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OPPOSITE: *Temptation of St Anthony* by Hieronymus Bosch (1490). St Anthony famously endured many torments sent by the devil during his years alone in the Egyptian desert.

Introduction

*Solitude is fine, but you need someone to tell you
that solitude is fine.*

—JEAN-LOUIS GUEZ DE BALZAC, ‘LES PLAISIRS DE LA VIE RETIRÉE
(THE PLEASURES OF THE SECLUDED LIFE)’, *DISSERTATIONS CHRÉTIENNES
ET MORALES* XVIII, 1665

Hell is other people.

—JEAN-PAUL SARTRE, *NO EXIT*, 1944

The world has always had its recluses. Secular and pious, male and female, rich and poor, the eccentric and the disaffected, hermits and those who choose to live the solitary life have been present in every age and in every culture. They have made their homes on Russia’s frozen steppes and in the deserts of the Middle East, on unnamed islands in the Gulf of Alaska and in the mountain monasteries of Honshu in Japan. Barely a corner of our planet has not, at some point in the sweep of human history, provided the contemplative and the hermitic soul with sanctuary.

Living the reclusive life is not the preserve of any religious or ascetic group. It is a universal human impulse that cuts across all religious, secular and social boundaries, and the study of the development of hermitic movements through history is full of surprises, constantly challenging our preconceived ideas of what recluses are and just what they represent. For instance, it was

long assumed that the earliest examples of ascetic life in Egypt were Christian when, in fact, many ascetic strands were present in secular Egyptian society long before the emergence of Christianity’s first hermits in the early decades of the fourth century. Although Christians were certainly the first to take the ascetic life out of Egypt’s cities and into the harshness of its deserts, evidence suggests secular ascetic cults may have provided a kind of social framework that not only predated Christian monasticism but also served as a philosophical model for the Christian communities that were to come.

The assumption that religious hermits outside the monastic life always lived lives of complete isolation also fails to hold up under scrutiny. The irony is that the more ‘successful’ hermits were at living the solitary life, the further their reputation would spread and the greater the attention they would then attract. In no time at all they would find themselves surrounded by dozens or even hundreds of disciples and followers eager to hear them speak and anxious to follow their example. History is full of accounts of hermits journeying ever deeper into the wilderness in a continual quest for solitude, as a curious coterie of the sick, the inspired and the curious followed in their footsteps. Often hermits would simply give in and accept the presence of a small group of followers, continuing an obvious New Testament precedent that would have been difficult to resist. A small core of those followers might then go on to form a separate cell, and then that cell would attract still more followers, and so on. It was as a result of small, almost spontaneous associations such as these that many of the great Catholic orders of history, such as the Camaldolese and the Carthusians, were born.

From the sixth century onwards to live as a hermit or monk meant to live a more or less structured life of conformity based upon strict adherence to a commonly accepted set of written principles. Historical documents such as the Rule of St Benedict for monks and the *Ancrene Wisse* for anchorites and anchoresses prescribed in detail how religious solitaires were to live their daily lives, in ways that left little room for interpretation.

In the twenty-first century, however, the definition of what constitutes a recluse has undergone a revolution. While a reclusive lifestyle means much the same to a Benedictine monk today as it did in the tenth century, thanks



Wealthy and talented, Howard Hughes was a record-breaking aviator and aircraft manufacturer in the years before he withdrew into a reclusive world of his own.

to the timeless common sense of the Rule of St Benedict, it has an altogether different meaning for a young Japanese male who refuses to leave his bedroom because he cannot cope with the demands and stresses of modern Japanese life. Some of these modern Japanese recluses, the so-called *hikikomori*, can spend decades as prisoners in their own homes, living solitary lives not through choice or in the pursuit of the divine, but as a manifestation of an acknowledged social illness they seem unable to overcome.

Better understanding of psychological conditions today allows for the recognition, diagnosis and treatment of those for whom the reclusive life is not

a choice but an illness that can, in extreme cases, force them to live their entire lives in isolation from the communities that surround them. Studying the behavioural patterns of some of the more eccentric recluses of history enables us to re-evaluate their behaviour, to demystify them and look for psychological causes for their retreat into seclusion. Several of the recluses in this book, including Bobby Fischer (see Chapter 6), seem to have suffered from autism spectrum disorders such as Asperger's syndrome, which can lead to the severe impairment of a person's ability to interact socially with others and push them into solitary pursuits.

One of the nineteenth century's most eccentric recluses, William Scott-Bentinck, the fifth Duke of Portland (see Chapter 7), exhibited several traits consistent with avoidant personality disorder (APD), which leads to an aversion to social gatherings coupled with a pervasive sense of inadequacy and a disproportionate sensitivity to criticism. Like many APD sufferers, he constructed a safe fantasy world where anxiety could be minimised—in his case a vast underground world beneath his ancestral home of Welbeck Abbey. Another psychological disorder that can lead to reclusive behaviour is obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), an anxiety disorder that can result in a preoccupation with the performance of mundane, repetitive tasks that are time-consuming and can severely inhibit a person's social integration. The reclusive Howard Hughes (see Chapter 7) exhibited several classic OCD tendencies, including 'germ phobia'.

One problem with living the solitary life—either voluntarily or involuntarily—that began to be appreciated only in the twentieth century is that humans are just not genetically wired to live their lives in isolation. Neurologists claim the brain's cortical mantle evolved primarily from a need to communicate, to assist humans to process interpersonal signals and refine the primitive survival mechanisms that ultimately led to the formation of social groups and, in turn, ensured our continuance as a species. Put simply, humans were made to be sociable and to live in community. In spite of the enduring and inspiring examples of the great hermits of history, we were made to talk to each other.