

Response to “The Poetic Imagination of Lonesomeness” by Kevin Lewis

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Not having (myself) encompassed the entirety of Kevin Lewis' *Lonesome: The Spiritual Meanings of American Solitude*, having read closely only the Preface and Chapter Two and having brushed up against a later chapter on Edward Hopper and scanned with lingering interest the Epilogue, I hesitate in my obligation to respond to just a part of what may be intended to be a larger whole. I say “may be,” because I am uncertain whether one whole, or many, or none can be identified as an organizational principle of the book, and because I am uncertain whether none or many or one is even desirable: some books may be said to be perfectly justified (if that is the right word) because they throw out many different kinds of “probes,” in the hope that different readers will pick up on different lines of inquiry or argument. From where I sit, “lines of inquiry” appears to me closer fitting to this book than those of “argument”—and all of us can name writers in many genres whose inquiries do not give anything *exactly* by way of “argument,” yet are nonetheless powerful, suggestive, truthful, etc.. (I am thinking here of the Harvard philosopher Stanley Cavell, whose extensive writings on the so-called “ordinary language,” and “the everyday, the familiar, the low,” in Emerson and Thoreau and others in the American grain might have been used to good effect in Lewis' book.) When taken up as a broad-brushed inquiry into many different and possibly integral matters—the clinical-therapeutic uses of an individual's entering into “lonesomeness;” the possible value of what Lewis calls “religious”

resonances of lonesomeness in personal experience and in collective American culture; the nature of American linguistic uses of the words “lonely” and “lonesome”—Lewis’ book may well provoke some readers to deeper thoughts and feelings of their own. Seen in this way, *Lonesome* is a meditation more than an essay, and a plea more than a meditation—what the author calls in the Preface “an extended essay plea for recognition of the fecund ‘lonesomeness’ of the greater American experience” (xiii).

A plea for “recognition”—recognition of what I take to be the healing powers of meditating on lonesomeness personally and culturally—sounds right to me. But the *style* in which Lewis seeks to undertake this, in which I hear far echoes of many of the writers he mentions and many he does not (Emerson and Frost and Edward Abbey and Barry Lopez among them), is not as strong or controlled or managed or deployed or pursued hard enough to lead me to find more than intermittent guidance. If “style” here seems a weak point of attack, it may be well to mention that I am not attacking, or even arguing; I merely hold out for consideration the great responsibility that style carries in essays, meditations, and pleas for recognition of this kind (while I myself can merely assert in so short a response as this). *Le style est l’homme meme*—“Style is the man himself”—gestures toward what I am after; but as a struggling speaker and writer myself, I want to insist that the phrase is not always convertible: the man is not necessarily the style in which he appears, because the style in which he (or she) appears may be inadequate to express the man himself.

Man (call it the ethos of the implied author) and style carry the burdens they do in certain kinds of writing because the recognition or acknowledgement sought must be displayed and exemplified (not merely, and only rarely, “argued”); and this is achieved

primarily in examples and style that *themselves* exemplify the values that the writer wishes to have recognized. Values may be asserted and argued, but assertion and argument themselves presuppose experience with those (or similar) values—if not antecedent experience, then (or also) experience *in the writing*.

For instance, when Frost writes in “Desert Places,” a poem Lewis uses as an “illustration” of Frost’s “communicating practical home truths”—when Frost writes, “Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast / In a field I looked into going past” (p. 41), both the content and the style of the lines together exemplify matters such as wariness, growing anxiety and urgency, and a lapsing prepossession of self and its hold on the world, all (and more) tucked into a an ever-so-slightly-reassuring past tense (“*looked* into”—as if we can suppose the speaker/writer pulled through): they *do* this, though it is certainly very difficult to analyze exactly *how*. Initial and repeated spondees in the first line; the stuttering-alliterative “fs” in both; the March Hare-like repetitiousness and caesurae of “fast, oh, fast;” the speaker’s sudden self-awareness of his own fall from grace (he had, after all, only “looked into” [!] the field, and how blameworthy could that be?): all these matters and many more *exemplify* (not assert, not argue, not plead for) Frost’s deeper value(s).

Great care, therefore, with these and related matters has everything to do with the readers of poetry coming to recognize certain kinds of value in poems, and (*a fortiori*) with what Lewis, for example, rightly calls the “deceptively simple” “homespun air” of Frost’s philosophizing. Yet “deceptively simple” further and rightly suggests (to stay with this example) that readers need to be cautious about what Frost might be up to, about what it is the poet might want us actually to value or to recognize in a poem like “Desert Places.” Yet throughout most of his second chapter, “The Poetic Imagination of Lonesomeness,” Lewis,

in my judgment, has been neither very cautious—he ignores his own warning about deception, relegating Frost’s form and content to what he (Lewis) more or less dismisses as “practical home truths,” whatever those are—nor very careful, for he uses Frost merely to “illustrate” his own (Lewis’s) *antecedent* point about the personal-cultural healing power of “lonesomeness,” as if such a term only needs clarification, not inquiry.

The limitation in such an approach, such a style, is that readers of this sort of meditative “essay-plea” primarily *need* something more in order to be sufficiently healed or transformed themselves. Certainly illustrative examples of an antecedently-established concept (what Kant called “determinant judgment”) are all very well, including in essays like Lewis’s. But really to *display* what “lonesomeness” might mean / feel like / bring into prominence in Frost and others, a writer needs at least both (i) to bring forth exemplary works to show in detail how they function, not as an instance of a concept but as an object of comparison—a model, a complex analogue (after Kant’s “reflective judgment”)—; and (ii) to himself write with a method and form and style that will “body forth” (exemplify, be examples of themselves) the values being urged. This is certainly also a very difficult thing to do.