

A Language of Things

Emanuel Swedenborg and the
American Environmental Imagination

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University of Virginia Press
Charlottesville and London

University of Virginia Press
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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

First published 2019

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Zuber, Devin P., 1978—author.

Title: A language of things : Emanuel Swedenborg and the American environmental
imagination / Devin P. Zuber.

Description: Charlottesville : University of Virginia Press, 2019. | Includes bibliographical
references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019015592 (print) | LCCN 2019021594 (ebook) | ISBN 9780813943527
(ebook) | ISBN 9780813943503 (cloth : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780813943510 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Environmentalism—United States—Religious aspects—History—19th
century. | Swedenborg, Emanuel, 1688–1772—Influence.

Classification: LCC GE197 (ebook) | LCC GE197 .Z83 2019 (print) | DDC 261.8/8—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019015592>

Cover art: Detail of *Reverend Joseph Worcester's House, Piedmont*, William Keith, ca. 1883.
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4

Heralds of a New Gospel

John Muir and the San Francisco Swedenborgians

I know something of what went on in Muir. For him, quite simply, the spirits of the wild were angels, who bore him on their wings through perilous places.

—Mary Austin

Ralph Waldo Emerson's call for a new kind of nature writing at the end of his essay "History" can be read not only as adumbrating the later appearance of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, but also as catalyzing agent for a young John Muir, who began studying Emerson's writings in the early 1860s, and who would later become, by the century's close, the iconic grandfather of the modern American environmental movement. Muir's formative role in establishing the Sierra Club in 1892 and his related political advocacy for the protection of wilderness areas throughout the American West heralded the beginning of an environmental imaginary that gave shape to the establishment of the National Park Service, in 1916, and even later on, the Environmental Protection Agency (in 1970).¹ Muir's consistent description of landscape as a sacred text, described both by science and an ecstatic, felt apprehension of its beauty, is unthinkable without his formative encounter with the doyen of American Transcendentalism.

Muir famously met Emerson in 1871, when the young naturalist was working in Yosemite Valley. In spite of Muir's enthusiastic overtures, the elderly

Emerson would not leave the comfort of his entourage for a night of camping in the rough with Muir in a sequoia grove. They nevertheless spoke of many things, including Emerson's telling Muir about the mystic Emanuel Swedenborg and his reputed conversations with the dead.² Their meeting prompted Muir to start a substantial rereading of Emerson, returning to the essays that had so electrified him when he first encountered them in the library of his mentor Jeanne Carr in Wisconsin. Some time after their Yosemite encounter, Muir wrote to Emerson reminding him to send along a certain Swedenborgian text that Emerson had promised. Emerson replied with a warm, enthusiastic letter that enclosed a small volume—none other than Sampson Reed's *Observations on the Growth of the Mind*.³ Emerson had just finished the "Natural History of the Intellect" lecture series, which indicate a revived interest in Reed, his "Swedenborgian druggist" (as chapter 3 took up); the still-unknown Muir, like Reed before him, would have borne out Emerson's contention in the lecture series that original genius percolated in the margins, among the obscure. Muir enthused to Jeanne Carr that Reed's little book was "full of the fountain of truth."⁴

This may not have been Muir's first substantial encounter with Swedenborgian thought, however. He might have encountered earlier an artistically inclined Swedenborgian named Joseph Worcester who had moved to California (from the East Coast) originally for health purposes, for the region's salutary climate. Worcester had spent intermittent periods in Yosemite Valley from the 1860s onward—even working, for several months in 1864, for James Mason Hutchings, who would later become Muir's employer.⁵ The charismatic Worcester was soon to become a major gravitational force, forming the center of an important coterie of influential painters, poets, architects, and writers in a burgeoning arts scene in the San Francisco Bay area. This group of "Worcesterites," as they were sometimes called, were the progenitors of the West Coast Arts and Crafts movement, a Ruskinian attempt to "bring nature indoors" through architecture, furniture, and the fine arts.⁶ The therapeutic dimensions of the Arts and Crafts aesthetic philosophy—its back-to-nature healing modalities that manifested in architectural innovations like the sleeping porch—shared in the same formative milieu of wilderness recreation that germinated John Muir's Sierra Club. Worcester's establishment of a new building for the San Francisco Swedenborgians in 1895 was infused with Swedenborg's doctrines of correspondence and influx; Muir is reported to have attended, on rare occasion, and some of the church parishioners were involved in the early days of the Sierra Club (William Keith, the painter, for example, was a charter member).⁷

Scholarship on John Muir has not paid significant attention to the books by Swedenborg and Swedenborgian texts like Sampson Reed's *Observations on the Growth of the Mind* that Muir collected, read, and annotated over several decades. Muir's distinctive marginalia—neat pencil-line jabs, and in some cases, exquisite filigree sketches and doodles of alpine landscapes—can be found in three extant Swedenborg(ian) texts now housed in the Muir archive at the University of the Pacific, and further references to Swedenborg occasionally pepper Muir's unpublished corpus. Overall, Swedenborg could be said to have reinforced Muir's scriptural tendencies to translate nature into a kind of bible, a numinous wilderness text that, if apprehended with the right reverence and wonder, would unfold a revelatory message. Due, in part, to the persisting influence of the ecological critiques of Christianity made by Lynn White and others, environmental historians have sometimes attempted to locate an Eastern strand in Muir's religious inclinations, attributing his spiritual view of nature to Buddhist, Taoist, or even Confucian origins.⁸ As Dennis Williams observes, this has obscured how "Muir's preservationist ideology emerged as a natural outflow of his mystical Christianity."⁹

If we amplify the aesthetic contexts that swirled around Worcester, Keith, and the San Francisco Swedenborgian Church, which developed in tandem with the political advocacy of the Sierra Club, we can better delineate the theological dimensions of three salient aspects of Muir's writing. First, Muir understood the destruction of nature as a kind theological desecration, a blasphemy that Muir responded to, in turn, by drawing on the well-trod ground of Christian polemics to shape his public conservation advocacy. Secondly, perhaps surprisingly, Muir's making of the Sierra Nevada into modern bibles broadened his capacity to acknowledge the other-than-human, decentering the anthropocentrism that he had inherited from Romantic literary traditions (Emerson, William Wordsworth) that were seminal for his ethics and aesthetics. Under the charm of immanent influx and correspondence, Muir expanded his sense of personhood: "[A]ll God's people, however serious and savage, great or small, like to play. Whales and elephants, dancing, humming gnats, and invisibly small mischievous microbes—all are warm with divine radium."¹⁰ The human presence was simply one of many in a larger divine semiotic of nature speaking, evolving, radiating life. And yet, thirdly, while Muir's own variant on the "language of things" he encountered in Sampson Reed may have fomented a more biotic kind of environmental imagination, the spiritualized construction of wilderness also rendered it as a blank page, and thereby participated in a problematic erasure of indigenous peoples already present throughout the California Sierras. Muir's writing is constitutive of the "trouble with wilderness"

famously anatomized by William Cronon; what has been sometimes lost in the ensuing wilderness debates is the theological habitus behind Muir's "reading" of places as pages of sacred Scripture.¹¹

This chapter will accordingly proceed in three distinct sections; instead of moving chronologically, and untangling in a linear fashion Muir's different engagements with Swedenborg and the San Francisco Swedenborgians, each section will focus on a particular body of materials—paintings, buildings, and a text—where Muir's inchoate environmental imagination intersected with the work of Keith, Worcester, and others. In the first, William Keith's landscape paintings will be juxtaposed with Muir's rhetoric to consider how Keith's aesthetic functioned as a foil for Muir's development as an environmental writer and activist. Keith's paintings were critically important for Muir's first debut as a public speaker; they formed the literal backdrop for the Sierra Club in the 1890s when the group would informally meet in Keith's studio in San Francisco, and, in spite of a falling-out and mutual disaffection as Keith's Swedenborg-influenced canvases became increasingly diffuse, abstract, and atmospheric, Muir still enlisted Keith's paintings in the struggle to preserve the Hetch Hetchy Valley at the very end of Muir's life: Keith's paintings, thus, can be seen as visual bookends to Muir's entire career.

The second section turns to the San Francisco Swedenborgian Church, where Keith installed important landscape paintings as permanent wall murals (completed in 1895, two years after the official founding of the Sierra Club). While the church has duly received attention from art and architectural historians for its significance in the development of a distinctive Arts and Crafts style in California, rarely has the space been situated in relation to the work of Muir and the Sierra Club. As a veritable temple to nature—or more precisely, a temple dedicated to the spiritual *within* nature—the building probably also refracts the mutual influence of Muir on Swedenborgian imaginaries. Many of the building's distinct, unusual features—the rough-hewn tree branches that retain their bark and act as the supporting pillars for the roof—have their ample corollaries in Swedenborgian theology, as we will see, but they also echo the vernacular architecture of Yosemite Valley, including Muir's cabin that famously had a stream running through it, which Worcester may have seen in person. A related structure, a beautiful house that Worcester designed for himself that anticipates some of the natural elements of the later church, will also be briefly considered, as the domestic space generated both important paintings by Keith and became the later home of the writer Jack London, who lovingly called it "the Bungalow." This house of Worcester's in the East Bay hills, in fact, was where London penned his naturalist classic *The Call of the Wild* (1903). These

Swedenborgian spaces—with their sleeping-porch verandas and rough natural materials—inculcated a therapeutic regime whereby wilderness aesthetics were seen as a healing tonic for the debilitating effects of modernity. Even within Jack London's most secularized and Darwinian aesthetic, the spiritual valence of wilderness allowed a residue of an original religious impulse to remain. The Swedenborgian church and Worcester's cottage where *The Call of the Wild* was born, should be seen as part of an aesthetic constellation that helped birth literary naturalism and an American nature-writing tradition out of the Romantic Transcendentalism of Emerson into the work of Muir, and beyond. Acknowledging these contexts should complicate, at the least, the typical literary historiography that sees American Naturalism as evolving out of the secularizing drift of encounters with post-Darwinian science.¹²

London's highly popular *Call of the Wild* was but one of many new kinds of writing about animals that burgeoned at the turn of the century as humans were reconsidering their place in the cosmos and the natural order of things. Muir's own famous tale of a dog, "The Adventure of a Dog and a Glacier" (1897), which was later expanded into *Stickeen* (1908), was based on Muir's spectacular adventure with a special dog on a stormy day in Alaska. He claimed, curiously, it was "the hardest thing [he] ever wrote."¹³ The final section of this chapter pays heed to Muir's draft notes for *Stickeen*, where he jotted down how his favorite dog was "like Swedenborg a Herald of a New Gospel." When we turn to the narrative of *Stickeen*, however, it is not clear just what kind of good news is being evangelized. How is *Stickeen* the silent dog like a Swedenborg, the Scandinavian mystic? The ambiguity in the story might be one place to locate Muir's own ambivalence toward indigenous peoples; *Stickeen* was so named because of the dog's connection to the Stickeen tribes of the Pacific Northwest. I argue for reading the dog's odd vanishing at the end of Muir's narrative metonymically, as the literary figuration of a caesura in Muir's enchantment of wilderness that depended on an erasure of native peoples from the landscape. The inscription of a sacred language of things into a sublime natural space needed to be prefigured as a blank page, devoid of human presence. In the end, the Americanization of Swedenborg's original doctrine of correspondences into a language of things could produce beautiful, proto-environmental architecture and painting for the Bay Area Swedenborgians, but it also facilitated an appropriation of land into landscape that was buttressed by an ideology of Manifest Destiny, and the complex representation of Yosemite as the reclamation of a prelapsarian, premodern sort of garden: this was to view Yosemite through the lens of the Puritan poetics of John Milton, as Mark Stoll's work has so brilliantly excavated.¹⁴ Keith's paintings and Muir's writings are entangled

in the aesthetics of what W. J. T. Mitchell has called the “the dream work of imperialism,” that is, an acculturated depiction of a natural landscape oversaturated with nationalist fantasies and their narratives.¹⁵ These embodiments of America as “Nature’s nation,” as Perry Miller put it, depended on a visual logic mutually constructed by text and image, converging around a theological episteme of nature-as-Scripture, as the next section takes up.¹⁶

Vague Jumbles of Paint

The artist William Keith first met Muir in Yosemite in 1872, introduced by Muir’s longtime mentor Jeanne Carr, who had been much impressed by Keith’s paintings. Keith had first heard of Muir from Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom Keith had befriended during a long sojourn in New England (Keith’s first wife, Elizabeth Emerson, was a distant relative of Ralph Waldo).¹⁷ Not surprisingly, Keith and Muir became fast friends: both were Scottish immigrants, with parents who had been steeped in a kind of harsh Calvinist Protestantism (Presbyterianism) that their sons would later eschew, and both “shared the view that nature should be protected from human destruction, that creatures large and small had moral worth, that beauty in nature was a divine gift, that wilderness had spiritual value,” as Ronald Limbaugh puts it.¹⁸ The friendship commenced thirty years of collaboration, commentary, and critique of one another’s work. In spite of their later differences—caused, in part, by the growing influence of Swedenborgian ideas on Keith’s mature, post-epic painting—Keith remained Muir’s “poet-painter” whose depictions of California’s Sierra Nevada were a “kind of bible of the mountains,” as Muir favorably put it.¹⁹

Keith’s painting frames the commencement of Muir’s vocation as a public speaker on behalf of the environment, when Muir was thirty-eight years old, in 1876. Muir had had no formal training in public lecturing and was extremely nervous at the invitation to speak to the Literary Institute of Sacramento (the talk was to be on the process of glaciation in the Sierras). A large canvas by Keith of California mountains was set up near the podium for Muir to gaze upon while he talked, and the effect of the landscape was such that Muir “completely forgot himself and his audience, only remembering that he was to make clear some wondrous mysteries.”²⁰ The talk began Muir’s bona fide career as a lecturer on behalf of the environment and a public champion of the earth sciences, and the Keith painting accompanied Muir’s speaking engagements on several other occasions.²¹ This anecdote suggests how Keith’s landscapes functioned for Muir as a veritable window onto nature, mimetically reproducing the healing spiritual power of wilderness; as such, they provide a kind of

mirror for refracting the power of the visual in Muir's own writing, where thick layers of ekphrastic prose attempt to re-create the dazzling optic dimensions of Muir's wilderness experience. Both Muir and Keith continued a form of the "panoptic sublime" that could be said to have formalized in American nature aesthetics with both Emerson's 1836 *Nature* and Thomas Cole's famous painting *The Oxbow*, created the same year.²² Even more so than Emerson's, Muir's influential writings operate along optical registers, unspooling long chains of visual association related to light and color: "glittering," "gleaming," "azure," "purpled haze," "white, glowing, irised falls and cascades," for example. Often the act of seeing land-as-landscape through the lenses of the sublime and the beautiful becomes a spiritualized moment of ecological connection, as in this well-known epiphany from Muir's *My First Summer in the Sierra*:

No Sierra landscape that I have *seen* holds anything truly dead or dull, or any trace of what in manufactories is called rubbish or waste; everything is perfectly clean and pure and full of divine lessons. This quick, inevitable interest attaching to everything seems marvelous until the hand of God becomes visible; then it seems reasonable that what interests Him may well interest us. When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe. One fancies a heart like our own must be beating in every crystal and cell, and we feel like stopping to speak to the plants and animals as friendly fellow mountaineers.²³

The famous line here about "when we try to pick out anything by itself," ironically, has often been plucked out of context to underscore Muir's ecological sensibility (it makes a good pithy aphorism, nice for bumper stickers and coffee mugs), yet it comes nested within Muir at his most theological, where he presses the land to become both a visual landscape and a semiotic, speaking text—a page "perfectly clean and pure and full of divine lessons." This syntactic fissure between text and image is significant; the gap creates a characteristic tension that is part of the efficacy of Muir's prose. Muir continues Sampson Reed's Swedenborgian project to recover a language—both verbal and visual—whereby "words were one with things."

Four years prior to his public lecture debut, as Muir read and annotated Reed's *Observations*, when he encountered the specific section where Reed expounds on a wish for "a language not of words, but of things" Muir responded by penciling in the margins a minuscule landscape depicting an alpine slope with pine trees, pitching down to a mirrorlike lake (fig. 2). Precisely at the juncture where Reed wants words to exceed and move on to some kind of representative space beyond language—into "things"—Muir responds with the

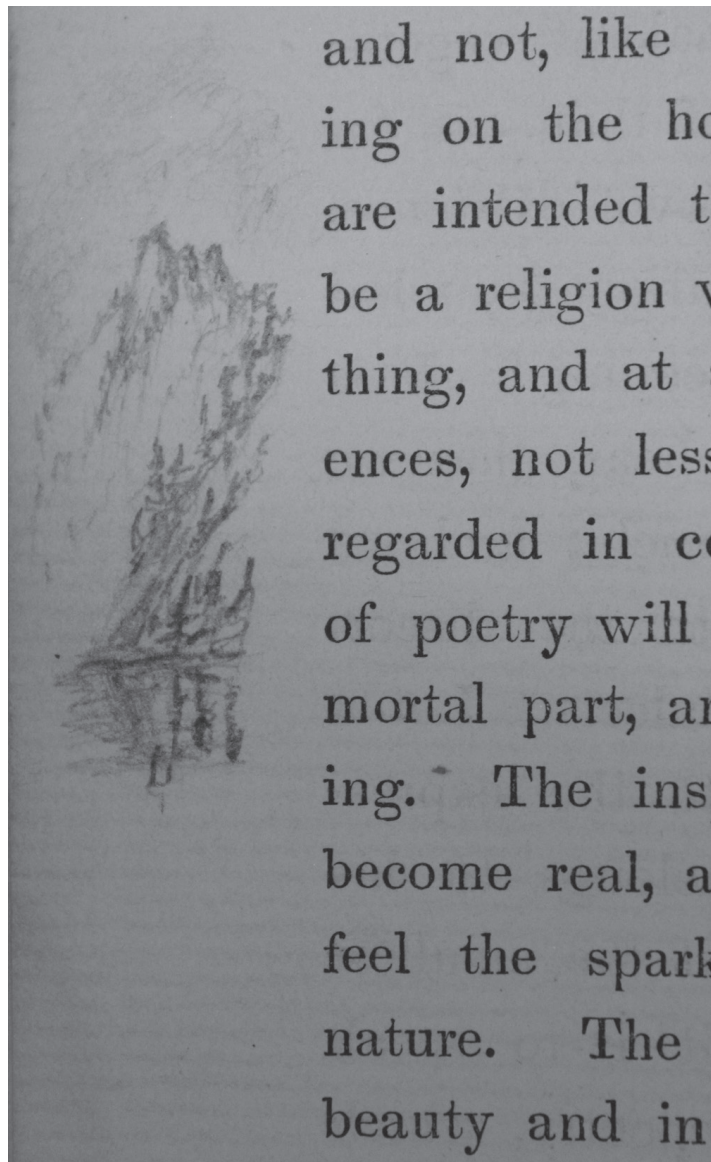


FIGURE 2. John Muir's marginalia to Sampson Reed's *Observations on the Growth of the Mind*. (Chicago: Meyers & Chandler, 1867; John Muir Papers, Holt-Atherton Special Collections, University of the Pacific Library. © 1984 Muir-Hanna Trust. Photograph courtesy of Michael Wurtz, 2019)

visual. Yet, it is the visual frame of the landscape in Muir's prose itself, the rhetoric of the sublime and the beautiful noted in the prior passage, that, in turn, provide the mechanism for a spiritual inscription, the transformation of mountains (back) into bibles and divine manuscripts. Yosemite is "a grand page of mountain manuscript I would gladly give my life to be able to read," as Muir puts it, somewhat hyperbolically.²⁴ This semiotic chain is lubricious and synesthetic, sliding between seeing and reading, and listening: a word becomes a seen thing, which is then made into the divine Word that speaks iconically: *My First Summer* frequently tropes on landscape as "hieroglyphic." The ekphrastic dimensions of Muir's nature writing makes it more modern, even Modernistic, than its purple-drenched private ecstasy might otherwise suggest—an emotive style that often rather recalls the Romantic pantheism of earlier authors like William Wordsworth, who is as central as Emerson was for shaping Muir's pantheistic sense of nature.

The same year Muir had read Reed's *Observations*, perhaps still under the tingling influence of Emerson, Muir published his first essay in the *New York Tribune*. "Yosemite Glaciers" lays out Muir's innovative theories of glaciation in the high Sierras, and while there is little of the religious ecstasy so characteristic of his later nature writing, this early essay strikingly opens with an extended metaphor of the mountains as a book:

Two years ago, when picking flowers in the mountains back of Yosemite Valley, I found a book. It was blotted and storm-beaten; all of its outer pages were mealy and crumbly, the paper seeming to dissolve like the snow beneath which it had been buried; but many of the inner pages were well preserved, and though all were more or less stained and torn, whole chapters were easily readable. In just this condition is the great open book of Yosemite glaciers to-day; its granite pages have been torn and blurred by the same storms that wasted the castaway book. The grand central chapters of the Hoffman, the Tenaya, and Nevada glaciers are stained and corroded by the frosts and rains, yet, nevertheless, they contain scarce an unreadable page; but the outer chapters of the Pohono, and the Illilouette, and the Yosemite Creek, and the Ribbon, and Cascade glaciers, are all dimmed and eaten away on the bottom, though the tops of their pages have not been so long exposed, and still proclaim in splendid characters the glorious actions of their departed ice.²⁵

The unnamed book in this anecdote (and it is tempting to imagine it as a bible, weather-beaten by climate) deliciously slides back into a kind of materiality that renders it almost illegible: a language of things dissolving into pure thingness—"all of its outer pages were mealy and crumbly, the paper seeming

to dissolve like the snow.”²⁶ If Reed’s Swedenborgian “language of things” was extended to its fullest logical consequence, going back into a time when “words were one with things,” semiosis would ultimately fail, the signified and signifier collapsing into one another. Muir’s metaphor-rich prose, his sustained attention to the visual dimensions of representation, ensured that a fissure remained between words and things, a *différance* (in Jacques Derrida’s sense) between seeing and speaking (or writing).²⁷

Muir’s attunement to the possibilities of word and image within his landscape prose can be usefully situated against the evolution of Keith’s painterly style. While Muir purportedly vastly preferred Keith’s earlier epic canvases that meticulously reproduced details of geography, flora, and fauna—much as in the “Humboldtian” manner of Frederic Edwin Church—there are telling parallels between Keith’s later subjective, even proto-Modernistic paintings that foreground a process of perception and Muir’s own nature writing that takes increasing issue with the mimetic reproduction of merely the material, or “scientific,” aspects of nature.²⁸ Most art historians agree that the death of Keith’s first wife, Elizabeth Emerson, pushed a grieving Keith more into the orbit of Joseph Worcester’s Swedenborgian influence, perhaps due to the Swedish seer’s insistence on the verifiable continuity of life after death.²⁹ Worcester’s ensuing impact on Keith’s aesthetics was profound, as richly illustrated by Keith’s surviving correspondence to Worcester that begins during Keith’s long sojourn in Europe between 1883 and 1885.³⁰ Likely solely through Worcester, Keith came to own seventeen works by or about Swedenborg (including the multivolume English translation of Swedenborg’s magnum opus, the *Arcana Caelestia*).³¹ The aesthetic ramifications of Swedenborg’s doctrines were further reinforced by Keith’s intense friendship with the Swedenborgian landscape painter George Inness (whose paintings are discussed in more depth in chapter 5). Keith was well aware of Inness’s aesthetic theories, derived, in part, from Swedenborg, long before they eventually met face-to-face—Keith’s 1888 lectures on art at the University of California, Berkeley, for example, drew heavily on Inness’s earlier essay, “A Painter on Painting,” that had appeared in *Harper’s Magazine*.³² The two months that Inness spent in San Francisco in 1891 galvanized Keith, with Inness painting up a storm side-by-side with Keith in his studio (and Keith regularly taking Inness to Worcester’s Swedenborgian church group, then meeting at Druid’s Hall in downtown San Francisco on Sundays). “I no longer want to die since Inness has arrived,” Keith reported to Worcester.³³

Under all this Swedenborgian influx, Keith’s painting drifted away from large-scale, detailed landscapes into more subjective and “moody”—in the

words of his contemporaries—atmospheric depictions of nature, closer in spirit to the Tonalism of Inness. These later paintings tend to become smaller in scale and size, and the titles (following Inness) occasionally shift from the specificity of topical places into more poetic sorts of associations: *Golden Skies*, *Mood*, *Gray Day*, *Ducks in Water*, *Dazzling Clouds* (though Keith certainly continued to paint landscapes designating particular locales).³⁴ Keith no longer wanted to reproduce a mimetic fidelity to nature, but rather the record of an inner, spiritual apprehension of a phenomenological epiphany that a particular place had provided. “What a landscape painter wants to render,” he wrote for a lecture in 1895, “is not the natural landscape, but *the state of feeling* which the landscape produces in himself. Under the impulse of feeling he has produced a piece of work and the feeling will have fused the material into a whole. Art is not the slave of nature.”³⁵

Art critics—including Muir—felt Keith’s shift in style was a betrayal of his earlier commitments to a honed realism. “It is amazing that a man who knows so much, who has done so much,” wrote a scathing reviewer of a gallery show in the *San Francisco Evening Post*, “should at this time of life fall into the silly error of supposing that there is more poetry in a *vague jumble of paint* than in the facts of nature.”³⁶ Yet today, Keith’s “vague jumble of paint” is seen as cannily prescient of how landscape painting helped generate later movements into abstraction and expressionism.³⁷ Akin to Wassily Kandinsky’s synesthetic interest in how abstract painting could re-create a feeling of symphonic sound, Keith, in this late period, collected various gongs and bells from Buddhist temples, and would ring them while he painted his landscapes—often, by this point, painting a composite landscape completely from different memories, with no preparatory sketches: he wanted his colors to capture the feeling of vibratory sound, and landscapes from this period were accordingly known as Keith’s “gong pictures.”³⁸ Color was, Keith wrote, merely “a thing of vibration.”³⁹

Muir, apparently, would have none of it. “Why in the deuce don’t you imitate nature?” he is reported to have scolded during one disappointing studio visit: “You’ll never paint a decent picture until you can do that.”⁴⁰ Keith, in turn, disparaged Muir in his public lectures: “Mr. Muir thinks of me as one of the lost, a son of perdition. I don’t know why I drag poor Mr. Muir in so much, except that as I told you at the beginning, this was to be a personal experience, but I use him in another way: which is that a man may be a poet and a man of education and may never get beyond the outside husk of art, the imitative side.”⁴¹

But this mutual, jocular sparring that juxtaposed their representational practices belied a deeper point of convergence. Whereas Keith’s later work

became more and more modern, Muir's writing, in turn, became increasingly Transcendentalist, in the Emersonian sense. As Donald Worster observes, as Muir aged, he "sounded more and more like a typical theist or Transcendentalist seeking beyond nature a God in heaven, a Creator of the world's material forms, or a great Spirit hovering over the earth."⁴² Arguably, however, this kind of immanent Transcendentalism—or "vibrant" panentheism, to return to some of the conceptual terminology that was used in chapter 2—was always latent in Muir, demonstrable in his enthusiastic early annotations to Swedenborgian texts like Reed's *Observations*. In Muir's copy of James John Garth Wilkinson's mid-century biography of Swedenborg—the text with its Humboldtian "planetary picture" discussed in chapter 1—Muir underlined in the margins a typical passage where Wilkinson pauses to criticize those "hard-headed scientific men" who show "a deaf ear, and a callous heart" to the "dear (spiritual) facts of common men and women."⁴³ Muir's reservations about the limits of empiricism stemmed from deeply personal experience; he had himself undergone three acutely paranormal incidents that involved prescient dreams or uncanny intuition of deaths in the family.⁴⁴ Not surprisingly, many of the annotations in Muir's Swedenborg volumes draw attention to the supernatural dimensions of Swedenborg's biography or theology that lay out an elaborate epistemology for how spirits communicate with humans: a Swedenborgian context, again, that seems to have been first suggested to Muir by Emerson. This material probably underscored Muir's own conviction that the spiritual was not another, otherworldly affair, but resolutely materialized and present in nature, embedded in the here-and-now. Like Keith's "vague jumbles of paint" that attempted to create an access to the spiritual—a state of subjective "feeling," in Keith's words—that lay incipient within the landscape, Muir's later writing often explicitly aims for creating a similar rhetorical effect on the reader. In the Yellowstone essay from *Our National Parks* (1901), which had first appeared as a serialized essay in the *Atlantic Monthly* three years earlier, Muir writes an extended passage on the activity of Nature as that of the artist, "ever working toward beauty higher and higher." After a lush and long description of landscape, Muir continues, sounding like Swedenborg or Sampson Reed as he keys a discourse of the "spiritual world": "Where may the mind find more stimulating, quickening pasturage? A thousand Yellowstone wonders are calling, 'Look up and down and round about you!' And a multitude of still, small voices may be heard directing you to look through all this transient, shifting show of things called 'substantial' into the truly substantial, spiritual world whose forms flesh and wood, rock and water, air and sunshine, only veil and conceal, and to learn that here is heaven and the dwelling-place of the angels."⁴⁵

But how are we to read such idealizing, somewhat cloying lines in view of the Anthropocene, facing an anthropogenic future that might obliterate our very “flesh and wood, rock and water, air and sunshine?” In this book’s introduction, Walter Benjamin’s angel of history—his ekphrastic gloss on a watercolor by Paul Klee—was invoked as a figure of anthropogenic catastrophe (or at least, this is how it has been influentially reread by Bruno Latour). Might we imaginatively reconfigure Muir’s wilderness angels here as Klee’s “Angelus Novus,” swept up in the catastrophe of progress?⁴⁶ Rather than a Neoplatonic evasion of matter, perhaps Muir’s “still small voices” can reinstantiate the apocalyptic of Benjamin’s *Jetztzeit* that breaks into history, unfolding a different messianic temporality that causes the “homogenous empty time” of modernity to implode on itself.⁴⁷ In this reading, Muir’s injunction to “look up and down around you” is to see a future void where humans have vanished from Yellowstone, perhaps akin to the famous depeopled scene of ruins overtaken by nature in Thomas Cole’s *Desolation* (1833–36) that closes Cole’s *Course of Empire* painting cycle: a truly posthumanist, post-apocalyptic nineteenth-century American landscape. Such an inflection of Muir’s text might seem less of a stretch if we recall Swedenborg’s distinct articulation of heaven (or hell) as not future eschatological places, but internal states of mind in the here and now. Swedenborg’s proto-Buddhism (as first anatomized by D. T. Suzuki) was grounded in the immanent materiality of nature. “Here is heaven,” Muir writes, perhaps not at all metaphorically, “the dwelling place of angels.” But “here” also just as easily slips into a hell populated by the capitalist devils of development and progress; “the mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heav’n of Hell, a Hell of Heav’n,” an equivocation that Muir (and Swedenborg) both knew from their Milton.⁴⁸

The later stylistic parallels between Keith and Muir culminated in their last significant collaboration when Muir enlisted Keith and his paintings in the great conservation struggle to prevent the Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite from being dammed. Their first joint work together had been with Keith’s contributions to the massive *Picturesque California* project (1888–90), a multivolume series edited and overseen by Muir that cemented the Far West in the minds of Americans as premiere wilderness tourist destination. Now, Muir utilized Keith’s paintings once again for what would become his final conservation battle, a legal fight that went all the way to Congress and shaped a kind of civic imaginary of the environment that continues to inform legal discourses around wilderness conservation and preservation. As Rebecca Solnit notes, the Hetch Hetchy battle was the first occasion whereby American citizens took a collective, national stance against unrestrained “growth, progress, and development,” and

the Sierra Club was transformed—veritably overnight—from being a quant local hiking club into America’s first major conservation organization.⁴⁹ The failure to stop the dam would haunt the Sierra Club and other national environmental organizations for decades to come.⁵⁰ As Hetch Hetchy legally lay within the federal boundaries established by the designation of Yosemite as a national park in 1890, it would ultimately take a federal act of Congress—the Raker Act of 1913—to allow the thirsty city of San Francisco to dam the valley for a new source of water. In the years leading up to the Raker Act, Muir and the Sierra Club conducted a strident campaign to sway public opinion about the valley, and to bolster their efforts, Muir and Keith traveled to Hetch Hetchy in 1907 and again in 1909, trips which produced writing and images that were deployed in the campaign to stop the dam project. Both men were in the twilight of their prolific lives; the 1909 excursion was to be Keith’s last extended stay in the high Sierras before his death in 1911, and the Hetch Hetchy paintings are Keith’s final images of the mountains that had given shape to his whole spiritualized oeuvre.⁵¹ These last paintings are not anything like the earlier epic panoramas that Muir had hailed as a “bible” of California mountains, but are typical of the late “mystical” Keith that Muir had publicly contemned: suggestive brushwork, almost gestural, and a close proximity of perspective in the frame that is counterbalanced by the blurring of light and shadow (fig. 3). In most of the Hetch Hetchy paintings from these trips, Keith has chosen to focus on foreshortened views of the cascades and waterfalls that tumble into the valley, feeding into the Tuolumne River—imagery that perhaps indirectly offers a wry comment on the utilitarian arguments over water made by the pro-damming advocates. It is hard not to find something slightly menacing, certainly foreboding, in the way the canvas draws our attention to the dynamic movement of the rushing water; the flows of color here stand in remarkable contrast to the relatively static and placid depictions of Hetch Hetchy that Albert Bierstadt had popularized earlier, in 1872. In Bierstadt’s large paintings, Hetch Hetchy unfolds as a golden, edenic valley in a typically panoptic manner, with a clearly stable, single point of perspective that masters and surveys the land, embodying what Angela Miller and others have called the imperial “scopic power” that constitutes so much nineteenth-century American landscape painting.⁵² Part of the stability recurring in Bierstadt’s Hetch Hetchy imagery also comes from him using the more familiar topography of neighboring Yosemite Valley, which is wider and broader—Bierstadt notoriously repackaged the famous valleys peaks and rock faces as the “newer,” lesser-known Hetch Hetchy, ostensibly for purposes of increasing the salability of his canvases.⁵³ By the time of his final Hetch Hetchy paintings, Keith had come to wholly reject the panoramic mode



FIGURE 3. William Keith, *Hetch Hetchy Side Canyon II*, ca. 1908. Oil on canvas, 22 x 28 inches (55.9 x 71.1 cm). Presented to the City and County of San Francisco by Gordon Blanding, 1941.5. (The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; photograph courtesy of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco)

made famous by Bierstadt and others from the “Rocky Mountain School,” as Keith would have known them. “A panorama is not fine art,” Keith declared, “and if deception were to be the test [of fine art] what could be more deceptive than some panorama. It is the way they are lighted that makes them so effective, and their bigness.”⁵⁴ Keith’s late Hetch Hetchy paintings accordingly never feature something like the panoptic sublime—the visual focus is rather in the rush of white water, a sense of destabilization furthered by the cropped bottom of the canvas that questions the locus of the observer in the visual field. Do we stand on land, or on water, or some indeterminate space between the two? The perspectival ambivalence captures the ambiguous future of the valley that was being so hotly contested in 1909.

Keith would have read in Swedenborg—particularly in the *Arcana Caelestia*—how floods of water corresponded to the “inundations” of falsities,

of the “desolations and temptations” excited by evil spirits. Thus, the biblical flood of Noah, according to Swedenborg, was not an actual terrestrial event, but a story symbolic of a spiritual struggle for the truth within human consciousness.⁵⁵ While Keith’s work resists didactic allegories or one-to-one correlations to Swedenborg, his late-phase work often captions his gorgeous sunsets and twilights with evocations of moods, or as Keith might have put it, “spiritual states”—these include, to add onto some of the titles already referenced, *Glory of the Heavens*, *Symphony of Peace*, *Revelation*. By contrast, the specificity of place in the Hetch Hetchy series was critical for their political valence as witnesses to the beauty of the valley that was in danger of being destroyed. Yet their aesthetics might also suggest a kind of transposition of private Swedenborgian mood into a public critique of the flood of “falsity” peddled by the prodevelopment lobby that saw Hetch Hetchy simply in terms of utilitarian extraction, as the easiest means for transforming San Francisco into a self-avowed “imperial city.”⁵⁶ Keith’s paintings, Muir’s writings, contend the lie that flooding Hetch Hetchy was necessary for fueling San Francisco’s rapacious growth.

Keith’s Hetch Hetchy paintings were exhibited locally in San Francisco but also in 1913 on the floor of the Senate during the congressional debates around the Raker Act.⁵⁷ The public circulation of Keith’s paintings must be understood as participating in a broader public campaign of Sierra Club encyclicals, editorials, and petitions to halt the dam. Muir’s rhetoric became more stridently theological, transposing Calvinist discourses of blasphemy and desecration to the wilderness pages of California landscape. The prodevelopment arguments “are curiously like those of the devil, devised for the destruction of the first garden,” he railed. Muir continued, working up to a sermonizing pitch at the end of his famous 1912 essay: “These temple destroyers, devotees of ravaging commercialism, seem to have a perfect contempt for Nature, and, instead of lifting their eyes to the God of the mountains, lift them to the Almighty Dollar. Dam Hetch Hetchy! As well dam for water-tanks the people’s cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the heart of man.”⁵⁸

Already by this point, the advocacy work of the Sierra Club was aligning itself with the reproducibility of landscape photography, a relationship that would culminate in the iconic work of Herbert Gleason, Ansel Adams, and Eliot Porter in the decades to come.⁵⁹ This link between conservation and landscape photography had already been firmly cemented by the essential work of Carlton Watkins, whose stunning panoramas of Yosemite in 1861 directly inspired Abraham Lincoln to sign federal legislation protecting those lands

for “public use, resort, and recreation” in perpetuity.⁶⁰ Watkins was deeply enmeshed in the literary and philosophical coteries that had originally brought Emerson to Yosemite Valley in 1871. As Tyler Green speculates, Emerson may have even cognized how the newly minted national park was a direct consequence of Emerson’s own formative ideas about nature, which had so marked the thought of the Unitarian minister Starr King who, in turn, shaped Frederic Law Olmsted’s writings about Yosemite that colored Lincoln’s pioneering federal legislation. Emerson returned to Concord from his California trip with two stunning Watkins photographs of California mountains—Mount Shasta and the Cathedral Spires in Yosemite Valley—which he purchased from Watkins’s gallery in San Francisco. The large photographs still hang in the sitting and dining room at the Emerson house in Concord.⁶¹

In Muir’s later polemic to protect Hetch Hetchy, his essay gestures to the “photographic illustrations” that originally accompanied the 1912 text as veritable proof that the valley, Eden-like, comprised a “high-lying natural landscape garden.” And yet, in terms of tenor and theological trope, Muir’s heated rhetoric shares more with the spiritual implications of Keith’s subjective canvases—much more, anyway, than the static black-and-white photographs in the volume that echo the panoramic stability of Bierstadt’s paintings of the valley.⁶² The displaying of Keith’s art in the Capitol building during the Raker hearings demonstrates how a Swedenborgian aesthetic could become constitutive to American environmental imaginaries; the failure of these paintings, and Muir’s words, to effectively negotiate legal regimes further point to the incommensurate ways early modern landscape in the United States was construed as both secular and sacred.⁶³ However, in both Keith’s paintings and the contemporary restoration ecology efforts to bring Hetch Hetchy “back” to some mythic, premodern original state, the indigenous claims on the land remain ignored or absent, and the valley is (re)imagined as sacrosanct: showing the ideological persistence of our ongoing “trouble with wilderness” and some of its significant ethical blind spots.⁶⁴

The Garden Church and Tree-Friends

Upon entering the San Francisco Swedenborgian Church, one is immediately struck by the resolute presence of trees and wood, from the large old-growth madrone trunks with their bark left on that support the roof, made of bare Oregon pine, to the assemblages of driftwood and branches that were left, like offerings, in the austere sanctuary. Though Muir seems to have made no direct statements anywhere about the structure itself where his friend Keith regularly

worshipped, the church's unorthodox use of rugged trees and found natural objects parallels Muir's rhetorical transformation of wilderness not only into "divine manuscripts," but also into ecclesiastical architecture (Hetch Hetchy as a cathedral). The church modeled what would become a hallmark of the West Coast Arts and Crafts style: a bringing of nature indoors that was meant to "harmonize" (a key, recurring word for the movement) between human and natural elements.⁶⁵ As one had to, unusually, move through a large garden in order to enter the door into the sanctuary after coming through the entrance from the street, the church acquired early on the moniker as "the Garden Church" of San Francisco—an aspect of its design that may refract Worcester's and others' awareness of Japanese temple layouts, where sacred shrines are entered only by first passing through a garden with a symbolic program.⁶⁶

The activities, aesthetics, and liturgical practices of the San Francisco Swedenborgians are embedded in a broader milieu of Californian spiritual experimentation and what Catherine Albanese and others have identified as a sort of distinct "nature religion" that began to be broadly practiced in the nineteenth century.⁶⁷ Like the many para-religious groups that functioned in extra-ecclesial spaces—such as the Sierra Club and, farther north, the Seattle-based Mountaineers—this milieu was avowedly countercultural, pitching their various back-to-nature programs as antidotes to modern industrialization, with its enervating urban alienation and ennui.⁶⁸ Muir's texts and the church space can be seen as mutually imbricated, each reinforcing a nature–culture dialectic through the careful construction of wilderness that, paradoxically, depends on the very space of culture for its fetishistic removal and therapeutic sanctity. If the garden church brings a precious piece of wilderness into the "imperial city" of San Francisco, we might find the inverse to be true of Muir's most raw and primal wilderness texts: that they rhetorically pivot toward a place of bourgeois pleasure and urban playground, indicating how intrinsic landscape tourism was to the conceptual construction of wilderness as a space apart. Muir's sensuous descriptions of the untrammelled wild were a kind of sales pitch for legal conservation and the inroads (often, literally) this enabled for middle-class leisure tourism, which could collectively enjoy and rejuvenate in a prelapsarian, precivilized Eden. Wilderness recreation was, as Evan Berry's important work reminds us, fully soteriological: a re-creation of American selves in fully Judeo-Christian frameworks.⁶⁹ But as Joni Mitchell would later lament, "They paved paradise, and put up a parking lot."

To juxtapose the church with Muir's nature writing can serve to underscore several tendencies that were typical of Bay Area fin-de-siècle nature-religion, illuminating both the efficacy of a wilderness aesthetic that facilitated a turn

toward the other-than-human as well as its ethical incoherence. Some of these rich ambiguities can be immediately located in the Swedenborgian church's extensive use of trees, and of a parallel strand in Muir's writing that celebrates those humans who were, in his words, "tree-friends."⁷⁰

Trees hold a special correspondence in Swedenborgian theology, signifying "perceptions and firsthand knowledge of what is good and true, which yield intelligence and wisdom"—indicating, thus, Swedenborg's Enlightenment project of a revelation based on science and truth.⁷¹ In his scattered remarks on the spiritual history of humankind, Swedenborg claimed—like many other eighteenth-century neoclassicists—that premodern "ancient" peoples had worshipped the Divine outdoors in groves of trees; this was, according to Swedenborg, because of their "science of correspondences," their knowledge of the spiritual semiotics of nature that modernity had subsequently lost.⁷² In view of the church's use of stained glass, gemlike in the darkened wooden interior, Joseph Worcester, the primary designer of the space, would have also been familiar with the fantastic passages in Swedenborg's *Earthlike Bodies Called Planets* that had described an interstellar visit to an alien planet where sacred architecture made out of living tree boughs twined around prisms of orange and blue light.⁷³

Historians concur that it is largely Worcester's singular vision that shaped the space and guided the aesthetic decisions around its construction.⁷⁴ In addition to all the Swedenborgian materials on groves and trees, Worcester would have been aware of Sampson Reed's *Observations on the Growth of the Mind* where, as noted in prior chapters, Reed's "language of things" articulates a longing for a poetics in accord with the asymmetry and variety of the organic natural world (Worcester's father, the Reverend Thomas Worcester, had established the Swedenborgian Church in Boston alongside Sampson Reed—both had been in the same graduating Harvard class that Emerson's older brother, William, had also been part of). These tenets had not only a consequential analogue in free-verse poetics; we can locate them in the tree-lined sanctuary of the Swedenborgian church, where the entire space deliberately disrupts neoclassic parallelism.⁷⁵ This is most noticeable in the enormous off-kilter fireplace on the back wall, deliberately askew from the central axis of the nave (and what kind of church places a massive fireplace in its sanctuary?). Next to the fireplace, and adorning the sanctuary around the altar on the opposite end, the early parishioners of the church interspersed boughs and branches of different trees found in the hills and in the driftwood detritus of nearby beaches.⁷⁶ There is nothing in the chancel that would indicate the space is a Christian church: where a crucifix or other traditional iconographic referent would be placed, one

finds instead a profusion of branches and leaves that appear even more stylized and flattened against the concrete stucco and wooden walls (fig. 4). In the earliest pictures of the sanctuary, one of Keith's temple gongs rests on the ground below the branches in the chancel, and in services at the church today, this same bell is used for meditative silences during Sunday services. The Japanese gong, the tree branches, the roughhewn bark limbs upholding the Oregon pine roof, the program of impressionistic landscape murals by Keith that line the north wall, like inset windows: these elements are all highly atypical features for Christian ecclesiastical architecture, and illustrate how the spiritual and aesthetic experimentation of the San Francisco Swedenborgians could inculcate a form of nature-religion at the turn of the century. An early visitor from the 1890s remarked that "it was as if everything you looked at were the result of natural growth. . . . It tranquilized and satisfied, as nature in the deep woods satisfied."⁷⁷

While the asymmetry and roughhewn tree trunks have their antecedents in Swedenborg and Sampson Reed, they might also betray Worcester's familiarity with the vernacular mountain lodge architecture that had been developed in Yosemite Valley from the 1860s onward. Worcester had first visited Yosemite in 1863, and spent several months working for James Hutchings at his hotel (just as Muir was to do later). In 1864, Hutchings renamed the hotel the "Hutchings



FIGURE 4. William Keith, *Reverend Joseph Worcester's House, Piedmont*, ca. 1883. Oil on canvas, 12.5 x 24 inches, signed at lower left; inscribed "S.F." at lower right. (Private collection; image reproduced courtesy of Alfred Harrison and the North Point Gallery, Berkeley, California)

House,” and began expanding on the original structure. He quickly attracted notoriety for building a large room—available for rent—around a 175-foot-tall cedar incense tree. The so-called “Big Tree Room” quickly became a gag and popular tourist attraction, frequently reproduced for stereoscopes and postcards. When Muir began working for Hutchings, perhaps inspired by this architecture that literally brought living nature indoors, he built his own homespun cabin in Yosemite around a stream.⁷⁸ As Freudenheim notes, “[S]eeing Muir’s cabin and other Yosemite structures with exposed, untreated wood inside and out, often with bark left on, may have inspired Worcester when he designed his homes and the Swedenborgian church.”⁷⁹ The San Francisco Swedenborgian church, the Hutchings House hotel, and Muir’s cabin all held in common a kind of domestication of wilderness—and in the case of the Hutchings House, even to the point of becoming kitsch: the popular photographs and stereoscopes of the Big Tree Room show bourgeois scenes unfolding in the cramped space, with well-dressed gentleman in suits reading, writing, or playing the guitar, while women in formal dresses sit and read the newspaper, all performing an indifferent obliviousness to the enormous tree trunk in their midst.⁸⁰ There is a kind of aesthetic contiguity between the San Francisco Swedenborgian church surprising the urban visitor with its interior wilderness, intimations of “raw nature” in the big city, and the domestic house and hotel in Yosemite, purportedly the locus of the wild, where the interior of the wilderness lodge ends up revealing the city: a couple self-consciously enacts the social conditions of civilization (doffed hat, rocking chair, newspaper, pipe), in spite of the gargantuan tree trunk. This is the same kind of impulse that led others to bore tunnels for roadways and paths through old-growth sequoia trees, a tourist gag that ultimately, in the end, weakened and killed so many of the ancient trees.⁸¹ The aesthetic of the sublime that sequestered wilderness as something cut off, existing outside of culture and human history, could harbor a civilizing violence within it. In his more overtly propagandist writings about the inchoate national park system, Muir tropes on the wilderness of Yosemite, Yellowstone, and elsewhere becoming transformed for the masses into a “pleasure ground,” a “summer pleasure park.” Yellowstone turns into a “Wonderland, and thousands of tourists and travelers stream into it every summer, and wander about it enchanted. . . . [It is] a grand health, pleasure, and study resort—a gathering place for travelers from all the world.”⁸² The site of wilderness slides into the cosmopolitan, a global circuit of middle-class, bourgeois relations. But as Solnit wryly notes, many of these spaces that miraculously appeared to Muir and others like “landscaped gardens” were indeed due

to centuries of careful forest-gardening and horticulture undertaken by local indigenous populations, who were subsequently forcibly removed, often by violent (if not overtly genocidal) means, from the federal boundaries created by the National Park system.⁸³

Like the presence of Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the heart of American wilderness in these cultural productions reveals not the Other of civilization or its antipode, but a kind of extension of (white) suburbia and its prejudices (Solnit, again: the contemporary experience of Yosemite Valley is so often as "a suburb without walls, rather than a wilderness with amenities").⁸⁴ While in a remote corner of the Alaskan tundra, stunned by the spectacular colors of the sky and the soil, Muir writes the following, perhaps even with his painter-poet friend William Keith in mind, whose paintings hung like windows onto nature in the Swedenborgian church, and on the walls of Muir's own study back in Martinez: "I was back a mile or two from the shore, reveling in this color-glory, and thinking how fine it would be could I cut a square of tundra sod of conventional picture size, frame it, and hang it among the paintings on my study walls at home, saying to myself, 'Such a Nature painting taken at random from any part of the thousand-mile bog would make the other pictures look dim and coarse.'"⁸⁵ It is a striking, signal moment of aesthetic perception where tundra melds into suburban study, further echoing the germination of the Sierra Club in Keith's San Francisco art studio, when the group informally met in a space that was enclosed by Keith's landscape paintings. The intense beauty of the wild takes Muir not more and deeper into some Alaskan "thing" out there in the tundra, in-and-of-itself, but back to the domestic confines of his house, where he cuts off the earth, framing and containing it like a painting.

Muir's wish to hang the tundra sod on his wall and the San Francisco church's own environmental aesthetics distinctly looks toward later earthworks undertaken by artists in the Land Art movement, in particular the tree-based sculptures of Andy Goldsworthy, who has several important installations that lie just a few blocks away from the church in the Presidio park of San Francisco. The sinuous lines of eucalyptus trunks in Goldsworthy's *Wood Line* (2011), or the slender, tapering pirouette of Monterey pines in his *Spire* (2008) directly (though not deliberately) echo the curving Arts and Crafts madrone boughs that hold up the ceiling of the nearby church. Goldsworthy's work has more recently become a major site of consideration for both eco-art historians and religious studies scholars who see his immersive, organic installations as sites of reenchantment.⁸⁶ It is a striking propinquity of place, a kind of loosening of discrete moments of time in a way that recalls the flash of Benjamin's *Jetztzeit*, that

has the largest public concentration of Goldsworthy's work in North America veritably lying at the doorstep of Worcester's garden church with its profusion of wooden assemblages in its sanctuary.⁸⁷

The San Francisco Swedenborgians, however, did not embrace the kind of earthy pantheism that has been located in Goldsworthy's work, which has more recently become sites for constructive (new) materialist theologies.⁸⁸ The church space remains true to Swedenborg's dualistic, Neoplatonic roots, as suggested by the symbolism of the central stained-glass roundel to which the eye is immediately brought, out of the flickering gloom of fireplace and dark wood paneling, located above the sanctuary chancel. Designed by Bruce Porter (William James's son-in-law), an artist who was, like Keith, also a church parishioner, the window shows a flowering bough of a tree. Below the bough a large birdbath with a perched dove occupies most of the frame, and again below the birdbath, three irises poke up. The window is awash in green and purple earth tones that mirror the subdued colors of the wood interior of the church. What becomes immediately apparent when the window is seen in person (and unfortunately not reproducible in photographs) is how the brightest flare of color in the glass is in the pink reflection of the tree blossoms in the water in the birdbath, and not in the blossom itself. The image in the water, in other words, the world it refracts back, seems to be the source of this central color for the tree's blooms, the center of attention in the middle of the roundel. There is no direct iconographic context or antecedent for this window, so the exact meaning intended by Porter or Worcester can only be surmised. Worcester would have been aware of Swedenborg's own iconographic program in the first Latin editions of his work, which Worcester had studied firsthand in the library at the New Church Theological School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Swedenborg had absorbed the craft of illustration and engraving while staying with different tradesmen's families in Amsterdam and London—the same working-class milieu that later produced William Blake—and Swedenborg subsequently came to create a number of unique ornaments and images for his theological works himself.⁸⁹ The image of a fountain in an enclosed garden, with a cherub watering flowers, and a small building at the end of an allée of trees, seems to have been one of Swedenborg's favorite title-page ornaments, as he used it for eight separate theological volumes, including the immanently themed *Divine Love and Wisdom*. Within the alchemical and Neoplatonic textual traditions with which Swedenborg was familiar, a fountain or a pool of water within an enclosed garden space carries deep iconographic resonance, functioning as a symbol of doctrines of emanationism as well as the "fountain of wisdom" that lay at the heart of so many esoteric teachings.⁹⁰ In

the Swedenborgian church, the pool of water in the birdbath, with its gash of pink blossom sharper, brighter than the tree itself, evokes this Idealist tradition, and suggests how the aesthetic totality of the church is meant to draw our inner eyes to a spiritual world *within* the natural. In no way can Worcester's garden church be seen as merely a temple to nature itself; it is meant to get beyond the "natural landscape" to the (spiritual) "state of feeling which the landscape produces," as Keith put it about his own aims with his painting. Swedenborgian theology remains unequivocally Neoplatonic and dualist, even as this position is somewhat modified by Swedenborg's immanent tendencies toward a kind of panentheism. "In hell, all worship Nature," Swedenborg darkly warns; "to worship the sun and the moon of this world and bow down to them, signifies a love of self and the falsities that spring from love of self, and it is said that such would be cut off."⁹¹

Swedenborg's correspondential system depends wholly on the keen distinction between the natural and the spiritual (the latter flowing into, shaping the former), as Wouter Hanegraaff and others have made clear. To conflate the two would be to collapse the foundational structure of his spiritual semiotics. Swedenborg "reintroduces an element of dualism which posits the superiority of spirit over matter," as Hanegraaff phrases it, at a historical juncture when esoteric theories of correspondences were generally turning more toward an animated conceptualization of nature.⁹² For an aesthetics based on Swedenborgian correspondences, like Keith's, the purpose of art was to point inward toward this spiritual reality behind the outer "husk" of nature (this was, again, Keith's critique of Muir, that he never got beyond the outer "husk" of the material world). In the series of paintings that Keith made of Joseph Worcester's Piedmont cottage—the home that Worcester had built for himself in 1878 in the unincorporated hills above Oakland—the dramatic rooflines of the house are made to mirror the sloping diagonal lines of Mount Tamalpais across the bay, and the pastured hills that spill down to the bay below: the painted representation of the home "corresponds," in other words, to the topographies of land and horizon, creating a parallelism for the eye between natural forms and the shape of Worcester's bungalow (fig. 5). With this kind of integrated harmony, no wonder, perhaps, that it "came nearer to Jack London's ideal than any [other] house that he ever dwelt in," as London's daughter Charmian later remembered.⁹³ Contemporary reviews of Keith's paintings of Worcester's home seem to have responded to the painter's idealist intentions: "This insight into the reality of nature," enthused an art critic in the *Argonaut*, "by which its ideality is discovered, is the goal which [Keith] has in view. Nature is there as an evidence to the senses; *but through it all may be seen a higher meaning.*"⁹⁴



FIGURE 5. Interior of the San Francisco Swedenborgian Church, ca. 1895. (Collection of the San Francisco Swedenborgian church; photographer unknown; image reproduced courtesy of the San Francisco Swedenborgian Church)

But, just as our eye in the Swedenborgian church is drawn up to the reflected pink glow in the fountain water of the stained-glass window, getting “beyond” the tree itself, does such spiritualizing idealism end up jettisoning the actual ground and the particularities of a place—and a cognizance of the environmental conditions necessary for a living-with nature that Aldo Leopold would later call a “land ethic”? The Swedenborgian church embodies a great paradox in the preciousness of its nature on display that yet depended on the wholesale destruction of old-growth redwoods and madrone trees. Worcester went to great lengths to procure the madrone trunks for his church, apparently against the wishes of the trees’ owners in the Santa Cruz mountains, to whom the trees were “very dear.” Freudenheim observes the irony in the church helping to launch an architectural movement that was devoted to bringing nature home, indoors, that yet through its immediate popularity, and subsequent boom of the Craftsman building craze in the Bay Area, led to the rapine destruction of redwood forests along the northern California and Oregon coasts.⁹⁵ Worcester

further oversaw acquiring the old-growth redwood for the church through his parishioner Mary Curtis Richardson, another painter (and student of William Keith's) who had married a rich Canadian lumber merchant. Worcester was by no means the only one in the Swedenborgian circle to manifest these paradoxes, which were in tension with the conservationist tendencies that Swedenborgian theology could simultaneously enable. Keith first became financially successful as a painter while working under commission for an Oregon navigation and railroad company that wanted dramatic landscapes of the Pacific Northwest for purposes of encouraging commercial development and logging.⁹⁶ Keith's ensuing canvases—such as *On the Columbia River* (1869), and *Sunrise, Columbia River* (1869)—feature figures in the foreground evaluating the pink horizon of an undeveloped woodland that unfolds in the morning before them: the images are veritable rosy prospects, and anything but innocent, containing none of the marked ambivalence that characterizes similar commissioned paintings made by George Inness for the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western Railroad in the 1850s (Inness's *Lackawanna Valley* is discussed in greater detail in chapter 5, as it has become a signal point of reference within American ecocriticism). Moreover, later in the 1870s, Keith began speculating in mining stocks, subsequently becoming very wealthy as a result.⁹⁷ The San Francisco Swedenborgian church's beautiful program of the four landscape paintings on the north wall, showing forests of California live oaks and the golden hills and fields of the Bay Area, were painted from a position of privilege and wealth enabled by the most rapacious form of extractive capitalism on the planet. This ambivalence is not that different from Swedenborg's own, if we recall the intrinsic ways that the Swedish mining industry, the larger open-pit iron and copper mine at Falun, fundamentally shaped Swedenborg's wealth, scientific output, and later theology, as chapter 2 has discussed at greater length.⁹⁸ The mining technologies propounded in Swedenborg's great *Principia* helped generate the carbon-based economies of the Industrial Revolution, and remain part of the ideological DNA of the Anthropocene.

Muir's consistent attention to trees as beings with even something like the legal status of rights stands in stark contrast to this sort of instrumentalization.⁹⁹ His writing, as the new century dawned, increasingly went on the offensive against the "tree killers" in the forestry and agricultural industries, those "wool and mutton men" who were "spreading death and confusion in the fairest groves and gardens ever planted."¹⁰⁰ Muir's fury is at times incandescent, anticipating the later polemics of Earth First! and Edward Abbey (who both in no small measure are deeply marked by Muir's wilderness gospel). In the preceding quote, taken from "The American Forests," which had first

appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1897 (two years after Worcester had built the Swedenborgian church, using so much old-growth timber), the threatened trees are endowed with a “religion” that vanishes under the ax and saw of the woodsman: “[E]very summer thousands of acres of priceless forests, with their underbrush, soil, springs, climate, scenery, and religion, are vanishing away in clouds of smoke, while, except in the national parks, not one forest guard is employed.” Throughout his writing Muir grants trees a kind of ontological being and agency of their own, and seeks to understand what they are communicating. Rather than this constituting a very outdated sort of Romantic pathetic fallacy, Muir’s openness to trees-as-persons accords with new materialist ethics, as well as the recent cutting-edge research undertaken by the German forester Peter Wohlleben (among others). Muir’s attunement to the communicability of trees is borne out by Wohlleben’s contemporary scientific findings on a true kind of arboreal semiotics, the ways various species use networks of fungal biochemistry and pollen to reciprocally communicate with one another (if at a much slower tempo than the human).¹⁰¹ In the end, Muir’s locating of the trees in a kind of Uexküllian *Umwelt* diminishes the place of the human, or at least greatly qualifies it.¹⁰² This is clear at the end of a famous moment in the *Mountains of California* where Muir rides out an intense windstorm on the top of a hundred-foot Douglas spruce, listening to the “varying tones of individual trees—Spruce, and Fir, and Pine, and leafless Oak” as they thrashed and bent about. Muir concludes: “We all travel the milky way together, trees and men; but it never occurred to me until this storm-day, while swinging in the wind, that trees are travelers, in the ordinary sense. They make many journeys, not extensive ones, it is true; but our own little journeys, away and back again, are only little more than tree-wavings—many of them not so much.”¹⁰³

This equivalizing kinship of humans with trees is also evocative of Swedenborg’s own charming device from his *Worship and Love of God* prose-poem, where the animals bear antlers and horns that resemble branches as hereditary signs of their arboreal descent from the tree-life that first hatched out of the primordial egg of the world, birthed by the father sun from the same inseminating life force that produces Adam the first-born. As Muir puts it, again: “[O]ne fancies a heart like our own must be beating in every crystal and cell, and we feel like stopping to speak to the plants and animals as friendly fellow mountaineers.”¹⁰⁴

Herald of a New Gospel

Muir's broad ethical concern for the other-than-human extended beyond an animating regard for the trees; it is also present in his "Stickeen" narrative that recounts his Alaskan adventuring with the eponymous dog. Just as Joseph Worcester's Arts and Crafts "bungalow" in the East Bay, built according to the same Swedenborgian principles of correspondence as the later church, provided a creative backdrop for the drafting of Jack London's classic *Call of the Wild*, so does Swedenborgian theology drape itself over the making of Muir's famous dog story, more or less contemporaneous to the creation of London's most famous naturalist novel. Muir began to write out a plan for his story on the flyleaf of a John Brown volume of stories and essays: "Stickeen," he scrawls, "Like Swedenborg a Herald of a new gospel." The Dr. Brown books had been given to Muir by Keith; both likely appreciated the Scottish physician's evocation of rural life and the landscape of their respective childhoods. Brown was an enormously popular author whose realistic portrayals of human-animal relationships mark him today as a kind of forgotten Victorian-era James Herriot. "Rab and His Friends" and other dog stories in Brown's *Horae Subsecivae* (1858) prompted Muir to recollect his earlier exploits with Stickeen, jotted quickly down here and there in the book, which then culminated with Muir publishing, in 1897, "An Adventure with a Dog and a Glacier," and later on, the expanded text called *Stickeen* in 1909. Both published versions, however, drop all references to the Swedish mystic that first appear in the notes around *Horae Subsecivae*.

The narrative of *Stickeen* is fairly straightforward: in 1880, Muir sets out to explore the icy regions of lower Alaska, and befriends en route a strange, quirky little dog named Stickeen, so-called because of the way the local Stickeen (Tlingit) indigenous peoples had claimed the creature as a kind of "good-luck totem," a "universal favorite; petted, protected, and admired wherever he went, and regarded as a mysterious fountain of wisdom."¹⁰⁵ At the outset, thus, Stickeen is linked metonymically, totemlike, to Muir's encounters with the Tlingit peoples. One morning while camping in backcountry wilderness along the coast, a fierce storm awakens Muir's curiosity, and he sets out into the glacial moraine and steep mountains to better observe the weather (or rather, to absorb it: Muir's witnessing of the storm becomes, typically, an ecstatic, sublime kind of contact). The plucky black dog follows Muir, despite Muir's remonstrance for him to return to the camp, and the two find themselves in dire straits when Muir loses his way among the dangerous crevasses on a glacier. When night begins to fall, the two must leap and slide together over precipitous

drops in a desperate attempt to find their way back to warmth and safety. The intensity of their death-defying experience bonds the two mortals deeply, and the text closes with their joyous return to camp, and Stickeen's ultimate disappearance. But the new gospel heralded by the mysterious Stickeen, this good news that Muir claimed—surprisingly, given the brevity of the narrative—was the “hardest thing” that he ever had written, nevertheless remains something of an enigma.

Within its generic parameters of the early twentieth-century wilderness-adventure tale, Muir smuggles in a deanthropocentrizing “ray of relation” (to put it in Emersonian terms) between human and dog. Muir's new understanding of Stickeen after their near-death experience emphatically takes on the aura of religious epiphany: “So hidden before, [Stickeen] was now transparent, and one could see the workings of his heart and mind like the movements of a clock out of its case. His voice and gestures, hopes and fears, were so perfectly human that none could mistake them; while he seemed to understand every word of mine.”¹⁰⁶ Muir's sense of Stickeen as “something human” is rendered overtly theological through the poetic epigraph that opens the later novella, a poem by Josiah Gilbert Holland (a figure as once famous, now as equally forgotten, as Dr. John Brown). Muir excerpts the portions of Holland's poem that ponder

I look into your great brown eyes,
Where love and loyal homage shine,
And wonder where the difference lies
Between your soul and mine.¹⁰⁷

At the end of the narrative, this “transparency” of Stickeen has become a figurative portal for Muir's expanded, ethical sense of connection to other-than-human beings: “[O]ur storm-battle for life brought [Stickeen] to light, and through him as through a window I have ever since been looking with deeper sympathy into all my fellow mortals”—the mortals being both human and the other-than-human, brought together by a shared condition as earthbound, death-tilting creatures.¹⁰⁸ This chthonic dimension of the story that causes, on the one hand, Muir to decenter the place of the human while, on the other, to expand agency and being to include the other-than-human, strikes the tone of the same theological heterodoxy (if not heresy) that Muir entertained in his private journal while traveling through the Florida Keys in 1867, written during his incredible walking journey from Indiana to the Gulf Coast, when he was twenty-nine years old.¹⁰⁹ Biographers of Muir and environmental historians concur that this meditation, instigated by an illness that nearly killed Muir and

his wondering observations on the tropical profusion of life flourishing around him, is a central event in his life, formative in developing his later environmental consciousness.¹¹⁰

Published only posthumously in 1916 as part of *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*, Muir's cogitation on the diminished place of the human in the cosmos probed the limits of theological (and Transcendentalist) orthodoxy. "Cedar Keys" deploys some of the same language that appears much later in *Stickeen*—most strikingly, for example, the phrase "fellow mortals":

From the dust of the earth, from the common elementary fund, the Creator has made Homo Sapiens. From the same material he has made every other creature, however noxious and insignificant to us. *They are earth-born companions and our fellow mortals.* The fearfully good, the orthodox, of this laborious patchwork of modern civilization cry "Heresy" on every one whose sympathies reach a single hair's breadth beyond the boundary epidermis of our own species. Not content with taking all of earth, they also claim the celestial country as the only ones who possess the kind of souls for which that imponderable empire was planned. . . . Plants are credited with but dim and uncertain sensation, and minerals with positively none at all. But why may not even a mineral arrangement of matter be endowed with sensation of a kind that we in our blind exclusive perfection can have no manner of communication with?¹¹¹

Muir's sensating minerals here are "vibrant matter," his framing of these questions exhibit what Jane Bennett has called "geoaffect": a sensitivity to the fundamental vitality of matter that "is born of a methodological commitment to avoid anthropocentrism or biocentrism."¹¹²

Muir's wondering about the agential feelings of a rock are also simultaneous, perhaps not coincidentally, to the inchoate field of psychometrics, which flourished between the Civil War and the close of the century. As Dana Luciano has shown, this somewhat odd meeting of geological earth sciences with the telepathic medium of spiritualism (a field diffused with Swedenborg's presence) produced a body of esoteric writing around what she calls, following Michael Taussig, "unthought zones of materiality."¹¹³ Psychometrists like William and Elizabeth Denton attempted to listen, empirically, to the spiritual resonances and acoustical auras of material objects—trees and rocks, fossils, sand and soil—and to telegraph their communicability through the (usually female) body of a medium under a trance-state. As a kind of "enchanted geography," as Luciano puts it, in spite of its bizarre methods, psychometry nevertheless enabled some nineteenth-century persons to record their *feelings* of deep time, and to experience a kind of materialized connection between their bodies and

others. “In sensory psychometry,” as Luciano puts it, “a certain pushback takes place in the medium’s body, so that even as psychometric geology instrumentalizes its specimens, the process of doing so also briefly *things* the human body, making it conscious of sensations that cannot be easily reaggregated into what it means to be a person, or even alive.”¹¹⁴

When it came to geology, however, Muir clearly preferred his friend Joseph Le Conte’s modern modeling to these more popularized distillations of spiritualist earth science. Muir was nevertheless still deeply, if covertly, interested in the paranormal (even if he notoriously interrupted the chicanery of a séance at a friend’s house in San Francisco).¹¹⁵ Stickeen’s proximity to Swedenborg might be properly understood when paralleled with Muir’s marginalia in the Swedenborg volumes, where it seems Muir’s interest in the seer lay more in Swedenborg’s purported psychic powers than in the theology itself.¹¹⁶ The majority of Muir’s underlinings in Wilkinson’s biography of Swedenborg, for example, signal attention to Swedenborg’s purported telepathic powers that later attracted the interest of Immanuel Kant and others. Perhaps Muir was trying to find himself here, and make sense of his own inexplicable experiences of clairvoyance and premonition (including the death of his mother). Whatever the cause or coincidence, Muir’s paranormal encounters were essentially moments of communicability—the transmission of some intelligible feeling or thought inexplicably across barriers of time, matter, or space. At its heart, this seems to be the electric transmission at the center of *Stickeen*, where a profound kind of communication—if not communing—takes Muir out of himself into a transformative contact with a dog, that then broadens the radius of his ethical attachments: “I have ever since been looking with deeper sympathy into all my fellow mortals.”

Swedenborg’s panentheism lay on the fringes of orthodox Christianity (and porously seeped into various spiritualist phenomena, like psychometry), but Muir would have also found his own spiritual inclinations toward the other-than-human corroborated by the indigenous traditions that he encountered. On the same Alaskan trip as when he met Stickeen, Muir also recorded rich conversations and observations of the native peoples who traveled alongside them, including Stickeen tribesmen. Among Muir’s traveling companions was Samuel Hall Young, a Presbyterian minister and missionary who was on good footing with many local tribes in Alaska. Muir seems to relish reporting an evening when a Stickeen friend, Kadachan, paused in conversation at the night campfire as a wolf howl broke across the way—“Kadachan puzzled the minister with a question, ‘Have wolves souls?’ The Indians believe that they have, giving as foundation for their belief that they are wise creatures who know how to catch

seals and salmon.”¹¹⁷ Though Muir, then, left no answer (at least in writing) to this question himself, soul-filled Stickeen, with his eponymous name linking him to Kadachan, would seem to echo a reply in Muir’s published story, many years later (*Travels in Alaska* was published posthumously, after *Stickeen* had first appeared). This animistic spreading of a soul into the other-than-human was not a view that would have been shared by Joseph Worcester and the San Francisco Swedenborgians; Swedenborg remained too much of an eighteenth-century Rationalist to lose his grip on an anthropocentric hierarchy, and was fairly explicit throughout his theology: believing that animals had souls was simply a “crazy notion,” a “hallucination” caused by the deluded love of our own human intelligence; humans are born as animals, and inherently inclined toward evil, “but become human” through spiritual regeneration and recognition that “nature is dead,” except when it is seen as an emanation of spirit.¹¹⁸

In the end, Stickeen seems to elude the conclusion of Muir’s narrative, perhaps in a way analogous to the slippery place of Native Americans in Muir’s nature writing as a whole—which certainly remains one of the more contested aspects of Muir’s legacy.¹¹⁹ There is not adequate space remaining to rehearse these debates in environmental history and critical biography here; suffice it to observe that Muir’s perspective on indigenous people certainly evolved from one of stereotypical ethnocentric disdain, even racism, to a growing appreciation for native cultures that were under threat from the same civilizing forces that drove Muir himself out into the wilderness. An oft-cited moment in Muir’s prose of his purported racism are his earlier observations of the Mono Paiute who lived in Yosemite, and yet “somehow seemed to have no right place in the landscape”; they were “mostly ugly, and some of them altogether hideous. The dirt on their faces was fairly stratified, and seemed so ancient and so undisturbed it might almost possess a geological significance.”¹²⁰

Muir’s later recollection and writing about Stickeen was an intense experience, coming after his transformative encounters with tribes of the Pacific Northwest, and he uses the present tense for a sense of immediacy at the very end of his dog story, how “it all comes rushing and roaring to mind as if I were in the heart of it . . . I see little Stickeen, I hear his cries for help and his shouts of joy.”¹²¹ But then the narrative dispenses with the beloved dog, more or less by the force of a single sentence: “After my work for the season was done I departed for California, and I never saw the dear little fellow again.” Muir continues to explain that he anxiously sent letters to Alaska, asking after the dog’s fate, and subsequently learned “that in the summer of 1883 he was stolen by a tourist at Fort Wrangel and taken away on a steamer. His fate is wrapped in mystery.”

Such opacity, after all the language about the Stickeen as transparent portal, is striking, and it might be a moment where Muir's narrative becomes inadvertently entangled with the larger cultural dispossession of indigenous peoples' lands that Muir's project of wilderness enchantment tended to reify (or at the very least, cloak and obscure). Tourism and colonialism "stole" Stickeen, vanishing the dog from Muir's purview in spite of his intense affection, which are the very same cultural forces that rendered indigenous Americans such as the Mono Paiute as a past obsolescence, severed from any particular futurity of a place like Yosemite Valley (the dirt on the Paiute, who "have no right place in the landscape," "so ancient and undisturbed it might possess geological significance"). This bifurcated vision of wilderness continues to ghost the ongoing indigenous struggles for recognition of sacred sites now deemed federal wilderness conservation areas, even if such land—today—is no longer overlaid with the same spiritualizing "language of things" that Swedenborg's theology had once effected for Muir and the San Francisco Swedenborgians.¹²²