

Response to Kevin Lewis,
Lonesome: The Spiritual Meanings of American Solitude, Chapter 2

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Kevin Lewis provides us with a richly evocative portrait of that cultural figure he calls “the American lonesome,” and for a topic that could so easily be treated in deeply melancholy terms, he provides a surprisingly sanguine assessment. Lewis clearly resonates with those voices of solitude – from Dickinson to Ammons and beyond – who have sung the song of lonesomeness throughout the American ages. Further, he hears in them not isolated notes of solidarity or consolation but a veritable chorus of acclaim for the “redemptive significance” that is waiting to be discovered “in lonesomeness.”

To set this lofty view of lonesomeness in its literary context, a nineteenth-century Frenchman can offer assistance. I am thinking of Alexis de Tocqueville, whose 1835 classic, *Democracy in America*, contains some of the most perceptive analyses ever offered of the intricate connections between the way Americans live and the way they write. In particular, one question that puzzled Tocqueville was why Americans, “who generally conduct business in clear, incisive language” that is “often vulgar in its extreme simplicity, are likely to go in for bombast” whenever they attempt anything in “a poetic style.”

Tocqueville’s answer was simple. America’s writers are bombastic because her citizens are. “In democratic societies, each citizen is usually preoccupied with something quite insignificant: himself,” he writes, and when that person “lifts up his eyes,” only “one immense image” appears, “that of society, or the even larger figure of the human race.” This sharp dichotomy – between the insignificant but intricate self and the immense but undifferentiated other – explains why each American citizen “has either

very particular and very clear ideas or very general and very vague notions; there is nothing in between.”

“There is nothing in between.” These are unsettling words, for they speak of an emptiness at the center of American public life and cultural space. In virtually all other cultures and ages, the space between the slight self and the vast other has been occupied by the mediating institutions of social life. In the actual experiences of most Americans over time, such institutions – marriage, family, church, neighborhood, school, and town – have played powerful roles, often for good, sometimes for ill. Yet in the cultural representations of America, in what Charles Taylor calls our “social imaginary,” those mediating agencies seldom appear as robust or salubrious realities. When such forces do play a role in our imaginative dramas, they are usually portrayed as facets of that “immense image” that looms before each of us and threatens to stifle or crush the vital, oppositional self.

Consider, for instance, a list of canonical works from a half-century segment (1835-1885) of American literary history: *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby-Dick*, *Walden*, the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Song of Myself*, the poetry of Emily Dickinson, and *Huckleberry Finn*. Where in these poems, essays, and novels can one come upon a favorable, or even faintly appreciative, account of marriage, the life of the family, the experience of the church, or the realities of community life?

Only the slave narratives of the mid-nineteenth century speak openly and longingly of family, community, and church, but the devastating irony here, of course, is that the institution of chattel slavery could survive only by retaining its power to sever, at a moment's notice, the most intimate ties that bound enslaved men, women, and children to one another. Whether it is in Henry David Thoreau's idyllic vision of lonesomeness at Walden or in Frederick Douglass's wrenching descriptions of isolation on the plantation,

nineteenth-century American literature finds it difficult to represent positively the life that unfolds in the “space between” the self and the other.

Lewis focuses for understandable reasons on Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman exclusively in his exploration of the nineteenth-century poetic “lonesome.” Nowhere else “in our poetry,” he writes, “do we meet two more appealing ‘selves’ than we do” in the works of Dickinson and Whitman. Lewis finds major American poets in general and these two in particular to be driven by a “native cultural imperative to re-invent religion for themselves.” The poets “have found again and again in lonesomeness a descriptor open-ended, suggestive, and positive enough to use” in their religious quests. He sees lonesomeness as having afforded Whitman and Dickinson a means of “expressing original, fugitive, ‘religious’ states of feeling-perceiving-knowing that ... precede the reflex to understand by interpreting them through traditional symbols and myths.”

This reading of Dickinson and Whitman is sensible and suggestive, but I wonder about the deeper claim that “lonesomeness” itself was a cherished ground of Being or a foundation of living for them. The differences between their works and lives seem too great to justify a claim of missional solidarity when it comes to Dickinson, Whitman, and the putative church of “the American lonesome.”

Instead of foundational unity, we find in Whitman and Dickinson a pressing, pragmatic adaptability marking their transactions with the unavoidable, irresistible “lonesome.” The stance struck by both poets is that of a Tocquevillian self that stares across the empty space between the inner self and the play, persons, and processes that flood the outer world. Near the opening of *Song of Myself*, after he has catalogued the doings and dealings of a typical Manhattan day, Whitman makes note of the “trippers and askers” who “surround” him in the press of city life. As he faces them, he strikes a pose of lonesome, but serene and satisfied, detachment:

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,
 Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary,
 Looks down, is erect, or bends an arm on an impalpable certain rest,
 Looking with side-curved head curious what will come next,
 Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it.

The lonesome self of Whitman's epic is content because it has absorbed, assimilated, and surpassed all the conceivable companions a person might have on life's journey. This includes even the gods or mediating emissaries – those “old cautious hucksters” – who people eastern mysticism and the creeds and stories of western theism. No matter how fast we travel or how strenuously we strive, we can never span the gap of the space between us and that lonesome “Walt Whitman, a kosmos”:

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
 Missing me one place search another,
 I stop somewhere waiting for you.

While Whitman's lonesome self was tramping the perpetual journey on the open road, Dickinson's avatar of lonesomeness was securing itself behind closed doors. For her the question of the lonesome had a distinct metaphysical dimension, as Lewis rightly notes, but it had powerful psychological and sexual resonances as well. Solitude was imposed upon Dickinson – by the seeming silence of nature and nature's God – but it was also a state of being she cherished and chose.

Half a century ago, Jay Leyda wrote perceptively of what he called the problem of the “omitted center” in Dickinson's poetry and letters. This was “the riddle, the circumstance too well-known to be repeated to the initiate, the deliberate skirting of the obvious” that was clear to the few but opaque to the many. This was one means by which Dickinson guarded her privacy while heightening her aloneness, and “it has also increased our problems in piercing that privacy.” What Lewis calls Dickinson's “lonesome” self was, in

effect, an agent or agency she employed to execute the strategy that would secure both her private life and her posthumous fame.

As she was considering marriage late in life, Dickinson wrote to her suitor, the widowed Otis Phillips Lord: “Dont you know you are happiest while I withhold and not confer – dont you know that ‘No’ is the wildest word we consign to Language?” Through the repeated assertion of that “No,” as well as through an occasional acquiescence of “Yes,” Dickinson deftly regulated whatever access others were able to have to her in her solitude. As one of her best-known poems explains, “The Soul” can indeed “select her own Society –/ Then shut the Door –.” And more than one person in Emily Dickinson’s life knew what it was like to have this woman

from an ample nation –
Choose One –
Then – close the Valves of her attention –
Like Stone –

To Dickinson, the nineteenth-century New England self was an analogue of the Calvinist God and its wan Unitarian descendant. Like that God, the Dickinsonian transcendental self had been stripped of Trinitarian communion but was still equipped with predestining powers of selection. God *elects* his own society, the soul *selects* hers, and nothing but an empty space lies between the inward poet and the “ample nation” that has gathered outside her “low Gate.” This is a *solitary* condition, but as Henry David Thoreau wryly observes, it is not necessarily a *lonely* one:

I am no more lonely than the loon in the pond that laughs so loud, or than
Walden Pond itself. What company has that lonely lake, I pray? And yet it
has not the blue devils but the blue angels in it, in the azure tint of its waters.
The sun is alone, except in thick weather, when there sometimes appear to
be two, but one is a mock sun. God is alone – but the devil, he is far from
being alone; he sees a great deal of company; he is legion.

In several places Kevin Lewis refers to Dickinson's inability – or refusal – to believe in what he labels “the biblical myth,” which “does not sufficiently enchant or convince.” But perhaps the real myth at issue here is that of “the American lonesome,” that isolated personality that mimics Thoreau's Unitarian God. This American solitary lives not in *perichoretic* communion but dwells instead in an “island solitude, unsponsored, free” (Wallace Stevens). Perhaps no one has described better than William James the wistful ache that attends the experience of this first, and only, person in the creed of “the American lonesome”:

Out of my experience, such as it is (and it is limited enough) one fixed conclusion dogmatically emerges, and that is this, that we with our lives are like islands in the sea, or like trees in the forest. The maple and the pine may whisper to each other with their leaves, and Conanicut and Newport hear each other's fog-horns. But the trees also commingle their roots in the darkness underground, and the islands also hang together through the ocean's bottom. Just so there is a continuum of cosmic consciousness, against which our individuality builds but accidental fences, and into which our several minds plunge as into a mother-sea or reservoir.

Over the past one hundred years, a number of brilliant theologians, philosophers, and artists – Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox alike – have questioned sharply this “one fixed conclusion” about our “island solitude.” Figures as diverse as Karl Barth and Flannery O'Connor, Hans Urs von Balthasar and W.H. Auden, have argued that the true myth of our age is that of the autonomous, heroic self doing lonely battle against its massive, faceless foes in an implacably indifferent universe. These figures suggest, proclaim, and in the case of O'Connor, shout, that on the contrary, the truth of life has to do with a word that “was made flesh, and dwelt among us.” This vision of things does not set us at the end of the open road or secure us behind the forbidding gate. Instead, in the words of Auden, it invites us to “join the dance/ As it moves in perichoresis,/ Turns about the abiding tree.” In the world given and governed by this Trinitarian communion,

each new day carries the self back to the other and returns the other to the self, as the play of life unfolds in a teeming space that is no longer empty, because it has become the ground upon which self and other meet and in which they live, and move, and have their being. As Auden concludes:

Bright shines the sun on creatures mortal;
Men of their neighbors become sensible;
In solitude, for company.

The crow of the cock commands awaking;
Already the mass-bell goes dong-ding:
In solitude, for company.

Men of their neighbors become sensible;
God bless the Realm, God bless the People;
In solitude, for company.