

common observations

timothy dwight's

travels in new england and new york

timothy b. spears

“There are no books,” Robert Beverley wrote in 1705, “so stuffed with Poetical Stories, as Voyages; and the more distant the countries lie, which they pretend to describe, the greater License those priviledg’d Authors take, in imposing upon the world.”¹ So Beverley prefaced *The History and Present State of Virginia* with a disclaimer characteristic of early American histories and travel narratives while he promised to reveal the true America. Throughout the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, writers such as Jefferson and de Crevecoeur followed Beverley’s example and, contesting the European lies of their times, affirmed America’s exceptional origins, resources and prospects. One traveler, a patriotic New Yorker named Christian Schultz, published *Travels on an Inland Voyage* in 1810 to refute the “mistakes, misrepresentations and fictions” of a narrative by Englishman Thomas Ash. Schultz revised Ash’s embellished description of a trip over Letart’s Falls on the Ohio River by returning the Falls to their proper location—ninety-six miles from where Ash had placed them—and undermining the melodrama of the tale. The waterfall was not a dangerous cataract, Schultz protested, but a mere ripple which “every boy in the neighborhood would delight to pass in a tub.”² Fiercely, if somewhat humorously, Schultz mapped the topographic features of a new nation and stressed the importance of seeing it correctly.

American observers of the late-eighteenth-century landscape shared a way of seeing, a discourse of perception that masked regional and political

differences. Common observations showed a common landscape, a common social purpose and a common future.

Of all these observers, Timothy Dwight may well be the most searching. As a poet Dwight never earned canonical status, nor as a Federalist clergyman did he play the dramatic historical role Perry Miller ascribed to his Puritan ancestors.³ But as a traveler and author of detailed observations of a rapidly growing country, Dwight earns respect. For glimpses of the emerging built landscape or an understanding of the shifting New England ecosystem—and more—scholars depend on his *Travels in New England and New York*.⁴ However, Dwight's depiction of the early American landscape is by no means complete. "Clear and emphatic where New England was in discussion," Henry Adams noted, "Dwight claimed no knowledge of other regions."⁵ Indeed, the omissions in Dwight's great travel record underscore the historical changes that marked an age of expansion.

Dwight's vision rested on a faith in America's millennial future. During the various journeys he made between the years 1795 and 1816, he thrilled to the sight of well-ordered communities. He hardly cared that America lacked "ancient castles, ruined abbeys, and fine pictures"—sights European travelers loved to see. Instead, he noted their absence to emphasize a "novelty" in world history, the "conversion" of a wilderness.⁶ In his *Travels*, Dwight paused to admire nature's sublime beauty, but he stressed its conversion above all else. "The colonization of a wilderness by civilized men, where a regular government, mild manners, arts, learning, science, and Christianity have been interwoven in its progress from the beginning," Dwight wrote, "is a state of things of which the eastern continent and records of past ages furnish neither an example, nor a resemblance."⁷

Refuting inaccurate portrayals of America and charting the progress of this unprecedented experiment required skilled observation. Where others failed to see the deliberate and ordered shape of the land, Dwight detected God's providential hand and the continuing vitality of the New England community ideal. To this ideal he remained utterly faithful and recorded its progress wherever he could. But where sober, republican values did not take hold or where the natural scenery evaded his measured aesthetic tastes, Dwight cursed the slipshod development and lamented the absence of familiar landmarks. Amid the restlessness and aggressiveness that characterized what John Higham has called a "spirit of boundlessness," Dwight was uncomfortable.⁸ He resisted the Jacksonian Era's individualistic ethos and the pushing, uncontrolled settlement of the frontier. His provenance was the New England town common, the church, or the halls of Yale College. On the ragged edges of civilization, Dwight struggled to maintain the boundaries of perception that New Englanders of a later age—Transcendentalists and Luminists—tried to see beyond. In an era

fast becoming a rebuke to Puritan discipline and eunomic space, Dwight's meditations on the landscapes of New England and New York exemplify the play of forces that moved America from the Age of Edwards to that of Emerson.

i

Ironically, Timothy Dwight had poor eyesight. He spent the last forty years of his life reading in fifteen minute bursts, suffering painful headaches and dictating to amanuenses. As a young tutor at Yale, he nearly died from studying too much and eating too little. Although his family nursed him back to health, the long hours of reading in poor light, often by candle, had taken their toll. Unable to read as he once had, Dwight committed his learning to memory and became an avid scrutinizer of the American scene.⁹

In 1816, shortly before he died, Dwight referred to the physical condition that had plagued him his entire adult life. At the outset of a short essay called "On Light," addressed to his colleagues in the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, he wrote:

It is known to most of the gentlemen, who usually assemble at our meetings, that my eyes have long been weak. In some respects, the disease, with which they are affected is perhaps peculiar. At least I have never seen some of the effects, which it produces, described in any publication. As they seem to me to elucidate, in a degree, the nature of light; I beg leave, through your good offices, to communicate this paper to the Academy.¹⁰

Dwight's investigation "On Light" proceeds in the Lockean empirical tradition. Experience and observation shape Dwight's methods and guide his reasoning. After much probing, he concludes that "light is matter, and not a quality of matter," the pressure of which on the optic nerve produces "the sensation of luminousness." Light rays produce "different impressions of colour" not according to inherent features but to their respective weights and pressures on the optic nerve. Thus Dwight locates external causes for his innate condition and, more importantly, internalizes the process of perception so that all appearances "denoted by the word, *VISIBLE*, are inherent in the nature of the Optic nerve; and not in the nature of light; nor in the nature of the objects."¹¹

"On Light" hardly offered a new subject to American readers familiar with Newton, Locke, Hume, or any of the Scottish Common Sense philosophers. Amid the eighteenth-century controversies over the origin of ideas, British empiricists not only devoted much of their energy to explain-

ing the mechanics of sensation, but they also relied heavily on the rhetoric of sensation—especially sight—to illustrate epistemological processes. The mind's apprehension of knowledge, Locke had written in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, is "most aptly explained by words relating to the sight." Perception forms the basis of Locke's theory, and light, the metaphorical equivalent of the mind's language. For while the mind "perceives the truth, as the eye doth light," on "the dark side" of the mind, ignorance rules.¹² Thomas Reid's 1764 "common sense" rebuttal of Hume's subjective skepticism offers an even stronger confirmation of the eye's significance. The Scottish professor declared in his *Inquiry Into The Human Mind* that sight was the "noblest" of the five senses. "The rays of light, which minister to this sense, and of which, without it, we could never have had the least conception, are the most wonderful part of the inanimate creation." Going far beyond Locke in his willingness to make nature the instructor of man, Reid unabashedly granted vision a providential purpose. "Yea," he exulted, "we are wont to express the manner of the divine knowledge by seeing, as that kind of knowledge which is most perfect in us."¹³

In America, the rhetoric of vision and light acquired a greater urgency. New Englanders had long understood the spiritual significance of vision, and would continue to do so into the nineteenth century when Emerson celebrated the eye/I, and Luminist painters gave American light a spiritual, New World quality.¹⁴ In early American writing, in Puritan sermons and colonial literature, light emanates and re-emanates, figuratively and literally, as a gift from God. As a clergyman and grandson of Jonathan Edwards, Dwight needed little reminder that the regenerate Christian experiences God's grace as light, immediately and spontaneously. And as a New Englander and a supporter of agrarian ways, Dwight understood the practical importance of light. The play of light across cleared land and well-plowed fields betokened good harvests and accounted for the "smiling" face of nature—the sign of God's approval.¹⁵ Although Locke and the empiricists who followed him articulated the mechanics of perception, the source—and the inspiration—for Dwight's understanding of vision came from New England.

Yet Dwight was no transcendentalist. Pervading his notion of observation was a commitment to shared principles that left little room for Romantic, individual vision. Closer to Adam Smith in this regard than to Emerson—that is, the Smith of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*—Dwight preferred the harmony of acknowledged social sympathy to the "occult relation between man and vegetable" that characterized the transcendentalist moment.¹⁶ He agreed in effect to Smith's proposition that solitary existence leaves man without any understanding of propriety, conduct and beauty. But bring man into society, "and he is immediately provided with the mirror which he wanted before. It is placed in the countenance and

behaviour of those he lives with . . . and it is here that he first views the propriety of and impropriety of his own passions."¹⁷ Smith's mirror of social restraint requiring every citizen to watch his own actions through the eyes of others makes observation the foundation of a moral, well-ordered community. Given these mechanics, and a devotion to Jonathan Edwards' spiritual order, Dwight promoted a visual attentiveness which safeguarded virtuous conduct.

A sense of moral empiricism pervades even the etymology of "observation." In 1828, Noah Webster defined it as "the act of seeing or of fixing the mind on any thing." This process of seeing and thinking brings Webster's definition closer in meaning to "observance," which the *Oxford English Dictionary* calls the act of "observing, keeping or paying attention" to a "law, command, duty, ceremony, set time, or anything prescribed or fixed."¹⁸ It is this understanding of the word that Dwight stressed in the *Travels*—a thinking process which, in a steady, methodical, even ritualistic fashion, led him from specific, discernible aspects of the landscape to broader, universal laws.

Dwight hoped for the same perspicacity from his fellow citizens. Well before he embarked upon the trips described in *Travels in New England and New York*, he schooled a Connecticut audience on the national cultural significance of careful observation. Written wisdom is valuable, he suggested in a 1786 article published by *The New Haven Gazette and Connecticut Magazine*, "yet from real life almost all valuable observations concerning the conduct of life are drawn." Dwight chided American writers for depending on the essays of Addison or Johnson for truths when America offered a "boundless" assortment of "pleasing and important" topics. Books were not enough: "men must have seen the original, before they will be much pleased with the copy."¹⁹ In urging his readers to go out and see their country—not just to look at it, but to observe it—Dwight addressed the relationship between sight and millennialism that shapes the *Travels*. Dwight challenged his readers to believe in America's exceptional destiny—by looking. And he encouraged them to develop their observational skills—by discriminating. Observation can build nations, Dwight suggested, when proper, civil conduct accompanies careful observation.

In the *Travels*, Dwight accentuated the importance of close observation by distinguishing it from vague aestheticism. True observation is not for those aspirants to taste and understanding who are unwilling "to take the trouble of examining." Such persons "busy themselves only with general principles" and their descriptions resemble "the last impressions of a copperplate, when the lines are so worn out as to be scarcely distinguishable, or a painting seen at the opposite end of a long gallery, or a landscape presented to the eye in a misty morning." Praising the curious investigator's refusal to let general ideas "sit loosely on the mind" untested

by specific inquiry, Dwight emphasized the importance of seeing—and thinking.²⁰ “Appearance only” yields superficial knowledge. To see things as “they are” rather than “what they appear to be” constitutes a task “of importance inestimable.”²¹

As Dwight’s narrative makes clear, to go beyond mere appearances is to alternate broad and particular views, to combine specific and general analysis and to pay close attention to timing. A country growing as rapidly as New England must “be described in a manner resembling that in which a painter would depict a cloud,” he argued. “The forms and colors of the moment must be seized, or the picture will be erroneous.”²² At once “comprehensive and minute,” Dwight’s vision in *The Travels* thus ranges far and wide, framing painterly views from hillsides and focusing microscopic attention on soil.²³ Following New England’s growth, and indeed celebrating it, led Dwight to describe dozens of cultivated farms and neatly ordered villages surrounded by a variety of nature “derived from heaven.”²⁴ And if the marks of civilization were “obviously wanted,” as they were on his visit to Lake George in 1802, Dwight often returned later as he did in 1811, to ask if mankind had “ever seen so large a tract changed so suddenly from a wilderness into a well-inhabited and well-cultivated country?”²⁵ The same observation that guided his examination of stagnant pond water brought him back to Lake George for a second look—to record the change. Both “alternate process[es]” of examination and re-examination—one broad, the other microscopic—grew out of his belief that observation reveals governing principles.²⁶

Dwight’s notion of observation owes much to Locke. His peripatetic attempts to substantiate ideas through particular facts, to find agreement among diverse examples and to gain knowledge through perception helped him reason more generally about the nature of New England and America. His familiarity with science reinforced his empirical method; he could reason by “pure Baconian induction.”²⁷ In the terms he adopted in an 1816 essay called “Observations of Language,” Dwight acknowledged the empirical, if not Lockean roots of his methods. To observe is finally to derive complex ideas, “partly acquired from objects, presented to us in nature,” partly obtained by “the three processes of Composition, Abstraction, and Comparison,” he wrote. The distinction between complex and simple ideas, of course, belongs to Locke, but in applying it to the American landscape, Dwight endeavored to make it his own.²⁸

Dwight’s search for signs of God in a land “derived from heaven” distinguishes him from Locke or Smith and gives his empirical investigations a distinctly American thrust. A wholehearted belief in America’s divine chosenness shaped his observations and conclusions. By scientific or philosophical standards, Dwight hardly qualified as a detached observer. As Dwight’s friend Benjamin Silliman noted after his death, he was not a “professed naturalist.” Although “much attached to agriculture and horti-

culture” and extensively acquainted with “the history of the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms,” Dwight ultimately referred to the laws of nature as “the ordinances of heaven.” He “considered this language as being more accurate, more beautiful, and more reverential to the great author of nature.”²⁹

So Dwight’s observations charted the history of what Jonathan Edwards called God’s “work of redemption.” The course of this history was clear. It was revealed in the social landscape spreading out beyond New England, in close-knit, spatially ordered villages that, seen over time, paralleled the growth of the striving soul. In this developing landscape, Dwight searched for the outward signs of grace. Figuratively, if not literally, light signified redemption’s progress for the nation and its individuals. Measured by historical time, grace has its “ups and downs,” Edwards wrote in *A History Of The Work Of Redemption*. Sometimes, “the light shines brighter, and sometimes it is a dark time; sometimes grace seems to prevail, at other times it seems to languish for a great while together, and corruption prevails, and then grace revives again. But in general, grace is growing.”³⁰ For Edwards—and Dwight—faith in divinely sanctioned history preceded any empirical investigation and shaped its outcome. Dwight never questioned the outcome of this providential history however halting or lacking its progress seemed. Within the individual and across the landscape, light would grow, meet and spread together in correspondence with and as a sign of God’s work of redemption in America. In the context of Puritanism, and especially Jonathan Edwards’ theology, Dwight’s spiritual vision superceded his poor eyesight. His effort to foster careful observation among his fellow citizens—and practice it himself—became his “humble attempt” to unite a nation under shared vision.

Thus while Dwight addressed matters of taste and judgment in language exemplifying his awareness of eighteenth-century aesthetics, he examined the American scene for the agreement and utility Jonathan Edwards called “the image of resemblance which secondary beauty has of true spiritual beauty.”³¹ Dwight acknowledged nature’s metaphoric power, its ability to add “not a little splendor to the similes” of poets.³² And attesting to its tremendous effect on his own fancy when he visited Cape Cod, he described “the variety and wildness of the forms” on the beach as “novel, sublime, and more interesting than can be imagined.” Following Edmund Burke, he honored nature’s sublime effects and their divine origins, but felt “forbidden” from such scenes; chaotic beaches, tremendous cataracts, and gloomy mountain notches were ultimately regions where “no human being could dwell.”³³ There, he failed to find visible signs of the orderly, social development he envisioned for the nation.

Dwight’s unease in wild, abandoned places epitomizes an imagination that operated more typographically than romantically, more objectively than subjectively. Above all, it demonstrates an imagination focused on

nature's progressive conversion. Not wilderness, but landscape—land shaped by man—commanded Dwight's imagination and elicited his constant attention. Unlike Emerson who exulted in nature's antinomian spirit or Melville who explored its terrible ambiguities or painters such as Heade who made peace with nature's intractable, unrevealing presence, Dwight saw in its well-ordered development the reflection of his own disciplined mind.³⁴ But when he did not, when in dark, deserted places he glimpsed a chaos apart from his New England ideal and felt "forbidden," he exemplified, however unwittingly, the differences between his eighteenth-century, Puritan view of the wilderness and the emerging romantic vision of boundlessness. With Thoreau's 1864 observation—that "a howling wilderness does not howl: it is the imagination of the traveller that does the howling"—he would never have agreed.³⁵ For Dwight, a product of the Puritan tradition, knowledge inhered in the objective truths revealed by God, while the imagination, as his grandfather had reminded all of New England, remained "the Devil's grand Lurking-place."³⁶ Uncontrolled, the imagination, like the unbounded forest, could be a place of darkness.

ii

Surrounded by rolling hills, half-cleared forest and arable soil, Dwight could easily contemplate the perpetuation of the New England way. The rude wilderness would be dressed, brought to heel, made to order; it would be bounded and in its stead would rise a commonwealth knit together by public worship and blessed by God. At these moments, when Dwight pauses in his *Travels* to gaze upon the improved land—or simply to imagine it—his millennial vision seems most clear. Boundaries, physical or otherwise, order Dwight's ideal America.

In looking back on the measured conversion that had made New England a land of neat, tidy villages, Dwight did not wonder at the pittance the settlers paid the Indians for their land. The purchased land represented but "a mere speck in a boundless forest . . . too abundant to become the subject of price." Only labor could give the land value.³⁷ Ownership, moreover, conferred permanent residence and separated improved land from the boundless wilderness. Private property, equally distributed among industrious landowners, contributed to the region's dignity and beauty. Pretentious villas or vast landholdings, however, undermined this balance and encouraged coarseness as much as unimproved wilderness did. Shaping Dwight's visual descriptions of New England—and absent in the borderless world inhabited by Indians—were the principles of a self-governed society.

Cleared land, useful employment, private ownership, gradual improvements and of course, religion—the "great hinges" from which society hangs—prove the key elements in Dwight's harmonious society. Espe-

cially in Connecticut, his home, where the legislature continued to establish public worship, these aspects came together in “one view,” as “part of a single design.” Connecticut’s support of public worship provided the foundation for the sort of social cohesion described by Adam Smith, while the ability of its “ecclesiastical societies” to levy taxes and manage property guaranteed more than material advantages. Inextricably linked, the spiritual and material landscapes struck Dwight as parts of the same picture. Castigating those who would oppose public worship, and choose not to pay for or use its benefits, Dwight argued that roads, schools and bridges, like religion, contribute to society’s overall happiness and that without them, men “would be hermits and savages,” solitary agents loose from the guiding influences of society. Between savagery and civilization, religion proved the difference. With its loss, Dwight stressed, “the ultimate foundation of confidence is blown up; and the security of life, liberty, and property buried in the ruins.”³⁸

While Dwight learned from Locke’s *Treatises On Government* that liberty grows out of private ownership, he enlarged the equation by giving property rights a Calvinist base.³⁹ So Dwight sharply condemned land jobbers as gamblers who believed that wealth “may be amassed at a stroke, without industry or economy, by mere luck, or the energy of superior talents for business” and castigated peddlers and other economic adventurers for similar sins. The hustlers he met on his journeys—land speculators, absentee landlords, petty traders—were not discerning travelers like Dwight, but “mere wanderers, accustomed to no order, control, or worship.”⁴⁰ They possessed little understanding of what, in Dwight’s terms, civilized living requires, nor did they engage in the sort of careful examination of the American scene practiced by disciplined observers. For their livings they depended on luck, betting that divine providence would boost the value of their property and send them quick profits. Leaving their futures to chance, they lived Godless lives. Their liberty was immoral, based not on steady work and long-term property holdings, but on boundless freedom. They never realized, as Dwight told the senior class at Yale in 1814, that the millennium was coming by “degrees” through large-scale improvements on the land.⁴¹

In New England, signs of moral living were common. Opulent estates and villas—subjects of special interest to European travelers—did not impress Dwight as much as a field “dressed” with manure or a stone enclosure. The beauty of these familiar sights arose “from the fitness of means to their ends.” They constituted the “different degrees of improvement” signifying a community’s prosperity and cohesion. Moreover, improvements such as the enclosures Dwight observed in Worcester County, Massachusetts revealed a “farm well surrounded and divided” and reflected “the image of tidy, skillful, profitable agriculture.”⁴² In the movement from objective reality to “image,” Dwight summoned an ideal that exem-

plified the triumph of order over boundlessness and, over and beyond the difficulties he may have actually had seeing the landscape, lucidly revealed the nation's future.

New England's neat, tidy villages symbolized this harmonious future, and Dwight devoted countless passages in *Travels in New England and New York* to the celebration of their virtues. It was not enough, however, for Dwight to describe these places as he saw them. He presented an attentive observer who, much like the "impartial spectator" Adam Smith created for his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, serves as his author's surrogate conscience. Only Dwight's spectator is a traveler who considers New England's many glories.

With these objects in contemplation, a traveler passing through the countries which I have described, surveying the scenes which they everywhere present to his eye, and remembering within how short a period and amid how many difficulties they have been raised up in a howling wilderness, will think it no extravagance of imagination to believe that throughout this vast empire, villages innumerable will everywhere speedily adorn its surface with the same beauty and cheerfulness which he beholds around him.⁴³

In depicting his attentive traveler, Dwight assumes a sense of agreement and sympathy that later observers of the American landscape rarely approach. Alone, Dwight's observer imagines sociability and progressive development, not transcendent solitude. Here, the imagination works objectively, building on an unimproved past and reaching out to a revealed future. Although Thoreau's "howling wilderness" is immanent, Dwight's appears so real that it must be conquered and an empire, built upon it. Like many early-nineteenth-century Americans, Dwight believed that the nation's destiny lay in the continued growth of its communities and institutions. Eschewing subjectivity and the inward peace derived from the imagination's communion with the unconscious, Dwight's vision proves militantly social; it draws strength from numbers.⁴⁴

A shared way of seeing—and thinking—vouchsafed social unity and separated virtuous citizens from those who had "coarse, groveling manners" and lived in "ragged, dirty houses."⁴⁵ In describing the imaginative and perceptive faculties that distinguished these two groups, Dwight emphasized the metaphorical boundaries dividing order from boundlessness and evinced the influence of the British Empiricists and his Puritan heritage. Never doubting that a community's appearance reflects its moral character or that "improvement" occurs spiritually as well as materially,

Dwight outlined the importance of attentive observation in the formation of virtuous manners.

Characteristically, he focused on vision and beauty. Using a return trip to Albany in 1798 as an occasion to confirm the positive relationship between neat appearances and virtuous behavior, he observed that the "perception of beauty and deformity, of refinement and grossness, of decency and vulgarity, of property and indecorum is the first thing which influences man to attempt an escape from a groveling, brutish character." Affecting "the taste" first, the perception of beauty or deformity influences conduct since there is "a kind of symmetry in the thoughts, feelings, and efforts of the human mind." But beauty and deformity are not equal contestants; the perceived "sense" of beauty "is instinctively felt" to be superior to the nature of deformity. Because the human mind is "powerfully operated on" by "what may be called the exterior of society," Dwight argues, beauty can play an educating role. By observing "the virtue of cottages and the purity of humble life"—not opulent homes and finery—even the poor can learn to live a moral life of "the golden mean."⁴⁶ Revealed in landscape, the sight of beauty molds the tastes and morals of viewers, while furthermore, as a perceived, learned standard, it in turn guides future efforts to shape the land. As a dialectical force, linking perception and action, beauty thus provides social cohesion and imposes on the land the same symmetry that structures the mind.

Empirically, Dwight investigated the relationship between consciousness and appearance, finding as Locke had, that perception leads to knowledge. And, like Adam Smith, he discovered in the sympathy that springs from community, a shared aesthetic standard. But the moral strictures underlying Dwight's vision of good society have more in common with his Puritan forebears' idea of theocracy. Beauty, operating externally and internally to improve "coarse society," finally develops in people the habits that "qualify them to convert a wilderness into a permanent residence."⁴⁷ In short, conversion begets conversion: the sensuous apprehension of beauty confers a kind of grace or social regeneracy through which man bounds the land. In tracing this process, Dwight follows not only Jonathan Edwards' description of beauty, but also his notion of grace. Dwight's improved citizen, like Edwards' regenerate Christian, experiences conversion sensuously, and his new understanding yields a new sense.

By this conversion, or "metamorphosis," Dwight believed that even Indians could change "from savages into citizens," and become "fair specimens of virtuous and commendable conduct."⁴⁸ A good Indian, as the growing number of missionaries believed, was simply a good white man. He adhered to the same principles which, in 1822, an American Board missionary called "those habits of sobriety, cleanliness, economy, and industry, so essential to civilized life."⁴⁹ As Robert F. Berkhofer has shown, the missionaries hoping to convert the Indians during the late-

eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries offered them more than Christianity. Indeed, the missionaries sought to make Indian society a “mirror of their ideal world.” Utopian in nature, the missionaries’ plans for Native American culture thus rested on a faith in the unmitigated progress of the United States, an increasing trust in economic individualism, and a belief that civilization advanced by stages.⁵⁰

Dwight shared these principles and, blaming the Indian’s “degradation” on his lack of “motives,” analyzed his situation as he would any unconverted, unimproved individual. Loosed from civilizing influences and any reason to improve, the Indian wandered aimlessly like “a sloth, a sot, and a vagabond.” Dwight dismissed the theories of such European philosophers as Buffon who claimed the Indian had an inferior mind. “The real cause of all this degradation,” Dwight argued, “is the want of such motives to exertion as he is prepared to feel within the view of his mind.” Here, Dwight’s description of psychological faculties parallels the critique he gave of “coarse” white society. The problem lies not with innate deformities, but in the dynamic interchange between social relations and the mind. Make the Indian a Christian and instill in him a “love of property,” Dwight claimed, and he will become a civilized individual.⁵¹ Not through violence or genocide, but through education and conversion, Dwight—and the missionaries whose principles he shared—proposed to regenerate the Indian and swell the ranks of useful citizenry.

Hence the Indian, like other marginal aspects of the America Dwight observed, begged for order and civilization. Given this outlook, Dwight naturally identified the unconverted Indian with the “wild, solitary, and gloomy” places, like Otter Creek near Middlebury, Vermont, which he visited in 1798. The Indians who traveled down this river on behalf of the French government, Dwight shuddered, “could not have chosen a route better suited to the gloomy purposes and lowering revenge of a savage bosom.”⁵² Unconverted, the wilderness and the Indian seemed parts of a foreign and unfamiliar land.

Although Dwight recognized nature’s fantastic, wild beauty, gloomy scenes of “rude and ragged” formations provoked his disgust when he strained to discern their useful function and “the masterly hand” that formed them.⁵³ Traveling through borderless, unimproved forests repelled and even frightened him. A “combination of evils”—swamps, animals, dangerous streams and Indians—made forests difficult to penetrate and improve, and observe.⁵⁴ Laced with tree roots, strewn with stumps and blocked by fallen trees, forest ways presented problems even after settlement. The many stories in the *Travels* of Indian treachery almost match in horror Dwight’s account of entering a darkened forest at dusk. Then, all the dangers—roots, stumps, stones, mires—“assailed us at once” and “multiplied upon us in almost every part of our progress, while the darkness was such as to prevent us from discerning the extent of our danger.”⁵⁵

Failing eyesight would have made dim light especially murky and impeded forward motion. Just what lurked in the forest Dwight preferred not to know. He wanted only to be out of the dark forest and on an improved turnpike where he could observe signs of progress.

Where ragged, bleak tracts of land without “those lines which constitute beauty of figure” vexed his imagination and his eye “instinctively” demanded a “wider extent of smiling scenes,” Dwight often corrected the “temporary defect” by drawing on his “perfect knowledge” of progress and, “transported in imagination,” re-visioned the land as bounded, settled and prosperous.⁵⁶ But, at times his imagination failed to conjure up a vision of America’s millennium. It failed, for instance, in western New York when he moved from the forest into the “openings,” the same “vacant places” which later provided the background for Cooper’s 1848 novel, *The Oak Openings or The Bee-Hunter*. But if Cooper discovered artful beauty in these “trackless regions,” Dwight lamented the lack of order.⁵⁷ Expecting a settlement in the clearing but finding no sign of civilization, he recorded the isolation and confusion that plagued even the attentive traveler.

Yet though the tract around him is seemingly bound everywhere, the boundary is everywhere obscure: being formed by trees thinly dispersed, and retired beyond each other at such distances as that while in many places they actually limit the view, they appear rather to border dim, indistinct openings into other tracts of country. Thus he always feels the limit to be uncertain; and until he is actually leaving one of these plains, will continually expect to find a part of the expansion still spreading beyond the reach of his eyes.⁵⁸

Here, Dwight fails to find the landmarks he seeks; he expects limits and borders but confronts an edgeless wilderness. He calls the chasms “labyrinth[s],” complains that even the prospect from higher ground confuses him, and settles finally for an appropriate adjective: the scenery is “bewildering.”⁵⁹ Though Dwight very rarely loses his way in the *Travels*, on this occasion he struggles to find a vocabulary to express his spatial disorientation. Crude and chaotic, the land beyond the skirt of civilization resisted language and common sense.

Yet such land called for settlement, and Dwight struggled to explain how civilization would claim it without undermining his own “perfect knowledge” of social progress. Ambivalently, he acknowledged the necessity of the itinerant pioneers who homesteaded in isolated clearings filled with girdled trees. But they could not live in regular society: “They are too idle, too talkative, too passionate, too prodigal, and too shiftless, to

acquire either property or character.” Still, they served a purpose. Farming on their half-enclosed, poorly cultivated fields, gleaning game, fish and “browse” from the land, these foresters eked out a living until the next wave of settlers arrived and they once again took to the wilderness.⁶⁰ In granting these first settlers a place in his progressive vision, Dwight struck an uneasy alliance with the dark, marginal places he disliked so much. Cut off from sober, well-ordered society, the pioneers occupied a physical and figurative realm beyond the common landscape of New England and the common perceptions of civilized Americans Dwight knew so well.⁶¹

Although Dwight’s belief in gradual moral improvement and his utilitarian perspective distinguished him from his more Calvinistic ancestors, his commitment to a close-knit, ordered community grew out of the Puritan tradition.⁶² In contrast to the emerging wilderness myth described by Richard Slotkin, Dwight’s transcendent vision focused primarily on settled agrarian America.⁶³ Avoiding the romance and freedom of the forest, he embraced the regenerative ideal revealed in the New England townscape and saw the world as a Puritan might—bounded and converted.⁶⁴ In this sense, Dwight’s impaired eyesight hardly mattered. Like Francis Parkman, another New Englander who overcame poor vision to write a visually detailed account of his trip on the Oregon Trail, he consciously subordinated pure perception to social, ethnographic analysis. In spite of poor eyesight, or perhaps because of it, Dwight looked beyond appearances to underlying principles and made seeing an act of revelation.

The vision and rhetoric Dwight brought to his descriptions of America’s bounded—and boundless—territories echoed throughout early-nineteenth century literature. Published eight years after the last trip described in the *Travels*, Cooper’s 1823 novel *The Pioneers; or, The Sources of the Susquehanna* offers a glimpse of the same “Unimproved and wild” “boundless forest” that Dwight longed to see converted.⁶⁵ Although Cooper departed from Dwight in his more romantic view of the wilderness, his language and his pessimistic picture of Templeton’s unrestrained settlers exemplify a shared way of seeing the margins of civilization. On the difference between civilization and wilderness, Dwight’s observations continued to make sense well into the 1840s. Even as Transcendentalists emphasized nature’s spiritual rather than pragmatic uses, there were New Englanders like Thoreau who echoed Dwight’s anxieties and, acknowledging the terror of the wilderness, dismissed the belief that all of “Matter, vast, terrific” could be mankind’s dwelling place. “Man was not to be associated with it,” Thoreau wrote after visiting Mt. Ktaadn in 1846, “It was a place for heathenism and superstitious rites,—to be inhabited by men nearer kin to the rocks and to wild animals than we.”⁶⁶ More honest perhaps about the limits of his own vision than Dwight, Thoreau nonetheless acknowledged the ferocity of wilderness and affirmed that man’s greatest desire was to conquer it—and build a home.

Communities did take root on the margins of the early Republic when frontier adventurers cleared the land for profit and for glory.⁶⁷ But of this brutal, liminal territory Dwight knew very little. Eagerly anticipating a world to come, he would not have seen the infant settlement at the mouth of the Cumberland River that his contemporary Christian Schultz described in 1810:

You will scarcely believe, that in a place just emerging from the woods, which, although advantageously situated, can prosper only by dint of industry and care, and where the girdled trees which surround its houses threaten with every storm to crush the whole settlement—you will scarcely believe, I say, that a billiard-table has been established, which is continually surrounded by common boatmen, just arrived from the Salt Works, St. Louis, or St. Genevieve, who in one hour lose all the hard-earned wages of a two months voyage!⁶⁸

Though coarse and even brutal, the frontier could foster luck.

Timothy Dwight loathed the fluctuating world of chance and opportunity that characterized frontier expansion and turned from it to gaze longingly at his beloved New England. Often, in the *Travels*, such observations become virtual epiphanies, observations not just of virtuous landscapes but of the communal spirit behind them. Once, after beholding a breathtaking prospect in the White Mountains where the landscape looked more like a “fairyland” than the “coarse realities” of everyday life, Dwight knew the truth of his theory of observation: “Our company consisted of five; and, whatever diversities of taste we might experience, they were all harmonized here in a single gaze of astonishment and delight.”⁶⁹ Despite the changes that were so rapidly altering the face of the country and threatening the traditions he loved, Dwight optimistically awaited the future. Careful observation revealed God’s logic in the steady conversion of American wilderness, persuading him that beyond the coarse, imperfect realities lay a divine, sunlit order. Although the future of this well-lighted world turned decisively on the proper development of the land, it relied equally on the regeneration of perception. Nor would one man’s perfect knowledge suffice. As Dwight stood on the margins of civilization and hopefully searched the landscape for the unmistakable signs of the harmonizing New England way, he believed that America’s destiny depended on the common observations of all its citizens.

notes

1. Beverley, *The History and Present State of Virginia, In Four Parts* (London, 1705), preface.
2. Schultz, *Travels on an Inland Voyage* (1810, rpt. Ridgewood, New Jersey, 1968), iv-v.
3. Perhaps this is changing. For an appreciation of Dwight's role in the development of early Republican culture see Emory Elliot, *Revolutionary Writers: Literature and Authority in the New Republic 1725-1810* (New York, 1982).
4. On the built environment see John R. Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America, 1580 to 1845* (New Haven, 1982); William Cronon claims that "anyone interested in New England ecology could do no better than to read Dwight from cover to cover" in *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York, 1983), 210.
5. Henry Adams, *The United States in 1800* (Ithaca, New York, 1954), 29.
6. The claim that Dwight was primarily interested in aesthetic prospects is advanced in John Sears, "Timothy Dwight and the American Landscape: The Composing Eye in Dwight's *Travels in New England and New York*," *Early American Literature* 11 (Winter 1976/77), 311-321; also, for a discussion of Dwight's efforts to apply European landscape aesthetics in America see Peter M. Briggs, "Timothy Dwight 'Composes' a Landscape for New England," *American Quarterly* 40 (September 1988), 359-77; Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York*, ed. Barbara Miller Solomon, 4 vols. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1969), I, 6-7.
7. Dwight, *Travels* I, 6.
8. Dwight witnessed the beginnings of what Higham calls the "classic age of the frontier," the period between the years 1815 and 1850. See Higham's *From Boundlessness To Consolidation: The Transformation of American Culture 1848* (Ann Arbor, 1969), 5-10. The quotation comes from page 10.
9. Barbara Solomon, introduction, *Travels* I, xv, xxxix; Moses Coit Tyler, *Three Men of Letters* (New York, 1895), 103; Charles E. Cunningham, *Timothy Dwight* (New York, 1942), 44-47.
10. Timothy Dwight, "On Light," *Memoirs of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences* 1:14 (1816), 387.
11. Dwight, *Memoirs* 1:14 (1816), 394, 395, 393.
12. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London, 1905), 289, 433, 450.
13. Reid, *An Inquiry Into The Human Mind* (1764, revised second edition, Edinburgh, 1765), 120, 123.
14. Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting 1825-1875* (New York, 1980), 41-43.
15. See John R. Stilgoe, "Smiling Scenes," in *Views and Visions: American Landscape before 1830*, eds. Edward J. Nygren and Bruce Robertson (Washington, D.C., 1986), 213-228.
16. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," *Selections From Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston, 1957), 24.
17. Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (New Rochelle, New York, 1969), 162.
18. Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols. (New York, 1828) I, no. pag.; "Observance," *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 12 vols. (Oxford, England, 1933), VII, 29.
19. "The Friend," *The New Haven Gazette and Connecticut Magazine* 1 (March 23, 1786), 42, 43.
20. Dwight, *Travels* I, 129-130.
21. *Ibid.* I, 371.
22. *Ibid.* I, 1.
23. *Ibid.* I, 130.
24. *Ibid.* I, 77.
25. *Ibid.* III, 252, 373.
26. *Ibid.* I, 279.
27. Leon Howard, *The Connecticut Wits* (Chicago, 1943), 381.
28. Timothy Dwight, "Observations of Language," *Memoirs* 1:14 (1816), 367. Dwight would also have been exposed to Lockean ideas by reading Edwards. For a discussion of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding's* influence on Jonathan Edwards and colonial America see Perry Miller, "The Rhetoric of Sensation" in *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1956), 167-183; also, in the Yale University Press editions of Edwards' writings, Paul Ramsey, introduction, *Freedom of the*

Will (New Haven, 1957), 47-65; Wallace E. Anderson, introduction, *Scientific and Philosophical Writings* (New Haven, 1980), 16-18, 24-26.

29. Silliman, *A Sketch of the Life and Character of President Dwight* (New Haven, 1817), 32-33.

30. Edwards, *Works*, 4 vols. (New York, 1844) I, 315. On Edwards and light see Rob Loewinsohn, "Jonathan Edwards' Opticks: Images and Metaphors of Light in Some of his Major Works," *Early American Literature* 8 (Spring 1973), 21-32.

31. Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue* (Ann Arbor, 1960), 31.

32. Dwight, *Travels* III, 143.

33. *Ibid.* III, 59. On Burke and the sublime, see Novak, *Nature*, 34-35.

34. On these views and the changing perceptions of landscape in the first half of the nineteenth century, see David Cameron Miller, "Kindred Spirits: Martin Johnson Heade, Painter; Frederick Goddard Tuckerman, Poet; And The Identification With "Desert" Places," *American Quarterly* 34 (Summer 1980), 167-85.

35. Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* (New York, 1985), Robert F. Sayre, ed., 761.

36. Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, (Boston, 1746), 178. On how Puritans came to believe in subjugating the wilderness see Alan Heimert, "Puritanism, The Wilderness, And The Frontier," *New England Quarterly* 26 (September 1953), 361-82.

37. Dwight, *Travels* I, 120.

38. *Ibid.* IV, 285, 283, 286, 285.

39. Kenneth Silverman, *Timothy Dwight* (New York, 1969), 68.

40. Dwight, *Travels* I, 58, 2: 34.

41. Theodore Dwight, *President Dwight's Decisions of Questions Discussed by the Senior Class in Yale College in 1813 and 1814* (New York, 1833), 331.

42. Dwight, *Travels* I, 272, 3.

43. *Ibid.* IV, 370.

44. Robert F. Berkhofer, *Salvation And The Savage: An Analysis of Protestant Missions and American Indian Response, 1787-1862* (Lexington, Kentucky, 1965), 7; Dwight's social vision contrasts to Frederick Goddard Tuckerman's approach to natural scenery, whose mid-nineteenth century poetry David Cameron Miller compares to Martin Heade's painting. See Miller "Kindred Spirits," 181-85.

45. Dwight, *Travels* II. 346.

46. *Ibid.* II. 346-47.

47. *Ibid.* II. 347, 158.

48. *Ibid.* III. 18.

49. Berkhofer, *Salvation*, 10. The American Board missionary is quoted in Berkhofer, 35.

50. Berkhofer, *Salvation*, 10, 4-14, ff. On the ambiguous relationship between the "savage" and "civilization" see Richard Drinnon, *White Savage: The Case Of John Hunter* (New York, 1972).

51. Dwight, *Travels* III, 17-18.

52. *Ibid.* II, 288-89.

53. *Ibid.* II, 99, 82.

54. *Ibid.* II, 205.

55. *Ibid.* II, 87.

56. *Ibid.* I, 335, 2: 94.

57. James Fenimore Cooper, *The Oak Openings or, the Bee-Hunter*, 2 vols. (New York, 1848), I, 11, 15.

58. Dwight, *Travels* IV, 37.

59. *Ibid.* IV, 37-38; for a definition of bewilderment as the disorientation brought on by the claiming of fields by forest trees, see John R. Stilgoe, *Metropolitan Corridor: Railroads and the American Scene* (New Haven, 1983), 315.

60. Dwight, *Travels* II, 321, 322.

61. The phrase "common landscape" comes from Stilgoe, *Common Landscape*, ix.

62. Henry F. May disputes the assertion that Dwight was "a monster of Calvinist obscurantism and reaction" in *The Enlightenment In America* (New York, 1976), 189-190. For a discussion of Dwight's Puritan vision see John Brinckerhoff Jackson, "A Puritan Looks At Scenery" in *Discovering The Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven, 1984), 59-64.

63. See Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, Connecticut, 1973).

64. On the development of this pattern see Stilgoe, *Common Landscape*, 43-58.

65. James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers; or, The Sources of the Susquehanna* (New York, 1964), 224.

66. Thoreau, *Maine Woods*, 645.
67. For a discussion of empire-building on the frontier, see Bernard Bailyn, *The Peopling of British North America: An Introduction* (New York, 1986) especially the chapter "A Domesday Book for the Periphery."
68. Schultz, *Travels*, 203.
69. Dwight, *Travels* II, 207-208.