

- Berry, Wendell. *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-1997*. Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1998.
- Evennden, Neil. "Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Ed. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1996.
- Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Judgement*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1952. *The Living Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1971.
- Lopez, Barry. *Field Notes: The Grace Note of the Canyon Wren*. New York: Avon Books, 1994.
- Lytotard, Jean-Francois. *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994.

---

G O R D O N M . S A Y R E

If Thomas Jefferson  
Had Visited Niagara Falls  
The Sublime Wilderness Spectacle in  
America, 1775-1825

*It would be vain presumption on my part, to attempt a minute description of this "most sublime of nature's works," a distinction which Mr. Jefferson would not have conferred on the Natural Bridge across Cedar creek, in Virginia, if he had seen this stupendous cataract. (Johnston 307)*

—Charles Johnston, on seeing Niagara Falls during his voyage eastward in 1790 after being ransomed from Indian captivity.

How did Americans regard sublime nature in the eighteenth century? Johnston's comment suggests that just a few years after the founding of the United States, its citizens were seeking out the land's scenic marvels, measuring their sublime effects in language, and even staging an informal competition for which site would claim pre-eminence as a scenic emblem of the young nation. Johnston was a lawyer of some education and influence, but not an intellectual or aesthete; his foray into print was a consequence of his Indian captivity. Nonetheless, he was familiar with the Natural Bridge near his home in Botetourt County, Virginia, and the description of it by Thomas Jefferson published in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1782), and he used that site as a benchmark for sublime scenery. He also was familiar with the rhetoric of the sublime, and he used a cliché that dozens of more famous writers would employ at Niagara Falls in years to come, the expression of inexpress-

ibility: "Such was the effect produced on me by surveying this magnificent object, that when I attempted to express the astonishment of my feelings to the officer who accompanied me, I could find no language to give it utterance, and remained absolutely dumb" (307-8). Johnston's associations of Niagara with the sublime, and of the sublime with Thomas Jefferson's *Notes*, have become common since the 1780s, and the two together offer an excellent point of departure for a study of sublime spectacles and their importance in early American nationalism, landscape aesthetics, and attitudes toward wilderness.

By "sublime spectacles" I refer to wilderness not as an extensive quality of the natural landscape or habitat across a broad area, but to the intensive, striking scenes for which wilderness has long been valued and promoted in America. As Allison Byerly has written, the Sierra Club and other environmental organizations "rely on picturesque appreciation of the landscape to further their goals" (63). This wilderness picturesque is represented through aesthetically composed photographs taken at moments of ideal lighting and weather and is used to make appeals for donations and political support. The aesthetic pleasure of such scenic photographs is more broadly appealing than an ecologist's statement of the importance of a tract of wilderness habitat, much as the picturesque was, in the late eighteenth century, a popular or middlebrow aesthetic compared to the genteel cultivation of the sublime. And much as the sublime, as Kant defined it, is "an object (of nature) the representation of which determines the mind to regard the elevation of nature beyond our reach as equivalent to a presentation of ideas" (119), the ecosystemic extent of wilderness is an ideal concept beyond the reach of the ordinary observer, whereas the picturesque scene is designed to be an accessible, popular aesthetic. If we wish to find the closest approximation in early America to the modern popular relationship to wilderness landscape, the place to look is not in the representations of extensive wilderness per se, which covered most of North America at that time, but in the visions of these scenic spectacles that emblemized the wilderness around them. After all, as Byerly also writes, "the American wilderness . . . has been gradually reduced and circumscribed until it no longer seems to stretch into infinity" (53). For all that we may bemoan the fact, it is protected and celebrated on an intensive, not an extensive scale, and the long vistas that remain have become picturesque postcard scenes more than sublime experiences. But in the eighteenth century, before there was a sense that the space and natural resources of America had the practical limits we recognize today, there was already an aesthetic of the wilderness spectacle, and controversies over how best to appreciate it. Chris Hitt has in a recent essay observed "the reluctance of ecocritics

to engage literary representations of the sublime" (605) and argued that "the traditional natural sublime, for all its problems, involves what look to us like eccentric principles" (607). Indeed, an appreciation of this eighteenth-century aesthetic of sublime wilderness can provide historical context for modern aesthetic relationships between viewer and nature.

Niagara Falls, the Natural Bridge, and the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers (which Jefferson also described superlatively), are the three sublime spectacles I wish to examine. For Jefferson and others of his time, these were nationalist emblems of the American landscape. The scale and power of these sites became indices of the cultural and industrial potential of America. Landscape historians and preservationists have studied how conflicts between tourism, industry, and public space at Niagara Falls encapsulate the conflicts over the values of scenic preservation to Americans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (McGrevey, Irwin, and Sears). I aim to show that the roots of these conflicts go right back to the Revolutionary Era. This survey of eighteenth-century American wilderness spectacles will challenge common conceptions of the sublime as a Romantic concept opposed to utilitarian values. Although they often did repeat the aesthetic formulations of Burke and Kant, early Americans did not see the natural sublime as antithetical to the human goals or uses of natural resources. Moreover, a scientific or rational conception of these spectacles did not exclude the perpetuation of folklore about their marvels and mysteries.

## I

The period from 1775 to 1825 represents a gap in the academic account of American attitudes toward wild nature. Historians like Roderick Nash and Perry Miller have documented how seventeenth-century Puritan colonists regarded the surrounding wilderness with dread, as the domain of wolves and tempting demons. Many others have celebrated the affirmation of nature that Thoreau located in the same New England in a later period. But what of the intervening years? At the time of the Revolution and founding of the United States, the beauty and power of Nature was already a source of pride and a locus of nationalism, yet the ways of looking at natural scenes were necessarily different than in the mid-nineteenth century. The scenic wonders of the western United States—Yosemite Valley, the Grand Canyon, the redrock spires and snowcapped peaks of postcard clichés—were yet unknown to Anglo-Americans. Many of the scenic spectacles which were celebrated, such as Passiac Falls in New Jersey or the

Natural Bridge in Virginia, are now unknown or unexceptional to Americans living beyond the immediate area. Also yet unknown were the effects of the industrial revolution which later transformed Niagara and Passaic. In this deist, rationalist era there was not yet the Romantic sense that technology or science was opposed to the artistic or imaginative temperament. Moreover, the rituals of tourism, by which wilderness spectacles today are enshrined and defaced, deified and commodified, had barely begun in America. Only a handful of men, such as Isaac Weld and the Marquis de Chastellux, travelled in the eighteenth century between major U.S. cities and these scenic sites, driven by the mere desire to see these places and write of their observations (Wills 260). A final important difference is that without photography, and before the popular explosion in American landscape painting beginning with Thomas Cole, scenic splendor was routinely conveyed in writing, and the influence of aesthetic theory on popular vision was far greater than it is today. Periodicals communicated scenic landscapes to readers not by simply reproducing a photograph, but by printing or reprinting the eye-witness accounts of travellers (sometimes alongside crude engravings), and the rhetorical formulas of the sublime served much as visual conventions do in landscape photography today. Something of this connection between visual and literary aesthetics is preserved in the word "cliché" which in French means photographic "snapshot." Thus the scenic wilderness spectacle was in this era already reified, already packaged into simulacra, but packaged not in visual representations, rather in literary ones.

Literary treatments of the American landscape in the revolutionary period also responded to the urgent project of forming a political and cultural union. Not only did the nation's small population and rudimentary infrastructure not measure up to England or France, but America lacked the very sources of aesthetic tradition: the classical civilizations of Greece and Rome. In European landscape painting and theorizing of the time, the ruins of Roman public edifices (such as in Piranesi's engravings) or of gothic churches (as in Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" and J. M. Turner's painting of it) conveyed a sense of respect for the great achievements of the past, and wonder at the forces which might have caused such decline and ruin. When Washington Irving travelled to England in 1815, he was the first American fiction writer to have achieved substantial fame in Europe, and he tried to balance the virtues of his native land with a need to absorb the culture of the Old World. Writing of his voyage in the pseudonymous *Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1819-20) he claimed that, "I visited various parts of my own country; and had I been merely influenced by a love of fine scenery, I should have felt little desire to seek

elsewhere its gratification. . . . no, never need an American look beyond his own country for the sublime and beautiful of natural scenery" (54). Yet although "My native country was full of youthful promise; Europe was rich in the accumulated treasures of age. Her very ruins told the history of times gone by, and every mouldering stone was a chronicle. I longed to wander over the scenes of renowned achievement—to tread, as it were, in the footsteps of antiquity" (54). In place of European ruins, scenes of cultural spectacle, America offered natural spectacles. These scenic landscapes might not convey a rich cultural past, but they did offer visual edification, as the title "sketch-book" suggests Irving's writing will do. Irving also claimed that "my idle humor has led me aside from the great objects studied by every regular traveler who would make a book," (55) and in place of sublime clichés, he wrote picturesque essays with titles like "Rural Life in England" and "The Country Church." Yet he also sought to synthesize the advantages of American and European scenery in the two famous tales that were first published in the *Sketch-Book*, "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." He set both in the Hudson Valley, the first accessible scenic tourist destination in the United States. And both tales endowed the landscape with a sense of "mouldering" history which he claimed he had gone to Europe to find. The magical and uncertain legend of the Headless Horseman, and the ghosts of Dutch colonists who entertain Rip, are both folkloric "ruins" which imbue American landscapes with history and mystery. We will see that Niagara Falls inspired similar legends.

Irving's preface offers a sense of how literary conventions of landscape in European literature were adapted to America. Nature could take the place of culture as a goal for travellers and a locus of pride for natives. In the same period, the United States was developing its own scenic tourist sites. By the 1820s there were hotels and spas along the Hudson Valley, such as the Catskill Mountain House and Ballston Spa near Saratoga Springs (Robertson 191). 1825 marked the opening of the Erie Canal, connecting the Hudson Valley to Lake Erie. This event was not only crucial as the opening of a trade route connecting the Great Lakes region or Old Northwest with the eastern seaboard, it also made it possible for tourists to travel with relative ease to Niagara Falls. The canal caused Niagara Falls to change from a wilderness to a tourist spectacle. By restricting this study to the pre-canal period, I exclude a great body of literature about the Falls from the mid nineteenth-century, including many famous names like Margaret Fuller, Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope and William Dean Howells. But there were at least two dozen accounts of the Falls written by travellers prior to 1800, including Chateaubriand, Crèvecoeur, and the Swed-

ish naturalist Peter Kalm. Many of the longer and more provocative descriptions were by writers all but forgotten today, such as Isaac Weld, who travelled to all three of the sites I wish to focus on, and quoted extensively from Jefferson's book in his *Travels through the States of North America and the Province of Upper and Lower Canada, During the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797*. By drawing upon non-fiction, amateur writers, I also hope to retain the diagnostic value of Niagara as a wilderness spectacle in the Early Republic. For, as Roderick Nash has written (without referring to Niagara specifically) by the 1830s the notion of wilderness as a sanctuary from society and commerce "appeared regularly in periodicals, 'scenery' albums, literary 'annuals,' and other elegant, parlor literature of the time. The adjectives 'sublime' and 'picturesque' were applied so indiscriminately as to lose meaning" (61). In the earlier period, these terms retained stricter definitions, meanings worth examining in detail.

## II

For landscape viewers and artists of two hundred years ago, steep mountains and raging rapid rivers were sublime, verdant pastures and quiet streams were beautiful or picturesque. English aristocrats in the eighteenth century who cultivated their landscape aesthetics on the "Grand Tour" through Italy and France celebrated Salvator Rosa and Claude Lorraine as the quintessential artists of the two moods. The former was known for rugged mountain scenes of gnarled trees and steep cliffs, frequently peopled with *banditti* prepared to pounce on wealthy travellers (such as those who later bought his paintings and engravings). The cult for these gothic landscapes was so pervasive that Horace Walpole, originator of the gothic literary genre with his *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), reduced it to a shorthand list: "Precipices, mountains, torrents, wolves, rumblings, Salvator Rosa" (qtd. in Monk 211). Salvator captured the sense of self-conscious fear that would become the trademark emotion of the sublime for Kant. By contrast, Claude (for some reason the artists' first names were always used) favored pastoral, picturesque scenes with softer contours. In this conception, Salvator stands for the sublime and for wilderness, with all the associations that the latter term had in pre-1800 America: danger, fear, spiritual deprivation and temptation. Claude represents the pastoral and picturesque modes of composed, pleasing scenes of nature, in which rugged mountains are relegated to the distant background. When Jefferson wrote that "The Ohio is the most beautiful river on earth. Its current gentle, waters clear, and bosom smooth and unbroken by rocks and rapids" (10), he expressed a Claudian pictur-

esque scene. When he wrote of how the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers "rush together" against the Blue Ridge, and "have torn the mountain down from its summit to its base" leaving "piles of rock on each hand" (19) he consciously evoked the Salvatorian mood.

The two painters provide convenient tags for the opposition between the sublime and the picturesque. Byerly, in her provocative article on the influence of landscape aesthetics on wilderness policy in the U.S., also employed the terms, writing that, "The American idea of the wilderness might seem closer to the aesthetic category of the sublime than to the picturesque. In fact, the American wilderness has gradually been transformed from a sublime landscape into a series of picturesque scenes" (53) in a process similar to the tourist development and reification of Niagara Falls during the 1800s. As quoted above, wilderness "has been gradually reduced and circumscribed until it no longer seems to stretch into infinity, but is contained and controlled within established boundaries" (53). The Salvatorian sense of fear and awe which a backpacker might feel has been for most people replaced by a Claudian picturesque simulcrum, in which the sport-utility vehicle replaces the shepherd as pastoral-mood accessory. The infinite, ungraspable scale of the sublime scene was a key tenet of Burke's theory: "Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test, of the sublime" (73). Likewise, the extensive, ecosystemic breadth of wilderness is beyond the scale of the momentary human sensation, while the picturesque is designed around the scale of the viewer: "It is the spectator who engages the machinery of the picturesque aesthetic, mentally manufacturing a work of art where before there was a work of nature" (Byerly 55). Byerly lumps both Claude and Salvator together as picturesque, reserving the sublime for a purer form of wilderness experience, one which escapes aesthetic representation. Yet the sublime is a subjective effect dependent upon the presence of the spectator, just as the picturesque is. The passage from Burke quoted above continues: "There are scarce any things which can become the objects of our senses that are really, and in their own nature infinite. But the eye not being able to perceive the bounds of many things, they seem to be infinite, and they produce the same effects as if they were really so" (129-30). This is the aesthetic effect which Isaac Weld wished to attest to when he wrote of Niagara Falls that "It is impossible for the eye to embrace the whole of it at once" (Dow 1: 102). The paradox that, as Byerly states it "The visitor to a wilderness area should find a place that has not been visited" (57) is in fact characteristic of the sublime, as a sensation which over-

whelms sensation, a place so extensive that a rational conception of it must be intuited from an intensive sensation.

Burke, Kant and earlier writers often defined the sublime in paradoxes, contradictory terms like "delightful horror." In Jefferson's writing this contradiction or confrontation of opposites was often mapped onto the landscape, as mountain and river, or even into the aesthetic categories themselves, the picturesque in contrast to the sublime. Jefferson, though we might not regard him as an ecological thinker, was among the leading wilderness aestheticists of his day. His *Notes on the State of Virginia*, the only book he published in his lifetime, is an amalgam of science, geography, and ethnography, but as one scholar has written, "is now most remembered for its descriptions of the passage of the Potomac River through the Blue Ridge Mountains, and of the Natural Bridge" (Lawson-Peebles 177). These two famous landscape descriptions both capture the dialectical quality of the sublime, and its dependence upon the spectator who feels its paradoxical effects. In the passage on the Natural Bridge, Jefferson used the grammatical second and first person to try to convey the emotional affect to the reader:

You involuntarily fall on your hands and feet, creep to the parapet and peep over it. Looking down from this height about a minute, gave me a violent head ach. If the view from the top be painful and intolerable, that from below is delightful in an equal extreme. It is impossible for the emotions arising from the sublime, to be felt beyond what they are here . . . the rapture of the spectator is really indescribable! (54)

We know that Jefferson read Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1759), and this passage echoes Burke (Lawson-Peebles 173), not only in the contrast of perspective ("we are much more struck at looking down from a precipice, than at looking up at an object of equal height" [128]), but also for the empiricist theory of stimulus and response. The beautiful, according to both Burke and Kant, produced pleasure or delight, while the sublime inspired pain (Burke) or fear (Kant), in tension with the former sense of pleasure. Burke explained that although an excess of terror, like an excess of labor, causes pain, a moderate degree could produce pleasure. Whereas at the edge of the precipice the fear of falling was real, at the bottom the sense of height was pleasing. The two combined produced a paradoxical or dialectical sublime affect, such as had been described by Englishman John Dennis, who in 1693 was perhaps the first writer in English to find Mountain scenery pleasing, writing that "the dreadful Depth of the Precipice . . . produc'd different emotions in me, viz. a delightful Horrour, a terrible Joy" (qtd. in

Monk 207). Dennis did not use the term "sublime" but he began to define the oppositions of pain/pleasure, mountain/valley, sublime/beautiful, which Jefferson drew upon. And Jefferson reinforced this dichotomy by adding that from below the bridge, looking down the gorge, "The fissure continuing narrow, deep and straight for a considerable distance above and below the bridge, opens a short but very pleasing view of the North mountain on one side, and Blue Ridge on the other, at the distance each of them about five miles" (54). As both Robert Lawson-Peebles and Garry Wills have noted, this view was not in fact visible from below the bridge. Jefferson had composed a framed, picturesque view, improving the site as a landscape gardener might wish to do, and he was forced to admit his error and correct the passage in 1817 by adding a hand-written note in the leaves of his own copy of his book. Jefferson's innovation upon the aesthetics of Burke was to show how the sublime was not a rarefied, elite phenomenon above and beyond the picturesque or beautiful, but that the two moods were dialectically dependent upon one another.

### III

The opposition between the landscapes of Claude and Salvator, river and mountain, pleasure and pain, therefore pervades Jefferson's aesthetics even more than those of Kant and Burke. If Jefferson proposed a dialectical synthesis of the two in his Natural Bridge passage, Niagara Falls and the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah both work to deconstruct these binary oppositions through a surprising reversal of the poles of landscape aesthetics. Andrew Ellicott in 1789 described the topography that creates the Falls:

. . . conceive that part of the country in which lake Erie is situated to be elevated above that which contains lake Ontario, about three hundred feet. The slope which separates the upper and the lower country . . . may be traced from the north side of lake Ontario, near the bay of Toronto, round the west end of the lake; thence its direction is generally east; between lake Ontario, and lake Erie it crosses the strait of Niagara . . . It is to this slope that our country is indebted, both for the cataract of Niagara and the great falls of the Cheneseco [on the Genesee river]. (Dow 1: 91-92)

This "slope" is today known as the Niagara Escarpment. It is in some spots a gentle hillside, in others a cliff or series of stepped cliffs. The Falls once cascaded off the very lip of the escarpment, but have gradually eroded the soft shale and receded southward, creating the Niagara Gorge in a geologic process we'll examine more below. The key point here is the sense that, contrary to the sublime

associations around the figure of Salvator, these mountains are linear and well-ordered. The sublime spectacle occurs when a river breaks through the line of a mountain. Against the orderly, linear mountains flows the dynamic, passionate element of water. Much as the Niagara "forces its way amidst the rocks" in Isaac Weld's 1796 account (Dow 1: 100), a linear mountain is "cloven asunder" by the Patowmac in Jefferson's other famous sublime scene. Both are examples of what Paul Shepard has called "The Cross Valley Syndrome," the phenomenon of a river cutting through a high ridge of mountains, rather than forming a valley alongside the range. In the case of the Columbia River Gorge and the Hudson River Valley, a large river passes through mountains as flatwater, even tide-water, but in the places under our examination here, the resulting waterfall or rapids is even more sublime:

The passage of the Patowmac through the Blue ridge is perhaps one of the most stupendous scenes in nature. You stand on a very high point of land. On your right comes up the Shenandoah, having ranged along the foot of the mountain an hundred miles to seek a vent. On your left approaches the Patowmac, in quest of a passage also. In the moment of their junction, they rush together against the mountain, rend it asunder, and pass off to the sea. . . . (19)

Even more than in the Natural Bridge scene quoted above, Jefferson uses the second person to invite the reader to become a spectator to the scene. But unlike the Natural Bridge passage, the dialectic of pain and pleasure, sublime and beautiful, is not achieved by a change in the viewer's perspective. The elements of the landscape itself play these two roles. In this "war between rivers and mountains" (20), the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers are not, like the Ohio, a figure for Nature's maternal bounty, pastoral purity, or commercial utility, but a dynamic and destructive, even phallic force, which breaks through a mountain ridge. The continuation of the passage is a narrative orgasm, as well as a template for landscape aesthetics. The "junction" of the two rivers, whose libidinal urges had been building for a hundred miles of frustrated flow at the foot of an Appalachian ridge, leads to a sublime "rending," then concludes in a picturesque scene of bliss:

. . . the distant finishing which nature has given to the picture is of a very different character. It is a true contrast to the fore-ground. It is as placid and delightful, as that is wild and tremendous. For the mountain being cloven asunder she presents to your eye, through the cleft, a small catch of smooth blue horizon . . . inviting you, as it were, from the riot and tumult roaring around, to pass through the breach and participate of the calm below. (19)

This calm in the background of the scene is the pastoral, yeoman-farmer landscape that Jefferson and Crèvecoeur are often associated with, the thickly settled Mid-Atlantic region of "Frederic town and the fine country round that" (19). Among many previous critical discussions of this scene are comments on its painterly composition (Jones 359, Lawson-Peebles 178), on the contrast between the pastoral, cultivated East and the wild, untamed West (Seelye 68-70), and the sexual innuendo of looking through the "cleft," or "breach" (Kotodny 27-29). This eighteenth-century aesthetics of the "cross valley syndrome," of the erotic war between water and rock in an era before erosion was well understood, seems to have extended beyond Jefferson. John Seelye finds it in the description of the union of the Allegheny and the Monongahela rivers in Gilbert Inlay's novel *The Emigrants* (158-59). In his account of Niagara, Isaac Weld also employed an orgasmic sequence: "The river forces its way amidst the rocks with redoubled impetuosity, as it approaches toward the falls; at last coming to the brink of the tremendous precipice, it tumbles headlong to the bottom, without meeting any interruption from rocks in its descent" (Dow 1: 100). Weld, having also visited the Natural Bridge and read Jefferson's *Notes*, goes on to disagree, as Johnston did in the epigraph, about the honor of America's most sublime scene: "The passage of the rivers through the ridge at this place is certainly a curious scene, but I am far from thinking with Mr. Jefferson, that it is 'one of the most stupendous scenes in nature' and 'worth a voyage across the Atlantic.'" (1: 244).

Contrary to the typical aesthetic sublime of Alpine scenery in European Romantic literature, in *Notes on the State of Virginia* mountains appear to represent Enlightenment values of order and restraint, while rivers stand for the wild powers of nature. "[O]ur mountains are not solitary and scattered confusedly over the face of the country," wrote Jefferson of the Appalachian chain in the opening lines to his Query IV on "Mountains," rather "they commence at about 150 miles from the sea-coast, are disposed in ridges one behind another running nearly parallel with the sea-coast" (18). As with the ongoing project of renovating his architectural masterpiece, Monticello, Jefferson's love of order and symmetry conflicted with practical goals he might otherwise wish to promote. The parallel ridges of Appalachia did and still do pose a much greater barrier to transportation and economic development than would a number of much higher mountains "scattered confusedly over the face of the country." From the perspective of settlement and commerce, the river is the civilized or picturesque, the mountain the wild or sublime principle. After all, at this time there was no inking of railroads; rivers were the only means of large-scale trans-

portation and commerce, and when the paths of rivers did not follow the needs of trade, canals such as the Erie Canal were the only answer. A waterfall or the rapids of a water gap created a barrier to the progress of trade and settlement. At the conclusion of his survey of Virginia's rivers in Query II, Jefferson considered trade, and foresaw that "There will therefore be a competition between the Hudson and Patowmack rivers for the residue of the commerce of all the country westward of Lake Erie" (15). As a Virginian, he wanted the Potomac route to become the most used, and it was in this light that he first mentioned Niagara Falls in *Notes on the State of Virginia*: "When the commodities are brought into, and have passed through Lake Erie, there is between that and Ontario an interruption by the falls of Niagara, where the portage is of eight miles" (44), more, he claimed, than the total land carriage distance on a route linking the Ohio, Youghegheny and Potomac rivers. Yet others did not agree with Jefferson's measurements. Weld reported of Niagara: "It is said, that it would be practicable to cut a canal from hence to Queenstown, by means of which the troublesome and expensive process of unloading the batteaux, and transporting the goods in carts along the portage, would be avoided. Such a canal will in all probability be undertaken one day or other" (Dow 2: 137). Unfortunately for Jefferson and the South, the Erie Canal was able to avert the problems of Niagara by digging straight across New York from the Mohawk valley to Lake Erie. Then the canal Weld envisioned, from Port Colborne to St. Catharines, Ontario, was completed in 1829. Both routes were more level than the Allegheny ridges of central Pennsylvania.

Thus by the early nineteenth century, the sublime challenge which Niagara Falls posed to commerce and transportation had been overcome. And there were strong suggestions, even before *Notes on the State of Virginia*, that eighteenth-century observers did not always regard the sublime spectacle of Niagara Falls as emblematic of man's humility before Nature. Hitt's essay begins by acknowledging recent critiques of the sublime aesthetic, such as Paul deMan's comment that Kant's sublime inscribes "a reconquered superiority over a nature of which the direct threat is overcome" (604). Niagara appears to support this conclusion. If the beautiful, placid river connoted trade and transportation, the rapid river or waterfall suggested power. William Irwin in his study of Niagara uncovered a 1799 treatise entitled *The Political Economy of Inland Navigation, Irrigation, and Drainage, with Thoughts on the Multiplication of Commercial Resources and on Means of Bettering the Condition of Mankind, by the Construction of Canals*, in which one William Tatham proposed a scheme to use Niagara Falls' own power to solve the problem that it posed for navigation. A mill would

*If Thomas Jefferson had visited Niagara Falls*

153

drive a giant escalator, lifting ships up an inclined plane from the level of Lake Ontario to that of Lake Erie. In fact, mills had already created an industrial landscape in some places in America, using the power of falling water to perform what steam and internal combustion would later do. By 1791, Passiac Falls, New Jersey, an earlier waterfall tourist attraction, was the site of manufacturing mills (Robertson 204). Tatham's plan was not so outrageous for its time as one might think, and, as Patrick McGreevey has shown, it was only the first of many far-fetched utopian schemes for technological and social innovation around Niagara Falls.

Another variation on the industrial development of Niagara was offered in the 1771 proto-nationalist poem, "The Rising Glory of America" written by Princeton graduates Hugh Henry Brackenridge and Philip Freneau for their commencement ceremonies. The Neo-Classical historiography of the poem imagined America as replicating the grandeurs of the Old World, and they smoothed the barrier that Niagara posed to commerce through an engineering feat of vague but millennial proportions:

And thou Patowmack, navigable stream,  
Rolling thy waters thro' Virginia's groves  
Shall vie with Thames, the Tiber or the Rhine,  
For on thy banks I see an hundred towns  
And the tall vessels wated down thy tide.  
Hoarse Niagara's stream now roaring on  
Thro' woods and rocks and broken mountains torn  
In days remote far from their ancient beds  
By some great monarch taught a better course  
Or cleared of cataracts shall flow beneath  
Unincumber'd boats and merchandize and men. (77-78)

The present Potomac stands for the Thames as the Romans saw it and the Tiber as it was before Rome was built, a place filled with potential for great civilization. The "days remote" for Niagara are not in the geologic past but the potential future, when its waters will be "cleared of cararacts" and levelled for trade. These 18th-century dreams and schemes demonstrate that the phenomenon Leo Marx called the "rhetoric of the technological sublime" has its roots in the pre-industrial age. The difference is that instead of using images derived from machines such as the railroad to hail the fulfillment of pastoral ideals of leisure and plenty, Freneau and Jefferson saw industrial or commercial potential as inherent in the sublime landscape itself. This pattern has been analyzed by Wayne Franklin in *Discoverers, Explorers, Settlers*. He asserts that "The idea

of use, of exploitation, lurks everywhere in the discoverer's paean to American nature" (23), and writes of Jefferson's "confluence" passage that "an aesthetic order lies implicit in the channels of commerce . . . the landscape seems to unfold itself according to the urgent human principle of navigation" (29). For example, at the very end of the Natural Bridge passage, Jefferson notes that Cedar Creek, running beneath the arch, is "sufficient in the driest seasons to turn a grist-mill" (25). Of the bridge itself, Jefferson wrote that "it affords a public and commodious passage over a valley, which cannot be crossed elsewhere for a considerable distance" (25), and Isaac Weld that "it seems to have been left there purposely to afford a passage from one side of the chasm to the other" (Dow 1: 221). The sublime wilderness spectacle was fully compatible with humans' practical needs, and even, as with the Natural Bridge, worked to satisfy these needs. While the picturesque might thrive on pastoral agricultural landscapes, the sublime made the leap from wilderness to industrial landscape.

These eighteenth-century observers did not express a Romantic sense of the sublime spectacle as a sacred place, of Niagara Falls or the Natural Bridge as manifestations of God's power in the form of natural beauty which it would be sacrilege for man to alter. Although they shared some of Kant's notions of the sublime, they did not see beauty in Nature as defined by Kant's famous dictum of "purposiveness without purpose." They were inclined instead to see the hand of the Creator as mimicking the works of man, or vice versa. A sense of natural theology undergirding a conservative ethic, so familiar in the later nineteenth century from quotations out of the writings of Mur and Thoreau, had not yet developed in the period 1775-1825. Approaches to sublime spectacles varied from the self-consciously aesthetic, as when Jefferson echoed Burke in his views of the bridge from upon it and below it, to the utilitarian, seeing the bridge as bridge, to occasional neo-classical personifications. It is surprising that the deification of Niagara or other spectacles as figures for American nature were not more common in the Early Republic. John Seelye has written that John Neal's epic poem of the War of 1812, *The Battle of Niagara*, is a rare early instance of this Romantic ethic in America, that it "runs against the full tide of Enlightenment faith in internal improvements" such as the Erie Canal (354). Yet oddly, Neal apostrophizes not to the Falls, but to "ONTARIO. Dark blue water hail! / Unawed by conquering prow, or pirate sail, / Still heaving in thy freedom—still unchained" (27). Lake Ontario, of course, is below the falls, and would not be much affected by a canal taming the cataract.

## IV

Kant wrote that: "The beautiful in nature is a question of the form of the object, and this consists in limitation, whereas the sublime is to be found in an object even devoid of form, so far as it immediately involves, or else by its presence provokes, a representation of *limitlessness*" (90). Jefferson seems to ignore the criterion of *limitlessness*, for he wants to have his sublime and measure it too. The Natural Bridge in Query V is already measured before Jefferson evokes the emotions and raptures it inspires. He provides five separate dimensions, in feet, and a geometer's description: "The arch approaches the semi-elliptical form; but the larger axis of the ellipsis, which would be the cord of the arch, is many times longer than the transverse" (54). The measurement of Niagara Falls was a lively controversy ever since Louis Hennepin, the first European to view them, in 1678, claimed they were "above 600 foot in depth" (Dow 1: 21). The subsequent realization that in fact the cascade drops only about 150 feet was a key factor in the evolving cliché of the traveller's disappointment upon viewing the Falls. Jefferson again scorns Niagara when he compares its deflated height to Virginia's own Falling Spring at the opening of Query V, "Cascades": "This cataract will bear no comparison with that of Niagara, as to the quantity of water composing it . . . but it is half as high again, the latter being only 156 feet, according to the mensuration made by order of M. Vaudreuil, Governor of Canada, and 130 according to a more recent account" (21).

There were ways, however, by which Niagara Falls defied explorers' attempts to measure and master it. As well as sublime, the Falls were gothic, hiding death and mystery behind foaming, roaring waters. The promise of a technological Niagara, and the rational inquiry which motivated the scientific analyses of all three sublime spectacles, were occasionally disrupted by gothic mysteries. Annie Dillard's dictum that "knowledge does not vanquish mystery" (241) held true, if just barely, in this pre-romantic Age of Reason. When Jefferson observed that a cave near North Mountain in Virginia had nearly the same temperature as the cellars of Paris, or described the "blowing cave," which "emits constantly a current of air" (23), he prompted himself to consider mysteries concealed within the earth. "There is a wonder somewhere" (33) he wrote *a propos* of theories about the formation of marine fossils in mountains far from the sea. Jefferson posited the earth's interior as a common substrate for inquiry which he might share with learned men in Europe, yet also offered an opportunity to speculate about mysteries which defied any rational explanation. Leslie Fiedler has



written of how gothic novels employed "the device of the explained supernatural" (139-40), titillating readers with ghosts and scenes of horror only to offer at the end of the novel a rational or scientific explanation for these phenomena, much like episodes of the animated television series *Scooby Doo*. Thus in the late eighteenth-century "At a moment when everywhere rationalism had triumphed in theory and madness reigned in fact" (138), popular fiction tried to have it both ways. Similarly, Niagara Falls inspired dreams of technological mastery of distance, water, and gravity, yet also became the focus of speculation about mysterious, unmeasurable depths behind and beneath its roiling waters. It led to important early analyses of the operation of erosion, and these in turn inspired a sense of awe and mystery at the scale of geological time.

Several of the common tropes of this "Gothic Niagara" find expression in another long poem about the Falls, Alexander Wilson's *The Foresters* (1805). This 2200-line work, in heroic couplets, was written by a Scottish-born ornithologist who is little-known today, but, suitably enough, was recognized in the fields of both literature and science in his own time. Wilson wrote dialect poetry on the heels of the popularity of Macpherson's *Ossian*, and he compiled a nine-volume illustrated *American Ornithology* (1808-14) which was the standard work until that of Audubon twenty years later. *The Foresters* is a travel poem recounting the journey of the author and two companions from Philadelphia to Niagara. When they finally arrive, after having been rescued from a "frail bark" in the midst of a storm on Lake Ontario, Wilson stresses the fear and religious awe with which he faces the sublime spectacle. He compares his pilgrimage to that of Muslims to "Mahomet's tomb . . . Such were our raptures, such the holy awe / That swell'd our hearts at all we heard and saw" (169). The Falls' power evokes that of a vengeful God, as Wilson seems to suggest in tales of the fate of animals who were swept over the edge: "Fragments of boats, oars, carcasses unclean, / Of what had bears, deer, fowls, and fishes been, / Lay in such uproar, midst such clamour drown'd, / That death and ruin seemed to reign around." (171). Although Wilson claimed to have seen this debris, the Swedish naturalist Peter Kalm in 1751 had written that no such clues survived the ride over the Falls: "The French told me they had often thrown whole great trees into the water above, to see them tumble down the Fall. They went down with surprising swiftness, but could never be seen afterwards; whence it was thought there was a bottomless deep or abyss just under the Fall" (Dow 1:62). Kalm says he doubts this story of the secret crypt, but reports it anyway, suggesting that Niagara Falls

might violate the conservation of matter. Kalm also wrote of a controversy over whether "the abundance of birds found dead below the Fall" was the result of some hypnotic force which the spectacle induced in them (McKinsey 29, Dow 1: 42).

Many early descriptions of the Falls described the challenge of climbing down into the gorge and walking behind the sheet of falling water, much like a descent into a dungeon or underworld. And, like those mythic journeys, its factual basis is uncertain. The Baron de Lahontan visited the Falls in 1688 during one of the frequent battles between the Iroquois and the French colonists with their Huron allies. His brief account claimed that "Between the surface of the water that shelves off prodigiously, and the foot of the Precipice, three Men may cross in a breast without any other damage, and a sprinkling of some few drops of water" (137). "JCB," a French soldier in the Seven Years War whose full name is not known, claimed he was the first writer to actually climb down the cliff and into a cavern behind the falls (Dow 1: 40-41), even though years earlier Kalm had reported that rockfall had closed up the cavern. Nonetheless, Alexander Wilson also reported the feat of climbing behind the cascading water:

Our Bard and pilot, curious to survey  
Behind this sheet what unknown wonders lay,  
Resolved the dangers of th'attempt to share  
And all its terrors and its storms to dare: . . .  
There dark, tempestuous, howling regions lie,  
And whirling floods of dashing waters fly.  
At once of sight deprived, of sense and breath,  
Staggering amidst this caverned porch of death (172)

Others explained that the deep cave was inaccessible because it repelled explorers with an asphyxiating atmosphere. Weid in 1796 wrote "my breath was nearly taken away by the violent whirlwind that always rages at the bottom of the cataract" and that none of his party would "attempt to explore the dreary confines of these caverns, where death seemed to await him that should be daring enough to enter their threatening jaws" (Dow 1: 106). The Falls was gothic, it concealed depths and mysteries which awed and terrified the spectator, yet, like the gothic, these mysteries were susceptible to being redescribed and dispelled by a scientific discourse. And this gothic aesthetic reflects the sublime one, insofar as the faculty of reason is briefly stifled or overwhelmed, only to return and succeed in comprehending its object (see Hitt 608).

This great o'erwhelming work of awful Time,  
In all its dread magnificence sublime,  
Rose on our view, amid a crashing roar,  
That bade us kneel and Time's great God adore.

(Wilson 169)

It was the conception of time that revived the sublime power of Niagara Falls, that imbued it with a significance which transcended Thomas Jefferson's utilitarian landscape aesthetics. Sublime time can also offer the key to an ecological aesthetics of wilderness spectacle today, one which challenges any anthropocentric preference for framed picturesque landscapes of pleasure by challenging the very scale of the human senses. Kant wrote, in one of his lengthy sentences in *The Critique of Judgement*:

The feeling of the sublime is, therefore, at once a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude to attain to its estimation by reason, and a simultaneously awakened pleasure, arising from this very judgement of the inadequacy of the greatest faculty of sense being in accord with ideas of reason. . . . (106)

In this section, subtitled, "The Mathematically Sublime" it is the scale of numbers, extending both infinitesimally and astronomically beyond either end of the scale of human senses, which invites reason to exceed and comprehend imagination. Yet Kant did not conceive of the best metaphor of all for the mathematical sublime, geological "deep time." Nor did Jefferson, who in his account of the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah evoked a geological past, yet proposed a biblical, catastrophist image of the formation of the spectacle. The central section of the passage, sandwiched between the violent rending and the pastoral scene "through the cleft", reads:

The first glance of this scene hurries our senses into the opinion, that this earth has been created in time, that the mountains were formed first, that the rivers began to flow afterwards, that in this place particularly they have been dammed up by the Blue ridge of mountains, and have formed an ocean which filled the whole valley; that continuing to rise they have at length broken over at this spot, and have torn the mountain down from its summit to its base. The piles of rock on each hand, but particularly on the Shenandoah, the evident marks of their disruption and avulsion from their beds by the most powerful agents of nature, corroborate this impression. (19)

This natural dam break is not an "unscientific" explanation, for modern geologists describe the same phenomenon on a much larger scale in the draining of a primordial Lake Missoula in a tremendous deluge down the Columbia River. Jefferson might be supposed to have used this theory to explain the presence of marine fossils on Allegheny ridges. Yet in Query VI he considered and rejected this theory. Nor did he use this hypothesis to support a belief in the Noachian deluge, for Query VI also attempts to rationalize that biblical story as an instance of a similar dam-break in the ancient Mediterranean. Instead, this violent cataclysm seems to be offered simply as a natural historian's explanation for the subjective affect of the sublime. It is ironic, therefore, that Niagara Falls invoked the opposite, a gradualist theory of geological creation by erosion.

As early as 1768, an anonymous writer on Niagara observed the scene from the edge of the escarpment above Queenston, and commented "At this place it is probable that the falls originally were, and broke up by slow degrees, to their present situation, which is seven miles higher" (Dow 1: 67). Andrew Ellicott in 1789 clarified this theory: "The cataract of Niagara was formerly down at the northern side of the slope . . . but from the great length of time, added to the great quantity of water, and distance which it falls, the solid stone is worn away, for about seven miles, up towards lake Erie" (1: 92). Isaac Weld repeated the theory, adding as evidence that "the falls have receded very considerably since they were first visited by Europeans, and that they are still receding every year" (2: 112). The rejection of the biblical chronology which this implied does not seem to have caused any consternation so long as no explicit estimate was made of the time involved. Charles Lyell, widely credited as the founder of modern geology, used the Niagara Gorge as an example of the powers of erosion in the first edition of *Principles of Geology* (1830). In this account, he blithely sidestepped the issue of biblical time:

There seems good foundation for the general opinion, that the falls were once at Queensdown, and that they have gradually retrograded from that place to their present position, about seven miles distant. If the ratio of recession had never exceeded fifty yards in forty years, it must have required nearly ten thousand years for the excavation of the whole ravine; but no probable conjecture can be offered as to the quantity of time consumed in such an operation, because the retrograde movement may have been much more rapid when the whole current was confined. . . . (1: 181)

Lyell had not seen Niagara when he wrote this, but he did in 1841, and wrote of the Falls in some of the twelve later editions of his great work, and in *Travels in North America, with Geological Observa-*

REFERENCES

- Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. 2nd ed. London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1759.
- Byerly, Alison. "The Uses of Landscape: The Picturesque Aesthetic and the National Park System." *The Ecocriticism Reader*. Ed. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1996. 52-68.
- Chastellux, François Jean, Marquis de. *Travels in North America*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P/Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1963.
- Dillard, Annie. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. New York: Bantam, 1974.
- Dow, Charles Mason. *Anthology and Bibliography of Niagara Falls*. 2 vols. Albany: J. B. Lyon for the State of New York, 1921.
- Fiedler, Leslie. *Love and Death in the American Novel*. 1960. New York: Anchor Books, 1992.
- Franklin, Wayne. *Discoverers, Explorers, Settlers: The Diligent Writers of Early America*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1979.
- Freneau, Philip. "The Rising Glory of America." *The Poems of Philip Freneau, Poet of the American Revolution*. 2 vols. Ed. Fred Lewis Pattee. Princeton: Princeton U Library, 1902. 1: 49-84.
- Hennepin, Louis. *Description de la Louisiane*. Paris: Sebastien Huré, 1683.
- Hitt, Chris. "Toward an Ecological Sublime." *New Literary History* 30.3 (1999): 603-23.
- Irving, Washington. *The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent*. The Works of Washington Irving. Vol. 1. New York: Cooperative Publication Society, n.d. 49-402.
- Irwin, William. *The New Niagara: Tourism, Technology, and the Landscape of Niagara Falls*. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1996.
- Jefferson, Thomas. *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P/IEAHC, 1955.
- Johnston, Charles. "A Narrative of the Incidents Attending the Capture, Detention, and Ransom of Charles Johnston. . . ." *Held Captive by Indians: Selected Narratives, 1642-1836*. 1973. Ed. Richard VanDerBeets. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1994. 243-318.
- Jones, Howard Mumford. *O strange new world; American culture: the formative years*. New York: Viking P, 1964.
- Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Judgement*. Trans. James Creed Meredith. Oxford: Clarendon, 1952.
- Kolodny, Annette. *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1975.
- Lahontan, Louis-Armand de Lorn d'Arce, Baron de. *Nouveaux Voyages de M. Le Baron de Lahontan, dans l'Amérique Septentrionale*. La Haye: 1703 [Trans. London: 1703].
- Lawson-Peebles, Robert. *Landscape and Written Expression in Revolutionary America: The World Turned Upside Down*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1988.
- Lytell, Charles. *Principles of Geology*. 3 vols. 1830-33. Ed. Martin J. S. Rudwick. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990.

tions (1845). His suggestion in the passage that rates of erosion varied avoided the outright attack on the 6000-year Biblical chronology which he would later take up more aggressively, but the matter of the exact date is less significant than the sense of "deep time" which any such estimation inspires. We might say that geological time is the greatest post-eighteenth-century instance of the sublime and the one which best preserves the aesthetic subtleties of an era which did not share our sense of eternity. Geologic time surrounds humanity; yet is on a scale which defies the human imagination; it is a creation of scientific measurement, yet it mocks the arrogance of this measurement. Like the early accounts of Niagara Falls, sublime time is both scientifically and spiritually edifying, and it can communicate to us, two hundred years later, the sense of wonder with which early Americans regarded sublime wilderness spectacles. Yet a sublime sense of deep time did nothing to prevent the construction of hydroelectric projects which now divert one-third of the water from Niagara Falls through subterranean tunnels.

If as Chris Hitt suggests, "the concept of the sublime offers a unique opportunity for the realization of a new, more responsible perspective on our relationship with the natural environment" (605), while, as Alison Byerly insists, today's commodified picturesque stands in the way of any sublime experience of wilderness, can these eighteenth-century American spectacles return us to a sublime aesthetic of nature? They can only if we acknowledge the paradoxes that were contained the sublime from its foundation. Like the Gothic, the sublime tempts reason to abandon itself, only to return and reclaim sovereignty. The wilderness spectacle invites an image of nature untouched by humans, but also suggests the means for industry, commerce, and commodification of that nature. The American sublime inspired Romantic idylls of mystery and awe, but also puffed up nationalist pride and invited schemes for mills, canals, and bridges. If Thomas Jefferson had visited Niagara Falls, he might have agreed with Johnston that it was the greatest sublime spectacle of American Nature, but if he had then proclaimed that no canal or mill would ever tame its raging waters, it might well have been only because he wanted to build one between the Ohio and Youighighery instead.

- Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. New York: Oxford UP, 1964.
- McGeever, Patrick. *Imagining Niagara: The Meaning and Making of Niagara Falls*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1994.
- Mckinsey, Elizabeth. *Niagara Falls: Icon of the American Sublime*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge UP, 1985.
- Miller, Perry. *The Errand into the Wilderness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1956.
- Monk, Samuel H. *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England*. New York: Modern Language Association, 1935.
- Nash, Roderick. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1967.
- Robertson, Bruce. "The Picturesque Traveler in America." *Views and Visions: American Landscape before 1830*. Washington, DC: The Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1986. 187-210.
- Sears, John. *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Oxford UP, 1989.
- Seelye, John. *Beautiful Machine: Rivers and the Republican Plan, 1755-1825*. New York: Oxford UP, 1991.
- Shepard, Paul. "The Cross-Valley Syndrome." *Landscape* 10 (1961): 4-8.
- Weld, Isaac. *Travels through the States of North America and the Province of Upper and Lower Canada, During the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797*. 1807. New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1968.
- Wills, Garry. *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1978.
- Wilson, Alexander. "The Foresters: Description of a Pedestrian Journey to the Falls of Niagara." *Poems and Literary Prose of Alexander Wilson, Vol II: Poems*. Ed. Rev. Alexander B. Grosart. Paisley, Scotland: Alex. Gardner, 1876. 2: 111-73.

MARY PINARD

## Lorine Niedecker

### Environment and a Grammar of Flooding

*She grew up in a world of floods, where  
residents tied a boat to their front door in  
spring to be ready for the likely evacuation.*

—George Butterick, "Ain't Those the  
Berries: The Writings of Lorine Niedecker"

It wasn't until I stood in the fresh mud of my own basement—the eerie presence of floodwater lingering in the damp, close air, in my hair—that I began to think deeply about the nature of flooding: its bold insistence, its fickle shifts, its disruptions and rearrangements. How it changes the order of space, how it reassigns weight. How it kills and overcomes, then vanishes. About a year ago, an underground river in my neighborhood rose and washed four to five feet of water back into several blocks, inundating yards, garages, parked cars, basements. At the flood's peak stage, a canoe glided across the lake of my backyard alongside a floating picnic table, barbecue, a goose or two. Since then, I've found myself thinking about flooding as a process, a kind of cycle of experience: Don't we think we can stop it—sometimes while it's happening—with dikes and sandbags, novenas? And afterward, don't we think we can prevent it from happening again, all our dams and levees? And what about loss—what's the real nature of insurance? As I shoveled and wet vac'd mud out of my basement and put my yard back together, I noted the rough-water marks across walls and fences like some kind of hieroglyphics. I find I'm more than a little haunted by a sense of violation, or is it visitation—that feeling that something's been there,