

# DIVISION

A QUARTERLY PSYCHOANALYTIC FORUM

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### The Subject of Psychoanalysis

David LICHTENSTEIN, Editor

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



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# 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?*

**L**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?

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We wish for solitude to come to us naturally: at the top of Mont Ventoux; during "a delicious evening" at Walden Pond; at Todtnauberg 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, pleurably 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.

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The solitude I experience in Granada is of a different kind: refined, protected, cultivated (call it effeminate, 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 his window. He is frightened of the elements, and feels scorn for the noisy rabble. ...He is ready to place his entire soul into the diminutive and bring the world into his room.*

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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

*Like a boy gazing in wonder at his mother dressed in bright colours 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



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.*

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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 someone else who is present while I am alone, is an environment—a room, a house, or a city. And in one form or another, m/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.

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.

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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 del Sol #1, overlooking the old city, I feel held by the aloof beauty of the Sierra, whose snow-covered crown and bluish coat softens the ardor of a pitiless 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 snuffs 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 rooftop; the fellow who loves 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 whole 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 maternal that we leave behind (but never quite forget) as we grow up and learn to live in language, and in cities. *A nightingale snuffs out sighs, and a pheasant chases them through the dust.*

**2** 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, banks, 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 closed 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

in this place?! But mostly I feel grateful for the opportunity to spend large portions of the day uninterrupted...

...

...and sheltered: *balconies closed / making cages for kisses.* The architecture of solitude, what does it look like?

*Granada loves tiny things. The diminutive's only mission is to limit, enclose, bring indoors and place in our hands objects and ideas which seem too large: time and space, the sea, the moon, distances, and even action. We don't want the world to be so big, the sea so deep. We need to limit and domesticate anything huge.*

Not much in this town was built to impress or intimidate, neither physically nor



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 monu-

ment 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—austere in its appearance, *la catedral* intimidates 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-

even and steep, forcing me to slow down, feel the ground under my feet. After a downpour the ancient stones are as slippery as polished marble. In its dedication to complicated, enclosed, and protected spaces, Granada can feel relentless. Anyone who is in a hurry, or elderly, or handicapped, or pushing a stroller will have to take long detours...and still not arrive at the desired destination. For some, the magnificent view from the Puerta del Sol will be forever unattainable: like so many places in Granada, the *placeta* can be reached from five different directions, but every single path involves climbing at least 200 steps.

...

Steps from behind, drawing closer; I turn around—nobody. Whispers beneath my balcony. I look down—no one.

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In Granada's thin mountain air, sound is crisp and travels fast on the steep and serpentine *cuestas y calles* of the Realejo and Albaycin. I can never be sure where they are, those bodies whose voices and motions I hear but cannot see. Are they following me; watching out for me; delivering a message? Who sent them? A hand on my shoulder, I turn... *You see them from the corner of the eye, never face to face.* Will they come back tomorrow? It takes awhile before I give myself permission to let go of the idea that the voices want my attention. Without purpose or reason they emerge from the houses and gardens, roam the alleys, climb the steps to my house, enter through the roof. A radio by an open window, a guitar player in his garden, a dog chasing a cat. *In the cool fountain a serpent is singing.* This morning, as I walk down the worn cobblestone steps, I make the invisible voices my companions. They no longer bother me. I'm glad they are here.

...

The soundscape of running water, soothing and rejuvenating. *Granada has two rivers, four thousand irrigation ditches, fifty fountains, a thousand and one jets of water*—they are the city's most congenial instrument. In every corner I turn, every plaza I cross, every courtyard I enter the sweet murmur of living water makes me feel welcome. There is nothing dazzling or intellectual about the water in Granada, *that is left for Versailles where the water is spectacle, and where it is as abundant as the sea.* Granada's fountains are modest and small, made for the ear and for day dreaming, not for the philosopher's critical eye. Many are hidden in tiny corners, I hear their song long before I see them, and some I never see at all. *Todas las tardes el agua se siente a conversar con sus amigos.* Granada's bashful river, the Darro, lazy and melancholic, is most alive at the *paseo de los tristes*, where even among scores of tourists I am always elsewhere. For centuries the city received its water from the hills of the Alhambra and the garden of the Generalife, where *the water suffers and weeps, silently, full of tiny white violins.*

*For sailing ships  
Seville has a path.  
In the water of Granada  
only sighs can row.*

...

Granada's aesthetic axis, Lorca writes, is the Alhambra. More than that, Granada depends upon the Alhambra for its emotional livelihood. From this 15th-century palace *soberly harmonizing its interiors with the living architecture that lies around it*—the Sierra Nevada, the Alpujarra mountains—the city draws her confidence. Without the Alhambra, once considered to be among the seven wonders of the world, Granada would not know that solitude was a way of taking place, that to be alone was a faculty so sophisticated that its

education must not be left to nature alone; a capacity so important to our happiness that it must be experienced in an environment that satisfies (and refines) our need for beauty. (The Christian idea of solitude—the saint in the desert, the nun in solitary confinement—cannot tolerate beauty or pleasure, except as lack and renunciation.)

The Alhambra was built as a succession of lavishly decorated central courts surrounded by rooms that give on to the courts. From the city below, the Alhambra resembles an enticing fortress, the spartan, almost hostile exterior walls a glowing red in the sunlight, sheltering the splendor of the interior. Paradise regained.

Inside, the palace space is defined by surface, and surface by decoration. Geometry and ornamentation create an environment where tension, rupture, and contrast are dissolved into a harmonious continuum, *where everything is exactly right, everything has human proportion.* Every single surface in the palace is (or used to be) decorated with the most exquisite ornamentation: calligraphy, arabesque, mosaics, lattice works, *mashrabiyas*. In this universe of repetition and permutation, inexhaustible and composed, there is no message to be understood, no order to be followed. The rhythmic pattern of calligraphic inscriptions evoke an emerging world, a third space, in which things have not been named yet. Transitions are measured and unhurried, never abrupt; "all lines grow out of each other in gradual undulations" (Jones 1910, p.64), straight lines are almost completely absent. Dressed in ornaments, the walls project a veil-like transparency and lightness that makes me forget their unyielding rigidity. Light, air and water too function as decorative elements, connecting space with time: pools as still as mirrors ever so gently fed by fountains that will not disturb their surface, a living image of the sky, moving yet immutable. *I dream I am not dreaming.* For the architects of the Alhambra, beauty gives rise to serenity, "that repose which the mind feels when the eye, the intellect, and the affect(ion)s are satisfied, from the absence of want" (Jones, p.74). The perfect time and place for solitude. An environment in which friction and desire are suspended—not by returning to nature but by transposing nature into art. *Air to dance on our fingertips.*

...

Most visitors have seen the Alhambra before they arrive: travel guides, coffee table books, TV documentaries seduce them into believing that reality conforms to the image. When we enter the palace, for a split second the surprise is almost palpable: so small! 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 ex-

pense. 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 photostream 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.

Descending from the palace on the footpath that leads directly to my home, in the graceful presence of the Sierra Nevada—majestic, overarching, unpossessable—I learn to inhabit Granada: small, humble, a gift not a given. A paradise closed to many—open to those who find beauty in being alone.

...

"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* a difference—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.*

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

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