

Response to “The Poetic Imagination of Lonesomeness”:
Chapter 2 of *Lonesome: The Spiritual Meanings of American Solitude* by Kevin Lewis

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Kevin Lewis’ project, as he informs us in his chapter on American poetry, is to establish “the moment in the American lonesome” in which “the numinous sensation of unnameable, unknowable Otherness combining feeling and perception in a ‘religious’ state of mind” is manifested (p. 44). Though I am sympathetic to his project, I think his approach to the poetry he examines is hampered by his attempt to draw too tight a distinction between “lonesomeness” and “loneliness” and to align the former with the American experience. “Where the meaning of ‘lonely’ is uniformly negative,” he asserts in his preface, “the savory meanings of ‘lonesome’ – of which there are many – layer a positive upon the negative, at least often enough to beg notice” (xviii). Granted that the word “lonesome” tends to be associate with American usage, but the idea that loneliness is uniformly negative is, of course, nonsense, and in fact is belied by almost every page of English Romantic poetry. Lewis seems bent on maintaining these reified categories, however, because he wants to make it seem as if the American religious imagination and American poetry were unique in their yearning for a transcendent reality. This has the effect, in practice, of severing American poetry from its roots in English Romanticism. Is the “moment of rapture in solitude (lonesomeness in loneliness)” (p. 45) that Lewis is interested in tracing in American poetry different from what Wordsworth (in “I wandered lonely as a cloud”) called “the bliss of solitude?” Lewis cannot show that it is, and so in this respect his argument is unconvincing.

In spite of his penchant for circular reasoning and special pleading (in the same sentence he

insists that religious feeling states are “more apt to be expressed under the term lonesome than under the term lonely,” but “because of lexical similarity, the lonely is occasionally used to express what lonesome, by virtue of associations gathered from previous uses, seems better equipped to evoke” [p. 25]), Lewis’ readings of the poetry he examines are sometimes illuminating. I was particularly impressed by his discussion of Whitman, whom he calls “our iconic master of loneliness, transfigured and redeemed” (p. 26). Not that what Lewis is saying about Whitman is wholly original, but his assertion that Whitman’s lonesomeness “is the steady undersong playing throughout his work as a whole” (p. 27) is beautifully phrased and gets to something essential about Whitman’s poetry. Because Lewis is mainly interested in the religious implications of his theme and has little to say about formal and stylistic matters, his discussions can sometimes seem overly generic. But this is also his strength. Whitman and Dickinson in particular really matter to Lewis: he is deeply attuned to their poetry, and the fact that he reads them as religious thinkers, whose vehicle is verse and whose thought expresses itself in and as poetry, enables him to write with a clarity and a sense of commitment frequently absent from the academic writing of contemporary literary scholars.

On the other hand, because Lewis does not engage in close readings or focus on literary language in a concrete way, his interpretations sometimes tend to be lacking in nuance. This is especially the case in his analyses of Dickinson’s poetry. For example, in response to the concluding stanza of Dickinson’s poem “The lonesome for they know not What,”

The Blessed Ether – taught them [i.e., the birds] –
Some Transatlantic Morn –
When Heaven – was too common – to miss –
Too sure – to dote upon,

Lewis asserts that “this poem, in its confident sense of connection to a ‘Blessed Ether’ beyond the common ‘Heaven,’ embodies the American lonesome capacity to be momentarily transfigured” (p. 37). Lewis’ phrasing here indicates that he has very little awareness of the ambiguities and complexities surrounding Dickinson’s conception. Why does he think that the Blessed Ether in Dickinson’s poem is *beyond* Heaven? On the contrary, as in so many poems in the Romantic tradition, because the Christian Heaven as traditionally conceived can no longer be grasped, that which is transcendent or *beyond* must be made immanent, relocated in the sky or ether. This is not a problem for the birds of stanza 2, who do not seek transcendence, but it is for human beings, who in the opening stanza are conceived as “Eastern Exiles.” Why are they conceived as “Eastern Exiles?” Is it because Adam and Eve were exiled east of Eden? or because the sun rises in the east and we are exiled from the source of its rising? Lewis makes no attempt to tell us. I find his use of the adjective “confident,” in his assertion that the poem has a “confident sense of connection to a ‘Blessed Ether,’” entirely misplaced.

I mentioned at the beginning of this response that Lewis severs American poetry from its roots in English Romanticism. In his discussion of the beautiful concluding lines of Stevens’ “Sunday Morning,” repeating what has now become a *mantra*, he says that “[t]he feeling conveyed is that of the transfiguring American lonesomeness” (p. 42) . Not that this isn’t true, but the details of an American landscape and the sense of an American sublime that Stevens grasps in those lines are completely saturated in English Romanticism. Stevens’ pigeons, who “make / Ambiguous undulations as they sink, / Downward to darkness, on extended wings,” are obviously reminiscent of and even dependent upon the “gathering swallows [that] twitter in the skies” of Keats’ ode “To Autumn.”

Seeking the “transfiguring American lonesomeness,” Lewis finds it wherever he looks.

This has an homogenizing effect, and, as a result, important differences are too often elided. In his discussion of Frost’s poem “Desert Places,” for example, a serious problem arises that he should have confronted but never addresses at all. Frost writes:

And lonely as it is that loneliness
Will be more lonely ere it will be less –
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
With no expression, nothing to express.

Lewis observes that Frost “adds courage to the American lonesome when, foreseeing still ‘blanker whiteness’ of more ‘benighted snow,’ symbolic of death and oblivion, he asserts that the mastered fear of his own interior ‘desert places’ shores him against the greater fear of extinction in the ultimate white-out” (p. 41). This has the effect of mitigating the radical confrontation with *nothingness* in Frost’s poem and of evading the fact that loneliness in this poem (and for an important strain of American poetry) is not transfiguring, not associated with rapture and a sense of transcendence, but, on the contrary, with poverty, absence, and an emptying out of the self. This is the American loneliness of Stevens’ poem “The Snow Man” (which Lewis does not cite), a poem in which “the listener . . . nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.” Having chosen to quote Frost’s “Desert Places,” Lewis ought to have taken responsibility for a religious tendency that is very different from – indeed antithetical to – the transfiguring lonesomeness that he sees as distinctive of American poetry.