

Julia Shuvalova
Exercises
in Loneliness

Unfinished Essays

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«Издательские решения»

Shuvalova J.

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Exercises in Loneliness is a collection of philosophical essays on a common topic of solitude that started as a series of blog posts. “There is something romantic and legendary about loneliness because every knight searches for the Holy Grail on his own. Even the best fairytales are born out of an extreme loneliness. So the secret is to stop asking to be saved and to start saving others. Before long you will see how your own loneliness subsides — like a tide that runs away with sunrise”.

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Exercises in Loneliness Unfinished Essays

Julia Shuvalova

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Exercises in Loneliness

For my grandmother (1924—2014) and my mother

Preface

This is my first book. Like some of the first books, it's taken a while to write. The genre of "unfinished essays" meant for quite a long time that I was writing occasional posts on my blog without a specific goal to turn them into a collection. Then it became obvious that it was possible to assemble them into a collection... and just about that time I gradually began to lose interest in the topic.

Regardless of circumstances, the essays are now ready to face the world. The book consists entirely of my essays and poems. In writing and then assembling the essays I went from irregular sketches on the topic of loneliness and solitude to a more concerted effort to share my views in the hope that someone may find them useful and benefit from my opinion or experience. Of course, this method can also be regarded as a means to combat loneliness. However, I genuinely believe there is something to benefit from in these texts. I've got a long way to go to reach the age and experience of Casanova, but on occasion of these essays I share the same attitude to letting others see into my inner world: *my life is my subject, and my subject is my life.*

Throughout the book you will find references to people whose work and thought has influenced, supported and developed me, so I won't mention them here. And I don't mention by name anyone who participated in creating the experiences that prompted me to write the essays. Some of them are physically gone, others I don't want to name for a reason. Strictly speaking, although I couldn't help drawing on some of my personal experiences, I never considered them as mine only. They were mine as far as my own circumstances were concerned, but they could be yours, too. The way I look at it, I describe some typical situations that one of my readers may have experienced.

I want to dedicate this book to my family. I published enough work for my grandma to see her prediction coming true, for I have become a writer. But I never managed to complete a book for her to know about it, at least. My mother will undoubtedly be proud. I owe her a bigger part of the home library and an undying support of my efforts and projects. Last but not least, I shall follow in the footsteps of those eccentric academics who thank their pets. I am very thankful to my pets for blissfully sleeping, while I was finishing the collection, and proving me right: loneliness subsides when you help and share your time and effort with those who need it. This is why, after some thinking, I added a short story, *Felina Petrarcae*, at the end of the book. It wasn't composed as a complement to *Exercises in Loneliness*, but as it touches upon a similar subject, I thought it was a fitting addition.

Julia Shuvalova, Moscow, February 2015

Introduction

I am writing a series of essays, *Exercises in Loneliness*. The title came from out of the blue, but I like its ambiguity, or better put – the variety of interpretations that the title has in other languages. I think, in one way or another, I will be writing this series forever, yet now I must stop somewhere to make further reflection possible. So I stop here... to continue again one day.

The series has started on my blog, *Los Cuadernos de Julia*, with a small note about a film director whom I interviewed in 2005. He asked me what I was doing apart from journalism. “I write”, I told him. “I can’t be a writer”, he said, “it’s a very lonely experience”.

I remembered this well. Then there was a quote from Huysmans, that literature “is a way to save those who write it from the tedium of living”. There were a few phrases from *L’Histoire de Ma Vie* by Casanova, in which he admitted that he took to writing his memoirs in order to once again experience his incredible adventures. There was hardly another reason for an old librarian to do so, except loneliness exacerbated by stomach problems.

Then there was a post about Pascal Quignard that started, as a matter of fact, with my musings on the desire to read something inspiring and the obligation to write something as daunting as the history of Sikh martyrs!

Then there was a text composed over a two-hour dictation at Cornerhouse art centre in Manchester, soon to become extinct, probably. I contemplated the inevitability of loneliness as equivalent to being unique.

There were notes written on the train, a rather suitable draft from the year 2004, a text about female loneliness inspired by the works of V. Woolf, A. Schopenhauer and F. Nietzsche. Then an essay about a poem *Café and Music*. And little by little all other essays followed.

They are all united, first and foremost, by the fact that I wrote them alone, both literally and metaphorically, with no recourse to another’s opinion. This was rarely solitude or loneliness in a strict sense of the word: I was invariably surrounded by people who could distract me. They could be neighbours or the folk at the next table in a café. But there was no collaboration, and I never discussed these ideas with anyone, so you may say that loneliness has become a method. All essays were written differently: some on computer, the fourth essay was written entirely by hand, others have got some hand-written drafts, and all poems have got autographs. The fourth essay was written in two hours and marks not merely the flow of thinking but *the passage of time*, if you like. Interestingly, half of this introduction was written in Russian, as I considered making this collection bilingual but discarded the idea. Hence, what you have been reading up to now is a translated text. The remaining essays were written in English. It is a bit complicated with poems. Ever since my first fairytale that I composed at the age of six, I have been writing both poetry and prose. Poetic lines intercepted the fairytale, and here you will also find a few poems, some originally written in English, some translated into English by me that, apart from one or two exceptions, were composed at the time when I was writing the essays and therefore serve as the addenda.

I call these essays “exercises” because they have always been conceived as sketches. Making them a complete, detailed study of loneliness has never been intended. Today we live in the world where there is always someone near you: unless it is a guy at the next table, your pet or God (provided

you are a believer), then it is almost certainly your virtual acquaintance who either communicates with you on Facebook or Twitter or reads the posts by you and others. This also means that loneliness is always fleeting, it comes and goes. Therefore, what is loneliness? When does it occur? When and why do we start feeling it? How do we experience it? When does it end? Does it end at all? My experience suggests that answers to all these questions are so personalized that it would be extremely audacious of me to try and offer any “complete” study of such condition. In addition, being a writer, the last thing I wanted was to turn this collection into a psychology book. Writing hardly needs to be any more psychologically underpinned than it naturally is.

As for me, I have no problem with loneliness, in general. I see loneliness as a rather normal type of human activity. It cannot be discarded as a state, but loneliness is in itself a by-product of some fundamental craving. However, there is a certain linguistic interest for me here, for the English language has at least three words that can all be translated into Russian as “loneliness”: solitude (being, or living alone, without any particularly negative connotation), loneliness *per se* (sometimes with a very negative connotation) and uniqueness (if we are to think of loneliness in some creative sense). That being said, uniqueness is a personal characteristic, while creativity is not necessarily connected to artistic sphere. Still, loneliness is normally taken in social or strictly physical sense. We therefore talk about the necessity to communicate, the aim to belong to a society. Very few mention loneliness on occasions when you are surrounded by people you presume to be your near and dear, despite the fact that most of us have experienced this at least once in our lives, and dare I say it is this kind of loneliness that most of us find the least bearable. Nonetheless, most people I know find loneliness a terribly awful accident that occurs when there is not a soul around and as such should be avoided at all costs.

Meanwhile I am not sure about self-sufficiency that arises from solitary living, as it follows from Schopenhauer’s work. Perhaps, the reason for this is that there is not much true self-sufficiency around. My uncertainty is also due to the fact that every person needs a conversation with real people to arrive at unbiased conclusions. Writers need this all the more so. We need real people from past and present, with their jokes, hopes and weaknesses. There is no place for arrogance in literature as far as the knowledge of life is concerned. Every hyperbole conceals something very realistic, which usually presents itself in the society, that huge common room where women used to write in secret until Virginia Woolf announced that we needed money and a room of our own. As a woman, I entirely agree with her. However, since then many writers, both men and women, have acquired money and shut themselves in their own rooms, causing the style and subjects of their works to suffer dramatically. This is why I am not sure about Schopenhauer’s aloofness, as it leads some folk to think they can get by with their intuition and the little knowledge of life they’ve got. Indeed, we can imagine many things by going through the Panoptikum of our brain, but for that you need some examples of what things can be. Reading will not suffice, and in fact, a thoughtful, attentive reading is no less a lonely experience than writing.

The essays therefore are meant to give us food for thought, and what can be better food than the one that comes from a person who has been alone for the better part of their life? Being the only child does not necessarily predispose you to solitude or the perpetual feeling of loneliness, but as you live on and discover people, habits and *modi operandi*, you realize that solitude is salubrious, and loneliness is not the end of the world. In the end, as Joseph Brodsky put it in *The Great Elegy for John Donne*, if there are people and things that share our lives, what then shares our death and after-life? Is this not an indication that we are always – infinitely – alone? Is this not also a hint at the divine nature of a man because if the man is created after God’s own image, he has to be alone and to learn to live with his solitude and loneliness, as this is what God has been doing since the time before

Time? This is not to say, “stop moaning! loneliness isn’t the worst thing that can happen”. Depending on circumstances and your predisposition, it can be the worst thing. But perhaps something in these essays will provide consolation, and each one being unfinished is a key to this. Loneliness, solitude, uniqueness are essentially permanent states; but, like tides, they can subside. All we need to do is to learn to live by the sea.

1

I remember speaking to one film director who complained that he had to write an article about his film. In his words, he'd be happy to talk about it as much as he could, but writing was weighing him down. As the person who, instead of a silver spoon, was probably born with a pen, I obviously asked what it was that he didn't like about writing. His answer was that writing was "a lonely experience".

Of course, as I'm writing this at an ungodly hour I have to admit that, physically, writing *is* the lonely experience. But mentally it can be quite stimulating and even scandalous, if one considers the works of Marquis de Sade, some of which he wrote in prison, and some – in a lunatic asylum.

Back in 2006 being alone felt exhilarating. I craved independence, and I had got my hands full. Not that I didn't want to share work or success, but I was determined to succeed alone, first and foremost. Unconsciously, perhaps, I was drawing inspiration from the famous *New York, New York* song, paraphrasing it as "*if I can make it on my own, I can make it with someone else*".

As I was to find out, we can all do things on our own but they often take awfully more time than if we did them in a company of like-minded people. Having gradually revisited my attitude to loneliness, I nonetheless kept my opinion of writing. It is not a lonely experience, for when I write I imagine the whole world that I inhabit both as an actor and a creator. My company is my characters, and even when I compose an academic essay or an article about a community leisure centre I am still surrounded by facts, figures and personalities. This is a thrilling experience, although I realise it may be more interesting, complex and fulfilling to operate a set of living people than the world that only exists in your head and maybe used to exist for real a good few centuries ago.

The longer you are alone, however, and the more you cherish your solitary state, the more you become insensitive to the outer world. Such scenario is not inevitable but loneliness becomes a habit, it blinds you, and it might take a bigger or lesser catastrophe to shake you out of this routine. You turn into Tony Camonte from *Scarface*, obsessed with power your solitude grants you and fully oblivious to the woes of others.

2

A few pearls of wisdom from the *Memoirs* by Casanova:

“My errors will point to thinking men the various roads, and will teach them the great art of treading on the brink of the precipice without falling into it. It is only necessary to have courage, for strength without self-confidence is useless.”

“As for the deceit perpetrated upon women, let it pass, for, when love is in the way, men and women as a general rule dupe each other.”

(Casanova knew this better than anyone: his affair with La Charpillon (Marie Anne Auspurgher) was a fascinating, if impossibly bitter, case of deceit perpetrated by a woman upon a man. The “affair” which was never consummated and which cost Casanova 2,000 guineas culminated in a “*journée du dupe*”, when Casanova was denied access to La Charpillon under the pretext that she was dying. Inconsolable, he decided to throw himself in the Thames but was talked out of it by a friend who happened to pass by. Together, they went to the Ranelagh Gardens where Casanova saw his expensive darling dancing, offensively healthy and beautiful.)

Also, to carry on expanding on the phrase by Huysmans:

“There is only one reason for literature to exist, to save those who write it from the tedium of living”,

here are a couple of extracts from Casanova’s *Memoirs* that quite potently prove the Frenchman’s point:

“I have written the story of my life,.. but am I wise in throwing it before a public of which I know nothing but evil? No, I am aware it is sheer folly, but I want to be busy, I want to laugh, and why should I deny myself this gratification?... By recollecting the pleasures I have had formerly, I renew them, I enjoy them the second time, while I laugh at the remembrance of times now past, and which I no longer feel”.

Indeed, for the man who had been to many countries and places and had known (literally, as figuratively, speaking) many people, to find himself as a librarian in an old chateau in Dux must have been frustrating, especially as his health also began to deteriorate. With nothing interesting happening around him in the chateau his only resort was his own past, which thought he captured with the well-known “*my life is my subject, and my subject is my life*”.

[The quotes are from the unabridged English translation of Casanova’s *Memoirs* (London, 1894)].

When we state that we are happy being lonely we dupe ourselves. I have just stated that loneliness can become a habit, and you can object to acquiring it, like Casanova. But I sincerely doubt that any person would genuinely wish to remain alone forever. Robinson Crusoe found himself a Friday, and we inevitably ascribe anthropomorphic traits to our otherwise solitary world. Whether we cherish books or pets, we turn them into something we would not want to lose, an undeniably human extension of ourselves.

The reader would certainly want to know how it happened that I started thinking and writing about loneliness. I went through a stage of wanting to be alone in my early teens, which may be familiar to many. Some early poems on this subject included the one with rather telling lines:

I love solitude,
I pray for it,
I don't ask for my days to be long
But I want to be united with her.

This is a verbatim translation, so don't be misled by "her": it was a reference to Soul, which is a feminine-gender noun in Russian. In hindsight, this was how I expressed a desire to gain inner comfort. This was the voice of a youngster searching for peace and love in early 1990s.

As I grew older and went to the university, I started getting torn between the inner comfort that came with studies and a feeling that I wanted to be one half of a pair. Moreover, I was determined that my family life would be full of passion or even Passions – a far cry from comfort and peace, as you can imagine. At the beginning of 2000s I read a few interviews with celebrities who claimed their family was their "peaceful haven". I found the expression alarming, as it oozed that particular bourgeois boredom I wanted to escape. I was convinced, as a true romantic, that love had to have some challenges. It could therefore be tumultuous, hot, problematic – anything, as long as it didn't embody "the tedium of living". I hadn't read Hyusmans yet, by the way.

As with independence, I got what I asked for, and even more. I had a seemingly peaceful haven that more often than not looked like a teacup, overtaken by a storm.

My first reaction was to find solace in the familiar idea of a hermit's life. By then, however, I had learned to reason, and various experiences convinced me that I was a very capable person. It just didn't make sense that I couldn't have a normal family life. It was then that I began to deconstruct the debris of my own conflicting views on marriage and peoples's relationships.

In the end, I admitted that I also wanted to live in a peaceful haven. I discovered that life outside your abode was rather unpredictable, and therefore the only place where you could gain confidence and strength to carry on was your family and your home. It had to be the first and the last place where you would turn for support, solace and determination.

Of course, it is possible to gain these from yourself, and some of us get quite good at it. But, believe me, it is the most wonderful thing when your near and dear believe in you, when they look up at you and proudly share your example with others.

I somewhat willingly got back to living alone. I know it won't last forever. As an historian, I believe in cycles, so waiting doesn't hurt. The French author, of whom I am to write more in the next chapter, wrote in one of his works: *il y a un plaisir non pas d'être seule mais d'être capable de l'être* (there is a pleasure not in being alone but in being capable of it). I agree, yet the topic, generously fed by personal experience, couldn't help but fascinate me. I wanted to think why people craved loneliness, and what they did after they obtained the inner comfort that arguably comes with it. I had a feeling that leading a solitary existence, with little socialising and not caring for anyone, could not be fulfilling in the long run. After a period of evolutionary development people usually need some sort of a revolution because, *well, you know, we all want to change the world* (The Beatles).

3

Generally, I love sleepless nights. I love the time when I can read or write, without being disturbed. There is only one exception: I prefer it when I am actually enjoying either writing or reading. Right now I'm about to embark on a very lengthy text on the topic of martyrdom in Sikhism. And although I already know and understand how the text needs to be written, I find it daunting to write because – God knows! – I'd prefer to write about something else. Something more inspiring, more creative.

To stay up at night has never been difficult to me. I don't even know how I came to develop such ability. When I was a student, however, my mates at the University used to ask me with all seriousness what to do in order to stay awake. The question would normally rise during the exam session. I could never give any sound advice, and from what I know, they never actually stayed up.

Writing daunting texts is also nothing new. The text I need to write only needs to be around 15 pages. The topic of martyrdom borders on History, Philosophy and Religion, and I'm looking at the whole of 17th c. in India. Of course, Asia is not Europe, but 17th c. is not something totally alien. I think it's because of *him*. He is Pascal Quignard. Ever since I read *Terrace à Rome* I wanted to find and read as many of his works, as possible. Naturally, since 2006 I've read most his works that were translated into Russian, as well as the French edition of *Le mot sur le bout de la langue* and a superb collection of essays about world paintings, also in French. (Mr. Quignard remains one of my favourite living authors).

What fascinates me in Mr. Quignard is a true *joie d'écrire*. A good writer, to me, must love people and language. This doesn't mean he can be oblivious to people's shortcomings but he must believe that Love is the power that rules this world. The love for language manifests itself in a variety of methods used to compose the text and in the ability to find a proper expression to make a description. Mr. Quignard has mastered both to perfection, for which reason some people casually note: "Oh, but he's an *aesthete*". You can hear irony, if not disdain, in their voice, even if this line appears typed on a computer screen. I dare say, in the world where aesthetism has shrunk down to a perfectly coiffed beard, it costs a lot to have someone who commands the language beyond its everyday and even conventional literary usage. Language, as something intangible but infinitely powerful, is what makes us closer to the divine source of Life.

In my life as a reader I went through a series of very intense "love affairs" with different authors. Those whose works I most hungrily devoured were Shakespeare, Hemingway, Chekhov, Bulgakov, de Sade, Henry Miller, Maugham, Süskind, Marquez, Llosa, and Vonnegut. Oh, yes, also Wilde, Prévert, and most Russian poets. I took an all-embracing approach to Literature, hence I have been reading (or trying to read) practically everything. As I studied History at the University, I read ancient playwrights, troubadours, Renaissance poets, 17th c. philosophers, the literary works of the Enlightenment, and the poetry and prose of the Orient.

As a result, a sleepless night has never been a lonely night for me. It certainly cannot be when you are in bed, so to say, with a good playwright, poet or writer. Someone shall certainly argue that a living man is better than the dead Shakespeare. Personally, I hope to never reach the state of mind when I claim that I like books better than people. But being on my own, drinking tea or coffee and reading or writing (and since 2003 – also translating or editing), is a bliss. The only thing that can ruin

this otherwise happy state is something I don't want to do, be it writing a text you have no particular desire to work on or vain socialising.

There is one more reason why I admire Quignard's work. His erudition is immense, as becomes a person who translated from rare languages, whose novels are always full of music, in which language he is also fluent, and who set his works in different countries and epochs. And yet all his novels are very easy to read, and none of them is too long. The author, having an absolute ear for both music and literature, seems to know exactly when he must stop.

I read a lot in a few languages, and I always find it amusing when authors try to jam every possible bit of information into their narrative. Laconism is a dangerous thing because, as Balzac said, it is like a lightning that blinds you and you no longer know where it leads you. But the so-called intellectual literature, as practised by the authors less potent than Eco or Vargas Llosa, sometimes resembles a *Kunstkammer* that terrifies you with its sheer size, not to mention the content. I have read a few 700-odd page novels recently, and I felt each one could be at least two times shorter. Today a commercial purpose also dictates to serialise stories, yet some novels that were awarded the Nobel Prize don't exceed 300 pages. The impression the latter make, however, is usually indelible.

The art of writing consists in finding the form to best shape and project the content. Like in silent film they used to move camera and change lighting to tell the story visually, so a writer should, too, use the language and its means to produce precise descriptions without falling into verbosity. I do believe that a writer and a film director are rather similar. Both are creators who should be stifled – in a good sense – by their art, if not budget or word count, to produce a work that expresses their ideas, while using the methods of each respective art to their full potential. Just as you don't need too much money to make an epic film, so you don't need too many pages to compose a good novel.

In Quignard's work every scene and every word are in their proper place. Laconism and precision produce a remarkably rich, detailed narrative. There is no thoroughness that makes you feel the author is trying to reach the word count. No long-windedness, walking in circles or constant repetitions. Instead of a cluttered text there is a virtuoso incarnation of a writer's idea that has obtained a perfect shape and now flows effortlessly, like some of the best improvisations. Such is the music of Mr. Quignard.

4

I'm sitting at Cornerhouse in Manchester, on the first floor. There aren't many people there yet, and I am fortunate to find myself by the window in the farthest corner. People are eating, or drinking, and chatting, and at the next table to mine sit two Spanish girls, in similar clothes, with laptops.

It's almost seven o'clock. Going to work in the morning happens pretty quickly, or so it seems, perhaps because I'm in a hurry. But in the evening homecoming takes ages. In truth, it takes probably just a little bit longer than in the morning – about 20 minutes longer – but somehow I'm conscious of this difference.

And so, I'm sitting here, writing this, and the tea in a delicate glass cup is still fairly hot but will get colder by the time I finish writing.

What is it that I wanted to say? I came here with the intent to carry on with my musings on self-identification and categorisation. I spent the most fulfilling half an hour on the train spilling the words out on the lined pages of a reporter's notebook where I'm now continuing with this. Henry Miller – and with him many a writer – would call this a “dictation”. It's this wonderful state of things when you feel yourself as a tool in someone's hands who is sitting somewhere afar and whispering these words into the tip of the tool, and they pass at the speed of light to land in your head to be heard and discovered.

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