

Response to Kevin Lewis,
Lonesome: The Spiritual Meanings of American Solitude

Paul Kane
Vassar College

Kevin Lewis does well to attempt to establish a phenomenology of “lonesomeness” in American poetry and in American culture generally. As a term, lonesomeness has not had much traction in the discourse of the humanities, but Lewis is keen to establish it as a genuine concept. Key to this concern, or perhaps enthusiasm, is his perception that lonesomeness is not just an affect, a homegrown version or variety of loneliness, but rather a positive condition of possibility for religious experience. This raises the stakes considerably, and brings into play a rich assortment of poets and other thinkers. Chapter Two of his book, “The Poetic Imagination of Lonesomeness,” focuses on Dickinson and Whitman, but along the way we run into Edward Hopper, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Theodore Roethke, A.R. Ammons, James Wright, and, significantly, Rudolf Otto. Clearly, lonesomeness is a densely populated territory, filled with trenchant individuals.

In urging us to enter this newfound land, Lewis is perhaps more cajoling than persuasive, especially as his analyses are sometimes a little thin, lacking the close grain texture we have grown accustomed to in the work of such scholars as Giles Gunn and Christopher Ricks (whom he mentions) and Geoffrey Hartmann, Helen Vendler and John Hollander (who are cited elsewhere in the book). But, to be fair, Lewis is working on a large canvas and in an ambitious mode. We have overlooked something important, he says, something quintessentially American and fraught with significance:

‘Lonesomeness’ American born and bred, as I shall argue, has proven a regrettably ignored but demonstrable locus of personal and cultural religious-like meaning. (xv)

To further his argument or presentation, Lewis is careful to distinguish “lonesomeness” from its cognates “lonely” and “loneliness”; lonesomeness, in his acceptance, carries the freight of the religious. This is a tricky distinction, especially when one goes looking for instances of “lonesomeness” in the work of writers for whom the loneliness/ lonesomeness determination might well have seemed a distinction without a difference. When Whitman refers to the “lonesome stretch of silence” of the Dakotas or mentions his “lonesome walks” in the city, it is fascinating to think of it as something more than the lonely, as leading perhaps to a “high, epiphanic lonesome moment” (29). It may be that we will come to distinguish the lonesome as a separate and special state or condition, but is that the same as establishing it as a robust concept central to American experience?

In reading Lewis’s account, and given the subtitle of his book, I was anticipating a discussion of a prior and more privileged term, so common in discussions of romanticism: solitude. In particular, in the context of “American Solitude,” it would make sense to engage with one of the most fully articulated versions of the idea in

nineteenth century America, the one found in the work of Emerson. Indeed, the title of Emerson's late volume, *Society and Solitude*, seems to point to the phenomenon Lewis is studying. Here, within the dynamic of Emersonian solitude, is precisely that "locus of personal and cultural religious-like meaning" that Lewis finds redolent in lonesomeness.

Lewis does look at Emerson later in his book (Chapter Four), but dismisses him "because he avoided addressing the problem of evil in nature as well as in history, upon which even his most sympathetic critics agree" (86). He goes on to say:

Emerson is not a particularly apt example of American lonesomeness—the disposition reflected in his writing generally is too sunny to evidence the shadow of a depressive loneliness overcome. (87)

It's a little surprising to find that this old canard about Emerson's insufficient acquaintance with evil still has currency. It is certainly not a view "upon which even his most sympathetic critics agree," as if Emerson hadn't written the later essays or any of his antislavery works. It strikes me as a missed opportunity for Lewis, for Emerson could have lent more depth to the analysis of lonesomeness as solitude. Moreover, since both Whitman and Dickinson were keen readers of Emerson, there is warrant for thinking about their work in relation to his notion of solitude.

In the essay "Society and Solitude," Emerson writes that the "necessity of solitude is deeper than we have said, and is organic," which would appear to line up with Lewis's argument. And as for overcoming "a depressive loneliness," that experience seems to be a key source of Emerson's power as a writer, as his sallies of self-recovery after the death of his wife, his son, his brothers and close friends are inextricably linked to the resources of solitude. In "Culture," from *the Conduct of Life*, Emerson gives us an extended consideration of solitude, where he speaks of the necessity of "periods and habits of solitude," but it is also central to *Nature* ("But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars") and to the essays "Self-Reliance" ("the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude") and "Friendship" ("We walk alone in the world"). It's not that Emersonian solitude and Lewis's "lonesomeness" are the same, but the relationship between them is worth exploring, especially if lonesomeness turns out to be, conceptually, a subset of solitude. Lewis might well answer that this is exactly the sort of further analysis his book is intended to provoke, and he would be right. It's just unfortunate that he cordoned off Emerson.

A similar argument could be made for looking more closely at Wordsworth, where, again, solitude is a central feature of his thinking and experience. As with Emerson, there is a visionary quality to solitude that is frequently presented to us in religious language. A consideration of Wordsworth, and English romantic poets generally, might undermine Lewis's thesis of an American exceptionalism, but it wouldn't necessarily cancel out a useful sense of difference. That would surely be an interesting comparison. But it would be churlish to criticize Lewis for not writing a book he never intended to write. Let us, instead, praise what he has done in bringing forth a stimulating and thoughtful study of American lonesomeness. After all, as he himself puts

it, the book is meant as “a work in praise of the timely comfort of occasionally illuminated and restorative solitude” (xxii).