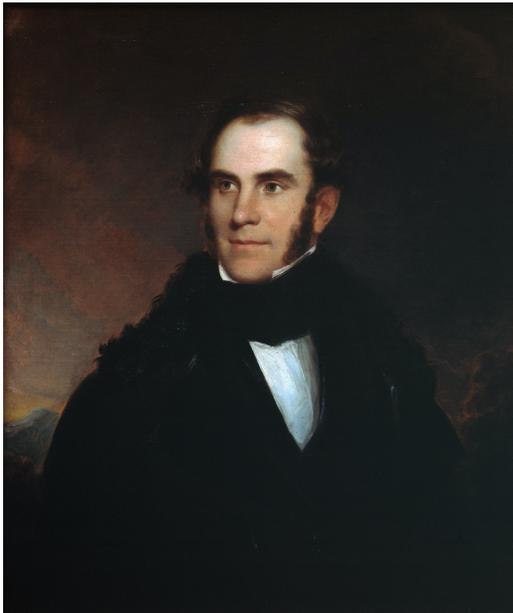


## *Thomas Cole and Transcendentalism*

By Owen Embury '24

As the climate crisis continues to progress, governments, entrepreneurs, and members of the public have engaged in a monumental sunk cost fallacy trying to push industrialization forward to solve the problems it has created. Possible solutions to some of these environmental issues, such as sheep grazing, have roots deep in the history of nature and our society. Since the inception of the Industrial Revolution, scholars, poets, and artists have rallied against the tide of Industry. In the 19th century, the most vocal and influential were the Transcendentalists, led by figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Transcendentalism, an ideology created here in Massachusetts, is built on the ideas of a harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature that prioritizes individuals without removing them from industrialization completely.



During the early 19th century, America was expanding geographically and industrially at a rapid pace that greatly altered the rural identity it was founded upon. Even after declaring independence from the British, Thomas Jefferson saw the ideal America as one whose citizens were engaged with agriculture. These ‘Gentlemen Farmers’ would tend to the land and prioritize farming, animal husbandry, and craft while relying

on England to supply industrial goods. In his *Notes on Virginia*, he writes, “While we have land to labour then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a workbench,

or twirling a distaff. Carpenters, masons, smiths are wanted in husbandry; but for the general manufacture, let our workshops remain in Europe.”<sup>1</sup> This ideal would soon dissipate in the 1830’s as mills, factories, and elaborate railroad infrastructure followed a population boom that more than doubled the population in 1800. The natural resources needed to fuel this expansion taxed America’s landscape, eliciting protests from authors and artists. The Transcendentalists had concerns about the razing of forests and hillsides, and they questioned the effects of this wanton destruction and push towards progress on the individual’s secular and spiritual life. In Henry David Thoreau’s *Where I Lived, and What I Lived For*, he writes,

“Men think that it is essential that the *Nation* have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour, without a doubt, whether *they* do or not; but whether we should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain. If we do not get out sleepers, and forge rails, and devote days and nights to the work, but go to tinkering upon our *lives* to improve *them*, who will build railroads? But if we stay home and mind our business, who will want railroads? We do not ride the railroad; it rides upon us.”<sup>2</sup>

A similar sentiment can be found in the art movements of the time. Thomas Cole was a leader in landscape painting and considered the father of the Hudson River School. Cole’s series, *The Course of Empire*, painted from 1833 to 1836, depicts the rise and fall of a fictional empire as it drifts farther from its early pastoral roots. Cole, who had recently gained American citizenship, made numerous trips to his home country of England where he witnessed the environmental and social strain of the

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Birney Vickery, *Landscape and Infrastructure: Reimagining the Pastoral Paradigm for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020) 74-75.

<sup>2</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Where I Lived and What I Lived For* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006) 70.

Industrial Revolution.<sup>3</sup> The most idyllic stage that Cole depicts is the second, *Arcadian or Pastoral State* in which the people of the first painting have settled into a stable village. A myriad of scenes unfolds across the lush green landscape, depicting a wide variety of characters at rest. Although humans are shown throughout the painting reaping resources from the land, their actions are counterbalanced by the roaming wildlife and their minute role in the natural order is affirmed by the mountains that dominate the background. This balanced environment is best seen through the vignette of the shepherd in the foreground of the painting. The relationship between a shepherd and their flock is a mutually beneficial relationship as they both directly and indirectly depend on each other for survival. Cole expressly depicts the relationship as non-exploitative through his inclusion of the clashing rams; a display that establishes the natural order of the flock without the influence of man. In the middle ground of the painting, Cole includes a megalithic structure, a reference to Stonehenge directly relating the series to the development of English society and their disconnection from their cultural roots.<sup>4</sup>

As we continue to look for solutions to the growing climate crisis, we cannot only look forward. Everyday we are presented with the choice to live a more harmonious life with less of what we have come to believe is essential. The first, immediate step we can take is allowing nature to assume the roles we have replaced with technology. In the case of sheep they can mow and fertilize the lawns which feed them. This balance connects our day-to-day tasks to nature, making us a cohesive part of it.

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser and Tim Barringer, *Thomas Cole's Journey: Atlantic Crossings* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018) 204-205.

<sup>4</sup>Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser and Tim Barringer, *Thomas Cole's Journey: Atlantic Crossings* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018) 208-209.



Thomas Cole, *The Arcadian or Pastoral State*, 1834, Metropolitan Museum of Art

