The Subject of Psychoanalysis

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Saul Bellow, the novelist, in a talk given in 1988 on his identity as an author, offered the following affirmation of his “first consciousness,” a sense of his subjectivity that is continuous, certain, and sufficient in its self-identity:

The “identity problem” has vexed and plagued the modern intellect. So what business have I, in view of the “new look” for individuals (in a word, for each and every one of us) sponsored by highly influential existentialist, deconstructionist, and nihilist designers, to speak of my personality and my personal history? ...for reasons I can’t explain, my own first consciousness has had a long unbroken history. I wouldn’t know how to defend my faithful attachment to it. All I can say is that it is a fact and I wonder why anyone should feel it necessary to put its reality in doubt. But our meddling mental world puts all such realities in doubt. (Saul Bellow, 2011; emphasis added)

Bellow goes on to address the significance of this manifest identity, as experienced by him in this “first consciousness,” its significance to his life as a writer, and to the cultural differences among American writers. Bellow was speaking within the context of debates in literary theory occurring at that time regarding
Taking Place Granada’s Solitude  Bettina MATHES

Where is solitude?
How does being alone take place?
If solitude was a city, what would it look like?

It’s a spur of the moment decision: an apartment found on Craigslist, a ticket bought with miles, Lorca’s poetry, the voice of Enrique Morente...three days later I’m on my way to spend four months in Granada, where I’ve never been and where no one knows me. My friends are as puzzled by my sudden departure as they are unconvinced by my explanation: I want to be alone in a beautiful environment. But then, why Granada—a busy tourist destination, drawing crowds from around the globe?

We wish for solitude to come to us naturally: at the top of Mont Ventoux, during “a delicious evening” at Walden Pond; at Tödtnau where in the silence and isolation of the Black Forest Martin Heidegger awaited the arrival of “the Truth of Being” (never mind that what “came to him” was Nazism).

A search for solitude on flickr yields 142,000 hits, almost all of them variations on one theme: nature, simplicity, absence, often combined with a sense of heroism—a lone tree on a hill, an unoccupied park bench, a wharf at dawn, a pier before dusk, a lonely beach. Sometimes a single person inhabits these deserted landscapes: hunched over, eyes turned inward, often seen from behind, always beautiful, always separate. The natural world mirrors the inner world (but how do we know what our inner world looks like?). As I click through the seemingly endless, pleasurably monotonous photostream, I’m beginning to recognize the fantasy.

Let solitude be simple, unsophisticated. Let it be as easy as sitting down on a lonely chair, as effortless as wandering about the shore of the ocean, listening to the murmur of the waves, watching the reeds sway gently in the breeze. Let there be a slight element of terror: a dramatic foreboding sky, the harbinger of a violent thunderstorm; dark shadows filled with danger; the terror of the infant alone in the dark; the angst of the child who cannot see herself reflected in the face of a loved one. To be alone, we imagine, is to be withdrawn and exposed, having only oneself to depend on for protection. Solitude, the fantasy suggests, means absence (most of all the absence of dependency), a brave encounter with death. In this, solitude is a masculine affinity; it celebrates the dream of self-sufficiency.

The solitude I experience in Granada is of a different kind: refined, protected, cultivated (call it effeminant, if you must); an aspiration, nature transformed.

The people of Granada are surrounded by the most splendid nature imaginable, but they do not go into it. The landscapes are extraordinary, but the person from Granada prefers to look at them from within. He is frightened of the elements, and feels torn for the noisy rubble...He is ready to place his entire soul into the diminutive and bring the world into his room.

Neither natural nor easy solitude is something we learn. A capacity and an art, solitude takes place when I find myself in a benign, reliable and protective environment. (An environment nature precisely cannot provide.) Whether we learn to be alone as infants or as adults, the capacity to be alone, Donald Winnicott proposes, is grounded in “the experience of being alone while someone else is present” (1965, p.30). Someone else we trust and who makes no demands on us. Someone else who may be alone as well. For the infant this someone else is the person who takes care of it; for the adult seeking to recreate her solitude this someone else is often a psychoanalyst. We may not (want to) be aware of it, but in our solitude we are always dependent on someone. (Our wish to find solitude in nature may be a denial of dependency.) Granada is a city of leisure—a city for contemplation and fantasy, a city where, better than in any other, the lover can write on the ground the name of her beloved.

If it is true, as Winnicott says, that solitude is a paradox (to be alone in the presence of someone else), then separation can be a form of union, a relationship between two bodies. Solitude is a gift from an other—even if this other is my own body.

Sometimes this other body, this one else who is present while I am alone, is an environment—a room, a house, or a city. And in one form or another, no/other is always nearby. You don’t believe me? Here’s Lorca, Granada’s incurable son whose words echo in her streets and find shelter in her tiny houses.

Like a boy gazing in wonder at his mother dressed in bright colors for a party, I want to show you the city where I was born, the city of Granada. Granada cannot leave her house. She isn’t like other cities, which are on the edge of the ocean or of great rivers: cities that travel and return enriched by what they have seen. Alone and pure, Granada grows smaller and binds up her extraordinary soul. Her only escape is her high natural port of stars. And thus with no thirst for adventure, she doubles back upon herself.

With care and patience the inhabitants of Granada (each one an architect of solitude) have devoted themselves to perfecting and sustaining an environment that allows for the experience of a sophisticated aloneness. An environment that asks nothing of me, that gives me the freedom, the space, and the beauty to move without purpose, to wander in my mind, oblivious and unresponsive to the needs of others; to “exist for a time,” Winnicott writes, “without being an active person with a direction of interest or movement” (p.34).

Granada lives on fantasy. It is full of initiatives but short on action. This is the Granada I love: a nesting place for daydreams—the product of a certain Islamic sensibility whose architecture speaks to the mind’s need for a body, and for solace.

When I arrive in Granada, I have plans. I want to travel: Córdoba, Seville, Cadiz, Jaén, Lisbon and Porto, perhaps Marrakesh. When I leave four months later, I have not once set foot out of the city. Enconced on the private roof garden of my apartment at Placeta Puerta de Sol #1, overlooking the old city, I feel held by the aloof beauty of the Sierras, whose snow-covered crown and bluish coat softens the arid of a pitless sun. Below me an undulating sea of green rooftops shields narrow alleys from sight; behind me the Alhambra floats above the city. I spend my days waiting for the setting sun to paint the sky in forty shades of red (totally fantastic, a half-effaced dream), and my nights longing for the white

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face of a moon (so close I can almost touch it) to send its cool light, promise of an unattainable passion. A nightingale sniffs out sighs and a pheasant chases them through the dust. There are days when even to write in my journal doesn’t appeal to me. I do nothing, unaware that this is what one does in this town.

...the watcher of sunsets who climbs anxiously to the rooftops; the fellow who loses the Sierra as form, without ever having gone near it. The dark beauty who yearns for love and sits with her mother in the garden, a zephyr admirable town of contemplatives who are surrounded by unique natural beauty; want nothing, and only know how to smile.

... “What sort of space is that,” Thoreau wonders, “which separates a man from his fellows and makes him solitary?” A third space, Winnicott replies. One “neither inside the individual nor outside in the world of shared reality,” a potential space; “a product of the experiences of the individual person in the environment that obtains” (1982, p.144). Latency. The space where solitude takes place: filled with echoes and reverberations; a space to forget (and remember) that things have names; the space where I reconnect with the mind’s preverbal register of form and color, sound and sight, touch and smell, time and consonance. Everything runs, plays, and slips away. An evocation of the world of the material that we leave behind (but never quite forget) as we grow up and learn to live in language, and in cities. A nightingale sniffs out sighs, and a pheasant chases them through the dust.

How hard it is to spend money in this town! During those long summer months, when the air is too hot and the light too bright to leave the cool shade of the house between noon and the early evening, Granada enjoys its siesta. Bars, restaurants, shops, the post office—closed. What is daily routine in Granada is unimaginable in cities like New York or Frankfurt, where money determines the rhythm of its inhabitants, where I am always involved in other people’s business, where I become part of the endless stream of objects presented to me for consumption. To buy or not to buy; to take this offer and decline that one; it’s your choice, yes or no, or both? No, Frankfurt and New York won’t leave you alone. In Granada, during the seven-hour siesta, I can be sure that nothing will interrupt my solitude, that no one will disturb my reveries. Paradise closest to many. In Granada I learn what solitude is about: the absence of excitement, monetary as well as sexual. Siesta is a time for being alone, for the relaxed inconsequence of a wandering mind. I feel for the poor turistas—tired and thirsty, they roam the city’s deserted streets hoping to find a dueño who will serve them lunch. Occasionally I get impatient myself: how am I supposed to get anything done emotionally. The typical _carmen granadino_, inspired by the privacy of Islamic domestic architecture, is a modest house that turns its back to the street, enclosing a small garden or orchard for quiet repose to carve little ivory flowers, inlaying them in hard wood. A protected space that allows its inhabitant to be outside and yet be alone with a pot of myrtle and a stream of cold water; and to remain inside and protected even when stepping out of one’s room. Granada’s true passions are the little chamber, the mirror of lovely, small proportions, the small garden or statue. The Granadino, says Lorca, sees things through the wrong ends of the binoculars.

Well, not everything. When in 1492 the Catholic monarchs Isabel and Fernando capture Granada, expelling or murdering most of its Muslim and Jewish inhabitants, a monument to Catholic supremacy is needed—a cathedral, of course, larger and taller than any other. Built on the site of Granada’s main mosque, la catedral displays a disdainful arrogance for its Islamic surroundings. Small, tiny, intricate, and playful are not part of the vocabulary of this new Catholic nation. Monstrous in its ambition—it takes 181 years to complete the building—astutely in its appearance, la catedral intimates and colonizes. Even when seen through the wrong end of the binoculars, its overbearing presence inspires terror: like a snail, I pull in my horns of poetry.

In the old quarter, streets are narrow and curvy, made for walking, not driving. Its cobblestone alleys and ancient steps are un...
In Granada’s thin mountain air, sound is crisp and travels fast on the steep and serpentine cuestas y calles of the Alpujarra mountains—the city draws its livelihood. From this 15th-century palace, the Alhambra. More than that, Granada de la Sierra is nested within the Sierra Nevada, the Alpujarra mountains—the city draws its livelihood. From this 15th-century palace, the Alhambra. More than that, Granada de la Sierra is nested within the Sierra Nevada. On a photograph the rooms and courtyards look bigger than they really are. The camera translates the potential space that emerges from the palace’s architecture—immeasurable and boundless—into an impression of physical expanse. When we enter the Alhambra, we are reminded of this gap between the unshareable space of our imagination and the shared space of commodification. The lens cannot render what the body sees and feels, but the mind has forgotten how to see without looking. If anything, the endless photos stream on flickr bears witness to a growing frustration—that we may never find a way to capture solitude in a photograph, that solitude without the presence of an other is in fact isolation.

... The Alhambra is sublimated aloneness, solitude transformed into architecture. Built to pay homage to the capacity (and the necessity) to be alone, inviting us to take sensual pleasure in what is perhaps most easily forgotten when we think of solitude: our need to be held and comforted, to find beauty and consolation—which may well be one and the same thing. For beauty, even though subject to transience, never disappoints. The beautiful object, be it natural or artificial, near or far, is the one that withstood destruction. As long as there is beauty there is life after death.

... “Solitude is perhaps the only word that has no meaning,” Kristeva writes. “Without other, without guidepost, it cannot bear the difference that, alone, discriminates and makes sense” (1991, p.12). If solitude does not make sense within the paternal logic of the symbolic—where every word makes sense—it means that when we are truly alone, we lose our interest in conflict and contradiction, in things and their usage. Intransitive, solitude has no object.

What is the opposite of solitude? I’m neither happy nor sad. I’m inside the autumn. I am... ...in Granada.

To Federico García Lorca whose words move this essay; and to Nicola Burg, for that third space in which words and love take place.

REFERENCES

Note: Italicized phrases and passages are the words of Federico García Lorca.


