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Hudson River School Revisited

**To Everything There is a Season:
Religious Solace in Frederic E. Church's Seasonal Views of Olana**

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Frederic Church (1826-1900), a member of the Hudson River School most noted for his paintings of distant lands abroad, made Olana his home in 1872. Upon his return to New York in July 1869 from his two-year sojourn in Europe and the Near East, between 1870 and 1891, he leaped into the design and construction of the house and its surrounding landscape to suit his family's practical needs and his artistic inclinations that combined science and orthodox religious faith. Atop a steep hill, Church composes a pulpit upon which incantations of nature's benevolence--yet imposing power over mankind--manifest in awe-inspiring views of his vast estate and the Hudson River Valley that stretched below.

The nineteenth century is a time of rapid expansion in the young United States—acquisition of foreign territories, Manifest Destiny, the Industrial Revolution, the Trans-Atlantic Railway and so forth. The structure of many Hudson River School paintings, for instance, Thomas Cole's 1836 *The Course of Empire: The Savage State* and *The Oxbow (The Connecticut River near Northampton)*, often reflected such changes with lush shrubbery of the wilderness on one side of the pictorial space precipitously colliding with impinging colonies' ardent deforestation on the opposite side. There seemed to have been, at this moment in time, an anxious preoccupation with the rapid disappearance of the natural landscape of the New World.

Having made Olana his home—complete with his own farm, Church knew firsthand the fecundity of the landscape along the Hudson River that lured him and the flux of other artists, tourists, and inhabitants to the area. In addition, he was cognizant of the resulting dissipation of expanses of pure, unbridled nature in America. Church did not shy away from the aforementioned compositional format. However, his Olana seasonal views rely less upon this pictorial structure

partly on account of the sense of solace he found in biblical scripture. Nevertheless, in nineteenth-century society-at-large, a discomfiting thought predominates, an uncertainty that Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville evoked in his book *Journey to America* (1831):

...It is this consciousness of destruction, this arrière-pensée of quick and inevitable change, that gives, we feel, so peculiar a character and such a touching beauty to the solitudes of America. . . . Thoughts of the savage, natural grandeur that is going to come to an end become mingled with splendid anticipations of the triumphant march of civilization. One feels proud . . . yet at the same time one experiences I cannot say what bitter regret at the power that God has granted us over nature.¹

A prevalent theme in Frederic Church's oeuvre is nature's sovereignty over humankind—actually, the diametric inverse of the notion expressed by de Tocqueville in the aforementioned quotation. The theme of man's mortality versus nature's intransigence is explicitly represented in Church's landscape paintings that incorporate the ruins of man-made objects—for examples, a house's remnants, a weathered ship, and the ruins of the Greek Parthenon. Notwithstanding, his observation studies and paintings of the four seasons in Olana epitomize a more poetic, spiritual approach to the topos of nature's omnipotence.

Nature's life span progresses in much the same way as Mankind's--Green Nature jauntily sprouts in spring; and, in summer, youth concedes to adolescence, and Nature maturates. In the sketch *Clouds Over Olana* (1872), Olana is dwarfed by the imposing vastness of the summer landscape, flanked by pink, billowy clouds above and a grassy hill below. The scene marks the precise month and year when Church and his family moved into their new home along the northern part of the Hudson River. The observations that Church will make of the changing seasons at his home in Olana—where nature's rhythmic, cyclical progression along the Hudson River has been said to be unlike anywhere else in the world—will iterate Ecclesiastic prophecy.

In the autumn of its life, Nature is imbued with boldness--ostentatiously cloaking itself in a color palette of crimson, gold, orange, and hunter green coveted by many a landscape painter in the nineteenth century. As one story goes, on a trip to London, Jasper F. Cropsey, a fellow Hudson River School landscape painter, took leaves from the Hudson River area to show the

Queen of England that in fact America's technicolor beauty was as real as the seemingly hyperbolic stories told about it.² In Frederic Church's *Autumn* (1853), a golden glow pervades the atmosphere, reflecting the warm, gilded shimmer of the vegetation that dominates the space and softens the rocky facades of the mountains. Bold crimson and emerald foliage punctuate the scene adding a touch of visual contrast and lures attention to the lonely house seated in a lit cove in the valley below. Even today, the fall season in the Hudson River Valley is yet the painter's dream epitomized in Frederic Church's *Autumn*.

In winter, Nature grays in an unforgiving frost. Ever punctual, as in Church's *The Hudson Valley in Winter from Olana* (ca. 1871-72) and *Sunset Across the Hudson Valley, Winter* (c.1870-80), autumnal leaves fall and the gilded atmosphere fades to a blinding winter white. The soil is blanketed in snow that burdens the remaining feeble branches of shrubbery. To an onlooker absorbing this view, the scene's desolation may seem an elegy that evokes mourning. Rather, when considered in the context of Church's religious ideology and his body of seasonal paintings, it exudes a moment of respite in which there is consolation in knowing the lonely, fruitless landscape is in but a necessary ephemeral state.

Vegetation subsumes a chimney, the only remnant of a New England home; a dilapidated, sail-less abandoned ship is cast ashore by the ebb and flow of tidal waves; and even one of the world's architectural wonders in all its majesty sits atop the Acropolis of Athens in ruins—these are but a few elegiac references in the oeuvre of Frederic Edwin Church that intimate that man—who with all of his personal achievements and acquisitions, brawn, dexterity and intellect—is ultimately powerless in the face of nature and God. In examining Frederic Church's work, it becomes clearer after perusing the Olana paintings that his effort to substantiate his religious leanings with empirical observation, particularly in the wake of Charles Darwin's contradictory theories in the polemical book *Origin of Species* (1859), did not seem to require his travel around the world to places like the Holy Land. For biblically prophetic signs were always there in the American landscape despite its lack of majestic ancient religious monuments or

landscapes like Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock and the Mount of Olives.³ In the Olana paintings, his spiritual affinity and Protestant creationist beliefs are demonstrated in an allegorical fashion akin to early paintings of perhaps his most influential teacher, the progenitor of the Hudson River School, Thomas Cole. Nevertheless, Church's largely uninhabited landscapes that explore the atmospheric nuances of the seasons (most of which were depictions of the landscape from his home, Olana, along the Hudson River) collectively bespeak the intransigence of nature vis à vis mortal mankind in a manner more subtle, yet tantamount to, his juxtapositions of ruins of man-made forms. More poignantly, on account of his incorporation of this theme, Church's body of work seems to persistently assert a less anxious regard to industrial expansion than the conflicted sensibility often attributed to the natural landscapes of the Hudson River School. For ultimately, as the Gospel proclaims, Nature will reclaim what belongs to it:

For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.⁴

Earlier in his artistic career (prior to Olana), in *To the Memory of Cole* (1848), Frederic Church memorialized the death of his beloved mentor Thomas Cole who suddenly passed away February 1848 after an attack of pleurisy. Spotlighted in much the same way as the unassuming house in aforementioned *Autumn* (1853), a solitary cross marking Cole's grave is subsumed by nature, which does not seem to "skip a beat." As during every spring, fresh flowers sprout from the earth in the foreground and Catskill Creek trickles along the waterway it has carved in the middle ground, while rolling cumulus clouds hang low anticipating heavy precipitation. Meanwhile, in quiet stillness, Thomas Cole lies in his grave at the foot of the Catskill Mountains to return nevermore to an earthly life. As aforementioned, nature's life span progresses in much the same way as mankind's; but, as suggested in *To the Memory of Cole*, one notable exception must be added: Nature, unlike man, will reincarnate once again upon the earth in all of its youthful, green splendor in the following spring.

¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journey to America* (1831; reprint, Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1971), 399.

² “The Flourishing of a Landscape Tradition,” in Joseph S. Czeszochowski, *The American Landscape Tradition* (New York: E.P. Dutton, Inc., 1982), 20.

³ John Davis, “Frederic Church’s ‘Sacred Geography,’ ” *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 1:1 (Spring 1987): 79-96. In this article, Davis notes that in preparation for his trip to Palestine, Church read several books in which the authors endeavored to support the Bible with empirical fact. Among the books in his extensive library was Léon de Laborde’s *Journey Through Arabia Petraea* which emphasized that Biblical facts could be substantiated by studying the landscape of the Holy Land and that there is extant evidence of fulfilled Biblical prophecies (82). Davis asserts that Church’s trip to the Near East was rooted in an effort to substantiate his religious beliefs which were being challenged by such evolutionary theories like that propounded by Charles Darwin in his book *Origin of Species* (1859).

⁴ The Holy Bible, King James Version, Ecclesiastes 3:1-22.

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