

〈書評〉

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*Modernizing Solitude: The Networked Individual in
Nineteenth-Century American Literature*

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The mid-nineteenth century witnessed an increase of human connection enabled by technological development. An expanded network of railroads improved the postal system and allowed the distribution of newspapers throughout America. The invention of the telegraph also facilitated immediate communication. However, Yoshiaki Furui's *Modernizing Solitude: The Networked Individual in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* does not focus on a utopianized unity of people. Instead, this work examines a new kind of solitude, which nineteenth-century American authors of various races and genders experienced, in varying degrees, as a result of the communication revolution. This type of solitude is a state of being in which they are physically alone but psychologically connected with the exterior world via various communication media. To clarify the paradoxical nature of this solitude, Furui coins the term "networked solitude" (12).

Networked solitude is, in other words, a concept located in that specific period of American history. Furui argues that Philip K. Koch's distinction between solitude and loneliness, which *Modernizing Solitude* is built on, lacks the historical context that is critical in examining these states of being. Based on Koch's study, Furui defines loneliness and solitude respectively as a negative state of longing

for communication and as a state of being receptive to every variety of reflection. However, *Modernizing Solitude* does not insist that solitude is solely determined by technological development, because solitude can take on diverse meanings and forms depending on the cultural, social, and geographical contexts that surround individuals.

Thus, the first four out of the book's five chapters select American writers with different backgrounds and focus on two types of solitude: one where a solitary individual attempts to connect with their surroundings through technological apparatuses; and the other where an individual both benefits from and rebels against the communication revolution. Chapters 1 and 2, which respectively analyze Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), can be classified as indicative of the first type of solitude. In contrast, the second kind of solitude is located in Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853) and *John Marr and Other Sailors* (1888) in chapter 3. Following a similar approach in chapter 4, Furui also investigates this second order solitude in a number of Emily Dickinson's poems.

Even though chapters 1 and 2 focus on the same type of solitude, Thoreau and Jacobs each portrays solitude in a unique way. Thoreau's networked solitude is facilitated by railroads. The sound of a steam locomotive echoes throughout Thoreau's solitary cabin and is reflected in his writing. Furthermore, trains enabled the distribution of newspapers, resulting in Thoreau being connected with the outer world. This is because Thoreau could keep up with public events by hearing news read aloud in the taverns he frequented. In contrast, Jacobs, who calls herself Linda Brent in *Incidents*, hides in the confining garret of her grandmother's house to escape her master Dr. Flint's sexual threats. In this garret, Linda connects to her surroundings by writing Dr. Flint a letter with a false address. Acquiring a New York address from a newspaper, Linda puts it on a letter to misinform Dr. Flint about her whereabouts. While Linda "places herself squarely in a communications circuit connected to the outside world" (56), Jacobs as the author feels anxious about white readers' understanding of *Incidents* and suffers "disempowering isolation" (64).

Chapters 3 and 4 both emphasize Melville's and Dickinson's ambivalence towards modern communication technologies; their self-imposed solitude is

rebellious against the communication revolution but they can be still connected to future readers due to communication technologies. The so-called “dead letter,” which became increasingly frequent due to railroads and the Postal Act, serves as a metaphor for Bartleby’s solitude. Like a non-circulating dead letter, Bartleby refuses to participate in “the circulation of ‘valuable’ documents” by disobeying a request for him to visit the post office (83). However, this does not mean Bartleby is completely isolated. Rendered into a published story by the narrator, Bartleby, who dies alone, never ceases to be circulated for future readers through printed media. Compared with Bartleby, Dickinson is more flexible. Refusing “the cult of speed” represented by the telegraph, Dickinson frequently wrote letters transported by railroads (109). This is because she desired to construct intimacy with her correspondents at her own speed. In addition, she removed from circulation an envelope and a telegraph upon which she wrote poems. In that way, Dickinson could connect with future readers in her mind while in her solitary room.

Chapter 5 is distinct from the previous chapters in that it contends that the telegraph produced a new type of loneliness, and consequently the positive aspect of solitude declined. To define this emerging loneliness, the chapter deals with telegraphic literature where a white female working-class telegraph operator tries to get married with a middle-class man through the use of a telegraph. However, the state of being constantly connected through a telegraph intensifies the moment of their disconnection. Ostensibly, this chapter contradicts Furui’s point about the blurry boundary between loneliness and solitude: driven by the desire to overcome lonesomeness, one utilizes various technological tools to reach the state of solitude. Therefore, a telegraph may produce a new loneliness, yet it might also create a novel solitude as well. However, the final chapter can be interpreted as a prelude to a further study of solitude in the age of the telegraph and beyond. This is because *Modernizing Solitude* claims that the “solitude of yesterday helps us reassess the solitude of today and envision the solitude of tomorrow” (24).

One significant virtue of this work is that Furui analyzes each author’s solitude against the backdrop of each work’s critical reception. For instance, Thoreau’s networked solitude is explored in an attempt to dispute critics’ tendency to read *Walden* solely as a Transcendentalist manifesto of individual selfhood. However, analyzing each writer’s unique solitude separately might also turn the reader’s

attention to another issue: what politics are involved in the differences of solitude based on gender, race, class, and sexuality? Although *Modernizing Solitude* does not yet fully answer that question, the text does inform us about what it means to live in an ever-increasingly modernized society. As its last chapter implies, contemporary people excessively connected by a social network system often feel unbearable loneliness. *Modernizing Solitude* investigates mid-nineteenth century American literature in order to suggest ways that we can transform our own oppressive loneliness into potentially positive forms of solitude.