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“Should I also make a garden out of the desert?”: A Case Against Invisible Hermits

Abstract: Ever since Aristotle’s conjoining of the creative and the melancholic state of mind – in the 33rd section of *Problems* –, much has been written about the relationship between artistic output and melancholy, depression, isolation or even madness. The artist – but also the philosopher – is caught at the centre of a polarising and ongoing debate, with those who wish to see him in a purity of inward contemplation that is unreconcilable with communal living on one side, and those who believe that his main purpose should be to create for others, that there can be no humanity in the search for solitude, on the other. But the figure that best encompasses Aristotle’s description of melancholic isolation as well as its inwardness and detachment from the physical world is none other than the hermit.

This paper explores the question of eremitism, the dilemmas between communal living and inward contemplation, using the figure of the hermit also as an image for the melancholic individual. It traces its particular issues and problematics as portrayed in various sources of criticism of the phenomenon and contextualises the discussion as a matter of spatial analysis, focused on the images and places of eremitism and melancholy: the city and the desert. This perspective also emphasises a number of questions related to eremitism and its “problem”: how far away (isolated) should the hermit be? Should he ever return and, if so, when? And the most important question of all: why must the hermit move toward isolation, toward the desert?

Looking into not just Aristotle but also texts by Szyborska, Tennyson, Buzzati (as well as the hermit in the visual arts) this paper traces the discussion around these questions and attempts to provide some answers.

Keywords: Eremitism, Melancholy, Desert, Isolation, Space.

What is it that we are saying when we say “hermit”? What is the group of actions, gestures, ideologies that are bounded by this word, which allow us to say “hermit” and mean

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something (or someone) in particular? Faced with an answer – any answer, even the most unsatisfactory one – we might then wish to challenge it further, uncovering in the process how a term that has come to mean something apparently so precise is, instead, bounded by fragile barriers; it encompasses more and, thus, appears to mean less. Let us say, in practical terms, that the hermit moves toward isolation. But why *must* the hermit move toward isolation? Or, that the hermit leaves the city and walks toward the desert. But, again, why *must* he do this? Even though the answers are composed of positive statements (telling us what an hermit *is* or *does*), they aren't clear enough to articulate a truly affirmative description. Without any specificity or clarifications, saying that the hermit is one who leaves the city is the same as saying that a hermit is the one who doesn't live in it.

As such, answers to these questions inevitably run the risk of tautological meaninglessness: if he didn't do *x*, he wouldn't be a hermit. But apart from failing to address the original problem, they don't move us closer to any logical conclusions stemming from further inquiries, some of which would be nothing more than obvious clarifications on practical matters: if he *must* move far away, how far is far enough? How long should he stay away? Should he remain alone? When should the hermit return and, more importantly, is a return needed in order to be a hermit or would that return be nothing more than a proof of surrender and failure? Is a hermit meant to be found? Some of these inquiries could be humorously constructed as a play on the oft-repeated musing: if a hermit makes a sound in the woods and one *is* around to hear it, is he still a hermit? And yet, as hard as eremitism may be to define, one thing that quickly becomes obvious is the importance of space and place, even if simply on account of this apparently undeniable factor: there's a place one leaves and another one fashions into the chosen setting of meditative isolation.

As an unfolding of the questions above, this might even allow us to consider hermits beyond the usual suspects: not only St. Jerome or St. Simeon Stylites but also Giovanni Drogo from Dino Buzzati's *The Tartar Steppe*, for example. What can he tell us about eremitism and its conditions? This paper is an exploration of various ideas and questions stemming mostly from criticism of the hermit as a figure viewed from the outside. Its viability is often tested, doubted and questioned, setting forth more profound questions regarding human nature and the great dichotomy between the needs for both interior and exterior lives, so often seemingly at odds.

Another feature that would traditionally be connected with eremitism is melancholy. In fact, we could say melancholy pervades all aspects of eremitism, turning it into another point of contention: is melancholy part of the motivation to adopt a eremitic lifestyle, a consequence of doing so or a risk of avoiding it? All three perspectives can be found throughout the long history of attempts at clarifying the relationship between the individual and the community, as we shall see. Let us begin, however, at one of its earliest iterations: Aristotle and the 33rd of his *Problems*:

Why is it that all men who have become outstanding in philosophy, statesmanship, poetry or the arts are melancholic, and some to such an

extent that they are infected by the diseases arising from black bile, as the story of Heracles among the heroes tells? (...) The same is true of Ajax and Bellerophon; the former went completely insane, and the latter craved for desert places, so that Homer wrote of him: 'But when he was hated of all the gods, then he wandered alone on the plain of Aleïum, eating out his heart, and avoiding the track of men.' (Aristotle 155)

The entire chapter focuses on the extent to which the mental, intellectual and even artistic dimensions of melancholy are sketched out up to the point where they are instantly recognisable to us. Once we put aside the medical context and, particularly, the theory of four humours that frames the discussion, much of the way in which we imagine the dynamics of melancholy, isolation and its deep connection to a rich interior life is present in Aristotle. He considers melancholy as a condition for an unavoidable (because pathological) cause for seeking isolation. It's an extreme and disproportionate lifestyle. And while he recognises that it can be responsible for producing brilliant individuals and works in every field – "In later times there have been Empedocles, Plato, Socrates and many other well-known men. The same is true of most of those who have handled poetry." (157) –, he points out its connection to madness also as an inseparable aspect of isolation and a dangerous consequence of melancholy. It's clear, however, that the author of *Problems* is conscious of the positive elements associated with the eremitic lifestyle as we've come to understand it, even with its melancholy, self-isolation, inwardness and connection to wild places. But his conclusions are still firmly in the classic greek spirit of prizing the virtue of moderation, as the inscription at the temple of Apollo at Delphi: *meden agan*, nothing in excess.

In the epistolary romance of Abelard and Héloïse we find evidence of a very different kind of relationship between eremitism and melancholy:

Mais ne parlons pas, poursuivant-elle, des entraves qu'une femme apporterait à tes études de philosophie, et songe à la situation que te donnerai une alliance légitime. Quel rapport peut-il y avoir entre les travaux de l'école et le train d'une maison, entre un pupitre et un berceau, un livre ou une tablette et une quenouille, un style ou une plume et un fuseau? (...) Aussi voyons nous les philosophes célèbres du temps passé, pleins de mépris pour le monde, quittant, voire fuyant le siècle, s'interdire toute espèce de plaisir et ne se reposer que dans les bras de la philosophie. (Abelard 72)

Abelard does regard himself as a hermit,¹ someone who was forced to leave the city (even if joined by his pupils) to put his life at the service of nobler intellectual affairs, untainted by the troubles of city-life. The genealogy is made clear in the excerpt: as in *Problems*, the relationship between an intellectual life and isolation is immediate. But here we see melancholy on the other side of the equation. If for Aristotle it was the root-cause that led men to run away from society, Héloïse's comment reflects the belief that the social eremitism of a scholar, such as Abelard, can, in fact, be a cure for

the sort of melancholic despair that would assault him if his talents were wasted on a mundane family life. It is, then, the decision to not run away that causes melancholy; cause and effect are inverted.

But these are not the only possible perspectives on the relationship between melancholy and eremitism nor do they establish any sort of one-dimensional spectre. Let us consider, for instance, Nelly Dean's portrait of Edgar Linton in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*:

So deep and sensitive was his aversion, that he refrained from going anywhere where he was likely to see or hear Heathcliff. Grief, and that together, transformed him into a complete hermit: he threw up his office of magistrate, ceased even to attend church, avoided the village on all occasions, and spent a life of entire seclusion within the limits of his park and grounds: only varied rambles on the moors, and visits to the grave of his wife, mostly at evening, or early morning before other wanderers were abroad.

But he was too good to be thoroughly unhappy long. *He* didn't pray for Catherine's soul to haunt him. Time brought resignation, and a melancholy sweeter than common joy. He recalled her memory with ardent, tender love, and hopeful aspiring to the better world, where, he doubted not, she was gone. (Brontë 182-3)

The most striking aspect of this excerpt is not the branding of Edgar as a hermit (even if one might wish to question it) but a conception of a melancholy that seems to fall neither on the side of Aristotle nor Héloïse. If for Aristotle melancholy is at the root of self-isolation and for Héloïse it's the consequence of not isolating oneself, Edgar Linton's melancholy is, quite surprisingly, the bittersweet resignation to isolation; the best of all possible worlds.

Of course, Aristotle's melancholy is not the same as Edgar's (or Emily Brontë's conception of it) nor do we wish to argue for it. The crucial takeaway from this comparison, since we're focused on the motivations and goals of eremitism, is that, as we start looking at and comparing the descriptions and accounts of hermits, we shouldn't be surprised to discover that there are as many different kinds of eremitism as there are different kinds of hermits. Nevertheless, the question of motivation remains at the centre. It's against this motivation that a hermit can be judged or criticised. Subsequently, in our own judgement of the relationship between eremitic motivations and the practices of the hermit, we might shine some light onto our own notions of what a hermit can be. For example, is Abelard really a hermit if he takes his students with him? Or Edgar Linton, if he still has a maid to attend to his needs? This much we can say: each of them went into isolation because, independently of their particular relation to melancholy, their thoughts were directed inward, toward their own contemplation. Consequently, these questions are framed also in a context of space and distance, an axis that has total isolation on one side and communal living on the other. And as all three of the examples above fall somewhere in between, so

does any negative criticism of the hermit that addresses problems of motivation and authenticity.

For those who observe the hermit, a recurrent sense of disillusion and disappointment can often turn into cynicism. This feeling is also split into two extremes, two radical ways of approaching radical asceticism: despair – and even repugnance – at the inhumane but necessary living conditions of the hermit and anger or sarcasm directed at the false hermit who, by still keeping some remnants or semblance of the abandoned society, is not entirely out of sight, is not different enough. The Polish poet Wisława Szymborska stands firmly in this second group in her poem “Hermitage”:

You expected a hermit to live in the wilderness,
but he has a little house and a garden,
surrounded by cheerful birch groves,
ten minutes off the highway.
Just follow the signs.

You don't have to gaze at him through binoculars from afar.
You can see and hear him right up close,
while he's patiently explaining to a tour group from Wiliczka
why he's chosen strict isolation. (Szymborska 207)

How can this hermit – and thus his mission – be trusted, if he himself is guiding people towards his “chosen strict isolation”? But perhaps a better question would be, why wouldn't he? For now let's keep in mind how Szymborska's criticism is directed precisely at the space of the hermit in two different ways: the conflict of expectations between inhospitable wilderness and a comely house – in which the presence of a garden illustrates an out-of-place activity of taming natural processes – but also the matter of distance as a condition for cultivating eremitic ideals.

To find an opposed view we won't have to go much further than Umberto Eco's self-descriptive inclusion of the hermit in his anthology *On Ugliness* and its use of Tennyson's poem on St. Simeon – the Church Father who set out to live alone in the desert on top of a pillar – as a main example:

[Let] This not be all in vain, that thrice ten years,
Thrice multiplied by superhuman pangs,
In hungers and in thirsts, fevers and cold,
In coughs, aches, stitches, ulcerous throes and cramps,
A sign betwixt the meadow and the cloud
Patient on this tall pillar I have borne
Rain, wind, frost, heat, hail, damp, and sleet, and snow;
And I had hoped that ere this period closed
Thou wouldst have caught me up into thy rest,
...

Am I to blame for this,
 That here come those that worship me? Ha! ha!
 They think that I am somewhat. What am I?
 The silly people take me for a saint,
 And bring me offerings of fruits and flowers; (Tennyson 66-9)

Tennyson's criticism, on the other hand, doesn't arise out of concern but of satire; he's still a critic, not of coming too close but of going too far. Firstly, and expanding of Edward Gibbon's similarly derisive critique in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*,² he places emphasis on a perverted relationship between the hermit and the community that surrounds him. Notwithstanding this pervertedness, it's for opposite reasons to Szyborska's. They might bring him gifts and sustenance but it's scorn and that drives Simeon's attitude toward the worshipers. It's to those same worshipers, however, that he will turn to as proof of his own saintliness, later in the poem, for if he does practice miracles, as they claim, what stands then between him and heavenly recognition? The answer: precisely this desire, as an example of the corrupted and egotistical nature of eremitic ideals. Secondly, the first lines revel on in the grotesque imagery of St. Simeon's damaged body, both decrying and ridiculing (through a rhythmic repetition which allowed for comedic readings of the poem (Tennyson 66n4)) the toll that the quest took on his body. But if we take some pleasure in those lines, regarding how pathetic and filled with self-pity they are, it's in the same swift motion that we turn pleasure into ironical condescension, as we identify the self-gratifying flaws, the proud, melodramatic dreams of saintliness in Simeon's character. Too easily we recognise the irony as he cries out "Courage, Saint Simeon! This dull chrysalis / Cracks into shining wings (...)" (69), in one breath declaring himself a saint and, yet, physical and organic like an insect.

How far away is Szyborska's criticism from Tennyson's? One has to doubt the hypothesis that the Polish poet would be more sympathetic to this particular brand of hypocrisy. Or we can wonder: why is irony the adopted gaze whenever a hermit refers to the material world? To Szyborska he's too close. To Tennyson he is also close but precisely by being too far. What these two texts have in common is the notion that the hermit's mind is not where it should be. But where should the thoughts of the hermit rest, then? Taking St. Simeon – and the Church Fathers – as a model, we could perhaps answer: the desert. They should be staring at the desert, offering their thoughts and meditations to the desert and the desert alone. In other words, not to tourists nor sainthood, but the desert. What happens then when the garden is turned into a desert?

The origin of the garden-desert dichotomy stretches all the way back to the establishment of the first agricultural societies. In the biblical Genesis, the dispute is illustrated by the two brothers Cain and Abel. The relevant section of the narrative is short but it still manages to capture the essential ingredients of the conflict:

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. And

Abel also brought an offering – fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. (*New International Version*, Gen. 4.2-5)

Cain, farmer and father of the first agricultural community, is our supposed ancestor. Abel, the shepherd, is killed but also the Lord's favourite. How to solve this contradiction? It seems to go to the heart of the problem identified by Aristotle: while the stable and communal nature of the agricultural society is our home and supposed place, there is, nevertheless, an attraction for the desert and the wandering nature of the nomadic life of the shepherd. The latter, furthermore, is also the place of divine inspiration, whether it is the Lord's favour or simply poetic, philosophical activity. Abel's example is one of the first that – tentatively – points to the ultimately interior nature of the hermit's lifestyle. As we've come to realise, it's still expressed in spatial terms which, once again, can be summarised by a city-desert tension. In *Nature and Madness* Paul Shepherd writes (in a chapter dedicated to the Desert Fathers): "If ideas have habitats in which they originate and prosper, then the desert edge might be called the home of Western thought." (47)

With our short analysis of the hermit, its variations and contradictions, we can say that the two – thought and space – are not separate instances at all, but something that comes together in the idea of what a hermit is and how its "problem", so to speak, can be expressed through metaphors of space, while simultaneously disconnecting it, in the real-world, from any spatial obligations. In this way, we can start connecting the dots between such different figures as Szyborska's and Tennyson's hermits, Abelard or Edgar Linton, and going even further, as Italo Calvino does, equating the work of the hermit with the work of the writer, in more general terms. But before that let us explore this transformation of the desert from an actual geographical location into a metaphor, an image, and its consequences.

Jung's *Liber Novus* – or *The Red Book* – presents an interesting development to either types of criticism we have observed:

Sixth night. My soul leads me into the desert, into the desert of my own self. I did not think that my soul is a desert, a barren, hot desert, dusty and without drink, The journey leads through hot sand, slowly wading without a visible goal to hope for? How eerie is this wasteland. It seems to me that the way leads so far away from mankind. I take my way step by step, and do not know how long my journey will last.

Why is my self a desert? Have I lived too much outside of myself in men and events? Why did I avoid myself? (Jung 236)

While there is still a desert, a wilderness, that comes up as a goal, it's the path of the exploration of the self, its implications as a mental space first and foremost that are brought to our attention. More than a place of physical exploration, Jung's desert

is, in fact, his own unknown self. It's a desert because it's unmapped, wild because it's his unconscious.

By mapping the desert into himself, Jung not only inverts the problem but offers some sense to the question of the hermit. The danger and perceived solution that eremitism offers doesn't stem from the outside world per se, but from the way through which a relationship is established with it. The real sin is to forget one self, to not realise that the most important lesson to take from a journey into the desert is self-contemplation and, consequently, knowledge of the self. Still, the journey undertaken is, and this is most crucial, "away from mankind", both solving and complicating the original question regarding distance and location. The dangers of the garden and the "gardenification" of the desert are also not exclusive to Szymborska. Jung, just after the previous excerpt, entertains this question as well:

Should I also make a garden out of the desert? ... Through giving my soul all I could give, I came to the place of the soul and found that this place was a hot desert, desolate and unfruitful. No culture of the mind is enough to make a garden out of your soul. (Jung 237)

This motif of the garden presents us with another interesting question. Its meaning rests on two core premises: 1) nature as wilderness is fundamentally foreign, a not-home; 2) gardening is an inherently humanising, even artistic activity. The problem: a hermit becomes a hermit when he travels away from humanity; he dangerously recedes by readopting human practices such as gardening. Yet, if we consider, for example, Zen Buddhist gardening arts, the possibility of fusing hermit, isolation or meditation and gardening into one sensible and harmonious activity is not entirely unreasonable, even as we account for obvious cultural and religious differences. Why not go further, and view the whole matter of the meaning of the garden – as David E. Cooper does – as an intrinsically philosophical and mystical activity?

... The Garden exemplifies a co-dependence between human endeavour and the natural world. ... this co-dependence itself embodies or refers us to the co-dependence of human existence and the 'deep-ground' of the world and ourselves. By embodying something that itself embodies something further, The Garden – in one of Goodman's 'chains of reference' – embodies this something further. The Garden, to put it portentously, is an epiphany of man's relationship to mystery. This relationship is its meaning. (Cooper 145)

To take care of a garden, to engage in protection and nurture of natural, pastoral, life can be, perhaps, the most adequate activity for those who seek an existence away from certain preoccupations. The mysterious laws of life itself might be glimpsed from meditation through the garden and its repetitive, tedious cultivation, as the Augustinian abbot Gregor Mendel shows us. And even if we were to consider these issues on a purely pragmatical level, it's easy to understand the importance of the garden as a source of nourishment, one that becomes more important the farther civilisation is.³

To starve, to actively seek death by lack of food, is also a sin, as Tennyson reminds us. Therein lies, precisely, the crucial distinction between starving and fasting.

But the key difference between Tennyson or Szymborska and Jung lies in this new meaning of the garden as something intrinsically internal rather than symbolic. Whereas the two poems regard the journey away from mankind as the main objective of eremitism and, thus, as an end in itself, Jung posits a going that necessarily implies a return. While the metaphors are bounded to space, it's still a mystical and psychological journey first and foremost, in which case the possibility of going without ever leaving distorts our problem – while providing its answers. Once again, using an example from Zen Buddhism, we find another counter-proposal: that the hermit can be not only visible but also reside at the heart of the city itself.⁴ In other words – and in spatial terms – it's a dynamic and relational approach that, like a stretched rubber band, continuously looks toward and builds tension in the opposite direction. The fault is not to cultivate a garden but to insist on not cultivating it. If we want to put it into a practical question, what would be the meaning of Abelard's isolation if he didn't write books or taught classes as a result? Or the meaning of Mendel's pea obsession without its actual foundational contribution to the field of genetics?

So is there also another way of reading Szymborska's hermit and garden? We could regard it as symbolic or metaphorical first and foremost, as the text itself suggests (and it would be too misleading of us to continue to insist on a too literal reading). It also presents an external critique rather than a self-reflective analysis, and this is a fundamental difference, since Szymborska's criticism is (also) against mappability: "Just follow the signs". This hermit's space is not only visible but mapped, through signs, routes itineraries. According to Szymborska's proposal, the map would be in itself a tool against the ineffability of mystical contemplation, for how can an ineffability – a blank space as it is usually hopelessly portrayed – be mapped? Both her and Tennyson urge the mind to turn away from all earthly – physical and thus geographical – matters. More importantly, they urge it to turn away from the magnetism that the presence of a close-by community implies: these are bad hermits because they acknowledge and welcome the fact that they can be seen. In other words, who else would have placed the signs? On the other hand, we could read it as an apology of maps: if one is willing to entertain the hypothesis that a hermit – a pure and authentic one – is in fact an essential part of civilisation (also the conclusion into which Aristotle's and Héloïse's differing ideas converge), then Wisława Szymborska's poem also contains a nuanced critique of both hermit and city-folk, not as individuals or separate groups, but as an organism which has ceased to recognise itself: if there's a need for maps and directions, perhaps it's because we forgot the knowledge (the motivation?) of how and where to look. Chesterton's short essay "The Case for Hermits" explains it succinctly, by presenting a social function for eremitism:

That is something of the secret of saints who went into the desert. It is in society that men quarrel with their friends; it is in solitude that they forgive

them. And before the society-man criticises the saint, let him remember that the man in the desert often had a soul that was like a honey-pot of human kindness, though no man came near to taste it. (Chesterton)

After all, this is also the true sin of Tennyson's Stylite; to somehow not recognise that the hermit must not have his gaze fixated in either desert nor city but in both directions at once.

If until this point we had been discussing hermits and their places, now, with the question of returning or of "going without leaving", we abandon the study of fixed places to focus instead on journey and trajectory. In the context of eremitism, journey and travel motifs, whether realistic, imagined or metaphorical, become meaningful as register of a traversal of space but also (and thus) as an account or representation of the traversal of the self, completing the union suggested by Shepard. Some of such representations – like desert, city, garden, hut – have indeed managed to etch a lasting impression on collective imagination and storytelling. However, to regard them and study them as fixed, stable and independent from each other is a mistake. Quoting Doreen Massey:

Sometimes there are attempts at drawing boundaries, but even these do not usually refer to everything: they are selective filtering systems; their meaning and effect is constantly renegotiated. And they are persistently transgressed. Places not as points or areas on maps, but as integrations of space and time; as *spatio-temporal events*. (Massey 130)

In Massey's reclaiming of temporality for space (or spatiality for time), abandoning an exclusive "rather than" rhetoric (Massey 37), the notion of trajectory acquires a central and crucial position. It's not simply a matter of space "rather than" time but a call to the exploration of space as the rediscovery of time. By looking at the tensions between hermit and community, hermitage and city (the same tensions which reside in the hermit's spirit), it's precisely this "realm of multiple trajectories" (Massey 89), and not fixed points or areas, that we end up focusing on. It might seem obvious once we start by considering the problem of journey, but, nevertheless, it's important to stress that this is also a matter of time and duration and not just space. Lt. Giovanni Drogo, in *The Tartar Steppe* by Dino Buzzati,⁵ also abandons the city and sets out for a desolate location: Fort Bastiani. It quickly becomes obvious – both to him and to the reader – that his particular choice of hermitage exists not only as a place, but also, on one hand, as a distance that requires a certain amount of time to reach and, on the other, as time-as-duration of both this journey and the stay:

"Yes, for two years—you will be doing the usual two years' tour of duty, won't you?"

"Two years? I don't know. They didn't tell me for how long."

...

"Excuse me, sir," asked Drogo.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Is it still far?"

"Not very — about two and a half hours, perhaps three at this pace. Perhaps we will be there by midday."

...

"I saw it in the distance yesterday evening," said Drogo.

"What—the Fort?"

"Yes, the Fort." He paused, then added to show that he knew how to behave: "It must be very large, isn't it? It seemed immense to me."

"The Fort—very large? No, no, it is one of the smallest—a very old building. It is only from the distance that it looks a little impressive."

(Buzzati 10-2)

Only too late will Drogo realise that it's not just the journey to Fort Bastiani that takes time. The journey back to his home, the place of childhood memories and aspirations, also demands that time passes. When the decision is made, too much of it is gone.

Fort Bastiani is an almost complete inversion of the traditional hermit's hut. Far from appearing as a primitive centre of concentrated solitude – that Bachelard would describe as the bright lantern on the otherwise dark and nocturnal landscape which radiates the light of peaceful and friendly solitude before God (Bachelard 46-7) – the Fortress' solitude is already – even at the horizon – claustrophobic. When Drogo sees it for the time, it seems to him to be a "prison", an "abandoned palace" (15). There is, in fact, a lantern that shines at night when Drogo writes a letter to his mother, before deciding to extend his fateful stay, but this particular light is not enough to dispel the Fort's somber weight. Unlike in Bachelard's hut no one sees this lantern, not even Drogo himself; he isn't able to express his true feelings even in writing, foreshadowing the tragic change of heart that will keep him still. The letter (and his hesitation) is nothing more than an extension of the deep melancholy present at the start of the journey. Lt. Drogo's particular tragedy of space forsaken by time is already foreseen when the Fort is nothing but a dot in the horizon:

They had reached the brow of a hill. Drogo turned to see the city against the light; the morning smoke rose from the roofs. He picked out the window of his room. Probably it was open. The women were tidying up. They would unmake the bed, shut everything up in a cupboard and then bar the shutters. For months and months no one would enter except the patient dust and, on sunny days, thin streaks of light. There it was, shut up in the dark, the little world of his childhood. His mother would keep it like that so that on his return he could find himself again there, still be a boy within its walls even after his long absence – but of course she was wrong in

thinking that she could keep intact a state of happiness which was gone for ever or hold back the flight of time, wrong in imagining that when her son came back and the doors and windows were reopened everything would be as before. (Buzzati 3)

By forsaking the moment of recognition of the space of childhood, Drogo is also abandoning all possibilities of a proper, healthy, eremitic journey: leaving and coming back. Without this moment of recognition there is no room for self-growth, no opportunity for either self-reflection or criticism. By yielding to illusions, Drogo is preparing himself to inhabit a space out of time ("But it seemed as if Drogo's existence had come to halt. The same day, the same things, had repeated themselves hundreds of times without taking a step forward." (71)), a space forcibly isolated from the magnetic pull of city life. As Spring returns and Drogo returns home on leave, he meets nothing but a pale reflection of what once was:

... he self his happiness change against his will to sadness. The house seemed empty compared to once upon a time. Of his brothers one was abroad, another on his travels somewhere and the third in the country. Only his mother remained and, after a little she, too, had to go out ... so all the world went on living without need of Giovanni Drogo. (Buzzati 136)

The implicit question is the same as Szyborska's: who would need this hermit or, as we put it before, who should? After a failed meeting with his old sweetheart, Drogo finally understands that time bound to space cannot be unwound: "with each passing minute the distance between them grew greater." (42). But now it's too late. After he returns to Fort Bastiani and resigns himself to his melancholic fate, he will spend his days literally staring at the desert through Simeoni's binoculars. Similarly to what happens in Tennyson's poem, the overlap between blind faith in the desert and damaging self-isolation couldn't be clearer.

The lack of a proper return, of a proper space for gardening or for finding the balance between the desert and the city: all these issues seem to lie at the heart of the question of the hermit and its particular relation to time and space. So what to conclude from all these critiques, self-reflections, metaphors? First of all, that eremitism must be a dynamic process rather than a state or a fixed structure of the soul. It's the direction in which one looks more than the place one looks from. Secondly, then, this gaze mustn't be that of the hypnotised; that's the tragedy of Giovanni Drogo and Tennyson's Simeon. The hermit's vector is a bidirectional one. It implies coming and going simultaneously. The journey is not an end in itself but only a necessary step in a new welcoming that must benefit both hermit and community. And as for the figure of the hermit itself, we can say that it stands as an image of a perpetual renegotiation and relationability of this multidirectional, multi-trajectory space, with simultaneous echoes of poetry, history and mysticism.

This problem of coming and going, of a before and after out of which a motivation can be read and criticised is, then, one of the sources of trouble for the texts we have analysed; a question of time as much as it is a question of space. But if the validity of the hermit can be so easily questioned through literature, hermits, on the other hand, seem to abound in visual arts, conspicuously free from the issue of time and duration. Consider, for example, Herman van Swanevelt's *Landscape with a Carthusian*, from 17th century Netherlands. In it we find all of the elements we've enumerated so far in juxtaposition instead of in a "rather than" mode of discourse. We see together wilderness and garden, cave and monastery, all while a figure gazes at a picked fruit in seemingly peaceful contemplation. Can such harmony exist outside of art?

In his book *On Friendship*, Alexander Nehamas analyses this same dichotomy between visual art and literature as it concerns representations of friendship. His study, however, seems to be diametrically opposed to ours in its results. Taking as example the similarity between friendship and courage he writes:

For courage is not a mode of behavior but the capacity to know when the brave thing to do is to stand your ground and when it is to retreat, when to persist in an effort and when to give up when it is worth risking your life and when it's not. Courage, like every other virtue, is not a form of behavior but a structure of the soul. And so is friendship. (Nehamas 79)

As paintings show, then, one reason that two people's behavior on any one occasion can't reveal whether they are friends is that no specific mode of acting is associated with friendship closely enough. Another reason is that whether an action expresses friendship or not depends crucially on the context within which, and the motives out of which, it occurs. ... But that is where painting reaches its limits: friendship, like the pattern of behavior it exhibits, takes time to manifest itself, and painting is not suited for the representation of time. (81)

As we had hinted before by using the same expression, the issues that these examples of hermit criticism make evident seem to refer to this difference between those things that we could call a structure of the soul, such as friendship, and what we've come to regard as essentially a behaviour, a movement or a dynamism that appears to be largely independent of motivation or justification for it. These two elements are certainly part of the criticism: they are present in Szyborska and Tennyson, they serve as a central premise for Abelard's or Aristotle's text and they are without a doubt present – by tragic omission – in *The Tartar's Steppe*. However, once again following Nehamas' line of thought, motivation is not (cannot be) present in Swanevelt's painting. We can only wonder at what the man (St. Bruno?) thinks as he admires the gifts of his garden. All of this might lead us to wonder whether the answer lies in a difference between literature and visual art that concerns motivation without it being required that motivation *per se* should have to become the problem in itself.

If friendship thrives once it is allowed to unfold in time – through literature but specially, according to Nehamas, through drama – eremitism just seems to run into the same problems we're already familiar with. Even though we have, thus far, conceived of it also in its performative dimension – the act of leaving, of renouncing a community and the dramatic encounters that might ensue – it's certainly worthy of attention that this particular action only becomes more problematic the more we allow it to unfold. By exposing it to time we might allow the initial gesture or impulse of the hermit to develop. But we're also exposing it to all sorts of paradoxes and contradictions.

However it's not only Swanevelt's painting that makes the case for a consensus in the visual nature of the hermit. As Italo Calvino has pointed out "the paintings of hermits, almost always, have a city in the background." (106). Bellini's *St. Jerome* (see fig. 1) – referenced by the Italian writer – is as good example as any other. Other visual representations of hermits go even further. Hubert Robert's *A Hermit Praying in The Ruins of a Roman Temple* (see fig. 2), by showing us the hermit praying along with four women who seem as if they have just entered uninvited, manages to solve the questions raised by both Szymborska and Tennyson regarding the nature of the relationship between the hermit and the city, with a solution so light and simple we could almost call it innocent, if it was the only example. In Hubert Robert's painting they simply coexist peacefully. Could one argue that this is only because, unlike in the poems, we don't have access to the hermit's innermost thoughts and concerns that would allow us to judge whether he is a true hermit instead of a hypocrite? Yes, without a doubt. And yet one could also argue that that is precisely the point.



Fig. 1: Giovanni Bellini. *St. Jerome in the Desert*, c. 1480, oil on panel, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

As a final example, let's now take a look at Jan van Eyck's depiction of *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* (see fig. 3). The comparisons with Bellini's landscape are evident and van Eyck's talent for detail even allows him to more accurately depict a thriving Dutch city, seemingly without contradicting the painting's mystical themes. However the *punctum* is neither St. Francis nor the city but the undoubtedly melancholic



Fig. 2: Hubert Robert. *A Hermit Praying in the Ruins of a Roman Temple*, c. 1760, oil on canvas, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.



Fig. 3: Jan van Eyck. *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, c. 1427, oil on panel, Sabauda Gallery, Turin.

figure who, like Durer's *Melencolia I*, rests his head on his hand and retreats into self-contemplation. As we first consider the idea of a hermit, St. Francis' companion – his brother and confessor Leo –, definitely turned away from earthly concerns, might strike us as the perfect example. But he fails to notice the main event depicted in the piece: St. Francis, in mystical contemplation, whose hands extend suspiciously in the direction of both the Seraph-Christ and the city. The melancholic companion looks to neither. But going even further, what van Eyck shows us is also a nudge in the direction of another solution to our problems. More than an individual achievement or moral victory on the part of the hermit – who sets out in an individual quest –, the relationship between hermit and city can benefit the city as much as it benefits the hermit: the artistic or therapeutic nature of the hermit's performance make it so that it's not only important for the hermit to have a city but, perhaps, also for a city to have a hermit.

The need of extraordinary individuals who are capable of making spatial tensions visible – with all it implies for the identity of those who regard them – gets us closer to the centre of our texts and turn Szymborska's and Tennyson's criticisms, in the end, into an appeal and a warning. The hermit embodies a deep internal tension that spills out onto life simply by way of his perceived existence. What are these tensions? The answer might lie in one of the older questions of Western thought, as it compares the one and the many: the troubles of individuality, authenticity, independence, identity and, the consequence ever looming over the hill, melancholy. Or, in other words, "should I make a garden out of the desert?"

While such a connection, in its totality, won't be part of this reflection, one of its premisses is part of our conclusion; we have argued, thus far, for the visibility of the hermit. Once again quoting Calvino, "only the city gives a meaning to the bleak landscape of the hermit" (106). And if Calvino was referring to art and landscape, we have managed to reframe the question under the guise of that same recurring problem that Lessing had already posed in *Laocoon*: "painting, owing to its signs or means of imitation, which it can combine in space only, is compelled entirely to renounce time" (89). Nevertheless, the hermit seems to fall somewhere in between the two.

Returning to Nehamas' valuable reflections, the phenomenon of eremitism could be defined as opposed to friendship, at least in these terms: the latter is an internal (ineffable, even) structure of the soul, that only takes form if allowed to unfold in time; it's not a behaviour but it manifests as such. Eremitism, on the other hand, is precisely a behaviour, but the kind which cannot be allowed to unfold in time. The solution, since, sooner or later, everything must unfold in time, is a harmonising of time and space which is only possible if the tensions created by the hermit are allowed to be incorporated into our own conceptions of space and time. That is, perhaps, the gift of the hermit.

A hermit distorts space like a magnet against a CTR monitor. The problem of the possibility of a valid hermit, as we've seen, also manages to deconstruct notions of place as a space to which one belongs, as we move away from strict space-time

dichotomies and return to Massey's harmonisation of space and time. On rereading the short quote we have included here, there's more going on than a simple overlapping of time and space – if event is to time what place is to space, then the meaning of place as a spatio-temporal event goes much further than that; if an obsession with either city or desert can destroy the hermit, the hermit's discovery – which must also be his motivation – is the need for a continuous pendular movement that can deregulate the intensity of belonging, the need to become a stranger to both city and hermitage. He must move *because* in his existence resides the possibility of consolidating the blank space that divides city and hermitage, continuously reactivating the dream of transmuting space into time and vice versa.⁶ Gaston Bachelard sums it up beautifully:

On croit parfois se connaître dans le temps, alors qu'on ne connaît qu'une suite de fixations dans des espaces de la stabilité de l'être, d'un être qui ne veut pas s'écouler, qui, dans le passé même quand il s'en va à la recherche du temps perdu, veut "suspendre" le vol du temps. *Dans se mille alvéoles, l'espace tient du temps comprimé.* L'espace sert à ça. (27)

Can the reversibility of space shatter the irreversibility of time or is it the other way round? Is it as in the first pages of *The Magic Mountain*, where Thomas Mann writes that "space, like time, engenders forgetfulness" (4) or maybe that time makes space itself irreversible? *Odyssey's* Penelope, by repeatedly undoing and resetting a burial shroud (symbol of the ultimate consequence of being in time), iconically represents this stoppage of the regular flow of time that won't go on freely until a journey reaches (returns to) its departing point. In Drogo's case, how happy he would have been if, while staring at Fort Bastiani, he could have seen all times and all spaces: the time he would spend away, the time of the journey there and back, the city in the past and in the future and, in short, his whole existence as a function of time and space.

Place for the hermit cannot possibly be conceived of as something in itself – a hermitage – but as a knot in a network of tensions. And true knowledge of the self and its place in the world arises out of identifying these tensions, more than their intersection. Only by seeing space in time and time in space can this tension be resolved into some sort of stability. It's always dynamic, lest it die, and yet, paradoxically, is what the hermit sets out to discover as he leaves alone into the wilderness: a sense of belonging.

Endnotes

1. Even using the term to describe his students. See Abelard et Héloïse 92.
2. "This voluntary martyrdom must have gradually destroyed the sensibility both of mind and body; nor it can be presumed that the fanatics, who torment themselves, are susceptible to any lively affection from the rest of mankind." (Tennyson 66n3)
3. See, for this more practical perspective, Jotischky.
4. See Parker.
5. The original title in Italian, *Il Deserto dei Tartari*, clearly presents us with a desert.

6. A possibility that some maps do dream of. Take, for instance, the *Mappa Mundi* at the Hereford Cathedral. In it, the flow of Christian time – from Creation to Judgement Day – is also represented by a civilisational, cultural and geographical movement from East to West. Time and space are not only connected but also indistinguishable. The itinerary is a modern version of the attempt to chart space and time: such is the case, for example, of Gordon Home's 1911 map of Roald Amundsen's trip to the South Pole.

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