

## **Lecture #9: Mountain Gloom, Mountain Glory: Sublime and Picturesque**

### **Suggested Readings:**

Jonathan Wordsworth *et al.*, *William Wordsworth and the Age of English Romanticism* (1987)  
Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825-75* (1980)  
Bryan Wolf, *Romantic Re-Vision* (1982) (especially chapter on Thomas Cole)  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, *American Paradise: The World of the Hudson River School* (1987)  
John Wilmerding, ed., *American Light: The Luminist Movement, 1850-1875* (1980)  
Elizabeth McKinsey, *Niagara Falls: Icon of the American Sublime* (1985)  
Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, 1995; *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005)  
Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (1995)  
John Conron, *American Picturesque* (2000)

### **Outline:**

#### **I. Introduction: The Romantic Legacy**

romanticism as single most important influence on American notions of landscape: we remain heirs to romantic tradition, which is strongly present in environmentalist thought  
key generalization: romanticism as example of, and reaction against, secularization of western European culture and religiosity typical of Enlightenment and after  
against threat of scientific empiricism, romantics rediscover god/spirituality in nature  
Thomas Cole's "View from Mt. Holyoke...After a Thunderstorm" (1836) as leitmotif: oxbow as image of eternal return, wilderness into pastoral, rise and fall of civilization: behind seemingly realistic image of nature, apocalypse & vision of sublime

#### **II. European Prologue: Revolution and Reaction**

importance of French Revolution for English romantics: revolutionary ideals, reaction to excesses of Terror and Napoleon, retreat into individualistic encounter with Nature  
John Martin's "The Bard," (1817) poet as lone prophet in sublime landscape of wilderness  
William Wordsworth (1770-1850) as key figure, moment on Simplon Pass in Prelude as paradigmatic encounter with Sublime: vast force of Nature as deity (mts, storms, etc)  
Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime & Beautiful*, 1757: sublime dark, large, awesome, terrifying, painful; beautiful orderly, smooth, polished, pleasurable. Sublime as surrogate for God in Nature.

Wm Blake's attack on Newton: mechanistic empiricism obscures energy/spirit behind "reason"  
romanticism as reaction to emerging industrialism & cities; Constable, Turner landscapes

#### **III. Self, Spirit, and Transcendence**

Americans viewed Revolution as *successful*, so more optimistic about combining romantic and progressive ideals than Europeans: relation of republic to Nature as key to dilemma.  
Ralph Waldo Emerson, (1803-82): book *Nature* in 1836 as manifesto of Transcendentalism, one American version of romanticism. Experience universe directly. Mystic optimism.  
Henry David Thoreau, (1817-1862): disciple of Emerson, retreat to Walden 1845-7 acted out romantic dream of direct encounter with Nature, imagination unencumbered by society  
Thoreau more direct observer than Emerson, but both saw Nature as infused with Spirit

#### **IV. Thomas Cole: Landscape and Romantic History**

Thomas Cole, (1810-48): helped create new genre of wilderness landscape painting, darker and more complicated relation to romantic conception of American nature  
Claude Lorraine's pastoral paintings of 17th century as key source of romantic landscapes; his motifs include vegetative framing, idling foreground figures, rustic bldgs, stream or road holds foreground and middle ground together, grazing animals, etc., all of which are employed by romantic painters  
problem of painting historical epics in landscape without history: infuse land with moral vision: embrace of wilderness landscapes as ultimate terrain for encountering sublime  
nationalistic problem of American artists, apologetic for lack of historical depth to national landscape (no classical ruins or monuments), so used wilderness and monumental natural wonders as alternative presence of Sublime inevitably shapes even "non-human" landscapes  
notions of America as primordial wilderness, Garden, original paradise, paradise regained.  
Cole's landscapes express drama of God, humanity, Nature, and declension. cf. narrative sequence on Course of Empire (1833-6): Savagery to Pastoral to Empire to Desolation  
all past empires had risen from pastoral innocence into imperial glory only to fall back into decadence and savagery, and landscapes recapitulated this cycle  
pastoral state ideal condition for Cole, akin to American frontier: but could it survive?  
view from Mt. Holyoke thus becomes anxiety-laden, sinister: fertile lowlands as signs of what: pastoral republican landscape? or early signs of imperial decadence?

#### **V. The Picturesque as Symbol and Commodity**

as more landscape transformed from wild, increasing efforts by leisured tourists to visit resort hotels like Catskill Mountain House (1823) becomes romantic escapes from city:

among most popular of artistic subjects, itself absorbed into sublime icon

paintings shape travel experience (and vice versa) through mechanism of picturesque

landscapes composed, framed, thematized as paintings according to principles set forth by William Gilpin in his 1792 *Three Essays on Picturesque Beauty, Picturesque Travel, and on Sketching Landscape*:

Claudian and other principles formalized and standardized

Lower Hudson Valley, Palisades as popular location for picturesque steamboat excursions: guidebooks

indicate favorite views, standardize travelers' experience to match art

but real monument to American exceptionalism was Niagara Falls: natural wonder as surrogate for missing historical depth of European landscape.

probably most frequently painted icon in entire North American landscape, capable of being assimilated to sublime, picturesque, republican nationalism, popular spectacle

also became key destination for tourism, with resulting crowding of commodified landscape

note use in advertisements as early as 1830s: hair restorers, shredded wheat, Hollywood

back to Cole's Mt. Holyoke view: 19th century as turning point for American relation to landscape. America as wilderness, garden, Nature's Nation, empire, commodity.