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Stein: Searching for Jacob’s Ladder

Searching for Jacob’s Ladder

By ROGER B. STEIN

This essay focuses our attention, at least initially, on a single image, or more precisely a pair of nearly identical stereographic images, probably of the late 1870s, of a train crowded with tourists on a cog railway ascending a trestle bridge over a crevasse on the way up Mount Washington, in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. The place is labeled on the caption: “Jacob’s Ladder” (Figure 1). The name had existed earlier to define this steep crag in the old Fabian foot trail up Mount Washington. When the trestle bridge for the cog railway was completed to that point in 1868 (and to the peak one year later), it became a favorite subject for numerous engravers and photographers, the best known of whom was the stereographer Benjamin Kilburn. This particular double image appeared within a display on White Mountains’ tourism in the exhibition “Picturing Old New England: Image and Memory,” at the Smithsonian’s American Art Museum in April 1999 (Figure 2), and a similar image appeared in my catalogue essay, “After the War: Constructing a Rural Past.”1 How and what “Jacob’s ladder” meant and means for its various audiences over time, what clusters around it and creates its contexts—that is my subject.

But in a larger sense, this essay is part of a continuing epistemological inquiry, a questioning of whether and how certain Americans—and especially New Englanders—have picked up and carried on a tradition of typology, that early Christian mode of Biblical exegesis, a way of reconciling what Christians call the “Old Testament” with the revelations of the New Testament, of seeing the narratives of Hebrew Scriptures as in particular ways prefigurations, “types” in history of the antitypical story of the Incarnation, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, which is finally transcendant, beyond history. Hence Moses as historical leader of a chosen people, leading them up from slavery, from Egyptian bondage to freedom and towards the Promised Land, and bringing the revelation on Mount Sinai to earth is in multiple ways a type of Christ; Jonah three days in the belly of the whale and issuing forth there-

1. The exhibition’s only venue was in Washington at the Smithsonian, April 2-August 22, 1999. The image we reproduce, from a series by Benjamin and Edward Kilburn, was graciously lent to the exhibition and made available here from the Robert M. Vogel Collection. A slightly different catalogue image also by Benjamin West Kilburn and dated by its owner, the New Hampshire Historical Society c. 1870, appeared in William H. Truettner and Roger B. Stein, eds. [and co-curators], Picturing Old New England: Image and Memory (New Haven and London: National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution/ Yale UP, 1999), 14-41, at 29.
Figure 1.
Benjamin and Edward Kilburn, stereograph, 3 1/4 x 6 3/4 inches (late 1870s).
Collection of Robert M. Vogel.

Figure 2.
from is a type of the resurrection: the book of Isaiah is understood particularly
(by Georg Friedrich Handel, among others) as predicting Jesus as Messiah,
and so forth. Examples proliferate endlessly, as Christian theologians, writers,
and artists sought to incorporate the tradition they inherited and to transform
it for their purposes. There are many versions of its history; in a study entitled
The Phoenix and the Ladder, C. A. Patrides traced the “Rise and Decline of the
Christian View of History” from the church fathers to its climactic
moment in Milton’s Paradise Lost. “Prior to the coming of Jesus, events are
meaningful only insofar as they herald his way ‘by types/ And Shadowes’,”
though Patrides does point out, almost parenthetically, that the tradition that
he sees as effectively ending with Milton in England and the continent passed
intact to New England.²

As scholar, I recognized early on that the seventeenth-century Puritans in
New England were inheritors and practitioners of typology, for my teacher
Perry Miller, Sacvan Bercovitch of my own generation, and others had adum­
brated its importance within New England.³ My own energies turned, sporad­
ically, in these directions both as literary and as art historical scholar,
including in 1984 a study of the well-known so-called self-portrait of Thomas
Smith (dated 1670-90), arguing that the poem beneath the skull in the paint­
ing, frequently quoted and leading to the vague labeling of the sentiment as
“puritan” needed to be read precisely—and typologically—as any seven­
teenth-century audience would have done, and that such a reading was the
key to the meaning of the painting in particular.⁴ In working on the essay, I
had occasion to contact Sir Roy Strong, whose work on Elizabethan portrai­
ture I had found especially helpful. His response to my inquiry was to express
pleasure: he too had always thought that the typological/emblematic tradition
had been carried over to America. It had also come over in less arcane, popu­
lar forms in the translation of Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress into its multiple
American editions and children’s versions of “hieroglyphic bibles.”⁵ I had
found other instances in the tradition of American seascapes, literary and
visual, and even argued its continued presence in the popular arts in Winslow
Homer’s graphic work of the 1850s.⁶

². The Phoenix and the Ladder: The Rise and Decline of the Christian View of History (Berkeley and Los
Angeles: U of California P, 1964), 62 (he is citing Paradise Lost, XII, 232-33). For the New England refer­
ence, see 66-67. Patrides’ note 33 (76) is an excellent brief bibliography of the tradition of typology to 1964.
³. Miller explored this in his New England Mind volumes (1939, 1953), but most explicitly in his intro­
Bercovitch’s also pioneering work appeared in numerous forms, including the collection of essays he edited,
Typology and Early American Literature (U of Massachusetts P, 1972), which contains his own extensive
annotated bibliography of the field, 249-337. Ursula Brumm translated her German study as American Thought
⁴. Roger B. Stein, “Thomas Smith’s Self-Portrait: Image/Text as Artifact,” Art Journal, 44 (winter 1984), 
316-327. See 325, note 10 and ff., for the Strong references.
⁵. Bunyan’s Divine Emblems, or Temporal Things Spiritualized was published in Philadelphia, 1808,
after the London 1724 edition. For the latest reading and correctives to earlier scholarship, see John Manning,
⁶. See, for example, Roger B. Stein, “Seascape and the American imagination: The Puritan Seventeenth
Century,” Early American Literature, 7 (spring 1972), 17-37; and “Picture and Text: The Literary World of
Winslow Homer,” in Winslow Homer: A Symposium, ed. Nicolai Cikovsky Jr., Studies in the History of Art,
But what of the tradition of Jacob's ladder in particular? The ultimate original source of my stereographic image, clearly, lay in the Book of Genesis, 28:10-19:

10 And Jacob went out from Beersheba and went toward Haran.
11 And he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep.
12 And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.
13 And behold, the Lord stood above it, and said, I am the Lord God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed ....
16 And Jacob awoke out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the Lord is in this place: and I knew it not.
17 And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.
18 And Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put for his pillows, and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil upon the top of it.
19 And he called the name of that place Beth-el.7

This key passage incorporates both a theophany and a restatement of God's covenant with the Jewish people, now being extended through Jacob, and Jacob's recognition of their historical destiny and of the special nature of the place: Beth-el, the house of God. It is, in other words, both visionary and located in history, in time and space.

The Jewish interpretative literature on the passage extends through the centuries. Linguistically it notes that the Hebrew term “sullam,” which has come down to us in English (through the Greek8) as “ladder,” is related to an Akkadian term and may signify something more like a ramp, of the kind describing the links between the levels on a Babylonian ziggurat like the Tower of Babel. Historically, Beth-El has origins in a very ancient Canaanite cultic site which the Hebrew Jacobite story clearly rejects, separating itself from pagan history and rites—the stone, for example, is a memorial of the theophany, the God-vision, not an object of worship itself—and reinterpreting the place (“ma-kom”) as the House of God.9

8. In the Septuagint of Genesis 28:12, the word “klismos” appears, a ladder or flight of stairs, out of the Greek verb klino meaning to lean, from which is derived the Greek Saint John Klimakos. I am indebted to my colleague Judith Kovacs for assistance on this.
The typological reading of this Judaic historical and spiritual tradition derives from the final verses of the first chapter of the Gospel of John, which had begun "In the Beginning was the Word":

49 Nathanael answered and said unto him, Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel.

50 Jesus answered and said unto him, Because I said unto thee, I saw thee under the fig tree, believest thou? thou shalt see greater things than these.

51 And he saith unto him, Verily, verily I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man. 10

This passage becomes the vehicle through which the story of Jacob’s ladder is transformed typologically by the Christian tradition, from the story of a people with a special spiritual destiny in time and space, in history, into a story of spiritual rebirth through the agency of Christ as Son of man. To trace the many verbal usages of this over the centuries is not our task here, nor the many visual representations, though they are widespread, from the parecclesion lunette of the Byzantine church of St. Saviour in Chora in Constantinople to the medieval ladder buttresses of Bath Abbey in England to the little etching by Rembrandt of 1655 or the post-Viet Nam war film of 1990. 11 The side note in the 1560 Geneva Bible version of Genesis 28:10 made the typology explicit: “Christ is the ladder whereby God and man are joyned together, and by whome the Angels ministre vnto vs: all graces by him are giuen vnto vs, & we by him ascende into heaven.”

It is this tradition that is passed to New England, perhaps especially through the agency of one of the Puritans’ favorite English theologians, Benjamin Keach (1640-1704), coauthor of Tropologia or, A Key to Open Scripture Metaphors (1681), a guide to typological reading, and of his extended practical version of this, entitled Christ alone the way to Heaven, or, Jacob’s ladder improved; containing four sermons lately preached on Genesis XXVIII, XII: wherein the doctrine of free-grace is display’d through Jesus Christ: also discovering the nature, office, and ministration of the holy angels

10. Again, this is the King James version.

11. The parecclesion of the Chora (today the Kariye Camii) was designed as a funerary chapel by Theodore Metochites (1315-21) and decorated with frescoes. The cycle in question was dedicated to the Virgin in a series of five Old Testament episodes, understood as types of the Virgin, including one of the ladder with inscription from Genesis 28:11-13, and “The Lord” represented by Virgin and Child. (See John Freely, City Guide Istanbul, 5th ed. [Blue Guide 2000], 202-20, citing Paul Underwood, The Kariye Duvar, volumes, Bollingen Series 76 [Princeton UP, 1966]). The buttress decoration at Bath relates medially to Bishop King’s dream of angels ascending and descending, ordering him to build the church, beginning in 1499. (See Nicholas Penny, The Buildings of England: North Somerset and Bristol [Penguin: 1958], 99-102). The Rembrandt etching is one of four illustrations for a little book in Spanish by Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel, a mystical treatise on the coming of the Messiah entitled Piedra Gloriosa, o de la Estatua de Nebuchadnessar. The story is developed around “the glorious stone hewn not by human hand” (Daniel 2:34) as symbol of the Messiah and is thus linked to the stone that served as Jacob’s pillow, and which became an altar after his dream of the ladder. For the four etchings and their context, see Michael Zell, Reframing Rembrandt: Jews and the Christian Image in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam. (Berkeley: U of California P, 2002). The film Jacob’s Ladder, directed by Adrian Lyne with book by Bruce Joel Rubin, plays a bit with biblical names (the ex-wife is Sarah, the current partner Jezebel, etc.), and the penultimate scene has the veteran Jacob Singer (Tim Robbins), who had with others of his battle unit been subject to hallucinogenic drug experiments, led up a staircase towards the blinding light by his now-dead son, the angelic stand-in (that image is on the front cover of the VHS Caroleo version).
The first of these sermons lays out the territory. God gives Jacob the dream “to succour and comfort him in his journey, and not only so but … to make known to him by this Dream, the Messiah that should proceed from his loyns, by whom he, and all his true Seed should ascend to Heaven, and be with God for ever” (2). In explicating further, he understands “by this Ladder directly, and Primarily is meant our Lord Jesus Christ” (citing John 1:51), “but more remotely or Subordinately it may refer … to the Church of Christ and angels ministering from the State of Grace on Earth to a State of Glory in Heaven” (3). Hebrew interpreters had noted the importance of the order—angels first ascending and then descending—offering various explanations. The angels, in Keach’s reading, minister to Christ Personally in ascending and to Christ Mystically in descending, that is, to the Church. Keach plays many variations on the meaning of the ladder: as it is a useful human contrivance of the wisdom of Man, so Jesus is mediator, the God-Man in one person. “who on this Mystical Ladder must ascend to Heaven” (11). He then contrasts those who seek justification through works—“Babel-Builders,” he calls them—to those who seek by faith. Jesus’ human nature is elsewhere the foot of the ladder; his divine Nature the top, for the Jacob story becomes “this glorious Type of Christ” (25).

The idea of the types is further developed in subsequent sermons in this series: Jesus is “the Antitype of Jacob’s Ladder, as our High-Priest also, by his Intercession now in Heaven” (43); indeed by the time Keach gets to “Fourteenthly, to Preach Christ, is to Preach him … to be the Antitype of all Types, and the Substance of all Shadows… The second Adam…. The true and Antitypical Isaac…. Our Moses, that brings all the Children of Israel out of Spiritual Egypt, and Bondage of Sin and Satan” (51). Finally, in the third and fourth sermons, Keach focuses on the Genesis phrase “Behold, a Ladder set upon the Earth, and the top of it reacheth to Heaven!” and explores both its astronomical possibilities and the emphasis on the process of “beholding,” the visual apprehension of the thing. Both of these were bound to have a special urgency in an age that was experiencing the revolutions that we associate with both Lockean epistemology and Newtonian physics and optics, the period we have come to call the “Enlightenment.” And this emphasis on vision will carry us finally back to our pair of stereographic images of “Jacob’s ladder,” to ask how much or in what ways the rich and imaginatively playful typological explorations of Benjamin Keach (who would himself probably be appalled by such terminology!) are indeed carried over into the nineteenth century in New England, and in the United States more generally.

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12. Subsequent parenthetical page references are to this edition. Bercovitch, Typology and Early American Literature, 281, singles Keach out for special mention; Miller speaks of him in Edwards, Images or Shadows, 24-25 and in note 31, 142-43.

13. He cites the Reverend William Greenhill [1591-1671], sermonizer on the book of Ezekiel, who observes “tis 160 Millions of Miles from Earth to Heaven! A wonderful thing! An amazing height! So it is a wonderful thing to behold Christ Jesus, the Way to Heaven” (69). One needs to read this typological explanation specifically in or against the context of the emergent Galilean/Newtonian physics of the seventeenth century.
The route to the cog railway passes through a varied territory. Edward Taylor (c.1645-1729), minister and poet down the Connecticut Valley at Westfield, Massachusetts, was a devoted student of typology, especially in the second series of his Preparatory Meditations. Thus it is not surprising that in the second stanza of Meditation 2.44, which takes as its text John 1:14, “The word was made flesh,” and seeks to make from language a new holy unity, he should evoke our image:

ThingsstyledTranscendent,do transcende the Stile
Of Reason, reason'sstares neere reach so high.
But Jacob's golden Ladder rounds do foil
All reasons Strides, wrought of THEANTHROPIE.14
Two Natures distance-standing, infinite,
Are Onifide, in person, and Unite.

The types offer more to the poet, whom he calls “The Orator from Rhetorick gardens,” than “Spangled Flowers of sweet-breathd Eloquence,” as he puts it at the outset; they carry intrinsically the strategy to overcome the limitations of the world, of both a merely decorative “Rhetorick” and the split between heaven and earth, body and soul. The angels, which seemed the conduit between heaven and earth (to Keach and others), must

Give place: and lower your top gallants. Shew
Your topsail Conjues to our slender barkes:
The highest honour to our nature's due.
Its neere Godhead by the Godhead made
Than yours in you that never from God stray'd. (lines 38-42)

Grace transforms the human self and raises us higher than the angels.15

One may at least speculate, given Taylor’s nautical experience as a voyager to American shores, whether he was aware that lowering one’s topgallants and showing one’s topsail required climbing the rigging that came to be known as—Jacob’s ladder. The OED traces this nautical usage only to Maryatt in 1840, but James Fenimore Cooper had used it metaphorically in the second chapter of The Pilot (1823) and again in The Two Admirals (1842); Melville has his young neophyte sailor sent up, at dead of night, to the Jacob’s Ladder to loose the Main Sky-Sail, in chapter 16 of Redburn (1850); and the usage is still familiar to at least some individuals today with sailing experience in large or antique vessels.16 Whether the nautical (this-worldly, practical) usage of Jacob’s ladder and the biblical, historical, and transcendant usages might come together in visual images made for New England and generally coastal audiences who knew both their Scriptures and seafaring terminology is at present also a matter of speculation.

14. Donald E. Stanford, in the glossary to his edition of the Poems of Edward Taylor (New Haven: Yale UP, 1960), 541, defines this term as “the fact of being both God and man: the union of the divine and human natures in Christ.”
15. This is surely an instance of the doctrine of the “Fortunate Fall,” a heresy beloved by John Milton and later by Nathaniel Hawthorne.
16. Another friend, a merchant seaman after World War II, recalls it as the term for the ladder used for boarding large steel Liberty ships.
To look ahead, a Civil War portrait image (c. 1864) of David G. Farragut, for example, the Union victor at the Battle of Mobile Bay (Figure 3), shows the rear admiral with Fort Morgan in the distance to the viewer's left and bracketed on the other side a near view of the ladder up the mast. This may indeed not only present a neatly balanced formal frame, of near and far, of the victorious hero and the subject of his achievement in this world—Farragut in fact asked to be lashed to the futtocks so that he might command even if wounded, and the rigging suggests that—but also that his heroism is transcendant, that like Jacob he is inheritor, leader and protector of a chosen

Figure 3.
people both at a particular moment in history and time AND of its spiritual destiny beyond.  

This dual functioning of the Jacob’s ladder image reconfigures the hierarchies of Christian typology, which would see and understand the historical or natural Type as somehow only a lower-order prefiguration of the transcendant Antitype. It thus opens possibilities of linking the two in some new ways.

Lockean/Newtonian epistemology and the pressure to reconcile Christian belief with the new laws of nature and human vision may have had something to do with this. In the eighteenth century Jonathan Edwards can be understood as struggling with this problem: to reconcile the types with the new world view, offering (at least privately) a new emphasis on the typical significance of the natural world. The reemergence of the classical rhetorical theory of the Sublime, from Boileau to Edmund Burke and beyond, the “development of the aesthetics of the infinite,” as Marjorie Hope Nicolson called it, is another piece of the puzzle; for it served in some ways to reconcile theology and aesthetics, the old language of typology and the new practices of nature worship while mostly skirting the edge of pantheism. This at least points us to the contours of Mount Washington, if not yet to any technological version of the sublime like a cog railway.

By the early nineteenth century, the White Mountains had become a destination for early tourism and for the artists who sought out such marketable images for their work, though travel was still difficult. The young landscape painter Thomas Cole (1801-48) made trips there in both 1827 and 1828, with travel directions from his Hartford mentor and patron, Daniel Wadsworth. He produced, among other works, a View in the White Mountains (1827), with its

...
grand image of Mount Washington at the end of a long vista, a road leading us down into the valley and then up towards the sublime peak. In October of 1828 he penned a manuscript poem “To Mount Washington”:

Hail Monarch of a thousand giant hills!
Who settest proudly on the earth thy throne!
Crowned with the clouds and the lightenings. Hail!
Vast monument of power that God hath reared
Upon the lowly earth to conquer time
And measure out eternity... \(^{21}\)

The language here is surely bombastic, but it is Cole’s attempt to find poetic verbal forms of the Sublime, to define the unmediated power of deity in the natural world.

Clearly Cole’s skills lay rather with the pictorial arts, but he struggled to find the spiritual meaning of his landscape subjects, turning sometimes explicitly in these years to biblical themes of the Garden of Eden and the Expulsion, to John the Baptist in a swirling mountainous setting, and later to allegories: both the secular five-part drama of *The Course of Empire* (completed 1836) and the religious *Voyage of Life* series (1840). The latter ends in *Old Age* with the lone voyager looking upward to the brilliant light of the heavens, in which we perceive a host of angels cascading down.\(^{22}\) It is very likely that Cole was encouraged to this final image by the work of the older American painter Washington Allston, whose grandiose five- by eight-foot explicit image of *Jacob’s Dream* (1817) had, by 1834, been turned into an engraving in *The Cottage Bible, and Family Expositor* (published in Hartford). In a larger sense, however, the angelic language of the *Voyage of Life* drama of the spiritual life of the individual, who finally abandons conflict in this world for a sublime spiritual destiny in the light, needs to be understood as Cole’s religious response to the unsolved—and to him insoluble?—political and social dilemmas of *The Course of Empire*: of a nation going from pastoral harmony to urban luxury to destruction and desolation.\(^{23}\) Which is to say that for Cole the


22. Jacob’s ladder is itself missing although the route between the human and the divine source of light, along which the angels are displayed, is a clear pair of lines in the underdrawing for the painting, and in the second version the clouds are arranged in gradations which seem almost like steps. This material is available in *The Voyage of Life by Thomas Cole: Paintings, Drawings and Prints*, an exhibition organized by Paul D. Schweizer (Utica, N.Y.: Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute Museum of Art, 1985).

hierarchies of the Christian typological still obtained: transcendence out of this world. By the end of his life, the low-church evangelical Cole from the British midlands had become a communicant of the Episcopal Church in Catskill, New York, for whom “the Pilgrim of the Cross” and “the Pilgrim of the World” were to go their separate Bunyanesque ways in his final uncompleted allegorical series. At the other theological extreme, Hosea Ballou, a key figure in the emergent Universalist Church, which held that grace was possible for all humans, had delivered a sermon entitled “Jacob’s Ladder,” at the dedication of the Universalist Chapel in Providence, Rhode Island.24

The “Beth-El” of Jacob’s theophany was clearly not limited by sectarian, racial, or occupational differences. For a rather different configuration of the relation between the historical covenant in this world and the spiritually transcendent, we must turn to another line of interpretation of Jacob’s ladder, which emerged in a different place, in a different form, and for a different audience: the African American community and the spiritual song “We are climbing Jacob’s ladder.” The story is complex and can only be sketched here. The antislavery movement was especially strong among Methodists (as well as Quakers, obviously) in the 1790s, and blacks in the port cities of Philadelphia and Baltimore after the turn of the century attempted to organize their own churches. In 1810, Daniel Coker, though still not ordained, was a leader of the black religious community (both free and slave) in Baltimore, and published an antislavery tract. In 1815 under his guidance the group withdrew from the white church and organized the African Methodist Bethel Society, independent of the Baltimore General Conference. As the historian of these events points out, “his choice of the name Bethel ... held a deeper meaning, one that heralded the rise of a strong, unified black people.... The story of Jacob’s seed took root in Baltimore by growth of another type: the development of the first independent black church in the slave states.”25 Jacob’s rock pillow before his theophany and his subsequent stone altar commemorating Beth-El, “the House of God,” as the heritage of his covenanted people became in the New World the place for organizing the dream of African American freedom, a freedom that was at once both political in this world and an ultimate evangelical spiritual aspiration.

Coker’s remarks to the Bethel Church in Baltimore celebrating the legal independence of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in January 1816, were framed typologically: “The Jews in Babylon were held against their will. So were our brethren.... Those Jews ... had not equal privileges with the Babylonians, although they were governed by the same laws, and suffered the

24. Delivered November 20, 1822 and published (Boston, 1822).
same penalties. So our brethren were governed by the same church law, or
discipline, and suffered all its penalties....” 26 Methodist antislavery and evan­
gelical hope was shared in the North, and “The Bethel Enterprise” became in
1828 in Boston a special ministry to save the souls of seamen, under the
direction of the Reverend Edward T. Taylor, “Father Taylor” as he became
known (and the model for Melville’s Father Mapple in Moby-Dick). The Sea­
men’s Bethel was under Methodist auspices, though supported with the funds
of leading Unitarians. 27

The interconnections among these several strands are available in the life
of Frederick Douglass, who spent some of his slave years in Baltimore,
escaped to New York in 1838 disguised as a free black seaman, moved from
there to New Bedford, Massachusetts, and found his own abolitionist voice
lecturing to the white abolitionists at their Nantucket convention. It is to Doug­
liss that one might turn for the most passionate early statement specifically
about slave songs. When he notes that “they would sometimes sing the most
pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous senti­
ment in the most pathetic tone,” he opens the door to irony, to the doubleness
of intention and meaning that is characteristic of the slave songs as a genre,
and hence of their typological function. Even the tones “breathed the prayer
and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was
a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.”
One must note his warning:

I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of
the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to
conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy.... 28

Booker T. Washington made the same point in his 1901 autobiography,
recounting the days of 1865 as freedom came, the singing in the slave quarters
increasing:

Most of the verses of the plantation songs had some reference to freedom. True, they had sung
those same verses before, but they had been careful to explain that the “freedom” in these songs
referred to the next world, and had no connection with life in this world. Now they gradually
threw off the mask; and were not afraid to let it be known that the “freedom” in their songs meant
freedom of the body in this world. 29

Two years later, in his brilliant collection, The Souls of Black Folk (1903),
W. E. B. DuBois would not only challenge the gradualist leadership of Wash­
ington and claim that blacks continued to have and need a double conscious­
ness to live in white America; he framed his essays with musical headnotes,

27. See the Reverend Gilbert Haven and Thomas Russell,
Father Taylor, the Sailor Preacher: Incidents
and Anecdotes of Rev. Edward T. Taylor, for over Forty Years Pastor of the Seaman’s Bethel, Boston
28. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself [1845], ed. Hou­
emphasized the “freedom” in slave songs and its relation to the doubleness, and concluded with a final chapter on the central importance “Of the Sorrow Songs,” as he called the spirituals. The doubleness, the hidden irony, the mask encoded the slave song, the spiritual, the hymn, the “Sorrow Songs” differently for black and white audiences. To the supporter of the slave system it argued and demonstrated the submission and acceptance by the black community of this-worldly difficulties in the name of a heavenly Christian reward after death. To the slave singers it voiced the hope of a covenant of freedom in THIS world (ordering Moses to go down and “tell old Pharaoh to let my people go”), or called for escape to the north, by stealth (“If you get to heaven before I do, just bore a hole and pull me through”), by using the underground railroad on land (“Follow the drinking gourd”) or by navigation (“Dis de good ole ship o’ Zion/ and she’s makin’ for de Promise Land”).

It could be a militant voice: “We are climbing Jacob’s ladder/ Soldiers of the Cross,” by which a traditional Christian crusading image and belief could become the voice of a volunteer in the Union army. One thinks of the transformation of “John Brown’s Body” into Julia Ward Howe’s version as the “Battle Hymn of the Republic.” But it also could be a “sorrow song” for loss, for the break up and deaths within black families (as Uncle Tom’s Cabin [1852] had so vividly shown) in the lament, “De little baby gone home/ For to climb up Jacob’s ladder” and “I wish I’d been dar, My Lord/ For to climb up Jacob’s ladder.” Our written records of these songs come initially through the abolitionist literature, for as one scholar has put it, “in the minds of many southern whites, black preachers and distinctive black religious singing were a potential cover for insurrectionary activities” (Denmark Vesey in South Carolina, Nat Turner in Virginia). Epstein cites as the first published report of “Go Down, Moses” a letter published in the National Anti-Slavery Standard on October 12, 1861.

In the months and years that followed immediately, the interest burgeoned, most notably within the “Port Royal Experiment,” a group of New England abolitionists who went to the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina—in 1862 these islands were in Union hands—and in the collecting of songs by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the poet and critic who became colonel of the first South Carolina Volunteers, a black regiment. In 1867 they published Slave Songs of the United States, which included a Gulf States version of “Jacob’s Ladder,” but in a note they rejected it as “spurious” (though they...
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said it was sung at Port Royal), because they found versions in a Methodist
hymn book. Higginson's deeply appreciative article on the songs appeared
in the Atlantic Monthly in June 1867; it was included as a chapter, "Negro
Spirituals," in his 1870 Army Life in a Black Regiment. Unfortunately, he
did not quite catch the coded language—the critical balancing of religious
faith and radical political resistance in the genre, which was so effectively
captured recently in the final campfire scene in the 1989 film "Glory." He
concluded instead:

There is no parallel instance of an oppressed race thus sustained by the religious sentiment alone.
These songs are but the vocal expression of the simplicity of their faith and the sublimity of their
long resignation. Clearly Higginson had not listened to Frederick Douglass' warning.

The songs and their publication have brought us chronologically back to
the moment that initiated this journey: the cog railway going up Mount Wash­
ington over Jacob's Ladder. But before taking that up, two more pieces need
to be put into place. The first is a vernacular usage: "Jacob's Ladder" is the
name of a quilt pattern. Believed to be pre-Revolutionary War in origin, it is
still in use today: a stark and simple, mostly two-color diagonal abstract
design, based on squares and triangles, for a pieced quilt. Quilt patterns
change both in execution and in name, and by 1825 this one was called in
some places "Stepping Stones," and—apparently especially in the western terri­
itories—"Underground Railway." As a pattern it has not been fully
"mapped," but it can be found in Amish Pennsylvania as well as in New Eng­
land and the "old Northwest": Ohio and those states that were indeed crucial
to the Underground Railway as the pathway from slavery to freedom in the
north. There is also one line of thinking that sees such quilts as coded mes­
ses which facilitated, signaled, and enabled escaped slaves to move on that
journey to freedom.

In the late nineteenth century we have an unusual case of the persistence of
the Jacob's ladder motif but in an explicitly narrative and figurative, rather
than an abstract pattern, in one of the two famous Harriet Powers Bible quilts.
Both have been celebrated because some of their applique animal forms seem

34. William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, Slave Songs of the United
States (1867; reprint New York: Peter Smith, 1929), vi, and #117, 96. The Port Royal Experiment, the book,
and its authors are discussed at length in Epstein, chaps. 14, 16, 17. Their attempt to wall off the spiritual, the
slave song, to segregate it as a "pure" form from its interconnections at times with white religious forms is his­
torically and ideologically interesting, even if ultimately "spurious" itself.
35. Higginson, Army Life in a Black Regiment, 197-222. The recently published Complete Civil War Jour­
nal and Selected Letters of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, ed. Christopher Looby (Chicago: U of Chicago P,
2000), contains well-indexed original materials on Higginson and the spirituals.
37. The "shadowy pre-Revolutionary origin" is cited in Ruth E. Finley, Old Patchwork Quilts and the
Women Who Made Them (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1929); the shifts in names described in Carrie A.
Hall and Rose G. Kretsinger, The Romance of the Patchwork Quilt in America (Caldwell, Ohio: Caxton Print­
ers, 1936), 65-66. The abstract pattern is stressed in John Forrest, Lord, I'm Coming Home: Everyday Aesthet­
ics in Tidewater North Carolina (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988), 78-79, 85-87; and cited again in Forensi and
38. Especially Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard, Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of
remarkably close to those found in West African textiles; but both quilts are also typological, working from Old Testament to New Testament images, as well as employing natural cataclysm as emblem or type of the spiritual journey. The quilt Powers produced in the mid-1880s, now in the Smithsonian collection, includes a panel on Jacob’s ladder in the middle row at a transition point: to the left and above are images of the Garden of Eden and of Cain and Abel; to the right and below the baptism (with a holy spirit dove above), scenes from the Crucifixion, the Last Supper, and other moments in the Christian story39 (Figure 4).

The second piece returns us to New England and tourism just before the construction of the cog railway. It is clear that footpaths took both locals and tourists up the Fabyan Trail through a difficult rocky crevasse that was known as Jacob’s ladder some decades before Sylvester Marsh conceived, patented, and finally constructed his particular engineering marvel.40 The Reverend Benjamin G. Willey, whose brother and family had suffered the famous avalanche that came to be known as the “Willey Disaster” in the 1820s, memorialized fictionally by Hawthorne in his “Ambitious Guest” (1832-33), was the author of a popular collection in the 1850s of history and lore, Incidents in White Mountain History. The oft-quoted final chapter urges a leisurely tourism to the area in a language which revises much of the territory we have traversed. The mountains offer a respite from “the cares and anxieties of Wall-street and State-street” (a major business depression would occur in 1857). Willey urged his obviously wealthy audience to

set your faces northward to these summer resorts. Freedom is an essential element in the air of these mountains,—freedom from the brain-ache and heart-ache attendant upon this money strife. Dollars and cents do not count in Tuckerman’s Ravine.... Freedom from political prejudice is here found.... Whigs and democrats go toiling up their steep sides together, and northerners and southerners, side by side on the same summit, look off on the same wide prospect below them. Americans and foreigners, descendants from the fathers of the Revolution and exiles from the iron rod of despotism, all bow in reverence and acknowledge willing allegiance to

This family of mountains clustering around
Their hoary patriarch.

39. The quilt has been frequently reproduced and discussed. See especially Regenia A. Perry, Harriet Powers’s Bible Quilts (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), plates 2 and 7. We know little about Powers’ life, and hence it is impossible to trace absolutely the “influences” upon her work; but it has been suggested that in one photographic image she is wearing a Masonic apron. The Masons also drew upon Jacob’s ladder. For one example see the chromolithographic Masonic Chart (Boston: Bufford, c. 1851-64), in David Morgan and Sally M. Promey, eds., Exhibiting the Visual Culture of American Religions (Brauer Museum of Art, Valparaiso [Indiana] University, 2000), plate 37.

40. Janice Simon has kindly directed me towards Lucy Crawford’s frequently reprinted 1846 History of the White Mountains, ed. Sternis Morse (Boston: for Dartmouth College and Appalachian Mountain Club, 1978), with its recollections of climbs with her husband the innkeeper Ethan Crawford over Jacob’s Ladder in August 1825 and other times. See 76, 324, note 6, facing 175 for an illustration, 143. She also calls my attention to a Jacob’s Ladder in the Adirondacks, mentioned by Seneca Ray Stoddard in 1874. There are other named Jacob’s Ladders at Glens’s Falls, New York, and elsewhere.
It should come as no surprise that he then urges his readers to “Come, and amid the works of God study the words of God. The Bible came out of a mountain country.”

It is an extraordinary peroration. As the nation teetered on the brink of commercial collapse and political tragedy over the issue of slavery, he insisted on connecting George Washington and liberty, that no oppression can exist around the White Mountains, and that “no slave can ever live on them, or near them. They are consecrated to freedom.” His final note was predictably not the

41. Benjamin G. Willey, *Incidents in White Mountain History* ... (Boston: Nathaniel Noyes; New York: W. M. Dodd; Cincinnati: W. H. Derby; Portland, Maine: Francis Blake, 1856), 301-03. My copy says “3rd Thousand”; obviously it had a wide distribution.
"Sorrow Songs" being sung by slaves but "anthems of eternity." Tourism at Mount Washington becomes an act of political purification. It didn't work. Different audiences understood "climbing Jacob’s Ladder" in fundamentally different ways, and the mask had finally to be torn off in a Civil War before Sylvester Marsh’s plan for a cog railway could actually be built between 1866 and 1869. The construction was a remarkable engineering achievement, much noted in the popular press, and its story has often been retold. Though the design of the passenger cars and the engine have changed over time, the railway remains in operation to this day, passengers “ascending and descending,” to follow precisely the word order of Genesis 28:12, to the sublime summit and returning to the world below. The base station, however, is not Beth-El, the House of God, but a tourist destination, as is the peak, which already had its “Summit House” in 1869 and housed climbers and visitors from the unpredictable storms which so frequently threaten the peak.

Thus finally to our little stereographic image, which has its own epistemological drama (Figure 1). In the catalogue for the Smithsonian exhibition, I commented, “Its name was ‘Jacob’s Ladder,’ both droll Yankee tongue in cheek and sacramentalizing in its allusion to the biblical sources of sublime seeing.” This compressed version of the contrasting significations of the phrase pointed at the shift that was taking place in both vision and aesthetics from the romantic awe before the natural sublime to the new forms of tourism but only hinting at its link to a tradition that we have tried here to sketch out: the transformation by Yankee engineering of a biblical typology into what Leo Marx and others have defined as “the machine in the garden” or “the technological sublime.”

In the actual exhibition space of “Picturing Old New England: Image and Memory,” we tried to place it in its immediate post-Civil War context, in a section titled “Constructing the Rural Past,” with adjoining walls of images of postwar rural work or play and vacationers’ coastal scenes of the rocks of Nahant and elsewhere. Between these two groups we created a wall focused on tourist travel to the White Mountains (Figure 2), with a genteel Winslow Homer image of women on horseback approaching the summit of Mount Washington and above it another oil painting of a stormy Mount Kearsarge by George Inness. Flanking these two were a large charming chromolithographic railroad timetable advertising trips to the area and a fine though equally unfamiliar image, entitled Interior at the Mountains (Figure 5) by Otto Grund

42. Willey, Incidents, 303-07.
43. Richard Joslin, Sylvester Marsh and the Cog Railway (Tilton, NH: Mount Sani Press, 2000) is a well-illustrated recent concise account by the architect/great grandson of the Mount Washington cog railway’s inventor, with useful bibliography.
44. Picturing Old New England, 29.
45. Marx in The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (New York: Oxford UP, 1964), and later works on the railroad in American art; but the seminal work for understanding the tradition and its British sources is Francis D. Klingender’s Art and the Industrial Revolution [1945] edited and revised by Arthur Elton (Paladin edition, 1972), which repositioned the aesthetic of the sublime and picturesque within the world of factories and railroads.
Otto Grundmann (1844-90), *Interior at the Mountains* (1878), oil on canvas, 18 x 27 inches. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Jeffrey R. Brown.

Grundmann, a recent German emigré who was directing the museum school at the new (1870) Boston Museum of Fine Arts.46

Grundmann had become close friends with the Boston minister Robert Waterston (who had delivered one of the eulogies at the death of Father Taylor in 1871),47 and while visiting with Waterston and his wife for two summer months in 1878 painted this image of the interior of the Waterstons’ vacation cottage. Whitefield, New Hampshire, had become a major resort area, with views of the Franconia, Kilkenny, and Presidential ranges, and nearby Mirror Lake, which appears in the foreground of the view. The elements within the painting all focus our attention on viewing, on the process of observing, from the fashionable wicker chair which awaits us to the four-windowed bay which opens out, the raised shades and awning, and the binoculars on the table. Grundmann’s painting wittily reminds us that our observations are a function not of “life” directly but of his own art-making and the Waterstons’ collect-

46. All these images, and the Homer pair below, are reproduced in *Picturing Old New England* (note 1 above), 27-35; I have also borrowed from my own text there.

47. For information on Grundmann and his friendship with the Reverend Waterston and his wife, and their summer cottage in Whitefield, New Hampshire, I am indebted to the research and generosity of Jeffrey Brown. The Waterston eulogy is quoted in Haven and Russell (note 27 above), 410-14. Waterston recalled his memories of forty years of the Seamen’s Bethel, and Taylor’s preaching: “His mind was full of imagery. Types, figures, and symbols came to him with prolific prodigality” (412).
ing, as the photographic images of European travel scenes, the map on an easel, and the “aesthetic” design of the room attest.

To this exhibition display on the wall of the gallery the curatorial team added a vitrine, visible in the foreground of the installation photograph, which stressed the popular media of tourism. It held a volume of the Boston periodical *Every Saturday*, opened to the August 1870 pair of Winslow Homer wood engravings, *High Tide* and *Low Tide*, to contrast both to his own oil painting on the wall and to the more elaborate oil seascapes on an adjoining wall. The vitrine also held a stereographic viewer and four images of Mount Washington, two by the firm of Benjamin and Edward Kilburn of Littleton, New Hampshire, world’s largest producer of stereographic views, including their “No. 134. Jacob’s Ladder” (Figure 1). As with the Grundmann painting, our goal was not to reproduce directly the three-dimensional experience of depth in space, of “being there,” which stereography intended, but to stress the packaging of vision, “The Joys of Spectatorship,” as we self-consciously titled the little textblock for inclusion within that vitrine.

Unfortunately, the title was dubbed “too trendy and stilted” by museum officials, and the textblock that we planned was cut from the vitrine and the exhibition. The issue of how much textblock material is appropriate in any given exhibition is a continuing source of discussion and debate. The length and complexity of our discussion in this essay concerning Jacob’s ladder, its biblical origins, its typological tradition and usages over time, the intersection of both a New England tradition of Christian otherworldly transcendence and a language of the natural sublime with another complex tradition of African American usage which recaptures the Hebrew scriptural tradition of both theophany, a direct vision of the divine, and its embodiment in a people’s destiny in this world (the double and conflicting meanings of the word “freedom”)—all of this makes clear the burden faced by visual presenters in exhibitions with a substantial intellectual content in communicating the gathered richness of meaning and context to their audiences in museum settings.

One answer, of course, is to “put it in the catalogue,” the medium in which one can spell out, or at least suggest, verbal ideas more fully (perhaps even with footnotes!), if editors and administrators allow and funds make it possible. Or to write an essay like this one to spell out the multiplicity of contexts, though that may be to concede too much to the pernicious notion that exhibitions themselves should not challenge or overtax the sensibilities of visitors.

Another answer is to leave all these questions primarily to the viewer and what she or he brings to the occasion. As one instance of this I would offer as a kind of coda the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts’ stunning presentation of the sculpture of Martin Puryear in 2001 (Figure 6). Among the beautifully crafted works in wire mesh, sometimes tareed, woven rattan, and especially woods of various kinds, all finely fitted to various shapes, the museum hung
between two floors in the major entry stair well space a thirty-six-foot piece of ash, split in half lengthwise and carefully dowelled with rungs from two feet at the bottom to less than two inches at the top. It was entitled, on a simple wall label, "Ladder for Booker T. Washington" (1996; collection of the artist). Suspended from wires, it touched neither floor nor ceiling but levitated between, aspiring upward and viewable from bottom and side (though NOT from above), a work of great and simple beauty as one follows the curves upward. The viewer—and the Virginia Museum’s Richmond audience includes many African Americans—might be reminded of the second verse of
“Climbing Jacob’s ladder”: “Ev’ry round goes higher higher,” but the artist-assisted installation and the curator’s catalogue stressed the formal values of the work, minimizing intellectual interventions between our direct perceptions of form and movement in space. A textblock on the balcony did note “that there is some controversy associated with Booker T. Washington” but left most of the implications involving Washington, his historical situation, and subsequent attitudes towards him and his work up to the viewer. Margo Crutchfield’s catalogue discussion touched lightly on a perfunctory identification of Booker T. Washington, and a note that the ladder is “rich with associations,” including ascension and aspiration, with a brief citation of Genesis chapter 28 and Dogon culture allegorical links between the earthly world and the world of the spirits. The extraordinary visual impact of the ladder sculpture in space is in its own way a “sublime” experience, but the richness and complexity of its cultural and historical contexts is a part of the story—another story.

49. Margo A. Crutchfield, Martin Puryear (Richmond: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2001), esp. 52-54 and notes, 57. I have quoted Janet Koplos’ review description of the show, stressing its formal values: “Martin Puryear’s ‘Arts Poetica’,” Art in America, December 2001, 74-79 at 75. Puryear had written an introduction to Richard J. Powell’s fine presentation in Homecoming: The Art and Life of William H. Johnson (Washington: National Museum of American Art/New York: Rizzoli, 1992), xix-xxi. Among Johnson’s late biblical images is a Climbing Jacob’s Ladder (ca. 1944), plate 175—it follows one of another spiritual, Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, on which Powell perceptively comments as continuing “this exploration of a spiritual space and time in Afro-America,” expressing a sense of spiritual entitlement and links to the black church (187, 189 and notes).

50. And the revolution effected by Edmund Burke’s 1757 Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful lay in its emphasis that “Sublime” is not a mere label for objects but a quality of our perceptions—that is, an epistemological drama.

51. As one more piece of the Washington story—I have instanced above Du Bois’s critique of Washington in The Souls of Black Folk (chap. 3)—I would mention a small 8 1/2 x 5 1/2 inch abstract collage by Robert Reed, wittily entitled Book Her Tea (2000).