

# An “American Sublime” in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Philosophy

## 1. Introduction

Martin Johnson Heade’s painting *Thunder Storm on Narragansett Bay* has been called “one of the masterpieces of American art.”<sup>1</sup> A striking and paradigm work of the Luminist landscape tradition of painting of the American nineteenth century, it represents the greatness of nature and a feeling of the sublime arising from an intimate felt-engagement with nature. The sublime is a common theme of Luminism, and in Heade’s painting it specifically corresponds to the tensely felt moment before an encroaching thunderstorm. In the image several details contribute to its expression. There is the large black cloud dominating and consuming the sky, and a conspicuous strike of lightning and streaks of rain descending in the not far off distance. Also in the sky are disturbed seabirds flying away from the darkness. Throughout the landscape there is a scarcity of human life, yet there remain two discernible human figures who are alone and isolated. These figures, as well as the other objects represented in the scene, are each confined to a spatial solitude. On the coastline in the foreground are the skeletons of boats, the possible remains of having been once overcome by nature and a sign of again being overcome in the near future. Off the coast, the still water, like the calm air, feels tense and uneasy since its placid state will not last long given the impending storm. All these elements

---

<sup>1</sup> Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr., *The Life and Works of Martin Johnson Heade: A Critical Analysis and Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 77.

arguably contribute to an overall ominous and anxious mood that is characteristic of an impending violent thunderstorm. That feeling furthermore is a form of the sublime as it concerns a sense of awe before nature's great power. As an observer of the painting, we can relate to this feeling that it represents by recalling our own actual memories of similar past experiences.<sup>2</sup>

This essay begins with an interpretation of Heade's painting because that work will serve as a primary example of the its topic, namely a unique sense of the sublime that is found in nineteenth-century American landscape paintings, works associated with the Hudson River School and its subsequent tradition of Luminism.<sup>3</sup> This "American sublime" can be distinguished from traditional conceptions of the sublime in the history of aesthetics, and it is grounded in the contemporaneous philosophy of New England Transcendentalism and Ralph Waldo Emerson, which itself has its roots in the philosophies of Spinoza, F.W.J. Schelling, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and other post-Kantians, and has its successors in Charles Peirce, Wallace Stevens, and other American philosophers and poets.

Yet, there is another reason for opening with Heade's painting. More than an example of a philosophical idea, it serves as a visual argument for a philosophical idea — understanding "argument" here not limited to formal logical demonstration, but in the

---

<sup>2</sup> For similar interpretations of *Thunder Storm*, see *ibid.*, 77–8; James Thomas Flexner, *That Wilder Image: The Painting of America's Native School from Thomas Cole to Winslow Homer* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), 229–30; and Gayle L. Smith, "Emerson and the Luminist Painters: A Study of Their Styles," *American Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (1985): 206–8.

<sup>3</sup> Art historians have done some interesting work on identifying a peculiarly American sublime in the paintings. Two works that have significantly contributed to my own understanding of the issue are Earl A. Powell, "Luminism and the American Sublime," in *American Light: The Luminist Movement: 1850–1875*, ed. John Wilmerding (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1980); and Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting 1825–1875* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), chap. 3.

Peircean sense of any sign that tends to produce a belief.<sup>4</sup> That argument stimulates our contemplation of the possibility of artistically expressing the feeling of the sublime in general. Arthur Danto is skeptical of realizing that possibility in painting. He claims in *The Abuse of Beauty* that “though sublime things can be represented, they cannot be represented as sublime,” neither by the paintings of the Hudson River School nor other representational artworks.<sup>5</sup> This is Danto’s only published reference to the Hudson River School—in so far as I know—and here he further claims that, while their works fail, they manage to come somewhat closer to successfully representing the sublime because they are assisted by their large-scale.<sup>6</sup> That, however, is factually false, and the error leads us to question Danto’s thesis. Most of the American landscape paintings concerned with the sublime are in fact relatively small. Heade’s *Thunder Storm* at a modest 32 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> by 54 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches is on the larger side for these works. John Kensett’s *Shrewsbury River* is a mere 6 by 12 inches. Edmund Burke, who is a key figure in the history of aesthetics on the topic of the sublime, also doubts the possibility of painting to represent the sublimity of nature.<sup>7</sup> While this essay is a reflection on a uniquely American sublime, it thus further challenges such philosophical conceptions of art by arguing for a more expansive understanding of its powers of representation.

## 2. Traditional Conceptions of the Sublime

---

<sup>4</sup> See Charles S. Peirce, “A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God,” in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, ed. Peirce Edition Project, vol. 2 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 435; also see “Nomenclature and Divisions of Triadic Relations, as Far as They are Determined,” *The Essential Peirce*, 292 and 296.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Chicago: Open Court, 2003), 149–50; and see 155 and 157.

<sup>6</sup> “There can be little question that the Hudson River artists reverted to large size in order to instill the awe and wonderment their depicted scenes aroused” (ibid., 150).

<sup>7</sup> See Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 57–9 and 70.

In order to grasp the contribution made by nineteenth-century American art and philosophy toward an aesthetic of the sublime, it first is necessary to provide a historical context by examining some traditional Western conceptions of the sublime, in particular those found in the aesthetics of Burke and of Immanuel Kant.

First, there is Burke's theory presented in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Beautiful and Sublime*, which was published in 1757, a time when discussions about the sublime were popular amongst the learned class in England. These discussions were initiated and invigorated by the writings of Lord Shaftesbury and Joseph Addison, as well as by the English translation of Longinus' *On the Sublime* (originally Περὶ ὕψους) by William Smith, all appearing during the first half of the eighteenth century. The first important thing to recognize about Burke's theory is that it is based on a traditional empiricist understanding of sensation, such as presented by John Locke, that assumes that sensations are the direct impressions caused by an external world of physical things. One class of these impressions is the sublime, and Burke characterizes it by the passion terror, which he states is "the ruling principle of the sublime" or "the common stock of every thing that is sublime."<sup>8</sup> The association with terror is part of a more general trend by Burke to connect the sublime to negative experiences and emotional states, especially pain, fear, danger, death, and horror.<sup>9</sup> Burke's theory also identifies the "origin" of the sublime, that is, those objects that are the external causes of sublime passions. These are things that are great, either in a

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 54 and 59; and see 36, 53, passim.

<sup>9</sup> One exception to this trend seems to be his idea that the sublime may sometimes excite a feeling of "delight." However, delight is not to be understood as a real positive pleasure, but a kind of feeling of relief that "accompanies the removal of pain or danger," and thus is not much of an exception after all (see *ibid.*, 34).

physical sense with regard to their brute “power” or in a psychological sense with regard to their intellectual “obscurity.” As such, these things possess a kind of superiority or domination over the human individual. Some specific examples that Burke provides are the vast ocean, animals of great strength, poisonous animals, darkness, gloom, solitude, the ideas of infinity and eternity, kings, and military commanders. As these objects dominate over us, they may instill such an intense fear of pain and death that a kind of psychological paralysis occurs which “robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning.”<sup>10</sup>

Following Burke’s *Enquiry* and appearing in 1790 is Kant’s theory of the sublime presented in his *Critique of Judgment*. While Kant continues to associate the sublime with natural objects that are great in size and power, his theoretical approach to the topic is fundamentally different from Burke’s empiricism. Rather than seeking the origin of the sublime in an external world of things-in-themselves, Kant’s approach consists in a transcendental or critical analysis of the powers (*vermögen*) of the mind. From this analysis, he claims that the feeling of the sublime is located in the mind’s efforts to form an adequate judgment concerning natural objects that appear overwhelmingly great in size or power, the so-called “mathematical” and “dynamical” sublime, respectively. While the feeling that initially accompanies these efforts is a momentarily painful one as the mind struggles to grasp the greatness of its object, there ultimately culminates the positive feeling of satisfaction that we possess an intellectual superiority over nature due to our supersensible power of Reason (*Vernunft*). Concerning the mathematical sublime, in particular, we take satisfaction in our ability to comprehend the absolutely large in an idea of Reason. Concerning the dynamical sublime, the satisfaction stems from a moral

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 53.

effect in our ability to resist the power of nature and its threat to our physical well-being in steadfastly abiding by the absolute moral principles that are essential to our humanity. In conjunction with this last point, Kant argues that the good or moral law when judged aesthetically, then, is itself sublime.

There is an important consequence of Kant's transcendental study of the sublime in regard to the topic of nature. With its prioritizing of human subjectivity, it assumes that the sublime "is contained not in anything of nature, but only in our mind."<sup>11</sup> This consequence has its place in Kant's greater philosophical system that defines "nature" as an ideal phenomenon in contrast to the thing-in-itself. Nature, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, is said to be the totality of appearances governed by the forms of the sensibility and the necessary laws legislated by the understanding.<sup>12</sup> This view of nature contrasts with Burke's assumption that the origin of the sublime resides in natural objects in themselves, objects that are independent from, and that resist rather than conform to, the experiential subject.

### 3. An "American Sublime"

One source of an American sublime is the landscape paintings of the Hudson River School and Luminism. Many of these works visually express a feeling of the sublime connected to the greatness of nature. Before examining the sublime as it is presented in individual artworks, we shall address some written statements of the painters because

---

<sup>11</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 123; and see 120–1, 131–2.

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B163–5, and *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science*, 294–6.

these reveal a view of nature on which their artworks depend. This view amounts to a monistic and pantheistic naturalism that is congruent with the philosophy of New England Transcendentalism. We encounter it in, for example, Thomas Cole's descriptions of natural objects as "the pure creations of the Almighty" or "the undefiled works" of God.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Asher Durand refers to natural objects as "Divine attributes."<sup>14</sup> Emerson, who originated Transcendentalism, announces his affinity for pantheism in the first chapter of his book *Nature*. In its opening paragraph he directly connects the idea to the sublimity of nature by identifying "the perpetual presence of the sublime" seen in the starry heavens, night after night, with "the city of God."<sup>15</sup> The idea receives special elaboration in Emerson's theory of the Over-soul, which is a monistic, immaterial, and divine being that immanently resides within and interconnects all individuals. It is important to notice that such pantheistic doctrines take it as axiomatic that nature is metaphysically significant, as opposed to merely phenomenal, as well as is a preeminent being superior to humankind. Hence, we read Emerson further asserting in the "Introduction" to *Nature* and when contrasting wild nature with art that humankind's "operations taken together are so insignificant, a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing, that in an expression so grand as that of the world on the human mind, they do not vary the result."<sup>16</sup>

By comparing these ideas on nature to those already discussed by Kant and Burke, we can begin to discern the grounds for a unique conception of the sublime. Contrary to Kant's emphasis on human subjectivity and morality, Emerson and the

---

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Cole, "Essay on American Scenery," *The American Monthly Magazine*, 1 (1836), 3 and 5.

<sup>14</sup> Asher Durand, "Letters on Landscape Painting: Letter II," *The Crayon*, 1, no. 3 (1855): 34.

<sup>15</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, in *Essays & Lectures* (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 9.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

painters could never concede, for example, that the sublime “is contained not in anything of nature, but only in our mind,” or that humankind by its power of Reason or any other means could stand apart from and supersede the powers of nature. Such a view would be heretical in its denial of the metaphysical and spiritual significance of nature, and vain in its human-exceptionalism. Emerson and the painters would sooner sympathize with Burke who, unlike Kant, locates the sublime in nature as an independent being possessing superiority over humankind.

However, they would disagree with Burke in other significant ways. Contrary to his theory of the sublime, they do not associate the greatness of nature with terror or any other negative feelings mentioned by him. Far from terrorizing us, the sublimity of the stars are great, Emerson says, because they make us “believe and adore” while they “light the universe with their admonishing smile.”<sup>17</sup> The conception of the sublime expressed here is one that is pleasant and welcoming. This is the sublime that we encounter in the American landscape paintings too. Returning to the interpretation of Heade’s *Thunder Storm*, despite the violence of the impending thunderstorm, the feeling it expresses is not one of fear at that which is terrible, but a kind of tranquil and contemplative admiration of nature. That feeling is displayed by the human figures that do not panic at the storm but are transfixed by it; rather than hastily rushing to unload their boat, their heads are slightly turned toward the storm which impresses them by its awesomeness. Thus, although we have the expression of a feeling of awe and one associated with natural objects that are great in scale and power, the feeling involves not repulsion from nature but attraction toward it. In several other American paintings, the sublime likewise

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 9.

connotes a sense of peace and tranquility, rather than fear and horror. In general, sublime nature is felt as beneficent and good, not harmful or terrible.

In their writings, the painters further articulate this sense of an American sublime. For instance, we read Cole describing the sublimity of nature in this manner when he reflects on his experience of viewing two lakes at Franconia Notch, N. H.: “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, wood and water, brooded the spirit of repose, and the silent energy of nature stirred the soul to its inmost depths.”<sup>18</sup> Likewise, in a letter to Durand, he reflects: “As I now look upon the fields and the groves, I am astonished at the wonderful power of nature.... A spirit of peace and gentleness breathes over the landscape.”<sup>19</sup> In addition to this peaceful spiritual attraction of the American sublime, let us call it a “contemplative sublime.”<sup>20</sup> Rather than a feeling that “robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning,” as Burke says, a predominant part of its attractiveness consists in it inspiring a state of wonderment and “musement.” As Peirce defines it, musement is the “pure play” of thinking or the free and creative process of reasoning about the nature of things.<sup>21</sup> But let us now look at some additional examples of its artistic expression.

The sublime is a major theme in the Luminist works of Frederic Church, Fritz Hugh Lane, John Kensett, and Sanford Gifford. Church’s *The Heart of the Andes* is one

---

<sup>18</sup> Cole, “Essay on American Scenery,” 7.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Cole, quoted in Louis Legrand Noble, *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1964), 162. Also see Cole, “Essay on American Scenery,” 1–3, 5, and 8 that all refer to a sense of the sublime involving tranquility and intellectual contemplation.

<sup>20</sup> Powell, “Luminism and the American Sublime,” 80.

<sup>21</sup> See Peirce’s essay “The Neglected Argument for the Reality of God.”

example. In common with other paintings by him, such as *Scene on the Magdalena*, *Twilight in the Wilderness*, and *Coastal Scene, Mount Desert*, it features the representation of the sun as a central, divine-like object bathing the surrounding landscape in a warm, colorful, and radiant glow. This characteristic content of his paintings has the effect of enfolding the various minute details of the landscape scene into a harmonious unity while simultaneously expressing an impression of nature as welcoming and good.<sup>22</sup> Gifford's landscape paintings are similar in this regard. It is a common theme of his works to represent radiating sunlight diffused throughout a thick layer of monotoned atmosphere. In his *Kauterskill Clove* and *Sunset over the Palisades on the Hudson*, although the light and color intensely flood the scene, the feeling is not harsh but soft and comforting. A contemporary critic aptly described the felt-character of Gifford's works when saying that his landscapes are "[b]athed in atmospheres of sleep."<sup>23</sup> Kensett's landscapes also express a feeling of tranquil sublimity. In seeing nature "devoid of stress," he regularly depicted its simple forms, stillness, and soothing white light.<sup>24</sup> This occurs in the minimalist and purified scenes of his *Eaton's Neck, Long Island* and *Shrewsbury River* in which large open spaces of calm water and clear sky illuminated by a bright white sunlight contribute to a feeling of quietism before the pure expanse of nature.<sup>25</sup> Lane, together with his fellow Luminists, loved the moments in nature of "deep

---

<sup>22</sup> See Barbara Novak, *Voyages of the Self: Pairs, Parallels, and Patterns in American Art and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), chap. 4; and Powell, "Luminism and the American Sublime," 88–93.

<sup>23</sup> George William Curtis, quoted in Franklin Kelly, "Nature Distilled: Gifford's Vision of Landscape," in *Hudson River School Visions: The Landscapes of Sanford R. Gifford*, edited by Kevin J. Avery and Franklin Kelly (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 8; also see other insightful quotes from contemporary critics on these two Gifford paintings at Avery and Kelly, *Hudson River School Visions*, 138–9 and 237–8.

<sup>24</sup> Flexner, *That Wilder Image*, 145.

<sup>25</sup> See Powell, "Luminism and the American Sublime," 84–6.

stillness and soothing calm” and strove to accurately express them.<sup>26</sup> His *Gloucester Harbor at Sunset* and *Owl’s Head, Penobscot Bay, Maine* achieve that goal by depicting objects in a clean and undisturbed manner—such as the glassy mirror-looking water—and by having frozen a select time of day before which the figure within the painting viewing nature stands transfixed in contemplation of its simple beauty.<sup>27</sup>

When viewing these paintings in person, the Luminist sublime has a way of literally imparting itself on its audience. Across the distance of the museum gallery, the paintings appear to hold “a pocket of air and light.”<sup>28</sup> That luminescent radiance attracts us toward the paintings in order to more closely inspect and contemplate them. And at a close enough viewing distance, our own faces and bodies become illuminated by the soft, warm light that brightly emanates from their surfaces—an optical effect of the gallery lights directed at the paintings reflecting off their surfaces.

In their expressions of the sublime, it is noteworthy, furthermore, that even when the painters elect to represent aspects of nature that are commonly taken as unwelcoming and harmful—its antagonistic forces such as storms, rough seas, rugged mountains, and precipices—they still portray them in a positive manner. Heade’s *Thunder Storm*, as discussed above, is a paradigmatic example. To reference one more example, there is Kensett’s *Storm over Lake George*, which James Flexner aptly describes:

Never was fundamental serenity more conspicuous.... The foreground water is so shallow that the wind raises only ripples. Although high branches are blowing, the role of the trees in the composition is motionless. The dark clouds cast a refreshing, moisture-laden light, and already, in

---

<sup>26</sup> Flexner, *That Wilder Image*, 231.

<sup>27</sup> See Novak, *Voyages*, 28; and Powell, “Luminism and the American Sublime,” 80–1.

<sup>28</sup> Novak, *Voyages*, 30.

the farther distance, the sky is bright with the promise of returning peace. We are not menaced but comforted, for in her fierce contortions Nature is shown, even if momentarily angry, as a friend.<sup>29</sup>

Kensett's painting and those of the other Luminists expressing a tranquil sublimity in the face of the dangers of nature exemplify the American sublime.

Here we may conclude by submitting that American landscape paintings make a unique contribution to the aesthetics of the sublime. Furthermore, they are evidence for a more expansive understanding of painting that challenges limited philosophical conceptions about its powers of representation.

---

<sup>29</sup> Flexner, *That Wilder Image*, 146.