

Introduction: Framing the American Sublime

Robinson Jeffers, says Albert Gelpi, “is the poet of the sublime without peer in American letters.”¹ Despite this assertion, however, there are entire books devoted to the American literary sublime that fail to cite Jeffers. This omission is all the more striking when one considers how deliberately he made natural grandeur his subject, and the thoroughness with which he explored it.

The reason for this neglect is, in part, the tendency to marginalize Jeffers as a ‘lyric’ poet. A consensus has formed in some quarters that his long narrative poems, whatever their incidental felicities, are too overwrought to be fully successful works of art. The result is that the gist of Jeffers has been sought in his shorter poems, where his skill in evoking the beauty of natural process appears directly, unencumbered by dramatic apparatus.

The consequence of this critical attitude has been not only to diminish Jeffers’ project, but to decontextualize the so-called lyric poems themselves, in which the pressure of tragedy is continuously felt. Far from seeking to eliminate the human in his work, Jeffers sought rather to give it fresh, and, as he took it, perdurable meaning: to create, that is, a new sphere for tragedy in modern letters. The failure to appreciate this impoverishes the full complexity of his view of nature in turn. It also makes it difficult to apprehend him as a poet of the sublime, since the essential aspect of the sublime is the encounter of human cognition and agency with the natural world.

To instate Jeffers as a poet of the sublime is, therefore, to reaffirm his commitment to the human. To claim further, as Gelpi does, that he is America’s great poet of the sublime, is to place him among the central poets of our tradition. I hope this book will show why such a claim can be made.

A word must be said about the other term of my study. The hermeneutic of the sublime has a long pedigree, beginning with Longinus and entering the Romantic tradition with Burke and Kant. Is there, though, a distinctively American subspecies? We do not think of Wordsworth and Turner as representing

an 'English' sublime, or of Goethe and Friedrich a 'German' one. Neither the nationality of the artist nor the particular *topos* described seems to require a nativist prefix. Why, then, in the American case?

The answer to that can be cast in terms both of Americans' perception of themselves and of others' responses to them. America remains the unique modern instance of a country settled originally on the basis of a prescriptive ideology, Calvinism, and politically constituted on the basis of another, democracy. I say "modern" to except ancient Israel, although the original intentions of the Hebrews in settling the southern Mediterranean shore are undoubtedly mystified rather than clarified by the retrospective depiction of a Promised Land. What is certain, however, is that the first New England settlers regarded themselves as the direct successors of Israel, and the wilderness they claimed as their own Promised Land.² Here they prepared, individually and collectively, for their encounter with God, the ultimate (if veiled) site of the sublime, and for the final revelation of his will in the world. Their purpose was consecrated, and so was the land that was to be cleared of encumbrances, both natural and savage, and made fit as the Lord's tabernacle.

As Americans ventured further into the wilderness, however, they found not only a natural abundance denied them on the scanty soil of New England, but an enlarged sense of their destiny and the stage on which it was to be performed. This coincided with the waning of first-generation Calvinism itself and the chiliastic narrative that had been based on it.³ Americans did not lose the sense of their distinction and of their connection to a divine, or at any rate to a higher purpose. They concentrated increasingly, however, on exploiting the material blessings of the land vouchsafed them, leaving the ultimate enactment of that purpose to the fullness of God's own time. At the same time, European conceptions of the sublime began to valorize the American wilderness. Rather than a place to be cleared for the erection of a tabernacle, America itself was seen as a natural temple in which a pantheist deity might be revealed, not in some culminating moment of history but as a perpetually available immanence.

Americans themselves, preoccupied with the practical problems of conquest and settlement, were slow to respond to this new vision of their land. A good example of the disparity between European admiration and American pragmatism is found in Tocqueville. His description of the Mississippi Valley is a splendid piece of Romantic scene-painting, informed, however, with a shrewd appraiser's eye:

The valley watered by the Mississippi seems to have been created for it alone. There, like a god, the river dispenses good and evil at will. Nature has seen to it that the fertility of its bottomland is inexhaustible. . . . Nowhere have the great convulsions of the globe left more obvious traces than in the Mississippi valley. The whole aspect of the region attests to the effects of water. . . . The tides of the primeval ocean piled up thick layers of vegetable matter in the valley's bottom, and with the passage of time these deposits were leveled out. The river's right bank is lined with vast plains as flat as if a farmer had smoothed them with a roller. Toward the mountains, however, the terrain becomes increasingly uneven and barren. The soil seems pierced in a thousand places by primitive rocks, which stand out like the bones of a skeleton from which time has stripped away muscle and flesh. . . .

All in all, the Mississippi valley is the most magnificent place God ever prepared for men to dwell in, yet it is still but a vast wilderness.⁴

For Tocqueville, the valley and its river are one titanic presence, vastly extended in space and time, a scene of grandeur and half-concealed purpose, behind which lies the divine hand. The mode of description is scientific, the intent poetic, the very impersonality of the geologist's rhetoric heightening the sense of an immanent sublime. At the same time, Tocqueville foresees the region's domestication at the hands of man, a heroic (and divinely blessed) labor which tends, however, toward an inglorious result: cultivation.

The irony in this description becomes explicit in a later passage in which Tocqueville depicts the hospitality he receives in a homesteader's log cabin. The cabin is set in land partially cleared, in which "the trees have been cut but not uprooted; their stumps remain, cluttering the land they once shaded." It is a scene reminiscent of the setting of Jeffers' own "Apology for Bad Dreams": "A lonely clearing; a little field of corn by the streamside; a roof under spared trees" (*CP* 1: 208). As Tocqueville's taciturn host offers provision, the visitor comments, "our gratitude runs cold in spite of ourselves," for it is clear that he performs his office as a duty of the frontier, and wholly without pleasure. His wife, too, seems drained of spirit, her own energies, like those of her husband, entirely consumed by the struggle with a wilderness that is ready to reclaim the land at the first sign of slackening. Tocqueville comments: "Their dwelling is like a small world unto itself. It is the ark of civilization, lost in a sea of foliage. A hundred paces beyond, the eternal forest spreads its shade, and solitude resumes."⁵

As Tocqueville realizes, American pragmatism is rooted in the imperatives

of survival. It takes a certain breed of men—"restless, calculating, and adventurous," as he describes them—to civilize a wilderness, and such men cannot afford excessive contemplation. Though they partake of the heroic, they are adversarial to the sublime, for it is the sublime that, ultimately, they are obliged to conquer and domesticate.

Hard on the heels of the settlers came a generation of *plein air* painters, the first to escape the studio conventions of academic European art and to join their Romantic compeers in forest and glen. Unlike, say, the French Barbizon school, however, American artists enjoyed the vistas of a still almost virgin wilderness. Their work was the first articulation of an American sublime which took raw nature for its subject and not merely its site.⁶ At the same time, it was deeply conflicted. American artists were not mere observers of the sublime; they were also, wittingly or not, its surveyors, sizing it up for demolition and recording it for posterity. The paradox of their situation, as witnesses of a transcendental scene that the act of vision itself profaned into history, gave an uneasy pathos to their work. To be sure, as Tocqueville had pointed out, the Mississippi Valley was itself geologically dynamic, the product of natural forces that continued to shape it. No scene, no matter how dramatic, was more than a passing event; all grandeur was provisional. It was still possible to see the guiding hand of Providence in natural as well as human history, as Tocqueville himself did; but it was equally possible to see both as autonomous processes, if not as competitive ones. If the hand of God did not shape nature to the viewer's pleasure, the hand of man well might. Frederic Edwin Church's much-admired *The Heart of the Andes* (1859) took this step. In search of an epitome of grandeur, Church created a virtual landscape, reshaping "actual" sites into a composite that contained at once soaring mountains, fertile plains, wide rivers, and plunging waterfalls. Although the genre of fantastic landscapes was well established in Europe, with Church we enter the modern picturesque, with the human imagination superseding the handiwork of God.⁷

That Church had rearranged the tropics rather than any American scene was yet another portent. *The Heart of the Andes* was an act of sovereign appropriation with imperial no less than aesthetic overtones. Manifest destiny had already had its prophet, however, in Thomas Cole, whose *The Course of Empire* (1834–1836) depicted the degradation of the natural sublime by human agency in five monumental canvases.⁸ Cole's theme was not the sublime as such but the dangers of hubris in the early American republic. Using the conventions of Claudian landscape and Vico's tropology of the epochs of civilization (gleaned

by way of J. M. W. Turner), he showed the transformation of primeval wilderness into Arcadian pastoral, its virtual disappearance in imperial, urbanized splendor, and its “repressed” return in the phase of empire’s collapse. In his first canvas, *The Savage State*, Cole offers a rugged landscape that appears more undisciplined than sublime, with tossing foliage, scudding waves, rearing thunderclouds, and primitive Indian settlements. In *The Pastoral or Arcadian State*, it has been transformed by cultivation and husbandry into a picture of serenity, the water becalmed and the sky cleared. All that remains of it in *The Consummation of Empire*, a scene represented by temples, fountains, concourses, and gilded statuary, is a glimpse of distant peaks covered with suburban dwellings, and a placid bay filled with pleasure boats. In *Destruction*, the bay is roiled, the peaks are bare, and the great city is falling to barbarian conquerors as the smoke of pillage rises into a menacing and almost engulfing sky. Nature is not, however, the victor but merely the scavenger in *Desolation*, the last of the series, in which a lone pillar juts into the sky and even the neighboring hills seem reduced to rubble. Wild vines crawl up the pillar’s sides, and a pelican nests at its top. But wilderness itself is irrecoverable, and the loss of a second Eden, like that of the first, cannot be reversed.

Cole does not valorize wilderness as such in *The Course of Empire*. Nature is subordinated to history, and degraded in if not indeed by empire’s fall. Its situation is hence pathetic rather than sublime. Nonetheless, something more than human tragedy is enacted here, and the spoliation of natural grandeur adds to the sense of transgression. As a wild, second Eden, America offered the world itself a new redemptive possibility. For it simply to reenact the fate of former empires would be not only a deep disappointment but a kind of blasphemy.

Cole’s vision, then, is still rooted in the Puritan conception of American exceptionalism, and the wilderness as a site marked out by Providence. The progress of America’s material civilization, involving as it did the clearing rather than the consecration of that site, led to an anxious preoccupation with what remained. The ever-retreating frontier appeared as a rapidly diminishing stage on which American destiny, whether couched primarily in religious or democratic terms, might still be realized. Following the Westward settlement with their easels, discovering still grander vistas, the painters reassured themselves and their public that sufficient time and space yet remained to fulfill that destiny, even as the very act of artistic representation recorded the reduction of both.

The discovery of California’s gold at mid-century rapidly accelerated the

process of settlement. It also led to the unveiling of the site that would become, and still remains, America's final place, the ultimate symbol of its natural grandeur. Yosemite Valley, a giant, glacier-carved gorge in the California Sierras, was a scene to rival Frederic Church's synthetic landscapes: sheer cliffs, dramatic monoliths, cascading waterfalls, verdant glens.⁹ Albert Bierstadt, a German-born and -trained artist whose career bridged the traditions of the European and American sublime, made it his particular subject in a series of canvases that attracted attention on both continents. Bierstadt conceived Yosemite as a "Garden of Eden . . . the most magnificent place I ever saw."¹⁰ It was an Eden, however, from which the human presence was to be banished, not after but before transgression: unlike his other landscapes, the Yosemite series contained no trace of human (or, for that matter, animal) presence. One might call this a pre-Darwinian sublime, the pristine world of creation rough-hewn from God's hand before the taint of sentient life, which, as Darwin implied for many of Bierstadt's generation, led inexorably to human transgression, and the degradation of the divine handiwork evident in mass wilderness clearance and commercial exploitation. This *Creation of the Fourth Day*, as it were, showed rather a world in which titanic forms—El Capitan, Sentinel Rock, and the Cathedral Rocks are clearly visible—coexist with a placid plant and arboreal life that softens their rugged outline and offers a partially domesticated if still imposing sublime. This is a world partly valorized by its closer temporal relation to God—closer, that is, to the first moment of creation itself—and partly by the absence, not to say the negation of man. The climactic work of the series, *Sunset in the Yosemite Valley* (1868), offers a dramatically lit prospect in which the descending sun, glimpsed around steep cliffs through a golden nimbus, seems to lead back in time as well as space to the divine source.¹¹

Nature is thus apostrophized, in Bierstadt and in other pictorial, photographic, and literary representations of Yosemite, as a transcendent value, at once the site, source, and symbol of divine manifestation. At the same time, man, formerly the bearer of divine signification and value, is excluded from this vision. If Yosemite is, as Bierstadt saw it, a Garden of Eden, it is one that may be glimpsed only from the outside. Man, having been expelled from the original temple and forever seeking it anew, has found it at last on the final, continental shore, only to realize that he can never reenter it, but only gaze from afar. It is not that his presence would profane it, but that he is profanation itself; the sacred repels him. Yosemite is not man's long-sought sanctuary from the postlapsarian world, but Nature's sanctuary from man, the haven denied

him. That he has found and beheld it—the apparition of Eden, primeval and undefiled—is only the seal of his exile.

Modern environmentalism, the movement to preserve what remained of the wilderness from human taint and corruption, emerged as a response to such sentiments. Partly the revulsion against the desecration of a “divinized” or at least an aesthetically valorized landscape, partly the attempt to maintain it in the more subtly appropriated form of a “heritage” for succeeding generations, and partly as a means of preserving it as a site of future redemption, environmentalism was fed by complexly interacting and sometimes contradictory values. Robinson Jeffers became its approved poet, an imprimatur placed on him by the Sierra Club’s immensely popular publication of *Not Man Apart* (1965), whose title was taken from a line in Jeffers’ “The Answer,” and which consisted of photographs of the California wilderness set against stanzas of his verse.¹²

With modern environmentalism, or at least the most extreme wing of it, the American sublime entered a cul-de-sac. If the sublime was construed as the encounter between man and the natural world that revealed the divine—and therefore the common participation in divinity that reconciled both—then to exclude or suppress the human was to annul it. In Bierstadt, the sublime remains accessible only as mediated, second-order experience: the spectator is permitted access to the scene of the sublime, but only through its artistic representation. One might argue that the absence of human figures in his Yosemite series invites the spectator to substitute himself as privileged witness. Nonetheless, the terms of his exclusion are clear. Just as the frame of the painting (and the glass covering, railing, or electronic sensor that might forbid access to it) proclaims that one may look but not touch, so its subject communicates a similar message. Denied entry into Eden, the spectator may behold it as a pilgrim, or in modern terms as a consumer whose appetite must be ever sharpened but never slaked. The National Park system, which permits physical access to the wilderness along specified trails or by “lookout point” vistas framed by railing, extends the prohibition and refines the exclusion. In Bierstadt, we are looking, perforce, at a single perspective, but one that represents at least the painter’s own direct experience, which we are invited to share through him and which he has represented for us. *We* have not beheld Yosemite bare, but he has, and what is offered is at least a record or memorial of the sublime. The modern park visitor, gazing at the prepared vista, sees a simulation carefully crafted from the real thing. He validates his experience by turning to the nearby diorama or postcard rack that faithfully reproduces what he has just seen: the replica of a replica.¹³

Representations such as Bierstadt's pointed up the inherent and seemingly insuperable paradox of the modern sublime. If the essence of the sublime was the human encounter with prime nature, it was an encounter that presupposed the alteration of one term of the equation alone. On one side was overwhelming, annihilative experience; on the other, imperturbable magnificence. As a theory of aesthetic (or religious) perception, this did not require the advent of an Einstein or a Heisenberg to reveal its inadequacy. To the extent that the human agent alone experienced transformation, his agency—even figured as mere presence—was suppressed. As a passive receptor, he stood literally outside the scene of the sublime, and was therefore no more a participant in it than the spectator of Bierstadt's paintings. (We will leave to one side the question of how works of art themselves are transformed, or rather informed, by the spectator's gaze.) If the encounter of the sublime was not in some sense dynamic and transactional, the sublime itself could be experienced only as nostalgia, a longing for experience rather than the experience itself. The gates of Eden remained closed.

The exclusion of the human agent from the scene of the sublime, however, or at any rate the insistence that his experience of it be mediated through barriers that, as in the case of the park, kept him from direct engagement with it, thinly concealed the anxiety that, in fact, the sublime could only be maintained as a fiction because the power of alteration flowed not from nature to man but the other way around. The clearing of the wilderness by settlement and the very necessity to "preserve" nature by limiting or excluding human access made it obvious that the effects of natural grandeur on man paled in comparison with those of man on nature. The natural sublime, as the ground of immanent divinity, sanctified man; by the same token, the wanton destruction of wilderness desecrated nature. Jeffers makes the point vividly through the mouth of the unnamed protagonist of his late poem "The Double Axe": "The human race is bound to defile . . . / Whatever they can reach or name, they'd shit on the morning star / If they could reach" (*CP* 3: 260).

With these words, the sublime appears to reach a point of negation. The encounter with the sacred is rejected; the temple is polluted, not to say vandalized. Language profanes whatever cannot be otherwise touched; cognition itself is a species of violation, and consciousness, as Jeffers says in the mid-period narrative "Margrave," is a "contagion" (*CP* 2: 161).

The adventure of the American sublime, however, was not limited by the encounter between individual subjectivity and natural grandeur. Such had been

its principal basis in Europe, where the landscape had long been domesticated and where even industrialization had merely replaced the pastoral. For Europe, the sublime meant a revaluation of the familiar, a new way of seeing what was already known. There was no question of discovering new Edens, but, as in Blake, of rediscovering the Eden already underfoot.

The terms of the sublime were different in America. The wilderness had been, originally, the site of redemption, of no more intrinsic value than a stage is without the play to be performed on it. As that first drama receded with the ebbing of Calvinist faith, it was gradually replaced by the contested ethos of democracy, whose grand visionary was Thomas Jefferson. Man's liberation was to be not from sin but from tyranny; his reward was not grace but freedom; his paradise was not heavenly but terrestrial. With Lincoln, especially the Lincoln of the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural, America's own secular redemption became a universal imperative, and the travail of its Union the template of human destiny. As the struggles of ancient Israel had been a pattern for the pilgrim fathers, so now the nation they had founded, having come to maturity and crisis, was to be a light for all mankind.

The great poet of the democratic sublime was Whitman, for whom sublimity resided in himself and his fellows, in man as such. For Whitman, too, the Civil War was a defining experience, the fratricide that seemed to negate the natural comradeship of man and man, but which also called it forth at a deeper level as compassion and solidarity in the face of humanity's tragic limit, death. Democracy, then, like its Calvinist antecedent, exposed death, and the attempt to transcend it, at its core. Whitmanian gregariousness was a compact against death, and individual liberty, always in tension with the larger community, found its immortality in the triumphant survival of the democratic collective. As heaven was the terminus of the Puritan sublime, and revelation that of the terrestrial one, so history was for the democratic sublime.

These, too, were questions that engaged Jeffers. His own Jeffersonianism was of a limited, conservative kind, without the imperializing rhetoric that characterized the Declaration of Independence or the acquisitive policies of Jefferson's presidency. He was deeply skeptical of all uses of power, and rejected any prospect of redemption through historical process. Indeed, though his poetic engaged the sublime at virtually every point, it was resolutely anti-apocalyptic. His view of all process, whether natural or historical, was cyclical, a vast, recurring chord without final resolution.

Jeffers' rejection of all tropes of finality was hard-won; the powerful un-

dertow of thanatos, the generalized impulse toward death and disintegration hypothesized by Freud,¹⁴ strongly characterized his early work, and remained a part of its deep structure. It is on this ground, indeed, that Jeffers most closely approaches Whitman, as his perhaps darker brother. I have dealt with the Freudian aspects of Jeffers' work in a previous study,¹⁵ but they remain, in part, germane to this one. In construing an Oedipal sublime, Jeffers was not merely reacting to but enriching the tradition of the American sublime, since it was he who first introduced the Freudian hermeneutic into American letters.

Jeffers' Freudianism was mediated by an earlier influence, that of Emerson and the Transcendentalists. What Jeffers took from Emerson was less a doctrine than an attitude, that of the individual confronting the sublime with nothing but native courage and wit, and finding, or shaping, something of himself in it. Such an attitude finally partook too much of the self for Jeffers' mature taste, and seemed to compromise the resolute monism of his religious and philosophical vision. Nonetheless, the Emersonian hero was important as a model for the transgressive protagonists of Jeffers' narratives, in whom the quest for divine truth was confounded with the desire to incorporate it. Jeffers found in this the basis of tragic (and Nietzschean) hubris, but his ultimate exemplar was the figure of Jesus, in whom Oedipal transgression and religious striving were inextricably mixed, and to whom he turned repeatedly in his narratives and verse dramas.

As Jeffers was the first poet to induct Freudian thought into American letters, so, too, was he the first to reckon with the implications of the most recent avatar of the American sublime, nuclear catastrophism. With the advent of the atomic age, the American sublime came in a sense full circle, linking hands with the Calvinist apocalypse in a vision of the end of history. Like Puritanism, it was implicitly redemptive for a chosen elite, who were now to be not the elect of an inscrutable God but the designated survivors of the nuclear State, which, in the fashion of New England's deity, appointed life for the few and death for the many. This recrudescence of Calvinist primitivism in the guise of modern science appalled Jeffers, not least for its Promethean arrogance, and called from him a final assertion of divine sovereignty and human limitation.

It is the contention of this book that Robinson Jeffers, more than any other figure in our literature, has comprehensively engaged and crucially defined the American sublime. There were, to be sure, interpreters and prophets of it before him, but it was he who gathered up its varied strands into a coherent whole. It might be said that he made his great synthesis only at the point at which

the sublime had become hypertrophic—a concept to be invoked only with a certain ironic distance, if not, as in Stevens, to be largely inverted. Yet it seems to me that the notion of the sublime expresses a conundrum of modern experience that we have rather laid by than put behind us. In that sense, a poetics of the sublime still points the way ahead for us, and not merely a road already traveled. If the vitality of the sublime is not particularly apparent in American poetry at present—a poetry, for the most part, of small risks—it still manifests itself in other genres, notably painting. Indeed, if we consider it in its full context, it appears deeply interwoven with the fabric of American culture as such. This alone justifies our exploration of it in its most salient figure.