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Sophie Abdela, Simon Dagenais, Julien Perrier-Chartrand, and Marie-Florence Sguaitamatti, eds., *La Sociabilité du solitaire: pratiques et discours de l'intimité, de l'exclusion et du secret à l'époque moderne*. Paris: Hermann, 2016. 182 pp. Notes. 23.00€. (pb). ISBN 978-2-7056-9298-8.

Review by John J. Conley, S.J., Loyola University Maryland.

Originally presented as colloquium papers, this collection of essays explores the relationship between the solitary and sociability in the early modern period. Emerging scholars—all are doctoral students or recently minted PhDs—the authors follow the major axes of contemporary French historiography. They are clearly influenced by the “history of everyday life,” with its interest in private spaces and intimate conversations. The archeology of institutions, with an obvious debt to Michel Foucault, flavors many of the analyses. The prison and the convent emerge as privileged sites of exegesis.

But the authors also challenge these contemporary approaches. They attempt to show how even the most private communications of solitary individuals have substantial social and political ends. Rather than opposing private and public, they explain how the private is actually more public than a first glance would indicate. Even the most isolated prisoner or cloistered nun lives a deeply communal life and addresses an external public. Rather than absorbing the corporate demands of the institution where they reside, the solitaires studied by these scholars often construct a literary “I” independent of these institutions and pointedly critical of them.

The strongest essays, which I shall consider first, focus on incarcerating institutions, such as penitentiaries and monasteries. They explore the dialectic between private and public in the literature written in these enclosures or in fictional accounts of life in these spaces.

Alex Bellemare analyzes two famous early modern fictional accounts of prison: Cyrano de Bergerac's *L'Autre Monde* and Charles Dassoucy's *Les Aventures*. Bellemare detects a dialectical tension in the narratives. Blind and completely isolated from society, *L'Autre Monde's* hero, Dyrcona, suffers complete biological isolation. But his imagination permits him to soar as he depicts utopian alternatives marked precisely by the sensual comforts he lacks. Cut off from society in a strict imprisonment that contrasts with his earlier picaresque adventures, the narrator of *Les Aventures* can only construct a durable “I” in the act of writing his memoirs for a hypothetical public (us, the eventual readers).

Luba Markovskaia's perceptive study of Madame Roland's *Mémoires*, written while Roland was imprisoned during the Terror, demonstrates how she transformed a place of horror into a niche of resistance. Roland transforms the prison into a place of recollection by linking it to two earlier spaces of retreat, the first in her home (a studious alcove) and the second in her convent school (the chapel). Embedded within her new alcove, Roland constructs a written republican critique of the anarchic external revolutionary society and of the decadent internal society of immoral prisoners.

The Marquis de Sade's prison correspondence is the subject of Bénédicte Prot's essay. Constantly denouncing his serial imprisonments, Sade becomes a critic of prison life on several levels. Autographically, he details the physical and psychological suffering the incarceration has imposed on him. Politically, he denounces the French practice of long prison terms as uncondusive to achieving the key goals of juridical punishment: rehabilitation and deterrence. Philosophically, echoing the humanism of the Lumières, Sade condemns the regime of incarceration as a brutal, unjustified destruction of the person, body, and soul.

The convent is the locus of Isabel Harvey's analysis. The texts studied are the *Paradiso* and the *Inferno* by Suor Arcangela Tarabotti, a Benedictine nun in seventeenth-century Venice. A forced vocation—she was placed into the convent by her father due to his incapacity to provide dowries for his surplus daughters—Suor Archangel wrote and published several works defending the freedom of women to choose either the cloister or the married state. The *Paradiso* describes the glory and happiness of those nuns who freely embraced their vocation and suggests the misery of those who entered the convent under coercion. The *Inferno Monacala* depicts the hellish caricature of religious life, inevitably doomed by violations of the vow of chastity, created by nuns forced into the convent. According to Harvey, Suor Arcangela's texts escaped censorship by the use of a double language. "Mon hypothèse est que le *Paradiso* maintient les revendications de la religieuse en faveur de la liberté de choix pour les femmes, mais en présentant un traité à double lecture possible: une lecture grand public—l'orthodoxie de la conversion—et une lecture pour les initiés—la liberté des femmes" (p. 61). Rather than serving an apologetic purpose, the texts critique the contemporary practice of forced vocations and defend the spiritual liberty of women. They aim at a double public: the pious, edified by the splendor of a happy vocation and by Suor Arcangela's gradual acceptance of her own fate as a nun, and the civic, dis-edified by the damage inflicted on the individual nun and the convent community by the practice of forced vocations.

The other essays in the collection are less convincing because they tend to focus on more amorphous institutions and practices. Solitude and isolation are less evident in a bustling court, salon, or diplomatic office.

In her study of Marguerite of Navarre's poems, *Miroir de l'âme pécheresse* and *Miroir de Jhésus Christ crucifié*, Mélissa Lapointe dissects the utterly isolated soul depicted in the verse. In the mystical rhetoric of the seventeenth century, the soul abandons itself to God up to the point of "anéantissement du soi." But Lapointe's concept of faith is narrowly privatistic. "Sentiment personnel et indicible, impénétrable pour les non-initiés, la foi est vécue de façon unique selon les croyants.... L'expérience de la foi, fruit de la solitude et du recueillement, est propice à la découverte et du dévoilement de soi" (p. 79). As the neo-Augustinian Marguerite would be the first to affirm, faith is a response to the Word of God proclaimed in the community of the church by an external minister; it is not a purely subjective affair. It is also difficult to perceive the social isolation of a royal personage so deeply involved in the religious and political controversies of the time.

Audrey Faulot explores the conflict between society and the individual in a study of Prévost's *Mémoires d'un honnête homme* and Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse*. The novels' heroes rebel against their ambient society because their idiosyncratic personalities refuse to accept the norms of behavior and identity it tries to impose on them. "En effet, chez Prévost comme chez Rousseau, les héros se caractérisent par une conscience aiguë de leur singularité: les errances qui occupent les péripéties constituent alors une conséquence directe de cette conception autarcique de l'identité, considérés comme autant d'assignations aliénantes" (p. 93). In Prévost's novel, the hero finds himself imprisoned as a spy in a foreign land, where he begins to confront his personality in solitude. Unable to integrate into a succession of unsatisfactory social groups, the narrator struggles to construct his own distinctive *honnêteté* in a precarious balance between virtue and vice.

The salon of Henriette Herz (1764-1847) is examined by Guglielmo Gabbiadini. Conducted in the late eighteenth-century in *Aufklärung* Berlin, her salon promoted Kantian philosophy and a politics of human rights. Within this visible and prestigious salon emerged a more occult “league of the virtuous,” entered only by invitation and festooned with neo-Masonic rituals, such as kissing Henriette’s ring, circulated among distant league members. The primary purpose of the league was the cultivation of Platonic love. Gabbiadini focuses on the correspondence between Henriette and a beloved friend, Wilhelm von Humboldt, where the Platonic love appears to be mutating into something more carnal. While the essay demonstrates how the salon serves to overcome a certain intellectual and emotional solitude and how a public society can hide a more private one, the salonnières in Berlin seem far removed from any social marginalization.

In her study of Madame de Staël, Catherine Beudet-Lefebvre analyzes Madame de Staël’s complicated relationship to Rousseau. While Madame de Staël admires Rousseau’s exaltation of sentiment, especially of sympathy, she condemns the tendency of Rousseau to allow sentiment to close in on itself in self-pity and a disdainful aloofness from society. In Madame de Staël’s revision of Rousseau, sentiment within the sympathetic person must lead him or her to political activism in an effort to foster social progress for others. Unlike Rousseau, she conceives personal affection as inevitably political. Through sentiment, the private and the psychological become the public and the social in a wave of reform.

The final essays are exercises in literary curiosities. Gábor Fölköli examines the two-volume manuscript work written by Michel Le Masle (?-1662), a secretary of Cardinal Richelieu and a canon of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame. Based on actual communications of the cardinal, the work provides models for letters, reports, and speeches which artfully use diplomatic ruses. Private sentiments are masked in an effort to manipulate the feelings of the recipient. Strategies of persuasion require the suppression of the private self in favor of a calculating public persona.

Marie-Ange Croft studies the relationship between Françoise Pascal (1632-1698) and Edme Boursault (1638-1701). The first professional female playwright in France, Pascal befriended and corresponded with Boursault, a fellow playwright. Both writers faced a similar problem: originally from impoverished provincial families, they struggled to establish themselves in the literary circles of Paris. In their respective writings, the two authors attempted to burnish their literary reputations through mutual praise. Croft’s effort, however, to show that Boursault is lurking behind certain pseudonyms in Pascal’s corpus is tentative at best.

This collection of essays demonstrates that the line between public and private is a porous one. Even in the isolating constraints of a strict prison or convent, the individual can create a liberated “I” through imagination and the act of writing. Rather than absorbing the norms of the enclosure—or, more broadly, of the ambient society—the incarcerated author can contest these norms and propose an often utopian alternative. Perhaps the most signal contribution of these contributions is to resurrect the old-fashioned liberal figure of the heroic individual. The story of many of the early modern authors studied in this collection is the capacity of the tenacious individual to contest and resist social normalcy through the literary creation of an irreducibly unique “I.”

LIST OF ESSAYS

Alex Bellemare, “Sociabilités carcérales: la représentation de la prison chez Cyrano et Dassoucy”

Luba Markovskaia, “La poétique de l’espace carcéral dans les *Mémoires* de Madame Roland”

Bénédicte Prot, “Les symptômes de la réclusion: la critique de la prison dans la correspondance du marquis de Sade”

Isabel Harvey, “Miroirs déformants et reflets trompeurs: petite leçon de création de l’acceptabilité à partir de revendications clandestines par Suor Arcangela Tarabotti, religieuse malmonacata”

Mélissa Lapointe, “L’expérience de l’intime dans la poésie spirituelle du XVIe siècle: le *Miroir de l’âme pécheresse* et le *Miroir de Jésus Christ crucifié* de Marguerite de Navarre”

Audrey Faulot, “Retraite et communauté élective dans les *Mémoires d’un honnête homme*: un modèle pour Clarens?”

Guglielmo Gabbiadini, “La ‘ligue de la vertu’ et les billevesées de l’amitié: mélancolie du solitaire et liens d’intimité salonniers à Berlin au tournant des Lumières”

Catherine Beudet-Lefebvre, “Des sentiments du coeur à la fraternité républicaine: Madame de Staël, héritière et critique”

Gábor Fölköli, “Apprentissage galant, apprentissage politique: le cabinet d’écriture du secrétaire Le Masle”

Marie-Ange Croft, “L’amitié stratégique d’Edme Boursault et Françoise Pascal”

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