

## **Esperanza Guillén**

Department of History of Art, University of Granada

### **Emotional Indifference and Creative Isolation of the Artist<sup>1</sup>**

Based on the words of artists, this article examines solitude in the creative process. The construction of the myth of the artist as a genius removed from conventional social customs ran parallel with the need artists had to assert the singularity of their work in the art system – that is to say, in a context of exhibition and market unheard of until the nineteenth century. Carrying out their particular mission, as many artists revealed in their memoirs, diaries and letters, required physical and emotional isolation. Thus, whether they had a stable family or lived alone, whether they enjoyed intense intimate relationships and lived a more or less unbridled life or they were misanthropes, what is certain is that, in order to develop their creativity, artists – as they confessed in their personal writings – needed to put their affections and social activity aside, and withdraw into an environment of profound dialogue with their own subjectivity.

Keywords: Solitude, creativity, artist, silence, isolation, nineteenth, twentieth century

The relationships that artists have established with their milieu – intimate, familial and professional – have frequently been conditioned not only by the dominant temperament in each of them but also by the

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need to find spaces of solitude and silence in order to do their work. This was made abundantly clear in the exhibition *Cabañas para pensar* (“Cabins for Thinking”), based on the relations that exist between the creative process and the solitude chosen by some writers and musicians who have shut themselves away in tiny and simple buildings: George Bernard Shaw, Virginia Woolf, August Strindberg, Dylan Thomas, Edvard Grieg, Gustav Mahler, etc.<sup>2</sup> Although the plastic arts, in general, require more open spaces, this does not mean they have a lesser need for isolation.

Since the Renaissance, writing on the lives of artists – notably the work by Giorgio Vasari – had distinguished between extravagant, haughty geniuses and socially affable artists. However, it was at the start of the contemporary era, that is, at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century, when the concept of genius was defined and acquired greater relevance, associated almost exclusively with artistic creation. Between the two aforementioned clichés the scales were tipped toward the former, toward the painters, musicians and poets who possessed a melancholic and saturnine temperament.

In the Enlightenment, nobility of blood came to be replaced by nobility of merit, and the genius, as Antoni Marí has studied, became “possibly the last model of humanity created by Western culture.”<sup>3</sup> The genius was a subject who was characterized by the capacity to give form to their ideas and by making a real use of freedom, which along with originality became their distinctive traits, since only through them could they raise themselves above the conventions of tradition.

The concept of genius would take on major importance in the aesthetic thought of early German Romanticism. *Sturm und Drang*, positioning itself against the poetic rules of Classicism, had emphasized the groundbreaking character of genius with regard to the rules and to everything that represented an obstacle to the tempestuous force of instinct. The new model of the artist substituted imitation for inspiration and probed the rich depths of their own self.

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<sup>2</sup> *Cabañas para pensar*. A project by Eduardo Outeiro Ferreño commissioned by Alfredo Olmedo and Alberto Ruiz de Samaniego. (Fundación Luis Seoane, Centro José Guerrero, Fundación Cerezales Antonino y Cinia, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Marí, *Euforión*, 16.

The artists of the nineteenth century needed to assert the singularity of their work against a new situation that confronted them with new types of demands and connections to power but, above all, with new systems of market and exhibition. They were creating in the face of the democratization of taste and the artistic reception that came about with the opening up of the Salon de Paris, and with the subsequent national Fine Arts exhibitions and the progressive emergence onto the scene of gallery owners and dealers who worked for an ever wider social group whose demands needed to be met. This broad social group was made up mainly of bourgeoisie who emulated certain customs and habits of the aristocracy: they read books, enjoyed music in their soirées and bought paintings.

The arrival of the Romantic era meant a great variety of artistic expression that reflected the voluntary distancing from the notion of “school” and indicated the triumph of individuality and freedom as opposed to stylistic uniformity envisaged by academic institutions. Each artist aspired to leave the strongest stamp of their personality on their work. Most did not achieve it, but it was undoubtedly an aspiration that extended throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. The anxious search for novelty led to a new interest in the rich psychological universe that lay hidden behind human behaviour. As the artist was an exceptional human being, they awoke the curiosity of the public, and the artist’s unique and unsettling interior world, as well as their life, had to be explored. Thus, as people who lived their subjectivity intensely, artists became the protagonists of paintings and novels. Writers also formed part of the public who listened to musicians or went to see the work of painters, but they were a very special public, capable of understanding the vertigo caused by the role, the blank score or blank canvas and the fear and irresistible drive to fill them.<sup>4</sup> And it was the writers, moreover, who took on the role of art critics.

Pierre Bourdieu has analysed how “novelists contribute greatly to the public recognition of this new social entity – especially by inventing and spreading the very notion of bohemia – and to the construction of

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<sup>4</sup> See Serraller, *La novela del artista* and Tomás, *Formas artísticas y sociedad de masas*, 97-145.

its identity, values, norms and myths.”<sup>5</sup> The most celebrated novels of this type are Balzac’s *Le chef-d’oeuvre inconnu* and Zola’s *L’oeuvre*.

Although we know that, obviously, not all artists ruled out sociability or were flamboyant, haughty, unpredictable and solitary, this is the image that most reinforces the construction of the myth of the modern artist. The stereotype of the martyr and rebel artist is generated in this way, which, with endless nuances, would find its expression in the real life of more than a few young people throughout the century and would be perpetuated with fin-de-siècle bohemia.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth, artists adopted unconventional ways of life and were represented in attitudes that in other periods would have been lacking in decorum, in spaces that were simultaneously workshop and dwelling, such as those depicted in 1808 in a self-portrait by Tommaso Minardi, or the artist in *Intérieur d’atelier* peeling potatoes, painted by Octave Tassaert in 1845. In these paintings, the artists are shown as individuals who do not live tied to convention or bound to the opinion of others. Moreover, as Rosen & Zerner write, “artists with any pretensions to originality expected and even hoped for resistance; an immediate success was grounds for suspicion; only a hack won his laurels easily.”<sup>7</sup>

Feeling misunderstood at times, although often it was a question of a sought-for misunderstanding, the artist, in isolation, gradually began to take refuge in the rhetoric of the genius who wanted to be considered the victim of times that were too materialist. Thus, as Jean Clay has clearly shown, one can observe a shift in the situation of the artist, which shifts from professional painter, sculptor, musician or person of letters to become the solitary, melancholic and Promethean genius.<sup>8</sup> This was a creative isolation that reflected the need for solitude so that ideas could blossom, and be transformed into forms to produce the artistic work. In this regard, Nietzsche wrote:

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<sup>5</sup> Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 56.

<sup>6</sup> See *Rebels and Martyrs. The Image of the Artist in the Nineteenth Century* (London: National Gallery, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Rosen and Zerner, *Romanticism and Realism*, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Clay, *Le Romantisme*, 22-23.

[...] the solitude of the *vita contemplativa* of the thinker: when he chooses *that* he is renouncing nothing; on the contrary, it would be renunciation, melancholy, destruction of himself if he were obliged to persist in the *vita practica*: he foregoes this because he knows it, because he knows himself. Thus he leaps into *his* element, thus he gains *his* cheerfulness.<sup>9</sup>

It was the search for isolation by those who knew themselves to be apart from the mediocrity that dominated the world; by those who were aware of the superiority of their spirit and that their interior strength only revealed itself in solitude. As Nietzsche would again write in *Beyond Good and Evil*, “he shall be the greatest who can be the most solitary, the most concealed, the most divergent.”<sup>10</sup> Although the activity they pursued could prove to be torturous for them, artists needed to carry it out as a solitary experience, independently of whether the result was a product that would be appreciated and valued by the public. One of the painters who best reflected this imperative was Delacroix, who on several occasions noted in his diary a profound regret derived from the excesses caused by the company of others, in short, caused by social life.

Do you imagine that Byron could have written his powerful poems in the midst of turmoil, or that Dante was surrounded by distractions while his soul was journeying amongst the shades? [...] Work is constantly interrupted, and it all comes from associating with too many people.<sup>11</sup>

Diaries and memories formed part of a genre determined by its intimate and subjective nature, and in them it is not strange to find expressions of suffering hidden from the eyes of the public until those writings emerged, often after the death of their author. Thanks to these texts, we know that many artists would withdraw socially, to isolate themselves from society. In 1858, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres was sixty-eight years old when he wrote:

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<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, 187.

<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 84.

<sup>11</sup> Delacroix, *The Journal of Eugene Delacroix*, 43.

Now that I am so old morally, I really see and appreciate (more than ever) what things are and what they are worth [...] I thus free myself from much boredom by breaking with society, which is ignorant, fake, envious, and of bad taste, and above all by avoiding arguing all the time.<sup>12</sup>

This also took place with writers. Franz Kafka occasionally referred to how conversations did not give importance, seriousness or truth to what he thought personally and how he needed to be alone for long periods, because his work ultimately reflected the triumph of solitude.<sup>13</sup> He noted in his diary: “Being alone has a power over me that never fails. My interior dissolves [...] and is ready to release what lies deeper. A slight ordering of my interior begins to take place and I need nothing more.”<sup>14</sup>

The myth of the artist aware of his faculties but frequently subjected to incomprehension and misery runs through the whole century, and is apparent, even more radicalized, in those, like Gauguin, who sought real spaces uncontaminated by cultural mediocrity and the dominant moral customs of Europe. Despite this escape, however, the artist had need of the material support that their recognition by a public would bring, something they needed but were wary of. In a letter to his wife Mette, written from Tahiti in March 1892, Gauguin commented:

You tell me that I am wrong to remain far away from the artistic centre. No, I am right, I have known for a long time what I am doing, and why I do it. My artistic centre is in my brain and not elsewhere, and I am strong because I am never sidetracked by others, and do what is in me.<sup>15</sup>

Many artists seemed to want to perform the special role of taking on, for the good of mankind, a creative mission that was sometimes compared to martyrdom. This is possibly the reason why Paul Gauguin painted his self-portrait with a halo like a saint, or why James Ensor drew himself as Christ crucified, replacing the INRI on the cross with

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<sup>12</sup> Ingres, *Écrits e propos sur l'art*, 47.

<sup>13</sup> Kafka, *The Diaries of Franz Kafka 1910-1913*, 292.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>15</sup> Gauguin, *Letters to His Wife and Friends*, 165.

his own surname, ENSOR. To give this idea further elaboration, we can quote the final verses of a poem by Marc Chagall: “Like Christ I am crucified / Fixed with nails to the easel.”<sup>16</sup>

Antoni Tàpies also identified his suffering with Christ’s own: “Later came the ‘hour of solitude’... And in my small studio-room, the forty days in the desert began, and I do not know if it has ended.”<sup>17</sup>

The reading of correspondence also reveals many of the tensions that artists experienced in their relationship with their own work. Many years before Tàpies, Zuloaga showed in his letters that he was endlessly dissatisfied. On 15<sup>th</sup> June 1914, he wrote to the sculptor Auguste Rodin: “Once the piece is done, it bears its worth. Nobody will change it. So arm yourself with three things I consider absolutely necessary for every artist: boldness, indifference and solitude.”<sup>18</sup>

Despite the fact that they needed to sell and that it is impossible to consider the results of creativity separated from the social medium in which they were developed, artists sought not to have to mask their identity in contact with others, and this found its reflection in what they produced, as Odilon Redon writes:

The artist knows very well that among all his works, the one that best reflects and reveals him was made in solitude. [...] It is in solitude that the artist truly lives, in secret depths, and where nothing of the mundane exterior requests him or compels him to disguise.<sup>19</sup>

The painter Edgar Degas, with problems in his kidneys and almost blind, yearned to be able to continue his work in solitude. “I want, more than anything else, to remain alone; to work as calmly as possible with my pitiful eyes and, in order to obtain this supreme good, this repose, to condemn myself to die alone too.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Clay, *Le Romantisme*, 46.

<sup>17</sup> Texto escrito por Tàpies para la revista *Essais* en 1969. Sagrario Aznar Almazán). “Agresores y víctimas: el sacrificio del artista”, *Espacio, tiempo y forma*. Serie VII, *Historia del Arte*, 10, 1997, 370.

<sup>18</sup> Zuloaga, *Ignacio Zuloaga et ses amis français*, 57.

<sup>19</sup> Redon, *A sí mismo*, 146.

<sup>20</sup> Kendall, *Degas por sí mismo*, 232.

Although almost all painters tried to generate a habit of isolation regarding their work, for some this did not prove easy to achieve, due to the demands of social life. When Monet had the intention of spending a month in Bordighera in order to work, he knew that it would only be possible if he was alone, which is why he wrote to Durand-Ruel from Giverny on 12<sup>th</sup> January 1884:

... But I would ask you not to mention this trip to *anyone*, not because I want to make a secret of it, but because I insist upon *doing it alone*. As pleasant as it was to travel as a tourist with Renoir, I'd find it awkward to do so with him to work. I have always worked better alone and from my own impressions.<sup>21</sup>

For Freud, the artist has a narcissistic personality, which means that artists find pleasure in themselves and in their work, which perhaps explains, in part, the abundance of self-portraits. One of the most narcissistic artists of the early twentieth century was Egon Schiele, a painter whom we know from countless self-representations. Schiele needed to feel close to the Austrian capital and confessed that the Viennese artistic scene suffocated him. As he wrote in a letter to Leopold Czihaczek in 1911, when what was important was for the artistic work to progress, nothing and no one else mattered:

When what is most loved by the artist is his art, he must be able to abandon even his best friend. I know that the reason for my aloofness regarding you will be interpreted unfairly, and you will think that I was rebellious and, effectively, I rebel against all kinds of interferences from life. I have the urge to experiment everything, for which I have to be alone, I cannot become weak.<sup>22</sup>

Emil Nolde's correspondence also throws light on the solitary nature inherent to artistic creation. By way of example, it is worth quoting from a letter he wrote to Max Sauerlandt in 1926, in which Nolde describes the artist as someone who lives shut away within a kind

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<sup>21</sup> Monet, *Los años de Giverny*, 34.

<sup>22</sup> Schiele, *Escritos. 1909-1918*, 59.



of shell, in the darkness of his thoughts, and who does not wish to be surprised by the curiosity of others:

The artist is a sensitive creature, who fears light and noise, who suffers often and is consumed by nostalgia. People are almost all his enemies, and friends, those closest to him, are the worst. [...] He lives behind walls, the artist, without time, [...] often in his shell.<sup>23</sup>

Paul Klee, who confessed that it was very difficult for him to have social feelings, upheld a similar idea of reclusion, likewise adopting the metaphor of the shell: “If I had to paint a perfectly truthful self-portrait, I would show a peculiar shell. And inside—it would have to be made clear to everyone—I sit like a kernel in a nut.”<sup>24</sup>

George Grosz referred to the same theme but in relation to his workshop, like a world isolated from the rest that

serves you like the shell to an oyster, which sometimes shuts up quickly. Sometimes it is like the home of a very sensitive snail. When you are inside, it occasionally sounds empty and hollow, but at the same time it seems to allow you to listen to the unending melody of the sea.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, the longing for solitude is relative and depended a great deal both on temperament and circumstances. Many artists had a stable family life or couple relationship, but there were those who nonetheless yearned for company, as is the case of María Blanchard, whose life was marked by physical deformity and by the difficult challenge of finding her own space in the Parisian art world. Although she sometimes received family visits, something that disturbed her greatly, solitude marked her existence, and on occasion, even though it was necessary to work, being permanently alone was very hard for her, since chosen solitude was not the same as imposed solitude. In 1925 she wrote:

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<sup>23</sup> Nolde, *Letres. 1894-1926*, 175-76.

<sup>24</sup> Klee, *The Diaries of Paul Klee, 1898-1918*, 185.

<sup>25</sup> Grosz, *Un sí menor y un no mayor*, 375.

... to live as I have lived would have been unsustainable for anybody, nobody knows how horrible it has been. There is no art or anything that is enough: it is not true! The important artists have never lived alone. Picasso told me of the horror he had of going home when he lived alone...<sup>26</sup>

At times, the solitude that was sought for creativity was not absolute. In 1912, Oskar Kokoschka began a temperamental romantic relationship with Gustav Mahler's widow Alma, which lasted three years despite their conflicting interests and characters: she was used to shining in the most select international and Viennese social circles, while he was a young painter prone to despondency and seclusion, somewhat misanthropic, depressive and lacking in money. Subject to pathological jealousy, Kokoschka tried to change his lover's customs and would spend the days awaiting news from her.

The painter was constantly reproachful of Alma, whose presence he demanded all the time, and whom he wished through any means to make believe that it was essential for her to be alongside him so they could develop his talent and his painting. He desired solitude, but solitude that was shared. The pressure he exerted on his lover to stay in isolation together while the artist worked was continuous. No other case compares for proving how emotional blackmail can be employed with the apparent justification that it was necessary for art. In March 1914, Kokoschka wrote: "If you cannot be for me what I so need, my talent, which I gain through love, will abandon me."<sup>27</sup> Alma Mahler was not prepared to accept being a passive muse, and this was possibly the main cause of their separation, which drove the artist to a kind of madness: "The only thing I desire every day, the only thing that would give me true happiness, is to be able to live with you, is your constant closeness, that you be by my side while I work."<sup>28</sup>

It was not always complete and permanent solitude that was desired, therefore, and there are some artists who had a pure sense of family. In his letters, Sorolla often bemoaned the fact that work compelled him to be far from his wife Clotilde. To quote just one example from the

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<sup>26</sup> Madaule, *Catalogue raisonné de Maria Blanchard*, 85.

<sup>27</sup> Kokoschka, *Cartas a Alma Mahler*, 142.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 159-60.

copious correspondence to his wife, when the painter was in Plasencia, on one of the many trips his New York commission for the Hispanic Society obliged him to make, which took him around the Spanish nation in search of motifs for the large panels that he would paint for Archer Milton Huntington, he wrote on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1917: “All Huntington’s money is worth nothing compared to these great hardships. Yet the only compensation is my poor children, and because of them and for them all the hardships are roses without thorns.”<sup>29</sup>

Looking back in 1926, the sculptor Arturo Martini told his friend Francesco Messina the travails he went through when he roamed the streets and had nothing to eat. He felt like a hero, although he drew attention to the miseries associated with the life of those who decide to undertake the hard road of art. He thought it was beautiful to listen to the heroic gestures associated with bohemia, but only when they were lived could one really come to know sacrifice and renunciation:

Hunger, not for one day but for months and years, no affection, no love, because the man who suffers has no time to dedicate to the joys of life. Everything is dark, friends disappear, and in the solitude and the misery there is even a shortage of time to work, because you must go out in search of 5 liras to eat, and it goes on like this with your shoes falling apart, and getting worse and worse, until you are walking without socks and with your feet wet, you have no home and not even the possibility of washing your face because even the landlady has thrown you out on the street.<sup>30</sup>

Much more pragmatic was Max Ernst. Although he admitted that creation required isolation, in an interview given to Robert Lebel in 1969, he answered the question of whether the artist should be alone:

You can’t give general rules about it. As I am neither solitary by temperament nor hugely gregarious, I need solitude, with myself, when I’m in the mood to paint, company when I’m in the mood to talk. For the rest, I hold by the Arab proverb: ‘God bless him who keeps his visits short’.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Sorolla, *Epistolarios de Joaquín Sorolla*, Vol. II, 320.

<sup>30</sup> Martini. *Le lettere di Arturo Martini*), 132-33.

<sup>31</sup> Ernst, *Escrituras*, 366.

Silence is found in solitude, although it is a silence filled by the voices of subjectivity, because when artists are alone, they sometimes find themselves with a “*self*” that can seem strange to them but that becomes completely real company, one that emerges in creative and emotional isolation. In Paris, Ramón Gaya noted in his diary on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1953:

More and more, *being alone* is to find myself again with *someone* who perhaps always accompanies me, but who only appears, reappears, when there is absolutely no one around.

No, it is not solitude itself – as it is for Cernuda – but someone very actual, a real, almost bodily companion. Having got used to him, I’ve ended up loving him, valuing him.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Gaya, *Diario de un pintor (1952-1953)*, 51.

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