

ROMANTICS ON THE MOUNTAIN TOP

(Revised Fall 2020)

This packet provides several primary documents in which well-known nineteenth-century writers and artists describe their experiences with sublime mountain landscapes. Our modern usage of the word “sublime” has changed a great deal from that of the nineteenth century. For us, it has become just another synonym for “beautiful.” For an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century romantic, on the other hand, “sublime” was a word reserved for those places in nature where one came closest to experiencing a direct face-to-face encounter with God. In the aesthetic writings of Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, and William Gilpin, sublime landscapes included the mountaintop, the canyon, the thunderhead, the chasm, the waterfall, the rainbow.

It is important to remember that visitors to such places, feeling awestruck and overwhelmed, were hardly comfortable: no mere mortal, surely, could feel relaxed when staring into the very face of God. Indeed, early romantic aesthetic theory set “the sublime” and “the beautiful” in direct opposition to each other. The sublime was grand, rough, dark, terrifying, masculine, God the Father; the beautiful was intimate, smooth, light, pleasing, feminine, God the Son. It is only later in the nineteenth century, as “wilderness” came to be an ever more popular destination for romantic travelers and tourists, that the terror of the sublime began to recede. As that happened, the wild became less threatening, and the sublime and the beautiful began to converge. Today, in modern American usage, they have nearly become synonyms. (If you are interested in tracing this history, you might take a look at the definitions of these two words, as well as the word “wilderness,” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*).

In the brief texts that follow, you will see several different reactions to the sublime. The famous passage from William Wordsworth’s “Prelude” (here in the 1805-06 edition) in which he and a companion cross the Simplon Pass in the Alps, is perhaps the best-known example of a sublime experience that is terrifying and awe-inspiring at the same time. For Wordsworth, the mountains are almost literally a biblical text. Next comes the introduction and opening chapter of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s influential book *Nature* (1836). This is followed by a passage (written in the late 1820s) from the American artist Thomas Cole in which he describes his “Bewilderment” while travelling through the Catskills in the Hudson River Valley. Then we have Henry David Thoreau’s description of his ascent of Mt. Katahdin in central Maine, experienced in the late 1840s but not published as part of *The Maine Woods* until 1864. All three of these writers express decidedly ambivalent emotions when facing the sublime, emotions which are in stark contrast with the final passage in which John Muir describes his first encounter, in 1869 (but not actually published until 1911), with the mountain landscape of Yosemite Valley in California.

One of the central riddles of this week’s readings is why Muir describes his experiences so differently from these other writers. Do not make the mistake of taking these texts at face value, or of assuming that Muir is simply “more at home” in the wilderness than the other writers. Do not assume when you read these texts that they are describing real physical landscapes. All four are responding to complex cultural conventions about how to understand and talk about what nature means; and all four share many common assumptions about the relation of wild nature to the godhead. Indeed, the chief difference between them may lie in their different attitudes regarding how best to show respect and piety when standing before God. Each describes an encounter with “Nature,” but each also describes a conception of nature (and of God) that is profoundly cultural in its origins.

To round out these texts, we are also including a couple of reproductions of two famous paintings that are relevant to these literary texts and to the lecture on romantic landscape traditions. The first, Thomas Cole’s “The Oxbow,” painted in 1836, is a classic image of the opposition between a sublime wilderness and the pastoral civilization that is transforming it. You’ll hear more about this during lecture. The second, Frederic Edwin Church’s 1853 “Mt. Katahdin,” takes Maine’s wildest and most remote mountain and gives it an improved, domesticated, pastoral foreground as a prophetic vision of its future--a future that did not exist at the time Church painted the mountain. The relation of the pastoral to the sublime, as with Cole’s painting, is another of the riddles you should be thinking about for this week’s discussions.

William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book VI, 1805-06

The dull and heavy slackening that ensued
Upon those tidings by the peasant given
Was soon dislodged. Downwards we hurried fast,
And entered with the road which we had missed
Into a narrow chasm. The brook and road
Were fellow-travellers in this gloomy pass,
And with them did we journey several hours
At a slow step. The immeasurable height
Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,
The stationary blasts of waterfalls,
The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
The rocks that muttered close upon our ears,
Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside
As if a voice were in them, the sick sight
And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
The unfettered clouds and region 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.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, 1836.

Introduction

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines to-day also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.

Undoubtedly we have no questions to ask which are unanswerable. We must trust the perfection of the creation so far, as to believe that whatever curiosity the order of things has awakened in our minds, the order of things can satisfy. Every man's condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put. He acts it as life, before he apprehends it as truth. In like manner, nature is already, in its forms and tendencies, describing its own design. Let us interrogate the great apparition, that shines so peacefully around us. Let us inquire, to what end is nature?

All science has one aim, namely, to find a theory of nature. We have theories of races and of functions, but scarcely yet a remote approach to an idea of creation. We are now so far from the road to truth, that religious teachers dispute and hate each other, and speculative men are esteemed unsound and frivolous. But to a sound judgment, the most abstract truth is the most practical. Whenever a true theory appears, it will be its own evidence. Its test is, that it will explain all phenomena. Now many are thought not only unexplained but inexplicable; as language, sleep, madness, dreams, beasts, sex.

Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE. In enumerating the values of nature and casting up their sum, I shall use the word in both senses; -- in its common and in its philosophical import. In inquiries so general as our present one, the inaccuracy is not material; no confusion of thought will occur. Nature, in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf. Art is applied to the mixture of his will with the same things, as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture. But his operations taken together are so insignificant, a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing, that in an

impression so grand as that of the world on the human mind, they do not vary the result.

Chapter I NATURE

To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me. But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds, will separate between him and what he touches. One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual presence of the sublime. Seen in the streets of cities, how great they are! If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile.

The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inaccessible; but all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence. Nature never wears a mean appearance. Neither does the wisest man extort her secret, and lose his curiosity by finding out all her perfection. Nature never became a toy to a wise spirit. The flowers, the animals, the mountains, reflected the wisdom of his best hour, as much as they had delighted the simplicity of his childhood.

When we speak of nature in this manner, we have a distinct but most poetical sense in the mind. We mean the integrity of impression made by manifold natural objects. It is this which distinguishes the stick of timber of the wood-cutter, from the tree of the poet. The charming landscape which I saw this morning, is indubitably made up of some twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet. This is the best part of these men's farms, yet to this their warranty-deeds give no title.

To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His intercourse with heaven and earth, becomes part of his daily food. In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows. Nature says, -- he is my creature, and maugre all his impertinent griefs, he shall be glad with me. Not the sun or the summer alone, but every hour and season yields its tribute of delight; for every hour and change corresponds to and authorizes a different state of the mind, from breathless noon to grimmest midnight. Nature is a setting that fits equally well a comic or a

mourning piece. In good health, the air is a cordial of incredible virtue. Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. In the woods too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of life, is always a child. In the woods, is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, -- no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, -- my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, -- all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, -- master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature.

The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me, and I to them. The waving of the boughs in the storm, is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right.

Yet it is certain that the power to produce this delight, does not reside in nature, but in man, or in a harmony of both. It is necessary to use these pleasures with great temperance. For, nature is not always tricked in holiday attire, but the same scene which yesterday breathed perfume and glittered as for the frolic of the nymphs, is overspread with melancholy today. Nature always wears the colors of the spirit. To a man laboring under calamity, the heat of his own fire hath sadness in it. Then, there is a kind of contempt of the landscape felt by him who has just lost by death a dear friend. The sky is less grand as it shuts down over less worth in the population.

Thomas Cole, "The Bewilderment"

(Early prose sketch, undated, in Thomas Cole, *The Collected Essays and Prose Sketches*, ed., Marshall Tymn, The John Colet Press, 1980.)

The sun hung low in the sky, and to me seemed to haste down with unaccustomed speed; for I was alone & a stranger in the wilderness.

The nearest habitation I knew to be on the other side of a mountain that rose before me, whose tangled woods were well known to the Hunter as the favorite haunt of wild animals. I had travelled far that day; but my road had been through the grand & beautiful of Nature & the delightful excitement of their presence had almost raised me above the reach of fatigue. Though not quite so buoyant in spirit, as in the morning my feet were not slow on the leaf-strewn path.

Men in the midst of society & the tumult of cities do not experience those vicissitudes of feeling that result from the mutation of natural objects. But a lone man in the wild is affected by every change; by the light & the shade[,] the storm and the sunshine. In the morning his spirits are fresh & elastic as the mountain breeze & sad thoughts vanish like mists in the sunbeam & he feels as though fatigue could never overtake him; but when the shades of evening thicken around[,] the winds have voices of sadness & wailing; the sound of the cataract comes through the gloomy arches of the forest, like the sighs of a mourning spirit. I could not but feel a tone of melancholy as I threaded the deepening shadows of the gloomy forest. The road was steep and difficult, and the impervious foliage rose on either side so as to shut from view all distant objects. I at length arrived at the summit of the mountain & a glorious prospect opened. The sun was sinking behind a dark fringe of pines & rocks, & the mountain-shadows stole mysteriously over the deep valleys here & there a beam of light shot from the depths like a star in the midnight firmament & discovered the course of some placid water. On every hand the mountains bore their ancient burthen of woods, from the neighbouring piny ridge, to where the veil of distance dropped from the sky & clothed their outlines in its delicate azure folds. On some of the highest peaks huge clouds were resting, & these illumined by the last red sunbeam shone like torches lifted by the earth to light the lamps of heaven. Ere I could leave this scene, twilight had gathered round & the air was chill.

Anxious to reach my intended [place] of rest I now hurried on with redoubled speed. My path was fast descending into a deep valley[;] the shades deepened at every step & rendered its windings more & more obscure. Several times I hesitated in doubt of its course; for the fallen leaves were heaped upon it. I at length lost it entirely. A Tornado had recently passed in this direction & had laid prostrate every tree in its track of desolation. Long I struggled through the entangled roots & branches; but they seemed interminable.

I became perplexed & bewildered & was utterly ignorant in what direction the nearest human habitation lay.

Fatigued & disheartened, supperless & unsheltered as I was[,] I sat down with the resolution of waiting patiently the coming of day. This was a transient resolution. The air grew cold; wild clouds hurried across the sky & the wind moaned fitfully through the forest. I could bear inaction no longer. Again I endeavoured to extricate myself from the windfall. It was a perilous labour. I climbed, stooped, was struck by the limbs of trees, and several times fell among the crashing branches. At length to [my] infinite satisfaction I beheld the starry sky unbroken by the branches of trees.

I advanced into the clear space; but stood again[,] for the earths before me was of a pitchy blackness; and yet I imagined that I could discern objects lying upon it[,] and the rough outline of the mountain rose a short distance beyond. I ventured a little farther and again stood in hesitation; but not long. The earth beneath my feet broke away & I was precipitated down a shelving steep. I clung to roots & shrubs as I descended but they failed me. Swiftly I shot down the steep accompanied by loose earth & stones; coming to a more precipitous place I was plunged headlong. How far I fell I know not; a deep water received me. Emerging from the depth[,] in my struggle I caught hold of a rock that rose above the surface[,] and dragging myself upon it lay for some [time] exhausted and motionless. After recovering a little I endeavoured to ascertain the nature of my situation; but the centre of the earth could not be darker than the gulf into which I had fallen. Excepting a small spot of blue sky far over my head with a single star twinkling in it, all was in blackness. I soon discovered that the fragment of rock on which I rested was an island in the midst of a pool; with whose depth & dimensions I was utterly ignorant.

I remained on the rock for some time in total inaction until my limbs ached with cold. The lone star that I had seen in the sky was extinguished, and there was utter darkness.

I heard the winds howling in the woody crags far above me & the nearer trees moaned as the[y] chafed each other. A large drop of rain fell in my face. My situation was one of painful uncertainty. I thought: if the rain falls as it threatens to do, the torrents from the precipices' round will descend and sweep me from this low rock. Nothing is so painful as suspense & inaction in situations of danger, & I found it impossible long to remain quiescent. Taking firm hold of the rock I lowered myself into the water, but found it beyond my depth and had great difficulty in regaining my former situation. I then tried the other side and with better success[;] it was no[t] so deep. The footing being uncertain I proceeded cautiously and had not waded far before I struck against some object and found it to be a perpendicular wall of rock. The knowledge of this fact chilled my heart. The rain now fell in torrents and despair came with the consciousness that I was imprisoned within

walls of unscaleable stone. "Here" I exclaimed "I shall perish & none shall hear my dying groan. And my friends shall never know my fate." This train of thought was brief & I felt how ignoble it was to yield to despair whilst I had strength left. I now raised my voice in the hope that I might be heard; but my voice mingled with the roar of the storm without an echo. I endeavoured to discover if there was any current in the water so that I might ascertain in what direction to seek the outlet; but alas! it was duller than Styx. I again commenced exploring. I kept close to the rock and cautiously waded round the pool, that in some parts was fearfully deep. At length I thought I heard the sound of falling water. I listened & was confirmed, stooped & found a low arch through which the water was rushing. One moment I stood in thought ere I ventured into this subterranean passage. Where might it lead? Perhaps to unfathomable gulfs, into black labyrinths, into the dayless caverns of the earth. In vain imagination [I] pictured dreadful things. It was my only hope, for by this time the rain fell in torrents and the sound of "many waters" came from the neighbouring crags. I entered; it was [a] fearful mystery that I had to unravel; the cave yawned like [a] sepulchre. The stream dashed furiously in its wild descent; the passage was low and I crept on my hands and knees among the rocks & water. Happily the stream was shallow; it was a dreadful road and as it sank far into the depths of the earth, my despair grew deeper & deeper. I now came where the stream flowed in silence and the water deepened. It appeared to me that I was passing through a broad subterranean lake, and the silence of the centre was undisturbed but by the sound of the distant stream I had left behind me or [by] my own motion in the water which echoed drearily through the vaulted chamber. My despair grew now to desperation and I began to feel a kind of pleasure in the fearful sublimity of my situation. I rushed on as the bottom was comparatively smooth; but the water grew too deep and I could not swim. Turning 'round to find a shallower place I struck my head against something that appeared to yield to the blow; it was a branch that stretched from the trunk of a small tree which rested on a rock and most likely had been cast there at some period when the water was high. A sudden thought shot through my mind. I climbed the rock and lifting the tree it rolled into the water with a heavy splash and it was some time before I found it in the deep darkness. I then seized the trunk with both hands and pushed it before me through the water; it was not long before the depth was too great for me[,] and grasping the tree more effectually I floated over the waters. My progress must have been slow for I trusted to the current to carry me where it would. Tedious was the time I spent in this strange voyage, but it ended. I heard a sound[;] it seemed at first to have an immense distance but it grew nearer & louder until I felt my bark was moving rapidly; that sound horrified me[;] it was the troubled noise of conflicting air & water, that whirlpool sound. More rapidly & apparently in circles my supporter speeded on; and the vortex roared loud and close when a sudden shock almost threw me from my hold; the tree appeared to remain stationary, though it swung to and fro in the

rushing stream. In its vibration I felt my feet touch the bottom and clinging yet to the tree I stepped carefully towards that end that was fixed. I know not by what means the tree was held in its place but I soon found myself walking on a sandy beach. A strange luminous appearance not far from me invited my steps, for light from whatever source was light. I approached it; it was a beautiful but strange brightness on a spot of smooth sand. I stretched my hand to touch it and[,] behold[,] my hand was illuminated and cast a shadow. I turned and beheld the blessed moon, looking down a long cavernous passage, like a pitying Angel of light. I knelt down and could have worshipped it. I hasted out of the cave though not without some difficult clambering & found myself once more in the upper world with a weary body but a thankful heart. I had come out in a wood on the slope of a hill[.] The last clouds of the storm were dissipating[,] and the moon was setting clear behind a range of distant mountains—the kind moon that had been my better Angel if I had been a Pagan. She of the silver bow would ever more have been the deity of my adoration. Though the moon was setting the day was dawning & there was light enough to enable me to pursue my way had I known in what direction. I was released from my uncertainty by the barking of dogs. Following the course of the sound I soon came to a log cabin[:] after being in great danger of being torn to pieces by the dogs I gained admittance [and] was soon sitting by [a] glorious fire, in an arm chair made of the fantastic root of a tree, a good natured looking woman busy cooking some venison steaks before me, and a tall, inquisitive, but hospitable hunter enquiring "how I came to get into the Pot" as he called the place where I had spent the night so delectably.

**Henry David Thoreau, "Ktaadn,"
The Maine Woods, 1864.**

At length I entered within the skirts of the cloud which seemed forever drifting over the summit, and yet would never be gone, but was generated out of that pure air as fast as it flowed away; and when, a quarter of a mile farther, I reached the summit of the ridge, which those who have seen in clearer weather say is about five miles long, and contains a thousand acres of table-land, I was deep within the hostile ranks of clouds, and all objects were obscured by them. Now the wind would blow me out a yard of clear sunlight, wherein I stood; then a gray, dawning light was all it could accomplish, the cloud-line ever rising and falling with the wind's intensity. Sometimes it seemed as if the summit would be cleared in a few moments, and smile in sunshine: but what was gained on one side was lost on another. It was like sitting in a chimney and waiting for the smoke to blow away. It was, in fact, a cloud-factory, — these were the cloud-works, and the wind turned them off done from the cool, bare rocks. Occasionally, when the windy columns broke in to me, I caught sight of a dark, damp crag to the right or left; the mist driving ceaselessly between it and me. It

reminded me of the creations of the old epic and dramatic poets, of Atlas, Vulcan, the Cyclops, and Prometheus. Such was Caucasus and the rock where Prometheus was bound. Æschylus had no doubt visited such scenery as this. It was vast, Titanic, and such as man never inhabits. Some part of the beholder, even some vital part, seems to escape through the loose grating of his ribs as he ascends. He is more lone than you can imagine. There is less of substantial thought and fair understanding in him, than in the plains where men inhabit. His reason is dispersed and shadowy, more thin and subtle, like the air. 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 on him as in the plains. She seems to say sternly, why came ye here before your time? This ground is not prepared for you. Is it 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? Shouldst thou freeze or starve, or shudder thy life away, here is no shrine, nor altar, nor any access to my ear.

**John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*,
Chapter 5, "The Yosemite," published in 1911, but
originally composed for 1869 journal**

15 JULY. Followed the Mono Trail up the eastern rim of the basin nearly to its summit, then turned off southward to a small shallow valley that extends to the edge of the Yosemite, which we reached about noon, and encamped. After luncheon I made haste to high ground, and from the top of the ridge on the west side of Indian Canyon gained the noblest view of the summit peaks I have ever yet enjoyed. Nearly all the upper basin of the Merced was displayed, with its sublime domes and canyons, dark upsweeping forests, and glorious array of white peaks deep in the sky, every feature glowing, radiating beauty that pours into our flesh and bones like heat rays from fire. Sunshine over all; no breath of wind to stir the brooding calm. Never before had I seen so glorious a landscape, so boundless an affluence of sublime mountain beauty. The most extravagant description I might give of this view to any one who has not seen similar landscapes with his own eyes would not so much as hint its grandeur and the spiritual glow that covered it. I shouted and gesticulated in a wild burst of ecstasy, much to the astonishment of St Bernard Carlo, who came running up to me, manifesting in his intelligent eyes a puzzled concern that was very ludicrous, which had the effect of bringing me to my senses. A brown bear, too, it would seem, had been a spectator of the show I had made of myself, for I had gone but a few yards when I started one from a thicket of brush. He evidently considered me dangerous, for he ran away very fast, tumbling over the tops of the tangled manzanita

bushes in his haste. Carlo drew back, with his ears depressed as if afraid, and kept looking me in the face, as if expecting me to pursue and shoot, for he had seen many a bear battle in his day.

Following the ridge, which made a gradual descent to the south, I came at length to the brow of that massive cliff that stands between Indian Canyon and Yosemite halls, and here the far-famed valley came suddenly into view throughout almost its whole extent. The noble walls sculptured into endless variety of domes and gables, spires and battlements and plain mural precipices all atremble with the thunder tones of the falling water. The level bottom seemed to be dressed like a garden - sunny meadows here and there, and groves of pine and oak; the river of Mercy sweeping in majesty through the midst of them and flashing back the sunbeams. The great Tissiack, or Half Dome, rising at the upper end of the valley to a height of nearly a mile, is nobly proportioned and lifelike, the most impressive of all the rocks, holding the eye in devout admiration, calling it back again and again from falls or meadows, or even the mountains beyond - marvellous cliffs, marvellous in sheer dizzy depth and sculpture, types of endurance. Thousands of years have they stood in the sky exposed to rain, snow, frost, earthquake and avalanche, yet they still wear the bloom of youth.

I rambled along the valley rim to the westward; most of it is rounded off on the very brink, so that it is not easy to find places where one may look clear down the face of the wall to the bottom. When such places were found and I had cautiously set my feet and drawn my body erect, I could not help fearing a little that the rock might split off and let me down, and what a down! - more than three thousand feet. Still my limbs did not tremble, nor did I feel the least uncertainty as to the reliance to be placed on them. My only fear was that a flake of the granite, which in some places showed joints more or less open and running parallel with the face of the cliff, might give way. After withdrawing from such places, excited with the view I had got, I would say to myself, 'Now don't go out on the verge again.' But in the face of Yosemite scenery cautious remonstrance is vain; under its spell one's body seems to go where it likes with a will over which we seem to have scarce any control.

After a mile or so of this memorable cliff work I approached Yosemite Creek, admiring its easy, graceful, confident gestures as it comes bravely forward in its narrow channel, singing the last of its mountain songs on its way to its fate - a few rods more over the shining granite, then down half a mile in showy foam to another world, to be lost in the Merced, where climate, vegetation, inhabitants, all are different. Emerging from its last gorge, it glides in wide lace-like rapids down a smooth incline into a pool where it seems to rest and compose its grey, agitated waters before taking the grand plunge, then slowly slipping over the lip of the pool basin, it descends another

glossy slope with rapidly accelerated speed to the brink of the tremendous cliff, and with sublime, fateful confidence springs out free in the air.

I took off my shoes and stockings and worked my way cautiously down alongside the rushing flood, keeping my feet and hands pressed firmly on the polished rock. The booming, roaring water, rushing past close to my head, was very exciting. I had expected that the sloping apron would terminate with the perpendicular wall of the valley, and that from the foot of it, where it is less steeply inclined, I should be able to lean far enough out to see the forms and behaviour of the fall all the way down to the bottom. But I found that there was yet another small brow over which I could not see, and which appeared to be too steep for mortal feet. Scanning it keenly, I discovered a narrow shelf about three inches wide on the very brink, just wide enough for a rest for one's heels. But there seemed to be no way of reaching it over so steep a brow. At length, after careful scrutiny of the surface, I found an irregular edge of a flake of the rock some distance back from the margin of the torrent. If I was to get down to the brink at all that rough edge, which might offer slight finger holds, was the only way. But the slope beside it looked dangerously smooth and steep, and the swift roaring flood beneath, overhead, and beside me was very nerve trying. I therefore concluded not to venture farther, but did nevertheless. Tufts of artemisia were growing in clefts of the rock nearby, and I filled my mouth with the bitter leaves, hoping they might help to prevent giddiness. Then, with a caution not known in ordinary circumstances, I crept down safely to the little ledge, got my heels well planted on it, then shuffled in a horizontal direction twenty or thirty feet until close to the outplunging current, which, by the time it had descended thus far, was already white. Here I obtained a perfectly free view down into the heart of the snowy, chanting throng of comet-like streamers, into which the body of the fall soon separates.

While perched on that narrow niche I was not distinctly conscious of danger. The tremendous grandeur of the fall in form and sound and motion, acting at close range, smothered the sense of fear, and in such places one's body takes keen care for safety on its own account. How long I remained down there, or how I returned, I can hardly tell. Anyhow I had a glorious time, and got back to camp about dark, enjoying triumphant exhilaration soon followed by dull weariness. Hereafter I'll try to keep from such extravagant, nerve straining places. Yet such a day is well worth venturing for. My first view of the High Sierra, first view looking down into Yosemite, the death song of Yosemite Creek, and its flight over the vast cliff, each one of these is of itself enough for a great lifelong landscape fortune - a most memorable day of days - enjoyment enough to kill if that were possible.

19 July. About noon, as usual, big bossy cumuli began to grow above the forest, and the rainstorm pouring from them is the most imposing I have yet seen. The silvery zigzag lightning lances are longer than usual and the thunder gloriously impressive, keen, crashing, intensely concentrated, speaking with such tremendous energy it would seem that an entire mountain is being shattered at every stroke, but probably only a few trees are being shattered, many of which I have seen on my walks hereabouts strewn the ground. At last the clear ringing strokes are succeeded by deep low tones that grow gradually fainter as they roll afar into the recesses of the echoing mountains, where they seem to be welcomed home. Then another and another peal, or rather crashing, splintering stroke, follows in quick succession, perchance splitting some giant pine or fir from top to bottom into long rails and slivers, and scattering them to all points of the compass. Now comes the rain, with corresponding extravagant grandeur, covering the ground high and low with a sheet of flowing water, a transparent film fitted like a skin upon the rugged anatomy of the landscape, making the rocks glitter and glow, gathering in the ravines, flooding the streams, and making them shout and boom in reply to the thunder.

How interesting to trace the history of a single raindrop! It is not long, geologically speaking, as we have seen, since the first raindrops fell on the newborn leafless Sierra landscapes. How different the lot of these falling now! Happy the showers that fall on so fair a wilderness - scarce a single drop can fail to find a beautiful spot - on the tops of the peaks, on the shining glacier pavements, on the great smooth domes, on forests and gardens and brushy moraines, plashing, glinting, pattering, laving. Some go to the high snowy fountains to swell their well-saved stores; some, into the lakes, washing the mountain windows, patting their smooth glassy levels, making dimples and bubbles and spray; some into the waterfalls and cascades, as if eager to join in their dance and song and beat their foam yet finer; good luck and good work for the happy mountain raindrops, each one of them a high waterfall in itself, descending from the cliffs and hollows of the clouds to the cliffs and hollows of the rocks, out of the sky-thunder into the thunder of the falling rivers. Some, falling on meadows and bogs, creep silently out of sight to the grass roots, hiding softly as in a nest, slipping, oozing hither, thither, seeking and finding their appointed work. Some, descending through the spires of the woods, sift spray through the shining needles, whispering peace and good cheer to each one of them. Some drops with happy aim glint on the sides of crystals - quartz, hornblende, garnet, zircon, tourmaline, feldspar - patter on grains of gold and heavy way-worn nuggets; some, with blunt plap-plap and low bass drumming, fall on the broad leaves of veratrum, saxifrage, cypripedium. Some happy drops fall straight into the cups of flowers, kissing the lips of lilies. How far they have to go, how many cups to fill, great and small, cells too small to be seen, cups holding half a drop as well as lake basins between the hills, each replenished

with equal care, every drop in all the blessed throng a silvery newborn star with lake and river, garden and grove, valley and mountain, all that the landscape holds reflected in its crystal depths, God's messenger, angel of love sent on its way with majesty and pomp and display of power that make man's greatest shows ridiculous.

Now the storm is over, the sky is clear, the last rolling thunder-wave is spent on the peaks, and where are the raindrops now—what has become of all the shining throng? In winged vapour rising some are already hastening back to the sky, some have gone into the plants, creeping through invisible doors into the round rooms of cells, some are locked in crystals of ice, some in rock crystals, some in porous moraines to keep their small springs flowing, some have gone journeying on in the rivers to join the larger raindrop of the ocean. From form to form, beauty to beauty, ever changing, never resting, all are speeding on with love's enthusiasm, singing with the stars the eternal song of creation.

20 July. Fine calm morning; air tense and clear; not the slightest breeze astir; everything shining, the rocks with wet crystals, the plants with dew, each receiving its portion of irised dewdrops and sunshine like living creatures getting their breakfast, their dew manna coming down from the starry sky like swarms of smaller stars. How wondrous fine are the particles in showers of dew, thousands required for a single drop, growing in the dark as silently as the grass! What pains are taken to keep this wilderness in health—showers of snow, showers of rain, showers of dew, floods of light, floods of invisible vapour, clouds, winds, all sorts of weather, interaction of plant on plant and animal on animal, beyond thought! How fine Nature's methods! How deeply with beauty is beauty overlaid! The ground covered with crystals, the crystals with mosses and lichens and low-spreading grasses and flowers, these with larger plants leaf over leaf with ever changing colour and form, the broad palms of the firs outspread over these, the azure dome over all like a bellflower, and star above star.

Yonder stands the South Dome, its crown high above our camp, though its base is four thousand feet below us; a most noble rock, it seems full of thought, clothed with living light, no sense of dead stone about it, all spiritualised, neither heavy looking nor light, steadfast in serene strength like a god.

Our shepherd is a queer character and hard to place in this wilderness. His bed is a hollow made in red dry rot punky dust beside a log which forms a portion of the south wall of the corral. Here he lies with his wonderful everlasting clothing on, wrapped in a red blanket, breathing not only the dust of the decayed wood but also that of the corral, as if determined to take ammoniacal snuff all night after chewing tobacco all day. Following the sheep he carries a heavy six-shooter swung from his belt on one side and his luncheon on the other. The ancient cloth in which the

meat, fresh from the frying pan, is tied serves as a filter through which the clear fat and gravy juices drip down on his right hip and leg in clustering stalactites. This oleaginous formation is soon broken up, however, and diffused and rubbed evenly into his scanty apparel, by sitting down, rolling over, crossing his legs while resting on logs, making shirt and trousers watertight and shiny. His trousers, in particular, have become so adhesive with the mixed fat and resin that pine needles, thin flakes and fibres of bark, hair, mica scales and minute grains of quartz, hornblende, etc., feathers, seed wings, moth and butterfly wings, legs and antennae of innumerable insects, or even whole insects such as the small beetles, moths and mosquitoes, with flower petals, pollen dust and indeed bits of all plants, animals and minerals of the region adhere to them and are safely embedded, so that though far from being a naturalist he collects fragmentary specimens of everything and becomes richer than he knows. His specimens are kept passably fresh too, by the purity of the air and the resinous bituminous beds into which they are pressed. Man is a microcosm, at least our shepherd is, or rather his trousers. These precious overalls are never taken off, and nobody knows how old they are, though one may guess by their thickness and concentric structure. Instead of wearing thin they wear thick, and in their stratification have no small geological significance. Besides herding the sheep, Billy is the butcher, while I have agreed to wash the few iron and tin utensils and make the bread. Then, these small duties done, by the time the sun is fairly above the mountain tops I am beyond the flock, free to rove and revel in the wilderness all the big immortal days.

Sketching on the North Dome. It commands views of nearly all the valley besides a few of the high mountains. I would fain draw everything in sight - rock, tree, and leaf. But little can I do beyond mere outlines - marks with meanings like words, readable only to myself - yet I sharpen my pencils and work on as if others might possibly be benefited. Whether these picture-sheets are to vanish like fallen leaves or go to friends like letters, matters not much; for little can they tell to those who have not themselves seen similar wilderness, and like a language have learned it. No pain here, no dull empty hours, no fear of the past, no fear of the future. These blessed mountains are so compactly filled with God's beauty, no petty personal hope or experience has room to be. Drinking this champagne water is pure pleasure, so is breathing the living air, and every movement of limbs is pleasure, while the body seems to feel beauty when exposed to it as it feels the campfire or sunshine, entering not by the eyes alone, but equally through all one's flesh like radiant heat, making a passionate ecstatic pleasure glow not explainable. One's body then seems homogeneous throughout, sound as a crystal.

Perched like a fly on this Yosemite dome, I gaze and sketch and bask, oftentimes settling down into dumb admiration without definite hope of ever learning much, yet with the longing, unresting effort that lies at the door of

hope, humbly prostrate before the vast display of God's power, and eager to offer self-denial and renunciation with eternal toil to learn any lesson in the divine manuscript.

It is easier to feel than to realise, or in any way explain, Yosemite grandeur. The magnitudes of the rocks and trees and streams are so delicately harmonised they are mostly hidden. Sheer precipices three thousand feet high are fringed with tall trees growing close like grass on the brow of a lowland hill, and extending along the feet of these precipices a ribbon of meadow a mile wide and seven or eight long, that seems like a strip a farmer might mow in less than a day. Waterfalls, five hundred to one or two thousand feet high, are so subordinated to the mighty cliffs over which they pour that they seem like wisps of smoke, gentle as floating clouds, though their voices fill the valley and make the rocks tremble. The mountains too, along the eastern sky, and the domes in front of them, and the succession of smooth rounded waves between, swelling higher, higher, with dark woods in their hollows, serene in massive exuberant bulk and beauty, tend yet more to hide the grandeur of the Yosemite temple and make it appear as a subdued subordinate feature of the vast harmonious landscape. Thus every attempt to appreciate any one feature is beaten down by the overwhelming influence of all the others. And, as if this were not enough, lo! in the sky arises another mountain range with topography as rugged and substantial-looking as the one beneath it - snowy peaks and domes and shadowy Yosemite valley - another version of the snowy Sierra, a new creation heralded by a thunderstorm. How fiercely, devoutly wild is Nature in the midst of her beauty-loving tenderness! - painting lilies, watering them, caressing them with gentle hand, going from flower to flower like a gardener while building rock mountains and cloud mountains full of lightning and rain. Gladly we run for shelter beneath an overhanging cliff and examine the reassuring ferns and mosses, gentle love tokens growing in cracks and chinks. Daisies too, and iviesias, confiding wild children of light, too small to fear. To these one's heart goes home, and the voices of the storm become gentle. Now the sun breaks forth and fragrant steam arises. The birds are out singing on the edges of the groves. The west is flaming in gold and purple, ready for the ceremony of the sunset, and back I go to camp with my notes and pictures, the best of them printed in my mind as dreams. A fruitful day, without measured beginning or ending. A terrestrial eternity. A gift of good God.

Wrote to my mother and a few friends, mountain hints to each. They seem as near as if within voice-reach or touch. The deeper the solitude the less the sense of loneliness, and the nearer our friends. Now bread and tea, fir bed and goodnight to Carlo, a look at the sky lilies, and death sleep until the dawn of another Sierra tomorrow.

23 July. Another midday cloudland, displaying power and beauty that one never wearies in beholding, but hopelessly unsketchable and untellable. What can poor mortals say about clouds? While a description of their huge glowing domes and ridges, shadowy gulfs and canyons, and feather-edged ravines is being tried, they vanish, leaving no visible ruins. Nevertheless, these fleeting sky mountains are as substantial and significant as the more lasting upheavals of granite beneath them. Both alike are built up and die, and in God's calendar difference of duration is nothing. We can only dream about them in wondering, worshipping admiration, happier than we dare tell even to friends who see farthest in sympathy, glad to know that not a crystal or vapour particle of them, hard or soft, is lost; that they sink and vanish only to rise again and again in higher and higher beauty. As to our own work, duty, influence, etc., concerning which so much fussy pother is made, it will not fail of its due effect, though, like a lichen on a stone, we keep silent.

24 July. Clouds at noon occupying about half the sky gave half an hour of heavy rain to wash one of the cleanest landscapes in the world. How well it is washed! The sea is hardly less dusty than the ice-burnished pavements and ridges, domes and canyons, and summit peaks plashed with snow like waves with foam. How fresh the woods are and calm after the last films of clouds have been wiped from the sky! A few minutes ago every tree was excited, bowing to the roaring storm, waving, swirling, tossing their branches in glorious enthusiasm like worship. But though to the outer ear these trees are now silent, their songs never cease. Every hidden cell is throbbing with music and life, every fibre thrilling like harp strings, while incense is ever flowing from the balsam bells and leaves. No wonder the hills and groves were God's first temples, and the more they are cut down and hewn into cathedrals and churches, the farther off and dimmer seems the Lord himself. The same may be said of stone temples. Yonder, to the eastward of our camp grove, stands one of Nature's cathedrals, hewn from the living rock, almost conventional in form, about two thousand feet high, nobly adorned with spires and pinnacles, thrilling under floods of sunshine as if alive like a grove-temple, and well named 'Cathedral Peak.' Even Shepherd Billy turns at times to this wonderful mountain building, though apparently deaf to all stone sermons. Snow that refused to melt in fire would hardly be more wonderful than unchanging dullness in the rays of God's beauty. I have been trying to get him to walk to the brink of Yosemite for a view, offering to watch the sheep for a day, while he should enjoy what tourists come from all over the world to see. But though within a mile of the famous valley, he will not go to it even out of mere curiosity. 'What', says he, 'is Yosemite but a canyon - a lot of rocks - a hole in the ground - a place dangerous about falling into - a d—d good place to keep away from.' 'But think of the waterfalls, Billy - just think of that, and the sound it makes. You can hear it now like the roar of the sea.' Thus I pressed Yosemite upon him like a missionary offering the gospel, but he would have none of it. 'I should

be afraid to look over so high a wall,' he said. 'It would make my head swim. There is nothing worth seeing anywhere, only rocks, and I see plenty of them here. Tourists that spend their money to see rocks and falls are fools, that's all. You can't humbug me. I've been in this country too long for that.' Such souls, I suppose, are asleep, or smothered and befogged beneath mean pleasures and cares.



Thomas Cole, "The Oxbow," 1836



Frederic Edwin Church, "Mount Ktaadn," 1853