

Heidelberg University English Department

Lecture Series: Separation, Isolation and Community in Literature

Introduction

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Welcome to the Heidelberg University English Department's lecture series on Separation, Isolation and Community in Literature. My name is Annika Elstermann and I will be hosting this lecture series podcast throughout the semester, which means that I will be speaking to a different colleague and/or fellow researcher each week about a topic from their area of expertise. Those of you who've been around for a while will know that this lecture series has a long tradition, including the format that it's usually held in. For obvious reasons we have to break some of that tradition this year, and by that I mean parts of the format, but apart from that I think it's all the more important to have this sort of academic exchange and through it hopefully a bit of community. One of the purposes of the format of this lecture series is to give students an opportunity to hear from and get to know different lecturers and for lecturers to hear a bit about what their colleagues have been working on lately. So this is also one of the reasons for the format of the lecture series now: We're talking with each other, not just lecturing into a void, and of course for the theme of community and isolation as well, which I want to give a brief introduction to now.

I want to start this with a quote from Michel Foucault's 1975 book *Discipline and Punish*. This is going to be quite a long quote, but I find it so pertinent to the current situation and to the theme of the lecture series that I just ask you to bear with me for a moment here. I'll make a few elisions, but you can read the quote in its entirety if you're interested; It's just the very beginning of the Panopticism chapter in *Discipline and Punish*. So this is, again, a text written in 1975, and it's about events from the 17th century:

"The following, according to an order published at the end of the seventeenth century, were the measures to be taken when the plague appeared in a town. First, a strict spatial partitioning: the closing of the town and its outlying districts, a prohibition to leave the town on pain of death, the killing of all stray animals; the division of the town into distinct quarters, each governed by an intendant. Each street is placed under the authority of a syndic, who keeps it under surveillance [...]. On the appointed day, everyone is ordered to stay indoors: it is forbidden to leave on pain of death. The syndic himself comes to lock the door of each house from the outside; he takes the key with him and hand sit over to the intendant of the quarter; the intendant keeps it until the end of the quarantine. Each family will have made its own provisions; but, for bread and wine, small wooden canals are set up between the street and the interior of the houses, thus allowing each person to receive his ration without communicating with the suppliers and other residents [...]. If it is absolutely necessary to leave the house, it will be done in turn, avoiding any meeting. [...] It is a segmented, immobile, frozen space. Each individual is fixed in his place. And, if he moves, he does so at the risk of his life, contagion or

punishment. Inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere: [...] Every day, the intendant visits the quarter in his charge, inquires whether the syndics have carried out their tasks, whether the inhabitants have anything to complain of; they 'observe their actions'. Every day, too, the syndic goes into the street for which he is responsible; stops before each house: gets all the inhabitants to appear at the windows [...] Everyone locked up in his cage, everyone at his window, answering to his name and showing himself when asked – it is the great review of the living and the dead. [...] This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead – all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism. The plague is met by order; its function is to sort out every possible confusion: that of the disease, which is transmitted when bodies are mixed together; that of the evil, which is increased when fear and death overcome prohibitions. It lays down for each individual his place, his body, his disease and his death, his well-being, by means of an omnipresent and omniscient power that subdivides itself in a regular, uninterrupted way even to the ultimate determination of the individual, of what characterizes him, of what belongs to him, of what happens to him. Against the plague, which is a mixture, discipline brings into play its power, which is one of analysis. [...] If it is true that the leper gave rise to rituals of exclusion, which to a certain extent provided the model for and general form of the great Confinement, then the plague gave rise to disciplinary projects. Rather than the massive, binary division between one set of people and another, it called for multiple separations, individualizing distributions, an organization in depth of surveillance and control, an intensification and a ramification of power."

All right, so this is a description and it is obviously critical description of how isolation, which is necessary to stop the spread of an infectious disease, can very easily shift into mechanism and means of control and surveillance. He also says at a later point that this thoroughly observed town in which all of the people are separated into individual bodies and no longer mixing is "the utopia of the perfectly governed city" and that when people are separated, observed, subjected to the sort of discipline and only do what they are meant to do than this is a "perfect society – it imposes an ideal functioning but one that is reduced". So, a very obvious question in here would be what perfect means in this case, because the way it is described it is clearly not perfect for the inhabitants as individuals. In the longer segment I quoted, Foucault describes that the plague is met by order and that the discipline counters confusion and chaos. And that's not just the confusion and chaos that comes with the disease. It's also the unpredictability and the chaos that can emerge from people interacting with one another and that is not so easily controlled. And so, in what Foucault is describing as something that is part of human nature – the chaotic undisciplined unpredictable – and also unknowable aspects of human nature are lost when people are segmented into individuals and can no longer mix with one another, can no longer interact, especially not without being observed while doing so. Now this is one point of view but I also want to give you a couple of contrasting examples. Or maybe they're not

diametrically opposite. This is something you can think about and comment on as well if you want to.

So first up there's Henry David Thoreau who is really an essential figure when it comes to questions of isolation and community and – I'm sure that he's going to come up a couple more times throughout this lecture series as well. In *Walden*, which was written in the mid 19th century, Thoreau writes: "I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found a companion that was so companionable as solitude." So, this is clearly a far more positive take on isolation and one of the reasons why Thoreau sees it that way comes through in a different quote from the same text. For a tiny bit of context, *Walden* is about the two years two months and two days that Thoreau spent in a cabin in the woods near Walden Pond in Massachusetts where he went to immerse himself in nature to be apart from society for a while.

"Some of my pleasantest hours were during the long rainstorms in the spring or fall which confined me to the house for the afternoon as well as the forenoon, soothed by their ceaseless roar and pelting, when an early Twilight ushered in a long evening in which many thoughts had time to take root and unfold themselves."

So, where Foucault was addressing mainly issues in the scope of society at large and how power is executed and control exerted over groups of people, Thoreau is very much looking at the individual and introspection and reflection in solitude. Foucault addresses the separation of bodies like physical separation, and this is an interesting parallel to Thoreau's text and this is the last that I am going to quote from Thoreau. Thoreau did get visitors at his cabin, so he wasn't entirely isolated for these two years and a bit. And about these visits and his conversations with these visitors he writes at one point:

"One inconvenience I sometimes experienced in so small a house, the difficulty of getting to a sufficient distance from my guest when we began to utter the big thoughts and big words. If we are merely loquacious and loud talkers, then we can afford to stand very near together, cheek by jowl, and feel each other's breath; but if we speak reservedly and thoughtfully, we want to be farther apart, that all animal heat and moisture may have a chance to evaporate. If we would enjoy the most intimate society with that in each of us which is without, or above. being spoken to, we must not only be silent, but commonly be so far apart bodily that we cannot possibly hear each other's voice in any case."

He goes on to describe that when he had visitors, the more in depth and intimate the conversation would become, the more they would kind of shift away from one another with their chairs, until their chairs would hit the walls of his small cabin and they couldn't move apart any further. This implies that physical separation is actually necessary or conducive to intellectual and social intimacy, which might be an arguable point and certainly goes counter to what Foucault writes.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was a contemporary and friend of Thoreau, and actually owned the piece of land on which Thoreau constructed his cabin, expresses a similar idea but with a slightly different angle on it. In the 1840s he writes in "The Transcendentalist": "It is simpler to be self-dependent. The height, the deity of man is to be self-sustained, to need no gift, no foreign force. Society is good when it does not violate me, but best when it is likest to solitude." Now, this might sound a bit misanthropic if you've never heard of or read anything by Emerson before, but it's mainly about

this theme of self-dependence. The same sentiment can also be found in other texts by Emerson, for instance in one titled "Self-Reliance" from 1841, where he argues strongly for this idea of trusting in your own inner self, and expressing your inner life essentially authentically. There, he writes:

"These are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity."

So, this is a criticism of society as a mechanism which breeds conformity and sameness out of the fear of judgement, and exclusion, which makes it easier to trust social norms than to trust yourself. And on the surface at least, this goes entirely counter to what I quoted from Foucault earlier, who argues that separating people, isolating them into individuals, is what actually breeds conformity, because it makes it easier to control these people and makes it easier to stamp out non-conforming-what Foucault elsewhere calls abnormal behaviour. Emerson and Thoreau meanwhile might argue that we have to be separate from society, you have to be isolated to figure out who you even are as an individual through introspection and reflection and so on, and that that is not possible while you are surrounded by other people, whose norms and judgements might inhibit what you allow yourself to be.

So even though I've only given you a very limited number of perspectives so far, it's already clear, I think, that this is highly ambivalent. And we're going to explore at least a dozen different perspectives over the next couple of weeks and months: From Anglo-Saxon and Norse hero sagas via transcendentalism and 20th century American novels to contemporary examples. The schedule's not going to be sorted chronologically, but to an extent thematically, and to an extent also simply pragmatically by how our schedules allowed it. But by the end of the semester, you'll hopefully have a sort of canopy of different points of view of how community, isolation and separation are seen and presented, and which values are attached to them in different time periods and different genres, but also just by different people.

We're all really looking forward to lecturing and having discussions in person again, but until that is possible, I hope that you can find some sense of community in this format as well. And I'm very much looking forward to hearing your input, too. There are different ways of sending in questions and comments, depending on whether you're enrolled in this lecture as a student or listening as a guest. All of that is described on the website, and if you somehow found your way to this audio file without visiting our website you can find the link on the department's homepage under as.uni-heidelberg.de. [If you've mysteriously found this transcript without the audio file, feel free to catch up [here](#).]

On the website, you can also find the programme with an overview of all of the talks that we have coming up, and you'll find all future episodes there as well. We'll have a new episode every week starting on Monday when I will be speaking with Margit Peterfy about being snowed in. Until then, take care and get in touch if there is anything you would like to add or ask.