

TERROR IN THE SKY

In primitive spiritual cosmology, power comes from the mysterious forces of the Cosmos. Art was a form of mediation, a means of establishing contact with this spirit world and participating in its creative energies. Man found his own truth by recognizing that he cannot live out of himself alone.

Suzi Gablik¹

Throughout history man has asked himself the big questions: Who am I?; What is the truth about Reality?. In this paper it will be shown that there is a tradition of artists looking at Nature, connecting with it, and participating in its creative energies. It will be established that artists throughout time have looked to the Sky and through their individual expressions have discovered answers to these questions of existence not only for themselves, but for their entire culture. As the knowledge of civilization has progressed and grown, so the language of art has had to change and experience transformation. Despite changes in the language of art, this activity of "mediation" is not merely a primitive concern but a modern one as well.

This ~~mediating~~ role began with the very first artists, but is perhaps most conveniently observed in the art of the Greeks. The Greeks saw the world as a mysterious place and themselves as mysterious creatures.² They were aware of the powers and forces in nature--irrational, arbitrary forces. These forces needed to be understood if they were to survive and find meaning in their lives. For the Greeks, art was the mediary of understanding

between the terrifying, mysterious forces of the universe and themselves.

The Nike of Samothrace (plate 1) has been labeled the greatest masterpiece of Hellenistic sculpture.³ Without knowing the original context, where and how the statue was located, one can still learn a great deal about the Greeks by examining the Nike. First of all Nike was the Greek goddess of victory. The statue was found at Samothrace, hence the name Nike of Samothrace, sometimes called Winged Victory. The fantastic thing about this sculpture is the appearance of wings. To any non-Greek this would appear, as it appears today, a draped female figure with wings. This raises a question: Did the women, or did a particular woman in ancient Greece have wings? To answer this it must be understood that in Greek cosmology, the forces of nature were given human attributes and were depicted anthropomorphically as gods. Victory was understood as a supernatural power, a spiritual power, complete with an individual persona and the incredible power of flight. This ability to assign the forces of the universe anthropomorphic characteristics was how the Greeks learned to connect with and understand those same forces. Victory was seen by the Greeks not as a matter of luck or the result of skill alone. The Nike of Samothrace is evidence of the belief that victory was a gift of the gods, that human activity was inextricably woven with divine activity.

If one looks at Eos and Memnon (plate 2) it may be easier to grasp this notion of anthropomorphic representation. In this moving evocation of grief, Eos is holding the dead body of her son Memnon, who had been killed by Achilles.⁴ It makes perfect sense for Eos to be depicted with wings because she is the goddess of Dawn. A ruler of this heavenly event would naturally have the capability of flight. For the Greeks, this female



1. "Nike of Samothrace" The Louvre, Paris

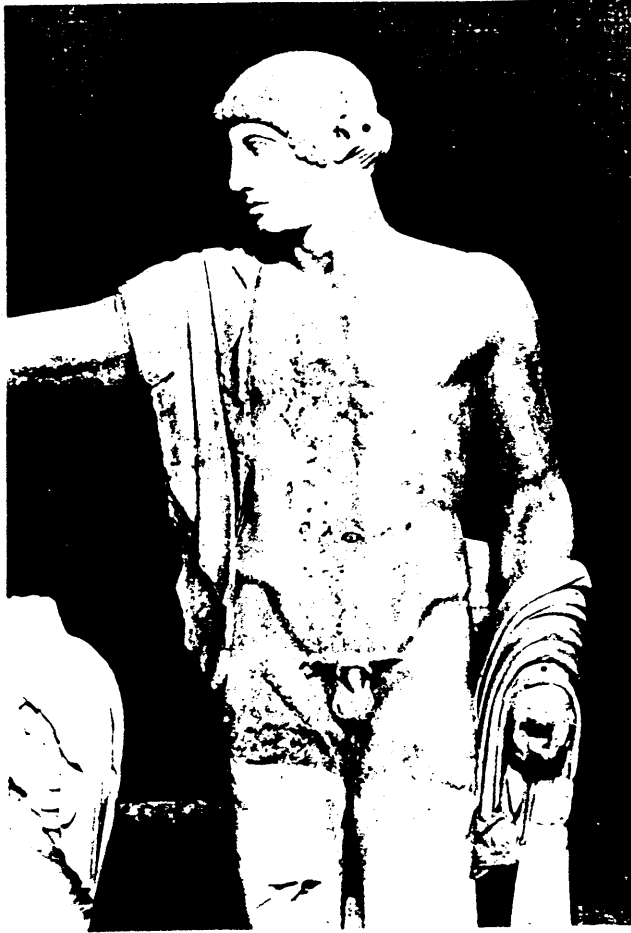


2. Douris "Eos and Memnon" interior of an Attic kylix
The Louvre, Paris

with wings anthropomorphically represents the natural occurrence of sunrise.

In the statue of Apollo (plate 3) the divine nature of the "God of the Sun" is not so apparent. Here, Apollo is depicted as a mere mortal, without wings, which seems inappropriate. To connect this statue with the symbol of a divine being one must understand the context in which the sculpture was originally displayed. This Apollo was not meant for the interior of a museum, he was created to adorn sacred Greek architecture, the temple. Placing this human representation on the temple gave it intrinsic symbolic divinity.

In Greek, the word "kosmos" meant "order" and order is what the ancient Greeks sought when they contemplated the universe.⁵ If one looks at a typical Greek temple (plate 4), one sees a model of the universe that has had an overwhelming effect on all of Western Civilization. Very simply the temple is constructed of three sections: the stepped platform, the columns, and the entablature. The entablature is composed of a frieze, the horizontal band above the columns, and on two sides of the temple above the frieze is the triangular pediment. In the Greek cosmos, the realm of the gods was Mount Olympus, heaven, the sky. Consequently, that is where the anthropomorphic depictions or sculptures were placed, in the highest parts of the temple. The columns beneath the entablature acted as the mediators between gods and men connecting heaven and earth. The platform sets this entire structure apart from the earth denoting its sacred function. In this way the Greek temple becomes a metaphor of the order they saw when they looked to the sky and saw the forces of nature at play.



3. "Apollo" from the west pediment of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia
Olympia, Greece



4. Greek Temple reconstruction drawing

This tradition of recognizing the sky as the spiritual or heavenly realm continues through all of Medieval art (plate 5). In this ivory carving, Christ is resurrected. He ascends to heaven accepting the hand of God which is depicted naively poking through a cloud. By this time (400-500AD) the Greek gods had been replaced by the Christian Trinity headed by one Almighty God. For nearly one thousand years there would be virtually no depictions of this Almighty God, but many anthropomorphic and iconographic representations of Jesus Christ: immaculately conceived, born as a man, and resurrected as the son of God. This is important because, in essence, having no visible way to represent God during most of the Dark Ages, God was separated, in a visual way, almost entirely from man. God was not felt as being as close as the top of a temple. He was further away, higher in the sky, in a distant heaven.

The Saints of the Holy Scriptures were often depicted in sculptural form (plate 6). They were seen as men and women who had achieved a sort of holy status through virtuous acts and were worshipped as if they were demigods. But God the Almighty was never to be seen. The only place one could hope to make visible or spiritual contact with the Divine was in the Cathedral.

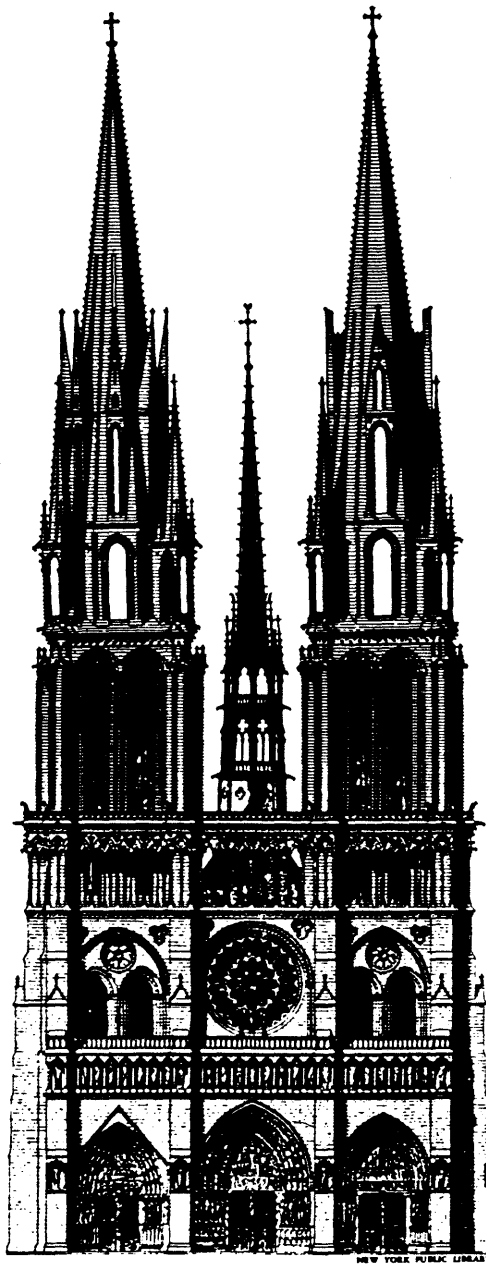
The Gothic Cathedral (plate 7) was the greatest achievement of Medieval man. It embodies the ideals and beliefs of an age that has lasted hundreds of years. Outwardly, the Cathedral towers upward reaching for God, signifying that the spirit world is "up there" above earth. These buildings were the tallest structures that had been built up to that time. They could have possibly been seen by Medieval man as actually touching heaven. It was definitely believed that the Cathedrals did in fact connect heaven and



5. "Christ Ascending" Ivory relief



6. Amiens Cathedral portion of façade



7. "Notre Dame de Paris" construction drawing (spires never built)

earth. Inside was considered the house of God. The rose windows were spoken of as the "eye of God".⁶ The feelings of splendor and awe when entering one of these masterpieces would have been enough to convince nearly anyone of its divine function as the house of the Lord and the connector of heaven above and earth.

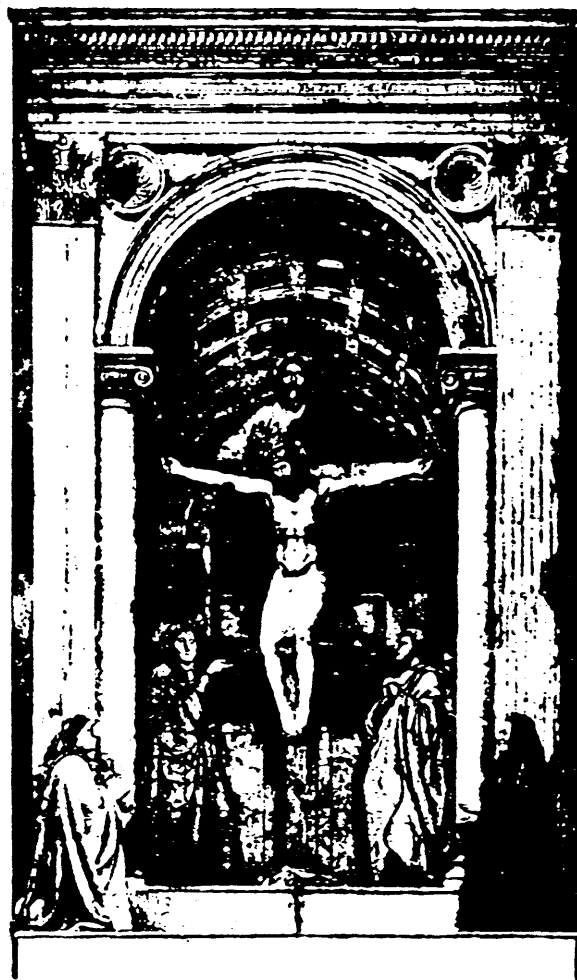
This vision of the cosmos continues during the Renaissance with one important difference, as seen in the works of Michelangelo (plate 8). Here, on the Sistine ceiling, Michelangelo anthropomorphically portrays God! God is depicted as an old man flying through the sky surrounded by heavenly spirits. In the Renaissance, God appears in the paintings of another artist, Masaccio (plate 9). In The Holy Trinity with the Virgin and Saint John, Masaccio places a representation of God hovering behind the crucified Jesus. The introduction of the Almighty God into visual imagery was a big step in bringing God a bit closer to man. The responsibility of depicting God in paint must have been overwhelming for most artists of this time.

Martin Schongauer depicted Saint Anthony (plate 10) floating in mid-air surrounded by wicked spirits and flying demons. This engraving could be interpreted as actually placing Saint Anthony in the role of a demigod, giving him the power of flight; or perhaps this is a symbolic portrayal of the spirit of Saint Anthony, a tormented soul. In either case, this ghastly event is taking place in the sky, the spirit world.

Albrecht Durer envisioned the Apocalypse--the holy destruction of world for the purpose of establishing a heavenly kingdom on earth⁷--as



8. Michelangelo "Creation of Adam" detail Sistine ceiling



9. Masaccio "The Holy Trinity with the Virgin and Saint John"



10. Martin Schongauer "Temptation of Saint Anthony"

four horsemen flying through the air destroying everything in their path (plate 11). The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse is another example of the forces of nature, or in this case the predicted forces of nature being interpreted in an anthropomorphic manner.

The Renaissance and the Baroque are filled with anthropomorphic or iconographic depictions of divine beings and events. Practically every major artist of these periods dealt with this type of imagery: Titian, Raphael, Botticelli, Bosch, Fra Angelico, Signorelli, Tintoretto, Grunewald, etc. In the Burial of Count Orgaz (plate 12), El Greco shows heaven and earth simultaneously. Here El Greco convinces one that human activity is again inextricably woven with divine and heavenly activity, as the Greeks before him had. This "return to classicism" was popular and very much a part of the Renaissance and Baroque spirit.⁸

Correggio went so far as to imagine and paint the ancient myths (plate 13). In Jupiter and Io, Io has been depicted in an anthropomorphic manner but Jupiter (the Roman name for the Greek god Zeus) is portrayed as a seductive grey cloud. Painting mythological events wasn't unusual at this time, but painting them as grey clouds certainly was. Correggio, being influenced by legends of Zeus' ability to transform himself into nearly anything, must have thought this vapor, this cloud, perfectly appropriate for depicting a god of the sky. As a matter of fact, Correggio, as well as Guercino, Gaulli, and others, was quite fond of painting vapors and clouds. In his Assumption of the Virgin (plate 14), Correggio paints the dome of a ceiling with a procession of angels and clouds spiraling up to heaven. The significance again, is in the display of the belief that the sky was the realm of the divine.



11. Albrecht Durer "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse"



12. El Greco "The Burial of Count Orgaz"



14. Correggio "Assumption of the Virgin"



13. Correggio "Jupiter and Io"

Guercino paints the cosmic event Aurora (plate 15) on a ceiling which harkens back to Michelangelo and the Sistine ceiling. What better place to portray supernatural and divine spiritual events than on a ceiling, creating the illusion of an opening to heaven.

Giovanni Gaulli in his Triumph in the Name of Jesus (plate 16) not only creates the illusion of the sky but, through the use of anthropomorphic figures painted along the edges of the composition diminishing in size as they approach the center, creates the illusion of the top of the Cathedral opening up, and beyond that a layer of clouds opening to reveal the Light of God and allowing it to shine in on the congregation.

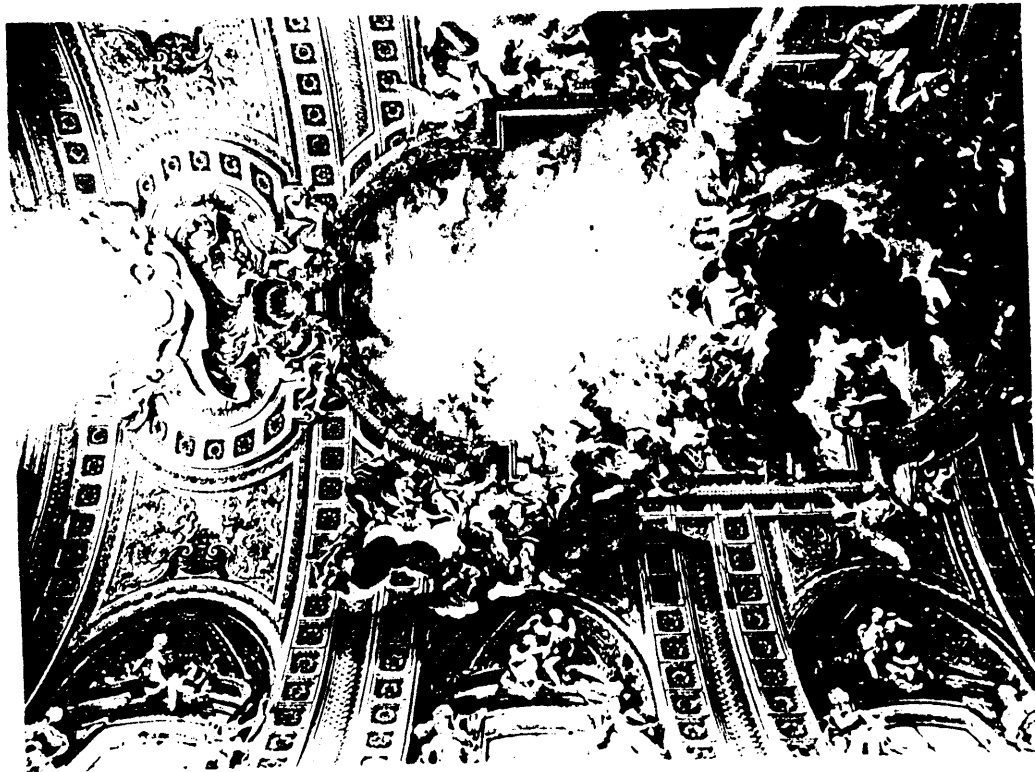
Even though God did appear occasionally in the art of this time, He was still at a distance, separated either by a high ceiling or an infinite space. Nevertheless, the sky was where He lived and the natural forces seen in the sky were understood as revelations of God.

Anthropomorphic depictions did not totally vanish with the end of the Baroque Era. They were seen in the 1800's through William Blake (plate 17). Blake's art is filled with many versions of God and spirits in the sky. Here in Tornado Blake portrays the natural phenomenon of a tornado as a god, complete with thunderbolt descending from heaven. Even as late as 1921, Ernst Barlach portrays God anthropomorphically flying through the sky creating the world (plate 18).

In all these examples it is obvious that for the artists who created them and for the cultures who embodied them, the mysterious face of God was seen in the sky. When these peoples asked themselves "Who are we?", and "What makes the world happen?", they all looked to the sky and found answers. By representing the forces of the cosmos anthropomorphically



15. Guercino "Aurora"



16. Giovanni Gaulli "Triumph in the Name of Jesus"



17. William Blake "Tornado" engraving



18. Ernst Barlach "The First Day" from "The Metamorphic Creations of God"
Woodcut

the mysterious hidden nature of reality was made visible and understandable. The iconographic quality of these representations allows them to act as mediaries between those same forces and man.

This anthropomorphic-iconographic style faded during the Romantic Era. It was replaced, for the most part, by a pantheistic view. Prophetically, Rembrandt in the early 1600's recognized there were superhuman forces at play in the sky. In his etching The Three Trees (plate 19), Rembrandt chose to depict those forces as he saw and felt them, imbued with all the power and mystery of the cosmos. He was not merely copying nature, he was "seeing God", or the power of God in the Sky. Rembrandt's art was more than simple Naturalism. His was an art of Supernaturalism, of Pantheism--equating God with the forces and laws of the universe.⁹ In this light one can view Rembrandt as the precursor of the entire Romantic movement of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Seeing and feeling (contacting) the power of God in every living thing was commonly expressed by the Romantic Period artists. Poets of the age were perhaps the most blatant about what they were seeing. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote:

Standing on the bare ground, --my head bathed by the blythe
air and uplifted into infinite space--all mean egotism vanishes.
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.¹⁰

Here it is necessary to discuss the landscape (which includes the sea, the sky, and the earth) and the idea of the "Sublime" in Romantic thought. Philosophically this idea was introduced by the Greeks and written down in the first century A.D. by Longinus. The Sublime didn't become dominant in



19. Rembrandt "The Three Trees" etching

the visual arts until the later part of the Romantic Era. Longinus, quoted here by an 18th century commentator, is referring to the idea of the Sublime as it applies to poetry and rhetoric:

...the effect of the sublime is to lift up the soul;
to exalt it into ecstasy; so that, participating, as
it were, of the splendors of the divinity, it becomes
filled with joy and exultation; as if it had itself
conceived the lofty sentiments which it heard.¹¹

This description conjures up images of Eden, the Elysian Fields, and Paradise. Originally, all discussion and argument concerning the idea of the Sublime during the early part of the Romantic Age referred to literary imagery of landscape. In John Milton's epic poem, Paradise Lost, which spans the creation of the world to the apocalypse, he says:

Then wilt thou not be loth
To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess
A Paradise within thee, happier far...
They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow
Through Eden took their solitary way.¹²

In The Sacred Theory of the Earth of 1607, Thomas Burnet sought to "demonstrate the existence and attributes of God... by reasoning from the phenomena of nature... translating theological and moral concepts into an aesthetics of landscape".¹³ He called this "phÿsico-theology". Later, theorists make a distinction between the beautiful and the sublime in nature. The beautiful in nature was understood as an expression of God's benevolence, while the vast and disordered [the sublime] in nature express his infinity, power, and wrath, and so evoke a paradoxical union of delight and terror, pleasure and awe".¹⁴ So by the time the visual artists of the 18th century in Europe welcomed the idea of landscape painting, the concept of the Sublime landscape had its source in the qualities of vastness, terror, astonishment, awe, infinity, and reverence.

One of the first Romantic artists to paint the Landscape Sublime was Alexander Cozens. He saw the sky-landscape for its poetic and imaginative qualities (plate 20). The Sublime aspects of landscape were seen through his bold strokes and rhythmic movement of mountains, trees and sky.

John Constable was interested in observing the sky. For him the sky was "the key note, the standard scale, and the chief organ of sentiment".¹⁵ In Hampstead Heath (plate 21), Constable captures the movement of the wind, the clouds, and the fleeting effects of atmosphere with his rapid brush-strokes.

By the early 1800's the sublime landscape was to be found throughout European art. In Germany, Caspar David Friedrich brought landscape painting to its height in The Wreck of the "Hope" (plate 22). Here, the vastness, the power, the terror of the power of God is expressed not only in sky imagery but in the thrusting, jagged pinnacles of frozen sea.

The idea of literal sublimity is inseparably combined with that of the sea, from the stupendous spectacle it exhibits when agitated by a storm.¹⁶

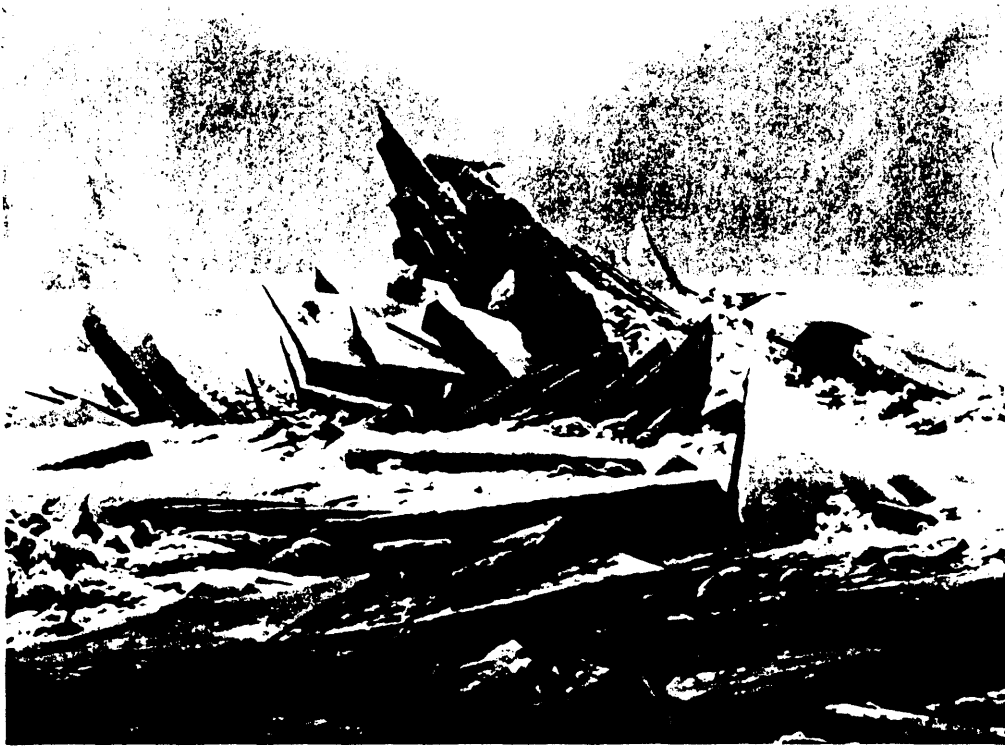
So said Dugald Stewart. He, along with other theorists of the time, suggested that virtually any description of the sea was by its nature sublime if in fact the artistic description of the sea were convincing. J. M. W. Turner would have agreed with Stewart in spite of the fact that in his earliest works the criticism he received concerned the inability of his marine paintings to convince one of the sea. In a series of mezzotints titled Little Liber (plate 23), Turner's depictions of the sea are definitely convincing. But in this series of prints Turner is concerned primarily with the elements of the sky. The vast, violent clouds, the powerful inclusions of light and lightning evoke sensations of awe and amazement at the forces



20. Alexander Cozens "Landscape" aquatint



21. John Constable "Hampstead Heath" oil/canvas



22. Caspar David Fredrich "The Wreck of the 'Hope'" oil/canvas



23. J. M. W. Turner from "Little Liber" series, mezzotint

of nature. In fact, Turner's entire oeuvre seems to deal with the elements of the Romantic Sublime. Turner and his European contemporaries found meaning for themselves and their cultures, they answered the questions of self-identity and true reality through expressions of the Pantheistic Sublime.

America at this time was still the "new land", the Garden of Eden, a vast continent of undiscovered territory. It is no wonder that ideas of the landscape Sublime were promulgated. As Robert Hughes states in The Shock of the New:

Throughout the 19th century, America seemed to be a repository of sublime landscape effects, from the solitude of its forests as described by de Toqueville--"a silence so deep, a stillness so complete, that the soul is invaded by a kind of religious terror"...¹⁷

The American Sublime landscape can first be seen in the work of a few artists historically grouped together and called the "Hudson River School". One of the most prolific of the school was Thomas Cole. In his painting The Voyage of Life (plate 24), an image of vastness is certainly depicted, but the surrealistic portrayal of the spirit and the glowing boat combined with the clouds opening up to welcome the maiden are perhaps a bit too narrative. This was common in much of Cole's later work, a narrative surrealistic storyline that tended to trivialize their emotional impact. The landscape is almost subordinate to the narrative, thus diminishing the Sublime effects, evoking a false or unbelievable sense of awe.

John F. Kensett (plate 25), on the other hand, seemed quite content to depict nature as he saw her. In The Shrewsbury River Kensett's sense of Sublime is evoked in a subtle, quiet way. The stillness of the water and the emptiness of the sky were enough to create a vision and grandeur



24. Thomas Cole "The Voyage of Life" oil/canvas



25. John F. Kensett "The Shrewsbury River" oil/canvas

and a vast infinity. The less violent aspects of sublime nature in fact seemed more suitable to the American landscape. James Fenimore Cooper described it in these words:

The sublimity connected with vastness is familiar to every eye...The most abstruse, the most far-reaching, perhaps the most chastened of the poet's thoughts crowd on the imagination as he gazes into the illimitable void. The expanse of the ocean is seldom seen by the novice with indifference; and the mind, even in the obscurity of night, finds a parallel to that grandeur, which seems inseparable from images that the senses cannot compass.¹⁸

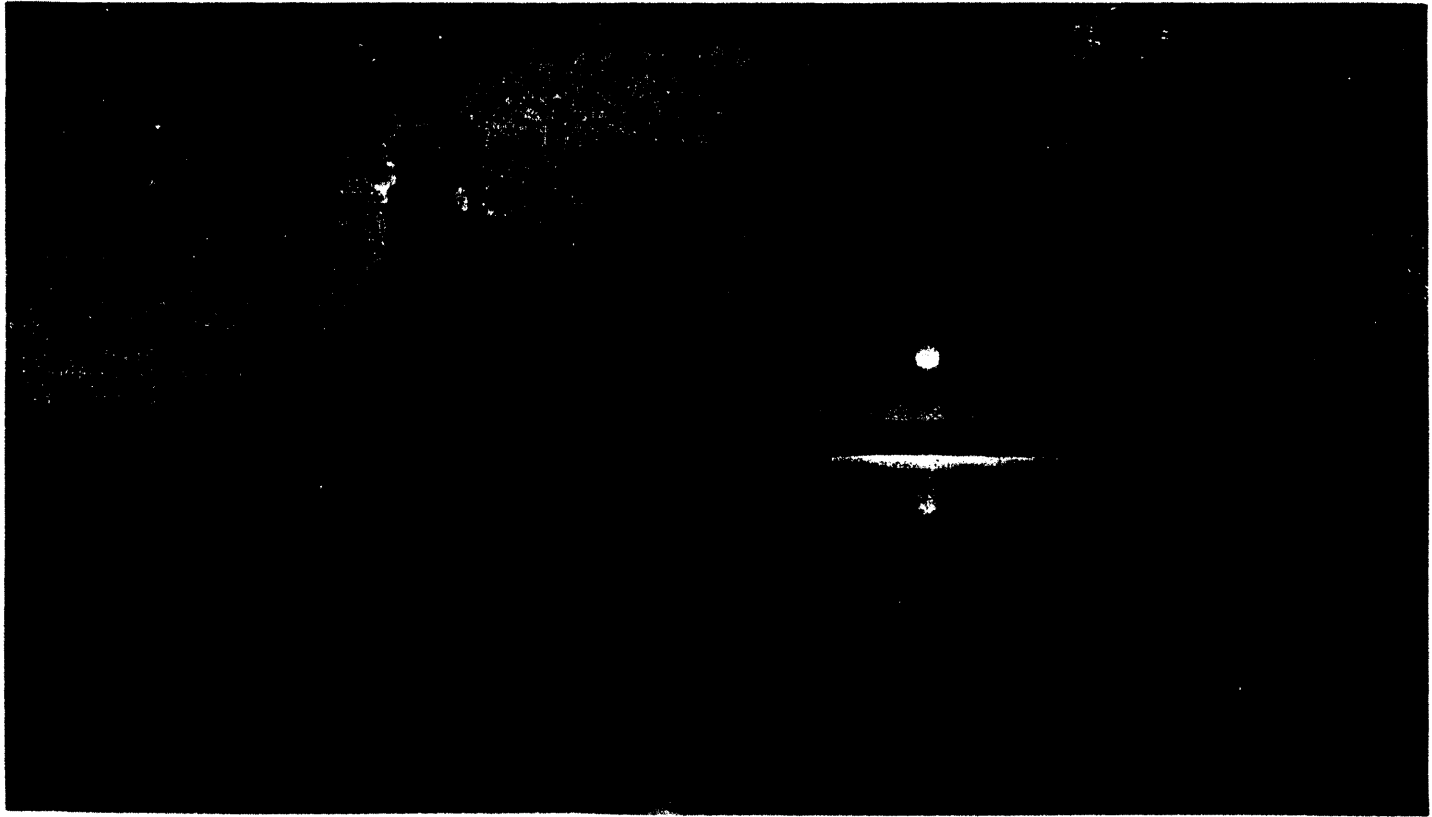
Martin J. Heade and Frederic Church, contemporaries of Kensett and Cole, were categorized by art historians as being of a Luminist School of thought. It was felt that the light these and other Luminists portrayed was somehow different than that of the Hudson River School painters. The Luminist's light was defined as "a new interest in light, in the phenomenal character of a particular light rather than the generalized poetry of light".¹⁹ In Heade's Approaching Storm: Beach near Newport (plate 26), a "different" kind of light is apparent. The bright white of the sail and the crests of the folding waves contrasted against the extremely dark sky give this painting an ominous haunting aura.

In Church's Cotopaxi (plate 27), as well as in most of Church's work, the infinite horizon, the grandeur of mountain, rock, and cloud formations and of course the magical light all combine to evoke sensations of a particular category of the Sublime; a specifically American Sublime, calmer and more vast than the European variety.

While European artists after 1850 were, for the most part, turning their attentions toward urban subject matter and the new ideals brought on by the Industrial Revolution, American artists were still enthralled with the Romantic notions of landscape. One of the most unusual American artists



26. Martin J. Heade "Approaching Storm: Beach near Newport" oil



27. Frederic Church "Cotopaxi" oil/canvas

of this time was Elihu Vedder. Vedder's The Lair of the Sea Serpent (plate 28) at first glance seems almost trite with the surreal imagery of a monster on the beach (his model was a dead eel on the Long Island shore²⁰). But the effect of the painting goes beyond that. Perhaps this was Vedder's response to the oncoming Industrial Age, his way of denouncing the new technology and urbanization already becoming apparent in America. This image evokes sensations of mystery and wonderment. Vedder saw the forces of nature as something to be revered and feared. The Lair of the Sea Serpent recalls the Romantic Sublime notions of vast space, of wild, untamed, unfettered nature.

Albert Pinkham Ryder was another artist who painted the mystery and terror of the forces of nature. Moonlight Marine (plate 29) depicts a lost sailboat on a turbulent sea. But the sky is what carries the meaning in this work. The sky speaks of the almighty power of nature. The forboding and mysterious shape of clouds and sky connote symbols of an ancient language. They evoke impressions of, not infinite space, but of infinite power, supernatural power.

A less fearful vision of the American landscape can be seen in Moonlight, Indian Encampment by Ralph Blakelock (plate 30). Blakelock seemed to be continuing the tradition of Frederic Church, of bringing images of the wild West, the untamed regions of the Frontier back for the civilized urban population to marvel at. The inclusion of figures not only sets up a grand scale for this composition, it adds an element of hospitality to the landscape. Wild savages in the midst of Paradise make this image more enticing than it might otherwise be. Where Blakelock excelled was in his depiction of light. His is a warm, inviting, magical light that invites



28. Elihu Vedder "The Lair of the Sea Serpent" oil/canvas



29. Albert Pinkham Ryder "Moonlight Marine" oil/canvas



30. Ralph Blakelock "Moonlight, Indian Encampment" oil/canvas

the viewer to partake of the vastness and benevolence of the powers of nature.

George Inness, late in the 19th century continued the Romantic tradition of painting the Sublime landscape. In The Monk (plate 31), Inness describes a quiet mystical setting. Without the title and the figure, this scene would still evoke awe and mystery. The meditative quality of this image is only slightly disturbed by the presence of the dark forest. The Monk celebrates the intimate connection between man and the forces of nature.

The Romantic Age in Europe and in America during the 18th and 19th centuries succeeded in an incredible feat--it brought God down from distant heaven. The pantheistic notions of the age ordered the universe in such a way that the power of God was seen in the panorama of the sea, land, and sky. His power was understood to be terrible and benevolent. It was seen in the realistic depiction of detailed landscape and in the turbulent void of the infinite sky. Through these types of images, God was made visible and the forces of nature were made more comprehensible.



31. George Inness "The Monk" oil/canvas

If a faithful account was rendered of Man's ideas upon Divinity, he would be obliged to acknowledge, that for the most part, the word "gods" has been used to express the concealed, remote, unknown causes of the effects he witnessed; that he applies this term when the spring of the natural, the source of known causes, ceases to be visible: as he loses the thread of these causes, or as soon as his mind can no longer follow the chain, he solves the difficulty, terminates his research, by ascribing it to his gods... When, therefore, he ascribes to his gods the production of some phenomenon...does he, in fact, do any thing more than substitute for the darkness of his own mind, a sound which he has been accustomed to listen with reverential awe?²¹

Paul Heinrich Dietrich, Baron von Holbach 1770

This quote expresses the sentiments of the Age of Enlightenment and the mainstream attitude of the Modern Era (late 19th, 20th centuries). It is not the intent of this paper to deny the belief in scientific reason. Nor is the intention to argue that art is the arena where moral and spiritual values should be presented. This has been done and will probably continue to be done by others.²² It is the intent of this paper to trace the tradition of art's mediating function through Western Civilization and into the Modern Era. No matter what the time period, artists were and still are talking about the same things. Whether these things are called the power of God, the forces of the universe, the forces of nature, et cetera, doesn't really matter. In all cases, art is a metaphor of and a mediator between the cosmic forces and man. Whether one looks to the sky and sees God (or gods) as anthropomorphic Icons, or whether one sees the power of god manifested through forms of natural events, or whether one sees nothing spiritual or divine in the sky at all, it can be agreed that when looking at the sky one sees MYSTERY and POWER. Man is still trying to connect with that power, to understand it, to find meaning in the events of the sky. The Age of Enlightenment, and all the scientific theory since then has failed to give anything

more than a superficial description of reality. Science has succeeded in creating a spiritless world. This technological age would have one believe that there is no mystery in the world, no unfathomable cosmic forces at play. And even if there are, the existentialists would have one believe that there is no control or possible hope of understanding those forces. Twentieth century beliefs in Capitalism and Individualism have created a world of confusion and separation.²³ Society has very little to hold it together. Art can no longer embody an entire culture, only individuals. In this era, art speaks in single voices, but valuable and potent voices nonetheless.

The champion of the Modern vision of the forces of nature has been, and may continue to be Vincent Van Gogh.

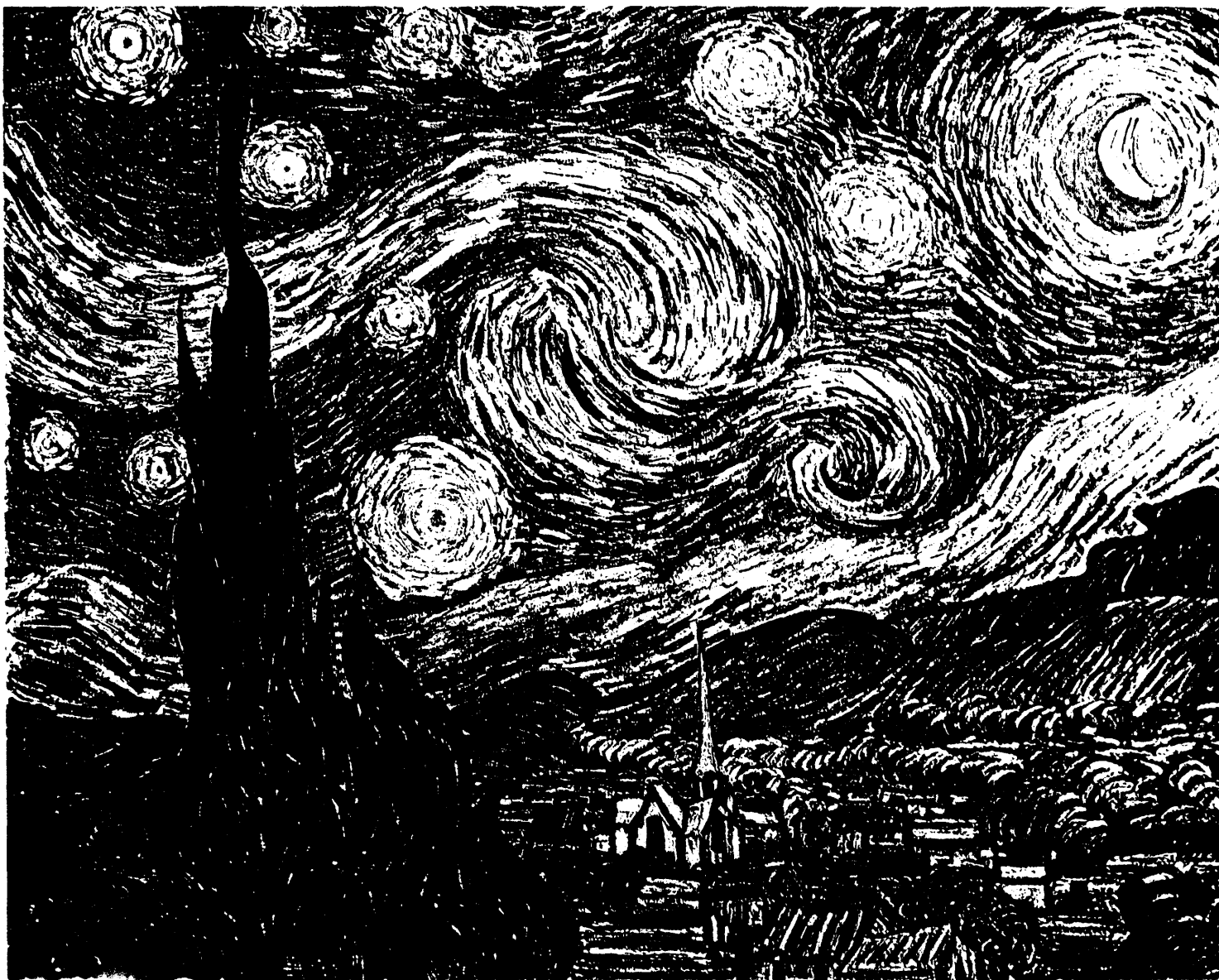
I have...a terrible need...shall I say the word?...of religion.
Then I go out at night and paint the stars.

Vincent Van Gogh²⁴

In Starry Night (plate 32), Van Gogh is not interested in portraying a Sublime picture of the night. Vincent tried to look at the world afresh, with new eyes. He saw the majesty of the heavens and tried to bring them closer. Instead of portraying the vastness of the night, he sought a more intimate connection with the powers of in the sky. He sought to bring nature close enough to touch.

Georgia O'Keeffe was another painter who made an intimate connection with nature. In Light Coming on the Plains 1 (plate 33), O'Keeffe evokes sensations of expansion, of opening up, and of benevolence. The act of painting a sunrise becomes, for O'Keeffe, a religious experience, a sacramental experience. Choosing to paint the sunrise admits a belief that the sunrise is a significant event, a mystical and marvelous happening.

Jack Orman does a similar thing in his etching Eclipse (plate 34). Scientifically, there is no mystery in an eclipse, they happen often.



32. Vincent Van Gogh "Starry Night" oil/canvas



33. Georgia O'Keeffe "Light Coming on the Plains" watercolor



34. Jack Orman "Eclipse" etching/engraving

Astronomers can predict them accurately. But that in no way diminishes the marvelous fact that they do happen, that planets and stars and moons operate within some sort of cosmic order. Eclipse celebrates that miracle.

George Burr is yet another artist who wished to make a connection with the forces of the earth and sky. His drypoint Mojave Desert (plate 35) does just that. Burr goes beyond literal representation in this print. The polarity he creates, by presenting a flat white surface, then, by using the minimum of mark-making, creates a deep infinite space, is stirring. The surreal yet absolutely believable whirlwinds touching the surface of the desert, become more than gusts of wind. They suggest whirlwinds of thought and emotion, the subtle stirring of feeling and insight.

I love all waste
And solitary places; where we taste
The pleasure of believing what we see
Is boundless, as we wish our soul to be.
Shelley²⁵

Mojave Desert becomes an inner event, a landscape of the mind, evoked through careful representation of the physical world.

These Modern artists recognize mystery and intelligence in the heavens. They, like the artists throughout history, want to understand that cosmic order, and experience the spiritual essence behind the superficial tangible reality of appearances. To express this, art in this era has had to invent an abstract, or as Robert Hughes calls it, "transcendental" language.²⁶ The abstract thought of the 20th century has had to discover a means of expressing itself in abstract visual imagery.

...Today we reveal the reality that is behind visible things through abstraction, thus expressing the belief that the visible world is merely an isolated case in relation to the universe and that there are more, other, latent realities...
Paul Klee²⁷



35. George Burr "Mojave Desert" drypoint

The important thing to realize is that whatever language artists use, they are still doing the same thing that artists from all eras of Western Civilization have done--communed with and participated in the creative powers of nature.

Jackson Pollock took this idea as far as to exclaim "I am Nature".²⁸ Pollock believed he was not an outsider looking in on the wonders of creation. The painting One (plate 36) is evidence of his belief that he was integrated with the powers of the universe, not because he had figured out some hidden secret, but that it was his inherent right as a human being to be in touch with these forces. The drips of paint are record of Pollock's dance, his expression of the heart of creativity itself.

In Una Johnson's introduction to Gabor Peterdi's catalog of graphic work, she says:

Peterdi has explored and studied many aspects of landscape. He firmly believes that an artist must become a sensitive part of nature. He cannot observe it from his studio window. It is of little difference what style he employs...the important thing is to create a relevant and memorable image... The underlying idea and motif must always be the creation of the image or symbols that express the integration of man and the universe in which he lives.²⁹

Stephen Raul Anaya's etching Kuraje (plate 37) is an excellent example of art seeking integration with the powers of nature. In this print the viewer becomes the participant in a vast complex panorama. Anaya allows one to see the tumultuous storm above as well as the teeming life of the sea below. These two sections of reality viewed together express the sentiment of oneness and wholeness of the world.

In Peterdi's print Angry Sky (plate 38), he seems to be interested in describing the forces of movement and time. Whereas before, artists of



36. Jackson Pollock "One" oil, enamel/canvas



37. Stephen Raul Anaya "Kuraje" etching



38. Gabor Peterdi "Angry Sky" etching/engraving

other ages partook of a more static, timeless reality, Peterdi sees the world in constant flux, ever moving, ever changing. This could either be a reluctance on the part of modern art to look at or discover the eternal qualities in nature, or it could be, as Einstein suggests,³⁰ this state of constant flux is the true or a truer expression of reality.

The question of all questions for humanity, the problem which lies behind all others and is more interesting than any of them is that of the determination of man's place in Nature and his relation to the Cosmos. Whence our race came, what sorts of limits are set to our power over Nature and to Nature's power over us, to what goal we are striving, are the problems which present themselves afresh, with undiminished interest, to every human being born on earth.

T. H. Huxley³¹

Now that it has been shown that the nature of reality is still being questioned, that the cosmic forces are still as powerful as they were in the beginnings of civilization, finally we return to the Greeks and to what they were exploring--the human experience. They were looking to nature, the sky, not only to understand the nature of reality, but to understand themselves. Today it is common for us to look at the sky and create metaphors of the human experience. The weather, the light, the darkness, and the movement of the heavenly bodies all have direct correlations to human emotional, intellectual, physical, and spiritual experience. The Modern artist uses the language of abstraction when expressing the underlying realities of divine, mathematical, and poetic order of the cosmos. Greek artists explored these same things. They used the more obvious language of anthropomorphic representation. In doing this the workings

of the Cosmos are understood through human awareness.

For we are the local embodiment of a Cosmos grown to self-awareness. We have begun to contemplate our origins: starstuff pondering stars...tracing the long journey by which, here at least, consciousness arose. Our loyalties are to the species and the planet. WE speak for Earth. Our obligation to survive is owed to not just ourselves but also to that Cosmos, ancient and vast, from which we spring.

Carl Sagan³²

Man looks to the sky to see the forces of the universe at play and to understand that those forces of the macrocosm (the universe) are the same forces of the microcosm (man). Man discovers himself in the creative energy of the sky and in so doing answers the question of who he is.

ENDNOTES

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- 2 G. S. Kirk, The Nature of Greek Myths (London: Penguin, 1982) 112-144.
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- 4 Janson, 81.
- 5 Kirk, 169-194.
- 6 Jay Jacobs, The Horizon Book of Great Cathedrals (Hong Kong: Crown, 1984) 64.
- 7 Meredith Corporation ed., Webster Encyclopedia (New York: Concord, 1985) 55.
- 8 Janson, 283.
- 9 Meredith, 683.
- 10 John Wilmerding, American Light: The Luminist Movement 1850-1875 (New Haven: Easter, 1980)
- 11 Andrew Wilton, Turner and the Sublime (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1980) 10.
- 12 Carl Sagan, The Dragons of Eden: Speculations on the Evolution of Human Intelligence (New York: Random House, 1979) 82.
- 13 M. H. Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature (New York: Norton, 1971) 101.
- 14 Abrams, 102.
- 15 Janson, 469.
- 16 Wilton, 46.
- 17 Robert Hughes, The Shock of the New (New York: Knopf, 1980) 311.
- 18 Wilton, 9.
- 19 M. W. Brown, S. Hunter, J. Jacobus, N. Rosunblum, D. M. Sokol, American Art (New York: Prentice Hall, 1979) 199.
- 20 Brown, 305.

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- 22 Hughes, 365-409.
- 23 Gablik, 126.
- 24 Sagan, Cosmos, 217.
- 25 Wilton, 104.
- 26 Hughes, 298.
- 27 Hughes, 304.
- 28 Brian O'Doherty, American Masters: The Voice and the Myth (New York: Random House, 1978) 106.
- 29 Pratt Graphics Center, Kennedy Galleries, Inc. pub., Print Review Number 1 (1972) introduction.
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- 31 Sagan, Dragons of Eden, 228.
- 32 Sagan, Cosmos, 345.

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