19.

[55] Ovid, *The Poems of Exile: Tristia and The Black Sea Letters* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005 [8–18]).

> Now today I cannot think what maggot was in my brain to produce such a monstrous egg. Or rather I *can* think: several maggots: – the maggot of loneliness, the maggot of romantic illusion, the maggot of sexual desire. I am not engaged, but heaven knows how I can get out of it now, decently or indecently.[56]

Larkin's solitude vision is closest to that of Dickinson,[57] domestic and ordinary, sought and feared, hell, perhaps, but not as hellish as the alternative. "The hell of loneliness, while still hell, is not so bad as the hell of marriage", he wrote.[58]

Another Larkin poem speaks to his attitude to solitude, and speaks, also, to Wordsworth and Milton. *Best Society*[59] describes how as a child the narrator (usually considered to be Larkin) thought solitude would be easy to find, but that as an adult, it is hard to find. It is not a matter of geography – either in the poem or in Larkin's life. (Larkin spent most of his adult life living on his own, and travelled comfortably to the nearby countryside and coast.) It is a matter of social expectations and, in particular, virtues and vices. To be a virtuous person means demonstrating social qualities: all virtues are social, he tells us. As a child, you might expect adulthood to be freer than childhood, and full of choices to be made. This is a common belief of children, as they are subject to instructions from adults (what to eat, when to sleep, where to go) whilst those same adults seem to have no-one telling *them* what to do. And it is one of the most common disappointments of adulthood, to find it is not such a free time, with many adults, ironically, looking back at *childhood* as a time of greater freedom. What is unusual is Larkin's association of solitude and *vice*. Are all virtues sociable? There is some validity in such a claim. For myself, having started research solitude and loneliness, and having been influenced by positive psychology (which focuses on character strengths or virtues), I could not find a virtue-word for someone who is good at solitude. Eventually, I found the obscure word "enstasy" in a translation of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, meaning being comfortable *within* oneself, in contrast to "ecstasy" (ex-stasis, rather that en-stasis), meaning *leaving* oneself or "transcendence".[60]

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[56] Anthony Thwaite ed., *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin: 1940–1985* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 165.

[57] Emily Dickson, *The Complete Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970).

[58] Thwaite, *Selected Letters*, 166.

[59] Larkin, "Best Society", in: Larkin, *Collected Poems*, 56–57.

[60] Robert Charles Zaehner ed., *The Bhagavad-Gītā* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 149.

Larkin did not find enstasy, the word or, presumably, the virtue. So when he was on his own, he felt he was vicious not virtuous. Viciously, he says, I close the door. There is a humorous theme, barely hidden under the surface of the poem. In English, the phrase "solitary vice" refers to masturbation. Larkin wrote about his enjoyment of masturbating to his friend Kingsley Amis, and in notebooks. A girlfriend read this in a notebook and was vaguely amused, but Larkin was furious. This aspect of his solitude was not for others to read unless he was completely in control of the telling.[61] He broke up with the woman, and then wrote *Best Society*. The title is taken from Milton[62] and is then quoted by Wordsworth, asking for:

> solitude
> More active even than "best society" –
> Society made sweet as solitude
> By silent inobtrusive sympathies,
> And gentle agitations of the mind
> From manifold distinctions[63]

For Milton (or Adam) and Wordsworth, perhaps solitude was indeed being in good company, with themselves, and in Milton's (Adam's) case was a wish for a mere "short retirement" followed by a "sweet return".[64] The final lines of Larkin's poem suggest to several critics that this poem is indeed in praise of solitude, like those earlier ones. But Larkin was a poet who often made a statement in the final line or two of a poem that was undermined by what was said earlier in the poem.[65] So the earlier parts of *Best Society* about all virtues being sociable, and about solitude being achieved "viciously" by closing the door, undermine the Romantic conceit of the final lines that "there cautiously / Unfolds, emerges,

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[61] Richard Bradfort, *First Boredom, Then Fear: The Life of Philip Larkin* (London: Peter Owen, 2005), 97.

[62] "Solitude is sometimes best society", from "Paradise Lost", book IX, line 249, with Adam suggesting a quick break to Eve; John Milton, *The Complete Poems* (London: J M Dent, 1980), 311.

[63] William Wordsworth, *The Collected Poems of William Wordsworth* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1994), 767.

[64] Milton, *Complete Poems*, 311.

[65] A good example is the much quoted "What will survive of us is love" from: Larkin "An Arundel Tomb", in: Larkin, *Collected Poems*, 111; Undermined by the earlier line saying this was "almost true", i.e., not true; Jeremy Axelrod, "Philip Larkin: "An Arundel Tomb": Does a notoriously grumpy poet believe in everlasting love?", *Poetry Foundation* (n.d.), access 3.10.2023, http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/guide/23791; Bradford, *First Boredom*, 153.

what I am". This is not Clare's "I am", but an already-undermined existential claim.[66] And, incidentally, another barely disguised reference to self-abuse.

Conclusion

Larkin and Beckett can both be described "failed" enstatic writers, and both here fit, if oddly, the theme of Postmodernism. They both also illustrate an old idea, expressed in the twelfth century by William of St-Thierry. Why, he asks, does a monk live in a cell, as does a criminal? In a cell, he says, you only have yourself for company, so a cell is a reward for a good person (who has a good person for company) and a punishment for a bad person (who has a bad person for company). "A bad man can never safely live with himself, because he lives with a bad man and no one is more harmful to him that he is to himself", he concludes.[67] Larkin wishes for an easy solitude, but in solitude finds he has a bad (vicious) person for company. That is why Bradford describes Larkin's as a "a kind of lewd masochism".[68] Solitude, in other words, is only "best society" for good people.

Modernism had "solutions", and great works of art that often combined a utopianism with a rather cold and lonely individualism. Into Postmodernism, things fall apart, the centre cannot hold, and the sheer anarchy of the Shoah and the Second World War (for Yeats, the First World War) let to artistic disintegration into irony. Both had loneliness at their heart, as did Larkin – himself part of the post-Postmodernist return to ordinary, provincial, life. As a novelist, Larkin has been compared to Arnold Bennett, that other author sitting to one side of literary fashion. Larkin and Bennett were both provincial novelists who wrote of mundane alienation and loneliness in domestic settings. The value of Larkin's position is complemented by his curatorial roles as librarian and anthologiser. *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* does a surprisingly good job of covering the various trends across the century to the 1970s. I say "surprising" as Larkin himself was surprised that the book worked for him. His skill as a librarian – building up the collection and guarding it conscientiously (he was of a generation of li-

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[66] John Clare, *Major works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 361.

[67] Quoted in: Diana Webb, *Privacy and Solitude in the Middle Ages* (London: Continuum, 2007), 72.

[68] Bradford, *First Boredom*, 99.

brarians who did not like to see people borrowing books) – adds to his anthologising, to hint at a rather Modernist tendency. Holding literature together, and creating a complete and more-or-less coherent system, this was his task, albeit undercut by his own claim that "I have acted not so much critically, or even historically, but as someone wanting to bring together poems that will give pleasure to their readers both separately and as a collection".[69] It is in his even more solitudinous writing of novels and poetry that he really took the edge off any grand visions, in awkward reverence for the ordinary sadnesses of life. "I shouldn't like to arrogate a 'philosophy' to myself", he writes to a friend, as "[a] poem is just a thought of the imagination – not really logical at all" and "I shd like to make it quite clear to my generation & all subsequent generations that I have no ideas about poetry at all".[70]

The post-Postmodernist refocusing of Larkin points to a more personal – if not necessarily happy – artistic world, in which solitude can be positively therapeutic as well as pathologically troubling. Older solitudes are being revisited, as Pärt is doing, and it is the therapeutic value of, and response to, solitude and loneliness that starts to emerge. This article has attempted to show how both Modernism and Postmodernism, and the arts sitting to the sides of these movements, all had a common focus on solitudes of a lonely kind. The lonely world of the Modernist account, the lonely worlds of Postmodernism, and the "ordinary" domestic loneliness of those like Larkin who attempted to bring together both traditions. This illuminates loneliness itself (which took its modern form only in the period beginning with Modernism) and contributed to the wider understanding of loneliness as a guilty or shameful emotion in response to alienation and the breakdown of optimistic forms of industrial capitalism of the modern (if not only Modernist) world.

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[69] Larkin, *The Oxford Book*, vi.
[70] Thwaite, *Selected Letters*, 173.

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Summary

A philosophical anthropology of solitude is presented through the art, literature and music of and around Modernism, Postmodernism. It is presented as an insight into both Modernism and Postmodernism. These movements portrayed and contributed to the lonely alienated worlds of the early-to-mid twentieth century. Culture and society together developed forms of loneliness that were centred on individualist, alienated, guilt and shame, to which a response may be appropriately silent or humorous, living or dead, and sometimes a lewd masochism. Even those who rejected Modernism and Postmodernism help describe – either positively or apophatically – the distinctive forms of lonely solitude in those movements.

Keywords: solitude, Modernism, Postmodernism, loneliness, utopianism, death, Quietism