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The Book of Nature: American Painters and the Natural Sublime

By Francis Murphy

In 1874 the young Edward Bellamy, the future author of *Looking Backward*, attempted to summarize his religious perspectives and in doing so, revealed himself as a well-informed historian of the natural sublime. "I would call attention to the fact," he writes, "that sentimental love of the beautiful and the sublime in nature, the charm which mountains, sea, and landscape so potently exercise upon the modern mind through a subtle sense of sympathy, is a comparatively modern and recent growth of the human mind. The ancients knew, or at least say, nothing about it. It is a curious fact that in no classical author are to be found any allusions to a class of emotions and sentiments that take up such large space in modern literature. It is almost within a century, in fact, that this susceptibility of the soul seems to have been developed. It is not therefore surprising that its language should still be vague. I am sure that much of the unrest and reaching out after the infinite, which is the peculiar characteristic of this age, is the result of this new sense." (*The Religion of Solidarity*, published posthumously in 1940)

Bellamy may well have been reading John Ruskin's *Modern Painters* (1856), for in the chapter on "The Novelty of Landscape," volume three, Ruskin also observes that meditation on Nature is the characteristic distinction of the modern mind. What would strike a visitor from the past in viewing a mid-nineteenth century art gallery, Ruskin notes, would be the absence of portraiture, and an almost exclusive preoccupation with landscape. "Mountains," Ruskin says, "instead of being used only as a blue ground for the relief of the heads of saints, were themselves the exclusive subjects of reverent contemplation; that their ravines, and peaks, and forests, were all painted with an appearance of as much enthusiasm as had formerly been devoted to the dimple of beauty, or the frowns of asceticism; and that all the living interest which was still supposed necessary to the scene, might be supplied by a traveller in a slouched hat, a beggar in a scarlet cloak, or, in default of these, even by a heron or a wild duck."

This new preoccupation with landscape had profound religious and aesthetic consequences, for by the end of the eighteenth century, traditional feelings of awe, majesty, wonder, fear, and mystery had been transferred from the literary to the natural sublime. What earlier generations might have found in churches, the generation after Wordsworth would find in places like the Simplon Pass, where:

The immeasurable height
Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,
The stationary blasts of waterfalls,
And in the narrow rent at every turn
Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn,
The rocks that muttered close upon our ears,
Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side
As if a voice were in them, the sick sight

And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
The unfettered clouds and regions of the Heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light
Were all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree;
Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.

When the Psalmist of old lifted his voice in prayer and affirmed that "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork," he expressed in an orthodox way our wonder at the natural world and at the power and genius of its maker. But when Joseph Addison, the eighteenth-century English essayist, told his audience in *The Spectator* that "The Imagination prompts the understanding, and by the greatness of the sensible object, produces in it the idea of a Being who is neither circumscribed by time nor space," he was saying something quite different and quite new: that we derive our abstractions from the observation of particulars. The Creator, in fact, Addison says, encourages the contemplation of great objects because they help us to apprehend the idea of the infinite:

Our admiration, which is a very pleasing notion of the mind, immediately rises at the consideration of any object that takes up a great deal of room in the fancy [that is, the imagination], and, by consequence, will improve into the highest pitch of astonishment and devotion when we contemplate His nature, that is neither circumscribed by time, nor place, nor to be comprehended by the largest capacity of a created being.

(*Spectator* 413)

What Addison is talking about is the natural sublime, although he would not have used that phrase. His feeling about the vast, and the natural objects which would encourage this emotion -- mountains, storms, cataracts, great expanses of water -- was a part of English sensibility long before the word sublime (meaning, literally, up to the lintel) was taken from the famous discourse on the elevated style in rhetoric by the Greek philosopher Longinus and applied to a state of mind induced by natural phenomena. The most famous eighteenth-century psychologist of sensibility, perhaps a greater assimilator than theorist of the sublime, was Edmund Burke, who published his *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* in 1756 and revised and expanded it (Barnett Newman once called it a "Surrealist manual") three years later. Burke links to Addison's delight in vastness the notion of terror as an integral part of the sublime, because it follows that if something is sublime it cannot be trivial, and all vast objects threaten as well as astonish us. Our feelings about any truly sublime object, says Burke, are bound to be ambiguous: a feeling of exaltation at the object's size, but an immediate sense of vulnerability about how it evokes our human limitations. A truly sublime moment, of course, can occur only when a certain detachment exists between ourselves and the sublime object. A drowning man is not concerned with the natural sublime.

The heightened sensibility for landscape had special consequences for American writers and painters, for, if one could intuit the divine from the wilderness, then what nation had been more blessed with the virtues of a pristine wild? America was, to use the historian Perry Miller's phrase, "Nature's nation," and Nature, like Bryant's waterfowl, would "guide aright the faltering steps of a young Republic." In *Errand into the Wilderness*, Miller observed that "The sublimity of our landscape not only relieved us of having to apologize for a deficiency of picturesque ruins and hoary legends: it demonstrated how the vast reservoirs of our august temple furnish the guarantee that we shall never be contaminated by artificiality." The American experiment would flourish precisely to the degree that its inhabitants properly read the book of Nature.

In the first quarter of the nineteenth century, no other nation had so allied its moral and political virtue to the wild. But there was also a sense of impending trouble. In 1823, the year that James Fenimore Cooper published *The Pioneers*, twenty-year-old Ralph Waldo Emerson was also meditating on the problem of the pioneer and the virgin American wilderness: "Separated from the contamination which infects all other civilized lands[,] this country has always boasted a great comparative purity. But the vast rapidity with which the deserts [sic] & forests of the interior of this country are peopled have led patriots to fear lest the nation grow too fast for its virtue & its peace." Audubon, too, writing in his *Ornithological Biography*, noted that viewing the Ohio River in 1831 could only make him think of the shores before they were inhabited, that the country was no longer "in a state of nature," but "covered with villages, farms, and towns, where the din of hammers and machinery is constantly heard." The 10 woods, he observed, "are fast disappearing under the axe by day, and the fire by night," and "hundreds of steamboats are gliding to and fro, over the whole length of the majestic river forcing commerce to take root and prosper at every spot..." Nature's nation was on a collision course. Until the end of the Civil War, when the issue seemed to most writers and painters lost, the natural sublime, in the form of the American wilderness, would offer a warning and a corrective to the course of American progress.

Thomas Cole's "Essay on American Scenery," included in its entirety later in this catalogue, is, for our purposes, the most important document on the subject of the natural sublime written by an American artist before mid-century. It was delivered on May 9, 1835 at the New York Lyceum, three years after Cole's return to America from a voyage to England, France, and Italy, and in the midst of his work on his great polemical sequence, *The Course of Empire*. Cole's essay represents the thoughts of a painter at the height of his powers, one who had been warned before he departed for

Europe by his friend William Cullen Bryant that he might gaze on the monumental sublime -- "Paths, homes, graves, ruins, from the lowest glen/ To where life shrinks from the fierce Alpine air" -- but must keep the American natural sublime always before him: "that earlier, wilder image, bright." Cole's address to the Lyceum [sic] and his adopted country (he had come to America from England at the age of eighteen). Like Emerson and Cooper before him, Cole too is conscious of the march of progress and the destruction of the wilderness; in fact, his essay is addressed to a people whose "meager utilitarianism seems to absorb every feeling and sentiment," and whose eagerness for improvement "makes us fear that the bright and tender flowers of the imagination shall all be crushed beneath its iron tramp."

What Cole was planning in *The Course of Empire*, and, by 1836, had exhibited, were five large panels (now in the New-York Historical Society) which traced the progress of humankind from its earliest beginnings to its most sophisticated and self-destructive devising: *The Savage State*, *The Arcadian or Pastoral State*, *The Consummation of Empire*, *The Destruction of Empire*, and *Desolation* [figures 4 through 8]. What stays unchanging in Cole's sequence is a great boulder-capped mountain, present at the beginning and remaining in solitary splendor at the end, when all civilization lies in ruins beneath it and Nature slowly takes back the land which was once hers. The mountain is a continuous moral presence, a constant reminder that in the struggle between Nature and Civilization, Nature always wins; the ruins of time are all about us. Cole's essay was written on the assumption that it was not too late, that a people close to Nature could be saved.

The literature and rhetoric of this period are full of a quasi-religious nationalism which, in our time, would embarrass anyone not running for public office, but it did not embarrass Cole or his contemporaries. We are excluded from the *hortus conclusus*, the traditional walled garden where Adam dwelt with Eve, Cole says, but "We are still in Eden," the earthly paradise, and alienated from it not by the traditional consequences of the Fall, but by our own "ignorance and folly." Cole anticipates the publication of Emerson's "Nature" in arguing that even that wall would disappear if only we would look at the landscape. The wilderness, Cole says, provides its own absolution: "Prophets of old retired into the solitudes of Nature to wait the inspiration of heaven. It was on Mount Horeb that Elijah witnessed the mighty wind, the earthquake, and the fire; and heard the 'still small voice' -- that voice is YET heard among the mountains! St. John preached in the desert; -- the wilderness is YET a fitting place to speak of God."

Cole voiced his ambitions for American painting in an age in which even our most honored literary representatives -- Cooper and Washington Irving, for example -- could only apologize for the poverty of the American scene. Irving's "The Author's Account of Himself" in *The Sketch Book* (1819) told his readers that America's mountains, valleys, cataracts, rivers, and plains were unparalleled, but that "Europe held forth all the charms of storied and poetical associations," and that, as a writer, he preferred the "accumulated treasures of age" over "youthful promise." He would, in fact, succumb to the monumental sublime for his subject, the same temptation which Bryant would warn Cole against: "I longed to wander over the scenes of renowned achievement - to tread, as it were, in the footsteps of antiquity -- to loiter about the ruined castle -- to meditate on the falling tower -- to escape, in short, from the commonplace realities of the present, and lose myself among the shadowy grandeurs of the past." When Cooper was asked for a pronouncement about American art and literature, he responded by observing that the subject was so "meagre" that there was almost nothing to say. In "Notions of the Americans" (1828), he argues that there can be no American school of literature or art; instead our art should be modeled after the English traditions.

Cooper goes on to observe that while Americans are not deprived of things to read or prints to view, the aesthetic plays no part in American life: there is no demand for literature, no talent, and, to make matters worse, a "poverty of materials." Cooper sounds like Henry James writing about Hawthorne some fifty years later when he says:

There is scarcely an ore which contributes to the wealth of the author, that is found, here, in veins as rich as in Europe. There are no annals for the historian; no follies (beyond the most vulgar and common place) for the satirist; no manners for the dramatist; no obscure fictions for the writer of romance; no gross and hardy offences against decorum for the moralist; nor any of the rich artificial auxiliaries of poetry.

In 1837 Emerson would argue in "The American Scholar" that a nation deprived of the "artificial auxiliaries of poetry" might breathe a sigh of relief; but passages like this remind us of how much that needed saying in the 1830s.

Cole offers none of the customary apologies. The "sublimity" of the wild is ours, he says, if we can only turn toward it an "unaffected heart." The American wild offers all the traditional iconography of *Salvator Rosa* (see Jasper Cropsey's *Storm in the Wilderness* [figure 9]) and the "aerial" charm of Claude Lorrain (an effect which Cole is seeking in his *Schroon Lake* [figure 10]). He even argues that our landscape is not destitute of the legendary: "The great struggle for freedom has sanctified many a spot, and many a mountain, stream, and rock has its legend." But as his *Gelyna* [color plate 1] attests, Cole's strength rests, not on the melodramatic and sentimental tale which his painting illustrates, but on the dramatic conflict present in the American landscape. Even without knowing the story of the death of Edward Rutledge (a wounded

British officer, Gelyna's betrothed, whose friend has left him in order to seek medical aid, and who returns at the moment when Edward expires on an open ledge commanding a view of Lake George), we know that the painting is about the forces of darkness and light and the triumph of the soul when the struggle has ended.

Cole's sensibility is essentially religious, and in noticeable contrast to the work of Charles Octavius Cole (no relation), a little-known New England painter whose *Imperial Knob* [figure 11] looks like something we might view on a visit to Count Dracula, all sinuous and threatening rather than elevating. Thomas Cole appeals to our sense of majesty in the landscape, and particularly delights in autumnal scenes when the death and rebirth of Nature is implied in all her brilliance. He notes in his essay that when he viewed two lakes in the wild mountain gorge called Franconia Notch, in New Hampshire, "Shut in by stupendous mountains which rest on crags that tower more than a thousand feet above the water, whose rugged brows and shadowy breaks are clothed by dark and tangled woods," he was "overwhelmed with an emotion of the sublime, such as I have rarely felt. It was not that the jagged precipices were lofty, that the encircling woods were of the dimmest shade, or that the waters were profoundly deep; but that over all, rocks, woods, and water, brooded the spirit of repose, and the silent energy of nature stirred the soul to its inmost depths."

Perhaps what most distinguishes Cole from the generation of painters who followed him is this sense of religious assurance. It made him prefer the elevated over the merely forceful. Six months before his death in 1848 at the age of forty-seven, he viewed Niagara Falls and noted that, while it was "stupendous," it was also "limited" as a subject of the highest sublime. Louis Legrand Noble, in his *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole*, quotes from Cole's diary of September 4, 1847:

The truth is, that the mind dwells not long with delight on objects whose main quality is motion, unless that motion is varied. Niagara, stupendous and unceasing as it is, is nevertheless comparatively limited, -- limited in its resources and duration. The mind quickly runs to the fountainhead of all its waters; the eye marks the process of its sinking to decay. The highest sublime the mind of man comprehendeth not. He stands upon one shore, but sees not the other. Not in action, but in deep repose, is the loftiest element of the sublime. With action waste and ultimate exhaustion are associated. In the pure blue sky is the highest sublime. There is the illimitable. When the soul essays to wing its flight into that awful profound, it returns tremblingly to its earthly rest. All is deep, unbroken repose up there -- voiceless, motionless, without the colours, light and shadows, and ever -- changing draperies of the lower earth. There we look in to the uncurtained solemn serene -- into the eternal, the infinite -- toward the throne of the Almighty.

Critics for the New York papers who viewed Frederic Edwin Church's *Niagara Falls in 1857* [figure 12] when it was exhibited at the show-rooms of Williams, Stevens, and Williams, 353 Broadway, caught the difference between Church and Cole immediately. The firm compiled an anthology of critical response to the picture. The reporter for the *Courier and Enquirer*, for example, noted that the "marvel" of the painting is "its treatment of the expression of mobility which every part of it conveys. There is not a line's breadth upon it that does not seem in motion," he continued, "not an outline in it that does not appear to be just passing into some other form." And the critic for the *New York Daily News* observed that:

Building up his composition upon the true principle of the sublime, he has not marred the simple grandeur of his subject by the introduction of any extraneous forms or objects of animal life. He has even excluded the shore from his 'foreground,' and makes the moving mass of waters-as they go rushing madly at his feet over angry-looking rocks here and there revealed amid the snowy-crested breakers -- serve him for his only and most appropriate foreground. Where sound and motion overwhelm the spectator, as in beholding Niagara, earth and sky are forgotten ... Your eye and mind wander up the 'Rapids' until lost in contemplation; and you only return with the rush of waters, to leap madly into the chasm below, to be lost again in the most sublime reverie It is the great painting of the grandest subject of nature! It is the *chef d'oeuvre* of Niagaras upon any canvas, and must give to its painter a fame as imperishable as his subject.

Niagara did establish Church's reputation as a painter and, until *The Icebergs* of 1861 was discovered in England and exhibited in 1979 and 1980, was the picture with which his name was most often associated. For Church, the natural sublime was identified not with repose, but energy.

Church was Cole's first pupil and although he remained with him only two years (1844-1846), Cole's influence on Church was profound. The Boston reviewer of *Niagara*, who noted that Church assimilated both Turner's light and a pre-Raphaelite attention to detail, correctly identified the surface difference between teacher and pupil, but the content which informs their art remains the same: Church inherited Cole's penchant for the allegorical and his concern about the course of the American empire. In fact, if one eliminated the panels *The Consummation of Empire* and *The Destruction of Empire* -- the two paintings which portray the growing decadence of civilized life -- one could say that Church painted *The Course of Empire* all his life. His chief subjects were the North and South American wild, the American pastoral, and the

monumental sublime. Cole included portraits of the consummation and destruction of empire in his series because he was presenting to his American viewers a warning about the development of their civilization and its violation of the wilderness. By the time Church formed his career, it was much too late to mount such warnings: Emerson notes in his diary for October 11, 1839, that "The Invasion of Nature by trade with its Money, its Credit, its Steam, its Railroad, threatens to upset the balance of man, and establish a new Universal Monarchy more tyrannical than Babylon or Rome," and one could make a representative anthology of such passages from 1830 to 1850. When a reviewer for the *New York Literary World* returned from an exhibition of Staten Island landscapes by Jasper Cropsey in May 1847, he felt compelled to write an elegy on the American wild:

The axe of civilization is busy with our old forests, and artisan ingenuity is fast sweeping away the relics of our national infancy. What were once the wild and picturesque haunts of the Red Man, and where the wild deer roamed in freedom, are becoming the abodes of commerce and the seats of manufacture ... the primordial hills, once bristling with shaggy pine and hemlock, like old Titans as they were, are being shorn of their locks, and left to blister in cold nakedness in the sun Yankee enterprise has little sympathy with the picturesque, and it behooves our artists to rescue from its grasp the little that is left, before it is forever too late.

(quoted in Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, 1956)

In Cropsey's *Catskills After a Storm* [figure 16], the blighted elm says everything that is left to be said about the possibility of reconciling conflicting values.

By the end of the 1840s was clear that American painters, like the writers before them, would have to seek their sublime further and further from the tourist-ridden Catskills and Niagara. Maine's Mount Desert and Mount Katahdin were two spots left still untouched by progress. Church's 1856 landscape of *Katahdin* [figure 17] captures something of the majestic hauteur of the mountain, the quality Thoreau had felt in 1846 when he saw it for the first time and perceived in its "sacred and mysterious" presence something of the indifference of Nature to man which is a part of the natural sublime:

Vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature has got him at disadvantage, caught him alone, and pilfers him of some of his divine faculty. She does not smile at him as in the plains. She seems to say sternly, why came you here before your time? This ground is not prepared for you.

It is not enough that I smile in the valleys? I have never made this soil for thy feet, this air for thy breathing, these rocks for thy neighbors. I cannot pity nor fondle thee here, but forever relentlessly drive thee hence to where I am kind. Why seek me where I have not called thee, and then complain because you find me but a stepmother? Should thou freeze or starve, or shudder thy life away, there is no shrine, nor altar, nor any access to my ear.

(*The Maine Woods*, 1864)

Students of American romanticism, particularly art historians who tell us about the fusion of man and Nature in nineteenth-century art, would do well to mark this passage, and similar passages in *Walden* and *Moby Dick*.

In the 1840s Thoreau could still boast that sixty miles above Katahdin "the country is virtually unmapped and unexplored, and there still waves the virgin forest of the New World," but by the 1850s there was very little wilderness left uncharted, and scouts for lumber mills were leaving their tracks behind them. It is not surprising, then, that Church's most famous sublime paintings, with the exception of *Niagara Falls* and *Twilight in the Wilderness* [figure 19] -- a painting so popular that a whole genre developed around the subject, as Albert Bierstadt's *Sunset Glow* [figure 21] attests -- are of places further and further removed from the sacred spots of earlier painters: *Cotopaxi* (1855), *The Andes of Equador* (1855), *Morning in the Tropics* (1858), *The Icebergs* (1861), *Chimborazo* (1864), and *The Vale of Saint Thomas, Jamaica* (1867) are only a few [figures 22 and 23]. Church had no interest in the American West as a subject for the sublime, leaving the territory to painters like Bierstadt, Francis Shedd Frost [color plate 2], Thomas Moran, and Worthington Whittredge [figures 24 and 25]. It was in South America that Church first confronted sublime nature in all its untrammelled innocence and brute power. His two trips there, the first in 1853 and the second in 1857, supplied him with sketches which he transformed into finished pictures for buyers eager to acquire views of an unfamiliar world.

A far more familiar world is revealed in Asher Brown Durand's *Kindred Spirits* [figure 26], and it suggests something of the sentimental benevolence which an earlier artist saw at the heart of Nature, for the title of the painting implies that the friendship shared between Cole and the poet Bryant parallels the friendship shared with Nature by all mankind. The picturesque landscape is unthreatening, and the rock formations have created a perfect lecture platform, where the painter points out a nicety in Nature's design to the poet. The view charms and entices, and the foliage provides a comforting protection against the sun's hot rays.

When Cole returned home after one of the last evenings he was to spend in the Catskills, he noted in his diary that with the coming of evening there arrived a great "unity of effect that ceased to exist by day," and every form "thus united with the great shadow of the wilderness, became, with trees and grass, a part of the mountain top." Night gives a kind of blessing to the whole, and the band of campers gather around the campfire to sing their nightly prayers, far from the "common world," their thoughts turned toward "heaven with its eternal order," in a spirit of "joy and thankfulness." Perhaps one reason Cole always rests easy in Nature's design is that, for all his interest in the wild, he never really encountered a personally threatening and chaotic natural force, something which has to be encountered alone to be honestly felt, as Church did when he came upon the volcano Sangay in July of 1857 [figure 27].

David Huntington first made Church's account of that event available to us in the *Brooklyn Museum Annual (Volume 5)* in 1964, and it is worth having before us, for Church's experience lacks all the comfort of the community of tourists which was available to Cole as the night darkened the well-traveled Catskills. Church set out alone to see Sangay, and, misled by his guide, was told that the mountain was "very distant" from their camp. The passage in which Church describes his first encounter with the volcano recounts his transformation from a tourist seeking the picturesque to an initiate confronting the Burkean sublime:

Quipo assured me that the Volcano was still very distant and as we were in a sort of bowl among the mountains which raised their hoary heads around us I knew I could get no view of Sangai [sic] that night without a scramble and as there was still a couple of hours of daylight grasped my sketch book and commenced ascending the hill which rose between us and the Volcano. The exertion of working my way through the tangled grass was tremendous. I toiled while every little eminence which I gained revealed still more elevated ones above, but my perseverance was rewarded finally, and I planted my feet on the summit. Dense clouds hung over the mountain tops everywhere and I looked in vain for a glimpse of Sangai or its smoke.

Its proximity, though, was evident enough from the regular, impressive shaking of the earth and the tremendous peals which marked each explosion. Turning my back, I commenced a sketch of the picturesque mountains at the Southwest where the clouds did not hang low enough to cover the snow line. Gradually the clouds broke away, the sun shone and gilded with refined gold every slope and ridge that it could touch. Patches of open sky revealed the most lovely blue in contrast to the rich coloring. My sketch finished, I turned my face, and Lo! Sangai, with its imposing plume of smoke stood clear before me. I was startled. Above a serrated, black, rugged group of peaks which form the crater, the columns arose, one creamy white against an opening of exquisitely blue sky, delicate white, cirrus formed, flakes of vapor hung about the great cumulous column and melted away into the azure. The other, black and sombre, piled up in huge, rounded forms cut sharply against the dazzling white of the column of vapor and piling up higher and higher, gradually was diffused into a yellowish tinted smoke through which would burst enormous heads of black smoke which kept expanding, the whole gigantic mass gradually settling down over the observer in a way that was appalling.

I commenced a sketch of the effect, but constant changes rapidly followed and new beauties were revealed as the setting sun crested the black smoke with burnished copper and the white cumulous cloud with gold. At intervals of nearly four in five minutes an explosion took place; the first intimation was a fresh mass of smoke with sharply defined outlines rolling above the dark rocks followed by a heavy, rumbling sound which reverberated among the mountains. I was so impressed by the changing effects that I continued making rapid sketches; but all the time I had from the moment I saw the first of them until the sun set was twenty minutes. Dense clouds again settled over the mountains and night took the place of day. The curtain had dropped. The darkness and a chilly dampness warned me to retrace my steps. I could not see where I was going and stumbled down the hill with no little trepidation for fear I might lose my way. I took the dim outline of a distant mountain as a landmark and plunged down the slopes. Finally my eyes detected a faint red light. I was reassured, knowing it to be the fire lighted by the guides.

The early night was beautiful and I laid down on my bed, the Southern Cross shining brilliantly over my head and fell asleep.

Cole could never have resisted the temptation to generalize about the Southern Cross, but for Church its presence as a familiar navigational guide is enough. It is unfortunate that Church did not make further substantial entries in his diaries and notebooks, but fortunately he had Cole's friend and biographer, the Reverend Louis Legrand Noble, with him on his next major expedition.

Church spent the summer of 1858 close to home, but in the summer of 1859 he took his last great trek into the regions of the wild, a trip along the coast of Newfoundland and Labrador in search of icebergs. Reverend Noble published his account of this voyage, *After Icebergs with a Painter*, with lithographs based on Church's drawings, in 1861. It may be

worth noting that while Noble's life of Cole is preoccupied with the question of national identity, and the role of the American artist in shaping an American mythology, there is no such concern in this narrative. Rather, both the painter and the writer are seen as almost totally concerned with Thoreauvian intensity in "getting icebergs" exactly right. "Like all the larger structures of nature," Noble writes, "these crystalline vessels are freighted with God's power and glory, and must be reverently and thoughtfully studied, to 'see into the life of them.'" He suggests that to see them in their monumental complexity is more than enough to make us feel the power of the sublime:

The cold, dead white, the subtle greens, the blues, shadows of the softest slate, all contrast with the flashing brightness in a way most exquisite to behold. True to all the forms of nature that swell to the sublime, an iceberg grows upon the mind astonishingly. On the boundless plains of water, of course, it is the merest molehill: in itself, it has the lonely grandeur of a broad precipice in the mountains.

It is precisely Noble's emphasis on the more ominous side of Nature which distinguishes his treatment of it in this book from the perspective described in his life of Thomas Cole. Following his encounter with the forces of Nature at Sangay and Labrador, Church may never again have felt as confident as he did before these epic adventures in reconciling Nature's power and Civilization's demands. In the following passage, Noble conveys something of both his awe and terror in confronting the natural sublime:

Icebergs! Icebergs! -- The cry brought us upon deck at sunrise. There they were, two of them, a large one and a smaller: the latter pitched upon the dark and misty desert of the sea like an Arab's tent; and the larger like a domed mosque in marble of a greenish white. The vaporous atmosphere veiled its sharp outlines, and gave it a softened, dreamy and mysterious character. Distant and dim, it was yet very grand and impressive. Enthroned on the deep in lonely majesty, the dread of mariners, and the wonder of the traveller, it was one of those imperial creations of nature that awaken powerful emotions, and illumine the imagination. Wonderful structure! Fashioned by those fingers that wrought the glittering fabrics of the upper deep, and launched upon those adamantine ways into Arctic seas, how beautiful, how strong, and terrible! A glacier slipped into the ocean, and henceforth a wandering cape, a restless headland, a revolving island, to compromise the security of the world's broad highway. No chart, no sounding, no knowledge of latitude avails to fix thy whereabouts, thou roving Ishmael of the sea. No look-out, and no friendly hail or authoritative warning can cope with thy work-day raiment. Though the watchman lay his ear to the water, he may not hear thy coming footsteps.

It is difficult to believe that, as a recent critic has put it, Church's great painting *The Icebergs* represents a "celebration of the New World man's imminent oneness with elemental nature." Surely Church experienced enough close calls attempting to paint icebergs from a rowboat to know firsthand just how precarious the human presence is in the face of the sublime.

Icebergs had a lasting hold on Church's imagination, and in 1891, thirty-two years after his voyage with Noble, he returned to the subject again in *The Iceberg* [color plate 3]. There is no direct confrontation with the iceberg here; instead, the fragile ship with its sails full out safely passes by the great white monolith. But the splendor of the berg in its isolation and the vastness of the dark blue sea serve as a powerful final reminder of those years when Church confronted the natural sublime. Like Cole, the great interest of his last years was in the monumental sublime -- from the creation of what he and his wife, Isabel, called Olana, an extraordinary house in the Persian style, which they filled with bric-a-brac from the bazaars of the Middle East, to painting the ruins of Greece and Rome and the remains of early Christian culture: *Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives* (1870), *The Parthenon* (1871), *El Khasna Petra* (1872), and *Constantinople* (1889) are among them. If Church needed "the tonic of wildness," he had only to look out Olana's windows to see the Hudson River and the town of Catskill to the west of him, but he seems to have been more preoccupied with his Bible (when the time came for the Churches' houseguests to share in the daily reading, Mark Twain could never find his glasses) than he was with the American experiment [figure 30].

Both Church and Bierstadt lived long enough to see their work held in contempt by a generation of younger painters, but both had long and profitable careers until well after the Civil War. Thomas Moran's *Seascape of 1906* [color plate 5] reminds us that there was a market for unabashedly romantic sublime subjects well into the second decade of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, at the same time that Church and Bierstadt were creating canvases rich in dramatic incident and chiaroscuro, a very different kind of work was being executed by such painters as Alfred Thompson Bricher [figure 31], John W. Casilear [figure 32], Samuel Colman, Francis Frost, Sanford Gifford [figure 33], Martin Johnson Heade, George Hollingsworth [color plate 6], John Frederick Kensett [color plate 7], Fitz Hugh Lane, and Aaron Draper Shattuck [color plate 8], all of whom, according to James Thomas Flexner, found their model not in the work of Thomas Cole, but in that of Asher B. Durand and his work in the engraver's studio.

These painters were no less well-traveled than Church or Bierstadt, nor were the sites they chose very different; one will

find in their painting all the conventional nineteenth-century landscape subjects: mountains, waterfalls, lakes and seashores, the ruins of classical and early Christian civilization, the charms of Venice and North Africa. But the true concern of their work is neither place nor event, but light, a light which they seemed to bring with them to any spot they painted, transforming the quotidian into something intense and miraculous. Ruskin, who knew the work of Frederic Church but probably not the work of these painters, remarked in *Modern Painters* that what distinguished medieval paintings from the work of his own contemporaries was that modern paintings were cloudy, dark, and in motion. In the art of the medieval, he observed, we find "stability, definiteness, and luminousness," while the nineteenth-century viewer is "expected to rejoice in darkness and triumph in mutability; to lay the foundation of happiness in things which momentarily change or fade; and to expect the utmost satisfaction and instruction from what is impossible to arrest, and difficult to understand."

Dante, Ruskin tells us, had no interest in clouds or mountains, only in the sky; all the beauty in Paradise depends on spheres of light. The modern painter, Ruskin says, prefers darkness because he has "an absence of faith." One wonders what he would have made of these American "luminists," who, in their passion for light, seem to express what Edward Bellamy called that "reaching out after the infinite, which is the peculiar characteristic of this age ... "

It was John I.H. Baur who, in *Perspectives USA* (1954, No.9) first called to the attention of a large audience a group of painters whose art could be described as luminist and which found its fullest expression in the work of Fitz Hugh Lane [color plate 9] and Martin Johnson Heade. In describing the work of Lane, Baur defined the chief characteristics of the style. Lane, he observed:

... painted the sun rising through mist, he painted it setting, with its red glow coloring the whole landscape, and he painted moonlight long before that subject was generally considered paintable ... Lane's technique was polished and meticulous realism in which there is no sign of brushwork and no trace of impressionism, the atmospheric effect being achieved by infinitely careful gradations of tone, by the most exact study of the relative clarity of near and far objects and by a precise rendering of the variations in texture and color produced by direct or reflected rays.

In the work of these artists, light becomes the highest manifestation of the natural sublime. They possess that calm assurance which Ruskin found missing in the work of most nineteenth-century artists, that confidence in the oneness of the self and Nature which Baur was the first to call attention to when he quoted Emerson's famous passage about becoming a "transparent eye-ball" when all "mean egotism vanishes." Perhaps even more relevant to our purposes is Emerson's affirmation that "In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature." In paintings like Kensett's *Shrewsbury River* [color plate 10], the light almost persuades us to adopt Emerson's confidence. Surely, it is the light which saves the painting from too easy a resolution of the characteristic tension between man and Nature, for no matter how much we are charmed by it, we know that light by its very nature changes. Luminist painting sacrifices much of the complexity of both man and Nature to make this accommodation possible: the only human intrusion in *Shrewsbury River* is the occasional holiday sailboat. When a painter like Samuel Colman tries, in *Storm King on the Hudson* [figure 36], to include a more realistic portrayal of human effort, the scene becomes cluttered, darker and more threatening than most luminist painting prefers, and we are not certain at first whether the sky is darkened by clouds or by the pollution generated from the engines of the riverboats.

Luminous painting longs for some unchanging, permanent resolution of all opposites -- nature and civilization, freedom and form, the limitless and the limited -- but given the fact that humankind is subject to time and death, such resolutions in a fallen world are impossible. We are separate from Nature, and the natural sublime reminds us of this incontrovertible fact, whether it takes its appearance in the shape of the sea or a mountain or, following a more Emersonian model, in the less grand form of a bare common. Emerson's euphoria regarding the self and Nature lasted only six years (from 1836 to 1842), and Walt Whitman's about five (from 1855 to 1860). What both learned from experience was that Nature finally remains enigmatic, unyielding, unsympathetic and judgmental. And yet, as later painters like Richards [figure 38], Murphy [figure 40], and Metcalf [Color plate 11] argued, we have nothing else. No church 'or institution ever offered the American writer or painter, even if ambiguously, so much. Edward Bellamy, who had been reading his Emerson when he wrote his own version of the relations between the "me" and "NOT ME," noted that:

The emotions of pleasurable melancholy and of wistful yearning produced by the prospect of a beautiful landscape are matters of universal experience, a commonplace of poetry. Upon analysis this mental experience seems to consist, if we may so express it, in a vague desire to enter into, to possess, and be a part of the beauty before the eye, to come into some closer union with it than is possible consistently with the conditions of our natures. This subdued, yet intense attraction, in its disappointment produces an indefinable sadness, and it is thus that is to be explained, at least in large part, the melancholy so often observed to result from the contemplation of natural beauty. It is the disappointment of the desire after a more perfect communion.

We call that art which attempts to make a momentary resolution of the tension between the wild and the civilized "pastoral," and no American painter had a better sense of the genre than Martin Johnson Heade. In *Sunrise on the Marshes* [color plate 12], the new day seems to bless the labor of man's work and to create a scene of great promise and harmony with Nature, yet the figures of the grandfather and grandson and the haystacks themselves remind us of the traditional harvest of the great reaper Death, correcting any sense we might have of permanence in the scene. Heade is always aware, whether in his fine *Thunderstorm over Naragansett Bay* (1868) or in his remarkable series of charcoal drawings of Plum Island River, of how the sublime both attracts us by its sensuousness and distances us by its irreproachableness.

When Emerson was thirty, he wrote in his journal for November 2, 1833, "Nature is a language & every new fact that we learn is a new word; but rightly seen, taken all together it is not merely a language but the language put together into a most significant & universal book. I wish to learn the language not that I may know a new set of nouns and verbs but that I may read the great book which is written in that tongue." Essays like "Nature," "The Over-Soul," and "The American Scholar" all display confidence that nature is the guarding American angel, at once the great source of our national and human strength and the subject of our art. But by 1860 Emerson would write that the Book of Nature is the Book of Fate," and take as his subject "Experience," "Illusion," and "Fate." Nature had become "tyrannous circumstance," which limits all we do: it was the "thick skull," the "sheathed snake," and the "ponderous rock-like jaw." Nature turns the "gigantic pages" of her book, Emerson says, "leaf after leaf, never re-turning one."

Emerson's education in the hard facts of experience are repeated in a whole generation of writers and painters who felt the impact of the Civil War and the spirit of Herbert Spencer and Charles Darwin in the air. Melville, in poems like "Malvern Hill" (the scene of the great Civil War battle in July of 1862), seems to feel more betrayed by Nature's relentless march than he does by the loss of human life when he concludes with a threnody sung by the waving elms:

We elms of Malvern Hill
Remember every thing;
But sap the twig will fill:
Wag the world how it will,
Leaves must be green in spring.

Nature's indifference is also what lies behind Henry Adams's remarks -- in his *Education* (1918) -- that he never really understood Nature until the death of his sister proved to him that "Nature enjoyed it, played with it," and "smothered her victim with caresses." When he comprehended that fact, Adams says, "For the first time in his life Mount Blanc looked to him for what it was -- a chaos of anarchic and purposeless forces -- and he needed days of repose to see it clothe itself again with the illusions of his senses, the white purity of its snows, the splendor of its light, and the infinity of its heavenly peace."

Both Adams and Emerson adopted their new views of Nature because of intensely felt personal loss (in talking about the death of his sister, Adams is really addressing a subject that was unmentionable for him, the suicide of his wife, and Emerson experienced the death of his first wife, his brother, Charles, and his six-year-old son, Waldo, in a comparatively short time). But if there was some profound personal loss behind Winslow Homer's withdrawal to Prout's Neck, Maine to paint for almost twenty-seven years the confrontation of waves and rock, we will probably never discover it. Homer was an old man when he told William Howe Downs that it would "kill him" to have a book written about him while he was alive and "as the most interesting part of my life is of no concern to the public I must decline to give you any particulars in regard to it." If anyone ever handed a future biographer a greater incentive to snoop, it could not have been more provocative than this one, but seventy-five years of inquisitiveness on the part of Homer's critics have turned up nothing. Certainly the secret wound did not result from the Civil War; with the exception of *Prisoners from the Front* (1866), Homer never went much beneath the surface of that great conflict.

The pictures he painted ten years after the war are some of his most charming, even if they did not always charm the more rigorous intelligences of his day. Reviewing Homer's work in 1875, Henry James told his audience that he hated the scenes of country life almost as much as he hated the wilderness scenes; they reminded him only of "rural doughnuts" and "flannel shirts." How much better, James thought, to paint Capri or Tangier. It wouldn't be the first time James was wrong about an American artist (think of his condescending review of Walt Whitman's *Drum-Taps*), but what he does correctly notice is that in these post-Civil War pictures, Homer "sees everything at one with its envelope of light and air."

There is no more striking contrast in our exhibition than the twenty-year difference between *An Adirondack Lake* [figure 41] and *Backrush* [color plate 13], one full of quiet attentiveness and expectancy, the other preoccupied with brute energy and force. In *An Adirondack Lake*, Nature has encountered a worthy intruder, but *Backrush* conveys no sense at all that

Nature can be approached; we can only look on in amazement at her ways, and they exist far outside the realm of any human intelligence. Homer is like the speaker of Robert Frost's "The Most of It," who cries out that all he wants from the wild is some kind of sympathetic response, only to be answered by an "embodiment" of power, a great buck, who pushes everything ahead of him forcefully aside and crashes through the underbrush.

The sometimes heroic and elegaic note that we find in Homer's English seascapes are not present in the Prout's Neck paintings of his later years; no figures look expectantly toward the sea. At the end of his career, Homer seems to have felt that it made little difference whether or not there was a human figure present in his work. Nature went about her affairs, her waves sometimes exultant and dancing, sometimes angry and malevolent, just as he did himself, alone.

For Abbott Handerson Thayer, however, Mount Monadnock always answered his sometimes poignant pleas. Like Emerson, who climbed the mountain on May 3, 1845 and wrote about it, Thayer also took pleasure in the mountain's permanence as measured against the efforts of men:

Thou seest, O watchman tall,
Our towns and races grow and fall,
And imagest the stable good
For which we all our lifetime grope,
In shifting form the formless mind,
And though the substance us elude,
We in thee the shadow find.

("Monadnock")

Thayer longed for a world of absolutes. Like his good friend Daniel Chester French he preferred classical to modern values and was best known as a painter of the idealized figure of Woman: seraphic, maternal, protective, serene, and compassionate. He read his Emerson (a copy of French's portrait bust of the sage looked out on the mountain from his New Hampshire home) with an eye toward the affirmation of those absolutes. Thayer said he returned to Monadnock as to a "shrine," and Susan Hobbs, who has written a monograph on his landscapes ("Nature into Art," *American Art Journal*, Summer, 1982), quotes from an unpublished paper of Barry Faulkner in which he tells us how much the Thayers shaped their lives around Monadnock's presence: it was, he says, "their totem, their fetish, the object of their adoration." Thayer never tired of painting it; it stood for a kind of integrity which he saw disappearing in the world about him, and he sounds like a number of disgruntled writers and painters born in the nineteenth century who were repelled by many of the attractions of the twentieth. After seeing the Armory Show in 1913, Thayer complained to Dwight Tryon about the "modern rush of commonplace humanity to the various educational headquarters, swarms to science and to commerce and these hordes to art."

In spite of Thayer's attachment to rugged country life (he required that the family sit at dinner with all the doors and windows open to the New Hampshire winds and insisted that, as a preventative for tuberculosis, everyone sleep outside, summer and winter!) he was much less hardy than his backwoodsman attire would suggest. Susan Hobbs tells us that when Thayer went to London in 1915 to plead for the adoption of a camouflaged uniform for British troops serving in France, he broke down one day walking on a London street, tears streaming down his face: "Without a word to John Singer Sargent who was helping him present his case to the British officials, Thayer suddenly took the next boat home," and recovered from his "nervous collapse" close by the "comforting shadow" of Mount Monadnock. When he died in 1921, his ashes were scattered there.

Three years before his death, Thayer undertook three remarkable portraits of the mountain, all of which emphasize (in a way which would have pleased Henry Thoreau) the dawn just raking the top of the peak. *Sunrise on Mt. Monadnock, New Hampshire* [figure 42] is the last painting in the series. Probably no American artist had quite so literally succumbed to the natural sublime: for Thayer, the mountain was the source of all aesthetic, psychological, and spiritual well-being.

One wonders what John Singer Sargent, who visited the Thayers in New Hampshire, made of his friend's passion for Emerson and Thoreau, and of Thayer's devotion to the mountain as Nature's "shrine." There is nothing in Sargent's background -- the child of American parents, he received his education in Florence, yet remained, in Henry James's opinion, "an admirable Bostonian" -- to suggest any sympathy with the sages of Concord, Massachusetts. He did, however, know how to paint mountains, and Richard Ormond, in his study of Sargent (1970) includes a fine view of the Mountains above Muerren, which was executed when Sargent was only fourteen. James said that it would be hard to imagine a painter less in the dark about his ideal and possessed of more poise about his art; the favorable reception of his portraits when he was a very young man gave him an assurance that separated him from most of the painters of his generation. In fact, of all the artists included in our exhibition who were born before the Civil War, only Sargent seems to

have been untouched by the anxieties of the age. *Glacier Stream -- The Simplon* [cover] is a work which leaves us with a purely Lucretian sense of the sublime. The pleasure in the painting is in the subjects themselves: rocks, water, flowers, light, and air, an attribute that reminds us of Santayana's observation, in *Three Philosophical Poets* (1910), that Lucretius's genius lay in his objectivity. "We seem to be reading," Santayana notes, "not the poetry of a poet about things, but the poetry of things themselves. That things have their poetry not because of what we make them symbols of, but because of their own movement and life ... " There are no Wordsworthian overtones in this painting, no suggestion that the Simplon presents to the viewer "Characters of the great Apocalypse." Rather, like Wallace Stevens when he wrote his great poem on the sublime, "Esthetique du Mal," we feel that "The greatest poverty is not to live/ In a physical world ... "

Having considered the elements of terror, obscurity, vastness, power, and infinity in the sublime, Burke added that we should also allow for "magnificence;" for magnificence "is likewise a source of the sublime. A great profusion of things which are splendid or valuable in themselves, is magnificent." He was anxious about including too many things in a work of art because what was potentially magnificent (Burke is always worried about crossing a mysterious line in which the sublime becomes grotesque) could become merely confusing; but he argued, nevertheless, that there is in Nature a "sort of fireworks" which are "truly grand." Sargent's *Glacier Stream - The Simplon* is a kind of sublime fireworks in paint.

Although Abbott Thayer thought that he had a "sort of monopoly" on the subject of great forms, neither the fashion for impressionism (John Henry Twachtman is a notable exception to the rule that impressionists preferred the comforts of hearth and home to the more arduous rigors of pursuing the natural sublime [figures 43 and 44]) nor the Armory Show of 1913 thoroughly eliminated the ingrained American attraction for what Thoreau called the "unsurveyed and unfathomed." Thoreau may have more accurately been defining only a mid-nineteenth-century sensibility rather than an early twentieth-century one, however, when he suggested that the sight of "the seacoast with its wrecks" was an indispensable and invigorating reminder of Nature's power. Most early twentieth-century painters would avoid the props which directed the viewer toward an allegorical reading of their work. But Thoreau touched on a more universal human longing when he said "We need to witness our limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander."

Few American painters born in the 1870s and 1880s would seek the volcanoes of South America, but Rockwell Kent -- who studied with Abbott Thayer and who captured in *Dublin Pond* [figure 45] all the mystery of Nature long before he went to Greenland and Labrador to paint "a world whose beauty is immaculate and absolute" -- and George Bellows would be deeply attracted to the rugged landscape of *Monhegan Island* [color plate 14] and the Atlantic coast [figures 46 and 47]. Other painters, like John Sloan, John Marin, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Marsden Hartley, were, at least for a while, exhilarated by the light and the air and the brooding forms of New Mexico [figure 48]. Marin told Alfred Stieglitz in 1933 that it seemed to him that "the true artist must perforce go from time to time to the elemental big forms -- Sky, Sea, Plain -- and those things pertaining thereto, to sort of re-true himself up, to recharge the battery [figures 49 and 50]. For these big forms have everything. But to express these, you have to love these, to be a part of these in sympathy. One doesn't get very far without this love, this love to enfold too the relatively little things that grow on the mountain's back. Which if you don't recognize, you don't recognize the mountain."

Marsden Hartley was only one of several easterners who didn't recognize the little things that grew on the mountain's back, and whose work reflected that estrangement. Until Hartley found a world that would become his center, a world which would make an adequate correlative for his feelings, his genius as a painter would be thwarted and stillborn. In writing about himself as a Maine painter, Hartley said in 1937: "We are subjects of our nativeness, and are at all times happily subject to it ... when the picture makers with nature as their subject get closer than they have for some time been, there will naturally be better pictures of nature, and who more than Nature will be surprised and delighted?" The center to which Hartley returned was his native state and "the country beyond to the north -- geologically much the same thing, with, if possible, an added tang because it is if anything wider still ... Nova Scotia."

It could be argued that Hartley never left New England, but as *Paysage* [figure 51] suggests, he would have to exorcise his hatred for it before he could ever feel anything but a sense of oppression for its seashore and its mountains. Later paintings like *Mountain ff123* [color plate 16] proved that he could but, like Emerson and Adams, he would also come to know Nature's "exclusiveness, its hauteurs," and "its ultimate independence." In *Northern Seascape: Off the Banks* [figure 52], Hartley found a context to embrace all his ambiguous feelings about place. What began as an elegy for his beloved Alty Mason and his brother Donald -- who, along with a cousin, were drowned on September 19, 1936 -- is here transformed into a sustained meditation on the complexity of the natural sublime. Hartley had said in his essay "On the Subject of the Mountain" (included later in this catalogue) that the mountain took "courage" for anyone who was "fated to live with it, for it is at all times indifferent to them, it asks no trust and no sublime hope against its cruelty, and like all great places of the earth calls for great sacrifice" What he said about the mountain he might also have said about the sea. But the sea, as Hartley suggests in his 1938-39 painting *Give Us This Day*, differs in that it is both the source of our daily bread as well as our tomb. In *Northern Seascape*, the affirmative triangular clouds and the ships at full sail speak of a

harmony with the infinite which the foreground rocks and waves -- the sea's jaws -- brutally qualify.

Hartley was not alone in his effort to work his way back to the subject of Nature and to the American romantic tradition based on the essays of Emerson. What he learned was that one could discard the Emersonian doctrine of the Over-Soul (the principle of unity which exists in the world and which is apprehended through the observation of concrete particulars) without denying the intensely felt emotional response to the world around us. I think that this is what Charles Burchfield, the last painter included in our exhibition, meant when he wrote to Frank Rehn in November of 1942: "I have no pantheism in me -- God is in his creation but separate from it" (this and the succeeding quotations from Burchfield may be found in John I. H. Baur's *The Inlander*, 1982). Burchfield's journals and letters reveal a pervasive desire to recapture the emotional intensity he had once felt in Nature's presence but was afraid he had lost in adulthood. He cautioned himself in 1921 that he was turning into an "inane genial American who has no emotions but those of the crowd," and spurred himself to "Strive to regain mental aloofness, the old searching into the infinite."

While Burchfield's vocabulary is indebted to Burke (he often speaks of mingled feelings of "awe and wonder and delight" about nature mixed with a sense of human imperfection and loss), he had no interest in the exotic or the vast. "The ocean," he noted in his journal for July 1954, "does not lure my imagination. Without discounting its awe-inspiring grandeur, it is not for me, and surely it has a worthy rival in a hay or wheat-field on a bright windy day." Burchfield's great triumph is to transform the ordinary things he saw in the countryside -- first near Salem, Ohio and then near Gardenville, New York -- into the monumental. *Sun and Rocks* [figure 53] takes the natural sublime about as far as it can go without crossing the threshold into the purely visionary. What began as a small watercolor called *The Song of the Peterbird* (the Audubon Guide says that the tufted titmouse cries peter loudly and persistently all year long) was transformed thirty years later into a hymn to both the painter's creative renewal and the earth's sexual reawakening. "It is impossible to imagine anything better or more beautiful than this world," Burchfield wrote; "Like Corot, I hope there will be painting [in Heaven], but somehow it does not seem logical."

The problem confronting the modern painter, Baudelaire once observed, is what to paint. There seems to be no debate about our longing for the infinite; the question which troubled and continues to trouble twentieth-century painters is whether or not the traditional subjects of the natural sublime--"the elemental big forms," as Marin called them--adequately convey the complexity of our longings. Barnett Newman says in his famous essay "The Sublime is Now.:"

We are reasserting man's natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the absolute emotions. We do not need the obsolete props of an outmoded and antiquated legend. We are creating images whose reality is self-evident and which are devoid of the props and crutches that evoke associations with outmoded images, both sublime and beautiful. We are freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you, that have been the devices of Western European painting. Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, or "life," we are making it out of our own feelings. The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history.

(*Tiger's Eye*, 1948)

Harold Rosenberg declared that in Newman's aesthetic, the Burning Bush "might resemble a demonstration by Einstein, never a Christmas tree." But isn't there something impoverishing in the notion of an art which excludes the "impediments of memory" and the objects in the world about us? Isn't there something almost perverse in shutting ourselves off from nature as the subject of our art and turning more and more inward into the abyss of the self? These questions are repeated often in the art criticism of the 1930s and 1940s. No one ever entertained the idea of the Victorian Christmas tree as an adequate representative of the sublime, but what of the larger forms, the mountain or the sea? Wallace Stevens, as he meditates on the question of "The American Sublime" (1935), wonders whether the whole concept isn't outdated, a part of the conventional and now outmoded accouterments of nineteenth-century tourism:

How does one stand
To behold the sublime,
To confront the mockers,
The mickey mockers
And plated pairs?

When General Jackson
Posed for his statue
He knew how one feels.
Shall a man go barefoot

Blinking and blank?

But how does one feel?
One grows used to the weather,
The landscape and that;
And the sublime comes down
To the spirit itself,

The spirit and space,
The empty spirit
In vacant space.
What wine does one drink?
What bread does one eat?

To ponder the question of the sublime, Stevens says, is to address the question of our mortality, because the sublime is a way of talking about the vast and the infinite -- all those things which make a mockery of our frail selves. But in an age without belief, the sublime itself is a concept which seems like so much Mickey-Mouse, a rather tarnished idea like some unwanted silver candlesticks received for a wedding present ("plated pairs"). We know, Stevens says, how Victorian heroes like General Jackson entered heaven -- in full-dress uniform astride a stallion whose left foot would be held forever above the ground -- but we've given all that up. How then does one meet one's maker? The nineteenth-century artist, like Wordsworth, saw the Apocalypse at the Simplon Pass, but we've rejected that too, for "ourselves" and "our feelings," as Barnett Newman put it, leaving the self confronting not Nature, but the Self; what Harold Bloom describes as an abyss of spirit in an abyss of space. It's a position which Stevens finds, finally, absurd because we derive our sustenance not from pure spirit, but from the world around us. The natural sublime may not be a Book of Revelations, but it offers, Stevens tells us -- and a number of modern painters would concur -- the only guide to absolutes that we shall ever know.

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Resource Library editor's note

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The Great Book of Nature (Italian: Il Grande Libro della Natura) is an Italian-Canadian-North Korean animated series produced by Mondo TV and SEK Studio in 1999. It is composed of non-sequential episodes hosted by a bear, this series features various kind of creatures, such as fish, insects and birds, while depicting their different habitats - whether sea, land or sky. At the end of each episode, the audience is treated to instructive sets of questions and answers that teach young viewers about a