

“On the Wind of Her Imagination”:
Nature, Religion and the Artistic Imagination in
Allegra Goodman’s Kaaterskill Falls
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Imagination in Allegra Goodman’s *Kaaterskill Falls*

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Allegra Goodman begins her 1998 novel, *Kaaterskill Falls*, by describing the physical and emotional distance the Kirshners, an Orthodox Jewish community who live in New York City but summer in the Catskills, place between themselves and the world around them when she writes:

The Kirshners’ apartment buildings are built close together of red brick, their few stores clustered together as if for safety. Flights of stairs, hundreds of cement steps, provide shortcuts from the streets above to those below. . . . There are no stairs, however, to the top of the Heights. No Kirshners climb up to Fort Tryon Park or go to the museum there, the Cloisters, with its icons and crucifixes. . . . The Kirshners never think of the Cloisters. They are absorbed in their own religion. Although they have no paintings, or stained glass, or sculpture, they array themselves with gorgeous words. (4)

For the Kirshners their tight living quarters in the Washington Heights section of New York City affords them protection from the influences and temptations of the secular world; their physical environment reflects their position — or rather how they position themselves — in the secular world. The Kirshners close, isolated living environment allows them to actively separate themselves from the art and daily rituals of the secular world in order to wrap themselves in the language of scripture and Goodman’s description highlights the relationship between the linguistic and the visual and the religious and the environmental.

Moreover, by beginning the novel in the cramped, urban environment of New York City and then rapidly moving the action to the Catskills town of Kaaterskill marks the novel as one of transformation; by setting her story in the Hudson Valley, the source of much inspiration for the Hudson River School painters of the nineteenth century, Goodman self-consciously positions the story against Emersonian notions of nature, art and religion.

For Rav Kirshner, the leader the Kirshners, his follower's inability or unwillingness to integrate their religious study with the secular study of art and literature is of great concern: "They are good people. . . But they are very *simple*. I notice all the time. They are always working and they are learning. Today I asked myself: What are they *thinking*? They are afraid of the mind, and to read. . . . they keep one thing, the religious, alive. It is the most important, but they have lost the other. They have forgotten the poetry. . . . They make their way, accounts, lawyers, in the banks. Getting and spending, I am afraid. Working all the time. When do they think of the spiritual?"(106). For Kirshner the religious education is greatly enhanced by the secular one. Kirshner's memories of his education in Germany are marked by rigorous religious study, but also by a fondness for Schiller and Shakespeare. For his followers, who are trying to recreate their community after the losses of the Holocaust, the study of art and literature has ostensibly been replaced by their work in the secular world. They live and work in the secular world, but their physical environment is secondary to their spiritual one.

Though it is Rav Kirshner who has led his followers into lives of greater and greater restriction, as he nears the end of his life he begins to question how the separation of the religious from the secular is affecting their spiritual lives. However, it is Rav Kirshner, or more specifically his wife Sarah, who determines that his followers should leave the city in the summer for the Catskills. Speaking of his late wife, who seemingly influenced his attitude towards the arts, Kirshner

remembers, "I had not wanted to buy the house in Kaaterskill. It did not interest me then to leave the city. . . I said it was trouble to come to the mountains, to have two houses, and she said, it is not enough to live in one place if it is not beautiful. It is not sufficient. . . She believed in beauty, it's power and strength. She believed in beauty and nature and in art." (110) Thus, early in the novel both nature and art are coded as being feminine, secular and elusive. Because Rav Kirshner does not deal directly with the women in his congregation and because his wife has passed away, art in the novel connotes something hidden, off-limits and deeply personal. Art becomes a focal point in the novel for revelation and possibility, but also of limitation. However it is nature, whether real or represented, that mediates between the sacred and the secular in the novel, between the religious imagination and the artistic imagination. The natural setting of Kaaterskill makes the unseen visible.

Elizabeth Shulman, a follower of Rav Kirshner, has a moment of personal inspiration standing before Thomas Cole's painting of Kaaterskill Falls. Cole, like Elizabeth, was originally from England and is credited with founding the Hudson River School of landscape painting, often considered the first American artistic movement. The painting moves Elizabeth because she feels that it is an accurate representation of a place she loves and because of the memories it evokes. Goodman describes Elizabeth's reaction to the painting when she writes, "Knowing the site as she does, she realized Cole's integrity, and now, among the exhibit's many paintings, this particular landscape seems to mark the truth in all others." (82) Because Elizabeth knows Kaaterskill Falls she therefore recognizes and believes in the truthfulness of Cole's artistic representation and because of this truthfulness she decides to create something of her own, something that reflects her own desires. The painting inspires Elizabeth to acknowledge her own desire to create something personal and immutable, something she can control. Describing Elizabeth's moment of epiphany, Goodman writes,

“Elizabeth looks intently at the painting, at that brilliant piece of the world, and gazing at the color and the light of it she feels the desire, as intense as a prayer. I want-she thinks, and then it comes to her simply, with all the force of her pragmatic soul-I want to open a store.” (83) During this ekphrastic moment in the novel Elizabeth decides to negotiate the border between the sacred and the secular while also recognizing the outlines of her religious life.

James Heffernan, in his essay, “Ekphrasis and Representation,” contends that ekphrasis-the verbal representation of a visual object-is unique from other literary forms that combine literature and the visual arts because ekphrasis, “explicitly represents representation itself. What ekphrasis represents in words, therefore, must itself be *representationa*.” (300) Ultimately, Heffernan feels that ekphrasis, due to its preoccupation with representation, is most useful in revealing the limitations of representation; whether verbal or visual, representation is ultimately inadequate in its attempts to capture, “permanence, stability, or truth.” (312) Though the ekphrastic moment of the Thomas Cole painting ultimately reveals to Elizabeth more limitations than possibilities, on the initial viewing of the painting Elizabeth is moved to create something precisely because she feels there is an accuracy of translation between the natural world she inhabits and the visual world of the canvas. It is the *possibility* of perfect representation that inspires Elizabeth rather than the product of representation. Ekphrasis might indicate limitation, but it also indicates a moment of fluidity between linguistic and visual categories. And it is the natural setting of the Hudson Valley that opens Elizabeth up, allowing her to recognize that categories, such as linguistic and visual or sacred and secular, might somehow be collapsed or overcome in order to create a different reality. Goodman writes of Elizabeth, “She loves the place; she loves the painting by association. The painting is all associations. All familiar to her; reminding her, inspiring her. It brings back her own half-buried wish to capture and even recreate a place and

time that beautiful. More than ever she wants to do something of her own. . . She feels so strong. Fearless.” (83) Though the painting is the catalyst, *Kaaterskill* is the inspiration for both Elizabeth and Cole. The painting serves to excavate memories and desires.

Elizabeth’s “epiphany” is quickly transformed into a desire to engage in commerce and as such a moment of imagination also becomes one of personal limitation. Elizabeth is able to imagine bringing her religious life into contact the secular world in the form of a kosher store because she recognizes her creative limitations but also those of her religious life. Work in her community is an accepted way to venture out into the secular world, however because Elizabeth’s desire to work is borne out of her experience with the Cole painting it becomes a manifestation of artistic imagination. Work serves as a threshold that both separates and binds together the sacred and secular world, but it is the painting that becomes a heuristic through which Elizabeth is able to pinpoint her desire to bring together the sacred and the secular. More broadly, the presence of the painting in the novel serves as a lens through which to view the tension between the sacred and the secular, the religious and the artistic and the potential that exists where they both meet.

Maya Socolovsky in her essay, “Land, Legacy and Return: Negotiating a Post-Assimilationist Stance in Allegra Goodman’s *Kaaterskill Falls*,” writes that “the novel deconstructs any traditional romanticization of nature and its relationship to an American landscape. Although it finds in nature a sacred retreat for community and family, the text does advance an isolationist view of man or woman in nature. Instead, the beauty of nature becomes linked to Jewish prayer and ritual...Nature alone is not reified except as a potential site for harmony in the community or one’s family.” (32) I would argue that Goodman’s use of a quintessential American romantic landscape is expansive enough to encompass both Emersonian notions of the individual in nature as well

discussions of how a religious community functions in the broader secular world. However, it is Cole's representation of Kaaterskill where the individual and the communal meet. Elizabeth associates Kaaterskill with her family and her community, but it is the painting of Kaaterskill that allows her to get in touch with her individual desires; these individual desires are expressed by Elizabeth's desire to serve her community through her kosher grocery store. Rather than an either/or proposition that pits the individual versus the community, Goodman's use of Cole's artistic landscape and the natural setting of the Catskills presents an alternative whereby Elizabeth can attempt to explore her individuality within the parameters of her religious community.

Goodman writes from within the Orthodox culture, not devoting much time to explaining phrases or customs and as such her portrayal of Orthodox Judaism is not romanticized. Elizabeth, even before determining that she would like to open a grocery store, recognizes that her romanticization of "worldly things," that is, the secular world, is partly due to the fact that she can analyze and examine them in ways she cannot analyze her own religious traditions: "Her religious life is not something she can cast off; it's part of her. Its rituals are not rituals to her; not objects but instincts. She lives inside them and can't hold them up to look at. That is the beauty of the secular world-she can examine it. And yet she'd like to hold it more closely; really touch it." (57) For Elizabeth, her religious life offers her shelter and comfort because of its familiarity but it is not connected to her personal desires or ambitions. The religious life is not limiting because of the external restrictions it places on her life but because of the circumscribed contact with the secular, artistic world. It does not connect with Elizabeth's deeper, interior life. The Cole painting enables Elizabeth to examine what she wants out of her religious life and of the secular world by allowing her to discover what it is she loves about Kaaterskill. Cole's ability to represent

Kaaterskill so accurately prompts Elizabeth to ask how she would like to represent herself.

Grant Scott writes in "The Rhetoric of Dilation: Ekphrasis and Ideology," "The process of any ekphrasis is a one-way street; what is outside must be taken in, translated, assimilated and therefore altered. Ekphrasis thus ensures the permanence of its own composition at the expense of the artwork; it disregards, and at times even delights in the ephemerality of the painted or sculpted image." (301) The individual act of viewing Cole's painting allows Elizabeth to momentarily separate herself from the Kirshners and in doing so she determines what she would like out of her community and out of herself. The story of the painting therefore becomes Elizabeth's story and the paintings voice becomes Elizabeth's voice. The narrative of the Kaaterskill landscape, real and imagined, becomes Elizabeth's individual narrative allowing her to discover how to make the either/or propositions of the sacred or the secular, the individual or the community, become a both/and possibility.

Though Elizabeth is devastated when she is ordered to close her store after only one summer and though this reprimand is ostensibly an affirmation that the sacred and the secular cannot coexist and that the desires of the individual are subordinate to those of the community, Elizabeth chooses to stay within her religious community, eventually finding another job as a bookkeeper in a neighborhood grocery store. Although Elizabeth's work, once untethered from the initial creative instinct that inspired her becomes less the production of something original and more an exchange of goods and services, it is still an expression of her individual desire to move around in the secular world and expand the possibilities of what it means to be a wife and mother and live a religious life. It is Elizabeth's faith, her belief in the unknown, that opens her up to the beauty of the mundane but it is the Kaaterskill landscape that opens her up to the power of artistic transformation, giving her ownership over the landscape

and ultimately ownership over how she chooses to negotiate the sacred and the secular worlds. The ekphrastic moment of the Cole painting is a site of productive confusion and ambivalence in the novel and it is this sense of flux that allows alternative narratives to emerge out the landscape of the Hudson Valley.