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Mnemosyne's Solitude in Broch and Kunitz

Taking a passage from a Hölderlin palimpsest as its point of departure, this essay compares the ways in which Hermann Broch (1886-1951) and Stanley Kunitz (1905-2006) present and discuss the nexus of individual loneliness, suicide, the need for dialogue, and the societal implications of solitude in their literary works, essays, and conversations.

Keywords: Broch, Kunitz, community, loneliness

In a draft of Friedrich Hölderlin's poem *Mnemosyne* (written around 1803), the mythical nymph and mother of all muses starts in medias res with a collective self-diagnosis of isolation, disorientation, numbness, and near muteness in exile: "Ein Zeichen sind wir, deutungslos / Schmerzlos sind wir und haben fast / die Sprache in der Fremde verloren." ("We are one sign, pointing nowhere, impossible to decipher. We cannot feel any pain, and in exile, we have almost lost the ability to speak," my free transl., OB) Hölderlin's *Mnemosyne* ends with an open-ended diagnosis asserting that "mourning" ("Trauer") is either missing, or that all our attempts at ritualizing grief are continuous failures ("fehlet die Trauer").¹ Subjected to aimless dispersion and consigned to the brink of speechlessness, the "we" that is evoked by *Mnemosyne* mourns the impossibility of mourning and offers a radical perspective on extreme solitude which in turn sustains the abandoned precarious community's resilient aliveness. Hölderlin's reimagining

¹ Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Gedichte*, 1033.

of Mnemosyne's solitary, exiled maternal voice which speaks for a dialogic nexus that is threatened by extinction evokes all our senses, and our longing for a community that would be capable of engaging in courageous dialogue, and of facing the inner wounds of our lonely, violent selves.

In his fragmentary theogonic project, *Die Weltalter* (1811, *The Ages of the World*), one of Hölderlin's early friends, the philosopher F.W.J. Schelling, posits that God's coming-into-being is nourished by a primordial interplay between solitude and power.² According to Schelling's speculative narrative, the "primeval being" that will later become God has to endure "terrifying loneliness" ("schreckliche[n] Einsamkeit") unaided, and "has to fight its way through this chaotic state all by itself."³ Schelling's mythopoetic passage is further developed in Ludwig Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christenthums* (1841) where God is characterized as synonymous with what Feuerbach calls "absolute Einsamkeit" ("absolute loneliness"). Feuerbach gives Schelling's scenic choreography a pointedly pragmatic turn in which solitude, independence, and self-reliance are interchangeable characteristics.⁴

To what degree does existential loneliness correlate with the semi-stable status of a literary work of art which, according to Friedrich Nietzsche in a journal entry from 1888-89, always consists of a plurality

² Schelling, *Ausgewählte Schriften* 4, 232: "[...] die ewige Kraft schlechthin, die Stärke Gottes, wodurch vor allem andern Er Selbst als Er Selbst ist, der einzige, von allem abgeschnittene, der zuerst und allein seyn muß, damit anderes seyn könne."

³ Schelling, *Ausgewählte Schriften* 4, 255: "[...] dem Urwesen aber in seiner schrecklichen Einsamkeit kann nichts helfen; es muß diesen chaotischen Zustand allein und für sich durchkämpfen."

⁴ Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, 74: "Gott als Gott, als einfaches Wesen, ist allein, ein einsamer Gott. Gott als Gott ist selbst nichts Anderes, als die absolute, hypostasirte Einsamkeit und Selbstständigkeit; den einsam kann nur sein, was selbstständig ist. Einsam seyn können ist ein Zeichen von Denk- und Charakterkraft." In his parodistic attach on Feuerbach, *Die Autolatrie oder Selbstanbetung, ein Geheimniß der Jung-Hegel'schen Philosophie. Ein humoristischer Versuch. Offenes Sendschreiben an Herrn D. Ludwig Feuerbach* (1843), Reichlin-Meldegg quotes and satirizes Feuerbach's claims about God's solitude at length, see Reichlin-Meldegg, *Die Autolatrie*, 47.

of “solitudes” (“Einsamkeiten”)?⁵ Is every creative act what the poet Else Lasker-Schüler, in her poem “Paul Gangolf” (1923), calls an “extract,” or distillate, of inhabiting the most radical kind of aloneness (“Extrakt tiefsten Alleinseins”)?⁶ According to Maurice Blanchot, in his 1955 volume, *L'espace littéraire* (1955, *The Space of Literature*), every literary text carries and embodies “solitude,” and “is solitary” because it is free of any prescriptive “claim,” and it remains undecidable whether it is complete or unfinished. Every reader of a piece of literature, Blanchot further asserts, “joins the affirmation of the work’s solitude,” while its author takes part in “the risk of this solitude.”⁷

In his novel, *Alte Meister* (1985, *Old Masters*), Thomas Bernhard’s protagonist fights his sense of loneliness by frequently visiting an art museum in Vienna for decades, always sitting on the same bench that he frequented with his deceased wife, across from a Tintoretto painting, and he defines art as a symptom of, as well as an attempt to survive, fundamental human helplessness facing the inescapable challenges of reality.⁸ In his essayistic fragment collection, “Sur la solitude” (2015), a series of dialogic reflections on Spinoza and other writers’ ideas about a community that consists of individual carriers of the loneliness pandemic, Pascal Quignard argues that the experiences of reading, of being untameably alive, and of dying with dignity, all share a connective tissue that consists of hallucinatory yet conscious solitude. Quignard insists that this central pulsating layer of our existence forms

⁵ Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe* 6, 167. Nietzsche also evokes the courage to endure loneliness in his “Dionysos-Dithyramben” (1888-89) Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe* 6, 389, 394

⁶ Lasker-Schüler, *Gedichte*, 351-53, here: 353. Like Hermann Broch, Else Lasker-Schüler was forced into exile by the Nazi regime’s reign of terror.

⁷ Blanchot, *L'espace littéraire*, 15: “La solitude de l’oeuvre a pour premier cadre cette absence d’exigence qui ne permet jamais de la lire achevée ni inachevée. [...] L’oeuvre est solitaire [...] qui la lit entre dans cette affirmation de la solitude de l’oeuvre, comme celui qui l’écrit appartient au risqué de cette solitude.”

⁸ Bernhard, *Alte Meister*, 302-303: “Die Kunst insgesamt ist ja auch nichts anderes als eine Überlebenskunst [...] Alle diese Bilder sind außerdem Ausdruck der absoluten Hilflosigkeit des Menschen, mit sich und dem, das ihn zeitlebens umgibt, fertig zu werden.”

an “untamable core” (“nucleus indomesticable”),⁹ an ongoing inner experience that he demands be respected as a vital secret that cannot be photographed, filmed, or taken into epistemic ownership in any way.¹⁰

Making a sales pitch for getting solitude under control and for levelling off its threats with the purpose of producing standardized productive members of society, the Swiss psychoanalyst Jean Michel Quinodoz posits, with a disappointingly aseptic and conformist impetus, that loneliness and its unruly carriers can be domesticated. He asserts that “when tamed, separation anxiety becomes a vivifying force: the taming of solitude is a matter not of eliminating anxiety but of learning to confront it and to use it in order to place it in the service of life.”¹¹ Similarly conforming to the growing market for self-guides in loneliness comfort, Batchelor, in his recent book-length essay, *The Art of Solitude* (2020), tries to sell a watered down version of loneliness as a palatable tonic, “the middle ground of solitude, which I consider a site of autonomy, wonder, contemplation, imagination, inspiration, and care.” Batchelor explicitly refuses to provide in-depth discussions of “isolation and alienation as the dark, tragic sides of solitude,” and contents himself with pitching “solitude as a practice, a way of life,” promising to “disclose its extent and depth by telling stories of its practitioners.”¹²

As Alberti reminds us in her 2019 monograph, *A Biography of Loneliness*, it is important to account for the historical cultural contexts of solitude, and she reminds the reader that we lack a nuanced vocabulary to comprehend the complexity that is easily glossed over by any singular psychological label, “[l]oneliness is not ahistorical or universal. Nor is it a single emotion.”¹³ Coining the term “cloneliness” in his homonymous 2019 study, O’Sullivan offers a gloomy crescendo that culminates in a dystopian twist of the reciprocity between

⁹ Quignard, *Sur l’idée d’une communauté de solitaires*, 65-71. Here: 70.

¹⁰ Quignard, *Sur l’idée d’une communauté de solitaires*, 70: “[...] non public, imphotographiable, infilmable, incommunicable, comme allergique dans son secret.”

¹¹ Quinodoz, *The Taming of Solitude*, 3.

¹² Batchelor, *The Art of Solitude*, ix.

¹³ Alberti, *A Biography of Loneliness*, 223.

loneliness and a dialogic drive: “Cloneliness shapes and molds users with the machines and algorithms of surveillance capitalism into the interconnected loners it needs; when each one of us finds the ‘incommunicable personality’ that only loneliness reveals, we might then feel truly connected.”¹⁴

This essay invites a comparative understanding of what the Polish poet and essayist Adam Zagajewski calls “the paradox of solitude versus solidarity” by examining how the works of the exiled Austrian novelist, essayist, and poet Hermann Broch (1886-1951), and the American poet and essayist Stanley Kunitz (1905-2006) conduct soundings of extreme loneliness, loss, and mourning.¹⁵ While Broch’s and Kunitz’s lives were most likely only tangentially connected through the poet Jean Starr Untermeyer (1886-1970) who was a friend of Broch’s and the American translator of his lyrical stream-of-consciousness novel, *Der Tod des Vergil* (1945, *The Death of Virgil*), and who was in correspondence with Kunitz,¹⁶ both writers share aesthetic affinities in their pursuit of writing as an art that requires a courageous reader because it activates a process that at once evokes and works through scenes of radical loneliness.

In an essay written between 1939 and 1941 that became part of his theoretical work on mass psychopathology, *Massenwahntheorie: Beiträge zu einer Psychologie der Politik* (Theory of Mass Delusion: Contributions to a Psychology of Politics), Broch posits that the source of our susceptibility to mass manipulation is an inescapable “primal fear” (“Ur-Angst”). This constitutive fear, Broch argues, in turn derives from an inescapable “loneliness in the face of death” (“Todeseinsamkeit”), or what the American sociologist David Riesman, in his classic, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the American Character* (1950), calls “the terror of loneliness,” which,

¹⁴ O’Sullivan, *Cloneliness*, 199.

¹⁵ Zagajewski, *Solidarity, Solitude*, x. For a discussion of the interweaving of loneliness and social awareness in the textual worlds of Kafka, Peter Weiss, and Elias Canetti see Berwald, “Polis, Solitude, and Solidarity”.

¹⁶ For archival information on Untermeyer’s correspondence with Kunitz, see <https://library.buffalo.edu/pl/collections/detail.html?ID=40> (last accessed September 29, 2020).

as Broch asserts, we continuously try to “drown” (“übertäuben”) in “ecstatic” hyperactivity linked to alleged values (“durch die Ekstase fortwährenden Wertgeschehens”).¹⁷

In Broch’s poem “Echosinn” (1946), language herself is presented as embodying loneliness, always moved to search for “the unspeakable,” for that which resists being domesticated and kept in conceptual captivity (“Sprache, / [...] / sucherische, / hindrängend zum Unbeschreibbaren”).¹⁸ Confined to his deathbed inside a ship that carries him from Greece back home, the poet Virgil in Broch’s genre-defying summum opus, the lyrical novel *Der Tod des Vergil*, discusses the interplay of art, ethics, and power with his friend, the Roman emperor Augustus, who wants to persuade Virgil to give him the unfinished *Aeneid* manuscript to use it as propaganda for his empire, in dialogue scenes that alternate with the dying Virgil’s solitary dream visions of traumatic encapsulation and intermittent release from fear.¹⁹ Broch’s protagonist Virgil undergoes recurrent nightmares of being buried alive, immobilized by terror, “alone, without support” (“im Grauensstillstand [...] einsam und ohne Beistand”), his solitary “self” (“Ich”) “dissolved,” under anonymous scopic surveillance, and itself reduced to a frozen gaze (“das Ich, aufgelöst und einverstart in den Blick des ringsum Drohenden, das blickbedrohte Ich, längst selber nur noch starrender Blick”).²⁰ Broch’s Virgil experiences a series of

¹⁷ Broch, *Massenwahntheorie*, 298: “Panik ist der Ausbruch jener metaphysischen Ur-Angst, die aus der jeder Seele eingeborenen Todeseinsamkeit entspringt und bloß durch die Ekstase fortwährenden Wertgeschehens übertäubt zu werden vermag [...]” Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 138. See also Ritzer, “Massenwahntheorie.” The protagonists in Broch’s novel trilogy *Die Schlafwandler* (1932, *The Sleepwalkers*) also discuss and embody correlations between the individual’s psychological isolation and a society’s blind obedience to authorities, see Broch, *Die Schlafwandler*.

¹⁸ Broch, *Gedichte*, 64-65, here: 64: “Sprache, beschreibende, selber unbeschreibliche, / sucherische, / hindrängend zum Unbeschreibbaren.”

¹⁹ Recent useful introductory research on Broch’s *Der Tod des Vergil* includes Heizmann, “A Farewell to Art,” and Heizmann, “Der Tod des Vergil.” For recent discussions of the interplay of ethics and trauma in Broch’s work, see Berwald, “Waiting as Resistance,” and Berwald, “Guilt and Autonomy.”

²⁰ Broch, *Der Tod des Vergil*, 162, 152-53; *The Death of Virgil*, 169, 160-61.

visions of “primal terror” and dreams of being an animal that is cut off from its herd and exposed to predatory enemies (“niemals erloschen die Erinnerung des versprengten Herdentieres, die Erinnerung des Ur-Grauens [...]”).²¹ At once an incantation of the physical, political, and spiritual layers of extreme solitude of a dying, hallucinating fictionalized poet, Broch’s *Der Tod des Vergil* offers at the same time sustained palimpsests of diagnostic reflections on community and the boundaries of the sayable in the face of imminent death and irreversible separation from dialogic symposium.

Broch offers another compelling literary example of lethal loneliness in “Steinerer Gast” (“Stone Guest,” named after the Don Juan myth), a story that is embedded in Broch’s last novel, *Die Schuldlosen*, (1950, *The Guiltless*). In this story, Andreas, a suicidal and guilt-ridden retired merchant to whom the narrator refers to as “A.,” accentuating his lack of dialogic impetus and of a stable identity, receives an unexpected visit by an enigmatic old bee-keeper to whom he confesses his guilt of lifelong indifference towards others, including a young woman who took her own life after he had abandoned her.²² In a relentless self-diagnosis that precedes his suicide, A. also admits that his indifference towards the suffering of others helped him to profit financially from war and from Soviet and German inhuman dictatorial regimes.²³ Turning from confessional self-analysis to a critique of society as a whole, A. suggests

²¹ Broch, *Der Tod des Vergil*, 156-57. In a letter from March 8, 1940 to the exiled Austrian literary critic Ernst Polak (1886-1947), Broch shares that composing *Der Tod des Vergil* have taken a toll on his psychological health and have resulted in frequent death thoughts, see Broch, *Briefe 2*, 179: “Todesgedanken verfolgen mich jetzt unaufhörlich. Das hängt z.T. mit dem Vergil zusammen, der ja für mich die weitgehendste und erreichbarste Todesnähe darstellt; man identifiziert sich nicht ungestraft monatelang mit einem Sterbenden.” In the same letter, Broch reveals that the “horror” (“Entsetzen”) of the Nazi regime was a main reason for his tireless pursuit of literary and essayistic projects. Referring to the arrest in 1939 of the journalist Milena Jesenská (1886-1944) who was Broch’s friend, Polak’s former wife, and Franz Kafka’s former fiancée, and who was killed in the Ravensbrück death camp in 1944, Broch writes, “es ist eben auch dieses Entsetzen, das mich stets zu neuer Aktivität treibt.” See Broch, *Briefe 2*, 180.

²² Broch, *Die Schuldlosen*, 248.

²³ Broch, *Die Schuldlosen*, 264: “Der Krieg wütete in Europa, und ich machte Geld; die russische Revolution verwandelte die ehemalige Siegerklasse ihres Landes in

that an inescapable sense of loneliness stems from a mutually reinforcing suffocating correlation between our indifference to our own human core vulnerability and our lack of empathy towards the suffering of others (“Ur-Gleichgültigkeit ist es, nämlich die gegen das eigene Menschtum; die Gleichgültigkeit vor dem Leid des Nebenmenschen aber ist eine Folge hiervon.”)²⁴ According to Broch’s self-loathing protagonist A.’s lucid diagnosis of some of the roots of dictatorships, many are trying to escape their solitude and thereby intensify their predicament of being “paralyzed by loneliness” (“einsamkeits-gelähmt,” an evocative term coined by Broch). A. insists on the nexus between the personal and the political, claiming that Hitler’s rise would not have been possible without the “paralysis-by-loneliness” pandemic (“Gelähmt fliehen wir [...] vor der Einsamkeit in noch nachbarlosere Einsamkeit; einsamkeitsgelähmt sind wir. Und wir haben Hitler gewähren lassen, den Nutznießer unserer Lähmung.”)²⁵ In a self-commentary on *The Guiltless*, Broch argues that a “complete disengagement” and absence of empathy between individuals constitutes an inescapable mode of indifference, and that unless this self-inflicted paradigm is broken, physical violence remains the only mode of engaging the fellow human being.²⁶ Broch further asserts that the monadic individual is always standing by to effortlessly “obliterate” itself and others (“ohne weiters sich auszulöschen bereit ist, aber ebenso bedenkenlos auch das Neben-Individuum auslöscht.”)²⁷

How does Broch’s contemporary Stanley Kunitz think through and present creative conflicts and collusions between loneliness, solidarity, and ways to possibly overcome the violence that is inherent in, and an effect of, radical solitude? Reflecting on his childhood in a 1990

eine [...] von Leichenbergen, und ich machte Geld; das politische Untier Hitler kam vor meinen Augen Schritt für Schritt zur Herrschaft, und ich machte Geld.”

²⁴ Broch, *Die Schuldlosen*, 265. See also Broch, *Die Schuldlosen*, 269: “Gleichgültig gegen fremdes Leid, gleichgültig gegen das eigene Geschick, gleichgültig gegen das Ich im Menschen, gegen seine Seele.”

²⁵ Broch, *Die Schuldlosen*, 268-69.

²⁶ Broch, *Die Schuldlosen*, 304-305: “[...] vollkommenen Verbindungslosigkeit zwischen Mensch und Mensch, die mitleidlose Situation der zwischen ihnen herrschenden völligen Gleichgültigkeit, so daß ihnen nur noch ein einziges Verständigungsmittel geblieben ist: die nackte Gewalt.”

²⁷ Broch, *Die Schuldlosen*, 304-305.

interview, Kunitz shares, "As I look back on it, my main impression is of how lonely I was."²⁸ In an interview from 1991, Kunitz describes himself as being in lifelong existential exile "because my feeling of metaphysical loneliness, something I experienced even as a child, is so deeply ingrained."²⁹ In the same passage of the interview, Kunitz offers his permanent social dialogic longing as a counterpoint, "my search for a community has been one of my most urgent motivations."³⁰

Kunitz elaborates on the interplay of a poet's solitude and communal leanings in a 1989 interview, "I think of poets as solitaries with a heightened sense of community."³¹ Referring to Henry James and Paul Celan, Kunitz outlines a similar complementary, oscillating reciprocity between a poet's solitude and need for dialogue in an interview given in 1995.³² Interviewed in 1997, Kunitz asserts, in a similar vein, "Poetry says, 'You are not alone in the world: all your fears, anxieties, hopes, despairs are the common property of the race.' In a way, poetry is the most private of all the arts, and yet it is public, too, a form of social bonding."³³ Shortly before his death, Kunitz refers to Celan again, insisting on the solitary and communal layers of creating poetry: "Paul Celan's formulation that the poem is 'solitary and on its way' strikes the ideal balance. A poet needs both the awareness of the self and the desire to know others, to share one's sense of being with others. The poet in the very act of writing is reaching out to others."³⁴

²⁸ Kunitz, *Conversations with Stanley Kunitz*, 123.

²⁹ Kunitz, *Conversations with Stanley Kunitz*, 149.

³⁰ Kunitz, *Conversations with Stanley Kunitz*, 149.

³¹ Kunitz, *Interviews and Encounters*, 156.

³² Kunitz, *Conversations with Stanley Kunitz*, 181: "When Henry James, toward the end of his life, reflected on his long creative voyage, he identified his point of embarkation as the port of his loneliness. That is true of most of the poets I know. 'A poem is solitary and on its way,' said Paul Celan, the poet of the Holocaust. What sets it on its way is the search for a community." See also Kunitz, *The Wild Braid*, 54: "I strongly identify with Henry James when he wrote, in answer to a letter asking him what compelled him to write, 'The port from which I set out was, I think, that of the essential loneliness of my life....'"

³³ Kunitz, *Conversations with Stanley Kunitz*, 192.

³⁴ Kunitz, *The Wild Braid*, 102.

Kunitz's poem "Sotto Voce" (1958) exposes the reader to a spiraling dynamic between a disoriented speaker who stages himself as "a felon / Whose prison is songs" and his vision of a "huntress," perhaps in allusion to the Ovidian myth of Diana, a libidinous projection screen whose gaze and voice he desires. Teasingly, or with threatening intent, the speaker tries to push the persecuted "huntress" to admit that she is irretrievably lost to language and its salutary uses. Projecting his radical self-isolation on the fantasized female beloved, the speaker in the poem posits a shared longing for redemption through the liberating gift of language: "Say to me only / Huntress of nerves / You too are lonely / For the language that saves."³⁵ The final stanza of the poem evokes a lethal commonality between the voice and the addressee of the poem's continuous apostrophe. The inescapable prospect of being executed ("gallows," "axe"), negates any hope for the possibility of finding shelter and protection. This vertiginous constellation of an apostrophe that chases its own tail is further explored by the American poet Jorie Graham. Graham's poem "Solitude" (2002), presents an anonymous cryptic exchange between a fictionalized editor and author.³⁶ Her aporetic poem "Fast" offers a disoriented apostrophe (2017): "[...] Whom am I talking to – / You talk to me when I am alone. I am alone."³⁷ The title of Graham's recent poem "Whom are you" (2020) bleeds into the main text, initiating an apostrophic investigation: "Whom are you // speaking to. What is that listening to / us. I'd like to know whom to address."³⁸

Two of Kunitz's most well-known poems mourn the loss of his father and of a friend who both took their own lives. His poem "The Artist" (1971) works through the suicide of the painter Mark Rothko (1903-1970), a close friend of Kunitz's. Not unlike Broch's Virgil, the self-isolated Rothko outlined in this poem finds himself "trapped in his monumental void" and suffers from what he experiences as spatial encapsulation and emotional suffocation: "His paintings grew darker every year. / They filled the walls, they filled the room; / eventually

³⁵ Kunitz, *Collected Poems*, 94.

³⁶ Graham, *Never*, 66-70.

³⁷ Graham, *Fast*, 19.

³⁸ Graham, *Runaway*, 72-73.

they filled his world.” Unlike Virgil in Broch’s novel, Kunitz’s Rothko liberates himself from the encroaching darkness by committing suicide: “At last he took a knife in his hand / and slashed an exit for himself / between the frames [...] / Through the holes of his tattered universe / [...] the light / came pouring in.”³⁹

In his autobiographical poem “The Portrait” (1971), rendered from a first person perspective, Kunitz evokes a traumatic moment from his childhood in which he was physically punished by his mother because he found a photograph of his father who had taken his own life in a public park before Kunitz was born: “My mother never forgave my father / for killing himself / [...] / that spring / when I was waiting to be born.” When the mother saw “the pastel portrait” of her deceased husband in her son’s hand, “she ripped it into shreds / without a single word / and slapped me hard.” This hurtful replacement of language with physical and emotional violence continues to hurt the lyrical voice and its author. It took Kunitz until his advanced adulthood before he could write a poem about his twofold childhood solitude trauma, the absence of a father and the mother’s fierce attempt at obliterating memories of her husband. Far from constituting a healing process, the poem ends with a laconic insistence on the continuous non-closure of the psychic wound sustained by his mother’s anger at his father’s suicide: “In my sixty-fourth year / I can feel my cheek / still burning.”⁴⁰ As the poet and scholar Gregory Orr, a former student of Kunitz, suggests, “[i]n all Kunitz’ poems the father is dead, but this fact in no way undercuts his reality; in fact, it heightens his reality at the psychological level.”⁴¹

Kunitz’s poem “The Long Boat” (1985) presents a scene of existential ambiguity and invites the reader to conduct soundings of the process of accepting death. Offered through a third-person perspective

³⁹ Kunitz, *Collected Poems*, 179. Compare Leonard Cohen’s song “Anthem:” “There is a crack, a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.” It would be worthwhile to examine the contribution of songwriters such as Leonard Cohen (“Lady of Solitude”), Georges Moustaki (“Ma Solitude”), and Townes Van Zandt (“Waiting around to Die”) to evocative and multidimensional discourses on loneliness, often using erotic forms of apostrophe.

⁴⁰ Kunitz, *Collected Poems*, 142.

⁴¹ Orr, *Stanley Kunitz*, 12. See also Orr, *Poetry as Survival*, 193-94.

and yet composed in a compassionately intimate tone, “The Long Boat” confronts us with a solitary male figure’s non-violent and loving self-release into irreversible solitude. In Kunitz’s poem, a nameless male figure realizes that the boat on which he is staying alone has all of a sudden become unmoored. At first, he tries to communicate the problem “to his dear ones on shore,” but they have instantly become unrecognizable, “they had already lost their faces.” Rather than struggling to cling to safety and reconnect with the known, the anonymous protagonist of the poem starts to ease into an uncharted journey in a fearless state, “absolved and free / of his burdens [...] / conscience, ambition, and all / that caring.” The protagonist’s ultimate consent to immersive unlearning and disorientation can be read as the inversion of a birth scene, an allegory of vibrantly perceptive living and dying as a gentle transformational process, “As if it didn’t matter / which way was home; / as if he didn’t know / he loved the earth so much / he wanted to stay forever.”⁴²

While Kunitz mentioned in a public conversation with Gregory Orr that Viking funeral rituals inspired the setting of this poem that evokes the moment of dying, “The Long Boat” also reimagines the literary topos of solitary self-displacement adrift on a boat. Kunitz’s poem can therefore also be read as not only a homage to, but also a radicalization of Rousseau’s *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (1782), in which the protagonist forces himself to return to safety at the last minute. The central image in Kunitz’s *The Long Boat* is also closely aligned to a passage in Hölderlin’s poem *Mnemosyne* which mourns disorientation and existential homelessness but also advocates for freedom from mappability through self-exposure to the sea.⁴³ Between 1985 and

⁴² Kunitz, *Collected Poems*, 240.

⁴³ See Kunitz’s broadcasted conversation with Gregory Orr, “The Writing Life,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KGMzr1kGeoQ>. Last accessed April 2, 2021. For Rousseau’s employment of this topos, see Rousseau, *Rêveries*, 67: “[...] j’allais me jeter seul dans un bateau [...] le yeux tournés vers le ciel, je me laissais aller et dériver lentement au gré de l’eau [...] plongé dans mille rêveries confuses mais délicieuses [...] je me trouvais si loin de l’île que j’étais forcé de travailler de toute ma force pour arriver avant la nuit close.” For Hölderlin’s use of this topos in *Mnemosyne*, see Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Gedichte* 1, 364: “Vorwärts aber und rückwärts wollen wir / Nicht sehn. Uns wiegen lassen, wie / Auf schwankem

1992, Kunitz's wife, the painter Elise Asher, created fourteen paintings that offer dreamlike sympoetic correlations with Kunitz's "The Long Boat."⁴⁴ Most of these paintings feature a flowing elongated human as well as fish-like creature sometimes in a boat, and at times becoming one with the sea. In the foreword to her volume *The Visionary Gleam* (1994), Asher outlines the interplay of aesthetic explorations and psychological soundings that form the core of her creative work, including her *Long Boat* series: "I am well aware of the subterranean parallel to these paintings ("outscares") to my innermost self: my fears of lostness, aging, endings, voids and nothingness."⁴⁵

Offering the reader a sustained intimate apostrophe, Kunitz's long poem, "The Wellfleet Whale" (written 1981) explores unspeakable primal closeness with a dying animal, "as you swung your blind head / toward us and laboriously opened / a bloodshot, glistening eye, / in which we swam with terror and recognition."⁴⁶ In a 1968 interview, Kunitz describes his encounter with a dying whale that had beached at Cape Cod two years earlier, an experience that inspired the poem, "I put my hand on his flanks, and I could feel the life inside that whale. And while I was standing there, suddenly he opened his eye, and it was a big, red, cold eye, and it was staring directly at me. Then it closed,

Kahne der See." ("But we don't want to look ahead or back. We want to be cradled as if / on the ocean's swaying boat.")

⁴⁴ Mostly taken from lines of Kunitz's poem, the titles of the paintings in Asher's *The Long Boat* series are *The Long Boat* (oil on linen, 1985), *When His Boat Snapped Loose* (oil on linen, 1985), *At First He Tried to Wave* (oil on linen, 1985), *To His Dear Ones on Shore* (oil on canvas, 1985-86), *In the Rolling Fog* (oil on linen, 1985), *He Loved the Earth so Much* (oil on canvas, 1985), *Absolved and Free* (oil on linen, 1986), *All That Caring* (oil on linen, 1986), *Content to Lie with the Family Ghosts* (oil on linen, 1986), *Endlessly Drifting* (oil on canvas, 1986), *Rocked by the Infinite* (oil on canvas, 1986), *Which Way Was Home* (oil on canvas, 1986), *Peace! Peace!* (oil on canvas, 1988), *In the Slop of His Cradle* (oil on linen, 1992; this painting was used as the cover illustration for Asher's *The Visionary Gleam*, 1994, and for Kunitz's *The Collected Poems*, 2000), see Asher, *The Visionary Gleam*, plates 27-40. Asher and Kunitz were married from 1958 until Asher's death in 2004.

⁴⁵ Asher, *The Visionary Gleam*, s.p.

⁴⁶ Kunitz 1983, 9-14, here: 13; Kunitz, *Collected Poems*, 241-45, here: 244.

and he died [...]”⁴⁷ A similar constellation of solitude as vertiginous visual self-recognition is also operative in Kunitz’s poem “King of the River” (1971), an elegy of Pacific salmon being driven to their life-giving death, “you have looked into the eyes / of your creature self, / which are glazed with madness.”⁴⁸ From its outset, “The Wellfleet Whale” poem suggests a symbiosis of song and solitude, the whale and the writing human are engaged in the same survival project, producing “sounds that all melt into a liquid / song with endless variations, / as if to compensate / for the vast loneliness of the sea.”⁴⁹

In his poem “Material XI: Die Internationale” from his volume *Der Stoff zum Leben 3* (1990), German poet Volker Braun gives Kunitz’s palimpsest of man-whale encounter in shared solitude a political turn, evoking an ambivalent, resigned yet resilient, feeling of solidarity with fellow humans and all animals, “touched by the sensible whales,” unearthing a “primal desire” for sensual and political renewal, and for overcoming our humiliating and dehumanizing “loneliness on earth” (“Einsamkeit auf der Erde”).⁵⁰ Not long before his death, Kunitz told Genine Lentine, “There’s a conversation that keeps going on beyond the human level, in many ways, beyond language, extending into the atmosphere itself.”⁵¹

⁴⁷ Kunitz 1993, 6. Compare the poem’s epigraph, Kunitz, *Collected Poems*, 241: “I put my hands on his flanks and I could feel the life inside him. And while I was standing there, suddenly he opened his eye. It was a big, red, cold eye, and it was staring directly at me. A shudder of recognition passed between us. Then the eye closed forever.”

⁴⁸ Kunitz, *The Wellfleet Whale and Companion Poems*, 1-3, here: 3; Kunitz, *Collected Poems*, 170-72. Here: 172. See also Orr, *Poetry as Survival*, 194: “Here, the salmon struggling upriver to spawn is an emblem of the self driven by instinctual demands and yet craving spiritual and emotional rewards beyond the merely biological. It is an incantatory hymn of the anguished self trapped in its body [...]”

⁴⁹ Kunitz, *The Wellfleet Whale and Companion Poems*, 9; Kunitz, *Collected Poems*, 241.

⁵⁰ Braun, *Der Stoff zum Leben 1-4*, 69-70. Here: 70: “Und der versunkene Mensch, gerührt von den vernünftigen Walen / Erhebt sich zu seinesgleichen, zu den winzigen Wurzeln // Und unser verrotteter Bund, solange erniedrigt / Von Einsamkeit auf der Erde / Fühlt / das elementare Verlangen.”

⁵¹ Kunitz, *The Wild Braid*, 62.

In what ways can our acts of reading and writing be at once solitary acts and unpredictably communal experiences? Can solitude, even with its wounded layers of fear, become synonymous with limitless dialogic reciprocity? *Mnemosyne's* exiled voice explores her own solitude and undertakes the emotional labor of mourning the loss of her sense of belonging in multiple textual threads that sustain Hölderlin's palimpsests, Broch's dying Virgil, and Kunitz's exploratory selves. These writers continue to be indispensable partners in transdisciplinary conversations on the trauma of solitude and its relation to a dialogic life beyond any boundaries. As the lyrical persona in Kunitz's poem, "The Snakes of September" (1985), comes to discover with incantatory humility, loneliness, if experienced to its full depth, can nourish an ecstatic sense of community beyond anthropocentric labels, "At my touch the wild / braid of creation / trembles."⁵²

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⁵² Kunitz, *Collected Poems*, 221. See also Kunitz, *A Kind of Order; A Kind of Folly*, 304: "There is an aspect of one's existence that has nothing to do with personal identity, but that falls away from self, blends into the natural universe. To be human is not to be apart from or superior to the whole marvelous show of creation." See also Kunitz, *The Wild Braid*, 54: "One of the great satisfactions of the human spirit is to feel that one's family extends across the borders of the species and belongs to everything that lives."

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