

# On Being "Anti-Sublimed": Early Tales of Fear and Glory at Niagara Falls

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Number 39-40, 2009

Culture — Natures in Canada  
Culture — natures au Canada

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/040825ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/040825ar>

[See table of contents](#)

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## Publisher(s)

Conseil international d'études canadiennes

## ISSN

1180-3991 (print)  
1923-5291 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

## Cite this article

Revie, L. L. (2009). On Being "Anti-Sublimed": Early Tales of Fear and Glory at Niagara Falls. *International Journal of Canadian Studies / Revue internationale d'études canadiennes*, (39-40), 109-127. <https://doi.org/10.7202/040825ar>

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**Abstract**

*This essay reads accounts of travel to Niagara from the 1790s-1840s through the lens of the sublime and the picturesque. Beginning with masculine adventurers who have special claims to the Burkean sublime, and moving onto later male and female travellers who master their feelings of weakness and irrationality through a more Kantian-based approach to reasoning, the essay ultimately isolates the critical stage in sublime logic when incomprehension diverts to meaning and presents this breaking through as a discursive strategy the author calls "the anti-sublime."*

**Résumé**

*Dans cet essai, l'auteure examine des récits de voyages à Niagara des années 1790 aux années 1840 sous l'angle du sublime et du pittoresque. Elle commence par évoquer les aventuriers de sexe masculin se réclamant du sublime burkien, pour s'intéresser ensuite aux voyageurs, hommes et femmes, qui maîtrisent leurs sentiments de faiblesse et d'irrationalité en adoptant une démarche argumentative plus kantienne. Pour finir, elle isole l'étape cruciale de la logique du sublime, où l'on chemine du non-sens vers le sens, cette percée se présentant sous forme de stratégie discursive qu'elle nomme « l'anti-sublime ».*

Europeans knew about Niagara before the *Mayflower* landed, but the Falls were not "discovered" until 1678 when a party of French explorers set out to navigate the upper Great Lakes. Over the next century, the area around Niagara was occupied by British and American militia, then traversed by natural historians, entrepreneurs, and tourists, yet women did not begin to record their visits until late in the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The numerous wars on the frontier, the difficulties and inconveniences of travel, the barely serviceable accommodations, and the fact that women did not fight wars or generally undertake inconvenient trips account for the scarcity of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century women travellers.

As Niagara Falls became increasingly accessible during the first three decades of the nineteenth century, more people flocked there and not coincidentally, women's accounts of travel peaked too<sup>2</sup>. Traditions of viewing drawn from eighteenth-century aesthetic theories of sublimity and picturesqueness influenced the patterns of travel for both men and women.<sup>3</sup> In this essay, I show how the writings of Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant,

and William Gilpin influence the ways gender and subjectivity are contoured in travel to Niagara. The first section recalls the Burkean emphasis on both an unintelligible terror and an active response to the challenge of the sublime. As well, it outlines a kind of rationalism drawn not only from Kant's masculine ideal of sublimity as a state of moral consciousness, but also from Gilpin's picturesque mode and his emphasis on the empiricist language of travellers' accounts as a trope of masculinity. Then I look at select late-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth-century travel tales to show the shared and sustaining masculinist biases of sublimity and picturesqueness inflected in writing about the Falls.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, I argue that the sublime does not unfold in these Niagara accounts according to a discreet linear chronology in which incomprehension simply yields to a heightened state of being. There are various negotiations that need to take place for this shift to occur. To analyze the series of discrete events in the passage to sublimity, I follow the example of twentieth-century literary critic Paul Endo who reconfigures the discourse for Romantic author Percy Shelley into "the presublime," the fully sublimed (which in turn has its own process of development), and "the negative sublime."<sup>5</sup> Like Endo, I also map the aesthetic on its path but emphasize different sequences in the chain. If Endo's re-emplotted Shelleyan sublime challenges the convention, it's at the end point, in the naming of the negative sublime. The Niagara sublime, as I see it, does not finish on the same link. It begins with "presublime" irrationality yet in place of being fettered, respondents experience a loop I call "the anti-sublime" that shapes a breakthrough to a more elevated positive state (and not to Endo's negative sublime characterized by "an awful doubt"). To trace the course of being anti-sublimed, then, I isolate the critical junction after the subject admits to irrationality and explore the sequential events that mediate the emotions or establish a state of reason. Accordingly, before breaking through, the respondent is never "fully sublimed" because he or she repudiates incomprehension by deflecting the fear and terror of the Niagara experience onto something, or someone else.<sup>6</sup>

Of the three aesthetics that dominated taste and travel in the later decades of the eighteenth century and early decades of the nineteenth, two of them—the sublime and the picturesque—have been culturally coded "male."<sup>7</sup> Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) makes a clear distinction between sublimity and another category—beauty—along gender lines. Burke defines the beautiful as something that flatters the viewer into compliance, whereas the sublime has the power to overwhelm or "master" the spectator through a series of inundations including sensory deprivation, fatigue, giddiness, and a kind of paralysis that leads to protests of inexpressibility. On the other hand, the less self-destructive philosophy of beauty carries with it notions of amusement and admiration, along with imperfection, which Burke equates with women:

Women are very sensible of this; for which reason, they learn to lisp, to totter in their walk, to counterfeit weakness, and even sickness. In all this, they are guided by nature. Beauty in distress is much the most affecting beauty. Blushing has no little power; and modesty in general, which is a tacit allowance of imperfection, is itself considered as an amiable quality, and certainly heightens every other that is so.<sup>8</sup>

The association of beauty with the physical concomitants of "weakness" and "sickness," and with women, reinforces how its opposite—the sublime—is thought of as more vigorous, and male. Further, Burke sees sublime *acts* as the antidote to the dissolution produced by the beautiful (and by women): "The best remedy for all these evils is exercise or labour; and labour is a surmounting of difficulties and exertion of the contracting power of the muscles" (135). This counteraction, which divides the sublime from the beautiful—the men from the women—forms the basis of what twentieth-century critic Frances Ferguson calls Burke's "neat binarism."<sup>9</sup> Ferguson's contemporary Tom Furniss also agrees that Burke's central task is to develop a set of theoretical principles which will demonstrate that the sublime and the beautiful are "extremely repugnant to each other."<sup>10</sup> Furniss distinguishes the Burkean dualities as distinctions between pleasure and pain (associated with sublimity) and between pleasure and delight (associated with beauty). Further, Furniss's analysis of the *Enquiry* postulates that a subject's response to that most self-destructive quality—pain—is crucial to Burke's account of the sublime. For example, the inflicted may either remain immobilized in the painful situation, or act to overcome the sensation. Yet Furniss makes it clear that to be fixated in Burke's second phase (pain) is potentially to submit to a kind of madness marked by a repetition compulsion: only the weak, passive and effeminate get trapped in at this juncture and they do not experience pure reason, "vaunting joy" and "elevation" (26-33).

Burke, who equates strength and agility with masculinity, and with the sublime, reinforces gender divisions when he associates weakness and vulnerability with femininity and with the beautiful. Similarly, in his early essay *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*<sup>11</sup> (1764), Immanuel Kant also separates those experiences which are regarded as sublime from those described as beautiful: "The fair sex has just as much understanding as the male, but it is a beautiful understanding, whereas ours [the males] should be a deep understanding, an expression that signifies identity with the sublime."<sup>12</sup>

Consistent with the tradition that separates masculinity from femininity, reason from affect, judgement from emotion, the elevating moral aspect of Kant's sublime—"a deep understanding"—does not apply to women.<sup>13</sup> For both Burke and Kant then, the beautiful/feminine is antithetical to the

sublime/masculine, and woman functions in this paradigm as both an illustration (of beauty), and a negation (of sublimity).<sup>14</sup>

The picturesque, another aesthetic concept, is often conceptualized as a link between the sublime and the beautiful.<sup>15</sup> Initially, the picturesque meant "what pleases the eye" and had no particular reference to landscape, travel or gender. Then, Reverend William Gilpin, who relied on picturesque concepts in his sketches and in his writings, published journals of his trips around Britain in the late eighteenth century and established the craze for picturesque tourism. Gilpin's notion of the picturesque was given a more extended theoretical discussion in *Three Essays* (1792) where he applied a refined code of appraisal and judgement to make the point that a picturesque sight provided amusement (like the beautiful) and evoked admiration (similar to the sublime).<sup>16</sup> Twentieth-century critics envision the picturesque as mostly a transitional fashion that not only blurs boundaries between the aesthetics of sublimity and beauty, but also between various other discourses, including a whole constellation of natural and pseudo-sciences.<sup>17</sup> For example, in Gilpin's *Observations, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty Made in the Year 1772 ... [in] the Mountains, and Lakes of Cumberland, and Westmoreland*, he experiments with the human auditory response by firing off muskets to measure sound levels and psychological reactions to noise. Through the lens of picturesque aesthetics, nature was not something to fear; rather, for Gilpin it was meant to be a testing ground for various scientific theories. As such, the picturesque became associated with what Jacqueline Labbe calls "the controlling male gaze" that needs to correct flaws in "Mother Nature."<sup>18</sup> Hence, picturesque narratives like Gilpin's not only formalized the connection between travel, technology and "expert," often scientific language, they also promoted the type of "manly" adventurer deemed capable of such explorations.

The commentators who journey to Niagara and frame their writings with sublimity or picturesqueness record dangerous expeditions down rickety ladders, over slippery rocks, and into the caverns behind the waterfalls. To analyze how sightseeing activities become a test of strength and how a series of trials and encounters with the unpredictable become masculine adventures, I look at four male writers from the late 1790s up to the mid-nineteenth century. Beginning with Isaac Weld (1796), Timothy Bigelow (1805) and Christian Schultz (1807), I show how they are influenced by Burke's sublime and Gilpin's picturesque. When we move onto Walter Henry (1843), it will be argued that he applies two forms of sublimity—Burke's and Kant's. My evaluation will include discussions on how each respondent controls an extravagance of feeling through rhetorical modes or other moderating influences, and how, at the same time, each devises exercises or experiments with equipment, and with manly quest-tests, to remove or overcome the pain associated with the

unintelligible, and to create a more detached spirit of connoisseurship. These strategies allow the individual to bypass the humiliation and abasement associated with submission to the painful stage in order to make progress toward the more elevated realm of the sublime.

If the sublime and the picturesque by Burke, Kant and Gilpin help to fashion masculinity, do women travellers to the Falls participate in these modes of discourse, muscular feats and privileges of visibility, or do they conform to both stereotype and behavioural expectation and get stuck in the overwhelmed phase without a breakthrough?<sup>19</sup> In the last section of this essay, I focus on one exceptional woman traveller at Niagara—Harriet Martineau (1834-36)—who uses the strategies of reason, posture and science related to all three theorists to overcome the culturally limited mode of viewing reserved for her. In fact, Martineau's discomfort with being "undone" sees her deflecting her hysteria onto another female tourist and during this anti-sublime episode she is able, like the male travellers, to move into a more rational state of "doing" Niagara.

British traveller Isaac Weld's late eighteenth century impression of the waterfalls is the first to focus on an object—a ladder—used to facilitate access to the sublime and to fulfill a need to prove his masculinity at Niagara. Weld, who went to the Falls in September 1796, begins his Niagara section in *Travels Through the States of North America ... during the years 1795, 1796, and 1797* by providing quantitative information on the cataract's breadth, depth and width before pronouncing the place "truly sublime"<sup>20</sup> then moving on to perform a feat that involved climbing down to the water's edge on "Mrs. Simcoe's Ladder."<sup>21</sup> According to Weld, this device made the journey down the cliff face known as Table Rock less terrifying:

[We] proceeded to ... Mrs. Simcoe's Ladder, the ladders having been originally placed there for the accommodation of the lady of the late governor. This route is much more frequented than the other; the ladders, properly so called, are strong, and firmly placed, and none of them, owing to the frequent breaks in the cliff, are required to be of such a great length but what even a lady might pass up or down them without fear of danger. (104)

Weld's reference to "the frequent breaks in the cliff" is a layman's assessment of processes such as erosion and denudation that altered the terrain downstream from the waterfalls. According to the passage above, the ladder facilitates safe, easy access past these terrestrial eruptions, just as it was intended to do. His description seems to encourage parity between travellers too, but this impression is contradicted near the end of the paragraph. The following addendum appears confusing, as it suggests that the climbing apparatus stops at a certain point and that the journey to the base of the Falls (*sans* ladder) is not an easy one: "To descend over the rugged rocks, however, the whole way down to the bottom of the cliff, is

certainly no trifling undertaking, and few ladies, I believe, could be found of sufficient strength of body to encounter the fatigue of such an expedition" (104).

Weld's afterthought, which contains a persuasive message for the woman traveller and a direct reference in words like "sufficient strength of body" to the masculine tradition of Edmund Burke's sublimity, shows how the deployment of aesthetic tropes contours gender. Here a ladder is used to weed the strong from the weak and ultimately, to allow men to seek a level of experience unavailable to women. Yet the ladder also reduces the risk for those manly adventurers brave enough to descend below Table Rock. We see this in Weld's description of the riverscape when he admits that the ladder provides a safe vantage point to witness Niagara's sublimity: "When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience" (40).

When the "terror" has been mediated, Weld is able to reach the third delight-inducing phase of Burke's sublime. He has achieved this by modifying the "danger" (with the ladder) and by creating a distance from "painful" emotions. The way he manages the danger and pain without being mastered is what I call the anti-sublime. In Weld's case, the breakthrough puts him in a bind though: he does not want to admit to being too secure on the ladder because that would emasculate him, so he negotiates this dangerous slippage into effeminacy by warning the weak, and women, away. His circumspect tale of danger and delight unleashed a masculine spirit of adventure which I call "the ladder tournament." In the next two accounts, writers link naturalist observation of Niagara with feats of physical endurance and in the meantime try to outdo Weld, and prove their own worth, by going down to the lowest rungs on Lady Simcoe's Ladder.

The challenge to go one step further is taken up by American traveller Timothy Bigelow. In his *Journal of a Tour to Niagara Falls in the Year 1805*, Bigelow describes how the very sight of the "perilous" ladder frightened tourists away, and to prove his point, provides an anecdote about gentlemen who "forego their curiosity rather than attempt it."<sup>22</sup> Bigelow then presents Lady Simcoe's Ladder in such a way as to pronounce it sublime. The details about how the device leans down the cliff and how it is only secured to the brambles growing from the top by "pieces of old iron hoops" set the scene and draw the reader in. So too does Bigelow's use of the pronoun "you":

After you have descended a few feet, you perceive that the bank from whence you stepped on the ladder projects, and that you seem to be suspended in the air. From the foot of the ladder, the approach to the foot of the falls is rendered extremely difficult by the

immense and irregular masses of rock which have fallen from the side, and a guide is necessary to conduct you. (133)

The guide at the bottom, another safety net, as it were, further problematizes Bigelow's need to prove himself in this masculine adventure, so he adds another feat to the tournament with a feature known as *Behind the Sheet*. At this entrance to the cavern hidden by the Horseshoe Fall, Bigelow draws his reader's attention to the crumbling landscape, which he says "would scarcely support [me]" (133). On this unsafe ledge, the wind behind the column of water "deprives [him] of breath by its violence," and the tempest of spray dashes mist in his eyes (133). Yet, in spite of the fact that he is blinded and stumbling, Bigelow reports seeing live eels squirming through the curtain of water, his way of adding to the danger of "going beyond." When describing Niagara's cave, Bigelow entertains some of the sensory deprivations associated with the fully sublimed but he avoids the madness and the inexpressibility, both of which would immobilize him in the second (painful) phase of Burke's agenda. His resistance to being trapped in is characteristic of the anti-sublime's vigorous rationalism. After managing this process, he arrives at a sort of self-glorification, admitting "from these considerations, it will readily be believed that not many adventurers have proceeded further, and none much further, than we did" (134).

Bigelow has furthered the itinerary—and proved his manliness—and that, along with the elevated sense of self, is the climax of his narrative. At the close, he shifts away from Burke's philosophy and uses language that depends on expert, not general, knowledge:

The rock which constitutes the bank is disposed in strata, the upper and principal of which are limestone, others are of slate, no freestone or granite. Many other mineral substances are to be observed in it; and streams of pure sulphur ooze from crevices of the rock in several places, and leave a yellow concretion on the wall from thence to the bottom. (133)

His observations of the "ooze" and "concretion" in the strata are references to periods in the earth's history being preserved as residue within the layers of the land mass. This is characteristic of another mode of aesthetics—the picturesque—as it intersects with early geological theories of recession, erosion and various forms of natural decay.<sup>23</sup> This rhetorical shift away from the sublime and into the picturesque allows Bigelow to register the process of terrestrial change that took place over eons of time, and to achieve the distance necessary for a lasting rational response.

The last male chronicler in our ladder tournament also enters the cave, acts out his manhood in bravado, and writes a two-part narrative that both amuses and instructs. American tourist Christian Schultz visited Niagara in August 1807 and wrote up his description in a lengthy letter which begins with a humorous account of Lady Simcoe's Ladder that is followed by a



humiliating portrait of his failure to conquer it, after which he takes up a more rational stance and issues another warning:

You will perhaps excuse my timidity, when you are informed that this ladder, which is eighty feet in length, is placed in a perpendicular direction over sharp and cragged rocks; and its being spliced and bound together in several places with grape vines, did not tend to lessen the ill opinion I had already conceived respecting its sufficiency.<sup>24</sup>

Like Timothy Bigelow, Schultz addresses the reader in the second person, but his is a more personal usage. So is the way in which he constructs his "sublimed" persona: through it he strikes a tone of vulnerability. This becomes obvious in Schultz's itinerary and choice of subject matter. He dwells on the suspenseful experience of mounting the 80-foot spliced-and-shackled contraption and creates a picture of the fearful traveller, on display in all his weakness:

I was at length under the necessity of descending alone, and had already gone about half the way, when I found the poor ladder, by some accident or other, had lost four of its rounds; this circumstance, added to its constant tremulous motion, did not render my situation a whit more pleasing; so making one more effort to reach the yet distant step, and finding it impossible, without sliding down the side of the ladder, and recollecting at the same moment that I could not slide *up* again, I determined to ascend. (137-38)

During Schultz's unaccompanied—and unaccomplished—descent, he is unable to negotiate the feeling of being mastered; hence he does not, in the end, master the climb to the bottom. His quest-test backfires at the moment he becomes addled: failing the ladder tournament then, he is incapable of coming up with another anti-sublime tactic and his masculinity is compromised. Twentieth-century critic Jacqueline Labbe would call this episode a "transforming gender-bending" of the aesthetic. Something that occurs when Burke's theory of taste indicates or involves a loss of power, it acts "as a kind of feminizing agent" that is, in turn, related to "castration anxiety." As Labbe goes on to argue, such an operative moment is the only time "men can experience the proper sublime."<sup>25</sup> My theory about the anti-sublime also asserts that lack of power feminizes, but ultimately I argue that participants can refuse to indulge in the irrational terror and immobility (in Labbe's terms, "the castrating agents") in favour of adventures, or they can replace emotion with rationalism in order to find different routes past the anxiety outlined by Labbe and remain in control right to the end. In Schultz's case, when he decides to forgo the tournament—"I determined to ascend"—then attempts to overcome his weakness and effeminacy by moralizing about the ladder—it is just "not suitable" for "proper" travellers—he provides another example of how mediation at that crucial juncture creates the distancing critical to

re-establishing a state of reason. Further, this anti-sublime interlude in Schultz's letter also demonstrates, again, the ways in which the concept of manliness, the quest-tests and aesthetics are all linked. Even though the ladder is associated with a pioneering female from a previous era (Elizabeth Simcoe), Schultz deems this structure inconvenient and improper to "lady-like" turn-of-the-century behaviour, reinforcing how Burke's philosophy contours gender in Niagara writing:

I am much surprised that a place so celebrated as the Falls of Niagara, and which is visited by so many travellers, amongst whom are no inconsiderable number of ladies, should not yet have induced some enterprising person to erect a convenient house on this side of the river for their accommodation, as likewise a proper stairs for descending to the bottom of the falls. (143)

The many levels of his complaint are intriguing. This celebrated ladder has been used by male writers to prove their masculinity. In Schultz's case, because he is initially unable to overcome his fear, he is emasculated on the ladder; hence, in this instance, it also acts as a "feminizing site."<sup>26</sup> To manipulate the gendered aesthetic code, and to compose himself, he finds opportunity via the anti-sublime route to deliver a judgement about the unsafe tourist facilities.

Despite Schultz's initial failure on the rungs, his thoughts have been lifted, inspiring him to attempt the device a second time. Fortunately for him, he not only descends the ladder but also slips *Behind the Sheet* of the Horseshoe waterfalls, thus proving once and for all that he is fit for the task. Inside the cavern *Behind the Sheet*, he has difficulty breathing the compressed air. What Schultz describes is the station in the sublime between incomprehension and reason. First, he suffers a respiratory attack that makes him "giddy"; he feels "something like a blow in [his] face"; and he loses his hat in the sudden blast of wind. Instead of being brought to another standstill (and repeating the agonizing "ladder" scene), this time Schultz gains the strength necessary to banish those dreads by conducting an experiment to test the force of the water's flow:

I took up a stone weighing one or two pounds and threw it with all my strength between the sheet of falling water and the rocks; it fell about forty feet from where I stood, as if it had there met something to oppose its farther progress. I repeated the experiment above a dozen times, and always found the same results. (139)

Stone-throwing, the first of many experiments inside the cavern, is another way in which "manly" commentators triumph over being mastered and move into the third stage of the Burkean sublime. Schultz finds his moment of glory when he applies all of his vigour to test the hypothesis. With each trial of strength, experimentation and posturing in this anti-sublime phase comes different quests, new concerns, and, finally, more advanced

technology, all to avoid a degrading loss of purchase in Niagara's manly challenge.<sup>27</sup>

In the next section, I look at a female travel writer who participates in this "male" tradition of landscape discovery fashioned to exclude (or, as Jacqueline Labbe argues, elide) her.<sup>28</sup> This reading, which continues to focus on how masculinization functions experientially, presents a unique woman who circumvents established gendered positions in order to avoid being trapped in the passive ("effeminate") stage of the sublime.

British author Harriet Martineau was already a well-known writer, having achieved early fame with her *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832) when she visited Niagara. She travelled there twice: for approximately one week in October 1834 and for only three days in June 1836. Her notes actually became the basis of two publications: *Society in America* (1837), a systematic examination of creeds and cultures; and *Retrospect of Western Travel* (1838), a more impressionistic mix of philosophy and science, description and hearsay. Part of her writing project was to find a way to comment on a wide range of nineteenth-century intellectual pursuits, including political economy, mesmerism, phrenology, Darwinism, geology, and the role of women in society.

At the outset of *Retrospect of Western Travel*, Harriet Martineau creates the sense that she is an astute observer of nature's processes when she incorporates phrases like "worn its way back," "narrowing of its channel," "counteracting agencies," and "inundation" in her description of the waterfalls. Previously, Timothy Bigelow used similar language to manage his dissolution and to add more science to the Niagara profile. However, when Martineau engages in this rhetoric, she relegates the information to a footnote—and claims that it came from her (male) companion—suggesting that she wants to keep the historico-scientific discourse in her narrative, but also wants to show that this is inserted knowledge:

It is familiar to all that the cataract of Niagara is supposed to have worn its way back from the point of the narrowing of its channel (the spot where we now sat), and that there is an anticipation of its continuing to retire the remaining twelve miles to Lake Erie. Unless counteracting agencies should meantime have been at work, the inundation of the level country which must then take place will be almost boundless. The period is, however, too remote for calculation.<sup>29</sup>

According to Martineau, these ideas (about recession) were "familiar" to every visitor; however, my extensive survey of women's literature about Niagara Falls from the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries reveals that few wrote about geological processes in such detail.<sup>30</sup> Because this scientific information appears in a footnote in Martineau's book, it is defined as a separate kind of text. This exceptional British woman who

takes up the (largely male) discursive technique does so by allowing another (male) tourist to speak on the subject. Martineau's strategy of introducing or reinforcing the standard view by placing it in a footnote and attributing it to someone else is clearly a way of accommodating the gendered codes that keep women from speculating on geology and other "male" discourses.

Martineau's compensation for her sex can also be seen as an anti-sublime strategy, especially when she participates in the dubious "manly" tournaments at Niagara. Then, she experiences situations that others would dread, becomes hyper-rational and in that mode does not suffer humiliation and abasement. Instead, as a reasoning individual, she ends up mastering those unintelligible attitudes. This occurs on the second visit, during an excursion to that bastion of male bravado—Behind the Sheet. Her adventure begins with the "extraordinary costume" she has to don:

We ascended to the guide's house, and surveyed the extraordinary costume in which we were to make the expedition. Stout socks and shoes (but I would recommend ladies to go shod as usual), thick cotton garments reaching to the feet; green oilskin jackets and hats;—in this mountaineer sort of costume is the adventure to be gone through. (164)

Words like "expedition," "mountaineer sort of costume," and "adventure" suggest that she is ready to laugh at her own expense. For Christian Schultz, humour was a linguistic device that created a distance from his anxiety about descending the cliff. Martineau's jaunty tone may also be playing down her unease about the costume and the rituals that appear to go with it. This is obvious when the guide, a "stout negro," takes her hand and she immediately becomes obsessed by her outfit.<sup>31</sup> As others deflected their timidity, surprise or fear onto the ladder (Isaac Weld, Timothy Bigelow and Christian Schultz), Martineau displaces hers onto a hat:

I presently found the method of keeping myself at my ease. It was to hold down the brim of my hat, so as to protect my eyes from the dashing water, and to keep my mouth hut. With these precautions, I could breathe and see freely in the midst of a tumult which would otherwise be enough to extinguish one's being. (165)

Her focus on manners and on clothing (other "feminizing sites") seems like a comic refusal to allow any grandiose or terrified emotions about the guide or the "tumult" through which he conducts her. Even when the strings unravel and the bonnet is spirited away, her fear is not described but the flight of the hat is, along with the guide's heroic efforts to rescue it:

In returning, my hat blew off, in spite of all my efforts to hold it on. The guide put his upon my head, and that was carried away in like manner. I ought to have been instructed to tie it well on, for mere holding will not do in a hurricane. It is a proof that we were well

lighted in our cavern, that we all saw the outline of a hat which was jammed between two stones some way beneath us. The guide made for this, looking just as if he were coolly walking down into destruction; for the volumes of spray curled thickly up, as if eager to swallow him. He grasped the hat, but found it too much beaten to pieces to be of any use. (166-67)

Just as when she had witnessed seasickness in others on the voyage out—she had lashed herself to the ship's binnacle to watch the varied effects of an Atlantic storm on her fellow passengers (29)—Martineau is at her best when she stands back to report on what she hears and sees. The situation with the black guide (and with the ocean journey) may have been compromising, but Martineau is not upset; rather, her rhetoric implies that she is in control and rational.<sup>32</sup> Later, she does admit that the gusts of wind and the air pressure were discomforting: "I felt some pain in my chest for a few hours, but was not otherwise injured by the expedition" (167). With her confession, the author is able to make the reader aware that she has had a physically demanding experience. But she is never overwhelmed—that would be too weak. Martineau makes this sentiment obvious through analogues. She sees a bird perish in the water—it got "bewildered," it "dove" into the spray by the Falls, it "flew directly into the sheet," and then was "swallowed up" (169). Interestingly, Martineau went directly *Behind the Sheet* too, but had enough wits about her to emerge and tell the tale. And, despite the irony, it is a didactic one: her writing upholds the need for rationality over passion. The tragic story of the bird is meant to be a warning, then, about what happens if you get too bewildered and stuck in the painful phase of Burke's sublime—a sojourn Martineau stoically resists. A final example of what she would deem an inappropriate reaction to Niagara follows on the next page: "Today, I saw a lady who was sitting on the bank,—as safe a seat as an arm-chair by the fireside—convulsively turn away from the scene, and clasp the ground" (170). This passage makes the reader aware that Martineau, who has also put herself at risk, did not lose control—she uses the trope of the trapped hat, and the bewildered bird, to do that. Further, she also makes it clear that she had the composure to look directly at Niagara's sublimity, whereas the seated lady who suffers vertigo needs to turn away "convulsively." Martineau's methods of refusing subjugation sees her drawing on modes of representational power culturally reserved for men in references to geology, with a distanced narrator, and through the stories of the hat, the bird and the other woman tourist. These gendered narrative strategies set Martineau apart from fellow (female) writers at Niagara during the same time period like Frances Trollope (1832) and Anna Jameson (1838). Similar to Martineau's "convulsive" female tourist, Frances Trollope wept uncontrollably at the entrance of *Behind the Sheet*, unable to penetrate the "shadowy mystery" within, and Anna Jameson, overcome by the scene, became emotionally stagnate.<sup>33</sup> Trapped at level two of Burke's treatise, Trollope and Jameson

have been mastered and are unable to manage an anti-sublime breakthrough to pure reason, elevated feelings, self-glorification, joy or delight.

One year after her trip to Niagara, Harriet Martineau sums up her lasting impression of the Falls when she writes in *Society in America* about a woman who questioned the overall experience: "'Did you not,' asked the woman, 'long to throw yourself down, and mingle with your mother earth?' 'No,' I replied."<sup>34</sup> This is a stony answer to the effusiveness that affected writers such as Frances Trollope and Anna Jameson, and other female travellers of the time.<sup>35</sup> Martineau does not dwell on what twentieth-century travel theorist Christopher Mulvey calls "the fall into insanity and the plunge into bathos that would have left her damned before her public."<sup>36</sup> Instead of making *herself* an object of curiosity, Martineau turned to a fellow (female) tourist and made her one. This is also characteristic of the anti-sublime mode: in it, writers like Martineau, Schultz, Bigelow and Weld are never fully possessed in formidable incomprehension; rather, this state is repudiated, or displaced, onto something—or someone—else.

As a coda to this, the final author under consideration finds an equally unique way of using an hysterical woman tourist as a register of the complex feelings incited by Niagara. Walter Henry, an Irish-born military doctor, challenges the idea that Niagara should be "done" alone. In his memoir *Events of a Military Life* (1843) Henry suggests that every tourist needs a female companion in order to process the sublime:

I have visited the Falls of Niagara four times; and on three of these occasions in company with ladies—for the view of anything grand or sublime in nature or art is not worth two pence in selfish solitude, or rude male companionship, unembellished by the sex, and I have noticed that the predominant feeling at first is the inadequacy of language to express the strength of the emotion.

Here Henry plots the aesthetic's degrading attributes—inadequacy and inarticulateness—before he turns away from the scene and looks at a fellow traveller who is experiencing a "breathless" Burkean-styled Niagara:

One of the ladies alluded to, of a refined mind and ingenuous nature, after gazing for the first time, with a long and fixed expression, on the sublime object before her, looked for an instant in my face and burst into tears. (187)

Although he is not deficient in human sympathy, the sensations that Henry writes about are vicarious ones. He is not indulging in the irrational terror directly; instead, he has diverted it onto another "feminine site." For him, sublimity is not tested with instruments, or through a tournament, but via the emotional outbursts of women: "There are others so constituted as to be fascinated by the spectacle to such a dangerous and overpowering extent, as to feel a strong desire to throw themselves into the abyss" (187). While women weep and become distressed, Walter Henry avoids that plunge into

bathos by contemplating Niagara in a different mode: "I am of a calm and subdued temperament, the result of long effort and much reflection on the silliness of giving the rein to strong feelings and emotions" (187). The outbursts Henry refers to are exhibited by his companions (and not by him) implying that those female travellers who allow their feelings and emotions full expression are incapable of being "anti-sublimed." His breakthrough has in effect brought him to a moralizing (Kantian) plateau where judgement and reason triumph over "silly" passion.

My reading thus far has emphasized how aesthetics form a neat binarism in which the sublime and the picturesque counteract "silliness," fear, surprise and timidity through strength, agility and reason. Because irrationality is associated with the effeminate (and with women), and because it needs to be overcome, resisted or displaced, travellers like Frances Trollope and Anna Jameson, who do not participate in any of the tournaments, conduct tests or deflect their hysteria onto objects, or other tourists, suffer humiliation and abasement and are pronounced fully mastered by the sublime. Interestingly, Harriet Martineau accessed some of the discursive strategies available to male respondents to avoid this entrapment. On her path from incomprehension into meaning, she overcame the sensory inundations, warded off weakness and negotiated a proper distance from the source of sublime feeling by employing a literary style associated with rational (male) writing when she objectified another female tourist. And finally, Walter Henry, still in the mode of the Kantian sublime, ends his account belittling his fellow (female) travellers by calling their impulses "silly," showing that he (and Harriet Martineau) can deflect the subjection at the anti-sublime juncture, whereas his female companions (and other mastered women writers such as Frances Trollope and Anna Jameson) succumb to the conventional gendered ways of experiencing Niagara.

If the weak, the passive, the effeminate ones submit to sensory inundations or deprivations during which they stand in mute apprehension—a far from liberating experience—it follows that the more controlled observers like Isaac Weld, Timothy Bigelow and Christian Schultz use techniques to rein in the dangerous slippage of subjectivity by projecting their fear and terror onto other objects. What matters in these writings is not contribution to scientific fields of knowledge (such as geology), but rather the simple fact of having braved the extreme, of having climbed down to the edge of a cultural, psychological, or physical otherness, and having lived to tell the tale. The Niagara narratives I have examined offer a range of postures and various recuperative strategies at a critical way station along the route toward sublimity. I have isolated the anti-sublime as a step in the aesthetic and focussed my attentions here, not to argue for a new rung, as Paul Endo does when he reconfigures the Shelleyan sequence, but to analyze the footholds and to contemplate how

the sublime secures ascent at the moment it elevates the unintelligible into signification.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to the peer readers and to Cape Breton University colleague Nat Leach for all our sublime conversations.

## Notes

1. The first published travel accounts by European women at Niagara Falls are included in the diaries of Ann Powell (1789) and Elizabeth Simcoe (1792). For excerpts of their accounts, see Charles Mason Dow, *Anthology and Bibliography of Niagara Falls*, 2 vols. [Albany, NY: State of New York, 1921], Vol. 1, 32-43.
2. For an extensive history of how travel to the Falls from the period of discovery until the mid-twentieth century changed the site into a tourist attraction, see George A. Seibel, *Ontario's Niagara Parks: A History* 2nd ed (Niagara Falls, ON: Niagara Parks Commission, 1991) and Pierre Berton, *Niagara: A History of the Falls* (Toronto, ON: McClelland and Stewart, 1992).
3. Travel literature is a literary form governed by its own conventions and discourses of which the aesthetics of sublimity and the picturesque formed only a part. For analyses of the genre of travel literature, see William W. Stowe, *Going Abroad: European Travel in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), James Buzard, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to Culture, 1800-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* (London: Sage, 1990), Ian Ousby, *The Englishman's England: Taste, Travel and the Rise of Tourism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and Christopher Mulvey, *Anglo-American Landscapes: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Travel Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
4. Due to the size of this essay, I present a limited sampling. See Chapter 2 "Challenges of the Niagara Sublime" and Chapter 3 "Naturalist Observations and Feats of Physical Endurance" of my book *The Niagara Companion: Explorers, Artists, and Writers at the Falls, from Discovery through the Twentieth Century* (2003), where I use many literary and scientific narratives to shape a larger argument about how various discourses influence accounts about Niagara.
5. Paul Endo, "The Cenci: Recognizing the Shelleyan Sublime" *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* Vol. 38, No. 3/4 (Fall/Winter 1996): 379. Endo describes Shelley's presublime phrase as a "daemonic [writing] style" and the negative sublime as "an awful doubt."
6. Several key books that analyze the importance of the Niagara experience have been consulted in the writing of this essay. Patrick McGreevy's *Imagining Niagara: The Meaning and Making of Niagara Falls* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994) looks at the way a body of texts helped to establish certain expectations that encoded Niagara experiences. McGreevy does not analyze the history of aesthetics; instead, his framework is more associative, and he sets up a series of binary opposites (such as utopia vs. dystopia, nature vs. technology) to draw connections between his favourite topics in Niagara



literature—love and death—and the various “accumulations”—tourist traps and funeral parlours—built up around the site. I rely on McGreevy's book, along with Karen Dubinsky's *The Second Greatest Disappointment: Honeymooning and Tourism at Niagara Falls* (Toronto, ON & New Brunswick, NJ: Between the Lines & Rutgers University Press, 1999) which looks at how the tourist industry made Niagara famous as a heterosexual site. Even though Dubinsky does not address the aesthetics behind the representations, her observation that Victorians at the Falls had vastly different views of male and female physicality has enriched my study. Patricia Jasen's *Wild Things: Nature, Culture and Tourism in Ontario, 1790-1914* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1995) has added much to my reading of commentators at Niagara too. Jasen's text concentrates on mid-nineteenth-century tourism to show how the growth of industry and commerce on the Canadian side, combined with a shift in aesthetics, served to reduce the experience at Niagara from sublime to sentimental, from wild to utilitarian. While she looks to the aesthetic and political context of the emerging colony of Upper Canada to suggest that nineteenth-century writings about Niagara can be associated with Canadian nationalism, I examine the historical and gendered shift in the concepts of the sublime and the picturesque as two aesthetic modes through which writers encoded Niagara travel. And finally, in *Niagara Falls: Icon of the American Sublime* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), Elizabeth McKinsey explores the idea that tourism, industry and development removed the danger, and the sublimity from the landscape. For McKinsey this devaluation of taste coincides with the “fall” of Niagara when it was “sentimentalized” into the picturesque and the beautiful, and hence “feminized.” Yet because McKinsey ultimately designates the picturesque and the beautiful as separate “womanly” categories that are lesser than the more “manly” sublime, her treatment is not in keeping with the historical development of the aesthetics, especially the picturesque. For this essay, I have used the above studies to read the ways in which aesthetics contour gender and subjectivity at Niagara.

7. Twentieth century critics of the sublime interested in gender analysis agree that it is culturally coded male; however, there is no consensus on how the picturesque is engendered. For discussions of the sublime as a masculine rite of passage, see Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), Jacqueline M. Labbe, *Romantic Visualities: Landscape, Gender and Romanticism* (London, GB: Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1998), and Joanna Zylinka, *On Spiders, Cyborgs and Being Scared: The Feminine and the Sublime* (Manchester, GB: Manchester University Press, 2001). For discussions of how the picturesque is coded male, see James Buzard, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature and the Ways of Culture* (Oxford, GB: Clarendon Press, 1993). Conversely, Ann Bermingham and Jacqueline M. Labbe call the picturesque “feminine.” See Bermingham's reading of decorous clothing in “The Picturesque and Ready-to-Wear Femininity” in *The Politics of the Picturesque: Literature, Landscape and Aesthetics Since 1770*, ed. Stephen Copley and Peter Garside (Cambridge, GB: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 81-119), and Labbe's *Romantic Visualities* in which the author argues for the existence of two picturesquees, the earliest incarnation representing the fragmenting “male gaze” and the later evolution as a less “organic,” more “concocted” way of seeing (38, 56, 64).
8. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. J. T. Boulton (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame

- Press, 1968, 110. All subsequent quotations from Burke will be to his *Enquiry* and will have paginal notations.
9. Frances Ferguson, "The Sublime of Edmund Burke, or the Bathos of Experience," *Glyph 8: Johns Hopkins Textual Studies*, ed. Walter Benn Michaels (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 69.
10. Tom Furniss, *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology: Language, Gender and Political Economy in Revolution* (Cambridge, GB: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 18. All subsequent quotations from Furniss will be to this text and will have paginal notations.
11. Immanuel Kant actually distinguishes between two forms of sublimity—the mathematic and the dynamic. For each, the imagination is key to reason's triumph over the immensity or the brute force of nature. Interestingly, twentieth-century theorist Barbara Claire Freeman argues that the Kantian imagination is gendered feminine and has to be sacrificed to ensure sublimity. See Freeman's *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction*, 68-75.
12. Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, transl. John T. Goldthwait (1764; Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1960), 79. All subsequent quotations from Kant will be to his *Observations* and will have paginal notations.
13. In Kant's later writings, such as "Analytic of the Sublime" (1790) he revises his theory about the aesthetic as equated with masculinity and argues that the "true sublime" is a universal emotion, accessible to all (Paul Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art* [Oxford, GB: Clarendon Press, 1989], 4).
14. For a complete analysis of the commonalities, and the differences, between Burke and Kant see Frances Ferguson's Introduction and Chapters 2-3 in her *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).
15. Susan Glickman, *The Picturesque and the Sublime: A Poetics of the Canadian Landscape* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998), 11. The debate about whether the picturesque is a single coherent aesthetic category or whether it exists in multifarious versions is taken up by Stephen Copley and Peter Garside in their "Introduction" to *Politics of the Picturesque*, 1-12 and in Sidney Robinson's *Inquiry into the Picturesque* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1991). Other books that aid in my discussion of the picturesque include Marjorie Hope Nicolson's *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1959) and Samuel H. Monk's *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (New York: MLA, 1935).
16. After Gilpin, a debate regarding the nature of the picturesque between Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight furthered the interest in this aesthetic. Price's *Essay on the Picturesque* (1794) suggested that the new discourse held a station between the relaxing qualities of the beautiful and the pain and terror of the sublime. Conversely, in his polemic against Price delivered in the second edition of *The Landscape* (1795), Knight questioned whether the picturesque actually mediated between the two and proposed that aesthetic experience was only a perception (and hence was not the psychological event described by Burke through his sublime) and that it had no moral significance.
17. Ann Bermingham, "The Picturesque and Ready-to-Wear Femininity," in *The Politics of the Picturesque*, ed. Stephen Copley et al., 112-113.
18. Jacqueline Labbe, *Romantic Visualities*, 38.

19. Whereas I talk about how aesthetic discourses help to contour femininity and masculinity, critics like Barbara Claire Freeman in *The Feminine Sublime* assert the opposite—that male and female subjects have different relationships to language and representation and that their different cultural configurations are absolutely dependent upon their genders (2-4).
20. Isaac Weld, *Travels Through the States of North America, and the Provinces of Upper Canada and Lower Canada, during the years 1795, 1796, and 1797* (Charles Mason Dow, *Anthology and Bibliography of Niagara Falls*, 2 vols. [Albany, NY: State of New York, 1921], Vol. 1, 99. All subsequent quotations from Weld will be from this text and will have paginal notations.
21. Elizabeth Simcoe had visited Niagara Falls in 1792-95. Her *Diary* recording this event was not published in her lifetime. However, because of her social position as wife of John Graves Simcoe, the first Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada, the ladders were named in her honour.
22. Timothy Bigelow, *Journal of a Tour to Niagara Falls in the Year 1805* (Charles Mason Dow, *Anthology and Bibliography of Niagara Falls*, Vol. 1, 132). All subsequent quotations from Bigelow will be from this text and will have paginal notations.
23. John Whale, "Romantics, Explorers and Picturesque Travellers" in *The Politics of the Picturesque*, ed. Stephen Copley, et al., 176. For a discussion on how late eighteenth- to early nineteenth-century writings about Niagara Falls and its related topography—the Escarpment, Gorge, upper Niagara River, and Lake Erie—form an occasion to debate whether the age of the Falls could be deduced from the length of the Gorge, and whether the rate of recession could be used to estimate the age of the earth, see Keith J. Tinkler, "Niagara Falls: The Idea of a History and the History of an Idea, 1750-1845," *Geomorphology* 1 (1987), 69-85.
24. Christian Schultz, *Travels on an Inland Voyage...Performed in the years 1807 and 1808* (Charles Mason Dow, *Anthology and Bibliography of Niagara Falls*, Vol. 1, 137. All subsequent quotations from Schultz will be from this text and will have paginal notations.
25. Jacqueline Labbe, *Romantic Visualities*, 41, 45-6, 54.
26. Catherine Hall, "Going a-Trolloping: Imperial Man Travels the Empire" in *Gender and Imperialism*, ed. Clare Midgley (Manchester, GB: Manchester University Press, 1998), 192. While Hall's article refers to the regions British author Anthony Trollope visited in America, all of which were associated with his mother who had travelled the same route decades before, the "feminised sites" theory is applicable here because the ladder associated with Mrs. Simcoe—and the towns associated with Frances Trollope—are places where visitors try to prove their masculinity.
27. Other experiments that come later include measuring the air pressure with a barometer (Basil Hall, 1829) and firing a musket inside the cavern (Thomas Hamilton, 1833). See Dow's *Anthology and Bibliography of Niagara Falls*, Vol. 1, 164; 525-6.
28. Jacqueline Labbe, *Romantic Visualities*, 36.
29. Harriet Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1838; New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), Vol 1, 161 fn. All subsequent quotations from Martineau will be from this text and will have paginal notations.
30. The other known female writer who approaches the subject of geological speculations is Scottish-born Isabella Lucy Bird. In her 1856 *The Englishwoman in America* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966), she alludes to the

- chthonic world but contends that the earth's abyss must "remain for ever unlighted" because it is beyond the scope of "human reason and research" (236).
31. Harriet Martineau later went on to write an article about "Dress and its Victims" for the periodical *Once a Week* (1859). In it, Martineau claims that women are "murdered" by their costumes and other feminine paraphernalia—tight and cumbersome outfits affect the human frame; clothing catches on fire; make-up causes illnesses. Even milliners and shop workers are "worn out and killed off in the cause of dress." Perhaps due to her discomforts at Niagara, in this article Martineau also advises all women to wear practical hats not bonnets or brimless "chimney-pot hats" (quoted in Gayle Graham Yates, ed., *Harriet Martineau on Women*, [New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1985], 229-38).
  32. Writers who come to Niagara after Harriet Martineau are frightened by the black guide. When they refer to him as "the Phlegethon of waters," "a grinning demon," and "a black imp" he is given a sinister grandeur (Emma C. Embury, "Niagara," *Ladies Companion* [Sept. 1841], 251; Isabella Lucy Bird, *The Englishwoman in America*).
  33. Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, ed. Donald Smalley (1832; London, GB: The Folio Society, 1974), 279-280; Anna Brownell Jameson, *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada* (London: GB, Saunders and Otley, 1838; Toronto, ON: McClelland and Stewart, 1990), 57.
  34. Harriet Martineau, *Society in America* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1837; New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), Vol 3, 81.
  35. For an analysis of the many famous nineteenth-century travellers to the Falls, including Harriet Martineau, Frances Trollope and Anna Jameson, see Chapter Two of my *Niagara Companion*.
  36. Christopher Mulvey, *Anglo-American Landscapes: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Travel Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 197.
  37. Walter Henry, *Events of a Military Life* (1843) (Charles Mason Dow, *Anthology and Bibliography of Niagara Falls*, Vol. 1, 187). All subsequent quotations from Martineau will be from this text and will have paginal notations.