

Seeking Harmony of Contrasts
A Response to *Lonesome: The Spiritual Meaning of American Solitude*
By Kevin Lewis

Reviewed by Robert J. Higgs

Several years ago Professor Donald Davidson of Vanderbilt remarked that T.S. Eliot and Roy Acuff should be closer together—a gap presumably unbridgeable, as reflected, say, in *Murder in the Cathedral* and “Freight Train Blues” by “the King of Country Music.” In *Lonesome*, the cases of “High Brow” and “Low Brow” art are presented fairly and evocatively, Lewis turning well from one side to the other, a classic virtue called *eutrapelia*.

Lewis wastes no time in establishing his thesis, doing so directly in the opening paragraph of the “Preface”:

“There is another Loneliness,” wrote Emily Dickinson in lyric # 1116 (c. 1868), crafting the insight in a forced and hushful way. “Not want of friend occasions it,” she observes, “But nature sometimes, sometimes thought.” Our distinctively lone and lovely poet of the nineteenth century, American to the core, testifies that “whoso this other loneliness ‘befall/ is richer than could be revealed by mortal numeral.’”—by any earthly measure (xiii). Her theme in that typically compressed poetic utterance is also our theme in this extended essay plea for recognition of the fecund lonesomeness of this greater American experience, and for its occasionally religious significance (xiii).

Referring to the same poem in Chapter 2, “The Poetic Imagination of Lonesomeness,” Lewis adds that “her ‘another loneliness’ here is not a ‘deprivation of relation’ to another human being, for no want of friend occasions it, but rather a richness of feeling *and* perception akin to Otto’s encounter with the Wholly Other.” Lonesomeness, as Lewis defines it, is loneliness plus “something more” that he is reluctant to define too narrowly but that he finds in abundance in poetry, especially that of Dickinson and Whitman, in many ways polar opposites.

In “They Say That Time Assuages,” Dickinson wrote, “Time is a test of trouble”, while Whitman proclaimed in Section 46 of “Song of Myself,” “I know I have the best of time and space, and was never measured and never will be measured.”

Yet on many themes they are of similar minds. “I dwell in possibility,” Dickinson wrote, while Whitman, addressing the advent of science and positivism and their advocates, had this to say:

Gentlemen, to you the first honors always!
Your facts are useful, and yet they are not my dwelling,
I but enter by them to an area of my dwelling. (Section 23, “Song of Myself”)

Thankfully, Whitman’s “dwelling” is a wide-ranging imagination encircling art, history, literature, philosophy, religion, and even the universe.

Lonesome is not a long book but in strategic places such as Chapter 4, “The Numinous and the Transcendent,” it is deep. In a letter to Evert Duyckinck, 1849, Herman Melville confides, “I love all men who dive. Any fish can swim near the surface, but it takes a great whale to go down stairs five miles or more.” Here one thinks of the great writer himself, but the metaphor also applies to the bravery of Kevin Lewis in exploring the depths of perhaps the most complex of

subjects, the “idea of the holy,” as evoked in *American Lonesome*—especially in a novel way and in an engagingly lyrical style already remarked by early reviewers.

In Lewis’s analysis it is necessary to keep in mind the sub-title of Otto’s stunning work: *An Inquiry into the non-rational Factor in the idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*.

Then, on the other hand, Otto insists, religion in our time has become deformed by excessive attention paid to the rational (as the “Warp”) at the expense of appreciation for the balancing non-rational (the “woof”), that is the non- or trans-conceptual element in all religious experience. Lest it remain deformed under the powerful but excessive influence of Western rationality, our sense of what it means to be religious must be corrected, Otto argues. He urges us to restore the balance in our view of religion by acknowledging the equally important, contrasting element of raw, pre-conceptual subjective experience of encounter with the “wholly other,” where the “other” is a symbol for the unnamable *mysterium*, and ultimately for Otto (for the Protestant theologian in him), of Divinity itself. In authentic, universal religion, Otto proposes, the language of conceptualizing rationality and the immediate experience of “otherness” that necessarily eludes all descriptive language must be dynamically, “harmoniously” related—one must not be devalued for the sake of the other. The non-rational and the rational, or, as he explains it, the moment of raw pre-conceptual experience followed by the spontaneous, reflexive moment of conceptualizing interpretation and naming (plus the inferences drawn from it), complement each other in a “harmony of contrasts.”(94)

In postulating this “Harmony of Contrasts,” Lewis renders nothing less than encomiastic praise for Otto, Robert Bellah, John Macquarrie, and Giles B. Gunn—the last for a revival of emphasis upon literature in the re-invigoration of religion in America and for his insight into the wide varieties of “otherness,” as noted in Gunn’s book by that name. For such an approach Gunn draws upon the support of Wallace Stevens who, as Gunn recalls, “urged production of a literature that provides the ‘satisfactions and consolations formerly guaranteed by faith,’ . . . by revealing something ‘wholly other’ by which the inexpressive loneliness of thinking is broken and enriched”(21). It is not surprising that Robert Bellah was also inspired by Stevens (See Chapter 4).

Much has been written about the holy, but Lewis’s theme is original, arguing as he does that “loneliness” is a particularly American cultural way of evoking “otherness” in a way that invites probing for comparison with Otto’s description of the Holy.

There is no doubt of the endless ways that mortals can and do respond to the “Wholly Other,” which, says Otto’s translator John Harvey, is not *Wholly Wholly Other*, but probably two of the leading means are by sight and hearing, themselves sort of a “harmony of contrasts.” Lewis provides several examples of how both light and dark and tones in between can evoke the idea of “loneliness.” Edward Hopper (1882-1978; the subject of Chapter 5) became famous as a master of American realism by his imaginative use of light (“luminism”) and by integration of light and shadow (“chiascuro”) to create what William Dean Howells called “the stamp of verity” and at the same time an implied longing for “something more” on the part of figures within the paintings.

This becomes clear in “Morning Sun,” showing a beautiful woman sitting on her bed in abbreviated apparel facing a large window, her legs drawn comfortably and her arms wrapped around them, her face and parts of her body suffused by sunlight, the rest of her in light shadow. Her face, says Lewis, “signals a person ‘lost in thought,’ representing “something more than . . . merely psychological inner experience.” Lewis goes on to say that “Hopper draws implicitly upon the age-old symbolism of the sun as representative of divinity, in a visual echo, as it were of the day-

dreaming meditation of the woman on the terrace in Stevens' "Sunday Morning. . ." (130). Clearly, Wallace Stevens is an anchoring vision throughout this text.

In literature and visual art, seeing appears to be the principle route to "something more." In folk and oral cultures it is listening.

I wish to pull together the threads of *Lonesome* into a "shock" as in wheat and as in *Shock of Recognition*, the title of Edmund Wilson's collection by writers on writers who made American Literature. To do this it is necessary to emphasize the significance of *sounds*, which Thoreau does famously in *Walden*, primarily for those of nature, and as Lewis does impressively for the "High Lonesome Sound," both in Chapter 6, "Country Lonesome," and, astonishingly, in his epilogue, "Therapeutic Lonesomeness."

In my home village of Anes Station, Tennessee, named for my Grandmother and consisting of seven houses, a store, church, school, and depot, the population never over 25, everything and everybody was surrounded by the sounds of "Country Lonesome," of the rattling of ten-gallon cans on the milk truck making its evening run, of late-night freights crossing the Duck River bridge, of yelping of hounds on the trail of a fox in woods all around us, of the Grand Ole Opry on Saturday night, of "The Pan American Blues" from the harmonica of DeFord Bailey, of any number of hymns in Higgs Chapel on Sunday.

One night well after dark, when I was sitting on the front porch with family and neighbors, there reached our ears the strangest, most startling notes ever heard in our surround. They continued off and on for nights, arising out of the moonlight in the east, floating over a community cemetery, across the railroad tracks, onto the front porches and into our consciousness, but the next day the secret, or part of it, was revealed. One of our neighbors, a dairyman, had started raising Peacocks!

Today we can "Google up" the astonishing colors of Peacocks, and the medley of their sounds and discussions of their religious symbolism since time out of mind. I would, however, recommend another source both for information on the "King of Birds" and for spiritual knowledge associated with it. Long years after those summer nights on our porch, when, shortly after the enchantment began, my mother would say quietly, "Listen"—a command and a plea and a word echoed in *Lonesome*—I would as a professor of English recommend a book to every student in my courses interested in writing.

On the cover of this text is a glorious picture of a peacock. The name of the book is *Mystery and Manners and Occasional Prose*, by Flannery O'Connor, a Catholic living and writing in the Protestant landscape of rural Georgia. The title of the "Foreward" is "The King of Birds," in which, among other things, she reproduces the variety of sounds for which the species is famous, as for example that of the cock.

He appears to receive through his feet some shock from the center of the earth, which travels upward through him and is released: *Eee-ooo-ii! Eee-oo-ii*. To the melancholy this sound is melancholy and to the hysterical it is hysterical. To me it has always sounded like a cheer for an invisible parade. . . . at short intervals during the day and night, the cock, lowering his neck and throwing back his head, will give out with seven or eight screams in succession as if this message were the last one on earth which needed most urgently to be heard. (O'Connor, 15)

Throughout O'Connor's works there is, I think, ample evidence of Lonesomeness as "something more," even in, or especially in, her many bizarre characters' hunger for meaning by relating somehow, someway to (perhaps) a "wholly other." Sometimes the something more in O'Connor's characters is demonic, suggesting the reality of evil as an inharmonious contrast with the good. O'Connor's religious vision is not identical to that of Otto, or for that matter to that of Dickinson, Emerson, Thoreau or Whitman. She is not exactly enthralled by "privatized" views, especially as they contrast with ritual built up within the body of the Catholic church. Still, just as there are similarities between Dickinson and Whitman, so there are points of contact between Otto and O'Connor. (In this regard, see Cynthia Seel, *Ritual Performance in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor*, 27-29.)

O'Connor would, I think, agree with Stevens, Gunn, Lewis and others about the role of art in understanding religion, and whatever the topic, religion or patriotism, on the absolute necessity of one particular virtue.

Art requires a delicate adjustment of the outer and inner worlds in such a way that, without changing their nature, they can be seen through each other. To know one's self is to know one's region. It is also to know the world, and it is also, paradoxically, a form of exile from that world. The writer's value is lost, both to himself and to his country, as soon as he sees that country as a part of himself, and to know one's self is, above all, to know what one lacks. It is to measure oneself against Truth, and not the other way around. The first product of self-knowledge is humility, and this is not a virtue conspicuous in any national character. (*Mystery and Manners*, 35)