Alois Riegl begins his 1899 essay “Mood as the Content of Modern Art” by describing an interrupted landscape viewing experience. The author imagines himself settling down atop a lonely Alpine summit. The ground slopes away before him, leaving nothing within reach, nothing to stimulate any sense but vision. He takes in the dark forested peaks around him, and beyond them, he can see meadows, the tiny white forms of cows grazing by the edge of a wood, and in the valley below, a cottage with a puff of smoke hovering beside it. A hushed stillness falls over everything. In the distance a waterfall runs down a rocky cliff, and even though the author recently experienced this waterfall up close and listened to its “angry thunder,” from his current position on the mountaintop, his “distant vision” (Fernsicht) perceives it only as a bright band of silver. He takes pleasure in this calm, contemplative state of being. Suddenly, however, his reverie is disturbed by a noise. A chamois leaps nearby and runs across the neighboring slopes. The author jerks, and out of a hunter’s instinct, he reaches for his gun. He is thrust back into an embodied awareness of his immediate surroundings. The beautiful mood he had enjoyed moments ago, now vanished, is a fragile thing. Any sensory intrusion, such as the leap of an animal, a sharp breeze that causes one to shiver, or the shriek of a bird in the air, is capable of shattering it.¹

What does this parable mean? Modern life, Riegl explains, is an endless Darwinian struggle for existence. Its conditions are discord and destruction. Our day-to-day experience is one of “near vision” (Nahsicht) in which the chamois is constantly leaping before us. The view from the Alpine summit is a respite from the sensory oppressiveness of the modern world. On the mountaintop, we
become aware of a higher law of causation in nature that governs what would seem, on the near view, to be random, intentionless actions. This feeling of harmony toward which we all strive is what Riegl calls Stimmung. Typically translated as “mood,” Stimmung is not to be mistaken for a transient emotional state; it is a redemptive knowledge in which the tensions and contradictions of near vision are resolved through the assumption of modernity’s “scientific worldview.” But it is difficult to reach this state of serene detachment amidst the immediate demands of modern life, and so we seek it in art. Stimmung is the content of art in the modern era. Some kinds of art, however, are more conducive to it than others. When we look at a painting that shows the human figure in arrested motion, for example, our expectation of the figure’s continued movement makes it difficult to achieve a contemplative distance. Vegetation and inorganic matter (rock, water, clouds), on the other hand, can reveal their true nature to us without the risk of such distraction. Landscape, in Riegl’s view, therefore “occupies the highest place in modern art.”

For Riegl, Stimmung is the historical culmination of an unfolding human desire for liberation from the narrow conditions of worldly existence. Art had to pass through several phases—primitve, antique, and Christian-medieval—before it could finally awaken to this mood in which we experience a peaceful distance from our struggles with the material world, and indeed, with the materiality of art itself. Whereas primitive man could not comprehend the natural forces at work around him, and therefore worshiped his fetish in the hope that it would bring him some relief from his constant state of warfare, art in the modern age is no longer worshiped, but operates according to laws that we view from the summit of history, as it were. Stimmung, in other words, is the mood of art history, a science that seeks to understand the causal principles of art’s development. This is a distinctly Hegelian outlook. If art history has a founding statement, surely it is Hegel’s famous dictum, delivered in his Berlin lectures on aesthetics in the 1820s, that “art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past.” Art history’s disciplinary imperative is to achieve the distant historical view, and although Riegl’s and Hegel’s ideas about the pastness of art were hardly simple or straightforward for these thinkers, art history nevertheless gets on with its steady ascent toward the summit. More often than not, this means avoiding those obstacles or intrusions that pose a threat to our sense of the historicity of art.

Consider the case of the American landscape painter Thomas Cole. In the early 1980s, Bryan Jay Wolf offered a provocative reading of Cole’s early sublime landscapes as enactments of a psychic drama, an oedipal struggle toward self-consciousness in which the beholder must overcome an obtruding foreground
hillock or promontory before identifying with an often threatening middleground peak or idealized meadows in the background (Figure 4.1). For Wolf, as for Riegl, the process of viewing landscape is a metaphor. In Wolf’s case, it is one about the romantic artist who, by representing his birth to self-consciousness through the natural imagery of landscape, locates his authority prior to the influence of social forces beyond himself. As Wolf puts it, “Cole sought in nature a metaphor for the self unburdened of history.” This approach was largely rejected by historians of American landscape painting. Wolf was charged with the “elimination of history as a category of critical discourse,” and studies of Cole have hardly looked back since. We now have accounts of the ways in which Cole and his patrons participated in the politics and class formations of Jacksonian America, nineteenth-century tourism and commerce, geological science, and Freemasonry. In short, the story of Cole scholarship has been a story of “landscape into history,” to
borrow the subtitle of the 1994 Thomas Cole retrospective at the National Museum of American Art. The result has been a richly textured historical account in which Cole’s world spreads out before our vision with exceptional clarity, much as the details of the Connecticut River valley are made available to us when seen from the top of Mount Holyoke in Cole’s well-known landscape from 1836 (Figure 4.2). But the scholarship on Cole has still not come to terms with the ways in which his art might be at odds with the very discipline that attempts to make it a thing of the past.

This chapter is by no means a call to neglect the pastness of Cole’s landscapes and accept uncritically the notion of a romantic artist unburdened of history. It is, however, an effort to listen attentively for the disruptive sound of the bounding chamois, the sudden intrusion that brings us back to our immediate surroundings and prevents the landscape from remaining comfortably in the past. And in this case, I do mean “listen”; for Cole, it is the sound of the landscape that unsettles our mood of contemplative distance. One sonorous painting in particular, Cole’s early landscape *Kaaterskill Falls*, occupies my attention in the following pages,

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**Figure 4.2.** Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow*, 1836. Oil on canvas, 130.8 × 193 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, 1908 (68.228).
where I make much of the loudness of the painting’s tumbling cataract (Plate 10). I begin by considering how Cole paints landscape as an uneasy relationship between optical and aural modes of experience: by painting the falls in their “angry thunder” rather than as a silver band in the distance, Cole does not allow us to leave behind their sound. Accordingly, in the second part of the chapter, I continue to attend to those sounds and argue for their implication in a specific cultural context of the 1820s: the notoriously loud and, indeed, “sublime” sounds of the religious revival. I turn to the revival not to give it priority over Cole’s art, as if it could somehow stabilize within history the radical act of unburdening that is Kaaterskill Falls. Rather, popular religion is best understood as a remainder that this painting leaves in its wake, a trace—or better yet, given the significance of sound in what follows, an echo—of the world in which Cole’s earliest landscapes took shape.

“THE VOICE OF THE LANDSCAPE”

The story of Cole’s Kaaterskill Falls is well known. First told in November 1825 in the New-York Evening Post, it is the classic story of the origins of an American school of landscape painting. The eminent painter, and at that time president of the American Art Union, Colonel John Trumbull, while visiting a New York art dealer, had come upon three landscapes by a young and unknown artist. Trumbull was particularly impressed by a view of Kaaterskill Falls in the Catskill mountains, a painting he chose to acquire for himself: “What I now purchase for 25 dollars, I would not part with for 25 guineas. I am delighted, and at the same time mortified. This youth has done at once, and without instruction, what I cannot do after fifty years’ practice.” The canvas purchased by Trumbull, a view from a cavern behind the falls, is now unlocated. But the following year, Cole made a replica for another patron, Daniel Wadsworth, the son of a wealthy Hartford merchant, who had seen Trumbull’s painting and was evidently impressed by it. Cole expressed in a letter to Wadsworth that he was not entirely satisfied with the copy: “I have laboured twice as much upon this picture as I did upon the one you saw; but not with the same feeling. I cannot paint a view twice and do justice to it.” Despite Cole’s protest about the unrepeatability of his initial inspiration, Wadsworth was pleased enough with the result. There were, at least, no complaints, and Wadsworth remained an enthusiastic collector of Cole’s landscapes.

It is the striking immediacy of Cole’s Catskill waterfall, one suspects, that impressed Trumbull and Wadsworth. Standing before Kaaterskill Falls, we feel less
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like observers than participants in the landscape. Cole places us just within the mouth of the cavern behind the upper portion of the falls. While the cavern opens onto an expansive view of the Catskills in the distance, the landscape in the immediate foreground solicits a more bodily response. Out of the dark mass of brush and foliage in the lower right corner emerge a few dead branches that invite us to grab hold and make a short but hazardous hike that will lead, if the branches don’t snap under our weight, to the diamond-shaped rock that juts into the water in the central foreground. Planting our feet on that rock would be a fitting conclusion to a spiraling journey that begins along the well-defined ledge at left and continues around the unseen back of the cavern to where we presently stand, then through the thick branches and undergrowth at right, and back toward the central rock.

The purpose of this journey would be to bring our bodies, and thus our full capacity for sensation, as close as possible to the remarkable waterfall that drops over the top of the cavern and tumbles into the pool in an explosion of mist (Figure 4.3). Cole has painted the falling water loosely, in flecks of lead white that recall Natty Bumppo’s description of Kaaterskill Falls in James Fenimore Cooper’s The Pioneers (1823), a description Cole may well have had in mind as he was painting: “The first pitch is nigh two hundred feet, and the water looks like flakes of driven snow, afore it touches the bottom.” But, in contrast to Cooper’s passage, Cole’s painting asks us to take in more than the look of the falls. The apparent motion of the flakes and the disturbance they cause in the churning water below, as dead branches pop erratically above the surface, create a palpable sense of loudness: the mists rising from the pool seem to carry with them the very sound of the cataract. The foreground of Kaaterskill Falls is, in short, a multisensory landscape. It is a place for the body, a “place of exposure,” as Edward S. Casey has described the foreground of Cole’s later landscape, View from Mount Holyoke (see Figure 4.2). We cannot take it in at once, but must negotiate it slowly, on foot, “feeling” it out with our eyes, with our hands, and perhaps above all, with our ears. Kaaterskill Falls serves as a declaration. For Trumbull, for landscape painters who subsequently modeled themselves on Cole’s example, and later for art historians, it declares that landscape painting will hereafter look different, that we will now be presented with a distinctly American landscape, sublime in its mood; and it declares that there is a particular painter who will show this landscape to us, Thomas Cole. Here is a type of painting the venerable Trumbull could not manage “after fifty years’ practice.” Compare with Cole’s painting one of Trumbull’s views of Niagara Falls, painted in 1807 and purchased by Wadsworth in 1828 (Figure 4.4). Trumbull’s is a much more placid view of a waterfall:
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the rising mists of the falls, seen at a distance through framing trees, belong to a quiet picturesque to contrast with Cole’s noisy sublime. A British soldier, advancing from the left side of the painting toward the foreground, raises his arm in the direction of the falls in order to display this natural wonder to his two female companions, although he seems equally to be addressing the viewer. This directorial gesture, which has the effect of removing the viewer still further from an untutored experience of nature, stands as a military metaphor for the kind of command the painting’s soldier-artist, Colonel Trumbull, exercises over us, as he gently yet firmly regulates our experience of Niagara Falls. It is precisely this kind of control that Cole, painting “without instruction,” relinquishes in the foreground of *Kaaterskill Falls*, and as a result, we experience his landscape not as an effort at

containment, but as an audible release in which the distinctive voice of a young artist spills beyond the conventions of eighteenth-century landscape painting.

Cole does, however, offer some relief from the clamor of the foreground. Kaaterskill Falls changes key at the rocky precipice that protrudes over the unseen lower falls and on which the tiny figure of a Native American stands, his miniaturization in effect reducing the viewer’s own body to a point, to a gaze that looks east over the deep depression of Kaaterskill Clove and toward a clearing sky, a distant peak, and the rising sun. To assume this point of view is to abandon one’s body in the foreground, and with it, the sensory excess of that space: its noise, its motion, and its disorder; we become only an eye that takes the measure of the transcendent landscape laid out before us. It is a view that many of Cole’s contemporaries would have recognized, for by 1826, Kaaterskill Falls had already become enough of a tourist destination to justify the building of a viewing platform at the top of the falls. Standing before Cole’s painting, however, we are no tourists: this is not a landscape previous sightseers have taken in. As Natty Bumppo describes
the site, “there has that little stream of water been playing among them hills, since He made the world, and not a dozen white men have ever laid eyes on it.” As we gaze silently on the Catskills with the tiny Indian, we see the mountains as Natty has seen them, through eyes untainted by civilization. It is the kind of view that Cole must have had in mind when, in his “Essay on American Scenery” (1836), he wrote that the highest purpose of art is to “sublime and purify thought.”

Yet, just as Riegl’s distant vision is disturbed by the sudden jumping of an animal, something prevents the full sublimation of the viewer’s body into ocular experience. For all the optical pull of that distant Catskill landscape, we cannot close our ears to the sound of Cole’s waterfall; its claim on us is more immediate than is the viewpoint enjoyed by the figure on the cliff, who is actually quite distant from us. While the jutting rock in the central foreground may be a difficult journey by foot, the Indian’s rock seems positively out of the question. To access it, we must disavow our own bodies, but this is a great deal to ask, given the bodilyness with which Cole endows us. The crashing of the waterfall will always keep us partially in the foreground; it will always be the background noise to our optical experience of the landscape, if only because it is here, at the mouth of the cave, where the body stands. Perhaps it was Cole’s success in creating this oscillation between sight and sound, between optical and aural modes of experience, that both “delighted” and “mortified” Trumbull when he purchased the first version of the painting in 1825. For our purposes, it provides an occasion to think about the relationship between vision and voice within Cole’s own aesthetics and within the larger cultural project of imagining the American landscape during the early nineteenth century.

A sensible place to begin exploring this relationship, the place Cole’s painting asks us to begin, is at the mouth of the cave—that “singular feature,” as Cole describes it, of “the vast arched cave that extends beneath and behind the cataract.” Like Plato long before him, and like many writers and visual artists working before his time and since, Cole seizes on the figure of the cave to construct his allegory about the process of coming to knowledge of the world through the senses. In Plato’s well-known version, told by Socrates in the Republic, prisoners chained within a cave mistake the shadows and echoes of figures on the outside for reality. Not until one of these prisoners escapes from his bonds and turns to the light coming in through the cave mouth does he begin to clear up his confusion and see the forms and hear the voices of the people walking outside for what they really are. Cole shows an unspoken involvement with this allegory throughout his body of work.
Consider his prose sketch from the 1820s, “The Bewilderment.” Having lost his way in the dark woods, the narrator falls through the earth into a deep hole and begins to follow an underground stream. Without light to guide his way, he can only describe his body’s blind struggle with the objects it encounters in the darkness. Creeping on hands and knees, bumping into rocks and dead branches, the narrator makes his way through a dark and treacherous netherworld until, finally, he discovers the mouth of his imprisoning cave. “A strange luminous appearance not far from me invited my steps, for light from whatever source was light. I approached it; it was a beautiful but strange brightness on a spot of smooth sand. I stretched my hand to touch it and, behold, my hand was illuminated and cast a shadow.” At this point, the benighted narrator is still like one of Plato’s prisoners, dwelling within the cave and perceiving the outside world obliquely, through its shadows. But then, after noticing the shadow cast by his hand, he turns to the source of light: “I turned and beheld the blessed moon, looking down a long cavernous passage, like a pitying Angel of light. I knelt down and could have worshipped it.” Looking directly into the angelic moonlight streaming through the mouth of the cave, the narrator is finally released from his bewilderment.

It is a release that is repeated elsewhere in Cole’s work, as in his Childhood, completed in 1839, the first canvas of his allegorical series The Voyage of Life (Plate 11). Here, the cave is associated with birth, with an emergence from the darkness of the womb that signifies the child’s awakening into consciousness. In the explanatory notes for the series, Cole was quite clear about how he wanted his public to interpret this element of the painting: “The dark cavern is emblematic of our earthly origin, and the mysterious Past.” In a letter to Wadsworth written in 1828, Cole comments on this symbolic dimension of his caves. Most likely referring to a cave entrance that appears in the right middleground of his Garden of Eden, an element that Wadsworth felt too “formal” and “gloomy,” Cole writes: “Though a cave may be a gloomy object in Nature—a view of its entrance gives rise to those trains of pensive feeling and thought that I have always found the most exquisitely delightful—The poets often speak of caves, and grottos as pleasing objects, and I do not know why the painter may not think as the poet” (Figure 4.5). Pictures like The Garden of Eden and The Voyage of Life adopt a familiar romantic trope (one thinks, for instance, of the “caverns measureless to man” from Coleridge’s Kubla Khan) in which the cave evokes mysteries that exceed the representational capacities of the poet’s pen or painter’s brush. Kaaterskill Falls draws on the same poetic imagery, yet it also reverses our relation to the cave. Instead of including the dark cave mouth within the painting as an emblem to be “read”
like a poem, Cole activates the cave’s perceptual role in the landscape. Instead of looking at a child coming out of the cave, we take on the role of that child. We begin our “voyage of life,” or escape from our “bewilderment,” as we emerge from the cave behind the falls, as our eyes and ears awaken directly onto the sights and sounds of nature.

One of the reasons the cave in Kaaterskill Falls lends itself to allegories of birth and awakening is that Cole is not excessively concerned with imitating the actual structure of a cave. An instructive comparison in this respect is William Guy Wall’s depiction of the same view, painted around 1827, probably after Wall had seen Cole’s canvas (Figure 4.6). An accomplished topographical painter, Wall insists on the capacity of vision to take in the falls, and he does this by pushing the viewer further into the depths of the cavern. From this more distanced viewpoint, one has a better understanding of how the cavern sits above the pool and a clearer view of the cavern walls, which the artist paints with geological precision. Cole, on the other hand, refuses the distance and detail favored by Wall; instead,
he places the viewer right before the pool and shows only the upper edges of the cave entrance, which he paints loosely and with a satisfying symmetry, unlike the decentered mouth of Wall’s cave. All of this suggests that Cole’s interest in the cave is not so much a topographical concern as an interest in framing, in figuring for the viewer the very processes of producing and experiencing landscape.

What, then, is the pictorial logic of this act of framing? If the cavern’s clear resemblance to a proscenium arch suggests an overtly theatrical act in which Cole insists on his own role as director of our landscape experience, at the same time, the smooth and even fleshy forms of the arch constitute a perceptual framing. The cave is a cyclopean eye through which we enter Cole’s landscape optically. It is also a cave *mouth*, an oral frame from which a young painter boldly voices a new landscape aesthetic. And it is an ear as well, a receptive portal into whose protective

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**Figure 4.6.** William Guy Wall, *Kaaterskill Falls on the Catskill Mountains*, c. 1827. Oil on canvas, 95.3 × 119.4 cm. Honolulu Museum of Art. Gift of the Mared Foundation, 1969, 3583.1.
space we are led by a winding pathway that leads from exterior to interior, as it spirals ear-like around the noisy pool. I do not suggest that any one of these readings could be called the “correct” interpretation of Cole’s cave; instead, they speak to the open-ended sensory potential of the frame. In short, if Plato’s allegory provides a model for reading Cole’s cave, we should by no means mistake it for a purely ocular fable about awakening to the truths of nature. For, Cole insists that we do not simply look from the mouth of the cave; we also listen.

Here is how Cole describes Kaaterskill Falls—not the painting, but the actual site—in a prose piece dating from 1843. The passage is best read aloud, so that one can hear the way Cole rehearses in his writing a perceptual ambivalence similar to that which structures the earlier painting:

> It is a singular, a wonderful scene, whether viewed from above, where the stream leaps into the tremendous gulf scooped into the very heart of the huge mountain, or as seen from below the second fall—the impending crags—the shadowy depth of the caverns, across which darts the cataract, that, broken into fleecy forms, is tossed and swayed, hither and thither, by the wayward wind—the sound of the water, now falling upon the ear in a loud roar, and now in fitful lower tones—the lovely voice—the solitary song of the valley. [Emphasis added]

Cole begins his description of the falls with an appeal to vision: his pairing of “scene” and “seen” captures the optical nature of this initial experience. In the middle of the passage, however, the entrance of the cataract disrupts the view and initiates a shift into an aural experience of nature. Mesmerizing rhythms of speech (“tossed and swayed, hither and thither, by the wayward wind”) turn our attention to sound, and by the end of the passage, we have forgotten our eyes and now simply listen to nature’s song.

The aurality of Cole’s *Kaaterskill Falls* is not unique among his early landscapes. One of his compositions of the 1820s, created not long after he painted *Kaaterskill Falls*, demonstrates a similar pairing of a cave entrance with sound. In 1829 or 1830, Cole completed a painting of an Old Testament scene entitled *Elijah in the Wilderness—Standing at the Mouth of the Cave*. That painting is now unlocated, though several studies do survive, including a sketch that bears the title, scrawled at the bottom of the sheet, *Elijah at the Mouth of the Cave* (Figure 4.7). Although the walls of Elijah’s cave are visible only on the right-hand side of the sheet, the compositional structure of the drawing essentially repeats that of *Kaaterskill Falls*: the opening of the cave frames a landscape that consists of a foreground plane at
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the edge of which stands a tiny figure, and beyond that, a distant view of mountainous wilderness and stormy skies. Elijah, however, shielding his eyes with a raised arm, does not look at that distant view. The relevant verse from the book of 1 Kings, that provided the inspiration for Cole’s composition, reads: “[Elijah] wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave: and behold, there came a voice unto him, and said, what doest thou here, Elijah?” Elijah’s experience of divine presence is, finally, a blind experience: vision gives way to the pronouncement of the Word, to the voice of God.

In Kaaterskill Falls, with its naturalized divinity, the substitute for the voice of God is the cataract, a natural feature that Cole refers to throughout his prose writings as “the voice of the landscape”:

The waterfall may be called the voice of the landscape, for, unlike the rocks and woods which utter sounds as the passive instruments played on by the elements, the waterfall strikes its own chords, and rocks and mountains re-echo in rich unison.
The tactile flakes of paint that descend from the cataract’s unseen source and the scumbled mists that rise from the pool in a sense are this voice in *Kaaterskill Falls*. We might say that Cole is “quoting” nature in this white, painterly noise that does not fully resolve into the autumnal landscape view. Suspended in the foreground, it interrupts our visual progress through the painting, clouding our vision, so to speak.

Michel de Certeau has argued that quotation has the potential to disrupt representation by introducing “voices of the body” into the text. Such voices are memories of the bodies that are always lodged in language but are not reducible to it; they are “cries breaking open the text that they make proliferate around them.” Among these voices in the pictorial register, we could include Cole’s sounding cataract, a voice that reverberates well beyond the rocks and mountains of a Catskill landscape. As we will see in the next section, Cole’s waterfall reechoes in the embodied sounds of popular religion, in the noisy religious fervor of the Second Great Awakening that, it turns out, was of some interest to the artist right around the time he was painting *Kaaterskill Falls*.

**“THE DIN OF THE REVIVAL”**

In a sketchbook dated 1827, Cole made a list of over one hundred ideas for future paintings, most of them never executed. The very first item on this list is a scene of “Preaching in the woods as is seen in the Western country,” a title that refers to the revivalist preaching that was rapidly gaining momentum in the first years of the nineteenth century, particularly in the western states of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Ohio, regions that had been prime ground for camp meetings since the massive Cane Ridge revival in Bourbon County, Kentucky, in 1801. These popular, open-air gatherings were the defining conversion events of the great evangelical movement that transformed American Christianity during the early years of the republic. As the country’s burgeoning population sought to realize the promise of its recent revolt against aristocratic authority, Protestant worship in America—its setting, its hymns, the style of its preachers, the way people responded to the preacher’s words—was definitively wrested from the control of elites who presided over the established churches and remolded in the image of the common people.

Preaching in the woods was not, of course, an invention of nineteenth-century American Protestantism. As the celebrated open-air preacher George Whitefield asked in 1749: “What do you think of Jesus Christ and his Apostles? Were they not Field-Preachers?” Open-air preaching is as old as evangelism itself, although it
did become an especially important practice in the transatlantic revivals of the eighteenth century. As early as 1739, Whitefield and John Wesley were saving souls in the fields rather than in churches. Following their lead, itinerant Methodist preachers in the British Isles traveled through city and country during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, evangelizing the urban working class and the rural poor in outdoor services. Field preaching traveled to the American colonies with Whitefield in 1740, and eventually, around 1800, the practice developed into the camp-meeting format characteristic of the Second Great Awakening. Held in forest clearings, these boisterous multiday and often multi-denominational affairs, attended by large crowds that camped on the meeting grounds and heard the services of any number of preachers, proved highly effective at evangelizing on the frontier. The nineteenth-century American camp meeting was part of a sweeping mobilization of people on both sides of the Atlantic in which vast populations, many of them existing on the economic and geographic fringes of society, found a voice in the enthusiastic expression of personal faith.

This voice was far from unified. It belonged to Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and many other sects both large and small. Both whites and African Americans participated in revivals, and many of the central actors in them were women. Scholars have argued that revivals fed popular resistance to the consumerist orientation of an expanding market economy, but they have also argued that revivalism instilled in the common people precisely the kind of middle-class morality that prepared them for participation in the market. Revivals were a leveling force that brought about the democratization of religion in early America, but they were also a repressive force that primed the masses for the discipline of the factory. There was, in short, no single direction to the transatlantic revivals. But what their participants did have in common, despite racial, gender, class, and sectarian differences, was a personal and passionate involvement in religion. Nowhere is this fact more apparent than in the nineteenth-century camp meeting. Regardless of how one understands its social and political significance, the camp meeting was a place where religion was experienced as ecstatic, emotional release. Above all, observers who witnessed these gatherings agreed on the overwhelming noise generated by the singing, shouting, and groaning of preachers and their enraptured audiences. For the champions of revivals, these sounds of the body signified an awakening to a new birth in Christ. For the many antirevivalists who made their opinions known, they were proof of the fanaticism that resulted when the practice of religion was put in the hands of the untutored mob.
Cole spent his life in the shadow of the religious revival. He was born in Bolton, Lancashire, in 1801, where Wesleyan Methodism was establishing a strong presence as the Industrial Revolution took hold during the early years of the nineteenth century. The Cole family emigrated to America in 1818, and although there were many aspects of British culture they left behind as they “bid a final adieu to England,” the revival was not among them. From 1819 until 1823, Cole lived with his family in eastern Ohio, an area rife with Methodist camp meetings. This evangelical fervor followed Cole back east in the early 1820s, as it spread into the same regions of western New York that inspired some of his early landscapes and continued to inspire him throughout his career. Indeed, the revivals raged with such intensity in this part of New York that it came to be known as the “burned-over district.” Is it any surprise, then, that revivalist preaching turns up at the top of the young landscape painter’s list of potential subjects in 1827?

The second item on the list continues with this theme: Cole envisions a “Camp Meeting at Night—a fire light & moonlight.” While no final version for either of the first two items on the list is currently known, Cole’s sketchbook does include a compositional study for the second (Plate 12). In this drawing, labeled “Camp Meeting,” small groups of observers stationed in the right and left foreground look out over a more-or-less typical setting for such a gathering: the tents of the revivalists ring the periphery of a clearing in the woods while two large fires illuminate the nocturnal scene. The composition is similar to other nineteenth-century views of the camp meeting, like an aquatint after a drawing by the French artist and naturalist Jacques Gérard Milbert, who encountered a Methodist camp meeting during his travels along the Hudson River in 1817 (Figure 4.8). In his published journal, Milbert describes the excited oratory of a preacher who is heard by a crowd of twelve to fifteen hundred, including women and girls “who believe they are inspired by the Holy Ghost, often utter cries that resound through the forest, roll in the dust, and beat their heads.” Milbert’s view, however, like Cole’s, plays down the bodily passions of the revival. Both artists accommodate the camp meeting to the conventions of picturesque landscape, framing it with trees and emphasizing the natural setting over the actions of the participants. In Cole’s view, a ridge of mountains, suggested by a rough, sloping curve just beneath the crescent moon, ties this scene of religious revivalism to the artist’s interest in the mountainous landscape of the Catskills and western New York.

The choice of subject is understandable: by all accounts, the camp meeting was a remarkable sight, especially at night. Frances Trollope, travelling in America in
1829, wrote of a meeting she observed in the backwoods of Indiana. Having arrived late at night with the moon “in meridian splendor above our heads,” she observes the crowd assembled before the preacher. “It is certain,” she writes, that the many fair young faces turned upward, and looking paler and lovelier as they met the moon-beams, the dark figures of the officials in the middle of the circle, the lurid glare thrown by the altar-fires on the woods beyond, did altogether produce a fine and solemn effect, that I shall not easily forget.
Cole may well have had similar memories of the picturesque camp meeting. It was a promising subject for a landscape painting, and one can’t help but wonder what he would have done with his “fire light & moonlight” in oils.

Although his sketch and his list of subjects suggest that, early in his career, Cole cultivated an interest in popular religion, it was an interest he never carried into a finished work of art. Perhaps the subject matter was too vulgar, too immediately caught up in the noisy religious fervor of the times for a landscape painter of Cole’s ambition. Vulgarity is, at least, what spoiled it for Trollope. While she admires the mysterious effects of the night-time scene, her reverie is soon broken by noises “discordant, harsh, and unnatural,” noises that “in a few moments chased every feeling derived from imagination, and furnished realities that could neither be mistaken or forgotten.”

Trollope goes on to describe a Bedlam of jerking preachers and maniacal crowds in language that enlists Milton and Dante for aid and is, as far as I am aware, unequalled in the literature on camp meetings for its condemnatory tone. And yet, however intense her personal horror may be, Trollope is sounding a note we hear regularly in accounts from the period, which habitually rehearse this disturbance of a picturesque view by a disconcerting irruption of noise. Another English traveller, Frederick Marryat, gives a similar account of an Ohio camp meeting witnessed on his tour of America in 1837. At first overtaken by the visual grandeur of the scene, the “snowy whiteness [of the tents] contrasting beautifully with the deep verdure and gloom of the forest,” Marryat is soon so shaken by the “groans, ejaculations, broken sobs, frantic motions, and convulsions” coming from the congregation that he retreats into the surrounding woods.

Cole’s suspicion of the democratic mob, evident throughout his writings, surely made him conscious of a tension between the silent, private experience of beauty enjoyed by the spectators in his drawing and the public cacophony of frontier religion. When it came to depicting the voice crying in the wilderness, Cole preferred biblical subjects over the camp meeting. Indeed, the third painting on his list is “Elijah in the Wilderness—Standing at the mouth of the Cave,” a study for which we have already encountered. For Cole, prophets like Elijah or John the Baptist were more suitable associations for a sublime landscape, and several years later, in 1835, when he expounded on the sublimity of American scenery, it was definitively the prophets he wanted his readers to hear:

Prophets of old retired into the solitudes of nature to wait the inspiration of heaven.

It was on Mount Horeb that Elijah witnessed the mighty wind, the earthquake, and
At the Mouth of the Cave

the fire; and heard the “still small voice”—that voice is YET heard among the mountains! St. John preached in the desert; the wilderness is YET a fitting place to speak of God.⁴⁹

It is important to our sense of the natural grandeur and moral profundity of Cole’s wilderness scenes that they are occupied by prophets like the one who harangues his audience in Landscape Composition, St. John in the Wilderness, not by the backwoods preachers of the artist’s own day (Figure 4.9).

But, if the sublimity of the subject and the exoticism of the palm-accented mountains in St. John in the Wilderness raise the sounds of revival above the mundane, this painting still has the capacity to place its viewers in the midst of popular religion in the 1820s. Cole painted it for Wadsworth in 1827, the same year he was sketching out ideas for camp-meeting scenes, and given Cole’s interest in popular religion at the time, it requires no stretch of the imagination to read the painting as a kind of biblical camp meeting. After all, the arrangement of figures in the composition looks like a camp meeting: the animated prophet stands on his rocky pulpit before an attentive audience, some of the figures enthusiastically throwing up their arms in gestures that echo those found in nineteenth-century depictions of camp meetings like Alexander Rider’s revivalist scene of about 1829 (Plate 13; Figure 4.10).⁵⁰ Rider’s image is suggestive simply in its attempt to capture some of the theatrics for which the revivalist movement was known: the swoons and gesticulations of the penitent and the shouts of the preacher who, in this case, leans into the podium, his eyes raised to the heavens and his arms in the air as his saving words ripple through the crowd. The difference of the revival in St. John in the Wilderness is that John’s audience does not only get religion; it gets nature too. As John extends one arm toward the crowd, the other points toward the cross and, beyond that, toward the distant cataract, a gesture that links his own cries in the wilderness to the voice of the landscape.

Many preachers of Cole’s day gestured right along with St. John toward the sublime. John’s voice resonates powerfully, for example, with that of the great prophet of the burned-over district, Charles Grandison Finney. Finney was a powerful speaker, a master of millennial rhetoric and also of parables. He was particularly fond of telling his “hearers”—as the audiences at camp meetings were commonly called—the parable of Niagara Falls. In this story, a man lost in reverie drifts toward the falls, unaware of the danger in which he places himself. Just as he is about to plunge over the edge, an observer lifts a “warning voice above the roar of the foaming waters, and cri[es] out, Stop,” a voice that “pierces
Figure 4.9. Thomas Cole, *Landscape, Composition, St. John in the Wilderness*, 1827. Oil on canvas, 91.4 × 73.5 cm. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut. Bequest of Daniel Wadsworth, 1848.16.
his ear, and breaks the charm that binds him.\footnote{The man thus realizes his predicament, and he is saved.} The parable answers a question: What must I do to be saved? The answer: as a sinner, I must listen and be responsive to the voice of the preacher. The parable is instructive not only for the importance it places on the preacher’s voice but also for the way in which it compares that voice to the “roar of the foaming waters,” as if this were the true test for the preacher, to measure up to the roar of Niagara Falls.

While Finney and Cole both link the preacher’s voice to the waterfall, even more frequently it is the shouting of the multitudes that Cole’s contemporaries likened to the sound of vast cataracts.\footnote{One observer at the Cane Ridge revival recounts: “A vast crowd, supposed by some to have amounted to twenty-five thousand, was collected together. The noise was like the roar of Niagara.”} It was due to such associations that Niagara became a popular site for revivalists throughout the nineteenth century. In his account of a visit in 1835, the Baptist minister Francis Cox expounds on the need to describe the sublimity of the falls that is felt...
by every writer who has witnessed “the woods, the rapids, and the cataracts, and heard the thunder blending its awful voice with the everlasting dash and rattle and roar of the gathering waters as they fret and foam and rage in convulsive agony.” But no, Cox protests: “I shall not attempt it. Let imagination supply the place of description.” And so, rather than dwelling further on sublime Niagara, he proceeds into an extended account of a Methodist camp meeting “held in the woods, about half a mile from the Falls.”

Revivalism, in short, went hand in hand with the cult of nature, which helps to explain why the subject of the revival posed a certain attraction to a worshiper of nature like Cole. It also helps to explain how the sounds of Cole’s Kaaterskill Falls mingle with those of the revival. As we listen to Cole’s landscape, as the turbulence of the cataract insists on our bodily presence in the foreground despite the attraction of the distant prospect, we experience a disruption similar to that experienced by observers of the camp meeting like Trollope and Marryat. We are called back to our bodies by a voice that exceeds the view given to our eyes, a voice through which we come to understand, in a visceral way, why Samuel Monk, in his classic study on the sublime, describes its embrace of emotion as “a sort of Methodist revival in art.”

I do not, however, wish to press too hard on the link between religious revivalism and Cole’s sublime landscapes of the 1820s. The Second Great Awakening certainly does not explain these early landscapes. St. John is not, finally, Charles Grandison Finney, and the landscape in which he preaches is decidedly not western New York. It is also important to remember that the nature-worshiping artist and the penitent sinner represented two very different spiritual camps in the early nineteenth century. The cult of nature found its members among the refined and educated; in Perry Miller’s words, it was a religion of “Nature spelled with a capital N, which Cooper celebrated, Thomas Cole painted,” and to which an elite “fled for relief from the din of the revival.” The revival, in contrast, emerged by and large out of populations that had gained little from the expanding markets of the early republic, and its loudness was a crucial sensory means of constituting class hierarchies in early America. It was against the intolerable noise and unrestrained bodies of evangelicals that quiet nature-worshippers could invent their own habits of composed reverence. “Compared with almost any chapter in the history of Protestantism,” writes Miller, the Second Great Awakening “is vulgar, noisy, ignorant, blatant.”

Yet it is difficult to make definitive statements about Cole’s attitude toward revivalism or his position within the religious landscape of the early nineteenth
century. Alan Wallach has stressed the importance of the “dissenting tradition” for Cole, which the artist inherited from a strong culture of religious dissent in his native Lancashire. Popular works like *The Voyage of Life*, which was aimed at a broad audience familiar with an emblematic tradition that dates back to the seventeenth century and was associated with dissent, support Wallach’s claim that Cole was “inclined to low-church evangelism.” Such leanings could help to explain why, when Cole wrote up his 1827 list of ideas for paintings, his thoughts immediately turned to a subject like the camp meeting. But, while the visual conventions of the dissenting tradition helped to shape Cole as an artist, “dissent” as such is not a term with much purchase in describing the notoriously complicated history of evangelical Protestantism in the early nineteenth century. Even within this movement, there were major divisions, particularly between the middle-class Finneyites, who were mostly Presbyterians and Congregationalists, and the other large, populist evangelical churches like Methodists and Baptists, whose members existed closer to the margins of the market revolution.

Cole, whose writings are unhelpful on the topic of his religious beliefs, is difficult to locate within this maze of religion and social class. While he may have inclined to a low-church evangelism, his early patrons hailed primarily from the Federalist aristocracy. As Wallach has argued, Cole’s identity was definitively shaped by the English class system: although he came from middle-class origins in the industrial region of Lancashire, a fear of sliding into the working class instilled in him a sense of his own moral superiority and gentlemanly status that naturally allied him with patrons like Trumbull and Wadsworth. The extent to which he “shared the aristocracy’s political and social conservatism” is evident in his disdain for unrestrained public displays of populist political sentiment. In a journal entry from November 1834, he recounts being interrupted during a tranquil walk with companions through a favorite dell, as his party gathered mosses and noted the beautiful play of light through the trees: “While we were in the valley we heard the shouts of a company of Jacksonians who were rejoicing at the defeat of the Whigs of this county. Why were they rejoicing? because of the triumph of good principles of the cause of virtue & morality? No! but because *their party* was victorious!” We have no direct commentary from Cole on the religious revivals of his day, but his attitude toward noisy Jacksonians, which echoes that of Trollope and Marryat toward the discordant sounds of the camp meeting, makes it easy to imagine him being repelled by the democratic, everyone-can-be-saved spirit of frontier religion.
Cole’s religious commitments did become more defined in the 1830s, when he became an active member of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Catskill. The Episcopal Church of the United States during this period was divided into two parties: the Evangelical or Low Church party, and the High Church party, which found in the distinctiveness of the Anglican tradition an alternative to the widespread Protestant revivalism of the period. In 1842, Cole more clearly identified himself with this antirevivalist faction when he was baptized by his friend Louis Legrand Noble, an Episcopal priest and later Cole’s biographer. Noble’s biography of Cole, published in 1853, was important for securing a legacy for the artist consistent with the self-image of quiet gentility that he increasingly sought in the 1840s. Describing the young Cole painting landscapes in a narrow garret in his father’s house in 1825, Noble writes that “a light flowed out upon his canvass from the silent cave of his thought.” In 1853, we are indeed a long way from the noisy cave of 1826, when Cole was still actively negotiating the radically uncertain boundaries of landscape painting and popular religion.

The emblematic image for this quiet and contemplative Cole, a landscape painter now fully awakened to the mood of modern art, is Asher B. Durand’s Kindred Spirits (Plate 14). In this painting, completed in 1849, Cole, who had died the previous year, stands on a rocky precipice alongside his friend William Cullen Bryant—their two names are engraved on the trunk of a tree in the left foreground—as the painter and poet converse about the expansive view of Kaaterskill Clove that stretches out into the infinite distance beyond them. The painting’s Catskill scenery makes direct reference to the landscapes with which Cole had first achieved fame, and indeed, the very falls that dominate the foreground in the 1826 painting appear in Durand’s picture as a small silvery band in the distance. The inspiration for Kindred Spirits was Bryant’s funeral oration occasioned by the death of his friend and delivered before the National Academy of Design in 1848. The title of Durand’s painting, however, refers not only to the sympathetic bond between two men; it refers to the sister arts of painting and poetry, a theme Bryant stresses in his eulogy when he describes Cole’s Voyage of Life, for example, as “a perfect poem.” Durand links the “solitary song” of Kaaterskill Falls to the refined sounds of music and poetry through the figure of Cole himself, who directs our eyes toward the falls with the recorder he holds in his right hand. As our eyes follow Cole’s instrument into the soft, hazy distance of the clove, the gentle strains of Durand’s brush seem far removed from the harsh sounds of the camp meeting. This is not because the camp meeting was no longer
an important feature of the American religious landscape in 1849; it is because the respectable sublimity evoked by mid-century Hudson River landscapes has muted any traces of it. Durand’s invocation of the Horatian discourse of *ut pictura poesis* domesticates the turgid waters of Cole’s earlier painting. From our elevated perspective, we look out on the Catskills with Cole and Bryant and, at this optical distance, free from any disruptions, come to a poetic comprehension of the American landscape.

When considered alongside Durand’s posthumous tribute, the painting Cole made for Wadsworth in 1826 reverberates all the more emphatically with the sounds of the revival. But as we have seen, even though the camp meeting topped Cole’s list of ideas for paintings in 1827, it was never a subject he was prepared to embrace in all of its auditory excess. My appeal to nineteenth-century revivalism as a context for Cole’s early landscape is not meant to add up to an accounting for *Kaaterskill Falls*. Cole’s painting stages a fraught relationship between the viewer’s sensory response to his art and the historical conditions from which that art emerged, and I have tried to explicate that relationship, not to resolve it. I conclude, therefore, on a note of ambivalence, with the contention that the sound of Cole’s *Kaaterskill Falls* both is and is not the sound of the camp meeting; in this painting, we find historical context and we lose it. The novelty of *Kaaterskill Falls*, its ingenuity and creative work, lies in its transformation of popular religious experience in the 1820s into aesthetic experience. Cole recuperates the revival for the project of landscape painting, transposing the shouts of the preacher into the voice of the landscape, but at the same time, he keeps the revival before us by making its sensory excess part of our experience of the picture. To what extent does such an art belong to a history from which it would unburden itself? As we survey the work of Thomas Cole from art history’s alpine perch, this is the question *Kaaterskill Falls* leaves ringing in our ears.