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The Americanization of the Sublime: Washington Allston and Thomas Cole as Theorists of American Art

Abstract: The idea of the sublime, borrowed by the painter Washington Allston from Joshua Reynolds and—through S. T. Coleridge—possibly also from Kant, at the beginning of the nineteenth century in the United States still had mostly European connotations. Both as a theorist of art and a poet, Allston explicitly pledged his cultural allegiance to Great Britain. It was paradoxically Thomas Cole, a British-born immigrant, who was the first to associate a much less strictly defined concept of the sublime with the American landscape of the Catskills, thus initiating the discourse of the US cultural nationalism both in his diary and essays related to painting, and poetry.

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In his canonical *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson has demonstrated that the proliferation of print-as-commodity has been the crucial factor which determined the rise of various "imagined communities," particularly those of a postcolonial origin. It remains an open question whether the culture of the United States can be legitimately called postcolonial—after all, the first thirteen states did not much differ from the British colonies they used to be, at least in socioeconomic and broadly cultural terms—yet since the publication of Michael Warner's seminal study *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* it has become obvious that without the print culture the American Revolution would have been quite different, if successful at all. In her now classic books on the nineteenth-century American painting Barbara Novak has shown that painting, and, for that matter, landscape painting more than historical representations related to the War of Independence, also significantly contributed to early US nationalism. Summing up her analysis of the ideological grip on nature in the age of Emerson, Novak writes:

> With such a range of religious, moral, philosophic, and social ideas projected onto the American landscape, it is clear that the painters who took it upon themselves to deal with this 'loaded' subject were involved not only with art, but with the iconography of nationalism. In painting the face of God in the landscape so that the less gifted might recognize and share in that benevolent spirituality, they were among the spiritual leaders of America's flock. Through this idea of *community* we can approach a firm understanding of the role of landscape not only in American art,

> but in American life, especially before the Civil War. The idea of this community through nature runs clearly through all aspects of American social life in the first half of the nineteenth century[.] (*Nature and Culture* 15)

Now, after almost forty years that have passed since that statement was made, the interest in the connections among American thought, literature, and the plastic arts, as well as between the US and Britain in a transatlantic perspective, has resulted in a number of publications, perhaps most recently a collection of essays *Transatlantic Romanticism: British and American Art and Literature, 1790-1860*, edited by Andrew Hemingway and Alan Wallach. Novak's pioneering claims have been continued and supplemented by scholars working across the borderline traditionally separating literary and cultural studies and art history, while her emphasis on the role of Washington Allston and Thomas Cole, both very much aware of the aesthetic categories of the beautiful, the sublime, and the picturesque, inherited from Burke and the British painters and theorists of landscape gardening, has remained uncontested. Still, even though Allston's and Cole's achievements in art have been attracting academic interest for decades, somehow particularly the former's contribution to American reflection on painting has been quite surprisingly rather neglected.

A good starting point for a comparison of Allston and Cole as regards their conscious support of the US national identity in culture may be a brief reading of their poems: Allston's "America to Great Britain," included in the volume *Sylphs of the Season* of 1813, and Cole's "Niagara," written in May, 1829, but published only in 1972. "America to Great Britain," a tribute to the "Fathers' native soil," ends with the following stanza:

> While the manners, while the arts,
> That mould a nation's soul,
> Still cling around our hearts, –
> Between let Ocean roll,
> Our joint communion breaking with the Sun:
> Yet still from either beach
> The voice of blood shall reach,
> More audible than speech,
> "We are One." (291-292)

In fact, having published such a poem in 1813, during a war between his country and Great Britain, the poet must have been a bit embarrassed since he decided to add to it the following apologetic footnote: "This alludes merely to the moral union of the two countries. The author would not have it supposed that the tribute of respect, offered in these stanzas to the land of his ancestors, would be paid by him, it at the expense of the independence of that which gave him birth" (Allston 292). Born on a South Carolina plantation, Allston could legally run for President,

but neither his Harvard education, nor marriage to Ann Channing, nor residence in Boston could affect his attitude of basic cultural loyalty to the Crown, characteristic of the former colonies south of the Mason-Dixon line long after the Revolution. On the other hand, Cole, a British-born immigrant, concluded his response to the view of Niagara Falls as follows:

> Ages untold thy voice broke forth unheard;
> But by the shrinking wolf, or the tim'rous deer
> Or wandering savage of the echoing wild—
> Until an enterprise sublime unbarred
> The mighty portals of the golden west
> And midst its teeming fullness thou wast found
> Majestic in the wilderness enthroned— (Tymn 51)

The contrast with Allston's message appears quite striking: here the focus is on the emblematic "wilderness," populated by animals and Indians, while the term "enterprise sublime" most likely refers to the United States itself. Moreover, Niagara has become a natural counterpart of the royal majesty from the other side of the water, "enthroned" in the landscape to be discovered, "found" by impressed American settlers. Thus, Cole not only made a reference to the discourse of the sublime, but did it in an explicitly political manner, applying it simultaneously to nature and to the country he chose to call his own.

A few years later, in the early 1830s, Allston would deliver in Cambrigeport to a select audience of two close friends: Professor Cornelius Conway Felton of Harvard and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a series of "Lectures on Art" to be published posthumously in 1850. (Significantly, their belated publication attracted almost no attention of the American reading public and had virtually no influence on the development of philosophical aesthetics in the US.) There, he would also take into consideration the concept of the sublime, yet in a different and, above all, much elaborate way. Probably inspired by Reynolds' *Discourses on Art* and definitely by Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into Our Ideas of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, Allston proposed in the "Introductory Discourse" a whole intricate system of categories superimposed on "Beauty" related to the natural world once the spectator "ascend[s] thence into the moral" (Allston 67). A "continuous chain of creation" begins with "Elegance" and then, through "Majesty" and "Grandeur," eventually reaches a realm where the

> physical… seems almost to vanish and a new form rises before us, so mysterious, so undefined and elusive to the senses, that we turn, as if for its more distinct image, within ourselves, and there, with wonder, amazement, awe, we see it filling, distending, stretching every faculty, till, like the Giant of Otranto, it seems almost to burst the imagination: under this strange confluence of opposite emotions, this terrible pleasure, we call this awful form Sublimity. (68)

First, in his account of the sublime, Allston actually goes far beyond both Reynolds' laconic formulations rooted in Pseudo-Longinus and Burke's empirical sensualism. His vocabulary, including such terms as "faculty" and "imagination," seems quite close to the Kantian diction of the *Critique of Judgment*, though he could not read Kant in German. (A long-time friend of Coleridge, he might have discussed with the English poet various problems of aesthetics, but their correspondence reveals no traces of such discussions.) Second, it is interesting that the painter used in his argument an example taken from literature—the gothic novel by Horace Walpole. On another occasion, just several pages earlier, he made a literary reference as well—to *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, once again unmistakably English. All in all, then, Allston's sublime had nothing to do with the United States or with space other than the inner space of the mind. In that inner space of the narrator's memory in *Monaldi*, Allston's gothic romance of 1822, he placed the only verbal landscape of the American Northeast that can be found in his written *oeuvre*:

> There is sometimes so striking a resemblance between the autumnal sky of Italy and that of New England at the same season, that when the peculiar features of the scenery are obscured by twilight it needs but little aid of the imagination in an American traveller to fancy himself in his own country; the bright orange of the horizon, fading into a low yellow, and here and there broken by a slender bar of molten gold, with the broad mass pale apple-green blending above, and the sheet of deep azure over these, gradually darkening to the zenith—all carry him back to his dearer home. (*Monaldi* 9)

The connection, or perhaps tension, between the United States and Italy was characteristic of both Allston and Cole since both of them learned most from Claude Lorrain and Salvator Rosa in Roman Campagna—they visited Rome and its environs as often as their unstable financial situation allowed them to do so. As Novak writes with reference to Cole, "[u]sing and reusing Salvator's gnarled trees and Claude coulisses and glittering ponds, he deftly imposed details of American scenery upon formulae derived from earlier prototypes, or upon his own favorite compositional schema, which he would repeat whether the locale were the Catskills or the White Mountains" (*American Painting* 51). The two continents and two countries coalesced in the works of both artists, even though one was more willing, in part under the pressure of demanding patrons, to paint the "savage" landscapes of the United States than the other, long storing in his mind's eye the views of Italy and faces of young Italian women. In Allston's case, nostalgia worked both ways to make him an "incurable romantic": when in the Apennines, his homesick narrator dreams about New England, when back in Boston, he himself could not forget the picturesque details of his European sojourn.

Cole liked American nature much better than his elder colleague who preferred his Boston studio to strolling around in the White Mountains and never confronted the wild nature of his country with a brush in his hand. The published

fragments of Cole's journal include a few accounts of trips to the Catskills and the Hudson River valley—the first dated November 1834, the last August 1846. The lengthy entry of July 5, 1835 demonstrates that he could also, like Allston, make use of literature when thinking about the aesthetic qualities of the visible world, his literary associations, though, were quite different:

> The first 7 miles by means of agreeable conversation & the blessed moon we passed over merrily, but then the moon sank behind the piny ridge of the North mountain, and we began to be thirsty & were disappointed by not finding a spring by Lawrence's; the inmates of the house appeared to be sound asleep & we deemed it better to pursue our way to Rip Van Winkle's hollow about three miles farther than to disturb the slumberers.… It was midnight when we sat down by the pure warbling stream that comes jumping down from the grand amphitheatre of wooded mountains called Rip Van Winkle's Cove. There was a tin vessel glittering by the stream [,] placed there for the use of travellers by some generous soul or perhaps some fairy who expected us at that silent hour; be that as it may we drank from it the cool pure water again & again & the drafts were more delicious even than those of Rip could possibly have been when he took the somniferous potion from the famous keg in or near this self same place. It was a solemn scene. Dark forests [,] rugged rocks [,] towering mountains encompassed us, & the night breeze brought the sound of waving trees, falling streams & the clear chaunt of the whippoorwill to our listening ears; it was grand, it was sublime to be thus by ourselves at midnight in the midst of the solitude of woods & mountains while all the world beside was slumbering. (Cole 129)

Contrary to Allston, a learned theorist, Cole mentions the sublime quite intuitively, outside any aesthetic system, but he does it in a testimony of a genuine experience of American scenery and with reference to Washington Irving's tale actually set in the area, a text already acknowledged at that time as culturally significant on both sides of the Atlantic. The result is a polysemiotic palimpsest: nature described through vernacular literature and—in the future—also painted. In the same journal entry the artist wrote:

> Before us spread the virgin waters which the prow of the sketcher had never curl'd, green woods enfolding them whose venerable masses had never figured in trans-atlantic annuals, and far away the stern blue mountains whose forms were ne'er beheld by Claude or Salvator or been subjected to the canvass by the innumerable dabblers in paint for all time past. The painter of American scenery has indeed privileges superior to any other; all nature is new to Art (131)

It seems as if under the pressure of that radical, wild newness European aesthetic distinctions must blur and clear-cut concepts coalesce: "In the mountains of New Hampshire, there is a union of the picturesque, the sublime, and the magnificent"

(9). When in September 1847 Cole visits Niagara for the second time, he calls the falls within one and the same sentence "great [,] glorious [,] sublime & beautiful" (185). Like Margaret Fuller more than four years before, who was disappointed with her own inability to appreciate the view properly and had to make herself admire it almost by force (Steele 71-77), he has a problem with what he can see—"It is limited, in that, the human mind can conceive of a cataract much greater & more sublime" (Cole 185)—but eventually he retracts his reservations as a true patriot: "Great [,] glorious & sublime Niagara! Wonder of the world! I do not disparage thee! Thou has the power to move the deep soul!" (186). The nationalist obligation wins and eliminates trouble rooted in the painful Kantian discrepancy between the ideas of reason and actual sense data.

After Allston's death in 1843, Cole paid his homage to the elder colleague: "He was truly a distinguished artist & has executed some works which will never cease to be highly prized & considered a great work of Art" (Cole 174). On the other hand, though, he admitted to himself in a note probably not intended for publication: "Fine as I consider many of Allston's works & superior as I think he is to most of the Artists of his time [,] I have never thought that he was a man of very original genius. His pictures (beautiful as they are) always reminded me of some work or School of Art, something I have seen before, either in invention [,] composition or colour" (174). That was, of course, not what genuinely American art was supposed to be and Cole knew it as well as Emerson who in 1842 wrote in his journal with a haunting sense of regret: "We have our culture like Allston from Europe & are Europeans" (Emerson 276). Cole was a European himself, yet he decided to become an American. Allston was an American, but on the contrary, he did not mind being a European, at least as a painter.

As a theorist of the sublime, the author of "Lectures on Art" proved sophisticated and self-conscious enough to observe conceptual rigor and even managed, probably thanks to Coleridge's inspiration, to comprehend the gist of Kant's idea of *das Erhabene*. He understood what he was writing about and, perhaps like Poe in the same period, refused to take into consideration "Americanness" as a necessary value. The Americanization of the sublime, which, however, lost in the process its distinctive aesthetic meaning and turned into little more than an emphatic term of admiration, took place in the reflection of Cole, although in fact both artists followed the conventions of landscape painting developed by Claude Lorrain and Salvator Rosa. Still, Cole reluctantly catered for the US market's demand for the recognizably "local" instead of the "universal" so that his "painting-as-commodity," to adapt Anderson's useful phrase to visual arts, contributed to the discourse of cultural nationalism just as much as his well-known "American Scenery" essay of 1836. In such a perspective, the Hudson River School emerges as the first symbolic national institution of American art. Allston contributed to it as an institution posthumously: when in 1870 the Boston Museum of Fine Arts was founded, its first acquisition turned out to be his gothic landscape painting *Elijah in the Desert*.

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