At the Mouth of the Cave: Listening to Thomas Cole's *Kaaterskill Falls*

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If art history has a founding statement, some pithy utterance that in retrospect announces a purpose and logic for the discipline, then surely it is G. W. F. Hegel's famous dictum, delivered in his Berlin lectures on aesthetics in the 1820s, that 'art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past'.[1] Art history's disciplinary labour, indeed its disciplinary imperative, is the production of this historical distance. And even if the meaning of Hegel's dictum was hardly simple or self-evident for the philosopher, nevertheless art history gets on with its work, and more often than not this involves a resistance to those moments when art and its historicity come into conflict.[2]

Consider the case of the American landscape painter Thomas Cole. Over a quarter of a century ago, Bryan Jay Wolf offered a thoughtful and provocative reading of Cole's early sublime landscapes as enactments of a psychic drama, an oedipal struggle toward self-consciousness in which the artist, by representing his own birth to self-consciousness as a *natural* birth, locates his authority prior to the influence of social forces beyond himself. As Wolf puts it, 'Cole sought in nature a metaphor for the self unburdened of history'.[3] This approach was largely rejected by historians of American landscape painting. Wolf was charged with the 'elimination of history as a category of critical discourse', and studies of Cole have not looked back since.[4] We now have accounts of the ways Cole and his patrons participated in the politics and class formations of Jacksonian America, nineteenth-century tourism and commerce, geological science, and Freemasonry.[5] In short, the story of Cole scholarship has been a story of 'Landscape into History', to borrow the subtitle of the 1994 Thomas Cole retrospective at the National Museum of American Art.[6] As important as this historicizing process has been, what the scholarship on Cole has not come to terms with, has refused to take seriously, are the ways in which Cole's art might be at odds with the very discipline that attempts to make it a thing of the past.

The present article is by no means a call to give up on the effort to historicize Cole's landscapes and accept the idea of a Romantic artist 'unburdened of history'. But it is an effort to listen attentively to the ways in which those landscapes may not remain comfortably in the past. And I do mean 'listen', for in Cole's case it is the sound of the landscape that unsettles our rational distance from the object. One sonorous painting in particular, Cole's early landscape *Kaaterskill Falls* (*plate 1*), occupies my attention in the following pages, where I make much of the loudness of the painting's tumbling cataract. I begin by considering how Cole paints landscape as an uneasy relationship between optical and aural modes of experience: Cole will

Detail from Thomas Cole, *The Voyage of Life: Childhood*, 1839, (*plate 4*).

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1 Thomas Cole, *Kaaterskill Falls*, 1826. Oil on canvas, 64 × 92 cm. Hartford, CT: Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art (Bequest of Daniel Wadsworth, 1848.15). Photo: Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY.

not allow us to leave behind the sound of the falls. Accordingly, in the second part of this article, I continue to attend to those sounds and argue for their implication in a specific cultural context of the 1820s, namely the notoriously loud and indeed 'sublime' sounds of the religious revival. But I turn to the revival not to give it priority over Cole's art, as if it could somehow stabilize within history the radical act of unburdening that is *Kaaterskill Falls*. Rather, popular religion is best understood as a remainder that this painting leaves in its wake, a trace – or better yet, given the significance of sound in what follows, an *echo* – of the world in which Cole's first landscapes took shape.

'The Voice of the Landscape'

The story of Cole's *Kaaterskill Falls* is well known. First told in November 1825, in the *New-York Evening Post*, it is the classic story of the origins of an American school of landscape painting. The eminent painter and at that time president of the American Art Union, Colonel John Trumbull, while visiting a New York art dealer, had come upon three landscapes by a young and unknown artist. Trumbull was particularly impressed by a view of Kaaterskill Falls in the Catskill mountains, a painting he chose to acquire for himself. 'What I now purchase for 25 dollars', declares Trumbull, 'I would not part with for 25 guineas. I am delighted, and at the same time mortified. This youth has done at once, and without instruction, what I cannot do after fifty years' practice.'[7] The canvas purchased by Trumbull – a view from a cavern behind the falls – is now unlocated; but the following year Cole made a replica for another patron, Daniel Wadsworth, who had seen Trumbull's painting and was evidently

impressed by it. Cole expressed in a letter to Wadsworth that he was not entirely satisfied with the copy: 'I have laboured twice as much upon this picture as I did upon the one you saw: but not with the same feeling. I cannot paint a view twice and do justice to it.'[8] Despite Cole's protest about the unrepeatability of his initial inspiration, Wadsworth was pleased enough with the result. There were, at least, no complaints, and Wadsworth remained an enthusiastic collector of Cole's landscapes.

I suspect it is the striking immediacy of Cole's Catskill waterfall that impressed Trumbull and Wadsworth. Standing before *Kaaterskill Falls*, I feel less an observer than a participant in the landscape. Cole places me just within the mouth of a cavern behind the upper portion of the falls. While the cavern opens onto an expansive view of the Catskills in the distance, the landscape in the immediate foreground solicits from me a more bodily response. Out of the dark mass of brush and foliage in the lower right corner emerge a few dead branches that invite me to grab hold and make a short but hazardous hike that will lead – if the branches don't snap under my weight – to the diamond-shaped rock that juts into the water in the central foreground. Planting my feet on that rock would be a fitting conclusion to a spiralling journey that begins along the well-defined ledge at left and continues around the unseen back of the cavern to where I presently stand, then through the thick branches and undergrowth at right, and back toward the central rock.

The purpose of this journey would be to bring my body, and with it my full capacity for sensation, as close as possible to the remarkable waterfall that drops over the top of the cavern and tumbles into the pool in an explosion of mist (*plate* 2). Cole has painted the falling water loosely, in flecks of lead white that recall Natty Bumppo's description of Kaaterskill Falls in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pioneers* (1823), a description Cole may well have had in mind as he was painting: 'The first pitch is nigh two hundred feet, and the water looks like flakes of driven snow, afore it touches the bottom.'[9] But if Cooper's passage focuses the reader's attention on the look of the falls, in Cole's painting the apparent motion of the flakes and the disturbance they cause in the churning water below, as dead branches pop erratically above the surface, create a palpable sense of loudness: the

2 Detail of Thomas Cole, *Kaaterskill Falls*, 1826.

3 John Trumbull, *Niagara Falls from an Upper Bank on the British Side*, 1807. Oil on canvas, 62 × 93 cm. Hartford, CT: Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art (Bequest of Daniel Wadsworth, 1848.4). Photo: Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY.

mists rising from the pool seem to carry with them the very sound of the cataract. The foreground of *Kaaterskill Falls* is, in short, a multisensory landscape. It is a place for the body, a 'place of exposure' as Edward S. Casey has recently described the foreground of Cole's later landscape *The Oxbow* (1836).[10] I cannot take it in at once but must negotiate it slowly, on foot, 'feeling' it out with my eyes, with my hands, and, perhaps above all, with my ears.

Kaaterskill Falls serves as a declaration. For Trumbull, for landscape painters who subsequently modelled themselves on Cole's example, and later for historians of American art, it declares that landscape painting will hereafter look different, that we will now be presented with a distinctly American landscape, sublime in its features; and it declares that there is a particular painter who will show this landscape to us – Thomas Cole.[11] Here is a type of painting the venerable Trumbull could not manage 'after fifty years' practice'. Compare with Cole's painting one of Trumbull's views of Niagara Falls, painted in 1807 and purchased by Wadsworth in 1828 (*plate* 3). Trumbull's is a much more placid view of a waterfall: the rising mists of the falls, seen at a distance through framing trees, belong to a quiet picturesque to contrast with Cole's noisy sublime. A British soldier, advancing from the left side of the painting toward the foreground, raises his arm in the direction of the falls in order to display this natural wonder to his two female companions, although he seems equally to be addressing the viewer. This directorial gesture, which has the effect of removing the viewer still further from an untutored experience of nature, stands as a military metaphor for the kind of command the painting's soldier-artist, Colonel Trumbull, exercises over us, as he gently yet firmly regulates our experience of Niagara Falls. It is precisely this kind of control that Cole – painting 'without

instruction' – relinquishes in the foreground of *Kaaterskill Falls*, and as a result we experience his landscape not as an effort at containment but as an audible release in which the distinctive voice of a young artist spills beyond the conventions of eighteenth-century landscape painting.

Yet Cole does offer some relief from the clamour of the foreground. *Kaaterskill Falls* changes key at the rocky precipice that protrudes over the unseen lower falls and upon which the tiny figure of a Native American stands, his miniaturization in effect reducing my own body to a point, to a gaze that looks east over the deep depression of Kaaterskill Clove and toward a clearing sky, a distant peak, and the rising sun (*see plate* 2). To assume this point of view is to abandon my body in the foreground and with it the sensory excess of that space – its noise, its motion, its disorder; I become only an eye that takes the measure of the transcendent landscape laid out before me.[12] It is a view that many of Cole's contemporaries would have recognized, since by 1826 Kaaterskill Falls had already become enough of a tourist destination to justify the building of a viewing platform at the top of the falls. Standing before Cole's painting, however, I am no tourist: this is not a landscape previous sightseers have taken in. As Natty Bumppo describes the site, 'There has that little stream of water been playing among them hills, since He made the world, and not a dozen white men have ever laid eyes on it.'[13] As I gaze silently upon the Catskills with the tiny Indian, I see the mountains as Natty has seen them, through eyes untainted by civilization. It is the kind of view that Cole must have had in mind when, in his 'Essay on American Scenery' (1836), he wrote that the highest purpose of art is to 'sublime and purify thought'.[14]

Yet something prevents the full sublimation of my body into a transcendent ocular experience. For all the optical pull of that distant Catskill landscape, I cannot close my ears to the sound of Cole's waterfall – its claim upon me is more immediate than is the viewpoint enjoyed by the Indian on the cliff, who is in fact quite distant from me. While the jutting rock in the central foreground may be a difficult journey by foot, the Indian's rock seems positively out of the question. To access it I must disavow my own body, but this is a great deal to ask given the bodiliness with which Cole endows me. The crashing of the waterfall will always keep me partially in the foreground; it will always be the background noise to my optical experience of the landscape, if only because it is here, at the mouth of the cave, where my body stands. Perhaps it was Cole's success in creating this oscillation between sight and sound, between optical and aural modes of experience, that both 'delighted' and 'mortified' Trumbull when he purchased the first version of the painting in 1825. For our purposes, it provides an occasion to think about the relationship between vision and voice within Cole's own aesthetics and within the larger cultural project of imagining the American landscape during the early nineteenth century.

A sensible place to begin exploring this relationship, the place Cole's painting asks us to begin, is at the mouth of the cave – that 'singular feature', as Cole describes it, of 'the vast arched cave that extends beneath and behind the cataract'.[15] Like Plato long before him, and like many writers and visual artists working before his time and since, Cole seizes upon the figure of the cave to construct his allegory about the process of coming to knowledge of the world through the senses. In Plato's well-known version, as told by Socrates in the *Republic*, prisoners chained within a cave mistake the shadows and echoes of figures on the outside for reality. Not until one of these prisoners escapes from his bonds and turns to the light coming in through the

4 Thomas Cole, *The Voyage of Life: Childhood*, 1839. Oil on canvas, 132 × 198 cm. Utica, NY: Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute, Museum of Art (55.105). Photo: Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute.

cave mouth does he begin to clear up his confusion and see the forms and hear the voices of the people walking outside for what they really are. Cole shows an unspoken involvement with this allegory throughout his body of work.[16]

Consider his prose sketch from the 1820s, 'The Bewilderment'. Having lost his way in the dark woods, the narrator falls through the earth into a deep hole and begins to follow an underground stream. Without light to guide his way, he can only describe his body's blind struggle with the objects it encounters in the darkness. Creeping on hands and knees, bumping into rocks and dead branches, the narrator makes his way through a dark and treacherous netherworld until finally he discovers the mouth of his imprisoning cave. '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.' At this point, the benighted narrator is still like one of Plato's prisoners, dwelling within the cave and perceiving the outside world obliquely, through its shadows. But then, after noticing the shadow cast by his hand, he turns to the source of light: '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.'[17] Looking directly into the angelic moonlight streaming through the mouth of the cave, the narrator is finally released from his bewilderment.

It is a release that is repeated elsewhere in Cole's work, as in the first canvas of his allegorical series *The Voyage of Life*, 'Childhood', completed in 1839 (*plate* 4). Here the cave is associated with birth, with an emergence from the darkness of the womb that signifies the child's awakening into consciousness. In the explanatory notes for the series, Cole was quite clear about how he wanted his public to

interpret this element of the painting: 'The dark cavern is emblematic of our earthly origin, and the mysterious Past.'[18] In a letter to Wadsworth written in 1828 Cole comments on this symbolic dimension of his caves. Most likely referring to a cave entrance that appears in his *Garden of Eden* (*plate* 5), an element which Wadsworth felt too 'formal' and 'gloomy', Cole writes that 'Though a cave may be a gloomy object in Nature – a *view* of its entrance gives rise to those trains of pensive feeling and thought that I have always found the most exquisitely delightful – The poets often speak of caves, and grottos as pleasing objects, and I do not know why the painter may not think as the poet.'[19]

Pictures like *The Garden of Eden* and *The Voyage of Life* adopt a familiar Romantic trope – one thinks, for instance, of Coleridge's 'caverns measureless to man' – in which the cave evokes mysteries that exceed the representational capacities of the poet's pen or painter's brush. *Kaaterskill Falls* draws upon the same poetic imagery, yet it also reverses our relation to the cave. Instead of including the dark cave mouth within the painting as an emblem to be 'read' like a poem, Cole activates the cave's perceptual role in the landscape. Instead of looking at a child coming out of the cave, I take on the role of that child. I begin my 'voyage of life' – or escape from my 'bewilderment' – as I emerge from the cave behind the falls, as my eyes and ears awaken directly onto the sights and sounds of Nature.

One of the reasons the cave in *Kaaterskill Falls* lends itself to allegories of birth and awakening is that Cole is not too concerned with imitating the actual structure of a cave. An instructive comparison in this respect is William Guy Wall's depiction of the same view, painted in 1826–27, probably after Wall had seen Cole's canvas

5 Thomas Cole, *The Garden of Eden*, 1828. Oil on canvas, 99 × 114 cm. Fort Worth, TX: Amon Carter Museum (1990.10). Photo: Amon Carter Museum.

6 William Guy Wall, *Cauterskill Falls on the Catskill Mountains*, 1826–27. Oil on canvas, 94 × 119 cm. Honolulu: Honolulu Academy of Arts (Gift of the Mared Foundation, 1969, 3583.1). Photo: Honolulu Academy of Arts.

(*plate 6*).[20] An accomplished topographical painter, Wall insists upon the capacity of vision to take in the falls, and he does this by pushing the viewer further into the depths of the cavern. From this more distanced viewpoint one has a better understanding of how the cavern sits above the pool and a clearer view of the cavern walls, which the artist paints with geological precision. Cole, on the other hand, refuses the distance and detail favoured by Wall; instead, he places the viewer right before the pool and shows only the upper edges of the cave entrance, which he paints loosely and with a satisfying symmetry, unlike the de-centred mouth of Wall's cave. All of which suggests that Cole's interest in the cave is not so much a topographical concern as an interest in framing, that is, in figuring for the viewer the very processes of producing and experiencing landscape.

What, then, is the pictorial logic of this act of framing? If the cavern's clear resemblance to a proscenium arch suggests an overtly theatrical act in which Cole insists on his own role as framer, at the same time the smooth and even fleshy forms of the arch constitute a perceptual framing. The cave is a cyclopean eye through which I enter Cole's landscape optically. It is also a cave *mouth*, an oral frame from which a young painter boldly voices a new landscape aesthetic. And it is an ear as well, a receptive portal into whose protective space I am led by a winding pathway that leads from exterior to interior, as it spirals ear-like around the noisy pool. I do not suggest that any one of these readings could be called the 'correct' interpretation of Cole's cave; instead they speak to the open-ended sensory potential of the frame. In short, if Plato's allegory provides a model for reading Cole's cave, we should by no means mistake it for a purely ocular fable about awakening to the truths of nature. For Cole insists that I do not simply *look* from the mouth of the cave; I also *listen*.

Here is how Cole describes Kaaterskill Falls – not the painting, but the actual site – in a prose piece dating from 1843. The passage is best read aloud, so that one can hear

the way Cole rehearses in his writing a perceptual ambivalence similar to that which structures the earlier painting:

> It is a singular, a wonderful *scene*, whether *viewed* from above, where the stream leaps into the tremendous gulf scooped into the very heart of the huge mountain, or as *seen* from below the second fall – the impending crags – the *shadowy* depth of the caverns, across which darts the cataract, that, broken into fleecy forms, is tossed and swayed, hither and thither, by the wayward wind – the *sound* of the water, now falling upon the ear in a loud *roar*, and now in fitful lower *tones* – the lovely *voice* – the solitary *song* of the valley.[21] (Emphasis added)

Cole begins his description of the falls with an appeal to vision: his pairing of 'scene'/'seen' captures the optical nature of this initial experience. In the middle of the passage, however, the entrance of the cataract disrupts the view and initiates a shift into an aural experience of nature. Mesmerizing rhythms of speech ('tossed and swayed, hither and thither, by the wayward wind') turn our attention to sound, and by the end of the passage we have forgotten our eyes and now simply listen to nature's song.[22]

The aurality of Cole's *Kaaterskill Falls* is not unique among his early landscapes. One of his compositions of the 1820s, created not long after he painted *Kaaterskill Falls*, demonstrates a similar pairing of a cave entrance with sound. In 1829 or 1830, Cole completed a painting of an Old Testament scene entitled *Elijah in the Wilderness – Standing at the mouth of the cave*. That painting is now unlocated, though several studies do survive, including a sketch that bears the title, scrawled at the bottom of the sheet, *Elijah at the Mouth of the Cave* (*plate 7*). Although the walls of Elijah's cave are visible only on the right-hand side of the sheet, the compositional structure of the drawing essentially repeats that of *Kaaterskill Falls*: the opening of the cave frames a landscape that consists of a foreground plane at the edge of which stands a tiny figure, and beyond that a distant view of mountainous wilderness and stormy skies.[23] Except Elijah, shielding his eyes with a raised arm, does not look at that distant view. The relevant verse from the book of *Kings*, which provided the inspiration for Cole's composition, reads: '[Elijah] wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave: and behold, *there came* a voice unto him, and said, what doest thou here, Elijah?'[24] Elijah's experience of divine presence is, finally, a blind experience: vision gives way to the pronouncement of the Word – to the voice of God.

In *Kaaterskill Falls*, with its naturalized divinity, the substitute for the voice of God is the cataract, a natural feature that Cole refers to throughout his prose writings as 'the voice of the landscape':

> The waterfall may be called the voice of the landscape, for, unlike the rocks and woods which utter sounds as the passive instruments played on by the elements, the waterfall strikes its own chords, and rocks and mountains re-echo in rich unison.[25]

The tactile flakes of paint that descend from the cataract's unseen source and the scumbled mists that rise from the pool in a sense *are* this voice in *Kaaterskill Falls*. We could say that Cole is *quoting* nature in this white, painterly noise that does not fully resolve into the autumnal landscape view. Suspended in the foreground, it interrupts my visual progress through the painting, clouding my vision so to speak.

7 Thomas Cole, *Elijah at the Mouth of the Cave*, c. 1829. Pen and ink over graphite on paper, 27 x 38 cm. Detroit: The Detroit Institute of Arts. Photo: The Detroit Institute of Arts/ The Bridgeman Art Library.

But quotation, as Michel de Certeau has argued, has the potential to disrupt representation, particularly when it introduces 'voices of the body' into the text. Such voices are memories of the bodies that are always lodged in language but are not reducible to it; they are 'cries breaking open the text that they make proliferate around them'.[26] Among these voices in the pictorial register we could include Cole's sounding cataract, a voice that reverberates well beyond the rocks and mountains of a Catskill landscape. As we will see in the following pages, Cole's waterfall re-echoes in the embodied sounds of popular religion, in the noisy religious fervour of the Second Great Awakening that, it turns out, was of some interest to the artist right around the time he was painting *Kaaterskill Falls*.[27]

'The Din of the Revival'

In a sketchbook dated 1827, Cole made a list of over one hundred ideas for future paintings, most of them never executed.[28] The very first item on that list is a scene of 'Preaching in the woods as is seen in the Western country', a title that surely refers to the revivalist preaching that was gaining momentum in the first years of the nineteenth century in the western states – Kentucky, Tennessee, Ohio, regions that had been prime ground for camp meetings since the massive Cane Ridge revival in Bourbon County, Kentucky, in 1801. Cole would have been familiar with such revivals from the years he spent between 1819 and 1823 in eastern Ohio, an area rife with Methodist camp meetings. This evangelical fervour followed Cole back east in the early 1820s, as it spread into the same regions of upstate New York that inspired Cole's earliest landscapes and continued to inspire him throughout his career. Indeed the revivals raged with such intensity in this area that upstate New York came to be known

as the 'burned-over district'.[29] Is it any surprise, then, that revivalist preaching turns up at the top of the young landscape painter's list of subjects?

The second item on the list continues with this theme: Cole envisions a 'Camp Meeting at Night – a fire light & moonlight'. While no final version for either of these first two items is currently known, Cole's sketchbook does include a compositional study for the second (*plate* 8). In this drawing – labelled 'Camp Meeting' – small groups of observers stationed in the right and left foreground look out over a more or less typical setting for such a gathering: the tents of the revivalists ring the periphery of a clearing in the woods while two large fires illuminate the nocturnal scene. A ridge of mountains – suggested by a rough, sloping curve just beneath the crescent moon – ties this scene of religious revivalism to Cole's interest in the mountainous landscape of upstate New York.

The choice of subject is understandable: by all accounts the camp meeting was a remarkable sight, especially at night. Frances Trollope, travelling in America in 1829, wrote of a meeting she observed in the backwoods of Indiana. Having arrived late at night with the moon 'in meridian splendour above our heads', she observes the crowd assembled before the preacher. 'It is certain', she writes, that:

> ... the many fair young faces turned upward, and looking paler and lovelier as they met the moon-beams, the dark figures of the officials in the middle of the circle, the lurid glare thrown by the altar-fires on the woods beyond, did altogether produce a fine and solemn effect, that I shall not easily forget.[30]

Cole may well have had similar memories of the picturesque camp meeting. It was a promising subject for a landscape painting, and one can't help but wonder what he would have done with his 'fire light & moonlight' in oils.

8 Thomas Cole, *Camp Meeting* 1827. Graphite on paper, 20 x 24 cm. New York: New York State Library. Photo: Courtesy of the New York State Library, Manuscripts and Special Collections.

9 Thomas Cole, *Landscape, Composition, St John in the Wilderness*, 1827. Oil on canvas, 91 × 74 cm. Hartford, CT: Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art (Bequest of Daniel Wadsworth, 1848.16). Photo: Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY.

But even if his sketch and his list of subjects suggest that early in his career Cole cultivated an interest in popular religion, it was an interest he never carried into a finished work of art. Perhaps the subject matter was too vulgar, too immediately caught up in the noisy religious fervour of the times for a landscape painter of Cole's ambition. Vulgarity is, at least, what spoiled it for Trollope. While admiring the mysterious effects of the night-time scene, her reverie is soon broken by noises 'discordant, harsh, and unnatural', noises that 'in a few moments chased every feeling derived from imagination, and furnished realities that could neither be mistaken or forgotten'.[31] Trollope goes on to describe a Bedlam of jerking preachers and maniacal crowds in language that enlists Milton and Dante for aid and is, as far as I am aware, unequalled in the literature on camp meetings for its condemnatory tone. And yet, however intense her personal horror may be, Trollope is sounding a note we hear regularly in accounts from the period, which repeatedly rehearse this disturbance of a beautiful view by a disconcerting irruption of noise. Another English traveller, Frederick Marryat, gives a similar account of an Ohio camp meeting witnessed on

10 Detail of Thomas Cole, *Landscape, Composition, St John in the Wilderness*· 1827.

his tour of America in 1837. At first overtaken by the visual grandeur of the scene, the 'snowy whiteness [of the tents] contrasting beautifully with the deep verdure and gloom of the forest', Marryat is soon so shaken by the 'groans, ejaculations, broken sobs, frantic motions, and convulsions' coming the congregation, that he retreats into the surrounding woods.[32]

Cole's suspicion of the democratic mob, evident throughout his writings, surely made him conscious of a tension between the silent, private experience of beauty enjoyed by the spectators in his drawing and the public cacophony of frontier religion. When it came to depicting the voice crying in the wilderness, Cole preferred biblical subjects over the camp meeting. Indeed, the third painting on his list is 'Elijah in the Wilderness – Standing at the mouth of the Cave', a study for which we have already encountered. For Cole, prophets like Elijah or John the Baptist were more suitable associations for a sublime landscape, and several years later, in 1835, when he expounded on the sublimity of American scenery, it was definitively the prophets he wanted his readers to hear:

> 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.[33]

It is important to our sense of the natural grandeur and moral profundity of Cole's wilderness scenes that they are occupied by prophets like the one who harangues his audience in *Landscape Composition, St John in the Wilderness* (*plate 9*) and not by the backwoods

11 Attributed to Jeremiah Paul, *Camp Meeting*, c. 1829. Oil on panel, 48 × 71 cm. Wheaton, IL: Museum of the Billy Graham Center (1979.0001). Photo: Billy Graham Center Museum.

preachers of the artist's own day.

But if the sublimity of the subject and the exoticism of the palm-accented mountains in *St John in the Wilderness* raise the sounds of revival above the mundane, this painting equally has the capacity to place its viewers right in the midst of popular religion in the 1820s. Cole painted it for Wadsworth in 1827, the same year he was sketching out ideas for camp meeting scenes, and given Cole's interest in popular religion at the time, it requires no stretch of the imagination to read the painting as a kind of biblical camp meeting. After all, the arrangement of figures in the composition *looks* like a camp meeting (*plate 10*): the animated prophet stands on his rocky pulpit before an attentive audience, some of the figures enthusiastically throwing up their arms in gestures that echo those found in nineteenth-century depictions of camp meetings like Jeremiah Paul's revivalist scene of about 1829 (*plate 11*).[34] Paul's painting is suggestive simply in its attempt to capture some of the theatrics for which the revivalist movement was known – the swoons and gesticulations of the penitent and the shouts of the preacher who in this case leans stiffly on the podium, head cocked and one arm raised in the air as his saving words ripple through the crowd. The difference of the revival in *St John in the Wilderness* is that John's audience doesn't just get religion; it gets Nature too. As John extends one arm toward the crowd, the other points toward the cross and, beyond that, toward the distant cataract, a gesture that links his own cries in the wilderness to the voice of the landscape.

Many preachers of Cole's day gestured right along with St John toward the sublime. John's voice resonates powerfully, for example, with that of the great prophet of the burned-over district, Charles Grandison Finney. Finney was a powerful speaker, a master of millennial rhetoric and also of parables, and he was particularly fond of telling his camp meeting audiences the parable of Niagara Falls. In this story a man lost in reverie drifts toward the falls, unaware of the danger in which he places himself. Just as he is about to plunge over the edge, an observer lifts a 'warning voice above the roar of the foaming waters, and cr[ies] out, *Stop*. The voice pierces his ear, and breaks the charm that binds him.'[35] The man thus realizes his predicament, and he is saved. The parable answers the question: What must I do to be saved? The answer: as a sinner I must listen and be responsive to the voice of the preacher. The parable is instructive not only for the importance it places upon the preacher's voice, but also for the way in which it compares that voice to the 'roar of the foaming waters', as if this were the true test for the preacher, to measure up to the roar of Niagara Falls.

While Finney and Cole both link the preacher's voice to the waterfall, even more frequently it is the shouting of the multitudes that Cole's contemporaries likened

to the sound of vast cataracts.[36] In the words of one observer at the Cane Ridge revival, 'A vast crowd, supposed by some to have amounted to twenty-five thousand, was collected together. The noise was like the roar of Niagara.'[37] It was because of such associations that Niagara became a popular site for revivalists throughout the nineteenth century. Revivalism, in short, went hand in hand with the Cult of Nature, which helps to explain why the subject of the revival posed a certain attraction to a worshipper of Nature like Cole. It also helps to explain how the sounds of Cole's *Kaaterskill Falls* might mingle with those of the revival. As I listen to Cole's landscape, as the turbulence of the cataract insists on my bodily presence in the foreground despite the attraction of the distant prospect, I experience a disruption similar to that experienced by observers of the camp meeting like Trollope and Marryat. I am called back to my body by a voice that exceeds the view given to my eyes, a voice through which I come to understand, in a visceral way, why Samuel Monk in his classic study on the sublime describes its embrace of emotion as 'a sort of Methodist revival in art'.[38]

But I do not wish to press too hard on the link between religious revivalism and Cole's sublime landscapes of the 1820s. The Second Great Awakening certainly does not 'explain' these early landscapes. St John is not, finally, Charles Grandison Finney, and the landscape in which he preaches is decidedly not upstate New York. It is also important to remember that the Nature-worshipping artist and the penitent sinner represented two very different spiritual camps in the early nineteenth century. The Cult of Nature was a kind of religion for the refined and educated; in Perry Miller's words, it was a religion of 'Nature spelled with a capital N, which Cooper celebrated, Thomas Cole painted', and to which an elite 'fled for relief from the din of the revival'.[39] The revival, in contrast, emerged by and large out of populations the market revolution had passed over, and its loudness was a crucial sensory means of constituting class hierarchies in early America.[40] It was against the intolerable noise and unrestrained bodies of evangelicals that quiet Nature-worshippers could invent their own habits of composed reverence. 'Compared with almost any chapter in the history of Protestantism', writes Miller, the Second Great Awakening 'is vulgar, noisy, ignorant, blatant'.[41]

Yet it is difficult to make definitive statements about Cole's attitude toward revivalism or his position within the religious landscape of the early nineteenth century. Alan Wallach has stressed the importance of the 'dissenting tradition' for Cole, which he inherited from the strong culture of religious dissent in his native Lancashire. Popular works like *The Voyage of Life* aimed to appeal to a broad audience familiar with the visual conventions of the dissenting tradition, support Wallach's claim that Cole was 'inclined to low-church evangelism'.[42] Such leanings could explain why, when Cole wrote up his 1827 list of ideas for paintings, his thoughts immediately turned to a subject like the camp meeting. But if the dissenting tradition helped to shape Cole as an artist, 'Dissent' as such is not a term with much purchase in describing the notoriously complicated history of Protestantism in the early nineteenth century. Even within the evangelical movement there were major divisions, particularly between the middle-class Finneyites and the other large, populist evangelical churches like Methodists and Baptists whose members existed at the margins of the market revolution.[43]

Cole, whose writings are unhelpful on the topic of his religious beliefs, is difficult to locate within this maze of religion and social class. While he may have inclined to a low-church evangelism, his early patrons hailed primarily from the Federalist aristocracy, and to the extent that Cole 'shared the aristocracy's political and social conservatism', it is easy to imagine him being repelled by the democratic, everyone-can-be-saved spirit of frontier religion.[44] Cole's religious commitments did become

more defined in the 1830s, when he became an active member of St Luke's Episcopal Church in Catskill. In 1842, he more clearly identified himself with high-church Episcopalianism when he was baptized by his friend Louis Legrand Noble, an Anglican priest and later Cole's biographer. Noble's biography of Cole, published in 1853, was important for securing a legacy for the artist consistent with the self-image of quiet gentility that he increasingly sought in the 1840s. Describing the young Cole painting landscapes in a narrow garret in his father's house in 1825, Noble writes that 'A light flowed out upon his canvass from the silent cave of his thought.'[45] In 1853 we are indeed a long way from the noisy cave of 1826, when Cole was still actively negotiating the radically uncertain boundaries of landscape painting and popular religion.

My brief appeal to the history of religion ends with uncertainty about Cole's position within his religious culture, but then it is not meant to add up to an accounting for *Kaaterskill Falls*. Cole's painting stages a fraught relationship between the viewer's sensory response to his art and the historical conditions from which that art emerged: I have tried to explicate that relationship, not to resolve it. I conclude, therefore, on a note of ambivalence, with the contention that the sound of *Kaaterskill Falls* both is and is not the sound of the camp meeting, that in this painting we find historical context *and* lose it. The novelty of *Kaaterskill Falls*, its ingenuity and creative work, lies in its transformation of popular religious experience in the 1820s into aesthetic experience. Cole recuperates the revival for the project of landscape painting, transposing the shouts of the preacher into the voice of the landscape, but at the same time he keeps the revival before us by making its sensory excess part of our experience of the picture. To what extent does such an art belong to a history from which it would unburden itself?[46] This is the question *Kaaterskill Falls* leaves ringing in the art historian's ears.

Notes

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1 G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. I, trans. T. M. Knox, Oxford, 1975, 11.

2 For some recent reflections on the complexity of Hegel's statement, see Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art?*, trans. Christopher S. Wood, Chicago, IL, 1987; Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. John Goodman, University Park, PA, 2005, 47–52; and Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert, Stanford, CA, 1999, 52–8.

3 Bryan Jay Wolf, *Romantic Re-Vision: Culture and Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century American Painting and Literature*, Chicago, IL, 1982, 195.

4 Alan Wallach, 'The word from Yale', *Art History*, 10: 2, June 1987, 256–7.

5 See, for example, Angela Miller, *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825–1875*, Ithaca, NY, 1993; Alan Wallach, 'Making a picture of the view from Mount Holyoke', in *American Iconology: New Approaches to Nineteenth-century Art and Literature*, ed. David C. Miller, New Haven, 1995, 80–91; Alan Wallach, 'Wadsworth's Tower: an episode in the history of American landscape vision', *American Art*, 10: 3, Autumn 1996, 8–27; Kenneth Myers, *The Catskills: Painters, Writers, and Tourists in the Mountains, 1820–1895*, Yonkers, NY, 1988; Kenneth John Myers, 'Art and commerce in Jacksonian America: The Steamboat Albany Collection', *Art Bulletin*, 82: 3, September 2000, 503–28; Rebecca Bedell, *The Anatomy of Nature: Geology and American Landscape Painting, 1825–1875*, Princeton, NJ, 2001; and David Bjelajac, 'Thomas Cole's Oxbow and the American Zion divided', *American Art*, 20: 1, Spring 2006, 61–83.

6 See William H. Truettner and Alan Wallach, eds, *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History*, New Haven, 1994.

7 Reprinted in Ellwood C. Parry III, *The Art of Thomas Cole: Ambition and Imagination*, Newark, DE, 1988, 25–6.

8 Thomas Cole to Daniel Wadsworth, 20 November 1826, in J. Bard McNulty, ed., *The Correspondence of Thomas Cole and Daniel Wadsworth*, Hartford, CT, 1983, 4. The painting was later engraved and published in John Howard Hinton, *The History and Topography of the United States*, vol. II, London, 1832.

9 James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers*, New York, 1993, 374.

10 See Edward S. Casey, *Representing Place: Landscape Painting and Maps*, Minneapolis, MN, 2002, 56–73. Kenneth Myers has also emphasized the participatory aspect of Cole's *Kaaterskill Falls*. Contrasting the painting to Cole's picturesque *Lake with Dead Trees* (1825), which he interprets as its pendant, Myers argues that '*Kaaterskill Falls* denies the viewer this kind of physical and interpretive distance in order to draw him or her into a less mediated encounter with the scene' (Myers, *The Catskills: Painters, Writers, and Tourists in the Mountains*, 44).

11 Historians of American art in fact began telling Trumbull's discovery story during Cole's own lifetime. The same day he purchased the original canvas of *Kaaterskill Falls*, Trumbull showed Cole's landscapes to the playwright and historian William Dunlap, who purchased one for himself. It was Dunlap, writing under the pseudonym 'American', who authored the original *New-York Evening Post* article and nine years later retold that story in his *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States* (William Dunlap, *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States*, ed. Alexander Wyckoff, vol. III, New York, 1965, 149–50).

12 Kenneth Myers reads the Indian standing on the cliff as he reads the falls themselves, as elements through which 'the individual momentarily forgets his or her apartness from the observed scene and experiences it as if directly' (Myers, *The Catskills: Painters, Writers, and Tourists in the Mountains*, 44). While I largely agree with Myers' compelling interpretation of the

painting, I would also qualify it by arguing that the Indian invites an optical identification that stands in contrast to, or rather as a sublimation of, the fuller sensory involvement that Cole invites in the foreground.

13 Cooper, *Pioneers*, 374. The platform at the top of the falls was built sometime between 1823 and 1825, when Cole made a sketch of Kaaterskill Falls that includes it. See Myers, *The Catskills: Painters, Writers, and Tourists in the Mountains*, 42, 83n.56; and Tracie Felker, 'First impressions: Thomas Cole's drawings of his 1825 trip up the Hudson River', *The American Art Journal*, 24: 1/2, 1992, 76.

14 Thomas Cole, *The Collected Essays and Prose Sketches*, ed. Marshall Tymn, St Paul, MN, 1980, 3.

15 Cole, *Collected Essays and Prose Sketches*, 12.

16 For the allegory of the cave, see Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, rev. C. D. C. Reeve, Indianapolis, IN, 1992, 514a–17a. For a recent consideration of the links between the figure of the cave and image-making, see Mark A. Cheetham and Elizabeth D. Harvey, 'Obscure imaginings: visual culture and the anatomy of caves', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 1: 1, April 2002, 105–26. For a discussion of the figure of the cave in American Romantic literature, see Clark Griffith, 'Caves and cave dwellers: the study of a romantic image', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 62: 3, 1963: 551–68.

17 Cole, *Collected Essays and Prose Sketches*, 101.

18 See Louis Legrand Noble, *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole*, ed. Elliot S. Vesell, Hensonville, NY, 1997, 214.

19 Thomas Cole to Daniel Wadsworth, 23 April 1828, in McNulty, *Correspondence of Thomas Cole and Daniel Wadsworth*, 38.

20 On Wall's view see John K. Howat, 'A picturesque site in the Catskills: The Kaaterskill Falls as painted by William Guy Wall,' *Honolulu Academy of Arts Journal*, 1, 1974, 16–29.

21 Cole as quoted in Noble, *Life and Works of Thomas Cole*, 259.

22 One finds a persistent doubling back between sound and sight throughout Cole's work, as exemplified in a journal entry of 1834 describing an idea for a piano that 'might be constructed by which colour could be played' (Noble, *Life and Words of Thomas Cole*, 141). While one could attribute Cole's idea to a general Romantic fascination with synaesthesia, it nevertheless speaks to his refusal to dissociate vision from other forms of bodily experience. On the history of the 'ocular harpsichord', see Thomas L. Hankins and Robert J. Silverman, *Instruments and the Imagination*, Princeton, NJ, 1995, 72–85.

23 Another early painting by Cole that shares this composition is *The Subsiding of the Waters of the Deluge* (1829, National Museum of American Art), which corresponds closely in its structure to the drawing of *Elijah at the Mouth of the Cave*.

24 1 Kings 19:13, in Robert Carroll and Stephen Pricket, eds, *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*, Oxford, 1997.

25 Cole, *Collected Essays and Prose Sketches*, 12.

26 See Michel de Certeau, 'Quotations of voices', in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, Berkeley, CA, 1984, 154–64.

27 Some scholars have already observed links between the clamour of Cole's art and the clamour of revivalism. Bryan Wolf, for example, notes that Cole's *The Bewilderment* echoes in its 'language of bewilderment and release the rhetoric of contemporary revivalist sermons', while Barbara Novak has observed how the operatic qualities of certain nineteenth-century American landscapes remind one 'of the noisy conversions of the evangelical revival especially prominent in the upstate New York area that spawned so many Hudson River painters: shouting, biting, groaning, etc'. See Wolf, *Romantic Re-Vision*, 219; Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825–1875*, 3rd edn, Oxford, 2007, 32.

28 The sketchbook is housed in the New York State Library, Albany (Thomas Cole Papers, VC10635), but the list of paintings has been published in *Annual II / Baltimore Museum of Art: Studies on Thomas Cole: An American Romanticist*, Baltimore, MD, 1967, 82–100.

29 Camp meetings were regularly held in the vicinity of Cole's home in Steubenville, as is apparent in the journal of Francis Asbury (1745–1816), first bishop of the American Methodist Church, who stopped regularly at Steubenville during his annual journeys along the Ohio River between 1803 and 1815. See Francis Asbury, *The Heart of Asbury's Journal*, ed. Ezra Squier Tipple, New York, 1904, 642, 694. An important early account of the revivals in the 'western country' is Theophilus Armenius, 'Account of the Rise and Progress of the Work of God in the Western Country', *Methodist Review*, 1819: 184–7, 221–4, 272–4, 304–8, 349–53, 393–6, 434–9. One of the oldest continuous camp meetings in the United States, which began in 1818, is at Hollow Rock, less the 20 miles north of Steubenville. See Eleanor L. Smith, *Hollow Rock: A History*, Toronto, OH, 1988. On the burned-over district, see Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800–1850*, New York, 1950.

30 Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, ed. Donald Smalley, New York, 1949, 171–2. Trollope travelled in America from 1827 to 1831, and published *Domestic Manners of the Americans* in 1832.

31 Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, 168.

32 Frederick Marryat, *A Diary in America, With Remarks on Its Institutions*, ed. Sydney Jackman, New York, 1962, 239–43.

33 Cole, *Collected Essays and Prose Sketches*, 5.

34 David Bjelajac has similarly linked Cole's *St John in the Wilderness* to contemporary revivalist scenes like Paul's. See Bjelajac, *American Art: A Cultural History*, New York, 2001, 194.

35 Charles Grandison Finney, *Sermons on Important Subjects*, New York, 1836, 21.

36 Edmund Burke himself had made this connection in the 'Sound and Loudness' section of his *Philosophical Enquiry*. See Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips, Oxford, 1990, 75–6.

37 James B. Finley, *Autobiography of Rev. James B. Finley, or, Pioneer Life in the West*, ed. W. P. Strickland, Cincinnati, OH, 1856, 166. David E. Nye discusses the relationship between the sublime and religious revivals in nineteenth-century America in *American Technological Sublime*, Cambridge, MA, 1994, 28–9.

38 Samuel H. Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England*, New York, 1935, 235.

39 Perry Miller, *Nature's Nation*, Cambridge, MA, 1967, 153.

40 See Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment*, Cambridge, MA, 2000, 66–9.

41 Miller, *Nature's Nation*, 84.

42 Alan Wallach, 'Thomas Cole and the aristocracy', *Arts Magazine*, 56: 3, November 1981, 103. On Cole and the dissenting tradition see Alan Peter Wallach, 'The Ideal American Artist and the Dissenting Tradition: A Study of Thomas Cole's Popular Reputation', PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 1973.

43 For a discussion of the revivalist movement in relation to Cole, see Christine Stansell and Sean Wilentz, 'Cole's America: an introduction', in *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History*, 11–12.

44 Alan Wallach, 'Thomas Cole: landscape and the course of American empire', in *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History*, 42.

45 Cole's involvement in St Luke's included designing a new church after the old one burned down in 1839 and also painting a *trompe l'oeil* window in the new church (see Parry, *Art of Thomas Cole*, 242–3). Cole's increasing involvement with high-church Episcopalianism is also suggested by his contributions, in 1846, to discussions on art in the high-church Episcopal weekly, *The Churchman*. For the Noble quote see Noble, *Life and Works of Thomas Cole*, 33–4.

46 On Romanticism as a project that partly defies historical analysis and thus raises the problem of historical consciousness itself, see Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, New Haven, 1990.