IV Solitude from the Nineteenth to the Twentieth Century: Society, Spirituality, and Religion

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Three Types of Deep Solitude: Religious Quests, Aesthetic Retreats, and Withdrawals due to Personal Distress

Abstract: Deep solitude is defined by prolonged withdrawal and intense passion. Three types of deep solitude are discussed in this essay: religious quests, aesthetic retreats, and withdrawals due to distress. Though these three deep solitudes share little in common, all three depend on prosaic routines to forestall psychic anomie.

1. Solitude and Deep Solitude: Conceptual Issues

The concept of solitude, as Ludwig Wittgenstein might say, is a grouping of activities that share only a family resemblance. The school teacher or sales clerk who disengages for a brief solitary respite from the stress of fulfilling her duties to others shares nothing more with the prisoner forced into solitary confinement for weeks, months, or more than the bare fact of being alone. Likewise, the author or composer who repairs to a room of her own for intensely focused creative work enters a solitude far removed from the peripatetic rambles of the bird watcher alone in the woods. Motives matter, too. Indeed, almost every solitude may be entered for a variety of reasons. An author may write alone for money and/or fame or simply to solve a problem or discover the story she has to tell. Even prisoners, if given the choice, may choose solitary confinement with all the risks of loneliness, boredom, and psychological anomie over the improved circumstances they might obtain by violating their principles or betraying a friend. In social scientific terms, the contexts and practices that constitute these solitudes form a Venn diagram with only a crescent of overlap at the center of all circles.

Given the great variety of social situations and personal circumstances in which individuals may end up on their own, there is no practical way to discuss solitude at large. In order to make cogent observations about solitude one must specify in advance just what type or category of solitude one has in mind. Given this consideration, I propose here to limit myself to the rarest sort of social withdrawal that occurs only when individuals voluntarily disengage from interpersonal activity for extended periods of time. I call this category of withdrawals 'deep solitude.' The adjective 'deep' here implies the passion that moves individuals to disengage from others for prolonged retreats. Deep solitudes are uncommon because it is not in

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the nature of human beings to live alone all of the time. But then, it is not in the nature of human beings to socialize continuously throughout the day. Most of us strike a balance in which we circulate in and out of solitude and sociability during the course of our schedules and routines. It takes a rare set of powerful emotions and compelling motivations to abandon one's web of social relations and concomitant social identities to engage in deeply personal pursuits. And it must be said that even those who withdraw into deep solitude do not keep to themselves all of the time. Most choose habitats not too far removed from communities where they occasionally travel to restock provisions and catch up with family and friends. But then, those fully committed to deep solitude quickly return to life on their own.

But how far does the notion of deep solitude carry us? A social theorist immediately would look for common denominators and intrinsic variations that treat deep solitude as a genus that divides into a number of more specific species. Thus, in my book, *Solitary Action: Acting on Our Own in Everyday Life* (2016), I identify a general process of behavior that is present (or in one case absent) from things people do by themselves. Thereafter, I differentiate that generic process into four specific categories of solitary action: reflexives, peripatetics, regimens, and engrossments. But deep solitude resists being theorized in this way. Why? Because beyond the compulsion of deeply experienced emotions, deep solitudes share no common denominators and passion is too polymorphous in itself to serve as a common denominator. What does the ascetic religious hermit share in common with the recluse who luxuriates in the rustic beauties of the wilderness? And what do religious hermits or aesthetic solitaries share with individuals who withdraw from intercourse with others to experience, absorb, and calm intensely painful emotions that disrupt their lives? Like briefer and less intense periods of solitude as indicated above, deep solitudes comprise a family of language games whose properties barely overlap at all. Nonetheless, if there is no overarching process or general quality that all deep solitudes share, there are several different kinds of deep solitude, each of which involves its own set of motives, meanings, and solitary ways of life. In this essay, I discuss three categorical types of deep solitude as distinguished above: ascetic religious quests, aesthetic retreats, and withdrawals to confront disruptive emotions. Thereafter, I briefly return to note one prosaic element that all deep solitudes share.

2. Ascetic Religious Quests

Those who withdraw to the monastic cell, or more often in earlier times the desert cave or the wilderness hut, enter deep solitude in its most extreme form. They are in fact, a species of what Max Weber memorably termed "religious virtuosi"

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(287), a species marked not only by withdrawal, but by self-imposed asceticism as well. If, as sometimes happens, solitude is referenced with an aura of mysticism or mystery surrounding the term, the solitude of the religious anchorite or hermit is an obvious source of the aura we detect. Saints Anthony and Jerome as well as Paul of Thebes left such a deep impression on early Christian culture and such an enduring legacy in monastic orders that it may seem anachronistic to speak of such spiritual vocations today. True, they are rare, but then we cannot be sure how common or rare were the solitudes of early Christianity, or for that matter, the solitudes of pre-Christian mystics or the solitary vocations undertaken by members of Eastern religions in the past or in more recent times. In any event, the spiritual call to solitude has not been completely extinguished in modernity. This much is evident from the life and works of Thomas Merton (1915–1968). Late in life Merton withdrew into solitude as a religious hermit. However, many publications from his large output of writings prior to that point not only make clear that he felt the call to a solitary vocation, but also that he possessed a subtle understanding and appreciation of what is at stake in the sacred pursuit and the challenges that confront the individual who accepts this vocation. Merton's "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude" (1960) presents one of his most thoughtful and acute examinations of the spiritual vocation to solitude. I shall rely on Merton's insights here as a guide to this reclusive way of life. A number of principle themes in Merton's essays are summarized in the following passage:

> The true solitary is not one who simply withdraws from society. Mere withdrawal, regression leads to a sick solitude, without meaning and without fruit. The solitary of whom I speak is called not to leave society but to transcend it; not to withdraw from the fellowship with other men but to renounce the appearance, the myth of union in diversion in order to attain union on a higher and a more spiritual level – the mystic level of the Body of Christ. He renounces that union with his immediate neighbors that are apparently achieved through the medium of the aspirations, fictions, and conventions prevalent in his social group. But in so doing he attains to the basic, invisible, mysterious unity, which makes all men "one Man" in Christ's Church beyond, and in spite of natural social groups by which their special myths and slogans keep man in a state of division. The solitary then has a mysterious and apparently absurd vocation to supernatural unity. He seeks a simple, spiritual oneness in himself which when it is found, paradoxically becomes the oneness of all men. (181–82)

Merton's sweeping dismissal of "mere withdrawal" underscores the qualities of Weber's religious virtuoso to which, in effect, Merton implies every true solitary must aspire. The solitary renounces the superficial "diversion" (and self-deceptions, self-gratification, social myths, illusion, and even the kind of simple faith that prevails among Christians in everyday life), as Merton makes clear at various points

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in the essay. The solitary seeks a mystical, mysterious union with the divine, but a union he experiences within himself as an oneness with all humanity as well. There is what Merton calls an "absurd" quality in this quest, but not the absurdity that might occur to the uncomprehending bystander. The absurdity comes with the solitary's "anguish of realizing that underneath the apparent logical pattern of a more or less 'well-organized' rational life there lays an abyss of rationality, confusion, pointlessness, and indeed chaos" (179). Merton goes on to condense this interior sense of life's absurdity in a trenchant way. This absurdity involves a special kind of renunciation, a renunciation of "the seemingly harmless pleasure of building a tight self-contained illusion about himself and his little world" (180).

It is not out of place to notice here how far removed the ascetic, spiritual quest of Merton's solitary is from the way ordinary solitary actions are performed in everyday life. Most forms of mundane solitary action proceed via processes of contextually reflexive moves in which each step in a sequence finds its place in the context of the nature and results of preceding moves and simultaneously creates and forecloses opportunities for the next move in the sequence (Cohen 75–76). But the religious recluse is called upon to abjure context formation of any kind. It is quite clear that Merton leaves no place for the individual on a spiritual vocation to follow a sequence of action as if writing a novel, playing solitaire, or preparing a household budget. Even those ordinary activities that call for internal discipline because they lack much context formation (e.g. assembly line work, household chores) bear little resemblance to the solitary, ascetic religious quest. Whereas assembly line workers or students memorizing items for an exam may need to discipline themselves for several hours at a time, the spiritual vocation is a continuous affair. So long as the individual persists in the quest, the self-imposed discipline is an unremitting integral aspect of every moment of daily life.

In a sense, the absurd renunciation of the construction of illusions would make it seem as though in the early stages of a solitary vocation the individual creates a condition of anomie. Indeed, Merton devotes a substantial section of his essay to what he terms a "sea of perils" (184–200), many of which resemble the confusion, insecurities, and doubts that victims of solitary confinement struggle to avoid with great feats of cognitive ingenuity (Cohen 183–88). Though Merton finds that certain individuals are, in a sense, destined from an early age for a solitary life for which they may be well-suited by temperament and character, many others reach the spiritual vocation of solitude the hard way, and it is these individuals who face the perils of what I here suggest are the effects of anomie. The torment of these experiences is described in remarkably vivid imagery toward the close of the essay, when Merton writes of the plight of the solitary who finds "he cannot pray, to see,

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to hope," and Merton suggests this circumstance may not be rare. At such times the solitary individual may experience "[n]ot the sweet passivity which the books (that supply popular versions of solitude) extol, but a bitter, arid struggle to press forward through a blinding sandstorm. The solitary may beat his head against the wall of doubt. That may be the full extent of his contemplation … a doubt that undermines his very reasons for existing and for doing what he does" (202).

Nowhere in everyday life will one encounter the extraordinary struggle of the spiritual vocation. Indeed, Merton's candor about the perils of the solitary spiritual quest seems intended to disabuse those who might have romantic notions about the pleasures of this extraordinarily intense and trying way of life. But the vocation, of course, is not about asceticism and the renunciation of mundane illusions. It is rather about the transcendent experience of unity with God and humanity. Here Merton, as befits a religious mystic, leaves us with a mystery. The tortuous existential doubt ultimately ends in silence, and with silence comes an end to all existential questions. But when the questions end, a spiritual certitude arrives, "the only certitude he knows: The presence of God in the midst of uncertainty, and nothingness" (202). This experience is so distant, even from the lives of the devout laity, that to frame this reception of certainty in the divine as a matter of sociological interest necessarily and inevitably misses the point. And, indeed the experience of mystic union may emerge in a flash as a transcendent spiritual epiphany.

But what comes then? Merton tells us that "the solitary man says nothing, does his work … He knows where he is going, but he is not sure of his way" (22–23). Hence, even beyond the moment of spiritual illumination, the religious ascetic steers clear of the kinds of ordinary context formation that, as Merton would have it, produce the illusions with which most of us live in our ordinary ways of life.

Now for a coda: There are hints that mystical epiphanies may not be confined to the religious realm. Simone Weil, a deeply spiritual essayist suggests the possibility that both science and art may in rare instances be undertaken as sacred (or perhaps, quasi-sacred) solitary quests:

> Truth and beauty dwell on this level of the impersonal and the anonymous. This is the realm of the sacred … What is sacred in science is truth; what is sacred in art is beauty. Truth and beauty are impersonal … impersonality is only reached by the practice of a form of attention which is rare in itself, and impossible except in solitude, and not only physical but mental solitude. (318)

Weil, of course, means to refer here only to the heroic artist or the scientific genius. The mystical sense of the truth and beauty to which she refers perhaps alludes to the kind of epiphany I discuss in *Solitary Action* (173–82).

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3. Aesthetic Retreats

To shift from the life of sacrifice and tribulation of the religious anchorite to the temporal solitude described by poets and essayists since ancient times is to create a disjunction so sharp that it justifies in itself the need to treat deep solitude as a series of different realms. But there is something illusory at times about this second realm of deep solitude. We know of this solitude primarily because well-regarded members of literary elites have sung its praises beginning in ancient Rome. More to the point, most of these authors employ romantic voices that create ornately stylized images of a kind of carefree solitude that seems too much of an ideal to be true in all respects. Romantic images can be illuminating and edifying in their own right. At their best, they distil the essence of a solitary habitat or experience. But one wonders if they gloss over the less than ideal realities of solitary settings or ways of life. Certainly there have always been some folks, who, like Michel de Montaigne in his essay "Of Solitude" (1580), have opted to retire from public life to enjoy time by themselves, reading and enjoying the fine fruits of a life well-lived. But the pool of individuals prepared to live this life must be small. For one thing, people must possess the financial resources to support themselves or the full set of skills necessary to live off the land. For another, they must possess the free time to leave society behind for an extended period of seclusion. Moreover, they must possess peace of mind, a rare commodity indeed, at least in our anxious and troubled times. But as Montaigne cautions readers of his essay, those burdened with troublesome feelings and desires cannot enjoy this kind of solitude (177–78). In saying this, Montaigne draws a line that distinguishes this tranquil realm of solitude from the two tumultuous realms discussed above and below. Emotional turmoil seems all but inevitable in the spiritual solitude of the ascetic anchorite and the experience of turmoil is at the heart of the deeply troubled solitarist to be discussed in the next section. The solitude here is that of an individual whose mind is already relaxed.

No matter how rare the aesthetic realm of solitude is in practice, it occupies a special hold in the popular imagination today. This is because the aesthetic quality of literary accounts of this solitude has settled on an idyllic image of solitary life in nature. Beyond Romantic literature, this image has grown with the advent of entire genres of paintings and photographs of beautiful landscapes and seascapes that imply the joys of a prolonged rustic retreat. A few illustrious landmarks can provide a glimpse of how this aesthetically refined image of solitude evolved.

The culturally refined connotation of solitude began with the authors who first described the practice in the later period of the history of ancient Rome. As Robert Sayre suggests, the taste for solitude emerged as land for rural second homes became available to successful public figures (20–25). Sayre does not say how popular the

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idea may have been, but we know it mainly through the writings of Roman authors, including Horace, Seneca, and Pliny the Younger, whose influence survived their time. The following excerpt from a poem by Horace illustrates the refined sense of enjoyment in solitary retreat in its classic Roman form: "O rural home: when shall I behold you! When shall I be able. Now with books of the ancients. Now with sleep and idles hours. To quaff sweet forgetfulness of life's cares" (qtd. in Sayre 22).

The Roman idea of solitude resurfaces much closer to modern times. One of the best expressions of this continuation comes in the "Ode on Solitude" (1700) by Alexander Pope, who may have written it at a very precocious age. Be this as it may, it is worth mentioning that Pope was a life-long student of ancient Roman poetry, ultimately composing a set of works entitled *Imitations of Horace* (1733–37). It may be that Pope's poem may thus directly expand upon Horace's Roman appreciation of solitude:

> Happy the man, whose wish and care
> A few paternal acres bound,
> Content to breathe his native air,
> In his own ground.
>
> Whose herds with milk, whose fields with bread,
> Whose flocks supply him with attire,
> Whose trees in summer yield him shade,
> In winter fire.
>
> Blest! Who can unconcern'dly find
> Hours, days, and years slide soft away,
> In health of body, peace of mind,
> Quiet by day,
> Sound sleep by night; study and ease
> Together mix'd; sweet recreation,
> And innocence, which most does please,
> With meditation.
>
> Thus let me live, unseen, unknown;
> Thus unlamented let me dye;
> Steal from the world, and not a stone
> Tell where I lie. (265)

The poetic form already suggests the refined quality of the solitary retreat. We observe as well that while Pope does not require a large estate for his solitude, he does ask for an inherited farm, a property that only prosperous English families could expect to pass along to their offspring at the time. Unlike Horace, Pope longs for the self-sufficiency that a working farm affords. But it is not at all clear that he would prefer to do any farm work himself. Instead, as in Horace, we find Pope

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eager for the tranquil life of alternating between periods of reading and sleep. This is not the life of an active aristocrat or businessman. It is rather an ideal for a certain kind of cultural aesthete. It is, of course, also a romanticized ideal rather than a reality. There may have been landowners with inheritances sizeable enough to provide them with an abundance of leisure time. But it is doubtful that even among this highly advantaged elite, life was as idyllic as Pope imagined it to be. The notion of solitary retreats has attracted other romantics as well. For example, as Wolf Lepenies observes, a sense of melancholy was introduced to the notion of solitary retreat in the late Middle Ages and early modern times (29–86). Here solitude was seen as a refuge for second-level aristocrats and bourgeois *arrivistes* who found themselves cut off from any real access to power. Confined to superficial rounds of social relations fleshed out with gossip and rumor in literary salons, members of this frustrated stratum found meaning in life and opportunities for emotional release in a new Romantic ideal of solitude, an ideal composed of heterogeneous elements such as the love of nature, a sensitive appreciation of literature and the fine arts, and above all, a bias in favor of emotion over reason (Lepenies 66).

The frustrated Romantics of whom Lepenies writes may have amplified and refined the aesthetic appreciation of nature that was a more implicit than explicit quality of the classical sense of solitude as it advanced from the Romans to Pope. This is not to overlook the melancholy note they also introduced, a note of sadness bordering on self-pity epitomized, if not hyperbolized, in various remarks of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1782), remarks in which he laments the rejection and estrangement he felt from the literary circles whose acceptance he desired. But as we approach modern times, the Romantic (or at least romantically rendered) experience of living alone in harmony with nature has flourished to a greater extent.

One can cite any number of poets, essayists, and artists who have contributed to the aesthetic appreciation of nature. But a smaller number recounted how it actually felt to withdraw into nature for a considerable period of time. One author who did, Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), brought with him a literary talent, a Romantic sensitivity, an aversion to town life, and an abounding love of nature that makes his *Walden* (1854) a beautiful statement of the small joys and tranquil pleasures of absorbing the atmosphere and the detail of encountering nature by oneself. Consider only the first sentences of the section devoted to solitude:

> This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirt-sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually congenial to me. The bullfrogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whip-poor-will is

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> borne on the rippling wind from over the water. Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; yet, like the lake, my serenity is rippled but not ruffled. These small waves raised by the evening wind are as remote from storm as the smooth reflecting surface. (87)

One can find many passages of this kind in *Walden*. But one of the most interesting things about this selection and about the section of *Walden* on solitude at large (87–94) is his emphasis upon serenity, which like the lake in the breeze is "rippled but not ruffled." Another selection from the chapter on solitude expands upon this peace of mind in a straightforward way:

> I experienced sometimes that the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object, even for the poor misanthrope and most melancholy man. There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature and has his senses still. There was never yet such a storm but it was Aeolian music to a healthy and innocent ear. Nothing can rightly compel a simple and brave man to a vulgar sadness. While I enjoy the friendship of the seasons I trust that nothing can make life a burden to me. (88)

Though Thoreau leaves no literary hint, it may be that he here means to dismiss the Romantic belief that solitude is a time for melancholy or dark moods. In any event, he is quite clear about his own peace and joy living alone in the woods. It should be said that Thoreau did not spend all of his time simply soaking in these good feelings. Not only did he keep busy working his rented woodland plot and writing chapters of *Walden*, but during the course of *Walden*, Thoreau mentions recurrent visits to his many friends in Concord, Massachusetts, a town situated about two miles from his solitary retreat. Perhaps his physical and intellectual labors provided a prophylactic to the dull boredom of a frightening anomie with which he otherwise might have been forced to contend. Still, Thoreau does not entirely overlook the difficulties of rustic solitude. He is perhaps more aware than many of his admirers that not every individual is as fit for solitude as he is (89). This point, which echoes Merton's sense that some are better fit than others for the rigors of a solitary vocation, also provides an instructive contrast with the discussion that follows of deep solitude in times of distress.

4. Deep Solitude in Times of Distress

In all likelihood circumstances of emotional distress, more than any other condition, induce people to withdraw from interpersonal routines. Distress with this kind of power comes in many different forms. The prototype here is grief over the loss of a loved one. But people may also feel the need for a solitary retreat after receiving a frightening medical diagnosis, after the dissolution of an intimate

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relationship or the disintegration of a family, following the trauma of being fired or otherwise suffering a severe setback in one's finances, occupation, or career. These are instances of what Anthony Giddens terms "fateful moments" (113–14), moments when unavoidable circumstances force life-altering choices upon individuals. It is a time when one's narrative of self-identity and relationships with others that may have been taken for granted for many years may need to be reframed, reinterpreted, and revised. Such questions are almost inevitable in times of personal crisis. This is not to say that everyone beset by existential problems withdraws into deep solitude. Some people are more adept at self-reflection than others. Some may prefer to discuss their adjustments in times of crisis with a trusted confidante or a psychotherapist. Nevertheless, as the late British author and psychologist Anthony Storr observes, it is better at times for others to set aside the impulse to comfort or support the troubled until we are sure they may not prefer to be alone (29).

Beyond fateful moments, a variety of other strong feelings may compel particularly sensitive individuals to retreat into solitude for significant periods of time. Emotions such as fear, remorse, and shame may accumulate while in public, to the point where the individual withdraws into solitude to allow the feelings to emerge. These are periods of catharsis. Released from the proprieties of interaction, the individual is free to absorb the brunt of feelings without concern that she may embarrass herself or anyone else. Having experienced her feelings, she may also try to make sense of them no matter how inconsistent or guilt-provoking they may be. To ventilate one's feelings is seldom easy or comfortable. But, catharsis in itself is widely recognized to end up having a calming effect even if the source of the painful feelings will always remain in view.

What is it about catharsis that offers emotional relief? The conventional answer, and persuasive one as well, is that people simply need to purge their feelings much as a steam kettle whistles to permit the pent-up steam to escape. But perhaps catharsis offers comfort in another way as well. Storr describes a folk theory held in some parts of rural Greece (31). The local custom requires widows to withdraw from society for five years before returning to their regular social life. The rural Greeks hold that by recurrently feeling the loss (e.g. during daily visits to the husband's grave) the widow experiences her grief many times over until she has absorbed it to the point where she dulls her pain and then comes to terms with it in her life. Though five uninterrupted years of grief may be more time apart from society than most people can bear, extended periods of solitude may help people to manage all kinds of distressing feelings, some chronic and others acute. It may take many nights alone in bed before one begins to diminish the pitch and frequency of the

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waves of fear stirred up by a threatening medical diagnosis. Likewise, exceptionally self-critical individuals may need to withdraw periodically to bank the fires of self-reproach in the ashes of regret.

Such is the case for May Sarton (1912–1995), a talented, and in the late stages of her career, a widely acclaimed poet and novelist. She was also a person with the courage to expose her deepest criticism of herself in print, and though her candid and dignified voice speaks well for her, her self-criticisms were often painful and harsh. Though Sarton led a very busy social life, complete with travel, friendship, and love, to accommodate her feelings, she periodically retreated by herself to a small house she kept for the purpose, first in New Hampshire and then in Maine. In 1973 she published a memoir of one of these visits entitled *Journal of a Solitude*, which is one of the best examples I have seen of catharsis put into words. Consider several lines from the opening entry in the book:

> For a long time now, every meeting with another human being has been a collision. I feel too much, sense too much, exhausted by the reverberations after even the simplest conversation. But the deep collision is and has been with my unregenerate, tormenting and tormented self … I feel like an inadequate machine that breaks down at crucial moments and grinds to a dreadful halt … or, even worse, explodes in some innocent person's face … I live alone, perhaps for no good reason, for the reason that I am an impossible creature set apart by a temperament I have never learned to use as it could be used, thrown off by a word, a glance, a rainy day, or one drink too many. My need to be alone is balanced against my fear of what will happen when I enter the huge, empty silence if I cannot find support there. I go up to heaven and down to hell in an hour. (12)

Sarton provides in other entries more specific events she regrets along with commentaries on her worries and anxieties. She knows herself well enough to know that she has an "impossible" temperament. So, while she does strive to make sense of her feelings, one does not get the sense that she is engaged in some kind of self-therapy. It appears more likely that Sarton needs these times alone in rural New England to simply absorb feelings of the burdens of being with other people, of the harms she feels she has inflicted on some, and for her own continuing dissatisfaction with herself. Unlike the widow, or the newly divorced, or the fired, Sarton can never come to grips with these feelings once and for all. Her recurrent retreats are better understood as episodes when she allows herself to register and recognize her feelings about herself for what they are. Though she wrestles with her sense that she must try to improve, it also seems that by releasing the full force of her feelings she is able to keep them from overwhelming her as well. Thus, Sarton's solitudes are the way she copes with her emotions and this, in turn, enables her to return from solitude with the ability to fully engage in her social life again. As in the Greek folk theory, she enters her solitudes to rehearse feelings she already knows well. Perhaps she found

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these episodes necessary to absorb, and then, through repetition, to dull the cutting edge of her self-criticism and thereby her self-inflicted pain.

5. Coping with Anomie: Prosaic Activities in Passionate Pursuits

Deep solitude appeals to individuals driven by transcendent passions. Anchorites, aesthetes, and the distressed share this much in common. Yet time and again in accounts of solitary retreats authors mention their prosaic activities. As I have indicated above, they do so to forestall the dangers of anomie. But this is not the sociological condition of anomie as famously conceived by Emile Durkheim in *Suicide* (1895). Durkheim drew attention to anomie as a collapse of cultural regulation following economic crises, wars, and other sudden breakdowns in social order (241–77). The individual experiences this anomie as a psychic chaos, an all-consuming flood of disconnected impulses, emotions, and thoughts that destroys all sense of self-control, agency and personal identity. Deep solitude creates a self-induced form of social disorganization that threatens the individual with psychic anomie just as much as a social catastrophe.

The question all solitaries must confront is how does one forestall losing control of one's mind? Alcohol and drugs do not really provide much relief. The individual might just as well return to the outer world as to dull and cool the passions that inspired the retreat. What is needed is a way to organize daily life in a manner that provides at least a minimal sense of order and self-control. It is not coincidental then that so many accounts of prolonged solitude refer in some way to recurrent forms of mundane activities that contribute nothing substantial to any given solitary pursuit. Merton advises those on a solitary vocation to keep to their daily work even as they remain uncertain of where they are bound. Thoreau devotes an entire chapter to the work he did while he was alone at Walden Pond. But Sarton brings to life her struggles to keep to the ordinary chores that anchor the order of her days in a particularly vivid way:

> [A]s a prisoner does (and in winter my life is imprisoned much of the time), I know it is essential for me to move within a structure. The bed must be made (it is what I hate doing most), the dishes washed, the place tidied up before I can get to work [her writing] with a free mind. There must be rewards for hard tasks, and often a cigarette had been the reward for putting out the rubbish or cleaning Punch's [her pet bird's] cage. (83–84)

Both Merton and Thoreau suggest that it takes a certain kind of person to lead a solitary life. Sarton suggests that among other qualities the solitary must possess the inner strength to maintain a kind of everyday discipline even against her own

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resistance. Thus, in a broad sense, even in deep solitude Durkheim was right. As human beings we seem to need some organization to regulate our lives lest our minds run wild and we are lost. For most of us, our rounds of sociable and solitary activities and our moral commitments to others provide sufficient regulation. But when one retreats into prolonged solitude one leaves behind the social elements of this support. Only those with the wisdom and will to maintain prosaic order are able to engage in solitary, passionate pursuits.

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Kevin Lewis

American Lonesome: Our Native Sense of Otherness

Abstract: Herewith a plea to take seriously, for once, the uniquely American cultural significance of the feeling state expressed throughout our literature, music, and fine art: lonesomeness. Ignored for too long in treatments of American culture, it deserves overdue considered critical reflection.

1. Lonesome: A Distinctly American Feeling-Perception

I invite the reader to consider a focus supplementary to those upon imposed or freely chosen conditions and implications of solitude in America. Could we move to the side, as it were, away from solitude as a continuing physical and elementary mental state of being, that is, as an alternative lifestyle. Hermeticism and reclusiveness are indeed conditions or life paths worth reckoning with. But here I would direct attention to a particular, usually fleeting subjective feeling state commonly varying in description, if amenable to description, among Americans who claim to be visited (or would appear to be visited) by it. I draw attention to the experience of 'lonesomeness,' to the feeling or perception of 'lonesome.' And I propose that Americans, of liberated individualism and (historically) open spaces, have been formed by our culture to employ this evocative term, to recognize its appeal, perhaps because its attractive, relatively open-ended meaning or meanings defy limited definition.

2. The Difference Between Lonely and Lonesome

I am unaware of any previous academic or journalistic attempt to address American lonesomeness with the intent to describe and define what it has meant and may mean today – to Americans occasionally prompted in moments of personal, reflective experience to so identify it. Impossible as it is to define narrowly, I think Ina Bergmann's opening conference introduction, invoking her childhood memory of attraction to Thom Pace's song "Maybe" with its opening line "Deep inside the forest there's a door into another land …" would seem to express a kind of lonesome feeling of the sort I will address. Fleeting experiences such as Bergmann's in response to these evocative lyrics help us direct attention to the yet unexamined function and meaning of the term 'lonesome' in our historical, North American culture, as I will indicate.

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Let us remedy this neglect – I am aware of only one previous, scant mention of this particular term's function, and only with regard to our blues popular music tradition, by critic T.S. Eliot in 1932 in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*: "Loneliness is known as a frequent attribute in romantic poetry, and in the form of 'lonesomeness' (as I need not remind American readers) is a frequent attitude in contemporary lyrics known as 'the blues'" (132). Eliot offers nothing by way of definition or comment. I address this neglect in my *Lonesome: The Spiritual Meanings of American Solitude* (2009).

Let us address a critical distinction between 'lonesome' and 'lonely.' Clearly attempts at dictionary definition are of no help, at least not yet. First, I will therefore provide a correcting distinction, and then examples. 'Lonely' is to be understood as commonly meant: a depressive state of varying degrees of intensity, experienced by the all-too-solitary individual. By contrast – here we move to the particularly North American, ingrained, historical cultural understanding of the term – 'lonesome' combines to a significant, predominating degree pleasurable feeling and perception lifted, as it were, from gratifying inward-looking solitude, with smaller measures of lonely distress momentarily balanced or well overcome. The key to the American 'lonesome' is that the memorably positive, the fleeting enjoyable, triumphs over the negative in the moment. The positive uplift, the momentary high, will vary in description from individual to individual, from setting to setting, from circumstance to circumstance. Nor need it occur under conditions of the hermetic or the reclusive. Examples in American poetry and fiction will help to focus on the issue.

3. The Poetic Imagination of Lonesomeness

"There is another Loneliness" (502), Emily Dickinson wrote in poem #1116, crafting the insight in her hushed and forceful way. "Not want of friend occasions it," she observes, "But nature sometimes, sometimes thought" (502). 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" (502). Here she is distinctly a prophetess of lonesomeness. And in poem #1370, she evokes again the unknowable and unnamable in the figure of "That lonesome Glory / That hath no omen here – but Awe –" (590). She had earlier rejected the appeal of evangelical Protestantism, of course. And 'lonesome' is a Dickinson term for pursuit of spiritual vision not available to her through that local sectarianism. In her poem #777, "The Loneliness One dare not sound," she had earlier reflected "I tried to think a lonelier Thing / Than any I had seen," and found herself among "The lonesome for what they knew not What" (379).

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Walt Whitman also speaks, in his own way, for a luminous lonesome, provoked in part by the experience of the opening westward migration in the nineteenth century. Lonesome roads and valleys proliferate and a spiritual dimension of these utterances, doubtlessly drawn from revival songs, is easily detected – as in the later country music examples I note below. He gives voice to a capacious feeling-perception, American to the core, and I will return to this spiritual dimension of country music. In characteristic expansiveness of imaginative response to his world Whitman offers these lines from "A Song of Joys" (1860): "Yet O my soul supreme! / Knows't thou the joys of pensive thought? / Joys of the free and lonesome heart, the tender, gloomy heart?" (153). He continues, invoking "Joys of the solitary walk" that balance "the ecstasies, joys of the solemn musings" with "The agonistic throes" (153). Whitman, as Dickinson, is a crucial forbear in American poetry, and not least for the respective 'selves' reflected in their poetries. 'Lonesomeness' in each is profound and appealing, if in different ways descriptive of open-ended, suggestive, perhaps fugitive spiritual states of feeling-perception.

Whitman is indeed a master poet of loneliness transfigured and redeemed in characteristic dilation of the spirit and the wide embrace of his yearning and illumination. He is an iconic master of our loneliness transfigured and redeemed. In "From Far Dakota's Canons" (1876) he invokes "Lands of the wild ravine, the dusky Sioux, the lonesome stretch of silence" (395), and in "Recorders Ages Hence" (1860) he portrays himself as one "Who often walk'd lonesome walks thinking of his dear friends, his lovers" (104). In "Proud Music of the Storm" (1869) he concludes his first section of the poem asking of transfiguring stormy images interrupting his sleep, "Entering my lonesome slumber-chamber, why have you seiz'd me?" (333–34).

Other American poets following have mined this vein. Wallace Stevens now seems lonelier in his career solitude and legendary self-reserve than we can imagine in any other well-known American poet. The woman in the well-known "Sunday Morning" (1923) knows we live our lives in "island solitude, unsponsored, free" (198), so many free of and uncomforted by traditional religious myth. Its concluding lines redeem the loneliness of her spiritual "island solitude" (198) in a hymn to natural beauty. "Divinity must live within herself," (198) she reflects, and the feeling conveyed by the poem is that of transfiguring lonesomeness. In his "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" (1921) Stevens pushes what he first describes as "The loneliest air" into, by reflection, a fulsome, oceanic possession of himself: "I found myself more truly and more strange" (123).

Theodore Roethke also does not employ the word 'lonesome' to describe his Romantic high 'lonely' when evoking moments of visitation by beauty almost too

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beautiful to bear. But his evoked moments of personal rapture in solitude suggest the lonely lifted into the lonesome, as in the love poem "She" (1958) when he observes of the woman: "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" (12).

One more illustration of the poetic imagination in American poets moving from lonely to lonesome, though not always using either specific term, is James Wright of the Midwest. His poetry is often depressive, touching darkly upon the tragic. But now and then he lifts out of flattened loneliness into the gift of lonesomeness, as in "A Blessing" (1963) where he observes of two ponies in a field "There is no loneliness like theirs" (143). He then writes when one of them walks over to him to nuzzle his hand and he caresses her ear, "Suddenly I realize / That if I stepped out of my body I would break / Into blossom" (143).

4. Lonesomeness in Fiction

Moments like these in American fiction are there for the finding, when suddenly provoked by landscape, light, or the course of solitary reflection. One such stands out from all the rest, in its simplicity and because it occurs in one of the few agreed greatest texts in the tradition, *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) by Mark Twain. Ernest Hemingway, in *The Green Hills of Africa* (1936) observes: "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*, … the best book we've had. All American writing comes from that … There has been nothing as good since" (22). The moment comes when Huck and his companion, the runaway slave Jim, rafting together down the Mississippi at night to avoid contact with anyone who might threaten Jim's bid for freedom, tie up at the river bank, fish, swim, and Huck observes:

> Afterward we would watch the lonesomeness of the river, and kind of lazy along, and by and by lazy off to sleep. Wake up by and by, and look to see what done it, and maybe see a steamboat coughing along upstream, so far off towards the other side you couldn't tell nothing about her … And then for about an hour there wouldn't be nothing to hear nor anything to see – just solid lonesomeness. (114)

Huck, the boy, is not without personal issues, of course. But we read his recounted experience of the river with Jim as symbolic of the original, archetypal American experience. Here the rebellious, spirited boy captures the youthfulness of the young nation's psyche mediated in the hopeful myth of the New Adam in the new Eden (R.W.B. Lewis). Huck feels a rapt attunement to no particular thing and to no particular transcendent Being or order of things, but simply to the immediate fullness and splendor of morning dawning on the big river. It seems like unobstructed

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integration into the plenitude of being, as nourished by the arresting natural scene. This moment of lonesome plenitude occurs, importantly also, in the company of buddy Jim.

When we think of a natural setting for American prose, we automatically think of Henry David Thoreau. But he does not express the lonesome that we embrace in other writers. On every page Thoreau presents himself as a serious, reflecting intellect in his responses to nature, but never as a feeling, sentient being. He is a chronicler of neither loneliness nor lonesomeness: "I have never felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude but once [when, for an hour he doubted] … if the new neighbourhood of man was not essential" (57). He never recorded a moment of lonesomeness of the kinds we are treating here.

But American fiction writers, like Laura Ingalls Wilder in *Little House on the Prairie* (1935), have touched upon the lonesome not infrequently, as in the passage when Laura, lying awake at night, listens to the mournful lowing of cattle, their "high, lovely, wailing songs … wandering in the night … [which] seemed to be crying for the moon. They made Laura's throat ache." (35)

The young character George Willard in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1922) experiences lonesome-like, epiphanic moments, too. In the chapter "An Awakening" he ventures into a dark vacant lot off a quiet street at night, "in a fervor of emotion … uttering words without meaning, … words full of meaning. Death, … night, the sea, fear, loveliness" (145). He returns to the sidewalk, and "felt that all of the people in the little street must be brothers and sisters to him" (145).

We read something similar of Eugene Gant as a paperboy in Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* (1930), as he wakes alone before light to go his route: "strange aerial music came fluting out of the darkness, or over his slow-waking senses swept the great wave of symphonic orchestration. Fiend-voices, beautiful and sleep-loud, called down through darkness and light, developing the thread of ancient memory, as he was born anew" (295). This is a lonesomeness unnamed as such, but akin to the other transfiguring moments experienced by characters in American fiction in their lonely solitude.

In the examples cited, and in others, like James Agee's meditation "Knoxville: Summer 1915" (a chapter in *A Death in the Family*, 1957), where bittersweet nostalgia seems to buoy a father comforting his child, singing him tenderly to sleep, bittersweetness balances the sweet with the bitter. Agee pushes toward expressions that emphasize the sweetness momentarily visiting a characteristically lonely character in his solitary life. What unifies these examples above is the experience of the American lonesomeness experienced in albeit different ways and degrees, leaving the generalized experience beyond any adequate, comprehensive definition. We

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continue then to trace the ultimately description-begging experiences of lonely melancholy rising or dilating into a fleeting sense of unexpected plenitude and splendor produced in the drama of the character's elicited response to his or her surroundings, mediating and immediate. The lonesome is expressed, in another way of putting it, when from nowhere a sense of unreflective, spontaneous joy rises in consciousness, breaking through depressive reverie.

One more example: in Jack Kerouac's *roman-a-clef The Dharma Bums* (1958), his alter-ego is climbing in the Sierras and is experiencing this moment:

> The woods … always look familiar, long lost, like the face of a long-dead relative, like an old dream, like a piece of a forgotten song drifting across the water, most of all like golden eternities of past childhood or past manhood and all the living and dying and the heart-break that went on a million years ago and the clouds as they pass overhead seem to testify (by their lonesome familiarity) to this feeling. (61–62)

Lonesome wonder and reverie can open up long vistas of comforting memory. In Oedipa, the intuitive pilgrim of Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965), we meet solitary moments of epiphany that reinforce her chronic sense of disconnection from others. For example, there is the "religious instant" in which she looks down in her car from a high road on her southern California home city: "a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding … she and the Chevy seemed parked at the center of an odd, religious instant. As if, on some other frequency, or out of the eye of some whirlwind rotating too slow for her heated skin even to feel the centrifugal coolness of, words were being spoken" (14). But we will move away from examples in fiction to American painters, one in particular, of lonesome vistas and to the clamor of lonesomeness in country music.

5. Edward Hopper's and Country Lonesomeness

Finally, let us have a look at examples from the fairly well-known later work of the painter Edward Hopper, and then from the equally well-known lonesome lyrics of American country music of the last century and a half.

Hopper's images are of course everywhere, in galleries, on posters, in reproductions, in tributes paid to him by critics and followers of twentieth-century American art. His singular version of American urban ennui and alienation, its haunted spaces and penchant for nostalgia, and most of all its brooding loneliness is so distinct that his work has taken on an iconic status. Response to his body of work has given us the term "Hopperesque," coined by an appreciative critic, Peter Schjeldahl. Another critic, Gail Levin, assures us that Hopper "read Emerson assiduously and sought to express the Emersonian vision" (109). The wistfully

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affirmative spiritual component of the Hopperesque, especially communicated in the later work, in his handling of light and the arrangement of human figures, confers our lonesomeness on his solitary figures haunted in their solitude.

His works we enlist include *Early Sunday Morning* (1930), *Rooms by the Sea* (1951), *Morning Sun* (1952), *Sunlight on Brownstones* (1956), *Second Story Sunlight* (1960), *People in the Sun* (1960), *Woman in the Sun* (1961), and *Sun in an Empty Room* (1963). Other works could be added. The above, however, come forward assuredly in their wistful, lonesome character. The critic Deborah Lyons observes that Hopper is a "master portraying our ultimate loneliness," adding that his figures in these paintings seem subsumed by his mature vision in which the mundane "suddenly becomes cause for epiphany" (xvii). In the poem "Sunday A.M. Not in Manhattan" (1971), a lyric tribute to Hopper, John Hollander addresses the dimension of the something extra and beyond in Hopper's vision. He focuses on the mysterious shadow in *Early Sunday Morning*, seeing it as the single element in the work that most encapsulates the mystery of the "something more" (70) with which Hopper has infused the painting as a whole.

The critic Barbara Novak helps us sense a linkage between Hopper, the quietist conceptual painter, and the nineteenth-century heritage of Luminism found in Fitzhugh Lane, Martin Heade Johnson, and John Kensett (262–88). The Hudson River Valley School of painters, including these, created large canvasses depicting beautiful, unspoiled landscapes of the young nation, with perhaps a tiny figure in the foreground, arguably expressing something of Ralph Waldo Emerson in his celebrated essay "Nature" (1836). In that essay Emerson recommended that his reader look upon unspoiled nature "with a supernatural eye" (82). Hopper's isolated single figures in the later work would seem to be looking and listening for the numinous moment the description of which, as theorized by the German religious scholar Rudolf Otto, we will touch upon below. The later Hopper is a visionary painter. His figures give themselves to the light of the otherness beyond them physically and to be approached, as possible, through studied lonesome vision. But let us move on – to country music.

Cecilia Tichi, in *High Lonesome: The American Culture of Country Music* (1994), writes: "If country 'owns' one American theme above all others, then that theme is surely ground-level loneliness" (82). It remains true that 'country' is the contemporary popular cultural form in which, more than any other, the continuing recourse to lonely-and-lonesome on the part of song writers begs notice and appreciation. The styles and tastes of the diverse, evolved forms of country by a rich, motley heritage befit a populist people's music. The short career of Hank Williams is remembered for both the sadness of his too-early, sudden death and by perhaps the most famous verse in all of country music:

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The silence of a falling star
Lights up a purple sky,
And as I wonder where you are,
I'm so lonesome I could cry.

To get the lonesome sound right on a banjo or fiddle, a performer of Appalachian Mountain music will re-tune his or her instrument to achieve the tonal mode of appropriate melancholy. Most Americans know the intended instrumental lonesome sound when they hear it. It is there in gospel, hillbilly, western, ballad imported by early Scottish and English settlers, in Tin Pan Alley songs, not to neglect the blues of both white and black cultures – co-existing, inter-mingling, especially in the South. Williams's song is an elegy in which the writer-singer (and hearer) is rescued from a passing depressive loss of the 'will to live,' in the process transfiguring loneliness into lonesomeness.

To mention just a few ensuing examples of country lonesome, note first George Morgan's 1955 song "Lonesome Road," with its repeated chorus:

Oh, play you lonesome record, play,
You're trying to break my heart.
Oh, play you lonesome record, play,
And let the teardrops start.

These will be tears of gratitude, even of joy, as well as tears of grief. Country lonesome feeds greedily upon itself to meet a large market demand for these savory, solacing "teardrops" – healing, renewing, attracting. Larry Cordell and Jim Rushing's tribute, "Lonesome Standard Time" (1992), following well over two hundred and fifty different, preceding lonesome songs, celebrated this popular feeling state, paying tribute to its country heritage, as they revisit its unclarifiable spiritual dimension:

Do you feel a kindred spirit,
To the sound of pouring rain?
Does your heart start to yearnin'
When you hear a distant train?

They play on the self-consciousness of the tradition:

When you hear them old sad songs,
Do you hang on every word?
Do you swear a cryin' fiddle
Has the sweetest sound on earth?
If you shudder at the music
Of a hoot owl in the pines,
You're on lonesome standard time.

The cleverness of play upon the notion of differing time zones across America, of which notoriously rootless Americans are well aware when traveling, is striking.

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The projection of an emotional 'zone' cutting across these time zone's divisions, to be accessed anywhere and everywhere lonesomeness strikes, touches a chord in the American imagination of ever-possible, redemptive self-recovery. In that experience we can 'zone out' temporarily away from our troubles. An American folk culture substratum of dreamy lonesomeness, responding to the opened landscape of our early history, was born in coping with the ever-present hazard of depressive loneliness. Witness are the many lonesome road or highway songs. These and other country lonesome songs are too many to name here. The reader will doubtless remember his or her favorites.

My own favorite is Johnny Cash's "Cold Lonesome Morning" (1980), a song worthy of Williams. The singer's girl pains him but he cannot stop loving her. He may have "gone past any good to cry," but he predicts he will wake one morning to find her gone for good:

> One of these cold, lonesome mornings
> Dark and early
> Before a wild bird sings, I'm gonna fly,
> While it's dark and I'm still reaching for you,
> I'll wake up and I cannot cry.

The Cash touch here is evoking the flight of the soul (see also his "I'll Fly Away," 2002). The feeling of that line, if not the explicit statement, suggests the ubiquitous transfiguring moment in the native American lonesome.

6. Numinous Therapeutic Lonesomeness

So what can we conclude of this phenomenon, this recurring but consistently ignored heightened moment in the experience of Americans in solitude? What to make of these accounts of timely personal comfort, of occasionally illuminating and restorative solitude, of loneliness redeemed in the elevating, integrative experience of a lonesome otherness by something more?

First, we owe to the comparative religionist Rudolf Otto, in *The Idea of the Holy* (*Das Heilige*, 1917), an influential descriptive-analytical study of the non-rational dimension of religion. This work became an indispensable resource for the new and evolving academic enterprise of formal Religious Studies in the twentieth century. Otto urges us to re-balance the two major elements of rational conceptuality on the one hand, and the non-rational, trans-conceptual on the other. In modern times, he notes, the rational-conceivable element had increasingly deformed its object of study, religion, by displacing the other element of raw, pre-conceptual, subjective experience of encounter with an unnamable "wholly other …" (199). For Otto, the

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"harmony of contrast" (31), the appreciation of these balancing elements in genuine religious experience, must be restored. For him, *homo religious* is marked by the recurring experience of a *sui generis* core state of mind or consciousness which precedes division into subject and object. Both this wholly other experienced and the capturing/captured state of mind for which he invented the term "numinous" (208) have subsequently been employed for generations of religion scholars. It continues to evoke the mental state merging elements of cognition and feeling in expressing raw, primary, individual experiences of inexplicable "otherness" (xix) beyond the self. In response to the numinous, then, one may, as predisposed, conceptualize the experiencing of visions and of voices, and the encountering of such spirits and gods and mysteries as one's personal spirituality may suggest.

Otto, at first, may seem wedded to assumptions about the experience of traditional religion. But in his epoch-making text, he does briefly step away from implied theistic preoccupations to observe generally of the 'whole' person: "Beneath it lies even in us, that 'wholly other,' whose profundities, impenetrable to any concept, can yet be grasped in the numinous self-feeling by one who has experienced the deeper life" (208). It is the "numinous self-feeling" (208) in the various expressions of the American lonesome that, when we identify it, enables a useful grasp of our special lonesomeness both comprehensive and penetrating. American lonesomeness, that is, would seem to play a variation upon Otto's feeling-perception of overaboundingness. Lonesomeness would be a culturally influenced, reflexive, secular expression of Otto's flooding, calming experience of the numinous. Suggestively, he helps us conceptualize the numinous dimension of lonesome understood as a personal experience qualitatively different from lonely.

The philosophical-anthropological writings of scholars such as John Macquarrie, Eugene Long, and Ian Ramsey, among others, have created a receptive climate for proposing the numinous character of lonesome, as we do here. Each in respectively different ways has wanted to weigh evidences for "finding the *locus* of transcendence in the human existent rather than in God," as Macquarrie puts it (25). We cannot pursue further his observation here, but we note in passing that readings of the ontological character of transcendence as a fundamental component of human life are rich, relatively numerous, and fascinating. Relevant here is the thought that a sense of personal mind-expanding transcendence, into a larger self, experienced even if only for a moment, qualifies indeed as at least a spiritual if not a traditionally understood religious experience. For example, our lonesomeness experienced as an open-ended hierophany, as we have seen, will not exactly be a tradition-related, divine "wholly other" (208).

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A more recent but equally helpful commentator for our purposes is Giles B. Gunn, especially in his work *The Interpretation of Otherness* (1979), in which he recommends:

> [I]t is now necessary to widen the terms in which [discussions of the relations between literature and religion, between culture and belief are] conducted … to reconstitute the discussion on the plane of the hermeneutical rather than the apologetic, the anthropological rather than the theological, the broadly humanistic rather than the narrowly doctrinal. (5)

Gunn observes that the 'other' projected by the Puritans and their followers in subsequent generations shifted, in American life, to the otherness "of their own innately human (though for some simultaneously divine) capacities to redefine and regenerate themselves" (190). The solitary self may encounter an unanticipated, self-redefining, self-recreative experience of an otherness eluding practical description. In Gunn's terms, our dilating moment in which loneliness lifts into an elevated lonesomeness is to be described as an inspiring intimation of an inviting otherness, even an otherness that draws the self beyond itself, even, as he writes, "over against" (15) the self. And he quotes R.P. Blackmur's take on the other as "the numinous force, the force within the self, other than the self, greater than the self, which, as one cultivates it, moves one beyond the self" (201).

Similarly, Romain Rolland, in a famous letter to Sigmund Freud in 1927 cited by William B. Parsons in his *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling* (1999), is objecting to Freud's pathologizing of religious mysticism and claims legitimacy for what he describes as a *sui generis* oceanic feeling, which he likens to a "spontaneous religious sentiment" (36):

> What I mean is: [this sentiment is] totally independent of all dogma, all Credo, all Church organization, all Sacred Books, all hope in a personal Survival, etc., the simple and direct fact of *the feeling of the "eternal"* (which can very well not be eternal, but simply without limits, and like oceanic, as it were). (36)

Rolland's "feeling of the 'eternal'" is certainly analogous to what Americans feel or know as the spiritual component of transfiguring lonesomeness. The oceanic and our lonesome in its overabounding register are well-related.

To adduce finally another helpful precedent support for our claim that American lonesomeness has a religious-like character, we turn to the testimony of the sociologist of religion who, in the 1960s and subsequently, more than any other scholar in the field, has instilled the interpretive concept of civil religion in America – Robert Bellah. The character of the lonesomeness for which we have drawn for support from Otto, Blackmur, Gunn, and Rolland is not that of a civil religious phenomenon in the sense that the earlier Bellah and Sydney Mead, and others have meant

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that term, harking back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's political theorizing. Nor does it quite come within the purview of scholars in Britain and elsewhere who discern implicit religiousness in specific routinized non-formally-religious behaviors of individuals and communities. To reiterate, lonesomeness is effectively the umbrella expression for a hardly describable if not actually inchoate momentary sense of contact with an otherness if not actually some other quite beyond but also within the individual self. We might call it a fleeting sense of being filled with a calming, unbidden, supervening presence, potentially restorative of harmony and completeness. As he typically puts it, this is not so much a conventional belief as a perception comprised of feeling perhaps and an unverbalizable wondering consciousness of self integrated with the surrounding manifold beyond the self.

Bellah proposes that in reflections upon religious experience (generally, as now understood) we must avoid an "objectivist fallacy," namely, as he puts it, the "confusion of belief and religion" (220). Hence our lonesomeness as defined above can indeed be regarded nicely as fundamentally religious. But we must dispense with the overly rational, Enlightenment-driven fallacy, seductive as it is among Western communities of traditional faith wedded to a literalistic hermeneutic. Bellah observes this hyper-rationalism is to be found "only in the religions deeply influenced by Greek thought" (220) and hardly at all in non-Western religions. His argument, that of a sociologist addressing the function rather than the content of claimed experiences or symbolizations of transcendence, is for that very reason fundamentally supportive of our exploration. For Bellah, religious experience, regarded as one of "the most fundamental cultural forms," is "neither objective nor subjective, but the very way in which the two are related" (220). Hence his proposal that a structural analysis provides "a more phenomenologically accurate understanding of ordinary religious experience than the assumption that it is primarily a matter of cognitive belief" (222). The deficit condition of loneliness – loneliness is the term he employs throughout – is structural in the human condition itself, one that can and does give way, in privileged moments, to the structural experience of transcendence as immanence, the potential of which, so he argues, is "deeply embedded in man's existential situation and a part of the very structure of his experience" (222). Such privileged moments are to be likened, functionally, to those described by the traditional mystics in the Western tradition. As he puts it: "The crux of the issue, as it has always been in mystical religion, is the relation of this self, myself, and other selves, the universe itself" (224).

In our skeptical, secular modernity, where appeal to traditional, transcendent sources of authority and worship are questioned and, by many, discredited, the need for a serviceable symbolism for what Bellah calls "higher values" (208) persists.

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Individuals and societies, we would add, do need symbols, implicit if not always explicit, to help express need to mark occasional experience of grasping a greater reality in its otherness, as suspect in the realm of materialist skepticism as this may be. Many, that is, need a symbolic language which, while it does not reach so far as to name transcendence as such, still manages to express what Bellah calls the overcoming of the dichotomies of ordinary conceptualization, e.g., the 'subjective' vs. the 'objective', and that "brings together the coherence of the whole of experience" (202), even if only, we would add, for that privileged moment. The varieties of American lonesomeness would seem to perform this function.

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