



Harrow, S. R. (2022). Community in Solitude: Inter-Art Epistolarity through Late-Modern Critical Thought. In A. Watt (Ed.), *Labours of Attention: Work, Class and Society in French and Francophone Literature and Culture - Essays for Edward J. Hughes* (pp. 229-242). (Legenda (General Series)). Legenda.

Peer reviewed version

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Community in Solitude: Inter-Art Epistolarity through Late-Modern Critical Thought

Susan Harrow

In the celebrated iconography of the (male) group portrait, the French inter-art community of the later nineteenth century is visualized in its disrupted cohesiveness. Henri Fantin-Latour's studies of gatherings of artists and writers capture a certain loose or dispersed sense of community: *Un atelier aux Batignolles* (1870) is a homage to Manet and to innovators in his orbit (Zola, Monet, Bazille, Renoir, the sculptor and journalist Zacharie Astruc, and the musician and arts patron Edmond Maître); his *Un coin de table* (1872) is an iconic portrait of Rimbaud and Verlaine, and other participants at a dinner of the *Vilains Bonshommes* literary and artistic group. In both paintings, the multi-directional placing of the figures emphasises differences and distinctions, tensions even, between community and individuality, and gestures to the complexities of sociability, solitude, singularity, and togetherness.

In this chapter I interrogate ideas of community and solitude that are in play, not in pictorial representations, but in the less prominent – critically underexamined – medium of inter-art letter-writing, angling the ethos and practice of togetherness and aloneness through the prism of late-modern critical thought. How might the contributions of Jacques Rancière, Maurice Blanchot, Giorgio Agamben, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Jacques Derrida – themselves formative of a community of singular thinkers on community – help us explore letter-writing as a site of creative community and of sustaining solitude? And how, reciprocally, might inter-art letter-writing of the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries help illuminate aspects of modern critical thought around ideas of community and solitude integral to the

creativity of authors and artists. Finally, I will ask how the non-human solitude immanent in the literary or artistic work is reflected in Modernist letter-writing.

My purpose is to explore the relationship of community and solitude, drawing on selections from the correspondence of Mallarmé, Cézanne, Zola, Van Gogh, Proust, and Edma and Berthe Morisot. The premises of this essay are intersectional: my choice of authors and artists – several who are world-leading and others who are lesser known – is synonymous with ‘high’ culture and boundary-breaking aesthetic innovation; my selection of letters reflects those artists’ and authors’ experience of the everyday in their lived experience: in this way, the ‘prestige’ values of Modernism intersect with experiential questions of privacy, routine, health, nature, leisure, food, and friendship, *inter alia*.

Epistolarity and Everyday Aesthetics

Epistolary communities are constituted by letter-writers and their correspondents, and their afterlife is sustained by new and coming communities, that is to say, readers present-day and future, drawn into the preoccupations, anxieties, desires, and fantasies of correspondents.¹ I approach letter-writing as an exploratory site of subjectivity in the creative community, turning critical attention to the rhetoric of selected letters written by contributors to the inter-art aesthetic we call ‘Modernism’. Let’s begin by reflecting more deeply, through the work of Jacques Rancière, on the relation of Modernism and the everyday.

In his landmark study, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (2011), Rancière argues that the displacement of the ‘representative regime’ by the ‘aesthetic

¹ Epistolary communities may involve the few or the many: usually in the letters examined here, we gain a sense of two interlocutors, and an intimation of networks beyond, the wider ‘connected community’, however porous, dispersed, and notional that community might be.

regime', at the beginning of the long nineteenth century, creates an experimental space that is receptive to the everyday and the ordinary, a space where art and 'real world' co-exist and intermingle, disrupting falsely stabilized and separatist conceptions of 'elite' art and 'popular' culture.² Across fourteen sites of aesthetic modernity that include the Hanlon Lees Brothers' pantomime acrobatics, Loie Fuller's self-morphing performances of colour and light at the Folies-Bergère, Emile Gallé's glasswork and social art, and the filmic plasticity of Charlie Chaplin, Rancière demonstrates the political displacement and the reinvention of aesthetic values that emerge from the cultural privileging of the interrelation of perception, emotion, space, and thought in the modern era. The touchstone of Rancière's thought is equality and the disruption of traditional partitions between 'high' aesthetic values and the assumed 'lowliness' (and, thus, marginality) of the everyday. The creative intersection of 'high' and 'low' in Rancière has implications for my reading of Modernist letter-writing, which I approach as a critically under-explored space of everyday aesthetics, and one that, to my knowledge, remains unexplored by Rancière himself as a site of *aisthesis*. I argue that the integration of art and everyday life can be extended, beyond the remit of the performance art, popular culture, and social art that Rancière investigates, to the letter-writing of Modernist artists and authors. Here, everyday matters – concerns with habitat, with work habits, with the life of the senses, with sociability, with family and friends, with aloneness and togetherness – move *towards* aesthetics (through modes of analogy, metaphoricity, fantasy); and, reciprocally, Modernist authors and artists probe, analyse, transform, and resituate quotidian experience through the inventions and reflections of epistolary language.

² Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, translated by Zakir Paul (London and New York: Verso, 2013). The original publication is *Aisthesis: Scènes du régime esthétique de l'art* (Paris: Galilée, 2011).

At the core of Rancière's argument is the principle of critical redistribution ('redistribution of the sensible'). As the defining agency of everyday aesthetics, the principle of critical redistribution empowers relations of equality between things of widely differing scale and normatively assumed value, as Edward J. Hughes has explored through writers in French of the long twentieth century.³ Alertness to the redistributive capacity of a work introduces the possibility that *anything* has the potential to become art: this finds its epistolary resonance in Proust's repeated attempts to remediate his chronic experience of internal noise (in his Boulevard Haussmann apartment block) across a series of letters to his upstairs neighbour; and in Mallarmé's concern that his acute suffering (from a posterior boil) may become the subject of local gossip.⁴ Such 'everyday' experiences are incorporated into letter-writing without hierarchy and thus participate in a process of 'flattening' where the sublime creative project (the task of composing *À la recherche du temps perdu* or the work of innovating reason-defying Modernist poetry) and the everyday (builders at work, the experience of frustrated creativity, physiological and social discomfort) come together in

³ Edward J. Hughes, *Egalitarian Strangeness: On Class Disturbance and Levelling in Modern and Contemporary French Narrative* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021), examines, *inter alia*, novels by Proust, Simone Weil, Claude Simon, Marie Ndiaye, Didier Eribon, alert to the redistributive agency of modern and contemporary fiction in its interrogation of the social order.

⁴ *Marcel Proust: Letters to the Lady Upstairs*, translated by Lydia Davis and edited by Estelle Gaudry and Jean-Yves Tadié (London: 4th Estate, 2017): the phenomenology, psychology and sociality of acoustic experience are a constant subject of these letters between neighbours. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondance 1854–1898*, ed. Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 2019), letter of 23 December 1865, p. 145.

relations of contiguity, connectedness, or active comparison. The levelling and democratizing work of the Modernist comes into sharp focus in the epistolary community where ‘high’ art – and elevated artists – connect with the everyday, sounding their preoccupation with what it is to be alone and what it is to be together, with what it is to work and to play, to sleep and to eat. Their preoccupation with quotidian lived experience produces critical redistributions – of bodies, things, voices, and actions – within and between letters, and in ways that resonate with readers today as we negotiate accelerated communications, the pressures of connectedness, and, often, a sense of atomization and intersubjective separation in the wrought fabric of our everyday.

I take forward Rancière’s notion of critical redistribution by treating letters on a par with a work of art or literature, according them equal importance with what is traditionally defined as ‘aesthetic’, as letter-writing too often escapes the critical and analytical attention of researchers and remains the object of routine scholarly fact-mining and corroboration.⁵ In privileging epistolarity as a site of the aesthetic–everyday coincidence, I take my lead from Modernist writers themselves: thus, in the midst of researching the art of Cimabue in Assisi, John Ruskin, in a letter to Susie Beever, illustrates the inferior quality of local food by inserting his scale drawing of a stunted asparagus (17 June 1874); and James Joyce constructs

⁵ There are however fresh signs of letter-writing being discussed on equal terms with Modernist works of literature. Abbie Garrington explores epistolary ties, the belay metaphor, and connective affect in Virginia Woolf’s writing and in the correspondence of the mountaineer George Mallory, in ‘The Line that Binds: Climbing Narratives, Ropework and Epistolary Practice’, *Modernism and Affect*, ed. by Julie Taylor (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), chapter 4.

a persona of fiscal prudence that is performed through his detailed iterations of household expenditure in his serial ‘begging’ letters to his brother Stanislaus.⁶

Modernists’ letters are a place where art and life – aesthetics and the everyday – intersect and connect, and where the democratization of ideas and subjects occurs, producing ‘political’ disruptions in what is assumed important or appropriate. Rancière figures the effect of such upheavals and incidents in the artwork or in the cultural event as a relief map of fruitfully uneven relations and sporadic interruptions, a figure that is salient for our understanding of Modernist letter-writing:

Aesthetic experience has a political effect [...] [as] a multiplication of connections and disconnections that reframe the relation between bodies, the world where they live and the way in which they are ‘equipped’ for fitting it. [Aesthetic experience] is a multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible.⁷

⁶ For Ruskin’s letter from Assisi, see <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/22230/22230-h/22230-h.htm> (accessed August 2021). Xander Ryan, *Modernist Letters: The Epistolary Selves of Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Reading, 2021, pp. 128-30, explores the financial and sartorial metonymics of material self-formation in Joyce’s letters to Stanislaus.

⁷ The quotation is from Rancière’s lecture, ‘Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art’ (2006) <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/ranciere.html> (accessed August 2021). (My emphasis.)

An exceptional example of the creative disruption of commonplace mappings of the perceptible and the thinkable is to be found in Mallarmé's 'Récréations postales' (*Vers de circonstance*), performative enactments in epistolary poetry of the coincidence of the aesthetic and the everyday.⁸ On 8 July 1890, on an envelope, Mallarmé replaces the conventional recipient's address with a quatrain addressed to the postman, exhorting him to rush the enclosed letter to 'Madame Berthe Manet' (the painter Berthe Morisot). Mallarmé's postal quatrain inscribes the notion and the lexis of 'distribution' – the distribution of voice, body, idea, and material thing across space, time, and social class:

Sans te coucher dans l'herbe verte
 Naïf distributeur, mets-y
 Du tien ; cours chez madame Berthe
 Manet, par Meulan, à Mézy

Don't fall asleep on this green earth
 Innocent distributor, get busy
 Skates on, and speed to Madame Berthe
 Manet, Meulan way, at Mézy⁹

⁸ That the 'pure' aesthetics of Mallarmé is complexified by the encounter with the everyday has long been recognised by critics, notably Roger Pearson, Rosemary Lloyd, Damian Catani, and Hélène Stafford, alert to the poet's concern across his *œuvre* – literary and journalistic – with the everyday, whether fashion, fog, infirmary walls, candied fruits, or the ladies' fan. Indeed, *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* is a remarkable instance of the Modernist scattering of everyday debris (feather, bone, sea foam) through the exploded structures of the experimentalist poem of catastrophe and revelation.

⁹ My translation.

The postal-quatrain affirms the critical agency of others: their intention, their inventions, their commitment, their kinetic (and here, also, readerly) capacity, beyond the letter-writer (whose own performance depends on all subsequent performances in the epistolary chain). The very next day, a delighted Berthe Morisot ('Mme Manet') reported that the postman – the innocent or ingenuous 'distributeur' – was stunned to read the poem on the envelope addressed to him.¹⁰

Rancière's *aisthesis*, posited on the transformative encounter of art and the everyday, is founded on the sense of belonging to the human community through fresh, invigorated relations between art and the perceptual and affective world of lived experience. Understandings of community have been an intense subject of critical thought and re-thinking across the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, to which I now turn in the context of Modernist letter-writing.

What kind of community? What kind of solitude?

Modernist epistolary communities reflect and represent real-world (and notional) communities – groupings, alliances, affinities, rivalries, family and friendship circles, collaborative partnerships, and social networks – that link individual artists and writers across an extended period of inter-art innovation. At first blush, 'community' can appear to be a notion in conflict with the solitude required – and nurtured – by the author or the artist, working singly (and singularly) and self-representing in ways individual and often solipsistic,

¹⁰ Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), vol. I, p. 1250.

which calls up those forms of equivocal community that Fantin-Latour's group portraits capture in the mode of a visual oxymoron.

'Solitude' is commonly perceived as a negation of 'community' and a countervailing agency, the terms forming a familiar dichotomy that encourages and legitimates over-determinist – and potentially reductive – interpretations of the solitude (or the community) of the artist or author. Cézanne, often characterized, reductively, as an 'artist-in-retreat', is a limit-case in this respect. Philippe Sollers reflects on the internal and external solitude of the painter in his 1991 lecture 'Solitude de Cézanne' to the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, framing Cézanne's affirmations of the need for solitude '[sans] souci de personne' ['[without] caring about anyone'] as evidence of solipsistic aloneness and of the absolute refusal of community: in Sollers's figuration, the artist is absorbed in the intensity of self's encounter with sensation, and aversively anti-social.¹¹ Marcelin Pleynet argues, in his 2006 essay on Cézanne, that the painter was determinedly 'marginal' and singularly 'solitaire', even if it could also be claimed that the artist's early letters reveal a more engaged social self, and that the end of his life saw him welcome younger painters to Aix-en-Provence to dialogue with him in a late-flowering realization of creative community.¹² Van Gogh is reputed to have been notoriously solitary and 'asocial' yet, as his letters testify, he believed that artists should work and live together in mutually supportive relations, and he would later articulate a sense of empathic community with fellow 'patients' in his asylum letters. In mainstream representations, Proust is routinely offered up as the very incarnation of the self-

¹¹ Sollers's lecture is reproduced at

<http://www.pileface.com/sollers/spip.php?article333#section1> (accessed August 2021).

¹² Marcelin Pleynet, *Cézanne marginal. Cézanne, sa vie et son enseignement* (Paris: Les Mauvais Jours, 2006), pp. 51–62.

sequestered author, an image belied, *inter alia*, by the astonishing 90,000 letters that he is believed to have written between 1891 and his death in 1922.

But inter-art letter-writing, read in dialogue with late-modern critical thought on community, challenges and disrupts that familiar dichotomy in terms of the complex relationship of community and solitude. The Modernist letter-writers I am referencing here tend to frame ‘solitude’ – in an affirmative and enabling sense – in the context of a creative culture that is primarily, though not exclusively, individualist, and that shapes critical, historiographic, and popular representations of the artist. Van Gogh, writing to his brother Theo from his lodgings in London in the Spring of 1874, develops a paean to the pleasure and benefits of solitary urban walking immersed in nature. In the process, the artist proffers a botanical model of well-being, visual appreciation, and democratic care for Theo to follow:

I walk here as much as I can, but I’m very busy. It’s absolutely beautiful here (even though it’s in the city). There are lilacs and hawthorns and laburnums &c. blossoming in all the gardens, and the chestnut trees are magnificent. If one truly loves nature one finds beauty everywhere. (letter 022, 30 April 1874)¹³

In canonical Modernist historiography, as in artists’ self-representations, the solipsism of Modernist innovation is a concept at variance with the collectivist ethos of the multifarious avant-gardes of the early twentieth century (e.g., ‘Unanimism’, ‘Futurism’, ‘Simultanism’, ‘Dadaism’, ‘Vorticism’). Thus, it is with wry humour that the novelist and poet Marie de

¹³ The superbly annotated and full searchable on-line edition of Van Gogh’s correspondence is at <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/> (accessed 14 August 2021). Quotations from the painter’s letters are sourced there,

Régnier (Marie de Hérédia) addresses Proust as ‘cher Canaque’, thus inscribing his role as *secrétaire perpétuel* of the Canaquadémie, a group founded by Marie and frequented by Gide, Léon Blum, Léon Daudet, Proust, Paul Louÿs, and Henri de Régnier (letter of 11 December 1919).¹⁴ Marie’s playful reminder to Proust of his group allegiance affirms that Modernism’s singular figures exist both with – and beyond – the *cénacle* and the *groupuscule*, identified and self-identifying as ‘independent’ artists. One thinks of the creatively ‘networked’ poet and inter-art intermediary Apollinaire, in the Cubist moment, who asserted ‘je ne veux pas faire école’, a position complicated by his parallel sense of belonging to a small visionary group of creative ‘hills’ (in the major, late poem ‘Les Collines’, *Calligrammes*), an image that extends the lineage of Baudelaire’s vision of individual ‘beacons’ of visionary creativity (‘Les Phares’, *Les Fleurs du mal*) – all are connected but each luminary is singular.¹⁵ As the name ‘Salon des (artistes) indépendants’ (founded in 1884) in the world of modern painting reminds us, individual artists are related by creative reciprocity, inspiring rivalry, vitalizing camaraderie, and sustaining cultures of mutual support. Bertrand Marchal highlights the remarkable insight into contemporaneous networks of sociability (‘réseaux de sociabilité littéraire’) offered by Mallarmé’s letters, the activity of these networks contesting the myth of the solitary poet.¹⁶ Marchal’s reflections on Mallarmé’s networked sociability remind us that, even in the solipsism of ‘difficult’ modern poetry and thought (and the poet of *Un coup de*

¹⁴ This letter from Marie de Régnier is among the first to appear in the electronic

Correspondance Proust edition <http://proust.elan-numerique.fr/letter/03978> (accessed 14 August 2021).

¹⁵ Apollinaire’s letter to Toussaint-Luca is to be found in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Michel Décaudin (Paris: Baland and Lecat), vol. IV [1966], p. 697.

¹⁶ Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondance 1854–1898*, Introduction, p. 9.

dés jamais n'abolira le hasard is in many ways a 'pure' exemplar of a quester after solitude and singularity) there is a countervailing ethos and practice of cultural affinity, intellectual togetherness, and creative community. Epistolary communication articulates the values of 'community' in their diversity and singularity, and in their ethos of shared or reciprocal individuality and empowering solitude.

Critical thought and community

Contemporary critical thought can deepen our understanding of the inter-art community where the dialogue between individual(ist) ethos (solitude) and modes of togetherness defines relationality in letter-writing. Spurred both by the erosion of 'traditional' community formation and by the enduring transmission of shared values in an atomized society, the radical redefinition of community as de-regulated, heterogenous, supple, intimate, and chosen – a major axis of late-modern critical debates – uncovers perspectives that are salient for our understanding of inter-art letter-writing in the Modernist moment.

Concepts of community have been integral to the thought of Jean-Luc Nancy, Maurice Blanchot, and Giorgio Agamben, each responding in convergent yet distinctive ways to the work of Georges Bataille.¹⁷ Nancy, in an early essay, 'La Communauté désœuvrée' (1983), explores community as an exhausted agency, an agency suspended in terms of its instrumentalizing and totalizing agency, and thus 'not working' (*désœuvré*) in the conventional sense, but also as a body of values that persists and re-surges in more pliant

¹⁷ See Patrick ffrench, *After Bataille: Sacrifice, Exposure, Community* (Oxford: Legenda, 2017), for a discussion of community and friendship in Bataille and after Bataille.

encounters of self and others.¹⁸ Responding to Nancy's essay and to his view of 'community' as existing *outside* of the literary work or other forms of creativity, Blanchot actively relates community to literary work (through his reading of Duras's *La Maladie de la mort* (1982)) in *La Communauté inavouable* (1983), and thus he extends Bataille's concern with literature as non-utilitarian, sovereign, and heterogenous, an aspect to which I shall return. Blanchot takes forward the concept of 'negative community', formulated by Bataille in the 1950s: that is, the idea of a community formed of those who have 'no community' in the traditional, prescriptive, and ideology-driven sense of the term. Blanchot asks what vanishes and what endures when traditional (and traditionally restrictive) communities disappear, a core question for our study of forms of togetherness in Modernist letter-writing.

Van Gogh's letters provide one possible response: each individual – as every letter demonstrates – is part of a network of relations founded on family and friendship ties, and these relations involve, *inter alia*, mutual support, (inter-)dependence, influence, advice, empathy, solidarity, mentoring, engagement, commitment, collaboration, loyalty, and affinity. Van Gogh's correspondence reveals a sustained feeling for what I shall call 'elective community': his letters to his brother Theo explore a sense of community support and succour, and this fraternal correspondence connects Van Gogh to his parents and his other siblings, and to a wider circle of friends and associates. In the sustained intensity of the epistolary relationship between the brothers, with its familial ricochets and resonances, Van Gogh's letters outline a pragmatic response to the need for solidarity and describe a form of creative community founded on the sharing of material and psychological benefits. The painter places significant emphasis on the need for the community of artists to be mutually

¹⁸ Jean-Luc Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée* (Paris: Galilée, 2001), was first published in *Aléa* (1983), vol. 4, 11–49.

supporting and care-giving. Creative community, in this instance, includes the possibility of living together whilst preserving the values of individual retreat. Thus, in letters written in the early summer of 1888, Van Gogh suggests sharing his home with Theo and Gauguin, an arrangement that would enable the brothers to support a fellow artist in an intimate community of three:

[Gauguin] says that when sailors have to move a heavy load or raise an anchor, in order to be able to lift a greater weight, to be able to make an enormous effort, they all sing together to support each other and to give each other energy. That it's just what artists lack. So I'd be really surprised if he weren't glad to come [and join the van Gogh brothers in Arles]. (letter 623, 12 June 1888)

I thought of Gauguin and here we are — if Gauguin wants to come here there's Gauguin's fare, and then there are the two beds or the two mattresses we absolutely have to buy. But later on, as Gauguin's a sailor, there's a likelihood we'll manage to make our grub at home.

And the two of us will live on the same money as I spend on myself alone. You know I've always thought it ridiculous for painters to live alone &c. You always lose when you're isolated. (letter 616, 28 or 29 June 1888)

Where Van Gogh extols practical solidarity and (a degree of) co-living in the creative community, others practise 'looser' and more individualist modes of sociability and inter-art exchange. Thus, Mallarmé's famous Tuesday evening gatherings are a legendary site of creative community-making. Hosted at the poet's *rue de Rome* apartment over a span of

thirteen years, *les Mardis* were fluid inter-disciplinary gatherings of writers, philosophers, composers, and painters: the *mardistes* formed a protean cosmopolitan community that included W.B. Yeats, Édouard Manet, Stefan George, Oscar Wilde, Berthe Morisot, Paul Verlaine, André Gide, Paul Gauguin, James Whistler, Édouard Dujardin, Méry Laurent, and Paul Valéry.¹⁹ By means of these ‘at home’ gatherings, the creative community defines itself through regular and more intermittent modes of communication and reciprocity that connect with other forms of interaction – from dinners, visits, lectures, and salons, to epistolary exchanges between individuals. In his correspondence, Mallarmé reveals how he carefully regulates social connection and community participation, and how he balances interpersonal relations with the requirements of writerly retreat: thus, in a letter to Huysmans, Mallarmé explains how his ‘habitudes invétérées de solitaire’ [ingrained habits of a solitary soul] (22 October 1882) mean that he expects Huysmans to visit *him*, but *he* won’t go to Huysmans: the centripetal movement of the poet drawing others towards him (as befits his lionized position) is a strategy for avoiding his own physical and intellectual dispersal.²⁰ So, the individual’s balancing of his self-determined needs for solitude and for connection, in unequal measure, specifically excludes reciprocal equity in this instance. The pursuit of solitude is integral to the poet’s ethos and practices, thus social and community interruptions are fastidiously calibrated by the *solitaire*. Togetherness is founded on a strong individual(-ist) ethos that is equivocal and precarious and often manifestly community-resistant, anticipating theorizations of *negative community* in our own time.

¹⁹ Gordon Millan, *Les ‘Mardis’ de Stéphane Mallarmé: mythes et réalités* (Paris: Nizet, 2008) documents the thirteen-year period during which the poet held his *salon*.

²⁰ Mallarmé, *Correspondance 1854–1898*, p. 495.

Giorgio Agamben, in *The Coming Community* (1993), reflects on the ‘community that isn’t one’.²¹ Here, Agamben explores ‘communities without presuppositions’ that are composed of ‘whatever singularities’, concepts expressive of the individuality that is inherent in Modernist ethos and aesthetic practice, and integral to expressions of togetherness, reciprocity, and solitude in the letter-writing of Mallarmé, Proust, Cézanne, and Van Gogh, and others. In its rejection of essentialist constructions of community, Agamben’s ‘coming community’ is, in some ways (if, admittedly, not in all ways), comparable with the ‘looser’ sense of community discernible in the letter-writing (and in the real-world relations) of painters and writers who write letters to other painters and writers, and also to significant others in their lives, in terms of forms of togetherness based on various, individual, singular, porous, scattered, and interrupted instances, rather than on identarian essences or sustained physical encounters. Proust’s correspondence speaks of the power and perennity of friendship experienced in its true and *singular* place, that is in a quality of friendship that lies outside the rituals of social life and is nourished by solitude: responding to Madame Albert Hecht, who shared his interest in Manet’s art, the novelist writes, ‘dans la solitude les amitiés persistent, sans être renouvelées par la société’ (circa September 1918) (‘in solitude, friendships are sustained, without requiring to be renewed by social contact’).²²

The dialogue of Blanchot, Nancy, and Agamben reveals a complexified situation where the old dichotomies of community and solitude themselves are disrupted and

²¹ The book was originally published in Italian with the title *La comunità che viene* (Turin: Einaudi, 1990).

²² See the *Correspondance Proust* digital edition at <https://proust.elan-numerique.fr/letter/03584> (accessed 14 August 2021).

invalidated (this partly answers the question of what vanishes when community vanishes). As concepts of community are re-visioned as ‘negative community’, so, at its core, solitude (often constructed in commonplace understanding as deleterious and in need of remediation) is reappraised, as we saw in the preceding example from Proust’s valuing of friendship-infused aloneness. In advance of late-modern critical thought, inter-art epistolarity of the Modernist era reveals the ethos of community founded on a culture of solitude and other forms of individualism, such that solitude and community form a vitalizing, synthesizing oxymoron that empowers and sustains creative working.

The late-modern debate around community (and, more precisely the positive term that is ‘negative community’, a balance of being together and being oneself (and being one’s ‘own self’) beyond prescriptions), from Bataille to Blanchot, Nancy, and Agamben, maps strongly onto the loose and porous understanding of community that emerges in the letter-writing that I’m exploring: that is, in significant ways, a notional community, a community that isn’t one, a community that *need* not speak its name (or, if it does speak its name, speaks it in playful and self-subversive ways like the Canaqadémie). This is precisely Blanchot’s sense of the ‘unavowable’: that is, a community that is constituted of singular artists in a dispersed and flexible grouping. Individual artists and authors form a community through mutual values and through the shared practice of letter-writing (and, also, they form that community, in part, as a consequence of my actively relating them one to the other in this study).

In *La Communauté affrontée* (2001), published in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Jean-Luc Nancy explains the shift of his thought away from ‘community’ and towards ideas of ‘being together’, for the term ‘community’ always risks implying an entity that may be appropriated for utilitarian and operative ends. (Indeed, one might venture that the variety of lexical and semantic qualifiers added to the root concept-word – from ‘negative community’

(Bataille, Blanchot), via ‘inoperable community’ (Nancy) and ‘unavowable community’, to ‘coming community’ with its ‘whatever singularities’ (Agamben) – captures the resistance to unqualified (and unreconstructed) ‘community’.) The importance of being together (as opposed to being absorbed by community) comes vividly into focus in an exchange between Zola and Cézanne. The novelist urges the painter to defer his visit to Médan (Zola’s country retreat downstream from Paris) due to an ‘invasion’ of guests and their servants. He wants to enjoy with Cézanne their shared freedom and a sense of complicity without the pressures of sociability: ‘[être] plus libres, plus *entre nous*’ (2 July 1885) (‘[being] freer, just the two of us’, my emphasis).²³ Connected retreat is based thus on the nurturing of privileged relations with the few (often the one), rather than with the many. So, to return to Blanchot’s question as to what persists when traditional community is superseded or resisted – one might venture that affinity, flexibility, desire, individual preference, freedom, and a sense of balance persist. What vanishes? – the burden of obligation, rule-bound rigidity, and adherence to social expectations.

As the telling example from Proust’s letter to Mme Hecht quoted above reveals, solitude is not dissociated from, or distinct from, the presence of others; rather, there is togetherness-in-absence. An important meditation on togetherness-in-absence is to be found in an early letter of Zola to Cézanne (15 April 1860). Here Zola extols solitude as a space haunted with the presence of those absent: ‘Le temps passe vite, même dans la solitude, lorsque vous peuplez cette solitude de fantômes chéris’ (‘the time passes quickly, even when one is alone, when one fills one’s solitude with the phantom presence of beloved friends’).²⁴

²³ *Lettres croisées: Paul Cézanne, Émile Zola*, with a preface by Henri Mitterand (Paris: Gallimard, 2016), p. 410.

²⁴ *Lettres croisées: Paul Cézanne, Émile Zola*, p. 139.

Here the experience of solitude is enriched by the active remembering of the subject's affinity with community, an instance of self-care and of the ethical perpetuation of the cherished other. Here Zola deploys a high-altitude metaphor, invoking resilience and a tenacious commitment to the other and to their bond; figuring the importance of his friendship with Cézanne, he writes, '[je me] cramponne' ('[I] hold fast').²⁵ The climbing metaphor then dissolves in an unexpected pantheistic vision where mist and clouds suddenly part to reveal Cézanne's face lit by a ray of sunshine: in this rhapsodic and performative letter-text, Zola tracks his search for consolation in the active remembering – and the protean visualization – of the absent friend and the singular experience of friendship.

So, where does friendship – lived or remembered – relate to the discussion of conceptions of 'looser' forms of community and togetherness that we have been exploring? Friendship comes into play in what I have been calling 'elective community' (and what one might also call 'true community'): in letters, this is often the community of two. Community contains the capacity for friendship, and friendships – from deep bonds through enduring empathies to more fleeting or interrupted associations – create the thickness and the diversity of community. In the epistolary context, as in other contexts, friendships bring particularity to community, which is to acknowledge the subtleties, shifting intensity, and variable evolution of friendships, and of friendship itself.

The long tradition of literary and philosophical meditations on friendship encompasses Aristotle's analysis of transactional and virtue-based forms of friendship, Montaigne's reflection on his affinity with La Boétie ('On Friendship', *Essais*, 1580), Nietzsche's principle of actively critical friendship ('Of the Friend', *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*,

²⁵ See note 5 above for Abbie Garrington's study of climbing metaphors in Modernist fiction and in letter-writing.

1883–92), and Blanchot’s ethics of friendship as always preceding the individual human in the pre-existing relationship that each human has with another (*L’Amitié*, 1971).²⁶ In his reflection on community and solitude, Jacques Derrida, in *Politiques de l’amitié* (1994), figures the community of solitary friends, metaphorized as an ‘anchoritic community’, as a basis for future politics.²⁷ Derrida’s thought on the equivocations of friendship and solitude, and his notion of ‘singular community’, are, I propose, salient for my reading of Modernist authors’ and artists’ letter-writing.

Writers and painters are, for the most part, writing towards others in the creative community from a situation of intentional solitude, and from the distance integral to letter-writing: they are *together* in cherishing both their separation from each other and their mutual connection, thus upholding their ‘singular community’, which is the community of those who value solitude and practise ‘solitary singularity’.²⁸ To this, Derrida gives the definition ‘anchoritic community’ (a term that brings to mind Barthes’s late work on real-world and fictional forms of community in *Comment vivre ensemble* (1977): that is, ‘the community of solitary friends’ and the “community of those who have no community” (Derrida is quoting Blanchot quoting Bataille, revealing the late-modern lineage of thinking around ‘negative community’).²⁹ Similar ideas are evoked with singular poignancy in a confidential letter

²⁶ See Leslie Hill’s elegant translation of Maurice Blanchot, ‘For Friendship’, *Oxford Literary Review*, 22 (2000), 25-38.

²⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Politiques de l’amitié* (Paris: Galilée, 1994) explores the equivocation between individual friendship and community in ‘Replis’. The quotations are taken from the English translation by George Collins, *The Politics of Friendship* (London: Verso, 1997).

²⁸ *The Politics of Friendship*, p. 35.

²⁹ *The Politics of Friendship*, p. 37.

written by Edma Morisot to her sister and fellow artist, Berthe. Recently married to naval officer Adolphe Pontillon, Edma writes of the disconsolation that she is experiencing within the exclusive confines of bourgeois matrimony, for which she has renounced her artistic vocation.³⁰ Edma recalls that creative solitude and occasional fifteen-minute exchanges with artists such as Degas – who had a serious and supportive opinion of her work – were more rewarding than ‘des qualités solides’, an allusion to the stolid companionship afforded by her new husband. In response, in a bid to assuage those feelings of constraint and loss of artistic belonging, Berthe encourages her sister to count her blessings and appreciate that *solitude* (slanted now in the social sense and freighted with ideas of emotional lack) is not what a woman wants. Edma’s reflection on the loneliness of socially sanctioned togetherness in marriage speaks powerfully of the countervailing richness of self-chosen solitude and the value of sisterly and peer support experienced in the creative community.

Solitude and the immanence of the work of literature

In this final phase of our discussion, I return to the earlier thought of Blanchot for it has specific relevance for the Modernist epistolary context founded, not only on the shared experience of creative ‘solitude vécue en commun’ (‘solitude experienced together’), Blanchot’s definition of community in *La Communauté inavouable*, but also on the assumed internal ‘integrity’ of Modernist art forms.³¹

³⁰ Intimating the sensitivity and the confessional nature of her communication, Edma asks her sister to destroy the letter, aware that Berthe habitually leaves correspondence scattered around her home. *Berthe Morisot: Correspondence*, ed. by Denis Rouart (London: Moyer Bell, 1987), p. 24.

³¹ Blanchot, *La Communauté inavouable*, p. 39.

In *L'Espace littéraire* (1955) Blanchot takes solitude in a particular philosophical, and specifically textual, direction where he defines 'la solitude essentielle' as the solitude immanent in the literary work, distinct from the existential, 'lived' solitude of the 'author in the world'. For Blanchot, the essential solitude of the work is terrifying and unknowable and is glimpsed in the abolition of the author; it is instanced by the hermetic, self-reflexive, and autotelic qualities of Modernist art – one might cite Picasso's analytical cubism, Paul Valéry's *Le Cimetière marin*, or Pierre Boulez's serialist abstraction as examples of Modernist intermedial interiority in the French tradition.

Mallarmé's letters to his friend and fellow poet Henri Cazalis afford a remarkable insight into what Blanchot comes to theorise almost a century later (where, it should be noted, Blanchot invokes the author of *Igitur* as a practitioner of 'pure', non-utilitarian language). Immersed in the Introduction to his *Hérodiade* poem, Mallarmé tells Cazalis, 'Je vis dans une solitude et un silence inviolés' (5 December 1865) ('I live in inviolate solitude and silence') (or a solitude 'violated' only by the sharing of ideas in epistolary friendship).³² He wills the 'jewel' that is *Hérodiade* to emerge from 'le sanctuaire de ma pensée' ('the sanctuary of my thought'). Thus, Mallarmé synthesises the immanent solitude of the work and a sense of the rarefied creative – and psychic – solitude of the author.

Several months later, in late April 1866, in another letter to Cazalis, Mallarmé explores two (related) forms of solitude: in a figurative move that prefigures Blanchottian critical thought on the immanent solitude of the work itself. Here the poet describes a double void in which the self is engulfed both in its somatic interiority (the physical abyss that is his wheezing chest) – and in the void that is the unachievable 'Livre', the solitude that the 'pure'

³² Mallarmé, *Correspondance 1854–1898*, p. 140.

Modernist literary work demands and perpetuates.³³ This epistolary expression of the idea of the literary work as an abyss in which the poet contemplates his own abolition in the work, his own death, makes of Mallarmé, *épistolier*, with his critical lucidity on the ‘essential solitude’ of the work of art, a precursor of Blanchot. Here, in post-Mallarméan echo, is Blanchot:

L’œuvre demande [...] que l’homme qui l’écrit se sacrifie pour l’œuvre, devienne autre, devienne non pas un autre, non pas du vivant qu’il était, l’écrivain avec ses devoirs, ses satisfactions et ses intérêts, mais plutôt personne, le lieu vide et animé où retentit l’appel de l’œuvre.³⁴

The work demands [...] that the writer sacrifice himself for the work, becomes other, becomes not another, not in the living form that he was – the writer with his duties, his satisfactions, and his interests – but rather becomes no one, the vacant, energized place that resounds with the call of the work.

At the beginning of this chapter, I invoked Jacques Rancière’s vision of inter-art modernity founded on the radical redistribution between ‘high’ art and everyday culture. I have sought

³³ Mallarmé, *Correspondance 1854–1898*, p. 161.

³⁴ Maurice Blanchot, *Le Livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, [1959] 1986), p. 293. The translation is my own.

to show that Rancière's redistributive principle has exportable salience for our understanding of Modernist inter-art epistolarity as a space of everyday aesthetics, where the 'pure' art associated with Modernist thought and practice is complexified by an encounter with the ordinary and experiential. Letter-writing is thus revealed as a singular space where traditional, dichotomous understandings of solitude and community are actively contested, in ways that anticipate – and may be explored through – some of the key concerns of late-modern critical thought. Examples of the letter-writing of some of the iconic artists and authors of the Modernist moment reveal how values of creative community and their cognates – togetherness and friendship – are defined, understood, and shared through the clarifying reflection of letter writers on the complementary and integral value that is solitude.

Just as modern critical thought, that of Blanchot, Agamben, Nancy, and Derrida, can help us configure letter-writing as a site of community-in-solitude, so, reciprocally, letters of the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries can help us illuminate and instantiate aspects of modern critical thought around the concept and practice of 'negative community' and lived forms of togetherness and intimacy in our own time, particularly in relation to bodies, affect, perceptions, and the senses, which is to loop back, *in fine*, to Rancière's vision of the aesthetic redistribution of the sensible. Late-modern critical thought, in turn, can benefit from this expansion of its remit beyond notions of political community and of the community that is represented by the immanence of the work of art, just as epistolarity studies can benefit from critical frames that complexify understandings of the creative community of individual authors and artists.