# explorations

# Solitude as a means of survival

*Alicja Bemben* (*University of Silesia*)

**Abstract**. In this paper I argue against perspectives that view solitude in a negative light. I aver that it is essential for the development of the self and for its further balanced preservation. "The right to solitude," defined by Giorgio Del Vecchio, serves as the starting point for my review of the "three-part construct of the self" proposed by Gardner and Brewer. In the first part of this study, I offer arguments to substantiate the claim that at each level of the Gardner-Brewer construct solitude can serve as a catalyst for the development and preservation of the self. In the second part, in order to show the interpretative potential of the reviewed model, I analyze the protagonist of Robert Graves's Claudius novels as a case of the solitude-driven self.

**Key words**: solitude, survival, the self, Robert Graves, *I, Claudius*, *Claudius the God*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the arguments with which Giorgio Del Vecchio undermines the Aristotelian conception of the human as a political animal denied the right to solitude is the claim that, although human nature is of a social type, this does not exclude the possibility of ascribing to it various features; among others, inclinations toward solitude (1972, 143). In this paper, I review Marilynn Brewer and Wendi Gardner's "three-part construct of the self" (1996, 83), which, in accordance with Aristotelian thought, assumes the importance of social relations and insignificance of solitude in the process of the development of the self. I aver that solitude is essential for the development of the self, its further balanced preservation, and that it may serve as a means of survival.

In the first part of this study, I offer arguments to substantiate the claim that at each level of this construct solitude can serve as a catalyst for the development and preservation of the self. In the second part, in order to show the interpretative potential of the reviewed model, I analyze the protagonist of Robert Graves's Claudius novels as a case of the solitude-driven self.

### 2. CATALYTIC ROLE OF SOLITUDE

Brewer-Gardner's three-part construct of the self is based on the stipulation that "different self-construals … coexist within the same individual" and function on three levels. The first level is the "individuated or personal self," by which an individual discerns his or her self from others (Brewer and Gardner 1996, 83). "This is the 'you' of your individual characteristics, without reference to anyone else" (Cacioppo 2008, 78). The second level is the "social or relational self" (Brewer and Gardner 1996, 83) that exists through interactions with other people and whose shape is an outcome of these interactions. The people who are closest affect the self by ascribing it social roles or reshaping its own perception. Thirdly, the "collective self" is a result of the sense of belonging to a group united by "common bonds." This self is depersonalized and "based on common identity" (Brewer and Gardner 1996, 83). Brewer and Gardner consider the two later identities as "social extensions of the self" that identifies with either "some symbolic group or social category" (1996, 83). The underlying assumption of this scheme is that "individuals seek to define themselves in terms of their immersion in relationships with others or larger collectives and derive much of their self-evaluation from such social identities" (Brewer and Gardner 1996, 83). The model hardly recognizes defining the self by means of internal references, but considers social connectedness fundamental to that process. Whereas deriving a sense of identity from others is of significant value, I would like to note that a similar value could be ascribed to solitude, which also contributes to the definition of the self.

According to Jacques Lacan, at the initial phase of identity development, there is no "defined centre of the self," and no clear-cut distinctions between the self and the external world (qtd. in Eagleton 1996, 142). All objects that shift into the scope of perception of the self are not conceived as other selves. Of course, whatever and whomever comes into contact with this blurry self comes from the outside world, but until the mirror stage it is not granted the status of the other. Thus, the self initially remains and matures in a constant state of solitude and does not display the need for social connectedness.

"[A]n integrated self-image" of the self takes place when:

> The child… finds reflected back to itself in the mirror a gratifyingly unified image of itself; and although its relation to this image is still of an "imaginary" kind - the image in the mirror both is and is not itself, a blurring of subject and object still obtains - it has begun the process of constructing a centre of self. This self, as the mirror situation suggests, is essentially narcissistic: we arrive at a sense of an "I" by finding that "I" reflected back to ourselves by some object or person in the world. This object is at once somehow part of ourselves – we *identify* with it and yet not ourselves, something alien (qtd. in Eagleton 1996, 143, author's emphasis).

Having been defined in the mirror stage, the personal self comes out from the solitary stage into the world of interactions with other selves.

For Lacan, the progress of the self continues by means of further identifications with other objects, other selves (Eagleton 1996, 143). This assumption might be juxtaposed with two arguments concerning self-regulation, not by means of social connection, but by reference to the personal, intimate self. Firstly, Donald Winnicott postulates that the emotional development of the self also covers the ability to be with one's own thoughts,

which he calls "the capacity to be alone." The personal self can attain this ability when, out of the sense of security, it takes others for granted and can "forget" them for some time. Lack of this ability suggests wrongly constructed social relations (Schmidt Neven 2010, 46) that hamper an individual's natural striving for independence. Secondly, the already independent self forms different patterns of behavior, ranging from the simplest ones to the most sophisticated acts. Lawrence Senthouse notices that intelligent behavior occurs when an individual does not react automatically, but allows oneself various adaptive behaviors, is able to learn and remember in order to manage new situations, and possesses the ability to abstract and generalize, and to see differences and similarities (Storr 2010, 53). Since thinking is generally done in solitude, and since its highly sophisticated form is creativity, it can be assumed that complicated intellectual operations demand solitude. The progress of the self demands identification with other selves, but it also requires forming a sense of independence possible only by means of solitude.

Solitude is also of crucial value in social relations as they develop. What attracts the self to others is "the need for *meaningful* social connection" (Cacioppo 2008, 7, my italics). The "I" seeks confirmation and acceptance in others, but as not all relations provide them, not all relations can be socially meaningful. Each encounter with other people starts with a clash of the selves mirroring one another. The result is a reflection of the self in itself and a possible redefinition. A successful redefinition conditions the establishment of a meaningful social connection. As far as mirroring takes place between the two selves, i.e. in their interactions; reflection and redefinition are done in solitude. If the relational self is unable to cut itself from external references, it cannot reflect and redefine, and consequently establish meaningful social connections.

Moreover, for John Cacioppo, impaired socialization negatively affects an individual's chances of survival.[1] A chronic state of this kind, i.e. deprivation of personal interactions, "inflicts pain, increases perception of stress, interferes with immune function and impairs cognitive function" (Cacioppo 2008, 141). In contrast, permanent socialization might be detrimental as well. The state of sensory overload tends to lead to severe distortions. An individual, continuously immersed in social interactions, receives too much input and is not able to process all the information. Distress, hyperarousal, as well as impaired concentration and thinking follow (Pabustan, 2010). Thus, it can be assumed that the self strives neither for a permanent sense of social connectedness nor for complete solitude, but rather for a balance between these two extremes. In moments of sensory deprivation, the relational self activates the need for social contact, but in the states of sensory overload the need for solitude has a self-regulatory character.

Similar equilibrium is bound to exist between "the need for social connection" (Cacioppo 2008, iii) and the need for intimacy and privacy (Long and Averill 2003, 27). Cacioppo asserts that the need for social connectedness is intrinsic to humans. It varies in its high or low standards (2008, 22), but its lack means loneliness and depression. Such an extreme treatment of the absence of social engagement allows one to interpret social dependence on others by means of analogy. If the self is unable to exist on its own, or does not show any need for intimacy and privacy, and instead immerses itself in social

---

[1] "individuals with behavioural dispositions less well adapted to the environment did not survive – or they survived only marginally, or they did not survive long enough (...) as those who were better adapted" (Cacioppo, 2008, 67).

life and neurotically seeks others to confirm and accept its status, then such dependence is the sign of an unresolved problem. Again, solitude can tone down these needs. It shifts the focus of an individual from others to his or her own self, and enhances reflecting on relationships and striving for independence.

Apart from creating bonds with other individuals, a consequence of the self-expansion is one's willingness to unite with a group. The need for social inclusion triggers "tailoring the self in order to attain some degree of social acceptance" (Cacioppo 2008, 216). This collective self, according to the Brewer-Gardner model, is depersonalized and "based on common identity" (1996, 83). The depersonalized self is a *merger* of the self and the other – the result of "a process through which cognition, perception, and behavior is regulated by group standards (group norms, stereotypes, and prototypes), rather than idiosyncratic personal standards" (de Cremer 2003, 318). The key point in this definition is the word "merger," as it denotes two elements that form a new construct and require a harmonic cooperation. If the depersonalization progresses too far and "the other" component of the merger starts dominating the central one, then a risk of dissociative disorder may emerge. Solitude, with its focus on "the self" component, may become a counterweight to excessive depersonalization and balance the unstable self.

Brewer and Gardner's conception of "common identity" denotes the identification of an individual with "social categories" (1996, 83). However, identifying with social values contributes to the development of the collective self when it is meaningful and socially positive. For instance, according to Tarnogórski, purely emotional identification with a crowd is meaningless (Cacioppo 2008, 36). Emotion is a response to stimuli that possesses no meaning itself – only feeling or being aware of emotions gives them meaning (Cacioppo 2008, 150). Moreover, identification with socially negative values pushes an individual over to the social margins. Unaccepted by society, one is denied a common identity. Solitude functions in this case as a deterrent – whenever one immerses oneself in meaningless or negative relations it is to avert him or her form potential loneliness.

To summarize, the Brewer-Gardner scheme concentrates on defining the self by means of external references. But as it was shown, self-referential defining, and thus the need for solitude, plays a crucial role on each level of this model. The personal self initially remains in solitude and needs to develop the ability to be alone. The relational self protects itself from sensory overload and meaningless social connections, and requires a sense of intimacy. The collective self recognizes the limiting functions of solitude, which prevents the self from dissociation and falling into loneliness. It is therefore visible that at each phase of the development, the self requires not only social connectedness but also solitude.

## 3. CASE STUDY

Having revised the Brewer-Gardner model, I would like to bring forth a sample analysis of the self[2] whose survival was possible due to the choice of a solitary life. The

---

[2] Robert Graves saw the figure he wrote about as a reconstructed personality (Buckman and Fifield, 16). As he was mostly fascinated by Claudius's character, then what the novels are inscribed with is his vision of the

individual in question is Emperor Claudius – the protagonist of Robert Graves's historical novels. Born a cripple, he was rejected by his kin. Yet, as an outcast, Claudius managed to perceive and use the potential that his solitude brought. Deliberately deterring people from his person, he concentrated on self-development and survival among his vicious family. Solitude in his case became a means of survival.

Claudius is born as a "battleground of diseases" one year before his father dies (Graves 1958, 50). Mother Antonia considers him an idiot (Graves 1958, 52), Livilla thinks that there was some mistake in the Sibylline books and could not believe that her stupid brother is to become emperor (Graves 1958, 53). Germanicus is the only one of his kin that pities him and tries to protect Claudius from maltreatment. His grandmother Livia's usual words to him are: "Get out of this room, child, I want to be in it" (Graves 1958, 53), whereas grandfather Augustus thinks that Claudius "brought bad luck and should be kept out of sight" (Graves 1958, 53). These are the typical reactions that he evokes, as in ancient Rome all signs of physical or emotional disability trigger offensive responses.

It is understandable that during formation of the integrated self-image, instead of confirmation and approval, Claudius's mirroring in others brings strongly negative feedback (Graves 1958, 52) that impair his development. The outward symptoms of this distorted progress are the gradual intensification of Claudius's disabilities, such as the loss of hearing in one ear, limping, "the cardiac passion" (Graves 1958, 51), a tic in his hands, nervous jerking of the head, stammering and dribbling at the mouth (Graves 1958, 52). When exposed to damaging influences, the natural way for the self is to rework, i.e. minimize the effect of these influences and seek objects that would supply confirmation and approval. This is why young Claudius does not long for contact with people. On the contrary, he increases his defense mechanisms, like stammering and twitching, and minimizes mirroring in others. A vivid case of such a blockage is the conversation between the protagonist, Augustus and his friend Athenodorus. Amongst these non-aggressive people Claudius does not feel endangered; he manages to participate in the conversation and forgets his stammer. However, as soon as the two men start to inquire how it is possible for "a half-wit" to speak Greek fluently, Claudius "grew self-conscious and stammered as badly as ever" (Graves 1958, 54). As long as the protagonist does not receive negative responses, he can function properly. The awareness of the censorious selves sets in motion his defense mechanisms to stop others from taking an interest in his person. Not to get hurt, Claudius withdraws into his solitude. There, immersed in creative activities, he finds positive and meaningful stimuli for his self. He becomes an excellent historian, masters Etruscan, Phoenician, Numidian, Egyptian, Oscan and Faliscan (Graves 1958, 227), invents three letters – later incorporated into the Latin alphabet (Graves 1958, 199) – and gets familiar with matters of religious reformation conducted by Augustus (Graves 1958, 141).

Acting according to Cacioppo's postulate of socialization as an enhancement of survival (2008, 67) would not allow Claudius to live through his grandmother's reign. The Roman Empire of the Julio-Claudian times faces continuous political struggle driven by the protagonist's grandmother Livia, who poisons all her adversaries or promotes her

---

personality of the emperor. It can be fleshed out from the text analogically to reading an analysand's personality out from the story he or she tells.

favorites. Claudius, as a member of the royal family and prophesized emperor, is in danger. But simultaneously, the Claudians are ashamed that among them there is "a wretched little oddity, a disgrace" (Graves 1958, 53), and they ignore him as much as possible. There emerges a vicious circle of mental and physical problems that hamper social connections. These failures in turn, increase Claudius's stammering-twitching reactions that again deprive him of social connectedness. Ironically, all this keeps the protagonist safe from Livia's plotting and ensures his survival. Even when Claudius learns how to control his speech and reactions to people, he preventively maintains his deterrent behavior and remains solitary. One may think that living in such a detrimental milieu should change an individual into the self driven only by negative emotions. Claudius experiences much harm from his kin, but he also seeks other positively meaningful relationships. He turns to those who surround him and yet are not completely hostile, he has acquaintances among slaves, their children, his tutors, and people of similarly degraded status, such as dancers and prostitutes. As much as these relationships can, they provide Claudius with some sense of meaningful social connection. Yet, in the case of Claudius's relational self, solitude is the main source of the positive meaningful stimuli for the development of his self.

The logical consequence of the self-expansion is emergence of the collective self. Pre-emperor Claudius displays tendencies to identifying himself with common beliefs, such as the idealization of Roman war heroes or general discrimination against other races, but at the same time he supports republican ideas and takes care of those who need help. Thus, the merger of the self-other of the pre-emperor Claudius could be described as balanced. The self of the *emperor* Claudius is a different case. Claudius's need for collective socialization expands relatively late, as it heightens greatly after his enthronement as the emperor of Rome (Graves 1958, 395-396).

Thrown into public situations, he is exposed to the influence of numerous people. Claudius's self, so far relatively deprived of socialization, is given a massive shot of confirmation and acceptance. The question of the meaningfulness of these relationships to Graves's protagonist is of essential value for further interpretation of the emperor's self. Claudius's inability or choice not to see the treacheries of Messalina, the frauds of his courtiers, the disobedience of generals, and finally, the plotting of his kin (Graves 1984, 421), allows one to draw conclusions that the protagonist values these relations immensely. Socially deprived for a very long time and under the influence of multiple confirmation and acceptance, Claudius manages to establish meaningful relationships or projects them as meaningful. Abandoned to his royal duties, he does not have time to reflect on reality and those who surround him (Graves 1984, 82-111). During Livia's life, the need for solitude protects him by means of activation and constant use of defense mechanisms. The emperorship makes him lose this need and, consequently, reduces the strength of his defense mechanisms. Disrespectful of Herod Agrippa's advice not to trust anyone (Graves 1984, 122) Claudius, as it is known from history, paid the highest price for his misplaced trust in his kin.

### 4. CONCLUSIONS

An individual entering the world of social relations tries to efficiently adapt to it. The need for social connections is a natural part of this process, but so is the need for

solitude. As it has been shown, building and functioning in relationships demands that this need appear systematically. If the external conditions are harmful to the self, socialization is not a means of improving them. Solitude helped Claudius to survive through the mad reigns of Livia and Caligula, but opening up to others pushes them to abuse Claudius and dispose of him when he was no longer necessary. Solitude in one's life does not have to be interpreted as a sign of inability to manage unresolved problems. Quite contrary, it can be understood as a way of dealing with them. In the end, the very idea of solitude, of keeping social distance, remains a subject of various interpretations, simply because its interpretative potential allows one to employ it in versatile contexts and highlight its diverse aspects.

## REFERENCES

Brewer, Marilynn B., and Wendi Gardner. 1996. "Who Is This "We"? Levels of Collective Identity and Self Representations." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 71(1):83-93. Accessed February 22, 2010. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.71.1.83.

Cacioppo John T., and William Patrick. 2008. *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Cohen, J. M. 1961. *Writers and Critics: Robert Graves*. New York: Groove Press.

de Cremer, David. 2003. "The Closer We Are, the More We Are Alike: The Effect of Self-Other Merging on Depersonalized Self-Perception." *Current Psychology* 22:316-325. Accessed February 22, 2010. doi: 10.1007/s12144-004-1037-7.

Eagleton, Terry. 1996. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Graves, Robert. 1984. *Claudius the God and His Wife Messalina. The Troublesome Reign of Tiberius Claudius Caesar, Emperor of the Romans (born 10 B.C., died A.D.54),as Described by Himself; also His Murder at the Hands of the Notorious Agrippina (Mother of the Emperor Nero) and His Subsequent Deification, as Described by Others*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Graves, Robert. 1958. *I, Claudius. From the Autobiography of Tiberius Claudius, Emperor of the Romans*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Long, Christopher R., and James R. Averill. 2003. "Solitude: An Exploration of Benefits of Being Alone." *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 33(1):21-44. Accessed February 22, 2010. doi: 10.1111/1468-5914.00204.

Pabustan, Mervin C. "Nursing Bullets: Medical-Surgical Nursing Part II. Nurseslab." Accessed February 22, 2010. http://nurseslabs.com/nursing-bullets/nursing-bullets-medical-surgical-nursing-part-ii/.

Schmidt Neven, Ruth. 2010. *Core Principles of Assessment and Therapeutic Communication with Children, Parents and Families: Towards the Promotion of Child and Family Wellbeing*. New York: Routledge.

Storr, Anthony. 2010. *Samotność: powrót do jaźni*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo W.A.B.

Vecchio, Giorgio. 1972. "Osobowość i prawa człowieka w świetle nauki prawa." In *Dociekania nad prawem natury czyli o potrzebach człowieka*, edited by Maria Szyszkowska, 137-146.Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy "Pax."

**AUTHOR'S BIO**: Alicja Bemben is Lecturer at the Institute of English Cultures and Literatures, University of Silesia, Poland. She has written and published on historical novels of Robert Graves and metahistory of Hayden White. She is interested in historical novels, theory of history, time and temporality and philosophy.

**E-MAIL**: tamburynek(at)o2.pl