

## **Spanish-American Travelers at Niagara Falls, 1824-1894: A ‘Real’ Confrontation with Nature and Language**

Catherine Vallejo

*“El ‘alma’ sale de su claustro y se hace semiosis”*  
Noé Jitrik (37)

In the nineteenth century, many of the intellectuals from Spanish America who traveled to the United States included a visit to Niagara Falls, a ‘sublime’ experience (as per Burke and Lyotard) that also produced a need in them to write about it. I maintain that these texts demonstrate that the impact of the scene was such that it fundamentally took away the writer-traveler’s capacity to express himself in language, a capacity they all struggled to recover. Based on the narratives of ten travelers who visited Niagara in the seventy years between 1824 (José María Heredia) and 1894 (Paul Groussac), this essay examines the experiences of these travelers, which were felt as confrontations: with being in the United States, with the powerful natural phenomenon, with the sublime, but above all with their (lack of) verbal expressive faculty, an especially significant struggle for these individuals, who were all (Latin-American) writers. In their totality, these texts formulate the re-construction of the subject through language, as per the proposals of Jacques Lacan and other contemporary thinkers.

A number of well-known Spanish-American intellectuals traveled to Niagara Falls during the nineteenth century, almost always as a ‘compulsory’ side trip of a larger voyage.<sup>1</sup> There are, of course, a quantity of poems written about these visits by Spanish-Americans, including José María Heredia, Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, Rafael Pombo, and Juan Antonio Pérez Bonalde—all of which have received fairly extensive critical study.<sup>2</sup> In fact, however, most Spanish-American travelers to Niagara expressed their experience in prose, in letters, or articles to be published in newspapers—a form of communication in which the referential or denotative function dominates, with a focus on the content of the message (Jakobson 353); the writer wishes to express himself directly and through one, clear meaning, in which the syntagmatic axis (of contiguity, combination, sequence) dominates to express the who-what-where-when of an experience. This paper will examine ten of these prose texts written by (all male) travelers between June, 1824 (José María Heredia) and early 1894 (Paul Groussac), from the point of view of a confrontation (which can be seen to include the concept of struggle, contradiction, dialectic, mirror, echo, reflection) at many levels: between Latin America

and the United States, between the forces within nature itself, between ‘man’ and nature, between man’s language and the natural scene observed, between presence and time and, perhaps mostly and certainly most fundamentally, as a struggle for linguistic expression, or better, for the mastery of language itself—and thus for being (as) a (thinking, human) subject.<sup>3</sup>

The voyages that included Niagara were generally oriented towards some official objective, often as a government representative, such as Alberto Blest Gana in 1867, Lorenzo Zavala in 1846, Guillermo Prieto in 1877, and Rubén Darío in 1893. Other motivations included study (Ramón de la Sagra in 1836 and Domingo F. Sarmiento in 1845), and journalism (Gastón Cuadrado in 1890, Miguel Cané in 1881, and Manuel Serafín Pichardo and Paul Groussac who reported on the 1893 Chicago ‘Columbian’ World Exhibition). In Blest Gana’s words, “No visitar el Niágara, hallándose en Estados Unidos, sería un crimen de lesa América” (253). Although one has to take into account the complex cultural diversity of the nineteenth century in Spanish America, including the different, sometimes conflicting views of subjectivity that prevailed during Romanticism, Positivism and *Modernismo*, as well as the great economic and technological innovations that had an impact on the individual during the last quarter of the century, the reactions of the travelers are quite similar and fascinating both in their common yet powerful elements and in their individual linguistic expressions. The ‘Niagara texts’ by the writers listed above will show how their experiences of the ‘Niagara phenomenon’ both deny and produce language in the traveler. In order to have access to the ‘real experience’ of Niagara (which would be to give it meaning), the individual must have the language (the *parole*) to express it for himself and for others; thus, it is possible to see the experience in its totality as the Lacanian constitution of these travelers as conscious individual subjects, so introduced to the symbolic dimension by their mastery of language, and which makes their experience and its expression (nineteenth century, Latin American) relevant to their readers today.

It should be noted first that most of the Niagara visitors were experienced travelers and respected, well-read writers in their milieux; their accounts of the Niagara experience, however, are not at all like traditional ‘travelogues,’ or “crónicas de desplazamiento,” as Beatriz Colombi defines this genre (16). The Niagara texts do not present any dynamic movements of the travelers; they are descriptive linguistic articulations which are, in fact, *the* most significant element of the ‘Niagara experience,’ as they palimpsestically represent the very struggle for expression on the part of the travelers. Paul Groussac conveys the complexity of this situation, in which his *not* writing about it (his silence: a lack or omission) would be an exception that would single him out: “Es tanto más imprescindible un nuevo esbozo de las caídas famosas, cuanto que ha sido innumerables veces intentado en todas las lenguas y en todas las formas [. . .] omitirlo, sería singularizarme” (479). Paradoxically, however, to a certain extent this is what all writers really aim for: to have a unique experience at Niagara, to be distinctive in their expression, and so to be a unique individual, one-self.

The texts examined demonstrate first that travelers to Niagara Falls experience a number of similar sentiments, which they expressed in their texts. For most of the writers of this

*corpus* the common experiences include: a description of the voyage to Niagara and the method of travel (generally by train); a description of the elements of the landscape or of the stops made on the way (both as a sort of intentional, sometimes fairly slow, lead-in to the very intense ‘Niagara experience’); the brief sojourn at Niagara (often not more than a day or two); that they were accompanied; a criticism of the commercialization of the area<sup>4</sup>; excerpts of guide-books that contain geophysical data regarding the Falls (the volume of water, height, breadth, distance, geology); references to the fatal accidents that have occurred at the Falls, in history and in legend; an account of the different points of interest visited, again as an ‘obligatory’ itinerary (Goat Island, Table Rock, the Cave of the Winds, Horseshoe Falls, the Rapids, the Whirlpool...—names that can, in fact, be seen as metaphors for some of the emotional states I will be referring to); and often including even a notation of the exact date of the visit. Some accounts are palimpsests, containing both the official travel account and direct quotes from a guidebook, or from a diary or notes made on the day(s) of the visit: “Aunque parezca repetirme, voy a copiar lo que escribí sobre los mismos lugares el lunes 12 de julio,” says Zavala in 1846 (108), again highlighting the travelers’ need to express the experience in—sometimes duplicated—writing.

Intertextuality plays a fundamental role in the experience. As almost all travelers make reference to the texts written by Chateaubriand and/or José María Heredia, it is clear their experiences are embedded in a pre-expressed reality that has become codified into a discursive ‘horizon of expectations.’ The relationship between the visitor and the object of his view is thus mediated by an already legitimated collection of signs and signifiers (Casey), as confirmed by Pichardo: “Niágara [. . .] Desde muy niño, ese nombre mágico despertaba en mi corazón la idea más completa de lo colosal y de lo sublime. [. . .] mi imaginación calentada por los versos de Heredia” (210-11). On the one hand, this reality provokes more desire to be unique and original; on the other, it is often accompanied by the fear that the phenomenon will not live up to the expectations already established. And in fact, some travelers are less than impressed by their first view: “no experimento decepción, pero no siento que suban a mis labios los borbotones de adjetivos entusiastas,” states Groussac (481).<sup>5</sup> Some writers make comparisons with other waterfalls; Miguel Cané, for example, places Niagara second to Latin America’s own Tequendama: “¡O mi soberbio Tequendama, dónde estás, con tu acceso difícil, tus bosques vírgenes, tus sendas abruptas, tus rocas salvajes! [. . .] Otra vez, ¿dónde está mi Tequendama? [. . .] para mí, la palma de la belleza queda al Tequendama” (Cané 187, 189). In general, a more extensive, or second visit to the scene confirms the much proclaimed reputation of the Falls. Domingo Faustino Sarmiento says that he took himself “por viajero pasablemente erudito en punto de cascadas [. . .] La de Niágara, empero, sale de los términos de toda comparación; es ella sola en la tierra el más terrífico espectáculo” (598).

It is also clear that the readings of others’ accounts and of the guide-books are not sufficient, that the Niagara Falls phenomenon must be experienced in person, and alone—a situation constituting a quite clear deictic (contingent) circumstance of an “I—here—now,” which destabilizes the traveler as it removes him from his historical and spatial context and sets him in a singular position: “Yo quería que aquel espectáculo grandioso fuera para mí solo, hacerlo mio, absolutamente mio,” in Guillermo Prieto’s words (308). The desire to make the experience unique pushes some travelers to look for a

special way to see the Falls, different from those described by others; thus Blest Gana and Groussac deliberately make a night-time visit: “¡El Niágara de noche! ¡Por esta vez creo que he dado con una novedad!” (Groussac 485).<sup>6</sup> In the narratives of the visit, the subject of the enunciation is ‘I’ or the impersonal ‘se’ to show that the experience, while personal, is also universally human. There is a sense of compulsion on the part of the ‘I’ to be at the location and express this ‘here,’ as well as a sense of timelessness, a sort of ‘necessary presence in the present,’ an eternal ‘now.’ The verbal tense is therefore mostly the present; there is no longer a sense that time (history) can govern nature. The ‘I-here-now’ dominates the time-bound collectivity that is history, and ‘time’ is lost; the past disappears as nature absorbs history in an all-encompassing present: “el tiempo [. . .] parecen años y segundos a la vez,” according to Gastón Cuadrado (53); it is only “[a] mi regreso a la posada americana, [que] supe el tiempo que había durado mi enagenación,” writes de la Sagra (257). As historical time disappears, the ‘I’ becomes more conscious of itself as a human being ‘now,’ in a particular place, and needs to find language to confirm this status.

The first confrontational component of the I-here-now is the fundamental opposition established at the level of the travelers’ context, between the customs reigning in the U.S. or allowed to North-Americans and those of/to others while in United States territory: “un norteamericano puede dispensarse de hacer esa peregrinación [al Niágara], pero un extranjero, ¡nunca!” states Alberto Blest Gana (254). Further comparisons are made between travel in the U.S. and in Latin America regarding its cost and efficiency and, by some of the writers, on women’s freedom of movement. Even at the Niagara scene, this confrontation persists for some as especially Sarmiento (602) and Blest Gana (254, 269, 271) comment on the fact that the “yankees” have completely taken over this natural phenomenon, making it into an exclusively commercial enterprise based on tourist economy and hydroelectric power and, as Sarmiento says: “Yo creo que los yanquis están celosos de la cascada y que la han de ocupar, como ocupan y pueblan los bosques” (602). Some comments go further and hint at the tendency towards territorial expansion on the part of the United States; the Mexican Lorenzo Zavala, for example, even in 1830 mentions the “débil barrera [que] es el Niágara y los lagos para evitar que el Canadá sea un día parte de los Estados Unidos del Norte” (108)—that is, Canada or, of course, by extension, Mexico and beyond. These fragments consciously situate the subject of the voyage in the context of his own history, society and culture (‘now’), in which the meaning of the relations between the U.S. and Latin America are expressed as a confrontation.

At the actual Falls, the something that is seen by an ‘I’ becomes an event experienced and recounted in a textual ‘I see, hear, feel and (need to) say.’ Thus, the second and major confrontation is the presence and effect of Niagara itself on the visitor. Several writers in fact use terms that reflect a confrontation between different forces of nature: struggle, battle or conflict (Sarmiento 598, 599; Groussac 483), violence (“impulsados por una violenta fuerza interior,” [Cuadrado 50]), and dispute (“Las aguas parecen disputarse el paso las unas a las otras, para lanzarse en el abismo,” [Blest Gana 290; see also Heredia 53]). Physical perceptions, the first of which is the sound of the roar of the Falls (“la soledad llena de estrépito,” [Prieto 292]), followed by the sight of the scene and the feeling of the damp vapor on the skin and the eyes, provoke an overload of sensory impressions:

“uno está siempre al borde del abismo entre impresiones de luz y acústicas que embargan completamente nuestros sentidos [. . .] la tensión nerviosa se halla en el máximo de su función normal,” says Cuadrado (43-44), the overwhelming force of which also, and by opposition, underscores the multiple lacks or absence(s) that become manifest: lack of power, home-country, reason, time, and especially language—the lack and absence of linguistic expressions that are adequate and appropriate to describe the scene. There is thus also a confrontation between the all-consuming presence which is Niagara, and the absence of everything else.

A brief reference to the concept of the sublime can serve as an introduction to the major problematic I want to address, which is the question of the presence, existence, nature or adequacy of language during the ‘Niagara experience.’ ‘Sublime’ is how the natural phenomenon that is Niagara Falls was often labeled (see for example McKinsey). In his fundamental *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* of 1759 Edmund Burke had explicated that the sublime includes the necessary presence of both attraction and repulsion, admiration and fear, that it is defined by what might be called “opposite extremes” (a dialectical confrontation itself) and that the sublime is in no way the equivalent of the beautiful. Burke includes a number of components that participate in the sublime: terror, power, obscurity, privation, vastness, infinity, difficulty, magnificence, and loudness, among others (39-66).<sup>7</sup> More recently, Jean-Francois Lyotard, in his study of Kant’s 1790 *Critique of Judgment* states that “the true name of sublime greatness is magnitude, [which is] a subjective evaluation” (82), a type of evaluation that is applicable to all of Burke’s components of the sublime. Guillermo Prieto’s summary, that Niagara “me pareció incomensurable” (287), relates to this concept. Several visitors mention the Niagara scene as “sublime” and some specifically include the concept of opposition; in his account, Sarmiento in fact expresses himself in quite Burkian terms: “Sus dimensiones colosales, la enormidad de las masas de agua, y las líneas rectas que describe, le quitan, empero, toda belleza, inspirando sólo sensaciones de terror, admiración y aquel deleite sublime que causa el espectáculo de los grandes conflictos” (598), which leads to the extreme contradiction (inherent in the sublime) that, in Cuadrado’s words, “[n]o se sabe si se ha gozado o sufrido” (53).<sup>8</sup> With respect to my investigation, Lyotard’s emphasis on Kant’s opinion that the sublime is beyond all representation (76) is especially interesting. In the sublime, he states, creativity “falls prey to a regime of anguish. [. . .] [there is a] suffering of an irreparable lack, an absolute nostalgia for form’s only always being form, that is, limitation” (75). The sublime is beyond the codification (expressed as form, limits) in which nature’s manifestations have necessarily been considered by human beings—that is to say, through language: “no object of coded nature is sublime,” says Lyotard (69).

The ‘Niagara experience,’ although based primarily on being in the presence of the Falls, is not just visual; it is a fully sensorial one—often beginning with the roar of the falling water, audible from a distance much beyond the capacity of vision. The ‘given,’ in Gilles Deleuze’s words, is “the flux of the sensible, a collection of impressions and images, or a set of perceptions” (87). In the case of Niagara, this sensorial ‘given’ causes a major destabilization; Guillermo Prieto’s reaction will serve as an example:

Alcé los ojos, y los volví a cerrar con terror: aquel derrumbamiento, aquella caída; es superior a lo que el delirio mismo puede fingir ni la mente humana alcanzar; era como el desbaratamiento del universo, como si se asistiera al quebrantamiento de la tierra, al desplome de los astros. El trueno, el huracán, la tiniebla, la luz moribunda, la vida en su desquiciamiento estupendo. [. . .] [T]odo es incompleto, todo por indicaciones, la sensación se semeja a la duda de la realización del presentimiento; embriaga el anhelo, se teme que la mente supere a la realidad del espectáculo. (293, 286)

All observers (participants) in fact begin by saying that they have no words to express what they see and feel, that language is inadequate, that Niagara is inexpressible: “Describir escena tan estupenda sería empeño vano,” says Sarmiento simply (597).<sup>9</sup> But then they all have a go at expressing it:

“En centenares de grutas y en millares de libros corre la descripción del Niágara [. . .]. No intentaré, ni es mi propósito, rehacerla; cuento mi impresión y basta.” (Cané 187)

“[N]o encuentro palabras legibles a las incoherentes y alucinadas que, esta misma noche, a la vuelta de la excursión, he garabateado [. . .] en mi cartera de viaje. Me limito a resumir algunas impresiones objetivas.” (Groussac 186)

“El calor de mi imaginación y la rapidez con que las ideas se formaban y sucedían, hubiera requerido para espresarlas [sic], una lengua que con un solo sonido representase una frase, y una escritura que de un solo rasgo fijase un pensamiento.” (de la Sagra 256)

The description of the scene often starts out as a list of words without any organized sequence, the use of (disordered) enumeration serving as an analogy to the magnitude of the elements observed, and reflecting both the chaos of the scene that the writer attends (“aquí el caos se enseñoa de la existencia,” Cuadrado 50), and the need to find the exact signifier that will convey the reality of what is seen, heard and felt. These lists are generally produced at several of the points along the observation route, as fragments of the scene’s totality (Table Rock, the Cave of the Winds, Goat Island, the Whirlpool, the bridge...), and while there is repetition of certain almost ‘required’ words, there are also variations, as if to indicate that the sensations are repeated in interaction with others that are slightly different—differences which make semantic negotiation necessary, make the text meaningful rather than being a simple referential sequence. However, the series of signifiers (which in itself are ‘meaningless’), in fact, confirm Lyotard’s concept of the sublime, that its expression is impossible. There is thus a confrontation between life/nature and language, with man’s (in)capacity to express reality in language, with language as Other, with being subject *to* language:

“[L]os torbellinos de espuma y cambiantes prismáticos, sucediéndose con una rapidez eléctrica [. . .], el reventar de la mole inmensa contra la roca, el torbellino níveo que se levantaba, el fragor de ese trueno constante [. . .]. Un ruido infernal atruena.” (Cané 188)

“[A]quel río sobrenatural [. . .] gruñidores, encrespados y frenéticos [. . .] blancas furias [. . .]. Corren, se precipitan, se alcanzan, se deshacen, crecen y, cada vez más amenazadoras y veloces ante los escollos que encuentran, lánzase por último al abismo, produciendo en su caída solemne y estrepitosa, fragor y polvo, un estruendo que repercute, amedrentador.” (Pichardo 212)

The visitors' existence is reduced to its originary pre-creation chaos or inevitable final catastrophe: “Desde la llegada, se oye a lo lejos el rumor inmenso, como un eco de la catástrofe suprema” (Cané 187). In this process, man and nature (the “I-here-now”) become indistinguishable: “me fue imposible distinguir mis propias sensaciones en la confusión que me causó el sublime espectáculo” (Heredia 49); “el mundo es la catarata” (Blest Gana 291). Man loses the consciousness of his rational existence: “Aquella escena fantástica [. . .] me hizo salir violentamente de la conciencia de la vida material, y lanzarme en alas de una fantasía caprichosa al través de un mundo imaginario” (Blest Gana 285). Together with the quite non-semantic list of descriptives that seem to spontaneously erupt from the visitor—and is more like a lacanian pre-symbolic expression of the fragments of the observed scene than a representation of it—the body is experienced both in some of its discrete components and as a whole entity as a number of visitors experience distinct physical effects in various parts of the body, such as faintness in the head, trembling legs, and pallor of the facial features:

“se me ha trastornado la cabeza.” (Heredia 53)

“las piernas me temblaban y aquella sensación fiebrosa que indica que la sangre se retira de la cara.” (Sarmiento 598)

“mis piernas flaqueaban, mis amigos acudieron á mí y me llevaban como en peso; [. . .] casi suspendí mi cuerpo en el aire.” (Prieto 287)

“no vi más que una nube colosal que me envolvía y cegaba a la vez que en mis oídos retumbaba una detonación perenne y medrosa.” (Pichardo 212)

Almost all visitors mention that there is confusion or chaos; reason, object, consciousness leave the body—and so does the order and structure of language, a component which, in Lacan's view, constitutes and defines the individual as a subject. Again, although it is clear that most travelers are not alone during the experience (accompanied by a friend or a guide), their feelings and expressions at the scene of the Falls are set in the first-person singular: “nos apeamos en el Hotel Americano, y a poco rato me dirijí [*sic*] solo en busca de las cataratas” (de la Sagra 255). I would argue that this (social) isolation, in fact, underlines their non-consciousness as a person, their loss of ‘self’ since, again as per Lacan, a person only exists as such because he is recognized by an ‘other.’ It is as if the

visitor has gone back to where he had no language, back to the lacanian mirror-stage during which he only begins to recognize himself in the fragments of his physical being, as if in a/the mirror of the falling water, where this outside fuses with the subject, where the wall of falling water acts as this Other's gaze, forcing a confrontation with the scene's elements. Upon reading the figures relating to the various manifestations of the Falls in a guidebook, Sarmiento feels the need to visually confront the measurements with the scene in order to encompass it, yet finds the eye (and the 'I') insufficient: "Al ver escritas estas cifras averiguadas por mensuras, nótase la incompetencia del ojo humano para abrazar las grandes superficies. [. . .] El espesor de la masa de agua es de veinte y un pies, de manera que no pudiendo atravesarla la luz, [. . .] revela a los ojos la magnitud de la escena, aumenta el pavor que inspira" (Sarmiento 598-99).

In order to be able to appreciate (know, understand) the power of the phenomenon, observers move around the various points of interest around the Falls—upriver, along the edge of the abyss, down to the Whirlpool, on to the bridge, etc.—, which are immobile even as they are dynamic. In this perspective fragmentation of the scene each stop becomes a slightly different signifier that all together build into a cumulative meaning—like the fragments of the body perceived in the mirror. It is possible to pass in front of the curtain of water (with the tour boat), and behind (through the Cave of the Wind or at Table Rock), but not through it; everywhere they go, visitors are randomly splashed (touched, gazed at) *by* the water that falls. In this state, the fluidity of the spaces between the solid rock and the swiftly running water constitutes an aperture to the extra-linguistic and never attainable 'real,' that which, in Lacan's view, always remains unnamed and without meaning—Lyotard's "irreparable lack" in the sublime (75), the unfathomable. Thus, even if our subjectivity depends on understanding, "nothing escapes our knowledge as radically as the powers of nature," states Gilles Deleuze (86). The only way that 'nature' exists for man is as inscribed and codified by language, and here, that order is also denied. In fact, the whole scene as expressed is a transgression against—and a denial of—culture, order, form, scientific knowledge, language (logos); the mirror-and-echo that is the curtain of water of the Falls reflects the terror that lies beyond the borders of social behavior, reason and rules, beyond consciousness to the center of the subject: the real, which will always remain beyond, resisting symbolic codification, as a bottomless, inexpressible, always-filled abyss. Man has lost consciousness, control: "Me parecía ver en aquel torrente la imagen de mis pasiones y de las borrascas de mi vida" (Heredia 54).

Confronted with this lack of language to express the experience, and in order to still 'capture' it, and thus retain some control over it and regain their subjectivity, the writers resort to verbal artifices—notably to metaphors and other type of comparisons, Jakobson's "poetic function," needing the paradigmatic axis and its grasp of plurisemic code-systems, but which at the same time points to absence. Metaphors, says Karsten Harries, can be used "to exalt the real object" (79)—a formulation in which the term 'real' might be taken to refer to Lacan's 'real,' as being an attempt to express what lies beyond language: "What metaphor names may transcend human understanding so that our language cannot capture it" (Harries 72); metaphors, continues Harries, "speak of what remains absent. [. . .] metaphor implies lack" (82), in the sense of the capacity of human language to express this lack which, at the same time, of course, creates a new image that replaces the referent. Niagara "[e]s un gigante de cien brazos, que estrecha al

mortal entre su cuerpo con una fuerza irresistible” (Zavala 106), “es un mar [. . .] es un estertor de muerte” (Prieto 288, 289), “el vasto lienzo de agua tendido delante” (Heredia 57). Other forms of comparisons such as similes abound:

“la catarata americana [. . .] se adelanta como un robusto pecho sobre las escotaduras...en las paredes del profundo cauce se hallan registrados como en las hojas de un libro los siglos de siglos.” (Cuadrado 47, 48)

“como el puro y magnífico incienso que desde ese altar augusto eleva la creación reverente.” (Blest Gana 285)

“como columnas [. . .] como cristal [. . .] como plata fundida [. . .] como ráfagas de rubí [. . .] como [. . .] un fantasma de la inmortalidad.” (Prieto 287-88, 293).

The adverb of quantity or degree that signifies magnitude gives an almost superlative quality to the representation by evoking the signifiers relating to intensity of size, volume and sound: “aquel cuadro, en fin, tan imponente, por sus dimensiones, tan magistral por la belleza indecible [. . .] tan vigoroso en sus expresiones de ruido y movimiento, [. . .] tan lleno de misterio” (Blest Gana 285). The expression ‘as if’ both formulates a comparison and denies it as being contrary to fact: “como si se asistiera al quebrantamiento de la tierra” (Prieto 293), “como si se tratase de una querida” (Prieto 308). The emphatic form of *cómo* signifies ‘in this way’ and attempts to explain *that* (not just *how*) things are; they exist in the here and now: “Admira cómo [los americanos] han podido dominar la terrible corriente” (Zavala 108); “se presencia cómo las aguas del continente Americano se convidan para asumirse en el abismo” (Cuadrado 48).<sup>10</sup> Again many of these comparative terms are repeated in an enumeration that reflects the magnitude of the scene.

In their various forms and arrangements, the expressions I have examined provide the effect of the observer/writer needing to learn ‘language’—first, words that name without order or any signifying process, then sentences that impose a narrative structure to what is seen and experienced, an exercise necessary to bring the event into the social, cultural world of their own humanity and for the ‘I’ to become a subject that can say ‘I-am-here-now.’ But there still remains a lack: these words, this language is not adequate to re-create the experience (observers’ resorting to enumeration and comparisons being one example). There will always be parts, elements, fragments of the experience that cannot be expressed.

In addition, and at the same time, of course, the linguistic expression of the experience erases the referent that is the physical presence of Niagara and makes itself the dominant, the only reality. Once the observer has left the scene, its expressed memory is all he is left with: “The real is what it is, but when it is represented, expressed, referred to, connected in some way or another to language, the real begins to be what it is not” (Miller 30), i.e. memory, language. Blest Gana seems to move towards that sort of concept: “Esta visita a la catarata fue como una idea precursora de la realidad” (286). Language, as a chain of signifiers that relate only to other signifiers, ends up suppressing the experience; it creates

its lack, and thus the desire to fill the void—by more use of language. And as the observer uses signifiers to express himself he creates himself as a *subject*—which is “the effect of the combination of the signifiers” (Miller 33).

The I-here-now compound is transformed into an uncertain ‘I-am?-here-now’ questioning on the part of the observer/subject. At some point, therefore, there is often a consciousness on the part of the visitor that ‘seeing’ is not enough to live the experience; he has to do something to confirm this existence: take the sightseeing boat, cross the bridge, go down into the abyss to the Cave of the Winds, go upriver to see the origin of the waterfall. As Gilles Deleuze claims, subjectivity is essentially linked with practice (see Boundas 17), and Alberto Blest Gana expresses some awareness of this phenomenon: “Ver las cataratas es idealizar, hallarse en la Cueva de los Vientos es sentir. Ver en el primer caso es ser espectador, en el segundo es ser actor” (287). Thus, in order to convey the experience, the visitor, in addition to the compulsion to personally experience the phenomenon, also feels the need to become a participant, both in the Niagara itinerary and in his own subject-construction: dig deep, create his language—society, culture, meaning, himself.

In addition to the power, magnitude, and violence of the phenomenon, the descriptions of the various scenes often refer to the abyss. The edge of the river and the whirlpool attract the subjects to the extent that some feel they may crash or edge into its depths: “Comienzo a sentir la atracción del abismo,” says Groussac (483). Some feel that it is necessary to go down into this whirlpool in order to give them a foundation: “la cascada no se siente, no se palpa, sino descendiendo al abismo que le sirve de base” (Sarmiento 599). The abyss is seen as the objective of the rushing waters as they jump over the edge, but also as their death, and in the subject’s identification with the scene, the view into the abyss produces his own confrontation with death: “se siente el poder inmenso de las fuerzas naturales, la brutalidad del número y la fatalidad de las causas” (Cuadrado 48). Again man and nature fuse, and man views the ‘real’ that is death. The visual-sensual becomes metaphysical, philosophical, religious: “[P]arece que el alma se siente oprimida por sentimientos que no puede resistir: las aguas del torrente ahogan en la imaginación todas las ideas” (Zavala 106). Many writers resort to addressing *el supremo Creador*, God as the only originator or power able to explain the phenomenon: “¡Sublime Dios! Aquellos mares no alcanzan con su revolución tremenda una burbuja en el océano de tu eternidad” (Prieto 293); “el ruido aterrante, invariable, perpetuo de las inmensas cataratas, que me parecía la voz de la naturaleza, proclamando el poder inconmensurable de su Creador” (Blest Gana 284). Indeed, some question Heredia’s first appeal to the Creator as ultimate foundation of Niagara—problematizing Niagara’s meaning, and by extension, all nature and all humanity—whether it is God or death, or whether, in fact, these are the same: “que no es el torrente que salta, se precipita y se estrella en el abismo; es un mar que sucumbe, que desfallece y muere. [. . .] no es la voz de Dios de que habla Heredia: es un estertor de muerte; es el suplicio de la grandeza terrena, proclamando á Dios al perderse en el caos; es una grandeza que se desvanece en la nada o el misterio” (Prieto 288-289).<sup>11</sup>

This consciousness of death and mystery that is provoked at and by Niagara adds a strong metaphysical or religious dimension (Niagara as ‘temple’) and supports the subject’s presence as a human being who exists. And as language expresses the ‘I-am-here-now’

compound, to confirm this existence as a social being, and in spite of the also necessary solitude, there is indeed a necessary confrontation with ‘you,’ with an ‘other’ (Niagara as ‘forum’ or communication center).<sup>12</sup> In order for there to be a meaning to the experience—that is, to life itself, to constitute the ‘I’—the participation takes the form of interaction, communication (language) with others. This encounter occurs at two levels, splitting the subject-I into one that addresses or writes for a public (the subject of the enunciation) about the ‘I’ that confronts Niagara (the subject of the enunciated). This public is often specifically identified as a government or a newspaper at home in Spanish America, or sometimes artificially created as the receptor of ‘letters,’ but this other in the split can also be Niagara itself. In Pichardo’s exclamation “¡Niágara, adiós, adiós, ‘trueno de agua’ que has necesitado retumbar entre las rocas de dos poderosas naciones [. . .]!” (216), he evokes Niagara as a reality of the observer’s ‘symbolic,’ conscious existence as a Spanish American, i.e. a specific cultural, political, social being: “yo veía en ti la representación más melancólica de nuestras desastrosas revoluciones,” says Lorenzo Zavala (111). Through the ‘Niagara experience’ that (re)created these subjects in the symbolic realm through the loss and subsequent recuperation of language, we have thus now come back to the subject as Spanish-American, in confrontation with his particular circumstances.

In 1824 José María Heredia concludes his account of his visit to Niagara Falls by recounting how, as he steps back from the edge of the river, the rock upon which he stood falls down into the whirlpool abyss (60)—again an experiential reflection of how at Niagara the subject is literally and figuratively at the edge of an abyss, at the joint between life and fatality, between subjectivity and the ‘real’ that is always beyond possession. The power of the Niagara experience eradicates the traveler’s access to language—effectively removing that which makes him a human being—and forces him to re-conquer it in a process of confrontation—with Niagara, with his circumstances as a Spanish-American in the United States, with himself and with language—in order to reconstruct himself as a subject. The following sentiment expressed in 1893 by one of the last nineteenth-century travelers I consider, Manuel S. Pichardo, reflects in summary the complexity and the paradox of the Niagara confrontation for Spanish-American travelers, the power of nature vs the need for expression—and how the latter also determines the ability to sense the former, as he refers to Heredia’s ode, the first that expressed the ‘Niagara experience’: “no sé si se nos reveló de súbito más grande la obra del hombre que la obra de la naturaleza. Para sentir la sublimidad de los versos de Heredia, es preciso ver el Niágara” (215).

*Concordia University, Montreal*

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Although even in the nineteenth century the Niagara Falls site included very diverse attractions and had already become a tourist center—and as such has produced an extensive bibliography, which also deals with the changing nature of the phenomenon in regards to the use of technology and nature parks—with this label all writers refer to the cluster of natural phenomena that are situated at and around the waterfalls. I am defining as “Spanish American” those individuals who lived and worked for a number of years in the region, although not necessarily born there—including therefore writers such as Cuadrado, de la Sagra and Groussac.
- <sup>2</sup> In one of the most recent of these, Rut Román studies Heredia and Pombo’s ‘Niagara experience,’ approaching it from each poet’s biographical and historical circumstances, and the prevailing philosophical-religious tendencies. The author does not problematize ‘the sublime’ nor question the very ability of the poets to express themselves at that moment, rather she sees the encounter with Niagara as the poets’ opportunity “para escenificar la experiencia por la que el sujeto, con los sentidos exacerbados ante el espectáculo monumental, alcanza el instante de revelación y percibe su identidad y relación única con el universo” (41).
- <sup>3</sup> The writers I will deal with are all male. In fact, very few Spanish-American women travelers wrote about any visit to Niagara Falls in the nineteenth century. Eduarda Mansilla, whose voyage was in 1860 but whose book was not published until 1882, maintained a vocabulary that stays within the “bello . . . hermoso” categories, rather than the conflictive ‘sublime.’ Two ‘international’ Hispanic women visited the Falls, and wrote brief comments: Emilia Serrano, the baronesa de Wilson, was there in 1886 and 1894 and published “El Niágara. Tradición” in the *Ilustración Artística* of Barcelona in 1888, and Eva Canel who visited the Falls on her way to the Chicago World Exhibition in 1893, limiting herself (exceptionally) to a brief paragraph in a Madrid newspaper. This lack of women’s writing is likely due to the limitations that still existed for women, limitations which would not have provided an opportunity for them to travel (and write) professionally. The several comments made by the male travelers regarding women’s reactions at Niagara are therefore especially interesting. The use of the third person masculine throughout this paper to refer to the authors is therefore appropriate, and deliberate.
- <sup>4</sup> For example, “los americanos han echado a perder esa maravilla que la naturaleza arrojó en su suelo. [. . .] Rodeado de molinos, bar-rooms [sic], albergues cubiertos de anuncios [. . .] Ultrajado, profanado” (Cané 189); “el sórdido parasitismo explotador” (Groussac 479).
- <sup>5</sup> Rubén Darío devotes half a paragraph to his whole Niagara visit: “Mi deseo era conocer la catarata del Niágara. [. . .] Mi impresión ante la maravilla confieso que fue menor de lo que hubiera podido imaginar. Aunque el portento se impone, la mente se representa con creces lo que en realidad no tiene tan fantásticas proporciones. Sin embargo, me sentí conmovido ante el prodigio natural” (42). It is interesting to note that this brief expression includes several condition(al)s and reservations, as well as a final reference to José María Heredia (43). See also Román (52) for the different experiences of Heredia and Pombo in this respect.

- 
- <sup>6</sup> His visit is also exceptional, or perhaps doubly unique, as it occurs during wintertime, with snow on the ground (and where he follows in the footsteps of a romantic couple on their honeymoon).
- <sup>7</sup> It is worth mentioning here that there is a clear gender issue with regards to the sublime, which “was a masculine mode, dealing out darkness and terror” as David Simpson states in his discussion of Edmund Burke’s text (127). Burke’s examples of writers of the sublime “all presuppose a male writer or narrator in whom the power of words and worldly power are closely identified” (Simpson 128).
- <sup>8</sup> Lyotard defines Kant’s view of the sublime as “an emotion, which forces thought to the extremes of pleasure and displeasure, from joyous exaltation to terror. [. . .] Violent, divided against itself, it is simultaneously fascination, horror, and elevation” (228, 231). Similar descriptions can be found on pp. 54, 55, and 75 of Lyotard’s text.
- <sup>9</sup> Sarmiento does not refer to any previous Spanish-American writer on Niagara, but rather quotes “versos que el espectáculo inspiró a una señorita [norteamericana]”—in English (597). It is also interesting to note that several writers—starting with Heredia—also state that pictorial representation of Niagara Falls is equally inadequate: “Mezquinas copias, infieles y miserables traslados de la naturaleza grande, sublime, sorprendente, nada ofrecen ni a la vista ni a la imaginación” (de la Sagra 258-59).
- <sup>10</sup> Other significant expressions used by writers, such as “parece que” or “puede decirse que,” that aim for more exact representation, still fall within the comparative category, as do “como dice...,” and “según,” i.e. ‘by whose authority’, such as the guidebooks.
- <sup>11</sup> Prieto spends several paragraphs on this issue and they are some of the very few fragments of all the texts that really don’t ring ‘true,’ having all the quality and tone of an exhortative essay or sermon of what he calls “mi entrevista con Dios” (288). He also included two fairly extensive poems in the prose account of his visit to Niagara.
- <sup>12</sup> The conditions that obtain after the nineteenth century at Niagara Falls make it possible to consider this natural phenomenon as being an object in a museum. Given the manipulation of the quantity of water that actually goes over the Falls—a power that in fact originated with the hydro projects late in the nineteenth century—, it is the viewer who becomes the Object of this manipulation, and as the natural phenomenon itself becomes an Object simply on display, controlled by superstructures and their master signifiers (see Casey).

## Works Cited

- Blest Gana, Alberto. *De Nueva York al Niágara*. 1867. Santiago de Chile: Ed. Difusión, 1947. Print.
- Boundas, Constantin V. "Translator's introduction." *Empiricism and Subjectivity. An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature*. By Gilles Deleuze. 1953. Trans. & introd. Constantin V. Boundas. New York: Columbia UP, 1991. 1-19. Print.
- Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. 1759. Oxford, NY: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.
- Cané, Miguel. *En Viaje. (1881-1882)*. Buenos Aires: 'La Cultura Argentina,' 1917. Web. 5 Nov. 2014.
- Casey, Valerie. "The Museum Effect: Gazing from Object to Performance in the Contemporary Cultural-History Museum." *Proceedings: International Cultural Heritage Informatics Meeting*. École du Louvre Paris: Perrot, 2003. Web. 5 Nov. 2014.
- Colombi, Beatriz. *Viaje intelectual: Migraciones y desplazamientos en América Latina, 1880-1915*. Rosario, Arg.: Beatriz Viterbo, 2004. Print.
- Cuadrado, Gastón. "Recuerdo de los Estados Unidos. Un viaje al Niágara." 1890. *Revista Cubana* XVII (1893): 41-56. Print.
- Darío, Rubén. *Autobiografía. España Contemporánea (Crónicas y retratos literarios)*. 1912. México: Ed. Porrúa, 1999. Print.
- de la Sagra, Ramón. *Cinco meses en los EEUU de la América del Norte. Diario de viaje*. París: Impr de Pablo Renouard, 1836. Print.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Empiricism and Subjectivity. An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature*. 1953. Trans. & introd. Constantin V. Boundas. New York: Columbia UP, 1991. Print.
- Groussac, Paul. *Del Plata al Niágara*. 1897. Buenos Aires: Colihue, 2006. Print.
- Harries, Karsten. "Metaphor and Transcendence." *On Metaphor*. Ed. Sheldon Sacks. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1979. 71-88. Print.
- Heredia, José Maria. "Carta del Niágara." 1824. *Revisiones literarias*. La Habana: Ministerio de Educación, 1947. 48-60. Print.
- Jakobson, Roman. "Concluding Statement: Linguistics and Poetics." 1958. *Style in Language*. Ed. Thomas A. Sebeok. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1960. 350-77. Print.
- Jitrik, Noé. "La estética del romanticismo." *Hispanérica* 26.76-77 (1997): 35-47. Print.
- Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." 1949. Trans. Alan Sheridan. *Écrits: A Selection*. London: Tavistock, 1977. 1-17. Print.
- Liotard, Jean-Francois. *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime: Kant's Critique of Judgment, [sections] 23-29*. Trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1994. Print.
- Mansilla de García, Eduarda. *Recuerdos de viaje*. 1882. Ed. J.P. Spicer-Escalante. Buenos Aires: Stockcero, 2006. Print.
- McKinsey, Elizabeth. *Niagara Falls: Icon of the American Sublime*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1985. Print.
- Miller, Jacques-Alain. "Language: Much Ado About What?" *Lacan and the Subject of Language*. Ed. Ellie Ragland-Sullivan & Mark Bracher. New York: Routledge, 1991. 21-35. Print.

- 
- Pichardo, Manuel Serafín. *La ciudad blanca. Crónicas de la Exposición Colombina de Chicago*. 1893. La Habana: Biblioteca de 'El Fígaro,' 1894. Print.
- Prieto, Guillermo. *Viaje a los Estados Unidos (1877)*. Tomo II. México: Impr. del Comercio de Dublan y Chavez, 1878. Print.
- Román, Rut. "Lo sublime que se desvanece. La imagen poética del Niágara en Heredia y Pombo." *Decimonónica* 2.1 (2005): 41-54. Web. 5 Nov. 2014.
- Sarmiento, Domingo Faustino. *Viajes por Europa, África y América. 1845-47*. Buenos Aires: Stockcero, 2003. Print.
- Serrano de Wilson, Baronesa Emilia. "El Niágara, tradición." *La Ilustración*. Barcelona. Febr. 13, 1888, 59-60. Print.
- Simpson, David. *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt against Theory*. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1993. Print.
- Zavala, Lorenzo. *Viaje a los Estados-Unidos del Norte de América*. Mérida: Impr. de Castillo y Compañía, 1846. Web. 5 Nov. 2014.