The End of Solitude: About Me but Not for Me

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With the coming of each new age, there has come a new general thought: the core value binding the soul and the self of a person to reality. In the Romantic Age, the self was driven for “sincerity.” In the Modern Age, the self was driven for “authenticity.” Now, in the Postmodern Age, the self is driven for recognition and “visibility.” Recognizing the Postmodern desire for recognition, Doctor William Deresiewicz states, in his essay “The End of Solitude,” “The Camera has created a culture of celebrity; the computer is creating a culture of connectivity” (Deresiewicz). Both celebrity and connectivity are clearly marked ways on the path to becoming known and achieving this visibility. Deresiewicz goes on to claim that “[t]he great contemporary terror is anonymity” (Deresiewicz).

Through the rest of his article, Deresiewicz follows society’s fear of anonymity as it progresses into the loss of solitude. Because of society’s “great contemporary terror,” we have moved into a state of constant connection. We are always interacting with others, and we are always communicating with others. When, at one point, it took weeks to deliver a letter to a friend in a different area, it now takes fractions of a second to send a text message. There is constant immersion into the mass of culture and those around us. We are essentially never alone. We have lost our desire, and even our ability, for solitude (Deresiewicz).
However, there has always been some societal need for solitude. The human is a social creature, but solitude is the reset needed to continue our being social. During the Romantic Age, we went to solitude seeking sincerity, or the cohesion of the the outward and inward personas. In the Modern Age, solitude became more inevitable as the view of the self changed. The self was considered enclosed and impossible for another person to reach, making solitude a necessary and inescapable entity as the self isolates us. If Romanticism developed the idea of the city and community, Modernism developed the idea of a much more threatening city -- a city in which we are under a constant attack on our selves -- and our only defense is to retreat into solitude. Yet we aren’t in the Modernist city any more. We don’t fear that we will lose ourselves by being caught up in the mob of society, but that we will lose the mob of society by being caught up in ourselves. “Our great fear is not submersion by the mass but isolation from the herd.” (Deresiewicz).

The internet helped; at least at first it helped. It gave people an opportunity to connect with others that they likely wouldn’t have been able to connect with otherwise. It allowed people to establish relationships that never would have happened without it. Then the situation escalated. The internet has created the tendency to be constantly connected -- to be constantly plugged into the mob. It lessens the amount of true contact, but exponentially increases the amount of indirect contact. We no longer seek people and relationships and actual society, but celebrity and recognition. We seek Facebook likes, and Instagram comments, and ultimately visibility. We have lost the self-security gleaned from solitude for
the a cheap and ineffective substitute of the self-security gleaned by recognition, and with that loss is the loss of our ability for self examination, our ability to read and stay focused for long periods, and even a loss of the solitary sections of the mind. We have brought ourselves to a point in which we are so intertwined within society that we have no brain space that is not tuned towards a social element.

Perhaps even more daunting is our loss of the understanding that vulnerability is not always a wise decision and that keeping oneself contained and reserved is simply safer. It allows us to keep ourselves secure in our soul’s position in the world, and it allows for self exploration and examination that leads to growth. Here, Deresiewicz closes his argument by leaving his readers with a challenge to stand alone to truly find solitude.

For his intended audience, William Deresiewicz wrote “The End of Solitude” quite expertly. He argues that the current generation of young people has lost their capacity for solitude, and all of the other capabilities that come along with that ability, all the while employing masterful uses of Ethos, Pathos, and Logos. He strongly supports his claims with historical thought and through the words of the renowned from before our time, yet despite his skilled writing and strong use of Ethos, Pathos, and Logos, his argument is ineffective because he has missed his ideal audience.

He writes about the younger generation, but he doesn’t write to them. He points out the flaws in our current situation, but he only tells those in the generation of our parents. He’s missed his ideal audience for actual culture change. It was written about me, but not for me.
Nevertheless, “The End of Solitude” is written strongly. Deresiewicz expertly makes use of Ethos, Pathos, and Logos. He uses Logos throughout his entire paper. Deresiewicz saturates his writing with logical thought for the reader to dive deep into and consider. His entire essay is a mass of interconnected logic binded together with history. At one point he tells about a teenager that sends over three thousands texts in a month, which divides into 100 texts a day, or 10 texts per waking minute -- including the minutes spent in class and eating, among others. At another time, he discusses the similarities between the introductions of the internet: the major addition to the current generation, and the television: the major addition of his own. He claims that, in his younger years, the television brought upon the issue of boredom and preyed upon the tendency of him and his peers to seek entertainment whenever boredom began to rear its ugly head. He explains that “[b]oredom is not a necessary consequence to having nothing to do, it is only the negative experience of that state.” Similarly, he connects boredom to loneliness. He says, “Solitude [is to] loneliness what idleness is to boredom. Loneliness is not the absence of company, it is the grief over that absence.” This progression is exactly the logic that I cherish. His statement is clear and to the point, yet it is deep and new and thought provoking.

Even more, throughout the entire piece Deresiewicz uses actual history to support himself, too. He thoroughly discusses his point through Romanticism and then again discusses through Modernism. He repeatedly goes back to these points to explain better the current state through the view of Postmodernism. Again -- logic, and highly effective logic at that.
Yet still, amidst all this deep, intellectual thought, Deresiewicz plays to the emotions. In the same moment that he may be activating the thoughtful left brain and Cerebral Cortex, he may also be activating the emotionally responsible Limbic System through skillful use of Pathos. From the beginning of his writing, he immediately proceeds to go logically but also emotionally. He plays to both sides directly out of the gate. He uses a logical argument, but he does so in a way that is hard hitting and cuts deep to a place that most authors’ writings will never reach. He cuts to the core of the man and calls him out. He tells us exactly what we are doing and how what we are doing is so wrong. What better way to prompt an emotional response than cutting to a part of us that we don’t like having exposed? Furthermore, he demands emotional responses through the constant eloquence in his phrasing and the emotion and desperation that is quite evident behind his words. He uses strong word choice in strong structures designed to play to the more emotional side of the brain while communicating ideas that demand the logical brain to come to play. For example, he does this when he says, “[n]ot long ago, it was easy to feel lonely. Now it is impossible to be alone,” or again when he says, “[w]e are not merely social beings. We are each also separate, each solitary, each alone in our own room, each miraculously our unique selves and mysteriously enclosed in that selfhood” (Deresiewicz). He creates powerful pieces that call both sides of the mind-- the logical and the emotional-- to come to the surface and respond to his words.

Through it all -- through the intellectual and through the emotional -- Deresiewicz quickly establishes a sense of credibility for himself. Before he ever mentions his students, he makes it clear
to a reader that he is a very well read and educated man. Only later do we find that he is, in fact, a man educated with a PhD from Colombia and has gone so far as to be at a level to educate others. In this establishment of credibility may lie one of his only flaws worthy of mentioning. He employs far too much appeal to authority. At first it establishes his credibility and strengthens his argument, but as the paper continues and the appeals to authority continue to happen, it becomes excessive. The first reference to Emerson was beneficial. It established Ethos for him. The second time, though, not as much was not so beneficial, and the third not at all. The same could be said for his references to Freud, or Trilling, and especially Thoreau. What once was good and strengthened his argument is now too much of a good thing and is actually hurting his argument. His use of old and renowned sources was quite good for him at first, but quickly turned into a sort of ‘name dropping’ that does nothing for him. However, it is definitely not enough to blow apart his argument. His argument is still sound and well put.

That brings us, however, to the true flaw in the piece. He writes about my generation: the young people in the world today that have lost this ability for solitude, but he doesn’t write to us. He is a quite convicting and remarkable writer, but he writes to people the age of my parents. Multiple times he refers to the younger generation as a “they.” He consistently writes about us in a detached context and never directly writes to us. If he truly wants a change to happen, he must write to the culprits that actually have the ability to change something. Writing to the parents will create the unrest needed to begin change, but writing to me and my
generation would create motivation and conviction needed to actually bring about this change. This is the fatal flaw in his argument: the deal breaker. Despite writing remarkably and eloquently and writing in such a way that does motivate change, it is written to the wrong people and is rendered ineffective because of it. You haven’t really achieved anything if you miss the best audience. You can shoot the most powerful arrow in the world, but it would be entirely ineffective if you miss the target. Just so, you can not motivate change by writing to the wrong people. You can not make me and my peers want to change if you merely write about us, but not to us.