**Romantic Nature**

“If the fields and vineyards are less cultivated, and if there are fewer towns and houses, there is also more natural greenery, more meadows, grove-shaded retreats, more frequent contrasts, and more variety in the terrain. As there are no large thoroughfares suitable for coaches on these happy shores, the countryside is seldom frequented by travelers; but it is interesting for solitary contemplators who like to delight in the charms of nature at leisure and collect their thoughts in a silence troubled by no noise other that the cry of eagles, the intermittent chirping of a few birds, and the rushing torrents as they fall from the mountain.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau (c. 1775)

I chose Rousseau because he addressed the philosophical pull of a generation as they moved toward transformation. With these words and similar sentiments, he formulated a concept which had been floating like the smoke left behind in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. First felt by those smog saturated city dwellers, these ideas would spread to inspire all manner of men.

The Age of Enlightenment had fostered a deeper understanding of the natural world, proving there was an underlying mathematical structure which unified a previously random wilderness. Coupled with a growing discontent for the social and physical restrictions of civilization, this new knowledge empowered a radical restructuring in attitudes toward wide open spaces. The same deep dark woods that once inspired visions of wild beasts now offered an escape from claustrophobic urban existence; “Appreciation of the wilderness began in the cities. The literary gentleman wielding a pen, not the pioneer with his axe, made the first gestures of resistance against the strong currents of antipathy.”

Artists of the Romantic Movement gave voice and vision to this premise. A new principle developed, that of the Sublime. Though pastoral farmland was pleasingly green, it failed to stimulate an impression of the awesome power of nature. For this the Romantics required storms, crashing waves and rugged untraveled peaks. In the text, Nash quotes Thaddeus Harris; “’The Sublime in nature … captivates while it awes, and charms while it elevates and expands the soul.” These two incarnations of nature inspired dissimilar emotions, one offered comfort, the other reveled in exposure. As Nash points out, the same Romantics who championed a return to magnificent, untouched wilderness unabashedly fled for civilization in the face of true peril.

Prior to the eighteenth century, inspiration in the form of natural beauty was an unexplored theme to western society. In the century that followed, many sought to a way to adequately encompass their experience. They felt a spiritual resonance in the vast expanse of wilderness and began to interpret that connection as divine. The creed of Deism arose in response, situated around a benevolent Creator who ordered the universe and formed the Earth; “…they accorded wilderness, as pure nature, special importance as the clearest medium through which God showed His power and Excellency.” This new doctrine challenged the anthropocentric servitude imposed upon the natural world by Judeo-Christian traditions, suggesting instead a coequal existence with other organisms.