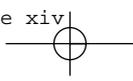


PREFACE

“There is another Loneliness,” wrote Emily Dickinson in lyric #1116 (c. 1868), crafting the insight in her hushed and forceful 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.¹ Her theme in that typically compressed poetic utterance is also our theme in this extended essay plea for recognition of the fecund “lonesomeness” of the greater American experience, and for its occasionally religious significance.

Why have critics, pundits, and talk-show jockeys hitherto not explored the American “lonesome?” Perhaps because we do not always see what is there in front of us. We see what our vision is formed to see. We miss things for which we are not primed by expectation. From unexamined habit, we avoid the busy work of probing for the embedded assumptions that prevent us from taking a fuller measure of our world.

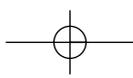


LONESOME

Shaped as it is by specific cultural and individual life formations, consciousness is always limited. The perceptions we register and the scrutiny we employ are always partial. Blind spots afflict us even when we know we should know them. The manifold of our perceptions of the world remains incomplete and flawed despite our occasionally inspired efforts to know ourselves better as individuals, thoroughly if not decisively influenced—some would say “constructed”—by the environments through which we move. Such wary skepticism is of course formative for all imbibers, knowingly or unknowingly, of modernist and post-modernist (not to speak of earlier post-Cartesian and post-Kantian) theories of knowledge generally.

This essay addresses a phenomenon of particular word usage, word imaging, and signaled “subjective” experience that would seem to stare in the face of North American if not other native English speakers, but with which we apparently have not yet really grappled. The subjective experience named in my title—comprised as it is of feeling, perceptual, and reflective elements in varying proportions in ways generally that challenge common definition—would seem, from the testimony of a significant number of writers, visual artists, and singers to function as an authentic spiritual expression, not merely a social construction by language. It would seem to be both simultaneously. Its currency as a private and personal experience of North American English speakers—as a state of mind that resists being reduced to or collapsed into some other sort of related but non-“spiritual” experience—has developed in dialectical relationship with a development in usage of the particular word which names it.

Language is a social experience. Evolving usage defines and redefines what words mean. This essay suggests that in the evolution of North American English over time, and alongside



Preface

other more obvious meanings, a particular kind of spiritual or loosely religious meanings has accrued for the word “lonesome,” and that we have not consciously identified and consequently not yet reflected upon its various, related meanings and expressive function. In part, the word has created the experience, as language does, and the experience has come to be reflected in the word. Or perhaps it is the other way round. Both observations are probably true. Evolving language funds evolving cultures. The concern of the essay, by way of “making the familiar strange,” is to cast light upon a blind spot in our awareness of common language usage, and to lift up for inspection a family of elusive but rich and complex meanings for a word in the North American English lexicon hitherto ill-treated by the dictionaries and ignored by the pundits.

Perhaps we ignore this meaning and function because, as is so often the case with habitual blind spots, the particular phenomenon has become so ingrained an element in our commonly acculturated personal experience of and response to our world as to become invisible. “Lonesomeness” American born and bred, as I shall argue, has proven a regrettably ignored but demonstrable locus of personal and cultural religious-like meaning. The lonesomeness examined in this essay is the “lonesomeness” which in usage signals an evolved, culture-specific, subjective feeling-state whose interesting complexity students of American culture have yet to “see” or to grasp sufficiently.

Apparently unnoticed, at least by conscious marking, this “lonesomeness” has gradually made a place within the repertoire of feeling-states, or, better, states of mind or perception which certainly include feeling, to be experienced (and savored!), we observe, exclusively and without exception by suggestible North American inheritors of the European-American cultural tradition.

LONESOME

This lonesomeness may indeed bear a family resemblance to subjective states experienced throughout diverse cultures, any of which may combine a similar feeling-perception with a slightly or significantly different culturally determined concept word. Field-working anthropologists and linguists could show us this. The somewhat related Japanese aesthetic term *sabi*, for instance, refers to a formal quality of beautiful melancholy, from which is derived the more depressive *sabishi* (“lonely”) and *sabishisa* (“loneliness”). Although some American nature writers in recent generations, reaching to the East, may have imported and applied such a feeling response, its origin in the Japanese cultural contextual usage separates it from that of historical American lonesomeness, despite apparent similarities. And surely the same is true for any like state of consciousness linked with perception that is both shaped and evoked by the particular language of another culture. But we are focusing here intentionally upon Anglophone culture and, more specifically, upon America. Among English speakers around the globe, the meaning of “lonesomeness” that we are addressing has enjoyed currency among the sub-set of North Americans alone, as we shall argue.

To limit the scope of this exploration still further we will restrict our focus to expressions arising within the culture of largely white European immigrants, their descendants, and all who by virtue of socialization into this culture speak its version of the language—its hegemonic dialect. Though it may fairly be judged to do so, ours does not set out intentionally to make a contribution to “whiteness” studies as such. Nevertheless, another essay, not this one, would be needed, *is* needed, to explore against another ethnic, socio-political, historical background the rich expression of loneliness and loss ameliorated, and, yes, perhaps transcended in performances inheriting and extending the African American blues tradition. We will echo this important disclaimer

Preface

when addressing the “lonesome” in the predominantly “white” country music tradition in Chapter Six.

True, we are hardly unfamiliar with the words “lonesome” and “lonesomeness.” Nor would the reader—too hastily assuming equivalence in “lonely” and “lonesome”—readily admit to unfamiliarity with the apparent, if unexamined, meaning of these words in common use. But when do we ever stop to examine “lonesomeness” closely for the latent meaning which, though it has emerged in usage and is not exactly hidden, certainly remains unclarified by dictionaries and not yet appraised etymologically or examined by cultural critics? Our attempt to do so, as I argue, will bring unanticipated rewards.

Not least among the benefits of tracing the witness of accumulated uses of the image of “lonesomeness” in the American arts, and of reflecting upon the pattern of meaning yielded by a probing of this historical-cultural linguistic phenomenon, is that of discovering a neglected locus of religious or religious-like expression. Combining description with interpretive, inductive speculation, this essay urges consideration of a religious dimension present under apparent disguise in this cultural phenomenon. It might be argued that Americans will know the rich complexity of this lonesomeness instinctively, simply by virtue of cultural assimilation. Perhaps so, but we have not raised to consciousness what we may indeed know or feel as thoroughly as we could. To know it better or to know it critically, or so we argue, is to grasp, perhaps for the first time, one yet unrecognized form of the evolving, multiform American religious imagination. The subjective experience of resonant lonesomeness has come to provide one of the numerous ways, at least tentatively, of feeling and being “religious” in the New World of the modern period—or so the testimony of our writers and artists would suggest.

LONESOME

The animating premise of the essay is that we have in the store of words at our command not one but two words, “lonesome” and “lonely,” for a reason. Here is an exemplary instance of an opportunity through vigilance to keep the language flexible and precise by insisting upon a useful distinction between them already present implicitly, if not consciously acknowledged, in usage. Where the meaning of “lonely” is uniformly negative, the savory meanings of “lonesome”—of which there are many—layer a positive upon the negative, at least often enough to beg notice. So we believe the evidence indicates. Ultimately, only our common, easy carelessness in speech and our lack of critical self-awareness as American speakers of English account for lingering confusion between the two words and for our all-too-common propensity to use them in haste interchangeably, effectively abetting the confusion out of habit. As we will show by way of introducing the discussion in Chapter One, our current dictionary definitions are of little help. Afflicted by haste and oversight, the relevant dictionary entries have yet to catch up with the culturally evolved usage of “lonesome” and “lonesomeness” for which I argue in subsequent chapters, enlisting the corroborating testimony of writers of poetry, fiction, and song, and (in Chapter Five) of one especially clairvoyant painter, Edward Hopper.

One of our purposes is to urge a revisiting and correction of the dictionary entries for these terms. Another is to offer brief, all too brief, but strategic capsule readings of American poets (Chapter Two), fiction writers (Chapter Three), and “country” songwriters (Chapter Six), in passages where they touch upon dimensions in the American lonesome state of mind heretofore unregarded by critics.

But the larger purpose should be stated as clearly as possible at the outset. Unlike Cecelia Tichi, whose purpose is to fit the core themes of country music lyrics into the larger context of

Preface

traditional concerns voiced in classic American literature (in her *High Lonesome* of 1994²), we shall explore the complexity of our lonesomeness itself as an American cultural phenomenon. In particular, we shall attempt to do justice to its apparent religious-like character, using precedent writings in academic literary criticism, psychology, sociology, phenomenology, and philosophy of religion as guides along the way. And we shall argue that here is a case where the arts in America have for generations simultaneously conducted and reflected a significant strain of implicitly religious life in our evolving common experience as a people. As we shall argue, this rich strain of subjective, tenuously “religious” observance over time and still today has accompanied, here and there like a repeated grace note—though unacknowledged as such—the many ways in which Americans have negotiated their privatized, non-traditional religiousness.

We are living through an evolved and evolving American age or period in which guidance from traditional faith tradition has less and less regulated what we still prefer to call the “religious” (as distinct from the amorphous “spiritual”) experience of an increasingly heterogeneous America. In the American cultural context—that is, in the context of current differential usage of these two terms—we observe that “religiousness” still points to a deeper subjective experience of consciousness and reflection (and often commitment) than does the “spirituality” all too often linked with the marketing of voguish, New Age, alternative, panacea visions packaged by this new guru or prophet or that. As phenomena of popular culture, these variant “spiritualities” *du jour* of course have attracted some attention among a significant portion of the population and subsequently among Americanist academics. At the risk of discarding too hastily the term “spirituality,” and despite its accretion of profound historical meanings in our inherited faith traditions, here we bracket and put it aside as

LONESOME

deflated currency at present, in preference for “religion” and “religiousness,” which we think more adequately describe the kinds of meaning we detect in “lonesomeness.” We will address this issue again in Chapter Four, directly addressing the religious dimension. In the individualized American experience then, and increasingly now (despite the resurgence of visible and contentious Fundamentalist expressions of belief and practice in some quarters), the “lonesome” begs “religious” description.

Throughout our young nation’s history—Alexis de Tocqueville provides an exemplary observation to this effect³—an openness to non-traditional, personal religion has accompanied and informed the native that supports our “pursuit of happiness.” This openness has characterized those clearly or tenuously claiming adherence to particular, evolved denominational or faith traditions, as well as the religious and “spiritual” freelancers. In the introductory chapter, we shall touch upon relevant insights of Americanist culture critics, especially those of Giles Gunn, who with sustained delicacy has considered how the personal inward experience of American religiousness has so often been a matter of sensing, in one’s own terms, fortunate access to a never clearly defined “otherness” (if not an “Other”) into which one feels integrated and therewith fulfilled—the sort of “access,” that we will suggest, is to be marked in evoked and original experiences of lonesomeness.

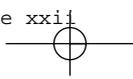
It would follow that, as it expresses or marks moments of deeper self-perception, lonesomeness can and should be addressed, if only briefly and in our conclusion, as a passing experience of privileged self-fulfillment, prophetic, as it were, of desired, sustainable self-integration, a deeper well-being and sense of self-worth. As such it could be of interest, we will suggest, to the clinically depressed (the “lonely”) and to the counseling practice of psychologists generally. For those so afflicted might benefit from acquiring from deeper exposure to

Preface

this particular cultural heritage a hopeful openness to the native feeling state of authentic lonesomeness, un-commandable though it may be. We will suggest in Chapter Seven that lonesomeness can function as a kind of unbidden gift of spiritual self-therapy. Its therapeutic possibilities, or at least our increased awareness of them, might find a small place among the various counseling initiatives of the day. To identify and to cultivate a redemptive significance in lonesomeness may prove a useful means of mitigating the increasing experience of loneliness, understood as “relational deprivation” (see Chapter One), as Americans, by percentage, increasingly live alone amid a “lonely crowd.”

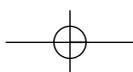
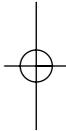
But credit the imaginations and sensitivities of a diversity of American artists with prompting our somewhat narrowly focused project in cultural study. In its undertaking we hold no brief for any particular comprehensive higher theory of culture of the moment. No particular explanatory theory drives our enterprise, and no expressly theological purpose. In an attempt to gain insight into promptings and contents of lonesomeness, the essay offers, modestly we hope, one kind of hypothesis among many that could conceivably be put forward. It offers the kind of argument that an academically trained Americanist religionist critic might propose—one who remains warily skeptical of the limitation of polling results that seem to show that Americans, measured by their claims of churchgoing and of formally held religious beliefs, are widely committed primarily to institutionalized religion; one who is daily made aware of the compartmentalization of and low public priority placed upon religious expression throughout our heterogeneous common life, shaped as it is by freedom, diversity, eroding skepticism, hypocrisies of convenience, the information deluge, and intensifying secularized self-consciousness.

Though modest in length, this essay reflects ongoing enchantment by the “great experiment,” culturally as well as



LONESOME

politically, which is America, and by the historically ambiguous consolations of “religion.” Unabashedly interdisciplinary and experimental in nature, it hopes to make a modest contribution ultimately to the field of American studies, populated as the field has been and must remain by scholars in diverse and complementing disciplines. This essay is precipitated by years of training, reading, research, and teaching at home and abroad in the interdisciplinary academic field professionally conducted under the rubric Arts, Literature, and Religion. It is a work in praise of the timely comfort of occasionally illuminated and restorative solitude, of loneliness transfigured and redeemed in an elevated, integrative experience of “otherness” by “something more.”



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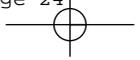
The POETIC
IMAGINATION *of*
LONESOMENESS

It is a lonesome Glee—
Yet sanctifies the Mind—
With fair association—
Afar upon the Wind

A Bird to overhear
Delight without a Cause—
Arrestless as invisible—
A matter of the skies.

Emily Dickinson (No. 774), c. 1863¹

Yet O my soul supreme!
Knows't thou the joys of pensive thought?
Joys of the free and lonesome heart, the tender, gloomy heart?
Joys of the solitary walk, the spirit bow'd yet proud, the suffering
and the struggle?



LONESOME

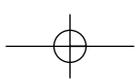
The agonistic throes, the ecstasies, joys of the solemn musings day
or night?

Walt Whitman, "A Song of Joys"²

I think of the rock singing, and light making its own silence,
At the edge of a ripening meadow, in early summer,
The moon lolling in the close elm, a shimmer of silver,
Or that lonely time before the breaking of morning
When the slow freight winds along the edge of the ravaged
hillside,
And the wind tries the shape of a tree,...

Theodore Roethke, "The Rose"³

For nothing quite so much as the qualities of their respective solitudes do we rightly hold up Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson as our greatest nineteenth-century poets, our crucial forbears in the American tradition. Nowhere in our poetry before or since them, their lives being roughly parallel, do we meet more appealing "selves" than in their two poetries, as differently as their familiar, idiosyncratic voices do speak to us now from out of the heroic, nation-building past of the nineteenth century. These two "selves" seem reported from an earlier, more innocent time. They seem constructed by passionate, disinterested intellectual and imaginative work, uncorrupted by the pathologies of excessive self-regard with which our writers of a later century have made us all too often aware. The "lonesomeness" in each of their poetries is profound, and in each, albeit in different ways, it expresses experiences and perceptions at the limits of what



The Poetic Imagination of Lonesomeness

language seems capable of expressing. When we trace American lonesomeness in these and other more recent poets of our tradition, we find this image employed—occasionally substituted by its cousin “loneliness” when that term crosses over, in a particular linguistic context, to evoke the fuller lonesomeness—as another of what T.S. Eliot in “East Coker” calls poetry’s obligatory “raids on the inarticulate.” Following the native cultural imperative to re-invent religion for themselves, our poets, and especially these two from the previous century, have found again and again in lonesomeness a descriptor open-ended, suggestive, and positive enough to use in expressing original, fugitive, “religious” states of feeling-perceiving-knowing that, as we shall be reminded by Rudolf Otto⁴ in Chapter Four, precede the reflex to understand by interpreting them through traditional symbols and myths.

We are exploring that moment represented or expressed in American poetries when perception is altered by a swell of feeling into an extraordinary subjective experience for the description of which “lonely” and, especially, “lonesome” have occasionally seemed appropriate though hardly adequate. Call this a complex feeling state, if we understand by this an experience that may include some manner of knowing and perceiving with feeling in a mixture difficult to disentangle. This feeling state is more apt to be expressed under the term lonesome than under the term lonely, although 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. This is an unbidden, unsought though welcome state of mind and feeling. It would seem to be usually of brief duration, although this is not always clear from the testimony. In older times, such an experience might have been described as a “visitation” by a spirit, or as a privileged state of

LONESOME

response to the world freely given by an intervening power beyond one's control. And, like those religious experiences across the traditions of coming into and remaining briefly "in the Spirit," the experience of label-begging, oceanic American lonesomeness is of course significantly if not exclusively programmed by the larger culture, or so and with good reasons the "linguistic turn" of post-modernism would suggest. In many if not all of its defining features, this lonesomeness is distinctive to North America. It is a homegrown product of what Rudolf Otto and others have called "*homo religiosus*" (add the qualifier, "*Americanus*") in the non-traditional, secular culture of the Republic. And we are prompted to feel it and to "know" something of the transcendent through feeling it first in our poets, and in particular in the immense influence of Walt Whitman, the first American poet of international stature and the great precursor founding father of the distinctively re-inventive and "kosmic" in American poetry.

No other native poet has done more to open up "lonesomeness" for use by Americans to signify a positive, "up-lifting" access of illumination and happiness paradoxically experienced in personal contexts of what Robert Weiss describes as "relational deprivation." Whitman is our iconic master of loneliness transfigured and redeemed. We will cite several passages from the carefully orchestrated death-bed edition of his completed life-work in life writing, *Leaves of Grass* (1892), to suggest this is so. One looks for appearances of the word "lonesome," of course. But Whitman's is a voice—Theodore Roethke's is another, if in lower register—which habitually conveys that "something more" than mere self-pitying loneliness. We recognize it in his characteristic, impetuous "dilation" of the spirit, and in the indiscriminately wide embrace of his yearning. His moments of melancholy are lined with glory. His lonesomeness in the sense

The Poetic Imagination of Lonesomeness

we have been evoking is the steady undersong playing throughout his work as a whole.

In the "I am afoot with my vision" section (#33) of "Song of Myself," we meet, perhaps for the first time in American literature, the image which subsequently became a beloved cliché: the poet traipses in his poetic vision "where sun-down shadows lengthen over the limitless and lonesome prairie,"⁵ reminding us that lonesomeness has been adopted famously as a defining attribute of the empty and Romanticized Western landscape. Similarly, we meet the mix of positive with negative in these scene-painting lines from his elegy for General George Custer in "From Far Dakota's Canons" (1876):

Far from Dakota's canons
Lands of the wild ravine, the dusky Sioux, the
lonesome stretch of silence,
Haply to-day a mournful wail, haply a
trumpet-note for heroes.⁶

Among the "Calamus Poems" in "Recorders Ages Hence," Whitman gives instructions as to how he wishes to be remembered:

Publish my name and hang up my picture as that of
the tenderest lover,
The friend the lover's portrait, of whom his friend his
lover was fondest,
Who was not proud of his songs, but of the
measureless ocean of love within him, and
freely pour'd it forth,
Who often walk'd lonesome walks thinking of his
dear friends, his lovers.⁷

LONESOME

Here the lonesome walks are full of remembering and reflection. The experience is expansive and gratifying, not untouched by the characteristic sense in Whitman of the “oceanic.” For he knows the “joys” of “the free and lonesome heart, the tender, gloomy heart,” to echo the epigraph at the head of the chapter, and he recommends them to his reader. Nor is he false to the lonely, as I have characterized it, in order to puff the lonesome. The “Joys of the solitary walk” are indeed taken in “the spirit bow’d yet proud, the suffering and the struggle.” The paradox he expresses is truly a paradox. Not for Whitman the avoidance behavior of a Pollyanna. The light is to be discovered in the darkness—he offers a lonesomeness of “the agonistic throes, the ecstasies, joys of the solemn musings day or night.”

A particularly apt passage, from “Proud Music of the Storm”, needs to be cited at length:

I

Proud music of the storm,
 Blast that careers so free, whistling across the prairie,
 Strong hum of forest tree-tops—wind of the
 mountains,
 Personified dim shapes—you hidden orchestras,
 You serenades of phantoms with instruments alert,
 Blending with Nature’s rhythmus all the tongues of
 nations;
 You chords left as by vast composers—you choruses,
 You formless, free, religious dances—you from the
 Orient,
 You undertone of rivers, roar of pouring cataracts,
 You sounds from distant guns with galloping cavalry,
 Echoes of camps with all the different bugle-calls,
 Trooping tumultuous, filling the midnight late,



The Poetic Imagination of Lonesomeness

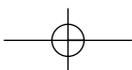
bending over me powerless,
 Entering my lonesome slumber-chamber, why have
 you seiz'd me?

II

Come forward O my soul, and let the rest retire,
 Listen, lose not, it is toward thee they tend,
 Parting the midnight, entering my slumber-chamber,
 For they sing and dance O my soul.⁸

Storm winds become orchestras and choruses, nature's "rhythmus" merges with a Pentecostal babble of the world's languages, accompanying vatic dances blend in this joinery with the thundering cacophony of battlefield and waterfalls. And all of these strains flooding together in irresistible tumult "part the midnight," break open his solitude and, by engorging his "soul," create the high, epiphanic lonesome moment. In this 164-line poem his apostrophized soul goes to school to wild hymns, symphonies, operas, and dreams conflated with violent inspirations of wind and spirit to find a "new rhythmus fitted for thee." The poem throws up a vivid symbolic assertion that his career in poetry proceeds from a solitude enabled by such transfiguration "... into such a lonesomeness to 'go forth in the bold day and write' poems that bridge the way from 'Life to death.' "

Whitman is our great native voice of yearning, always holding together in unity the yearnings of body and of soul, of intellect and of emotion—the adult ever illumined by the memory of childhood, ever pressing for restored relation to meaningful others and for re-consummated human embrace, never forgetting the deepest truths of the heart. In "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," as elsewhere but nowhere more



LONESOME

powerfully expressed in his poetry, the note struck is elegiac and supernal, bittersweet, and triumphant. The poet wanders the beach on Long Island where he played as a child. He connects the voice of his own musing with the calling song of a single mocking-bird, whom he once observed caring for his mate “with bright eyes” crouched in a nest over four light-green eggs spotted with brown. But the female has vanished, leaving the male heart-broken to sing his loss all summer long “in the sound of the sea, and at night under the full of the moon.” The poet calls the bird “brother,” identifying with his perpetual plaintive cry, saying of the bird, “He pour’d forth the meanings which I of all men know.” Here is Whitman “translating the notes”:

*Low hangs the moon, it rose late,
It is lagging—O I think it is heavy with love, with love.
O madly the sea pushes upon the land,
With love, with love.*

Whitman displays the gift of the spirit-filled mystic to reconcile opposites, to find serenity in paradox. Typically, in this poem, he describes the ultimate unity of love and death, lifting elegy for lost youth and lost love into a celebration for which the joyous associations of the carol as a special song genre are invoked:

*Shake out carols!
Solitary here, the night’s carols!
Carols of lonesome love! death’s carols!
Carols under that lagging, yellow, waning moon!
O under that moon where she droops almost down
into the sea!
O reckless despairing carols.*

The Poetic Imagination of Lonesomeness

*But soft! sink low!
Soft: let me just murmur,
And do you wait a moment you husky-nois'd sea,
For somewhere I believe I heard my mate responding to me,
So faint, I must be still, be still to listen, ...*

He addresses the bird finally:

O you singer solitary, singing by yourself,
projecting me,
O solitary me listening, never more shall I
cease perpetuating you.⁹

The poet listening as he sings is never more illuminated and strangely happy than at this moment, the human spirit in him filling with a blissful calm. And so he concludes, "O if I am to have so much, let me have more!" Whitman's lonesome, achieved by strenuous emotional work, makes a powerful, influential image.

Christopher Ricks, in "Loneliness and Poetry," as discussed in the previous chapter, dismisses the self-indulgent mawkishness of the feelings that for him the word "lonesomeness" describes. As formed by the culture of a native-born Englishman, he is hardly concerned to explore what Americans feel in this moment of spiritual fullness born of loneliness, as represented in our poets writing an English shaped by another cultural tradition. Indeed, when he reports his findings upon examining the dictionary definitions of "loneliness" and kindred terms that the language has thrown up in the past, he studiously avoids mention of "lonesome." But when he finds, as anyone must, that the dictionary definitions are "often immediately inadequate,"¹⁰ he is

LONESOME

effectively suggesting that the subject is ripe for further inquiry, as so it surely is.

It would be useful here, in further pursuit of this inquiry, to clarify by re-thinking the relation of lonesome to lonely, as found in Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and their inheritors who give voice to the American lonesomeness in this century. In a word, the feeling state itself must be our primary concern while the choice of term to describe or to evoke it remains secondary. "Lonesome" is our term of choice, for reasons laid out in the first chapter. But "lonely," as well, when employed by some poets in some passages similarly, it would seem, expresses the redemptive sensation of fullness for which "lonesome," as I am suggesting, seems the more appropriate word, for American writers and readers. This is the case, and dictionary discriminations as well as definitions prove "immediately inadequate," because we, the users of the language, have not yet clarified the distinction in consensus usage. And this is the case, doubtless, because the forces of "secularization" and of re-invention and *bricolage* in the spiritual life of individual Americans (as described by the sociologists) have produced a kind of frontier arena of emotional-spiritual life in which language (and concept) is perpetually catching up, but is never adequately caught up with experimental, subjective reality itself. It is no surprise, under these conditions of fluidity, to find "lonely" where I am suggesting "lonesome" is the more appropriate descriptor of a somewhat amorphous feeling state, perpetually provoking expression in individualistic poetic language differing from individual to individual.

If Whitman is a master of yearning, affective lonesomeness, Dickinson is a specialist expert in metaphysical lonesomeness. With refreshing intellectual severity and cryptic precision, refusing false comfort of any sort, she explores both the idea of

The Poetic Imagination of Lonesomeness

the unknowable transcendent and how reflection on the idea feels. A number of passages in her poetry illustrate capture of the privileged lonesome moment, and in that characteristic idiom whose delicacy serves not so much to dispel as to increase appreciation of the mystery for which religious myth proves an inadequate container or vehicle. When Dickinson observes,

There is another Loneliness
That many die without—
Not want of friend occasions it
Or circumstance of Lot

But nature, sometimes, sometimes thought,
And whoso it befall
Is richer than could be revealed
By mortal numeral— (#1116, c. 1868)

she is evoking the epiphanic lonesome to be discovered or given *through* the lonely, or so it would see. 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,” as we shall see. That which is “revealed” would be more than merely a feeling as we ordinarily define that word, for “thought” as well as “nature” is credited with “occasioning” it. And the description of this special other kind of loneliness, which, as she observes, many never feel—she does not tell us why not—inevitably proves impossible in human language.

Dickinson’s depressive loneliness can be devastating, as reflected in “The Loneliness One dare not sound” (#777, c. 1863), where the state is imaged as “The Horror not to be surveyed—/
But skirted in the dark.” But the Dark Night moment only serves

LONESOME

to validate the probing, courageous voyage of discovery she makes within and through the perils of this “dark.” If at moments in loneliness to be “skirted” she might propose avoiding a confrontation with it (“With Consciousness suspended—/And Being under Lock—”), at another moment she might choose to open herself to it:

I tried to think a lonelier Thing
 Than any I had seen—
 Some Polar Expiation—
 An Omen in the Bone

Of Death’s tremendous nearness—
 I probed Retrieveless things
 My Duplicate—to borrow—
 A Haggard Comfort springs

From the belief that Somewhere—
 Within the Clutch of Thought—
 There dwells one other Creature
 Of Heavenly Love—forgot—

I plucked at our Partition
 As One should pry the Walls—
 Between Himself—and Horror’s Twin—
 Within opposing Cells—

I almost strove to clasp his Hand,
 Such Luxury—it grew—
 That as Myself—could pity Him—
 Perhaps he—pitied me— (#532, c. 1862)

The Poetic Imagination of Lonesomeness

What is to be prized or recovered out of the “Clutch of Thought” which imprisons even as it structures inquiry? Dickinson may not have known Kantian philosophy, but she appears to know and to feel in this poem the Kantian categories as the irremovable obstacle (“our partition”) on the path of her quest for apprehension of the ultimate source of her loneliness and, simultaneously, its relief. The poem is theological in that she reflects on the question of a transcendent God figured in the tradition as incarnate in Christ (“Creature/Of Heavenly Love”) and on the notion of her creation in the image of that God. But utterance ends in defeat and pity—she cannot break free of the clutch of thought within mortal conditions of space, time, and causality. Here and as in what she calls elsewhere (in the later poem, “There is a solitude of space,” #1695) her “polar privacy,” two irreducible terms are forever joined, forever modified, and muddled the one by the other: “Finite infinity.” Nor is it possible to pretend that she can. And yet, on her way to defeat and pity, in the ordering of this utterance, she passes through a moment of metaphysical loneliness nearly overcome: “I almost strove to clasp his Hand.” She finds “Luxury” in this moment, and furthermore “it grew”—a moment of fleeting plenitude certainly sensed if not fully grasped.

If this poem uses language echoing that of religious myth which Dickinson intentionally rejected when she refused co-option by evangelical revivalism as a girl, this one uses her more characteristic, more elusive, gnomic language:

The lonesome for they know not What—
 The Eastern Exiles—be—
 Who strayed beyond the Amber line
 Some madder Holiday—

LONESOME

And ever since—the purple Moat
 They strive to climb—in vain—
 As Birds—that tumble from the clouds
 Do fumble at the storm—

The Blessed Ether—taught them—
 Some Transatlantic Morn—
 When Heaven—was too common—to miss—
 Too sure—to dote upon!

Putting aside the question of the source of this puzzling imagery, here we come as close as perhaps we will come to a tag motto for anti-traditional and experimental Americans fixed in the ambiguities of spiritual freedom and “secularized” culture: “lonesome for they know not What.” The poet may be referring here to flowers in her garden reaching for the sun, comparing the force propelling plant growth (or the movement of the stars) with that which sends birds climbing the sky, even if, inevitably, they tire and “tumble from the clouds.” In these cases, aspiration struggles for the unattainable, and struggles on. This is symbolic language for a spiritual, if not to say a metaphysical, struggle, compelled by force beyond one’s control, doomed to frustration. “Lonesome” here describes the religious yearning for belief in a transcendent reality, a yearning not capable of being fulfilled for more than a tantalizing, fleeting moment, but at least for that.

The poem ends, however, without striking a skeptical note. The actual lonesomeness described belongs to flowers or stars, after all, not to self-conscious human beings. The language of the third and final stanza is positive. The returning morning sun, rising from across the Atlantic in the east, “taught them” to “dote upon” the “Heaven” too obvious, “too sure,” “too miss”—reminiscent of Thoreau’s buoyant *ave atque vale* at the close of

The Poetic Imagination of Lonesomeness

Walden (1854), “The sun is but a morning star” to steer by. Though the symbolic “Eastern Exiles” climb “in vain” ultimately, and though birds “Do fumble at the strain,” 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. It suggests Otto’s “numinous” experience of the unnameable but (given the constructive function of religious myth) always to-be-named “Wholly Other.” Dickinson’s utterance here makes the lonesome a positive feeling state. We would read the poem wrongly if we took lonesome automatically to mean the depressive state of loneliness. The poem tells us rather that hers is an aspiring not a depressive lonesome fixed upon the Blessed Ether beyond the Heaven “too common” and “too sure.”

For good reason we have placed “It is a lonesome Glee” (#774, c. 1863) at the head of the chapter as an epigraph. This is a sister poem to “The lonesome for they know not What,” and, if anything, presents still more positive a feeling state signaled by lonesome, suggesting that it has a religious character and that the poet has a religious purpose, non-traditional and paradoxically inclusive of devastating skepticism as that character and her purpose may be:

It is a lonesome Glee—
 Yet sanctifies the Mind—
 With fair association
 Afar upon the Wind

A Bird to overhear
 Delight without a Cause—
 Arrestless is invisible—
 A matter of the skies.

LONESOME

In nature an individual consciousness can be lifted and filled with “sanctifying,” “lonesome Glee.” Again, here “Glee” defines lonesome, not depressive loneliness, as similarly lonesome defines her “glee.”

Dickinson is a poet of changing moods and intellectual complexity. The glee in her lonesome fades in and out. In #947 (1864) she asks rhetorically—here it fades:

Of Tolling Bell I ask the cause?
 “A Soul has gone to Heaven”
 I’m answered in a lonesome tone—
 Is Heaven then a Prison?

Eden as well as heaven is associated a more melancholy, a lonely lonesome, as in #413 (1862):

Because its Sunday—all the time—
 And Recess—never comes—
 And Eden’ll be so lonesome
 Bright Wednesday afternoons—

Religious belief itself is correlated with lonesome in the late “The Bible is an antique volume” (#1545, c. 1882):

Boys that “believe” are very lonesome—
 Other Boys are “lost”—
 Had but the Tale a warbling Teller—
 All the Boys would come—
 Orpheus’ Sermon captivated—
 It did not condemn—

Here, casting a dubious eye upon the evangelical revivalist either/or of co-opted belief or self-“damnation” by refusal of that



The Poetic Imagination of Lonesomeness

co-option, the poet acknowledges, we gather, that such “believers,” although comforted and even gladdened by their belief, must in the marketplace of testable ideas feel an isolated loneliness for the cost they have paid in what she regards as intellectual dishonesty. The biblical myth does not sufficiently enchant or convince.

But the mood in Dickinson swings again. When not venting displeasure with what must have seemed the fraudulence of evangelical appeals and the indignity of the emotional pressure exerted by evangelists, she was capable of evoking the unknowable and unnameable in a figure simple and powerful, charged with Otto’s sense of the “mysterium tremendum:”

Gathered into the Earth,
 And out of story—
 Gathered to that strange Fame—
 That lonesome Glory
 That hath no omen here—but Awe— (#1370, 1876)

If these passages are not familiar, this last poem, much anthologized, certainly is. And its supernal concluding stanza is lonesomeness itself—in hindsight, it looks forward to the idiom of the painter Edward Hopper, visited in Chapter Five:

There’s a certain Slant of light,
 Winter afternoons—
 That oppresses, like the Heft
 Of Cathedral Tunes—

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us—
 We can find no scar,
 But internal difference,
 Where the meanings, are—



LONESOME

None may teach it—Any—
 'Tis the Seal Despair—
 An imperial affliction
 Sent of the Air—

When it comes, the Landscape listens—
 Shadows—hold their breath—
 When it goes 'tis like the Distance
 On the look of Death— (#258, 1861)

The utterance concludes in the exquisite poise of that long-kept, silent regard in held breath, as though to hold and to hold more truly that crystallizing moment in which the reflective listening of the speaker is greeted by the projected listening of the landscape under a thinning slant of winter light and lengthening shadow. The light goes. The dark suggests death. But the poise includes the moment of haunting light given way to the dark. This is the characteristic Dickinson lonesome: tough-minded, austere, evanescent, uncomforted, braced by an irresistible chill.

Among the inheritors of Whitman's and Dickinson's lonesome, we would include especially Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Theodore Roethke, A.R. Ammons, and James Wright—to offer illustration from the twentieth century. The sense of the lonesome varies among them, however, as of course we would expect; for these are distinctive, individual voices. We will consider examples from the work of each to round out the chapter.

The deceptively simple Frost, whose air of the homespun philosopher (whose philosophy is not to be taken so seriously as such) and of the amiable naturalist has made him a set text for schoolchildren, earned his popularity through a prolonged struggle with himself and the language. Never a poet of romance or of "spilt religion," more like his fellow New Englander

The Poetic Imagination of Lonesomeness

Dickinson (and, before her, Emerson and Thoreau), he reads his natural surrounding as a landscape of signs and signals communicating practical home truths. One apt illustration will suffice here: "Desert Places," from the 1930s, in which the lonely is pushed inexorably into a lonesomeness paradoxically as vast and majestic as it is matter-of-fact and close to the bone. Not to read into it a religious-like feeling where there is none, but the poet's refusal to "scare" in response to the lonely white-out snowfall in the surrounding woods does make an assertion of spirit, *against* his "absent-spiritedness," in a reflective moment of reclaimed self-possession. He 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:

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast
 In a field I looked into going past,
 And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,
 But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

The woods around it have it—it is theirs.
 All animals are smothered in their lairs.
 I am too absent-spirited to count;
 The loneliness includes me unawares.

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.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
 Between stars—on stars where no human race is.

LONESOME

I have it in me so much nearer home
 To scare myself with my own desert places.¹¹

And then there is Wallace Stevens, lonelier in his career solitude and legendary self-reserve than we can imagine any other American poet. But in his life-long exploration of the capacities and reserves of the unfettered imagination he pursues a project that cannot be belittled as mere estheticism. The woman in the well-known “Sunday Morning” knows that we live in “island solitude, unsponsored, free”—free *of*, that is, but also uncomforted *by*, traditional religious myth. Her material life is comfortable; the natural world in its physical beauty gives her joy. And yet:

She says, “But in contentment I still feel
 The need of some imperishable bliss.”

As she “dreams a little” during the course of the poem’s exposition, she thinks, “Divinity must live within herself.” Her solitary meditation culminates in an affirmation of an “as if” which will suffice—an imagined “boisterous devotion to the sun, /Not as a god, but as a god might be”—to replace the discredited religious myth. And the famous concluding lines of pure lyric, beginning “Deer walk upon our mountains ...,” redeem the loneliness of her spiritual “island solitude” in a hymn to natural beauty. The feeling conveyed is that of the transfiguring American lonesomeness.

In that same early collection, *Harmonium* (1923),¹² Stevens included the shorter “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon,” which also, if in briefer compass and in the high-flown, imaginative idiom of the poet, offers another representation of such a numinous moment:

The Poetic Imagination of Lonesomeness

Not less because in purple I descended
 The western day through what you called
 The loneliest air, not less was I myself.

What was the ointment sprinkled on my beard?
 What were the hymns that buzzed beside my ears?
 What was the sea whose tide swept through me there?

Out of my mind the golden ointment rained,
 And my ears made the blowing hymns they heard.
 I was myself the compass of that sea.

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
 Or heard or felt came not but from myself;
 And there I found myself more truly and more
 strange.¹³

In “the loneliest air” the speaker comes into the fullest, oceanic possession of himself, through the experienced power of imagination, and in a high modernist moment of self-recapture or self-reinvention. The skeptical poet claims that this experience came “but from myself,” in other words, not from any guessable transcendent power. But to find himself therein “more truly and more strange” is to echo that “Awe” of Dickinson’s and to suggest at least a religious-like state of mind. In this effusive evocation of a passing state of illumination, the boundary between consciousness and the outer world collapses. The speaker merges with the world and, reciprocally, the world (“the compass of the sea”) becomes his projection. “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon” looks forward to the later “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour,” which for flooding fullness of spirit expressed through beauty of phrasing cannot be matched in his work. Other readers may with justification find other elements and themes in

LONESOME

these two poems. But, for us, these are both impressive renderings of precisely the moment in the American lonesome we are purposing to establish: the numinous sensation of unnameable, unknowable Otherness combining feeling and perception in a “religious” state of mind. The concluding nine lines of “Final Soliloquy” (1950) deserve quoting:

Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves.
 We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,
 A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous.

Within its vital boundary, in the mind.
 We say God and the imagination are one...
 How high that highest candle lights the dark.

Out of this same light, out of the central mind,
 We make a dwelling in the evening air,
 In which being there together is enough.¹⁴

Whether alone or in the company of others, the speaker speaks not to any others but in “soliloquy” to himself. The “we” who overhear him are a non-functional collective: all of us as individuals in our essential solitude. The brotherhood/sisterhood of “being there together” in the last line is an existentialist description of our common condition, in the last analysis, as solitaries. But the sharing of the common condition is indeed a bond, as is the hoped-for shared belief that “The world imagined is the ultimate good.” This is a high modernist version of the numinous, redeeming lonesome.

Theodore Roethke does not use the word “lonesome.” But he characteristically pushes his self-hugging songs of quest for stability and place in the world from the lonely into the realm of the lonesome. His Romantic lonely reads like lonesome—this is a

The Poetic Imagination of Lonesomeness

property of his voice. With "I was that lonely" he concludes "The Geranium."¹⁵ In another lyric in the late collection, *The Far Field* (1964), "The Tree, the Bird," he tells us:

The willow with its bird grew loud, grew louder still.
I could not bear its song, that altering
With every shift of air, those beating wings,
The lonely buzz behind my midnight eyes;—
How deep the mother-root of that still cry!¹⁶

The poem proceeds from this moment of Whitman-like identification with a bird's unbearably melancholy song to, at the very end, the speaker's elicited sense of a "last pure stretch of joy, /The dire dimension of a final thing." "Dire," balancing "joy," keeps the poise of which Roethke at his best is capable, and, in the process, stamps out another instance of the American lonesome. Much of Roethke touches on this sort of moment: visitations by beauty too beautiful to bear in what appears a life-long quest for validating exaltations of the spirit. "I love the world; I want more than the world," he pleads in the poem, "The Exulting," from *Words for the Wind* (1958).¹⁷ The language of his poetry follows this lead. The moment of rapture in solitude (lonesomeness in loneliness) comes in the passage from "The Rose," used as an epigraph for the chapter:

I think of the rock singing, and light making its own
silence,
At the edge of a ripening meadow, in early summer,
The moon lolling in the close elm, a shimmer of silver,
Or that lonely time before the breaking of morning
When the slow freight winds along the edge of the
ravaged hillside,
And the wind tries the shape of a tree.

LONESOME

We meet it again in the love poem, "She," from the same collection:

I think the dead are tender. Shall we kiss?
 My lady laughs, delighting in what is.
 If she but sighs, a bird puts out its tongue.
 She makes a space lonely with a lovely song.
 She lilts a low soft language, and I hear
 Down long sea-chambers of the inner ear.¹⁸

"Lonely" is not a misprint in the key and most poetic line of this passage: "She makes a space lonely with a lovely song." Precisely. And we may co-opt this lonely to the lonesome. We may find in this image, in the lonely-making beauty of a "lovely" song, an echo of the beauty almost too painfully beautiful to bear of "The Tree, the Bird." Roethke's lonely—one and the same with our lonesome—is a transfiguring state.

The 1981 collection *A Coast of Trees*, by A.R. Ammons, includes the powerful, often-anthologized "Easter Morning." If American poetry has evolved a sub-genre of Sunday-morning-alternative-to-churchgoing lyrics (in the mode of Stevens' "Sunday Morning"), this is surely one of the finest. The poem begins in loneliness as a personal given, a fatality, a condition thrust upon the speaker from his youth:

I have a life that did not become
 that turned aside and stopped,
 astonished:
 I hold it in me like a pregnancy or
 as on my lap a child
 not to grow or grow old but to dwell on.

The Poetic Imagination of Lonesomeness

The speaker has returned to his childhood home and to the cemetery of "my home country" in order to call up in memory a circle of older family members, teachers, and others "all in the graveyard/assembled, done for, the world they/used to wield, have trouble and joy/in gone." Standing in the cemetery, the speaker realizes that the child stunted in him ("the child in me that could not become") remains with him, demanding attention. This child almost materializes beside him "crying out for help," unheeded by the adults, in pain seemingly that cannot be relieved. But is the child himself as a child? As a child, the speaker suffered the loss of a brother in a "mishap" on a road nearby. Now:

I stand on the stump
of a child, whether myself
or my little brother who died, and
yell as far as I can, I cannot leave this place, for
for me it is the dearest and the worst,
it is a life nearest to life which is
life lost.

Memory crushes him, intensifying what he feels: deserted and bereft, alone and thwarted by a hopeless life pattern of "incompletions." But then he chances to look up. The beauty of the natural world impinges upon his consciousness. A vision of "two great birds,/...oaring/the great wings steadily" overhead flying north lifts his spirit. How the two birds then behave in flight becomes a hieroglyph to be read for solace and instruction. The speaker invests them with transcendental significance. He reads their movements as a sign of a redeeming orderliness suffused through the brokenness of a life experience such as his own:

LONESOME

... then one bird
the one behind, veered a little to the
left and the other bird kept on seeming
not to notice for a minute: the first
began to circle as if looking for
something, coasting, resting its wings
on the down side of some of the circles:
the other bird came back and they both
circled, looking perhaps for a draft;
they turned a few more times, possibly
rising—at least, clearly resting—
then flew on falling into distance till
they broke across the local bush and
trees: it was a sight of bountiful
majesty and integrity: the having
patterns and routes, breaking
from them to explore other patterns or
better ways to routes, and then the
return: a dance sacred as the sap in
the trees, permanent in its descriptions
as the ripples round the brook's
ripplestone: fresh as this particular
flood of burn breaking across us now
from the sun.¹⁹

This is a moment of transfigured lonesomeness.

One more illustration of the movement from lonely to lonesome will suffice. Ammons grew up in the South. In the same generation, James Wright grew up in the Midwest, and then wrote his poetry out of an abiding sense of that region as his place of origin and destiny. His work is often depressive, darkened by identification with failure, set in a regional



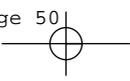
The Poetic Imagination of Lonesomeness

landscape haunted by the tragic. In this poetry come moments when Wright lifts out of a flattened loneliness into a richer gift of lonesomeness. Occasionally, in a fleeting magic moment, his otherwise saddened lives of his speakers would get lucky, and it would tend to happen in the presence of animals. Here, in the poem titled "A Blessing," he walks into a field to observe more closely two ponies. "There is no loneliness like theirs," he writes, and then:

I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,
For she has walked over to me
And nuzzled my left hand.
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear
That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.
Suddenly I realise
That if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom.²⁰

Poetry is of course a privileged use of language. In the alchemy of words, poets keep the language up. They expand the inherited capacity of language to clarify experience through suggestiveness by re-making language creatively in the crucible of imagination—by making it new, the watchword of the Modernists early in the twentieth century. The poets I have cited have contributed memorably to the shaping of American English, a variant English tongue evolved in North America to record and transmit the experience of, at first, primarily the European American response to the social conditions and the natural landscapes of the new nation. Closely to examine the poetry I have exhibited is to discern a native imagination at work probing for always a personal means in language of expressing authentic, adventuring,





LONESOME

non-traditional, religious-like life of the spirit. Other readers of this body of poetry will inevitably read it in other, perhaps complementary ways. To propose that these examples record an ongoing, evolving attempt to give expression to a numinous American lonesomeness of the kind we are exploring here is to bid for but one possible way of reading these poets among many possible other ways.

But the native lonesome is not merely a matter for poets. The testimony of other genres and other arts can be invoked to strengthen the argument for this approach. This strain of religious-like lonesomeness in American emotional and spiritual life, difficult as it may be adequately to capture conceptually, is corroborated in our painting, our popular country music, and, as we shall see in the following chapter, in our tradition of fiction.

