

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 14 (2002)

Artikel: Contesting the sublime : new versions of an alternative American tradition
Autor: Crumbley, Paul
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99983>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 06.08.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Contesting the Sublime: New Versions of an Alternative American Tradition

Paul Crumbley

As theorist of the American sublime Rob Wilson has noted, “the aesthetic of the sublime, as a trope haunting the will to any distinctly American sensibility,” has become “increasingly recognizable” in the years following the second world war (6). Nowhere has this haunting presence of the sublime been more clearly linked to sensibility than in late twentieth-century written and pictorial accounts of Mount Everest summit experiences published by American climbers. An examination of the rather striking differences in two of the most well publicized accounts of the ill-fated May 1996 Everest ascent reveals the way American writers define distinct political sensibilities through their approaches to the sublime. The nearly simultaneous summit accounts published by Jon Krakauer and Sandy Hill Pittman convey alternative versions of the American sublime traceable at least to Ralph Waldo Emerson and Frederic E. Church, on the one hand, and Henry David Thoreau and Asher B. Durand on the other. Acknowledging the tensions conveyed in these differing traditions usefully illuminates the internally contested relationship America has always maintained with the natural sublime, while also clarifying the political dispositions each tradition conveys. Understanding what might be thought of as the “politics of the sublime” is especially useful in accounting for the way late twentieth- and early twenty-first century nature writers like Krakauer and Barry Lopez seek to recuperate the lesser known communally oriented and environmentally sensitive sublime of Thoreau and Durand as a corrective to the aggressively self-oriented Romantic sublime of Emerson and Church.

Mountain peaks have often provided the most spectacular settings for encounters with the sublime – especially if there is a storm, lives are imperiled and the mountain is the highest on the planet – all conditions the 1996 Everest ascent provided in more than ample portions. One might reasonably expect, then, that reports of the climb would communicate the unsettling fear

and influx of spirit that heralds the sublime. In the most widely publicized account of that venture, however, little sense of personal triumph or spiritual expansion surfaces. In Jon Krakauer's essay "Into Thin Air," that appeared in the September 1996 issue of *Outside* magazine, he gives two decidedly downbeat descriptions of reaching the summit. The first provides the basis for his opening paragraph:

Straddling the top of the world, one foot in Tibet and the other in Nepal, I cleared the ice from my oxygen mask, hunched a shoulder against the wind, and stared absently at the vast sweep of earth below. I understood on some dim, detached level that it was a spectacular sight. I'd been fantasizing about this moment, and the release of emotion that would accompany it, for so many months. But now that I was finally here, standing on the summit of Mount Everest, I just couldn't summon the energy to care. (48)

Perhaps to drive home for readers the absence of the sublime, and the deflation its absence provoked in him, Krakauer gives another equally demystified description of summiting at the mid-point of his essay:

Plodding slowly up the last few steps to the summit, I had the sensation of being underwater, of moving at quarter speed. And then I found myself atop a slender wedge of ice adorned with a discarded oxygen cylinder and a battered aluminum survey pole, with nowhere higher to climb. . . .

Reaching the top of Everest is supposed to trigger a surge of intense elation; against long odds, after all, I had just attained a goal I'd coveted since childhood. But the summit was really only the halfway point. Any impulse toward self-congratulation was immediately extinguished by apprehension about the long, dangerous descent that lay ahead. (60)

Here Krakauer strategically embraces his readers' anticipation of the sublime by acknowledging that he also expected "a surge of intense elation." This admission of shared expectation intensifies awareness of disruptive features that have prevented its occurrence; these, of course, are the "discarded oxygen cylinder" and the "battered aluminum survey pole," both highly symbolic items: one signifies the union of self interest and environmental pollution, the other indicates dedication to public welfare, of mapping the wild for the larger good.

The other summit description contrasts sharply with Krakauer's. This account was written by Sandy Hill Pittman and appeared under the title "cliff-hanger" in the August 1996 issue of *Vogue* magazine. Pittman's presentation is much more consistent with the expectations of readers who anticipate the traditional sublime and at first affords a degree of satisfaction and affirma-

tion that the Krakauer essay denies. Here is her moment of achieving the summit:

At 2:30 in the afternoon, I took the last few steps to the summit, with all the terror, wonder, and awe any human being who is witness to a miracle of God can muster. I suddenly understood that there is little one can do to prepare for summit day on Mount Everest. It is at once empowering and humbling to stand on a surface no bigger than a tabletop, having climbed so far and knowing that in the whole world you can go no higher than this. (284)

This language provides a textbook perfect example of the sublime. Pittman's use of the word "terror" echoes Edmund Burke's famous 1757 formulation of the sublime as, "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*" (36).

Pittman's reference to God positions her squarely in the Romantic sublime that Roderick Nash understands to have emerged in the eighteenth century when "sublimity" came to suggest "the association of God and wild nature" (46). Nash's position is in turn consistent with the analysis Thomas Weiskel provides in his magisterial study of the Romantic sublime where he argues first that the "essential claim of the sublime is that man can, in feeling and in speech, transcend the human" (3) and later that during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries enlightenment science so threatened the position of deity that "God had to be saved, even if He had to marry the world of appearances. And so, in the natural sublime, he did" (14). This weight of cultural precedent and scholarly acumen does help clarify the reasons Pittman's words seem appropriate and fitting: she passes through terror to an expanded appreciation of God's grandeur. Yet when read in the context of Krakauer's account the experience seems strangely overdetermined, isolated, and notably oblivious to such things as abandoned oxygen canisters and survey poles. It is true that as a woman, Pittman's accomplishment may also advance feminist political objectives, and this may in part explain the selectivity of her vision, but I want to argue here that part of the difference between these two summit accounts can be traced to divergent traditions within the American sublime.

To appreciate the tensions that give rise to divergent sublimines, it helps to consult representative paintings from the nineteenth century that comment on the history of the sublime in America. As Rob Wilson has observed in *American Sublime: The Geneology of a Poetic Genre*, "the sublime is a rep-

representative American trope" (36) that has persisted through some 150 years in "painterly and literary manifestation" (32). Most of us think of painters within the Hudson River or National School (Miller 4) when we think of the American sublime because no other movement in American painting has made a study of the sublime so central to its aesthetic mission. Asher B. Durand's well known 1849 painting "Kindred Spirits" epitomizes the facet of this movement closest to the critical self-awareness Krakauer expresses. One of the most striking characteristics of this work is its foregrounding of artifice: we see two artists – Thomas Cole and William Cullen Bryant – delicately poised on a rock outcropping located at Clove of the Catskills. The wild expanse that stretches below and behind the artists emphasizes the untamed character of the environment that is counterbalanced by the trappings of civilization that command the foreground: the clothing, the formal postures, the sketch pad and the mutual absorption in conversation – features of the painting that define them not so much as lone individuals but rather as the vanguard of culture. As art historian Barbara Novak has noted, for American landscape art Durand's portrait offers the "classic exemplar" of "a sharing through communion, of a potential community" (15). In this context, the role of conversation is worth stressing because it points to the painting's function within a larger conversation with the actual painter, Durand. The fact that the original poet-to-painter discussion is here transmitted by another painter reflects Durand's efforts to position himself within the Sister Arts movement as one of a stalwart band of artists who make nature palatable, therefore not only bringing nature to the nation but also easing national consciousness into the private places of nature.

The single painting that may provide the sharpest contrast to Durand's communal experience of the sublime is Frederic E. Church's 1857 "Niagara"; while also part of the National School, this work has been widely viewed as an icon of mid-century American individualism (Miller 217-18). By placing the viewer on the very verge of the cataract, and filling the canvas with the turbulent force of cascading waters, Church conveys the unmitigated communion with nature present in Pittman. In Church's painting, all signs of human presence vanish, as if the territorial expansion of America underway at the time of Durand's "Kindred Spirits" effected so great an enhancement of national confidence that Church can by this point dismiss the cultural intermediaries, along with their hierarchies of dress, profession and social status, to present the unleashed forces of nature directly to the individual viewer.

The important question drowned out by this highly complimentary presentation of individual power, though, is what becomes of the sketch pad and the conversation with others so central to making community rather than the individual the means by which nature acquires significance? Is it possible that this direct exposure to the forces of nature that so powerfully feeds the expansionist national ego also reduces the complexity of the human encounter with nature? Implicit in this confrontation with elemental force, and reflective of the pronounced differences observable between the way these works by Durand and Church present the human engagement with nature, is the distinct sense that America's experience of nature has been significantly internalized and dampened, that Americans are comfortable seeing more force because they register less of it. In the words of art historian Angela Miller, icons like Niagara Falls "occupied the somewhat paradoxical position of celebrating not only wilderness but the will to subdue it" (218). Another way of saying this is to assert that nature, even at its wildest and most sublime, has become many degrees more familiar. Accordingly, the painting can invite direct participation in raw nature because even in its wildest expressions nature no longer seems so remote, so external to the viewer, so much an alien "other."

Such an interpretation of the Church painting is consistent with one strand of the sublime that can be traced back to John Locke's late seventeenth-century philosophical assertion that all knowledge is grounded in individual sensory perception. In Weiskel's words, Locke "emptied" the soul of its essence by removing the possibility that humanity could discover within the soul evidence of God's prior presence. By focusing on more immediate sensory information, Locke introduced the view that the soul is a faculty of pure potentiality wherein experiences that violate the pattern of routine daily affairs make deep and lasting impressions. These impressions on the soul are then turned to as evidence of God's infinite spirit and therefore incapable of containment in finite human constructs like language, but nonetheless discernible through another faculty, the imagination. Locke's contemporary, Immanuel Kant, stated the case succinctly: "'We can describe the sublime in this way: it is an object (of nature) the representation of which determines the mind to think the unattainability of nature as a presentation of [reason's] ideas'" (qtd. in Weiskel 22). The outcome of all this philosophizing is that the sublime is made a facet of internal experience. Weiskel explains this move inward: "The 'unattainability' of the object with respect to the mind would be duplicated in an inner structure, so that in the sublime moment the mind would discover or posit an undefinable (ungraspable) do-

main within" (23). Hence, we can see that the groundwork was laid far in advance of the American sublime for an experience of nature that acquires meaning through internal self-discovery.

Perhaps the most famous literary example of this form of the sublime comes in Emerson's 1836 essay *Nature*, where he describes the discovery of the soul through sublime union with nature. Emerson begins by establishing the difference between nature and the soul: "Philosophically considered," he writes, "the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul" (22). The aim of life, then, is to bring the two together, and this is accomplished through the influence the sublime has on the soul. Here is his famous "transparent eyeball" passage:

Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, master or servant, is then a trifle or a disturbance. (24)

Worth noting here is the radical discontinuity that accompanies the vanishing of "mean egotism" and the corollary entry into what is described as a much vaster apprehension of fundamental reality that by contrast reduces social relationships to mere "trifle[s] or . . . disturbance[s]." Through the dynamic that Emerson presents, subjective union with "Universal Being" occurs at the expense of temporal specificity. When two paragraphs later Emerson writes that "the power to produce this delight does not reside in nature, but in man, or in a harmony of both," his logic is clear: interior experience takes precedence because nature must be approached through the imagination's embrace of the soul. As a consequence, nature emerges as a catalyst for interior self-discovery that then provides the basis for the human understanding of nature.

One historical explanation, then, of Pittman's neglect of the empty canister and the surveying pole is that her experience of the sublime is part of a tradition that dismisses such items as trifles and instead concentrates on an internalized imaginative fusion with the divine. The central photograph that accompanies Pittman's narrative effectively conveys this interior orientation. In this full-page photograph, the author appears alone, climbing a vertical ladder on her way to camp one; the austere mountain landscape captured in the mirror lenses of her sunglasses further conveys an isolation that her brilliant smile seems to welcome. On the right-hand side of the photograph, bold faced text underscores the private nature of Pittman's experience: "When

Sandy Hill Pittman reached the summit of Mount Everest, it was the fulfillment of a lifelong dream" (227). According to the analyses both Weiskel and Wilson have provided in their discussions of the American sublime, what we witness in Emerson and Pittman is "the grand confidence of a heady imperialism . . . a kind of spiritual capitalism, enjoining a pursuit of the infinitude of the private self" (Weiskel qtd. in Wilson 38). In other words, the benefits that accrue through the sublime conform to what Emerson identifies on the page following his transparent eyeball passage as the "advantages which our senses owe to nature" that fall under "the general name of commodity" (25).

In this context, we can begin to see that Krakauer's scrutiny of details that mark the presence of other people may both thwart his progression into the sublime and reflect his refusal to allow his experience to focus exclusively on an interior terrain where the political has no authority. When Krakauer tells us that he is surprised to have felt no elation, we can perhaps interpret his discovery as evidence that the tradition of the sublime he is attempting to embody is not capable of accommodating his political concerns. The photograph of camp four on the South Col of Mount Everest that accompanied Krakauer's 1996 *Outside* essay, gives visual form to the subjective clutter that impeded his access to the sublime. This photograph stretches across the top third of the page, presenting a landscape that all too clearly bears evidence of previous human presence; oxygen canisters and abandoned tents define a littered foreground that extends to the horizon. The reduced type of the photograph's caption drives home the inescapably communal nature of the climb: "When the 33 climbers from three teams departed the Col on summit day . . . , bound for the top, the route resembled a commuter line" (59). There can be little doubt that the extreme conditions prevailing in the Death Zone above 25,000 feet make matters such as environmental house keeping seem inconsequential. But it is difficult not to ask why people who so value nature that they risk their lives to experience its most inhospitable face would care so little about its maintenance.

The challenge Krakauer poses is that of locating a new sublime capable of remediating existing ecological damage while allowing for future encounters with nature. His own writing demonstrates that the impulse to achieve the sublime remains active, even after repeated discoveries of environmental and human degradation. A year after his first Everest essay appeared, Krakauer returned to the very Everest events that so dispirited him in an effort to place what had happened in perspective. This led to an *Outside* interview that was followed in a few short months by his best selling book about the climb, *Into Thin Air*. Even more telling, perhaps, is his evident

refusal to withdraw from wilderness adventurism and by that means bring to an end the seemingly endless discovery that no region of the planet is free from humanity's restless quest for a sublime that leaves a wake of terrestrial waste.

Discerning the role the sublime plays for writers like Krakauer is of course terribly vexed, primarily because nature writers are often drawn to their subject precisely because of the spiritual expansiveness promised by the tradition of the Romantic sublime. But there are cultural precedents well worth considering. In a recent essay, Barry Lopez argues that "nature writing is the least equivocal strain of American literature when it comes to denouncing the status quo" ("Writing" 84). He alludes to Daniel Peck's assertion that "Thoreau intuited . . . the need for a new foundation mythology, one that would link human activity to an actual place, if American civilization were to survive the dehumanization and despiritualization – the barbarism – of the Age of Empire." Lopez then offers his personal belief that a new "mythology is working itself to the fore . . . in the essays, novels and poems now being assembled by different reviewers under the rubric of nature writing." Taken together, Lopez's own words and his representation of Peck's position suggest both that there is a literary precedent for challenging the primacy of Emerson's Romantic sublime and that this precedent may be acquiring authority today.

One of the most vivid examples of an alternative sublime appears at the end of the "Brute Neighbors" chapter in *Walden* where Thoreau presents himself frolicking with the loons that annually visit Walden Pond. To frame the scene, he introduces the blundering efforts of hunters who all too clearly betray their ignorance of nature's citizens. Though the men outnumber the loons ten to one, they so awkwardly mismanage their numerical advantage that the forces of nature appear to rise in opposition:

Some [hunters] station themselves on this side of the pond, some on that, for the poor bird cannot be omnipresent; if he dive here he must come up there. But now the kind October wind rises, rustling the leaves and rippling the surface of the water, so that no loon can be heard or seen, though the foes sweep the pond with spy-glasses, and make the woods resound with their discharges. The waves generously rise and dash angrily, taking sides with all waterfowl, and our sportsmen must beat a hasty retreat to town and shop and unfinished jobs. (155)

With these interlopers out of the way, the stage is set for Thoreau to demonstrate a more harmonic engagement with the birds, which he does for a brief period when he is not busy trying to enter the loons' brains and "divine

[their] thought in [his]" (156). He presents the process of coming into balance with the birds as allied to initial frustration; after having been exasperated by his own failed efforts to anticipate where a diving bird will rise, he makes the following discovery:

I found it was as well for me to rest on my oars and wait for his reappearance as to endeavor to calculate where he would rise; for again and again, when I was straining my eyes over the surface I would suddenly be startled by his unearthly laugh behind me. (158)

Once he surrenders to this unearthly laugh and ceases to make sense of it on human terms, he discovers delight in the interplay of his thought with the behavior of the loon, reflecting with some placidity that "he was indeed a silly loon."

But this peaceful idyll ends when Thoreau attempts to appropriate the bird's consciousness by "concluding that [the loon] laughed in derision of my efforts, confident of his own resources" (158). Immediately upon this declaration that he has achieved a certain grasp of nature's mind, the sky becomes overcast and very shortly thereafter Thoreau describes the loon as uttering

one of those prolonged howls as if calling on the god of loons to aid him, and immediately there came a wind from the east and rippled the surface, and filled the whole air with misty rain, and I was impressed as if it were the prayer of the loon answered, and his god was angry with me; and so I left him disappearing far away on the tumultuous surface. (158)

Thoreau thus concludes the scene by describing himself as assuming the position initially assigned to the blundering hunters – his status as wilderness adept seriously in doubt.

As was the case with Krakauer, we are taken to the verge of the sublime only to be denied. Instead, Krakauer gives us an oxygen canister and a surveying pole and Thoreau closes the chapter by showing that the philosopher king may be no more spiritually accomplished than a group of coarse hunters. By acknowledging the failure of his attempt, Thoreau accomplishes two objectives: he sustains a vivid sense of the world around him that includes other people and he allows us as readers to remain a part of his experience by not attempting to voice a spiritual blossoming that would have isolated him in a domain impervious to language. Both Thoreau and Krakauer represent a failure to achieve the traditional sublime that may simultaneously signal the search for a new sublime, one not dependent on isolation and an erasure of otherness. As Ralph W. Black has noted in his discussion of the sublime in

Walden, Thoreau at least may be seeking a mode of written expression capable of displacing reason and understanding as the privileged elements of a new language that is more fully responsive to a nature within which human and non-human elements are intermingled. In Black's words, "Thought, reason, and understanding vanish because they are overwhelmed by the physical: *locus* rewrites, and ultimately silences, *logos*" (69). Whether this new sublime can in fact accommodate new forms of linguistic or non-linguistic expression with other humans is left open in Thoreau's loon scene and Krakauer's Everest account.

The core elements of what might be thought of as a sublime of anticipation or longing are substantially duplicated in a Lopez essay titled "Apologia." Only in this essay we are shown even more clearly that the absence of any dramatic infusion of spiritual grandeur is not so much a denial of the possibility of the sublime as it is a searching for the means to experience it while sustaining contact with the human and non-human details that define the surrounding world. Through Lopez's first-person narrative of a solo drive from Oregon to Indiana, we begin to see that the disappointment evident in both Thoreau and Krakauer may represent a pattern linked to a sublime of longing, a sublime that is sought by many but achieved by none. The opening paragraph immediately evokes both a sense of sympathy of the sort commonly felt for someone engaged in acts of Sisyphean futility and incredulosity in the face of an ambition so monumental it staggers the mind:

A few miles east of home in the Cascades I slow down and pull over for two raccoons, sprawled still as stones in the road. I carry them to the side and lay them in sunshot, windblown grass in the barrow pit. In eastern Oregon, along U.S. 20, black-tailed jackrabbits lie like welts of sod – three, four, then a fifth. By the bridge over Jordan Creek, a crumpled adolescent porcupine leers up almost maniacally over its blood-flecked teeth. I carry each one away from the pavement into a cover of grass or brush out of decency, I think. And worry. Who are these animals, their lights gone out? What journeys have fallen apart here? (*Life*113)

While the exaggerated sympathy expressed here may threaten to spill out of confessional seriousness and into farce, there remains an astonishing sense of personal exposure. To think of undertaking such a task at once elevates and humanizes the speaker, giving him qualities both familiar and alien. If he is a clown, he is a clown we can respect. The same may be said of both Thoreau and Krakauer, each leaves us with the belief that no matter how improbable their ambition they will rededicate themselves to it. But what is possibly the most provocative commonality linking all three writers is the fact that they

each acknowledge their contribution to the problem they are trying to remedy. Krakauer discarded his share of oxygen bottles, Thoreau drove the loon away and Lopez performed funeral services for road kill while completing a cross-country drive.

If there is such a thing as a sublime of longing, it is a form of the sublime achieved through its evocation of unfulfilled desire. That is, it so impresses the imagination with the desire to remedy an unacceptable circumstance that the author in effect solicits reader participation in the joint anticipation of a conversation that never actually takes place. Jean-Francois Lyotard's definition of the postmodern sublime as "an intrinsic combination of pleasure and pain: the pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation, the pain that imagination or sensibility should not be equal to the concept" (81) might apply to the dilemma explored by Lopez, Krakauer and Thoreau. To be more specific, Lyotard's analysis of the postmodern artist or writer's creation of an "event" that is itself the search for a future aesthetic helps clarify the way readers are drawn into an imaginative endeavor that rejects all past forms of the sublime:

A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*. Hence the fact that work and text have the characteristics of an *event*; hence also, they always come too late for their author, or, what amounts to the same thing, their being put into work, their realization (*mise en oeuvre*) always begin too soon.

When Lyotard's postmodern sublime is set in the context of works like Lopez's, we can see that the authorial event is one that calls for reader participation in the perpetuation of a conversation of such importance that it can't be allowed to terminate. Lonely as the author's search for the future may be, this search itself proceeds out of an absurd optimism founded on the belief that even while established communal forms have proven inadequate the only acceptable solution must come through collective effort – that of illuminating the significance of an authorial effort that can never be established in isolation. And this illumination project is always laden with political implications precisely because it is both a conversation and a communal struggle to alter a specific set of concrete circumstances.

The conclusion of "Apologia" does a wonderful job of demonstrating such an invocation of the future that also acts as a demand for reader partici-

pation. Once he has reached his final destination in South Bend and stepped out of his vehicle, the narrator leans back into the window of his now vacated car and prepares to speak, as if he were at last capable of providing the words he so longs to hear:

I stand in the driveway now, listening to the cicadas whirring in the dark tree. My hands grip the sill of the open window at the driver's side, and I lean down as if to speak to someone still sitting there. The weight I wish to fall I cannot fathom, a sorrow over the world's dark hunger. (*Life* 118)

Though the desired words do not come, the depth of the speaker's longing registers with great force. The text that immediately follows clearly establishes the communal orientation that the narrator ultimately assumes as the most likely source of potential solace:

A light comes on over the porch. I hear a dead bolt thrown, the shiver of a door pulled free. The words of atonement I pronounce are too inept to offer me release. Or forgiveness. My friend is floating across the tree-shadowed lawn. What is to be done with the desire for exculpation?

"Later than we thought you'd be," he says.

I do not want the lavabo. I wish to make amends.

"I made more stops than I thought I would," I answer.

"Well, bring in your things. And whatever I can take," he offers.

I anticipate, in the powerful antidote of our conversation, the reassurance of a human enterprise, the forgiving embrace of the rational. It awaits within, beyond the slow tail-wagging of two dogs standing at the screen door. (118)

Despite the fact that the essay ends with the hope for rather than the realization of the "antidote of conversation," the implication is clear: coping with "sorrow over the world's dark hunger" is a collective enterprise. The astonishing understated humor conveyed by what appears to be a deadpan exchange about numerous stops and a late arrival euphemistically obscures the high seriousness of all that has preceded. And by doing so, the futile efforts of the narrator are invested with a comic dimension that allows for a fresh approach to the problem. Passing into the shared space of the friend's home, accompanied by the wagging tails of not one but two dogs, signifies a cycling out of isolation and into communality that holds out the promise of moving beyond guilt to the possibility of constructive action.

In making this statement, Lopez joins Krakauer in defining a form of the sublime traceable to Thoreau and painters like Durand who conveyed respect for nature by illustrating individual limitations. Thoreau may well have had something like the emergence of his own shadowed precedent in mind when

in the concluding paragraphs of *Walden* he describes the “beautiful bug which came out of the dry leaf of an old table of apple-tree wood” (222):

Who does not feel his faith in a resurrection and immortality strengthened by hearing of this? Who knows what beautiful and winged life, whose egg has been buried for ages under many concentric layers of woodenness in the dead dry life of society, deposited at first in the alburnum of the green and living tree, which has been gradually converted into the semblance of its well-seasoned tomb, – heard perchance gnawing out now for years by the astonished family of man, as they sat round the festive board – may unexpectedly come forth from amidst society’s most trivial and handselled furniture, to enjoy its most perfect summer life at last! (222-23)

Looking back at this early example of a sublime of longing makes particular sense as within Thoreau’s words we can discern both the importance of waiting for a collective conversation and the fear engendering absence of progress. We can also detect in these words the same attentiveness to the destructive power of human technology so clearly represented by Krakauer and Lopez. Only here Thoreau’s presentation of nature as achieving a rebirth from within that most potent symbol of humanity’s loss of innocence – the apple tree that in this case takes the form of hewn lumber – suggests that for him what Lopez would refer to as “sorrow over the world’s dark hunger” (*Life* 118) has a direct link to the fall from grace in Eden. This elevation of the symbolic value of even the most familiar domestic surroundings performs as a direct response to Emerson’s erasure of all things “trivial” during the sublime moment; instead, Thoreau presents “society’s most *trivial* and handselled furniture” (my italics) as the point of origin for an anticipated encounter with the sublime that will engage not the individual alone, but the entire “family of man.”

With Thoreau, as with Durand, Krakauer and Lopez, the sublime functions as part of a collective experience within which nature retains a degree of exterior otherness that the Romantic sublime denies through the imagination’s interiorization of the natural world. Even Durand’s “Kindred Spirits” expresses reverence for the danger presented by a natural world that must be negotiated jointly and not attempted by any individual imagination. Whether or not Durand understood his painting as part of a political consciousness that could be contrasted with the aggressive optimism of Emerson and Church is less important than the fact that nineteenth-century painters and writers were developing very different views of the sublime that would, over time, come to represent contesting traditions with very obvious implications for the politics of environmental management. The dramatically different

accounts Sandy Hill Pittman and Jon Krakauer offer of the same Everest ascent point to the remarkable degree that the aesthetics of the sublime have become allied to environmental ethics and the kind of public politics expressed by each writer. Pittman appears to invite future climbers to fulfill their spiritual aspirations on peaks like Everest, whereas Krakauer asks that readers consider the extent that reliance on others and the inevitability of further pollution make pursuit of the Romantic sublime seem both selfish and irresponsible. This final gesture, that of contesting the Romantic sublime by pausing to contemplate the possibility of a more satisfying and responsible alternative, provides an important common thread that links the work of Krakauer with that of Henry David Thoreau and Barry Lopez.

References

- Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. Ed. Adam Phillips. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Stephen E. Whicher. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957.
- Krakauer, Jon. "Into Thin Air." *Outside* XXI. 9 (September 1996): 46-66; 158-163.
- Lopez, Barry. *About this Life: Journeys on the Threshold of Memory*. New York: Vintage Books, 1998.
- . "Nature Writing" [Introduction]. *Nature Writing: A Catalogue*. Hadley, MA: Ken Lopez, Bookseller, 2000.
- Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- Miller, Angela. *The Landscape of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.
- Nash, Roderick. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982.
- Novak, Barbara. *Nature and Culture: American Landscape Painting 1825-1875*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Pittman, Sandy. "cliff-hanger." *Vogue* (August 1996): 226-31; 284-85.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden and Resistance to Civil Government: Authoritative Texts, Thoreau's Journal, Reviews and Essays in Criticism*. 2nd edition. Ed. William Rossi. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992.
- Weiskel, Thomas. *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- Wilson, Rob. *American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991.