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Turbulent Bodies: Disruptive Materiality in American Painting, 1880-1940

by

Matthew Bailey

A dissertation presented to the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

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Preface and Acknowledgments

This study is about paint. Rather, it is about the difficult experiences of painting and the kinds of technical, physical, and conceptual struggles that tormented certain American painters when they tried to manipulate their materials into visual representations of something seen, felt, or imagined. Instead of seeing paint as a submissive medium that is seamlessly molded in the creative process, I am interested in exploring how the truculence and intransigence of paint, as a physical substance, challenged an artist's aesthetic efforts in ways that tested his beliefs in the function of paint as well as his attitudes towards the material world and physical experience. Throughout this project, I have been struck by how the difficulties one faces when writing is similar to the struggles that many painters experience. What one famous author wrote of the troubles that authors confront holds equal resonance for anyone who has grappled to put paint on canvas or words on paper:

Most writers . . . prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy—an ecstatic intuition—and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought—at the true purposes seized only at the last moment—at the innumerable glimpses of idea that arrived not at the maturity of full view—at the fully matured fancies discarded in despair as unmanageable—at the cautious selections and rejections—at the painful erasures and interpolations—in a word, at the wheels and pinions—the tackle for scene-shifting—the step-ladders and demon-traps—the cock's feathers, the red paint, and the black patches, which, in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred, constitute the properties of the literary *histrion*.¹

These are the kinds of convolutions of the creative process that I wish to foreground in this study. Like writers, most painters would prefer us to think of their artworks as created through an intuitive flourish—they too would “shudder” at the thought of allowing their audiences into their smelly, messy studios and seeing the fits and starts of painting that I try to recover. I, too, would

¹ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition,” *Graham's American Monthly Magazine of Literature, Art, and Fashion* 28, no. 4 (April 1846): 163, <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.wustl.edu/docview/124731907>.

shudder at the thought of letting anyone see the kinds of tribulations I experienced in writing about painting in this way. It is perhaps fitting that the master of the tale of terror, the nineteenth-century American author Edgar Allan Poe, penned the passage above, for I have had my share of times when the task has been frustrating and frightful. This project would have been impossible without the generous support and encouragement I received along the way from many who eased the process and helped my own glimpses of ideas and crudities of thought to develop in the following pages.

My research benefited from financial support from several sources, including a Henry Luce Foundation/ACLS Dissertation Fellowship in American Art, a dissertation fellowship from the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Washington University, a month-long research fellowship at the Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library in Winterthur, Delaware, and a nine-month long Tyson Fellowship at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas. I am deeply grateful for the assistance I received from the museum and library staff at Winterthur as well as Crystal Bridges, both for the help with mining archives and unusual materials as well as the advice, intellectual stimulation, and encouragement I received while in residence.

I owe my deepest gratitude to my adviser, Dr. Angela Miller. Dr. Miller's intellectual rigor, unwavering support, patience, and openness to experimental ideas and approaches has nurtured this study from the beginning and served as sources of stimulation and inspiration throughout my graduate career. I would also like to thank Dr. Elizabeth Childs and Dr. John Klein, whose insightful comments and criticisms in response to this study helped shaped my ideas and refine my writing as well as kept me grounded.

Finally, the support of my many friends and family has been overwhelming and immeasurable. Above all, my mother's unflinching support, encouragement, and perseverance in the face of her own adversity during my time as a graduate student inspired me, while the memory of my father sustained me throughout this journey. I dedicate this study to them both.

Introduction

Histories of art often reduce paintings into transparent signs, images, or texts that can be “read,” like any language, for their iconographic or ideological significance. This way of thinking about painting, however, leaves us begging all the questions about the real experiences and processes of painting itself. Before paintings are a series of formal elements made to stand for something else, they are molded out of formless, resistant grease composed of colored substances ground from organic and inorganic materials (rocks and plants mostly). These pigments are combined with vehicles such as linseed oil, turpentine, or varnish, and worked onto surfaces such as canvas or wood with a variety of tools including brushes, palette knives, or fingers. This act of painting demands a nuanced synthesis of pressure and time, with insistent pushing and pulling and prudent touches and motions of the fingers, hands, wrists, arms—sometimes the whole body—to transform this inert matter into something meaningful. Painting is a frustrating, give-and-take process in which painters settle for compromise, coaxing paint into various guises rather than effortlessly bending it to their will. In the process, the physical substance of paint undergoes something of a hypostatic transubstantiation from crude and amorphous stuff into pictures, transported from dirty, smelly studios into the world of aesthetic and cultural significance.

Traditionally, art historians have neglected these physical conditions of artistic production. In the conventional study of art, Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss have noted, “matter does not exist . . . except as it is in-formed, made over into form.”¹ Art historians such as Bois and Krauss, along with the painter and theorist James Elkins and the philosophers Nigel

¹ Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide*, exh. cat. (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 25.

Wentworth and Hubert Damisch, have attempted to address this failure to account for the material intricacies involved in painting. Elkins, for instance, has asked what it means to “think in paint” rather than think about paintings as transparent pictures in order to understand the nuances of physical process that painters experience as they work in and on their materials.²

Elkins reminds us that

a painting is made of paint—of fluids and stone—and paint has its own logic, and its own meanings . . . To an artist, a picture is both a sum of ideas and a blurry memory of ‘pushing paint,’ breathing fumes, dripping oils and wiping brushes, smearing and diluting and mixing. Bleary preverbal thoughts are intermixed with namable concepts, figures, and forms that are being represented. The material memories are not usually part of what is said about a picture, and that is a fault in interpretation because every painting captures a certain resistance of paint, a prodding gesture of the brush, a speed and insistence in the face of mindless matter.³

Nigel Wentworth has applied the phenomenology of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty to understand these complexities of painting, arguing that a painting is never simply the “physical realization of the representational intent that governs it.” Wentworth argues instead that it is the result of a process that occurs in a largely pre-reflective state of experience, what Merleau-Ponty called the “lived body,” in which distinctions between mind, body, and matter are not yet formed.⁴ In this view, an artist’s conceptual intentions are intertwined with primordial, phenomenal experiences of the physical world of paint, the process a dynamic exchange of habit, reflex, and experimentation, as well as conscious and unconscious reaction to the materials.

² James Elkins, *What Painting Is: How to Think about Oil Painting, Using the Language of Alchemy* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Nigel Wentworth, *The Phenomenology of Painting* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Hubert Damisch, *Fenêtre jaune cadmium, ou, Les dessous de la peinture* (Paris: Seuil, 1984). For an analytical interpretation of the importance of this text, see Yve-Alain Bois’s review of Damisch’s study in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990), 245-257. Also influential for my approach, particularly in writing about the physical process of painting, is Elkins, *On Pictures and the Words that Fail Them* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), which addresses the failure of traditional language or semiotic approaches to painting to understand the nuances and intricacies of painterly signs.

³ Elkins, *What Painting Is*, 2-3.

⁴ Wentworth, *Phenomenology of Painting*, 5.

These studies offer valuable ways of thinking about the dynamic complexities of painting. These approaches, however, speak in terms of the phenomenology of painting as an a-historical practice. To be sure, many of the problems and complexities pointed to above are aspects all painters encounter; I would argue, however, that the processes of painting are also historically contingent and shaped by a constellation of aesthetic, psychological, and philosophical factors. With this in mind, this study historicizes the material processes of painting of the artists Winslow Homer (1836-1910), Albert Pinkham Ryder (1847-1917), and John Marin (1870-1953). I situate the complexities and nuances of their practices in the context of late-nineteenth and twentieth-century American culture by thinking of painting as a phenomenal experience shaped by beliefs and attitudes towards the material world, physical experience, and the function of painting. More specifically, this study examines what I identify as these artists' struggles with the viscous and voluptuous nature of oil painting as a process rooted in the visceral world of the body and base materials in selected paintings, including the late oil seascapes of Homer such as *High Cliff, Coast of Maine* from 1894 (fig. 1.1), Ryder's abject, deteriorating paintings, including *Temple of the Mind* and *Jonah* (figs. 2.1, 2.7), and in the oil seascapes of Marin, such as *My Hell Raising* (1941; fig. 3.3). In these works, I argue, the artists struggled with paint as an amorphous, resistant, yet seductive substance in ways that disrupted their aesthetic practices and threatened their fundamental attitudes towards art and physical experience. These material conflicts, in turn, generated metaphysical conflicts inflected by shifting beliefs and anxieties concerning the relationship between the mind, body, and matter in American culture in the late nineteenth through the first half of the twentieth centuries.⁵

⁵ My use of the terms "sensual" and "sensuous" in this study requires clarification. While I use "sensuous" to broadly refer to experiences affecting or related to the senses, the term "sensual" involves more specifically an indulgence in sense experience and the gratification of carnal, physical appetites in ways that undermine intellectual or moral interests.

My arguments throughout this study hinge on thinking of paint as having a kind of agency in itself; it is a point of mediation between an artist's ideas and aesthetic aims and the materialization of these visions, perceptions, or expressions. This way of thinking falls in line with the theories of the artist and art historian Barbara Bolt, who argues that we should think in terms of the "co-responsibility" of humans in the dialectics and dynamics of artistic production rather than in terms of an instrumentalist relationship between artists and their materials. The artist alone is not responsible for creativity, transforming his or her medium through superior mastery and skill. Rather, it is the result of a dynamic exchange, an "ensemble of co-emergence" involving minds, bodies, physical conditions, materials, and psychological and environmental factors.⁶ I would argue that this dynamic exchange is also historically contingent and dependent on personal and cultural systems of belief regarding the relationship between the self and the physical world as well as artists and their materials. My aim is to flesh out these attitudes as well as how and why oil painting in particular, and at certain moments, disrupted these beliefs through its complicating technical demands and physical properties, producing struggles that were inscribed in the turbulent surfaces of these paintings and, in many instances, inflected the subject matter as well.

In situating the materiality of paintings in specific historical contexts, I draw on the scholarship of historians of modern European art of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and the manner in which they examine the social, cultural, and philosophical function

⁶ Barbara Bolt, "Material Thinking and the Agency of Matter," *Studies in Material Thinking* 1, no. 1 (April 2007), 1-3, <http://www.materialthinking.org>. For an application of these material theories to modern and contemporary art, see Estelle Barnett and Barbara Bolt, eds., *Carnal Knowledge: Toward a "New Materialism" Through the Arts* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

and meaning of painterly signs.⁷ In particular, Debora Silverman's study, *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for the Sacred in Art*, has provided a compelling model for ways to address how an artist's way with paint is shaped by subjective values. Highlighting the importance of religion in the work of Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, Silverman examines in detail the spiritual meanings of the distinguishing feature that characterizes the work of each artist and how their individual beliefs and values informed their material practice.⁸ Silverman's study is informative for investigating how an artist's values shape their way with paint, which is a crucial aspect of this study; my method, however, departs from Silverman's in significant ways. Rather than examining how paint as a medium is acted on and reflects an artist's beliefs, I explore how the dynamic, entangled processes of painting resisted the aesthetic efforts of Homer, Ryder, and Marin in ways that complicated their beliefs and attitudes towards art and physical experience.

The work of Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss in *Formless: A User's Guide* provides useful ways of thinking about the substances and processes of painting in this regard, particularly in the way they study modern and contemporary artists through the lens of what French philosopher George Bataille called "l'informe" or formlessness. Neither a state, idea, or thing, l'informe is an "operation" of transgression that lowers works of art from the sphere of the exalted to the realm of the base and crude. In exploring artworks in these terms, including the action paintings of Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) such as *Full Fathom Five* (fig. 0.1), the authors examine objects that work against what they call a "mainstream" version of the history of

⁷ Some key texts in this regard are Bois, *Painting as Model*; T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the Second French Republic, 1848-1851* (Greenwich, CN: New York Graphic Society, 1973), and *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); John House, *Impressionism: Paint and Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Richard Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism: A Study of the Theory, Technique, and Critical Valuation of Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

⁸ Debora Silverman, *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for the Sacred in Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000).

modernism, which assumes that painting “addresses itself uniquely to the sense of sight,” the materials that constitute a work of art existing only as they are “in-formed, made over into form.” This supposition is dependent on several forms of repressions, including the process of sublimation analyzed by Sigmund Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) in which humanity raised itself from the horizontal world of primitive, animal life, a mode of being dictated by carnal appetites and senses of smell and touch, to the erect orientation of civilized man, sublimating primal being for a life governed by the intellect, hygiene, and sight.⁹ As Bois and Krauss explain, modern art,

being ‘purely visual’ . . . is addressed to the subject as an erect being, far from the horizontal axis that governs the life of animals. Even if one no longer speaks of painting as a ‘window opened onto another world,’ the modernist picture is still conceived as a vertical section that presupposes the viewer’s having forgotten that his or her feet are in the dirt. Art, according to this view, is a sublimatory activity that separates the perceiver from his or her body.¹⁰

Bataille’s concept of “base materialism” is integral to the authors’ transformation in ways of thinking about art as appealing to forms of experience and being other than transcendent sight, describing a repulsive, formless phenomenon that defies “metaphorical displacement” or symbolic meaning, whether it be bodily excrement, obscenities, insanity, or a sludgy, amorphous morass of paint.¹¹ The exploration of horizontality, the sphere of the physical and earthly, is one manner in which this condition is examined, as in Pollock’s drip paintings in which he laid his

⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), 54-55n.

¹⁰ Bois and Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide*, 25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 31. In their examination of the vertical/horizontal dichotomy, the authors note that Leo Steinberg was one of the first to apply these notions to art. Articulated in a lecture in 1968 and later in an article from *Artforum* in 1972, in Steinberg’s theory the work of American artists from the 1960s such as Robert Rauschenberg emphasized the horizontal as their fundamental axis rather than the vertical, which addressed eyesight. For Steinberg this constituted a radical shift since Rauschenberg’s works dealt not with representations of nature but rather a different order of experience, such as the operational processes of the flatbed printing press and the practice of everyday life. See Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (1972; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 55-91.

unstretched canvases on the floor rather than placing his supports upright on an easel. Pouring, splattering, and throwing paint from sticks and brushes, Pollock allowed gravity coupled with gestural improvisations to shape the character of the work as in *Full Fathom Five*, the thick encrustations of oil paint and interlacing webs of latex house paint that pooled on the surface attesting to the work's horizontal axis of making, along with the random detritus littering its surface such as tacks, nails, buttons, coins, and cigarettes.¹²

Pollock's process of de-sublimation, or the lowering of art from the sphere of the vertical to the crude plane of the horizontal, served as a form of transgression or violence against traditional notions of art as something that transcends the messy contingencies of earthly, carnal existence. His practices, as Bois and Krauss examine them through *Full Fathom Five*, also bring into focus the aesthetic and moral implications of the struggles of the artists in this study. In contrast to Pollock, Homer, Ryder, and Marin were trying to sublimate oil painting's ties to the crude world of the body and base materials into higher forms of exalted experience. Rather than subverting the traditional function art, these artists were trying to raise their formless, resistant materials of painting—as they existed in raw form on their palettes or in paint tubes—into formed, referential, and symbolic pictures. Instead of intentionally breaking down metaphors or meaning in their art, they struggled against oil painting's crude physicality and embodied processes to transform paint into a metaphor of things observed and experienced.

Within the scholarship on American art of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I follow recent trends by scholars who examine how particular systems of representation operated in their social and cultural contexts, demonstrating larger cultural concerns with modernity and

¹² Bois and Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide*, 95-97.

intersecting with issues in science, philosophy, and social theory, among other fields.¹³ In this study, I connect the physical and metaphysical conflicts of Homer, Ryder, and Marin to similar intellectual contexts, exploring shifting attitudes towards the physical world by scientists, philosophers, historians, literary authors, and religious thinkers. In order to flesh out the nature of the artists' technical problems and to reconstruct their processes of painting, I also engage in close, sustained interpretations of selected works, moving from the particulars of practice to the historical contexts in which I situate these artists by thinking of their physical experiences of painting as the point of mediation between the individual and the cultural. In my examination of these objects as manifestations of the artist's beliefs and experiences, I also follow studies in material culture by historians of American art. More specifically, my thinking has been influenced by the scholarship of Alexander Nemerov, whose work demonstrates the influence of the material culture approach of the art historian Jules Prown. Prown's theory is guided by the idea that works of art are "events" that can be "re-experienced" by historians through close sensory observation and analysis, revealing the ideas, beliefs, and values of a particular artist or cultural context.¹⁴ Nemerov brings this method of sustained phenomenological investigation of objects to his study of the still lives of the artist Raphaele Peale, arguing that the uncanny quality of these works owe to the way they "possess the density and sometimes the liveliness of the human body." More specifically, Nemerov is interested in exploring how "the paintings simulate the artist's own physical existence projected onto the objects of perception," arguing that these embodied objects reveal Peale's psychological struggle with competing notions of

¹³ See, for instance, Kathleen Pyne, *Painting the Higher Life: Art and Evolutionary Thought in Late-Nineteenth Century America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996) and Rebecca Zurier, *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

¹⁴ John Davis, "The End of the American Century: Current Scholarship on the Art of the United States," *Art Bulletin* 85, no. 3 (September 2003): 556.

selfhood in early nineteenth-century America.¹⁵ I also see paintings as events that can be recovered and reconstructed through phenomenological engagement with them; whereas Nemerov employs a kind of intellectual archaeology by examining the iconography of Peale's works and how they manifest a fantasy of projected embodiment, however, I employ a kind of material archaeology by diving beneath the surface of paintings to reconstruct the tangible, embodied experience of painting itself. Although much of the recovery of these processes depends on understanding the psychological conflicts the artists' experienced, I seek to locate their struggles in relation to broader social concerns as well. In this, my research is also informed by the work of the art historian Sarah Burns in her study *Painting the Dark Side: Art and the Gothic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century America*, in which she examines how selected artworks demonstrated "gothic" patterns and habits of thought that reveal darker fears and anxieties seething beneath the enlightenment ideals of rationality and progress of the middle and wealthy classes.¹⁶ In examining the cultural implications of the material struggles of Homer, Ryder, and Marin, I too explore how their manner of painting conjured larger cultural concerns for the artists as well as their audiences, specifically with regard to shifting attitudes towards physical experience and the relationship between the self and the world.

Although influential in my analytical approaches, these studies remain focused on form and representation in painting, a perspective that is especially characteristic of the field of American art history. Privileging art as a mode of experience reflective of larger historical concerns and preoccupations, historians of American art have tended to emphasize conception, iconography, and ideology over the messy contingencies of the physical process of painting.

¹⁵ Alexander Nemerov, *The Body of Raphaelle Peale: Still Life and Selfhood, 1812-1824* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 2.

¹⁶ Sarah Burns, *Painting the Dark Side: Art and the Gothic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

Idealizing artworks as the seamless materialization of a painter's vision, we have instead tended to examine how pictures intersect with broader cultural and social issues of including modernity, race, class, gender, and problems of individual and national identity.¹⁷ This is even true of approaches to material culture such as the influential method of Jules Prown, which interprets objects as "evidence" of the values, attitudes, and beliefs of individuals or communities in ways that transcend the material specificity of works of art.¹⁸ The reason for these omissions or repressions in the field of can be answered in a number of ways, including the field's roots in programs of American culture studies that developed in the mid-twentieth century. In her historiographic essay from 1988, the art historian Wanda Corn identified the trend at this same time, during American art's "coming of age," to distance American art from the looming shadow of European patrimony and distinguish it as the "unique expression of a democratic society." This tendency led to scholarly interpretations of how American art reflected its society and culture. Another impetus for the field's suppression of materiality might also be what Rosalind Krauss has identified as much wider trend in the academy in the last half of the century, coinciding with what W.J.T. Mitchell has called the "pictorial turn," to identify artworks as images, collapsing their material structure and privileging them as "the shared property of

¹⁷ Two notable exceptions are Rachel Ziady Delue *George Inness and the Science of Landscape* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) and David Bjelajac, *Washington Allston, Secret Societies, and the Alchemy of Anglo-American Painting* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Both authors examine issues of technique and materials in their studies. Delue examines George Inness's probing and struggle with paint to materialize his Swedenborgian visions of the world, while Bjelajac explores Washington Allston's quest to resuscitate the long-lost and mystical Venetian methods of painting in his romantic works. Although Bjelajac especially focuses on Allston's experimentation with different kinds of pigments, both authors nonetheless treat paint as a symbolic medium rather than a resistant physical substance.

¹⁸ See Jules Prown, "Style as Evidence" and "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," in *Art as Evidence: Writings on Art and Material Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 52-95.

Psychoanalytic Studies, Cultural Studies, and the incipient field of Visual Studies.”¹⁹ Although these scholarly trends throughout the twentieth century offer insights into why the field has favored cultural context over material structures of works of art, the literary historian David Miller has examined the manner in which longstanding cultural beliefs and attitudes towards physical experience have continued to shape scholarly approaches to art. Miller argues that American cultural apprehensions of the physical and the sensual, as well as traditions in Western thought that distinguish the body from the mind, have had a lasting effect on Protestant culture in the United States. These beliefs have also perpetuated concepts stemming from the paradigm of the Sister Arts fully developed in relation to American landscape painting of the mid-nineteenth century, in which the visual and the literary are considered as analogues. In this ideal, paintings are transparent representations that appeal to broader intellectual and emotional themes transcending the sensual particulars of images. According to Miller, “the American cultural establishment [has] continued to distrust the image unmediated by moral, religious, social, and literary frames of reference.”²⁰

These cultural attitudes have influenced more than how works of art have been read and interpreted in studies of American art, however; they have also shaped the fundamentals of the creative practice and how artists engaged with painting. The artistic tendencies to idealize the raw materials of painting in American culture, rendering them into transparent forms or signs of things seen or felt, have in turn inflected how images are interpreted. Such an idealizing approach to the materials and practice of painting is exemplified, for instance, in the

¹⁹ Wanda Corn, “Coming of Age: Historical Scholarship in American Art,” in *Critical Issues in American Art: A Book of Readings*, ed. Mary Ann Calo (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 1-34; Rosalind Krauss, “Welcome to the Cultural Revolution,” *October* 77 (Summer 1996): 92.

²⁰ David Miller, “Afterword,” in *American Iconology: New Approaches to Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature*, ed. David Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 279.

transcendental landscapes of Asher B. Durand (1796-1886). In paintings such as Durand's *The Beeches* (1845; fig. 0.2), the artist seems to have effortlessly manipulated the crude materials of paint into transparent signs of nature. A detailed view of the large tree near the center of the composition reveals how Durand fastidiously applied strokes of paint to echo nature's forms (fig. 0.3), from the longer, vertical strokes noting the striated bark of the tree to the soft, circular dabs indicating leaves or hanging moss. At the same time these strokes serve as equivalents for natural forms, they also reveal just enough touch and handling to indicate an artist in full conceptual and physical control of his materials, as if his painting was the natural outpouring of objects seen through the eye and captured in the mind, itself a mirror of nature. This philosophical attitude towards the material world was crucial to the Sister Arts paradigm that informed landscape painting in New York in the mid-nineteenth century, guided by the concept that the mind and nature were "commensurate."²¹ Painting was itself understood as an idealized, transparent representation of nature as it was presented to the mind, unmediated by the contingencies of physical creation or the unpredictability of the subjective imagination.

Durand's suppression of technical execution and the unavoidably embodied, sensuous nature of painting in favor of unmediated representations of the world was expressed in the artist's "Letters on Landscape Painting," published in 1855. Addressed to an imaginary pupil, the artist instructed the student to learn the rudiments of art directly from nature, which spoke directly to the mind and soul. Nature's forms would naturally manifest themselves in painting so long as fidelity to nature was maintained. For Durand, art was created primarily through the spiritual side of humanity rather than through material means or technical knowledge, the soul stimulated by nature, which provided revelation of the divine: "That is a fine picture which at

²¹ Angela Miller, *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 95.

once takes possession of you—draws you into it—you traverse it—breathe the atmosphere—feel its sunshine, and you repose in its shade without thinking of its design or execution, effect or color. These are after considerations: it will be great in proportion as it declares the glory of God, by a representation of his works, and not of the works of man.”²² The artist’s detailed control of brush and pigment in *The Beeches* indicate his efforts to elide his material processes and present his painting as something created in a moment of spiritual revelation inspired by God’s works. Such a moment of transcendence was famously described by Ralph Waldo Emerson in “Nature,” an essay that articulated his transcendentalist philosophy that saw the external world—encompassing everything apart from the human soul—as a material manifestation of the divine. In the contemplation of the glories of nature, a space of harmony and tranquility, the self “is uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes,” Emerson wrote. “I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.”²³ Just as the experience of nature in Emerson’s view induced a moment in which the spirit was freed from the shackles of physical existence, in Durand’s thought painting itself was a disembodied act, the seamless transformation of matter into spirit. The allegedly effortless relationship between the painter and his materials emphasized in his “Letters” was also shaped by the artist’s transcendental philosophy, which perceived the relationship between self and nature, man and material, as essentially peaceful and harmonious. This correlation is manifested in *The Beeches* in its carefully controlled strokes as well as the pastoral subject, in which a shepherd and his flock peacefully move through a natural world

²² Asher B. Durand, “Letters on Landscape Painting, Letter III,” *Crayon* 1, no. 5 (January 31, 1855): 66, www.jstor.org/stable/25526826.

²³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature” (1936), in *Essays and Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), 12.

bathed in a divine glow, just as Durand fluently manipulated his materials with spiritual inspiration from on high.

Although not motivated by the transcendental piety of their predecessors, the artists I examine also worked to transform their materials into an idealized medium of representation, signifying objects observed in nature, as in the case of Homer, internal, spiritual responses to the outer world, as Ryder struggled to achieve, or a combination of these two, which Marin fought to synthesize. Their efforts, however, were momentarily disrupted and complicated by the resistance and sumptuousness of oil painting, inducing artistic, psychological, philosophical, and spiritual conflicts shared by their contemporaries in the realms of science, literature, philosophy, history, and religion. The era and place in which these artists lived and painted in the American northeast of the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries experienced a broad range of social and cultural transformations. Economic and industrial expansion as well as changing scientific worldviews uprooted traditional values and beliefs, fundamentally altering attitudes towards physical experience and humanity's relationship to the material world. Empirical and materialist perspectives of nature in particular undercut traditional forms of spirituality and beliefs in the reality of the unseen, exemplified by Durand. In place of his transcendental view of nature as a source of harmony and transcendence, the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin and his followers transformed nature into a godless, alienating arena of conflict and suffering, in which life was guided by chance rather than divine fiat. In chapter one, I examine the late oil seascapes by Winslow Homer from the 1890s, in particular *High Cliff, Coast of Maine* (fig. 1.1), in relation to this post-Darwinian context. I explore how Homer's struggles with oil paintings of the sea in Prout's Neck, Maine produced an entangled, alienating experience of painting evocative of Darwinian perspectives of nature and primitive life, which transgressed cultural expectations

towards the function of painting while challenging the artist's spiritual beliefs, his fundamentally realist attitudes towards art and nature, and his apprehension of sensual experience. In chapter two, I situate the deteriorating paintings of Albert Pinkham Ryder in the context of the spiritual crisis of the late-nineteenth century, arguing that his idiosyncratic manner of painting and efforts to transform paint into a vehicle for the transcendent, demonstrated in paintings such as *Jonah* (fig. 2.7) were undermined by the physical complexities and resistance of his materials. The material decay of his works in particular produced a metaphysical crisis in the artist, his struggles with the physical world of paint challenging his spiritual beliefs and romantic attitudes towards the world. In the third chapter, on John Marin, I concentrate on the artist's thick and painterly oil seascapes executed in Maine in the 1930s and early 40's, exemplified by *My Hell Raising* (fig. 3.3). In these, I argue, Marin's effort to synthesize representations of the objective world and emotional and physical responses to that world into symbolic, aesthetic unities were also challenged by the complexity and physicality of oil painting, inducing artistic and philosophical uncertainties reflected in the artist's statements and writings.

In what follows, I examine particular paintings as instances in which these artists struggled with their materials. I am not suggesting that these conflicts between the painters and their materials defined their entire careers; rather, I would suggest that in these moments, in the artists efforts to broaden their aesthetics and experiment with new ways of painting, they overreached a certain level of comfort with oil painting. Nor am I suggesting that they were fully aware of their struggles or anxieties. Instead, these material and metaphysical conflicts were experienced somewhere between a conscious awareness and an unconscious entanglement with the messy intricacies and convolutions of oil painting. With the exception of Ryder, whose abject paintings have begged to be interpreted through an art historical lens, the choices of Homer and

Marin may seem arbitrary. As we will see, however, critics also found the oil seascapes of Homer and Marin troubling; the critical reception of these works offers inroads into the nature of their physical struggles and the broader cultural implications of them. Uniting these artists, too, is the theme of the sea. The main premise of my arguments regarding Homer and Marin in particular is that they fought with oil painting when taking on the amorphous subject of the sea in more painterly, gestural styles than they were accustomed to in oils. In the hands of all these painters, however, the sea transforms into a synonym for paint, as a resistant, turbulent, formless yet versatile and tractable substance, a material that, like the ocean, is sensuous and seductive yet powerful and obdurate, overwhelming, and threatening.

In order to reconstruct these artists' perplexing experiences of painting, I examine a broad range of sources. The secondary literature on these artists is helpful for establishing their artistic aims, techniques, philosophies, and beliefs. In addition to the critical reception of these artists' work and primary texts by authors, historians, scientists, and philosophers who articulated the kinds of anxieties and experiences I relate to their physical and metaphysical struggles, above all the paintings themselves are the principal focus of my analyses. In order to resurrect their physical processes I examine them through an empathetic engagement with their materials and surfaces, informed by my own experiences as a painter. In addition to that of a painter, however, this study has demanded that I assume several guises, from an art historian to a critic, philosopher, or psychologist, to fully understand their physical experiences of painting, the nature of their physical conflicts, and their fundamental beliefs and attitudes towards the material world that were challenged by the complexity and resistance of oil painting. This is especially true in the case of Homer and Ryder, who were notoriously silent about their art and lives.

Finally, my aim is not to diminish the aesthetic impact of the paintings I analyze and dissect, or call into question the skill or importance of these artists in the history of American art. Rather, it is to try to understand the rich complexity of artistic practices and the dynamic historical factors that shape them. Doing so means that I think of the process of painting not as an exalted, transcendent realm of experience, but rather as a messy, dirty, and frustrating encounter with the material world with which we can all empathize. My task, to quote from the philosopher John Dewey, is “to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience.”²⁴ I believe that the physical struggles and metaphysical conflicts embodied in these paintings bring these artists back down to earth and make their works of art all the more powerful and compelling.

²⁴ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; repr., New York: Perigee, 1980), 3.

Chapter I

In Spite of Paint: Winslow Homer's "Savage" Materiality

Winslow Homer's oil paintings of the churning waters and rocky coast at Prout's Neck, Maine, where the artist lived and worked the last three decades of his life (1836-1910), have been cast in art historical literature as the height of the artist's achievement and some of the finest examples of nineteenth-century American realism. In paintings such as *High Cliff, Coast of Maine* from 1894 (fig. 1.1), Homer exploited oil paint's inimitable qualities—its luster, texture, and density—to conjure the energy and brute force of rollers breaking against the promontory. *High Cliff* is one of many "pure" seascapes from the 1890s in which Homer turned from the drama of human life on the sea, a concern of the previous decade, to the drama of the sea itself. Representing one of the distinctive outcroppings at the south of Prout's Neck, not far down shore from the artist's studio, *High Cliff* shows the icy waters of the Atlantic churning and slamming into the rocks during a winter squall, Homer's favorite conditions in which to paint. Positioning viewers precariously on an unseen cliff edge, the artist created a high vantage point looking down on the thundering waters, bisected the canvas diagonally into asymmetrical wedges of water and rock, and cropped the view abruptly, creating the impression of a fleeting experience of nature frozen in time. Characteristic of these seascapes, Homer also painted in a manner far different than in his earlier figurative or narrative oils, sacrificing detail in favor of broader, freer, and more varied brushstrokes executed with thicker, impastoed surfaces, capturing the movement and weight of water, the stubborn bulk of stone, and the elemental power of nature in ways that gave his subjects tangible presence.

For one critic writing in 1899, Homer's seascapes were even among the masterpieces of western art, having all the "skill, force, individuality" and "conviction" of first-rate paintings that left indelible impressions in viewers. With these paintings, he believed, Homer had at last mastered a synthesis of naturalistic observation with force of pictorial effect.¹ In the opinion of another American critic, Homer's depiction of "shifting and unsteady forms" in the dynamic compositions of rocks and water indicated "weight and mass and movement" in ways that made comparable subjects by Courbet and Monet appear conventional and insipid.² While devotees of realism found his seascapes compelling representations of fact and evidence of Homer's superior powers of observation, those concerned with more transcendent meanings found them symbolic of universal truths, if enigmatic, regarding nature and human existence. Uniting both perspectives, Homer's first biographer William Howe Downes wrote in 1911 of *High Cliff* that "the mingling of reality and mystery, of rude strength and atmospheric delicacy" made this painting stand out as a "direct, virile setting forth of the truth of everyday phenomena." For Downes, the painting was a "portrait of the high cliff, a personification of passive and stubborn resistance, stonily confronting the passion of the Atlantic with its inscrutable ancient face, scarred and furrowed by time and tempest."³

Homer's fame in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries indeed rested on these formidable paintings, in addition to his rugged wilderness images of hunters and fisherman from the 1880s and 1890s. As the art historian Sarah Burns has observed, this admiration came at the sacrifice of the artist's earlier work. Favoring the work done in Maine, critics downplayed

¹ William A. Coffin, "A Painter of the Sea: Two Pictures by Winslow Homer," *Century Illustrated Magazine* 53, no. 5 (September 1899): 653.

² "Winslow Homer," *Art Amateur* 39, no. 6 (November 1898): 112, <http://search.proquest.com.libproxys.wustl.edu/docview/124494890>.

³ William Howe Downes, *The Life and Works of Winslow Homer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), 172.

Homer's paintings of the Civil War, his images of middle-class leisure, or his genre scenes of rural life from New England and the South "as a necessary but relatively negligible passage to the heights of supremacy he now enjoyed."⁴ In 1902, for example, the critic Frederick Morton declared that Homer's "greatness" was found in his Prout's Neck marines, which "overshadowed" the artist's "experience and practice in figure-painting and landscape." For Morton, these earlier works were but exercises leading "up to his inimitable seascapes, which he paints as no other artist ever did or can. Apparently he recognized his forte and selected his retreat, apart from society, . . . with a view to developing to the fullest his special genius."⁵ Burns has situated the high regard for Homer's seascapes more specifically in the context of the pressing concern for masculine health and revitalization in turn-of-the-century American culture. Homer's regional representations of raw, primal forces along the remote Maine coast, she argues, served as intoxicating and invigorating elixirs that rejuvenated urban businessmen and intellectuals physically and mentally worn by "nervous exhaustion." These were New Englanders "who ran the institutional and cultural structures supporting the complex new machinery of corporate America" who required the renewal of masculine vigor crucial in order to fuel "American progress, prosperity, and expansion."⁶ Burns has also argued that Homer's images of conflicting forces even served as metaphors for the cut-throat world of business and commerce beginning to dominate American life, the myths of virility and heroic power

⁴ Sarah Burns, "Revitalizing the 'Painted-Out' North: Winslow Homer, Manly Health, and New England Regionalism in Turn-of-the-Century America," *American Art* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 21, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3109183>.

⁵ Frederick Morton, "The Art of Winslow Homer," *Brush and Pencil* 10 (1902): 47-48, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25505741>.

⁶ Burns, "Revitalizing the 'Painted-Out' North," 22-23, 28.

intimately linked with the artist and his art serving as potent models for the kind of vigor and strength necessary for autonomous achievement in competitive corporate culture.⁷

In slightly different terms, the art historian Bruce Robertson has explored how Homer's dynamic representations of the sea were therapeutic antidotes for New Englanders alienated by industrialization, urbanization, and an anemic and stifling genteel culture. As they were mythically fashioned at the time, Homer's art of an honest, simple realism provided wholesome experiences of primitive nature, manifesting in the artist a heroic man of action exhibiting a bold, rugged independence.⁸ In other words, Homer's seascapes fulfilled what the historian T. J. Jackson Lears has called anti-modern "yearnings for the authentic, the natural, the real" that pervaded American thought and culture at the turn-of-the-century.⁹ These longings were especially prevalent among members of the educated, Northeastern middle and upper classes disenchanted with the bland assurances and false comforts of genteel culture with its uncomfortable linkage between spiritual growth, material progress, economic expansion, and scientific rationalization, as well as its values of physical and emotional comfort and restraint. In reaction, many searched for life-affirming "authentic experience" that "seemed ever more elusive" in American culture, in which "life seemed increasingly confined to the airless parlor of material comfort and moral complacency."¹⁰ Homer's paintings of primal nature, in this context, served as forms of physical invigoration and moral regeneration, providing psychic release and

⁷ Sarah Burns, *Inventing the Modern Artist: Art and Culture in Gilded Age America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 187-205.

⁸ Bruce Robertson, *Reckoning with Winslow Homer: His Late Paintings and Their Influence*, exh. cat. (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art in association with the Indiana University Press, 1990), 63-80.

⁹ T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 305.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

an intense, virile, life-affirming power. Very often, these values were linked directly to Homer's forceful brushstrokes and rich, physical surfaces, read as vigorous and emphatic equivalents to the power of nature captured in his representations. Homer's "uncouth honesty" and "sincerity," one commentator wrote in appreciation, for instance, "gave him an almost religious respect for nature . . . Intense, full of brute strength, the power of the sea which smites the rock is behind his brush." These paintings, as a result, were more than just simple images of the sea; they were tangible manifestations "of manly power, the beauty of man strong in will and muscle fighting the elements."¹¹

Curiously enough, however, despite widespread critical acclaim for their aesthetic force and for all their intoxicating, revitalizing potency, Homer's oil seascapes such as *High Cliff* rarely met with unqualified success. In the same breath the paintings were applauded, many critics also found a disquieting yet provocative quality in the materiality of these particular pictures that was not a matter of deficiency in skill or his imitation of the forces of nature through broad, unpolished swirls and slabs of pigment. Rather, it was something about how Homer engaged with paint that for some was an unsettling distraction to otherwise powerful paintings, for others a crude and bewildering quality that enhanced their overall effect. The critic Charles Caffin favorably believed, for instance, that it was the very "negation" of "technical finesse" that made Homer's seascapes powerful; for Caffin, it was by the "shock of rude force that they reach home to us."¹² As the critic observed of the paintings *Northeaster* (fig. 1.2) and *Maine Coast* (fig. 1.3) from 1895 and 1896:

¹¹ Henry Reuterdaahl, "Winslow Homer, American Painter: An Appreciation from a Sea-Going View," *Craftsman* 20, no. 1 (April 1911): 8-9, 10.

¹² Charles Caffin, "American Painters of the Sea," *Critic* 43, no. 6 (December 1903): 550, <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.wustl.edu/docview/124876428>.

From the point of view of modern technique . . . they present crudities of painting. Indeed, I have heard some of our small precisionists of technique with nothing big to express, roundly abuse these pictures. But I suspect it is their very crudity, their occasional almost savage disregard of formula and of mere ocular observation of phenomena that is the secret of their greatness. They rise superior to small painterly shibboleths, crush and confound the formularies, and plunge one into contact with the crudeness of elemental force.¹³

Unrefined and unpolished, Homer's paintings thrillingly pushed beyond the mere representation of visual fact. In his pure seascapes, Caffin declared, Homer at last reached "his grandest force of utterance" in both his imagery and manner of painting in ways that were "threatening, lowering, savage."¹⁴ While for Caffin these "savage" qualities of Homer's paintings and the way he engaged with paint were invigorating and inspirational, for others, such as the respected academic artist and critic Kenyon Cox (1856-1919) or the art historian, critic, and author John Van Dyke (1856-1932), these same qualities were more unsettling. Although Cox and Van Dyke felt that Homer's seascapes offered refreshing and ennobling experiences of nature, for these critics Homer's more unrestrained manner of painting with oils in his Maine seascapes manifested an alienating physical and psychological struggle between the artist and his materials that was disturbingly analogous to his representation of conflicting natural forces. Homer's "savage" materiality, as I shall explore in this chapter, transgressed these critics' expectations towards the relationship between painters and their materials in ways that threatened the notions of willpower and autonomy otherwise prized in Homer's seascapes, demonstrating physical experiences that undermined cultural and moral values concerning the relationship between the mind, body, and matter in turn-of-the-century American culture.

¹³ Charles Caffin, "A Note on the Art of Winslow Homer," *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 6, no. 3 (March 1911): 52, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3252995>.

¹⁴ Caffin, "American Painters of the Sea," 551.

Painting Nature

Homer's oil techniques had drawn the attention of critics well before his seascapes. As the art historian Margaret Conrads has shown, although Homer was recognized as an artist with great promise since the beginning of his career in the 1860s, he often received adverse criticism for his handling and color, his manner of painting provoking dismay for its failure to measure up to conventions of finish in his blotchy execution, muddled hues, and relatively dense pigments.¹⁵ One critic, for example, commented in 1868 that his execution lacked "enough elaboration to even give an idea of what the artist was trying to do," as if there were a discrepancy between Homer's technical abilities and his conceptual intent at this early stage.¹⁶ This coarse technique, however, was also generally attributed to the foibles of a painter in the nascent stages of development whose facility would naturally unfold with due diligence. A commercial illustrator by trade, Homer had not taken up oils until 1861 at the age of twenty-five; his scant training then only included a few lessons with the French-born painter Frédéric Rondel, where he learned rudimentary skills of how to assemble a palette and handle brushes.¹⁷ The painting *Rocky Coast and Gulls* from 1869 (fig. 1.4), Homer's first and only oil seascape until his marines of the 1890s, demonstrates the artist's largely self-taught methods early on. This kind of technique also defined the more restrained and hesitant handling he would use in his figural and narrative works throughout his career, as opposed to the painterly flourishes and greater physical exuberance he

¹⁵ Margaret C. Conrads, *Winslow Homer and the Critics: Forging a National Art in the 1870s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press in association with the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2001), 9-47.

¹⁶ Theodore Grannis, *New York Commercial Advertiser* (May 12, 1868), in *ibid.*, 14.

¹⁷ Lloyd Goodrich, *Winslow Homer* (New York: Published for the Whitney Museum of American Art by MacMillan, 1944), 17-18.

experimented with in his Prout's Neck marines.¹⁸ First outlining forms with a contour underdrawing, for the imprimatura Homer applied thinned, translucent washes of subdued hues, including browns, oranges, and tans, to establish perspective and tones in negative spaces, while for positive forms such as the rock formations he applied thin washes of more saturated colors. He then defined shapes and forms with more opaque paints scumbled and stippled across the surface. Although the somewhat rough handling along with the subject of the painting insinuates spontaneity and plein-air study, Homer's methods were in fact mechanical and controlled, the artist methodically constructing the surface with an interlocking series of flat shapes and unblended colors. In the final stages he refined details and added naturalistic effects in a precise, fastidious manner as well, as in the meticulous delineation of the horseshoe crabs in the left foreground or the surging spray of water off the rocks, executed with calculated dabs and flecks (figs. 1.5 and 1.6). Homer's facture here exhibits the hand of a draughtsman and illustrator-turned-painter caught between a finicky attention to detail and the wish to suggest more general, transient effects of color and light through looser, more casual touches, resulting in stiff, affected strokes at odds with the momentary qualities of the subject.

In addition to these unyielding qualities of Homer's hand, the artist's more "impressionist" style was also part of what troubled critics in these early years. *Rocky Coast and Gulls*, with its stark light and coarse handling, defied traditional notions of finish or polish, characterized by more unified and subdued tones as well as more blended, fluid strokes, as in Asher Durand's *The Beeches* (fig. 0.2). In the following decades, however, as the art world

¹⁸ On the techniques of Homer's early oil painting, see Kristin Hoermann, "A Hand Formed to Use the Brush," in Marc Simpson, *Winslow Homer: Paintings of the Civil War*, exh. cat. (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco; Bedford Arts, 1988), 103-19; Judith Walsh, "Mixing Oil and Water: The Development of Winslow Homer's Painting," in *Winslow Homer: Poet of the Sea*, ed. Sophie Lévy, exh. cat. (Giverny, France: Musée d'Art Américain Giverny and the Terra Foundation for American Art; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 40-53. Though it focuses largely on Homer's early development, Walsh's essay also gives a cursory summary of Homer's technical evolution in both oil and watercolor throughout his career.

embraced a more pluralistic approach to style, critics also became more tolerant of Homer's technique.¹⁹ During the last quarter of the nineteenth century the tide of thought turned toward a renewed emphasis on form, style, and technique and what these elements revealed about subjective vision, poetic feeling, and the individuality of artists. Although hesitations with Homer's technique persisted, what was once perceived as faults in his paintings were transformed into virtue as critics began writing of his style as fresh, rustic, and authentic, free from the constraints of tradition and formula. The qualities of "originality and honesty" that critics found in Homer's fresh, unpolished paintings, as Conrads has observed, "were two primary traits inextricably linked to the identity of America's national character . . . Therefore, their appearance in paintings could exact positive responses despite harsh reactions to other shortcomings."²⁰ The critic Mariana Van Rensselaer, for instance, found in 1883 that the "crudeness" and "rugged irregularity," even "ugliness," in Homer's style were "primitive" and "rustic" traits that confirmed the artist's disregard for fussy detail and technical finesse. His was a beauty of individuality and conception rather than method, concerned not with the superficial niceties or technical flourishes but instead for "strong artistic *feeling* expressed in strong, frank, decided ways."²¹

Similar language was used in responses to Homer's Prout's Neck oil seascapes of the 1890s as well. Using many of the same expressions, including "raw," "rough," "crude,"

¹⁹According to H. Wayne Morgan, the term "impressionist" in American parlance in the last quarter of the nineteenth century was a label "applied to any painter who avoided details in an effort to suggest broad emotion or changing character in a subject." See *New Muses: Art in American Culture, 1865-1920* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978), 116. On the practice and critical reception of French and American impressionism in American culture, see 112-44.

²⁰ Conrads, *Winslow Homer and the Critics*, 22.

²¹ Marianna Griswold Van Rensselaer, "An American Artist in England," *Century Illustrated Magazine* 27 (November 1883), in *American Art to 1900: A Documentary History*, ed. Sarah Burns and John Davis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 584-85. Emphasis in original.

“primitive,” “virile,” and “real,” these reviews have been examined for how Homer’s contemporaries mythologized his work as distinctly native and masculine in his rugged, idiosyncratic representations of primeval nature that shunned convention in style and subject.²² The way art historians have framed the critical reaction to Homer’s paintings, however, has diminished the complexity of the aesthetic responses to his art. While using the same kind of language in response to his seascapes, critics were also perplexed and hesitant, if also fascinated, with the character of Homer’s paint and grappled with ways to describe his surfaces—discordant notes that have been written out of histories of the critical reception of Homer’s seascapes.

In his 1914 monograph on the artist, for example, Kenyon Cox considered what made Homer’s paintings so appealing to professional artists and the public alike despite shortcomings in the artist’s oil techniques. Cox admitted that Homer’s disregard for convention in style and subject accounted for the refreshing qualities of his pictures, giving us pleasures in new ways of seeing by painting aspects of nature yet explored, monumentalizing the mundane, and materializing the grandeur of nature’s forces. In the end, he believed that Homer’s intuitive powers of composition were the foundation of the aesthetic force of these paintings, exemplified in *High Cliff* (fig. 1.1) with its dynamic, abruptly cropped design and high-angled perspective that thrust viewers into close contact with nature. In these paintings, Cox believed, Homer “has

²² For studies on the reception of Homer’s seascapes, See Randall Griffin, “Winslow Homer, Avatar of Americanness,” in *Homer, Eakins, and Anshutz: The Search for American Identity in the Gilded Age* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004); Judith Hayward, “Nature and Progress: Winslow Homer, His Critics and His Oils, 1880-1900” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2003); Cynthia H. Prebus, “Transitions in American Art and Criticism: The Formative Years of Early American Modernism, 1895-1905” (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 1994); Robertson, *Reckoning with Winslow Homer*, 63-80. Griffin and Hayward in particular argue that Homer’s seascapes met with unqualified success and that Homer was consciously responding to mythologized constructions of his American identity with a brash, rugged, “untutored” style free from foreign influence. These issues are placed in a larger context in which the primary concerns for critics centered on debates about the advantages or otherwise of foreign training and concerns for the development of a national style. For this context, and the construction of a critical language to identify specifically “American” qualities in art, see Linda Docherty, “A Search for Identity: American Art Criticism and the Concept of the ‘Native School,’ 1876-1893” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina, 1985).

realized for us, as no other artist of any time has done, the power and grandeur of the elemental forces of nature, and has dramatized for us the conflict of water, earth and air.”²³ At the same time, however, Cox also found a distracting fault with the way Homer handled oils. Nobody, he went so far as to say of Homer’s general oeuvre, “has found Homer’s technic [sic] . . . a reason for liking or admiring his paintings, but many have found it a reason for disliking them; and to some of the artist’s most sincere admirers, his technical limitations remain a stumbling block in the way of their free enjoyment of his great qualities.” Though the artist had come a long way from the “hard, dry and timid” nature of his early paintings and dramatically improved in terms of “force and directness” in the last decades of his life, there were still moments when the technique was unsettling and awkward. He found Homer at his best in a painting such as *West Wind* (fig. 1.7), with its graceful, economic application of long, softly blended wisps of paint. On the other hand, for Cox many of Homer’s more “labored” oil paintings showed signs of difficulty, the handling more garish and distracting. At times, the academic painter and critic found, his “surfaces become wooden and woolly, his handling grows labored and harsh and unpleasing. At best his method is a serviceable tool; at less than best it is a hindrance to expression, like a bad handwriting, which one must become acquainted to [sic] and forget before one can enjoy the thing written.”²⁴ For Cox, the more intrusive of these confused and crude qualities of Homer’s technique were amplified in the dense Prout’s Neck seascapes. “There is nothing gracious or insinuating, hardly, even, anything reticent or mysterious about the art of Homer,” Cox wrote, in reference to Homer’s paintings of the sea:

His pictures will not hang comfortably on a wall or invite you discreetly to the contemplation of gradually unfolding beauties. They speak with the voice of a trumpet

²³ Kenyon Cox, *Winslow Homer* (New York: Privately Printed, 1914), 39.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

and, whether they exhilarate or annoy you, you cannot neglect them. They have none of the amenities of the drawingroom, and you might almost as well let the sea itself into your house as one of Homer's transcripts of it. Even in a great gallery they often seem too strident, too unmitigated, too crude. If they do not conquer you they surprise you and disconcert you.²⁵

Though finding these paintings captivating, in Cox's estimation Homer's seascapes were *too* loud and real in form and materiality, their surfaces carrying too much of the raw stuff of the material world as if Homer had not sufficiently transformed paint into transparent signs of nature. Instead, his medium announced itself as harshly as the sea, his painterly surfaces as crude, discordant, and weighty as the boundless elements of nature they conjured, threatening to fall off the canvas and into the very parlors whose function it was to shelter inhabitants from such crude and unsettling, if also ennobling, forces.

The critic and art historian John Van Dyke was also strangely ambivalent toward the character of paint in Homer's seascapes. Like Cox, he too found little to praise in Homer's general oil technique; yet, in his view, what the artist lacked in refinement he made up for in simplicity and veracity. "There is no grace or charm or polish about it," he regretted in his survey of American art from 1911. "The manner of it repels rather than wins one. The cunning, the adroit, the insinuating are hardly ever apparent, but in their place we have again and again the direct, the abrupt, the vehement. He states things without prelude or apology in a harsh, almost savage, manner."²⁶ Despite praising Homer's seascapes as his finest works and as powerful as any work by an American artist, Van Dyke's analysis wavered between anxious irritation with their handling and physicality and steadfast admiration for their hypnotic force. Pushing Cox's drawing room analogy further, he wrote that

²⁵ Ibid., 40.

²⁶ John C. Van Dyke, *American Painting and Its Tradition* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911), 92.

they are epic, tremendous characterizations, all powerful statements that startle and command. You cannot get away from them. They fascinate, yet they are not attractive in the sense that you would like to have one of them in your drawing-room . . . The picture would sweep everything before it, put everything else out of key, make a black spot on the wall, and continually irritate you with its harshness of method. . . . Had he been educated, taught restraint and method, given a sense of style, schooled in decorative value, he might have risen to the great gods of art . . . He has no comeliness of style, no charm of statement, no grace of presentation. To the last he is a barbarian for all that we may feel beneath his brush.²⁷

Van Dyke nonetheless concluded, almost in spite of himself, that there was “nothing more virile, more positive, more wholesome [that] has ever been turned out in American art. . . . You cannot help but admire his frankness, his honesty, even his brutality.”²⁸

Even though critics had difficulty articulating what it was about Homer’s oil seascapes that was so disconcerting, uniting their responses was the notion of an apparent struggle between this “barbarian” of the brush and his oil paints. An irrepressible quality of irritability seemed to define his materiality in its insistent stridency and physicality, the residue of a material conflict equivalent to their imagery of warring natural forces. Such reactions, significantly, were markedly different from responses made to the artist’s watercolors, in which Homer was hailed as an unsurpassed master. Cox found, for instance, that Homer painted “better in watercolors—with more virtuosity of hand, more sense of the right use of the material, more decisive mastery of its proper resources—than almost any modern has been able to do in oils.” One had to look to Rubens or Hals to find a painter as adept with his medium as Homer was with watercolor, in which “perfect material beauty” was achieved by means of a “perfect harmony between the end sought and the means employed.”²⁹ With oils, however, this harmony was wanting, the artist

²⁷ Ibid., 108-09, 111. Van Dyke acknowledged that Cox’s earlier writing inspired his observations.

²⁸ Ibid., 113-14.

²⁹ Cox, *Winslow Homer*, 60-61.

laboring against the more viscous and convoluted medium. “Homer’s technical handling of oil paint,” Cox dryly observed, “is entirely without charm, and it is abundantly evident that he triumphs not through it but in spite of it.”³⁰ Many shared this opinion regarding the difference between Homer’s oils and watercolors. “There is none who, from the technical standpoint, commonly paints more hatefully than he, and yet at the same time produces greater pictures,” the critic Leila Mechlin commented, suggesting not only that Homer’s surfaces were in some way odious, but also that the artist took a spiteful attitude to oil painting itself.³¹

It does appear that Homer was hesitant to take on the subject of the sea in oils, as though the medium was a frustrating source of exasperation but a process he had to face if he wanted to adequately portray the power of the sea in paint. Moving to Prout’s Neck in 1883, he examined and explored the rocky coast and sea in watercolors for almost seven years before turning to the theme with oils in 1890, after a four-year hiatus from oils altogether. Thereafter, he worked sporadically on his seascapes from year to year, sometimes producing a few, sometimes none.³² The artist spent long periods away from oil painting, tending to practical affairs on the Neck or fishing (his favorite pastime). While these caesuras from oil painting were the result of his need to observe fleeting natural conditions, they also reveal a certain measure of impatience with the medium, particularly when using it in the more physical manner the fluid sea demanded. More

³⁰ Ibid., 49.

³¹ Leila Mechlin, “Winslow Homer,” *International Studio* 34, no. 136 (June 1908): cxxv.

³² Franklin Kelly, “Time and Narrative Erased,” in Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr. and Franklin Kelly, *Winslow Homer*, exh. cat. (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 306. Kelly also observes that “fewer than one-half of the thirty to thirty-five major oils he created from 1890 until his death fully qualify” as pure seascapes. Martha Tedeschi has examined the development of Homer’s watercolor techniques at Prout’s Neck, observing that Homer’s oil paintings in the 1880s were figural while his watercolors of the sea were mostly pure marines. Homer finally pushed this theme to oils in the 1890s. See “A Light on the Sea: Prout’s Neck,” in Martha Tedeschi et al., *Watercolors by Winslow Homer: The Color of Light*, exh. cat. (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 122.

than once in the last two decades of his life, in fact, Homer expressed discouragement with his oil paintings, even going so far as to proclaim he had quit painting for good (even though he continued to work). These statements have been read as expressions of the artist's disappointment over the failure of many of his seascapes to sell and also revealing his savvy business acumen, the artist threatening to cease painting so as to drive up the value of his works.³³ They can also be read, however, as Homer's expressions of frustration with the process of painting itself. The artist declared to fellow artist John Beatty on his visit to Maine, for example: "I have given up the business . . . I have quit painting. We will do nothing but fish and have a good time."³⁴ "I have painted very few things this summer," Homer also wrote his patron Thomas B. Clarke in 1892, "for the reason that good things are scarce & I cannot put out anything in my opinion bad."³⁵ Four years later, however, Homer wrote in frustration to Clarke encouraging the collector to purchase his oil seascapes, with the caveat that he still had plenty of talent left: "I can assure you the best work is yet to come, whenever I think it is needed. I am engaged now in pressing things and making a 'corner' . . . I shall no longer put out anything unless it is carefully considered & made the most of."³⁶

When Homer did work on his oil seascapes, he worked in impatient flurries of activity, waiting long periods to observe the natural phenomena and precise conditions of light atmosphere he was after, then rushing back to his studio to set down his perceptions as quickly as possible. Between these episodes he would let an image gestate, forming an overall conception

³³ On Homer's shrewd business tactics, see Kevin Murphy, "Painting for Money: Winslow Homer as Entrepreneur," *Winterthur Portfolio* 37, no. 2/3 (Summer-Autumn 2002): 147-60, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/379950>.

³⁴ John Beatty, "Recollections of an Intimate Friendship," in Goodrich, *Winslow Homer*, 208.

³⁵ Homer to Thomas B. Clarke, 25 October 1892, Winslow Homer Collection, 1863, 1877-1945, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

³⁶ Homer to Thomas B. Clarke, 9 January 1896, *ibid.* Underline in original.

toward which he worked. Philip Beam has written that Homer “customarily made rough sketches, studied and planned and built [a picture] in his mind, and after sufficient observation, returned to his studio and only then began the actual painting.”³⁷ The artist in some cases toiled for years this way on an image, working feverishly at first, retouching it intermittently, stowing it to wait for natural conditions to repeat themselves, then jumping back into the painting after moments of observation. An anecdote by the artist’s brother, Charles Homer Jr., illuminates these methods. “There in the studio was a large canvas, the palette all set, and yet day after day passed and nothing was done,” he recounted to William Howe Downes. “Presently it became apparent that the painter was waiting for a certain effect of weather or of light. The whole summer passed away, and he did not get what he wanted . . . He knew precisely what he wanted, and could wait patiently until the opportunity came to him.”³⁸ In another instance, Homer took two years to complete *Early Morning after a Storm at Sea* (1902, fig. 1.8), writing to his dealers that his work was delayed by his inability to “have a crack at it outdoors.” “After waiting a full year, looking out every day for it,” he wrote in spring of 1902, “I got the light and the sea that I wanted; but as it was very cold I had to paint out of my window and I was a little too far away—it is not good enough yet, and I must have another painting from nature on it.” Later that year, he was relieved to find the opportunity he was waiting for: “The long-looked-for day arrived, and from 6 to 8 o’clock a.m. I painted from nature—finishing it—making the fourth painting on this canvas of two hours each.”³⁹

³⁷ Philip Beam, *Winslow Homer at Prout’s Neck* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1966), 207.

³⁸ Charles Homer, Jr. as quoted in Downes, *The Life and Works of Winslow Homer*, 117.

³⁹ Homer as quoted in Cox, *Winslow Homer*, 55.

Homer's irritation with oils may have been, in part, the practical result of the problems he faced when trying to paint the sea with his realist convictions towards art and nature. The artist was obsessed with painting directly from nature, his habitual repainting of a particular work indicating efforts to obtain the exact effects of color, light, form, and texture of things observed. His struggles to articulate such momentary sensations is revealed in the surf of *Early Morning after a Storm at Sea*, in which the foaming waters in the center of the composition appear more like petrified cotton balls than rising spray. As the art historian Elizabeth Johns has shown, Homer's realist aesthetic was a part of an empiricist tradition concerned with making objective the sense experience of the external world. Homer's realism meant he "supported the scientific principle that truth needed to be tested by replication—that his observations were subject to validation by all viewers attentive to natural phenomena."⁴⁰ The artist's obsession with verifiable, tangible fact was also rooted in the comforting realist doctrines of the late nineteenth century. These affirmed, in David Shi's words, "the existence of a physical realm independent of the mind, a coherent and accessible world of objective facts capable of being known through observation, understood with the use of reason, and accurately represented in thought, literature, and the arts."⁴¹ In Homer's mind, paint functioned as a sign of his materialist sensations, serving as a means of giving form and order to the external world in ways unmediated by conventions of art or the contingencies of subjective experience. Though his pictures depended on the artful arrangement of form and color, these were calculated choices made to represent nature observed at its most convincing, forceful and verifiable. This belief in paint's task also accounted for his

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Johns, *Winslow Homer: The Nature of Observation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 136.

⁴¹ David Shi, *Facing Facts: Realism in American Thought and Culture, 1850-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4-5.

pragmatic attitude toward the medium, with which he tested and developed different techniques according to the demands of the naturalistic effects pursued. As one critic noted in 1911, “that fidelity to fact . . . formed the basis of his every brushstroke.” Homer’s methods, according to this viewer, were dependent on his objectivity from moment to moment, “relying solely upon his innate capacity for seeing and doing as he saw fit.”⁴²

Homer’s endeavor to “paint truthfully what I see,” as he once stated, also revealed itself in his comments about his art as well as the work of others (as rare as these were).⁴³ Homer was attentive to the truthfulness of a painting with regards to its natural effects and subject matter. “His point of view seemed to be that of a non-professional, keen observer,” John Beatty thought, “rather than that of a technician.” Homer’s vehement declaration to Beatty, who asked whether the artist modified color or form for pictorial effect, that “Never! Never! When I have selected a thing, I paint it exactly as it appears,” illustrates the degree to which he wanted to at least assert the truth-value of his pictures.⁴⁴ No matter what license he may have taken to enhance aesthetic effect, Homer always took great pains to clarify the subjects of his paintings when questioned (if sometimes tongue-in-cheek, poking fun at the general public’s insistence on clear narratives).⁴⁵

Homer’s realism lent itself more readily to watercolors, which he used to sketch plein-air the immediate sensations of form, color, and light. Quickly drying and highly pliable and fluid,

⁴² Christian Brinton, “Winslow Homer,” *Scribner’s Magazine* 49 (January 1911): 20, 22, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3252995>.

⁴³ Winslow Homer as quoted by John Beatty, “Recollections of an Intimate Friendship,” 221.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁴⁵ For instance, in a letter to Thomas B. Clarke, 11 December 1892, Winslow Homer Collection, Homer wrote: “The critics may think that the deer is alive but he is not,” speaking in irritation about painting *Hound and Hunter* (1892, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC), “otherwise the boat & man would be knocked high and dry. I can shut the deer’s eyes, & put pennies on them if that will make it better understood. . . . This head has been underwater & from the tail up has been carefully recovered in order to tie the head to the end of the boat. It is a simple thing to make a man out an ass & fool by starting from a mistaken idea—So anyone who thinks this deer alive is wrong.”

with fewer required additives than oils (the essential elements are just pigment and water, for instance, instead of pigment and oils, thinners, dryers, varnishes, and so on), watercolors permitted the speed and spontaneity Homer demanded. In fact, they insist on a swift working pace with which he was more comfortable and adept, working rapidly to record his immediate sensations of the external world. In other words, in Homer's hands watercolors offered the path of least resistance between perception and execution. Due to this facility, the art historian Nicolai Cikovsky Jr. has observed, oils and watercolors became more distinguished in practice as Homer's career progressed. Whereas oils were reserved for more universal and symbolic themes in larger formats, watercolors "became in the same degree Homer's most immediate response to visual experience, at once more spontaneous and experimental."⁴⁶ Taking up watercolors in 1873, in the following decades Homer expanded his repertoire and developed innovative methods, thus able to work with even greater spontaneity and more masterfully utilize the medium's elasticity. Favoring watercolors for on-the-spot impressions, he also used them to experiment with the modern color theories of Michel Eugène Chevreul and Ogden Rood, exploring subtle color relationships and intensities for naturalistic effect.⁴⁷ Watercolors, moreover, were also easily transportable. Homer could take his compact materials, including a Winsor & Newton paint box with a tray of color cakes, a leather pouch with brushes, pencils,

⁴⁶ Nicolai Cikovsky Jr., "Reconstruction," in Cikovsky and Kelly, *Winslow Homer*, 98.

⁴⁷ Homer was heavily influenced by the theories of Chevreul. Homer's brother Charles Jr. gave him a copy of *The Principles of Harmony and the Contrast of Colors* (1839; translated into English 1854), which the artist referred to as his "bible," in the early 1860s when he started painting. On Homer's use of Chevreul's theories, see Hoermann, "A Hand Formed to Use the Brush"; Patricia Junker, "Expressions of Art and Life in *The Artist's Studio in an Afternoon Fog*," in Philip C. Beam, *Winslow Homer in the 1890s: Prout's Neck Observed*, exh. cat. (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1990), 34-65; Judith Walsh, "Mixing Oil and Water: The Development of Winslow Homer's Painting" and "Winslow Homer and the Color Theories of Michel-Eugène Chevreul," in Tedeschi et al., *Watercolors by Winslow Homer: The Color of Light*, 199-205. Walsh was the first to suggest that Homer was equally influenced by the color theories of Ogden Rood, American physicist and fellow member of New York's Century Club. See "More Skillful, More Refined, More Delicate: England," in Tedeschi et al., *Watercolors by Winslow Homer: The Color of Light*, 80-81.

charcoal, as well as papers and wooden tablet, on his walks along the Neck's paths and among its precipices and rocky shores. There, the artist momentarily settled to sketch while enveloped by the vivid sensations of the coast—the booms of thundering breakers and pounding surf or the rhythmic cadences of waves lapping against the rocks, gentle summer winds or biting icy gales, and salty taste and smell of the sea.⁴⁸

Upon moving to Prout's Neck Homer immediately began trolling its rocks and ledges, experimenting with how to capture the momentary character of rocks, waves, water, and light in watercolor sketches that, in some cases, he later refined in the studio.⁴⁹ In these works Homer used a variety of pioneering methods that explored the unique properties of the medium. These included utilizing the white of the paper for greater luminosity, painting with transparent washes, and using techniques of bleeding, layering and rewetting as well as lifting off, blotting, or smearing and scraping paint with a knife, sandpaper, rags, and even his fingers. *Incoming Tide, Scarborough, Maine* (fig. 1.9), for example, used a resist, in this instance a white chalky paste that Homer developed, to repel paint layers in the foam and fingers of water and accentuate the ocean's translucency.⁵⁰ One of his first marine watercolors that presaged his oils of the following decade in its absence of human presence, *Incoming Tide* is an example of a more calculated watercolor that Homer initially sketched outdoors but later refined with more methodical

⁴⁸ For detailed analyses of Homer's watercolor materials, see R. Newman, C. Weston, and E. Farrell, "Analysis of Watercolor Pigments in a Box Owned by Winslow Homer," *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works* 19, no. 2 (Spring 1980): 103-05. See also Tedeschi et al., *Watercolors by Winslow Homer: The Color of Light*, passim.

⁴⁹ On the technical and thematic development of Homer's watercolors at Prout's Neck, see Tedeschi, "A Light on the Sea: Prout's Neck," 108-34.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 115. For a detailed analysis of this painting and of Homer's innovative techniques, see Judith Walsh, "A Summer Pleasure: 'Incoming Tide, Scarborough, Maine' by Winslow Homer," *American Art Journal* 25, no. 1/2 (1992): 62-73, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1594600>. The following discussion of this painting culls from Walsh's insights and observations.

procedures, including blotting, scraping, re-wetting, and masking, along with the addition of touches of chalk to enhance white highlights in the shimmering water.⁵¹ Layering a range of unmixed colors that drew from Chevreul's color system of simultaneous contrasts, including predominantly blues and oranges along with small touches of pink and purple, Homer captured the heat and intensity of blinding summer sunlight shimmering off the water's surface and illuminating the dancing spray of the sea.

Whereas *Incoming Tide* is an example of a re-worked watercolor, *Sea and Rocks During a Storm* (fig. 1.10), a study for *High Cliff*, was a more spontaneous sketch that Homer likely painted on-site in a single sitting. Representing the cliff from the same vantage point as the larger oil painting, Homer applied a series of wet-on-wet washes to set the general divisions of sky, rocks and sea. He then flicked, scumbled, and bled paint with a smaller brush to illustrate the surging flow of water and the distinctive, craggy buttresses of the cliff. Attentive to the subtle interplay of more subdued colors but again exploiting the refracting luminosity of the paper, the artist invoked the effect of muffled light in ways that suggest an ominous, pre-storm phosphorescence.

Whether extemporaneous or more calculated, sketched outdoors or retouched in the studio, these watercolors of the coast derived from the intense observation of nature. These were the kinds of paintings Kenyon Cox had in mind when he wrote of Homer's masterful skill with the medium, which demonstrated the perfect confluence of observation, material and making:

The perfection of watercolor depends, largely, upon directness and rapidity. . . . It is the ideal material for rapid sketching from nature because the sketcher, instead of sacrificing technical beauty to directness of expression, gains greater beauty with every increase of speed. Therefore, for the fastidious in technical matters, Homer's sudden notations of things observed have an extraordinary charm which comes from the perfect harmony between ends sought and means employed. The more his mind is fixed upon the

⁵¹ Walsh, in "A Summer Pleasure," 63, has found evidence of particles of sand in the painting, indicating he initially sketched the image on site.

rendering of his impression and the less he thinks of his material the more beautiful his material becomes. The accuracy of his observation, the rapidity of his execution and the perfection of his technic [sic] increase together, and reach their highest value at the same moment. The one little square piece of paper becomes a true record of the appearance of nature, an amazing bit of sleight of hand, and a piece of perfect material beauty.⁵²

Painting numerous watercolor studies of Prout's Neck in the 1880s and into the 1890s, however, Homer eventually ran into the medium's limitations. On the one hand, he aspired to the formal meanings and heightened aesthetic associated with large-scale oil paintings, which offered an arena to explore more universal, symbolic meanings in nature. Just as important, however, oil paint also more fully conveyed the phenomenal impact of the breadth and rush of the sea and the coast's monumental, impenetrable rocks owing to the medium's greater density, opacity, and richness. Philip Beam has suggested that Homer became frustrated with the inability of watercolors to articulate "the thundering, crashing impact of tons of solid water against the rocks." Even though the artist "loved the watercolor medium, with its flexibility and handiness . . . and [had] used it for most of his finished paintings up to that time . . . the great breakers defied his best efforts to capture their power, and he finally turned to oils, almost against his will."⁵³

Beginning in 1890, then, when Homer at last turned to painting the sea in oil, he applied the techniques he had been exploring in watercolor, using more broad and spontaneous brushwork that tested the weight and transparency of different oil paints along with subtle intonations of colors, exploiting the specificity of the medium to different effects more than he had previously attempted.⁵⁴ In these seascapes, too, for the first time in a prolonged series of oils, Homer practiced the kind of painterly aesthetic formerly reserved for his watercolors, freezing

⁵² Cox, *Winslow Homer*, 61.

⁵³ Beam, *Winslow Homer at Prout's Neck*, 61-62.

⁵⁴ Walsh, "Mixing Oil and Water: The Development of Winslow Homer's Painting," 50-51.

time and space into non-narrative pictures that stood as representations of nature observed. As Barbara Novak has written, Homer's seascapes were the first easel paintings in which he synthesized intuitive skills of form and design with his "sense of observation, his perceptual awareness of plein-air light," developing "a professional sea-watcher's precision of observation and a sense of the *specifics* of time."⁵⁵ In *Sunlight on the Coast* (fig. 1.11), the artist's initial effort in oil paint, he explored the same luminous effects and complementary color patterns of blue and orange as in the watercolor *Incoming Tide*, arresting the qualities of reflected and refracted light shimmering off the surface of waves and spray. In this subtle exploration of color, the rich, deep blue of the sea mutates into churning white form in the foreground and fades into the dull gray sky of the fog or rain-soaked distance, suggesting a relieving calm after a storm. Though much more subdued in overall tone, *High Cliff* also demonstrates the use of broken complimentary colors in the rocks (fig. 1.12), where surprising punctuations and dashes of blues, yellows, oranges, and even pinks give, at a distance, the multifarious effect of muffled light glinting off damp rocks.

Painting in this way, however—bringing to rich, stubborn oils the spontaneous, fluid methods he had perfected in watercolors—must have disturbed the more restrained, meticulous manner of handling that Homer employed with the more viscous medium. Apart from his pure seascapes, Homer's easel paintings were largely anecdotal. Accordingly, he approached oils such as *Life Line* of 1884 (fig. 1.13) with an illustrator's mindset for articulating naturalistic form and detail enough to indicate the spatial and narrative arrangement of his subjects. Such paintings were also structured by drawings distilled from numerous studies, through which Homer determined a priori the final design of the picture and which served as an armature and pattern to

⁵⁵ Barbara Novak, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century: Realism, Idealism, and the American Experience* (New York: Praeger, 1969), 189.

guide the process of painting. Though using denser paints along with a more rough application than was standard, Homer was nonetheless methodical and exact with oils. *Life Line*, for instance, represents the dramatic use of a breeches buoy during a shipwreck rescue. In the embracing figures he took great pains in the detail, drawing viewers into the pictorial elements bearing the compositional and narrative weight. With this painting, we can imagine Homer stationed close to his canvas at a distance of no more than a foot, grasping in his fingertips a quarter-inch brush with semi-opaque paint pulled from the palette in globs, and applying the greasy oil with careful, plodding insistence to delineate the figures. Facial features, folds of wet cloth, buttons, locks of hair, drips of water flowing from the woman's fingers, and even tiny beads of water clinging to the taut rope are all described with calculated touches. The ambient elements of water and sky—though painted with a broader brush and more thinned paints, giving the effect of the kind of spontaneity later explored in his pure marines—were nonetheless executed in the same fastidious manner. Homer guided his brush slowly across the surface of the canvas, carefully following contours to mark the crest or trough of a wave; even the spray and foam, which initially appear to be improvised dabs of white and gray, instead exhibit a uniform, systematic pattern.

Homer exercised cautious restraint when using oils in these narrative pictures, the medium's intransigence contained by drawing and tamed by disciplined handling. When moving from his linear, illustrational mode to a painterly style in a work such as *High Cliff*, however, Homer had to relinquish that order and control. Less important than form and detail in these seascapes were the effects of color and brushwork, executed with enough swiftness and breadth to accentuate the medium's density and give the effect of nature momentarily observed. Subsequently, he worked without the reassurance of drawing, likely only sketching contours of

broad forms and blocking-in masses of light and dark with thin underpaintings. The effect of these marines hinged on the peculiarities of every brushstroke, requiring more decisive improvisation and consideration of the properties of each mark from moment to moment, including color and value along with degrees of opacity and texture and the size, speed, force, and direction of each stroke. In *High Cliff* (fig. 1.1) especially Homer experimented with an extensive range of nuanced techniques and marks. In the rocks, the initial layer was slathered in broad masses with at least a one-inch brush and with a mixture of deep earth colors, including burnt sienna, burnt umber, and dark, rich Van Dyke brown. Working for the most part in a wet-on-dry method and with long paints (thinned, fluid pigments that conceal evidence of the brush), Homer then suggested the ragged character of the cliffs with stiff slabs, wide strokes, and short, angular dabs, curls and scratches, executed with a range of brushes and perhaps a palette knife to create a variety of notations and surface effects. In the passage of broken color, where the cliffs spill over the lower rock ledge (fig. 1.12), Homer used swatches of saturated opaque and semi-opaque paints—chrome orange and yellow, cerulean and Prussian blue, and lightened tints of vermillion—scumbled over the dried underpainting. He also took a fine detailing brush with thinned black and ran through the dark masses with delicate, calligraphic lines to indicate cracks and crevices. In the sea and sky, by contrast, Homer switched to fat paints for a rich, impastoed surface, blending and swirling both on his palette and directly on canvas paints such as zinc white, chrome green, and cerulean and Prussian blue, using a wet-on-wet technique to build form and give a sense of mass and movement to the rushing foam and spraying water (fig. 1.14).⁵⁶

⁵⁶ The differences in these techniques can be seen in the distinction between brushstrokes—the dry-on-wet can be distinguished by the clarity and integrity of brushstrokes, while the wet-on-wet is distinguished by the blurred, impastoed strokes. In order to prevent the muddying of paints a certain amount of control has to be exercised here as well, such as working with a minimal variety of paints and also waiting for thick underlayers to dry.

Such a complex blend of paints and processes demanded a high degree of patience and diligence, since each pigment has different properties effecting its behavior and interaction with others. To sustain the requisite weight, color, opacity, and permanency of paints, for instance, Homer had to be attentive to the covering power of certain colors, how different pigments interacted physically and chemically, and what ratios of pigment to oil or paint to thinner could be safely mixed to achieve certain densities and opacities. Also crucial was knowing how to slow or quicken drying times to paint at a certain pace, as well as understanding how long to wait before launching back into specific passages in order to allow layers to dry and prevent muddiness. With these issues in mind, all the while Homer had to perform a delicate dance between patience and spontaneity, between pensive restraint and impulsive speed. Such processes must have been trying, to say the least, for an artist concerned with quickly registering the ephemeral observations of nature, yet whose ease with watercolor in this manner of painting ran into the particular demands of oil paint. A degree of impatience, in fact, can be detected in a portion of the cliff face with pronounced cracking and smearing (this section, at the top of figure 1.14 is hard to detect in this reproduction). It appears that Homer applied a thinned layer of burnt sienna before the thicker and glossy chrome orange beneath dried sufficiently, resulting in an inconsistent layering of brown along and cracking owing to the differences in density, the fat, slowly drying orange beneath expanding and contracting and pulling apart the lean, dried layer of paint above it.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Little technical analysis has been performed on *High Cliff* owing to the excellent condition of the painting in its present state. I have speculated on the exact paints Homer used through close analysis of the original combined with knowledge of what watercolor pigments Homer favored. These preferences can easily transfer to his seascapes in particular since he brought to these oils the same aesthetic ideals. See Kristin Dahm, "Intention and Alteration: Winslow Homer's Watercolor Palette," in Tedeschi et al., *Watercolors by Winslow Homer: The Color of Light*, 206-15. By the late nineteenth century there were numerous technical studies of pigments that detailed chemical and physical properties, permanency, and interaction. Two of the most popular were Charles L. Condit, *Painting and Painters' Materials*. (New York: The Brooklyn-Gazette, 1883) and Arthur H. Church, *The Chemistry of Paints and Painting* (London: Seeley, 1890). It is unknown whether Homer knew of these sources, though it is possible that he

The physical gestures that Homer used in the brushwork of *High Cliff* (fig. 1.1) were also markedly different from his figural easel paintings. They indicate a wide variety of movements, from short flicks of the wrist executed close to the canvas to longer sweeps of the arm done from farther away. To obtain an even looser technique, in some cases Homer likely also moved brushes to the palms of his hands, wrapping his hand around the brush instead of grasping them with his fingers. Sacrificing exact control, this strategy allowed for greater freedom of gestural movement involving both the wrists and arms. The nature of Homer's broad brushstrokes also required that he constantly shift back and forth in space in order to maintain a visual balance of parts to whole that could not be perceived close to the canvas: stepping back for a moment, for example, to judge the nature of a mark or the effect of the total picture, then jumping back into particular areas. These are the restless physical actions of a character we don't normally associate with the reserved, restrained Homer as revealed in the controlled materiality of paintings such as *Life Line*, and must have gone somewhat against his nature. Even so, the crashing, vertical spray at the center of the painting could be described as gesticulatory. (fig. 1.14) These aren't the marks of a painter hunched close to the canvas and methodically following contours or defining details with precise flicks of the fingers and wrist. Rather, they demonstrate an almost athletic involvement of the arms, with Homer rapidly contorting, turning, spinning and twirling the fingers, wrists, elbow, and shoulder to coax paint into the thick, swirling spray.

Such an involved, challenging manner of oil painting would have physically and technically run counter to the habits and procedures with which Homer was accustomed and

acquired technical advice from his brother Charles Jr., an industrial chemist who gained notoriety for developing an innovative industrial varnish. The cracks observed are consistent with drying cracks that scar the paintings of Albert Pinkham Ryder, as explored in more detail in the following chapter. In brief, this occurs when a thinner layer is applied over a thicker oil paint, which dries much more slowly owing to its greater density and the fact that it is concealed from oxygen, required for the drying process. As oils oxidize, they expand, contract, and undergo chemical transformations affecting the viscosity and weight of the pigments.

comfortable. The theories of habit by Homer's contemporary, the philosopher and physiological psychologist William James (1842-1910), provide a useful psychological model for understanding, in part, the nature of Homer's struggles with oils and the source of his anxiety with the medium in his seascapes. Habit, wrote James in his groundbreaking study *Principles of Psychology* (1890), is a condition of overcoming the physical resistance of a task or stimulus. For James, habit formation involved neurological and physiological processes in which both were adapted to the point where conscious effort is reduced, movements are simplified, and the experience of resistance is diminished. To illustrate, James cited the example of a novice piano player who noticeably

not only moves his finger up and down in order to depress the key, he moves his whole hand, the forearm and even the entire body, especially moving its least rigid part, the head, as if he would press down the key with that organ too. Often a contraction of the abdominal muscles occurs as well. Principally, however, the impulse is determined to the motion of the hand and single finger. This is, in the first place, because the movement finger is the movement *thought of*, and, in the second place, because its movement of that key are the movements we try to *perceive*, along with the results of the latter on the ear. The more often the process is repeated, the more easily the movement follows, on account of the increase in permeability of the nerves engaged.

As the player exercised the actions, however, neural pathways were created, muscles were trained, and the gulf between conception and execution was bridged, with movements becoming effortless, automatic, and focused in the practiced fingers, the actions not so much performed as they were already achieved.⁵⁸

For a seasoned artist like Homer, painting existed somewhere between habit and deliberate action, between automatic, pre-conscious reflexes and concentrated intent. To apply James's notions of habit to Homer's manner of painting in his seascapes, however, when the oil paint was employed with the painterly processes Homer had perfected in watercolor, the artist's

⁵⁸ William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 2 vols. in 1 (1890; repr., Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 73-74.

habits might have been obstructed owing to oil paint's obstacles. Instead of more natural, unrestricted, and unconscious movements, to paint in a manner suited to his experiences of the coast in oil paint Homer had to—like the beginning piano player—concentrate his thoughts on the material and tasks at hand. Along with a sustained attention to the technical demands and nuances of the medium, each stroke must have been a concentrated effort focused on the behavior of paint and the movement of the fingers, wrists, and arms as he exercised new and foreign physical procedures with the more unctuous material. Such processes would have not only disrupted Homer's accustomed manner of painting, they would also have amplified oil painting's complexity in ways both productive and frustrating: productive in that they would have made the artist aware of the unique properties and potential for oil paint; challenging since they would have imposed physical obstacles to the seamless realization of his visions in ways that intensified the medium's limitations and resistance. Such frustrations account in part for the petulance characterizing Homer's materiality as he fought to paint against more familiar and comfortable patterns of habit.

Further adding to Homer's struggles, moreover, must have been confinement to the studio when working on easel paintings of the sea, which so depended on immediate impressions. By all accounts Homer preferred to paint outdoors, where he could transcribe nature directly. Whether exaggerated or not, he insisted that he always worked outside in order to substantiate the truth-value of his realist paintings. What he informed an interviewer early in his career remained an ideal throughout his life:

I prefer ever time a picture composed and painted out-doors. The thing is done without your knowing it. Very much of the work done now in studios should be done in the open air. This making studies and then taking them home to use them is only half right. You

get composition, but you lose freshness; you miss the subtle and, to the artist, the finer characteristics of the scene itself.⁵⁹

Though Homer may have found opportunities to work outside, whether on the coastline or on the veranda of his studio overlooking the sea, the size and complexity of easel painting in oils, along with the cold, tempestuous weather that he often painted, required that he more often work inside. Several commentators on Homer's seascapes have pointed to the inherent difficulty Homer would have faced when working in the studio on his seascapes. Downes, for instance, observed that it was

not easy for a layman to imagine the appalling difficulty of painting water in violent commotion. To accomplish this satisfactorily, the painter must have the rare faculty of memorizing with approximate exactitude the instantaneous impression—all its confused and intricate details, its lightning swift movement, the thrust of its titanic onset, its tremendous impetus, the swoop and crash and welter of eddy, foam, and spray, the wild dance of waves with the reefs and ledges and cliffs, a warfare that has been going on for unknown ages.⁶⁰

Grasping for the impetus behind Homer's labors with oils despite the artist's "swiftness and certainty of hand" in watercolor, and speaking from his own experience as an artist, Kenyon Cox likewise conceded: "The highest perfection of oil painting depends upon complicated processes which are almost impossible to the painter from nature, impatient to set down his observations while they are immanent to his mind."⁶¹

As these remarks suggest, Homer's long periods of observation and conceptual gestation were put to the test in studio practice, where he had to recollect the ephemeral impressions of color and light and the momentary character of the sea amidst oil painting's obfuscating material

⁵⁹ Winslow Homer as quoted by George Sheldon, *Hours with Art and Artists* (1882; repr., New York: Garland Publishing, 1978), 138.

⁶⁰ William Howe Downes, "American Painters of the Sea," *American Magazine of Art* 23 (November 1931): 364.

⁶¹ Cox, *Winslow Homer*, 60-61.

processes. Memory, to use another useful psychological model by William James, is not simply the recurrence of a mental image per se, but a subjective representation attached to a range of associations, emotions, and experiences that are specific to the moment in which they occurred. Recollection involves both body and mind, the vestiges and penumbra of mental images coming together with momentary physiological and psychological states to form the object of memory “in one integral pulse of consciousness.”⁶² Given James’s notions of memory, Homer’s past experiences of nature—including the images, associations, and states of being that formed the core of his memories—would have been fragmented and jumbled by the act of painting, the artist’s concepts and memories entangled with its complex physical and technical processes and his concentrated efforts to work in a manner different than he was habitually accustomed. The artist’s thoughts would have also been confused by what James Elkins has appropriately called the “necessary insanity” of the studio in all its isolation and perplexity. Here, instead of the immediate, invigorating sensations of the coast, the artist was hedged in by stagnant air and the disordered experiences of “breathing fumes, dripping oils and wiping brushes, smearing and diluting and mixing,” all compounding his physiological and psychological frustrations.⁶³

Homer struggled to give form to perceptions and conceptions in the thick of painting’s convolutions—a frenetic back-and-forth between palette and canvas, paint tubes and bottles of oil and turpentine, brushes and knives, and the pushing, dragging, and pulling of paint. This inexorable give-and-take between the artist and his materials, in which he surrendered a degree of control and volition to painting’s demands and contingencies, may have partly been what troubled critics such as Cox and Van Dyke, who otherwise admired the aesthetic force and

⁶² James, *Principles of Psychology*, 426.

⁶³ James Elkins, *What Painting Is: How to Think About Oil Painting, Using the Language of Alchemy* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 2-3. 147-49.

dramatic subject of Homer's seascapes. Respected by artists, critics, and the public alike for their sensitivity to painting's formal properties, Van Dyke and Cox were highly attentive to matters of technique and style as much as subject matter, signaling late nineteenth-century trends towards "art for art's sake" and aestheticism that emphasized craft, form, and the decorative beauty of surface effects.⁶⁴ Their popular lectures and writings, moreover, which addressed the cultural function of painting, illustrate specific expectations for the behavior of paint and the relationship between artists and their materials that Homer's practice transgressed.

Van Dyke's texts in particular addressed the technical problems painters faced and the significance of a picture's formal qualities, seeking to speak of painting in "humbler" terms, as he wrote—"more material, more technical and, if you choose, more practical."⁶⁵ The critic advised viewers to ask first not what a picture represented, but rather how well the painting was executed in terms of an artful arrangement of both two and three-dimensional elements—of form, composition, color, light, drawing, perspective, brushwork, and texture of things represented. "You will perhaps insist that true art is above all this petty planning," he wrote of the reality of painting, "that the ideal out-soars the base materials [that] hold it down to earth. There are those who believe that inspiration dictates with the voice of an angel and that the hand of the poet or painter obeys the voice; there are those who believe there is no labor or plan or design or foundation in the work of art . . . Every great work of art is based in technical

⁶⁴ On aestheticism in the Gilded Age, see Elizabeth O'Leary, "An Age of Surfaces: Aestheticism and American Painting in the Gilded Age," *Nineteenth Century* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1999), 19-29; Doreen Bolger Burke, "Painters and Sculptors in a Decorative Age," in *In Pursuit of Beauty: Americans and the Aesthetic Movement*, exh. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986), 294-339. On the nascence and gradual critical acceptance of modernist abstraction in the late nineteenth century, a corollary development in the aesthetic movement, see JoAnne M. Mancini, *Pre-Modernism: Art-World Change and American Culture from the Civil War to the Armory Show* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁶⁵ John C. Van Dyke. *Art for Art's Sake: Seven University Lectures on the Technical Beauties of Painting* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893), 2.

knowledge and has the skilled workman back of it.”⁶⁶ The alienation between artists and the public, he believed, was the result of the layperson’s ignorance of the means and methods of the painter, whose current purpose within the grand evolution of art was to translate into pictures the formal beauties of nature.⁶⁷ He felt that the public need for stories in their pictures asked of painting more than it could give: “The sad jumbling of figment and pigment, the telling to the eye with a paint-brush of half a story, and to the ear in the title or catalogue of the other half, is quite unnecessary.” Instead, a “painter’s ideas” were

limited to such subjects as may be comprehended by the unaided eye independent of time-movement, and that his language is limited to such symbols of ideas as form, color, light, shade, air, and their kind. When, therefore, people call for ideas in painting—meaning thereby literary, anecdotal, moral, or religious ideas—and overlook with scorn the pictorial motives of the artists, they are simply asking that painting shall abandon its proper purpose. . . . The conservative answer to the question, “What is meant by an idea in art” is, first, *a pictorial idea*—an idea conforming to the limits of painting.⁶⁸

Though elements such as form, color, and technique constituted the essential tools of painting, however, they were not to be thought of ends in themselves. It was through these instruments, rather, that painting was to achieve its cultural function as a source of edification that reached towards higher planes of thought and feeling. Of brushwork, for instance, he wrote that it was an overlooked yet essential component that was the strength of all great painters, with a beauty and perfection all its own; yet painting was not about technical flourishes or sumptuous surfaces alone. Brushwork must function as a means to an end, serving as a manner of telling that permeated the painting with the personal expression of the artist while enhancing the beauty of the whole. The best artists were those who maintained an “equilibrium of style and thought”

⁶⁶ John C. Van Dyke, *The Meaning of Pictures: Six Lectures Given by Columbia University at the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1911), 132-33.

⁶⁷ Van Dyke presented his theory of the evolution of art in *Principles of Art* (New York: Fords, Howard, & Hulbert, 1887).

⁶⁸ Van Dyke, *Art for Art’s Sake*, 13, 16-17.

rather than throwing up “meaningless splashes of pigment.”⁶⁹ Ultimately, however, “the strongest part of art is not its language but the ideas which that language expresses.”⁷⁰ Van Dyke warned that “the work of the hand and the conception of the mind must not bear false relationship to one another. The thought is greater than the means of expression, but there is beauty in both. Despise neither, but place the former above the latter.” “The most enduring part of art,” he put another way, “is the conception of the artist, and the embodiment of conception in form and color and their variations constitutes the highest aim of painting.”⁷¹

Among Americans who worked with painterly flourishes of the kind Homer experimented with, Van Dyke’s exemplary artists were painters such as William Merritt Chase (1849-1916) and John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) (figs. 1.15 and 1.16). Qualifying his accolades of these artists by warning that their styles could run close to the superficial—in other words, emphasizing too much technique and not enough the conceptual or ideal—these painters nonetheless represented a promising generation of artists who pushed the technical beauties and expression of painting to new limits. They also demonstrated an almost magical effortlessness in their brushwork, controlling with great ease the physical aspects of their art. Chase and his students in particular made apparent that “material and method” were fast becoming preoccupations, since—as Van Dyke put it—“each new generation in art pins us down more narrowly and positively to the material,” meaning both nature and the formal language of art.⁷² Like Chase, and much like his description of Homer, Van Dyke also characterized Sargent as a

⁶⁹ Ibid., 35, 247-48.

⁷⁰ John Van Dyke, *How to Judge a Picture: Familiar Talks in the Gallery with Uncritical Lovers of Art* (New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1891), 108-09.

⁷¹ Ibid., 120.

⁷² Van Dyke, *American Painting and its Tradition*, 215.

great observer. Yet the brush in Sargent's hand, he believed, was like a magician's wand in which "the hand obeys his mind without flinching, without doubting, without hesitation," as if the contingencies of technical execution were non-existent and through which the artist enlivened his portrait subjects with a living, breathing presence.⁷³

Though more conservative in his academic preferences in terms of subject matter, Kenyon Cox, too, was interested in innovations in artistic technique. Painting, in his view, was to express humanist ideas mediated through nature and the human figure, with harmony and balance exhibited through surface effects of color, design, and facture as well as subject matter. Much like Van Dyke, Cox rallied against superficial overindulgence in brushwork that was devoid of meaning, appreciating painterly styles so long as they were tempered by broader idealistic principles and themes that transcended the subjective.⁷⁴ Despite reservations over Sargent's ostentation, for instance, Cox admired the artist's talents, acquiescing to the superiority of his technique and the transformative powers of his brush. Both Homer and Sargent were realists of the highest order, but Sargent's ability to transform paint into the object of representation was unmatched. "He is one of the great virtuosi of the brush," Cox declared, "and he counts upon the pleasure his virtuosity will afford you for a great part of his effect. . . . In this particular and perfectly legitimate charm of art—the charm of prompt and efficient execution, the magic of the hand—Sargent is, perhaps, the equal of anyone, even of the greatest."⁷⁵ The

⁷³ John C. Van Dyke, "Sargent the Portrait Painter," *Outlook* 74, no. 1 (May 2, 1903): 38, <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.wustl.edu/docview/136960350>.

⁷⁴ H. Wayne Morgan, *Keepers of Culture: The Art-Thought of Kenyon Cox, Royal Cortissoz, and Frank Jewett Mather* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1989), 43. On Cox's career and the principles underlying his criticism more broadly, see 15-60.

⁷⁵ Kenyon Cox, *Old Masters and New: Essays in Art Criticism* (New York: Duffield, 1908), 259-60. For a discussion of the gendered rhetoric behind the critical reception of Sargent's techniques in comparison to those of the artist Cecilia Beaux, see Sarah Burns, "The 'Earnest, Untiring Worker' and the Magician of the Brush: Gender

danger with Sargent's style, however, as he also wrote of the work of William Merritt Chase, was "that the love of painting may degenerate into the love of paint, that execution may usurp the more serious qualities."⁷⁶ Like Van Dyke, Cox demanded for the highest form of art a balance of skill and thought, with technique a conduit to more elevated and ennobling levels of meaning. Revealing an appreciation for more abstract forms of painting, for instance, Cox found in the painting of James McNeill Whistler such a delicate and compelling synthesis. "He has a strong sense for the beauty of the material," he wrote of Whistler's harmonies and nocturnes, "but it is of material brought to the verge of immateriality. His paint is fluid, thin, dilute; his touch feather-light and melting. There may be twenty successive layers of pigment on the canvas, but it is scarce covered, and its texture shows everywhere. It is almost as if he painted with thought." Though Whistler's painting pushed too much toward the evanescent in ways that diminished the importance of subject matter and accentuated too much for Cox's taste the subjective and fleeting, the result of his painting was "an art infinitely subtle, infinitely fastidious, tremulously intense; an art of exquisite sensibilities and fine nerves, of reticences and reservations; a music of muted strings."⁷⁷

For Cox and Van Dyke, artists such as Sargent, Chase, or Whistler ontologically transformed paint from a crude substance into fluid, transparent signs of the external world, achieving a delicate synthesis between conception and execution—between thought and individuality of style—that reached toward the ideal. Importantly, however, their fluid, masterful techniques also symbolically demonstrated the superiority of the exalted power of the intellect

Politics in the Criticism of Cecilia Beaux and John Singer Sargent," in *Critical Issues in American Art: A Book of Readings*, ed. Mary Ann Calo (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 177-98.

⁷⁶ Kenyon Cox, "William M. Chase, Painter," *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 12, no. 2 (February 1917): 26, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3253870>.

⁷⁷ Cox, *Old Masters and New*, 249-51.

and skill over the base material world embodied in painting and its physical processes. This reassuring relationship was one that Homer—in his laborious struggles against oil painting’s greasy thickness, its technical limitations, and its troubling disruptions of habit, conception, and memory—disturbed in a manner both aesthetically and culturally subversive. The vehement insistence of Cox and Van Dyke on the idealistic relationship between artists and their materials as exhibited through technical craft and on the larger transcendent function of art was shaped by the beliefs and values of the genteel culture of white northeastern society of the late nineteenth century. Howard Mumford Jones has described the genteel tradition as this era’s “cultural norm,” the “central principle for aesthetic values, philosophy, upper-class religion, and higher education.” In the arts, just as in the thinking of Cox and Van Dyke, it fused an aesthetic and spiritual idealism with an emphasis on craftsmanship, a fascination with contemporary European culture, including the more cosmopolitan, painterly techniques used by Homer, and a widespread encouragement for the decorative arts. All of these convictions were underpinned by a deep-seated conviction of the “moral, aesthetic, and philosophical” purpose for art.⁷⁸ Seeing form, style and technique as keys to aesthetic beauty, the highest function of art was to be a form of moral expression that affirmed the existence of a higher reality, working against the doubt and uncertainty of the age induced by materialist worldviews and evolutionary theories that threatened faith and humanity’s superior place in nature. Affirming the reality of the spiritual, the genteel tradition went so far as to wed religious faith and liberal economic ideals in the belief that society was tending toward both material and spiritual perfection.⁷⁹ Corresponding to the insistence by critics such as Cox and Van Dyke on the preeminence and transcendence of the

⁷⁸ Howard Mumford Jones, *The Age of Energy: Varieties of American Experience, 1865-1915* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 216.

⁷⁹ Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 4-26.

mind over the physical world of painting, another major component of the genteel tradition, as the philosopher Georges Santayana observed, was its persistent intellectualism, which saw the world in terms of theoretical laws and abstractions, natural harmonies, and providence rather than focusing on immediate experiences and the messy contingencies of physical reality.⁸⁰

The painting of Thomas Wilmer Dewing (1851-1938) exemplifies the kind of art that nourished genteel values. In tonalist works such as *The Hermit Thrush* (fig. 1.17) Dewing represented idealized figures coexisting with nature in an eternal, spiritual harmony. Dewing pushed paint toward the immaterial, using diluted pigments pressed into the canvas to create atmospheric veils and soft, suffused forms, executed with a limited range of values.⁸¹ “As in other Dewing paintings of this type,” the art historian Kathleen Pyne has observed, “the earth seems released from the weight of gravity so that it floats up around the women, merging with the atmosphere.” Pyne sees in this painting a synaesthetic fusion in which the meditating women are entranced by the “loping, rhythmic contours of the tree” that mimics the cadences of the thrush’s song, presenting a moment “when, in the simultaneous apprehension of sight and sound, consciousness is expanded, time seems to stop, and one is lifted above the quotidian to the higher plane of experience.”⁸² Demonstrating the cultural and social function of such paintings, Pyne

⁸⁰ George Santayana, “The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy” (1911), in *The Genteel Tradition: Nine Essays*, ed. Douglas L. Wilson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 37-64.

⁸¹ On tonalist aesthetics, see Wanda Corn, *The Color of Mood: American Tonalism, 1880-1910*, exh. cat. (San Francisco: M.H. De Young Memorial Museum, 1972). For a more recent, detailed study of the philosophy and techniques of tonalists, see Marc Simpson et al., *Like Breath on Glass: Whistler, Inness, and the Art of Painting Softly*, exh. cat. (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, 2008). On Dewing’s technique in particular, see Susan Hobbs, Yu-tarng Cheng and Jacqueline S. Olin, “Thomas Wilmer Dewing: A Look Beneath the Surface,” *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 4, no. 3/4 (Summer-Autumn, 1990): 62-85. See also Lance Mayer and Gay Myers, “Understanding the Techniques of American Tonalist and Impressionist Painters,” *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 32, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 129-39.

⁸² Kathleen Pyne, *Art and the Higher Life: Painting and Evolutionary Thought in Late Nineteenth-Century America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 147-48.

has shown how these works were informed by the evolutionary principles of English biologist and philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), whose revision of the dangerous theories of Charles Darwin (1809-1882), which undercut humanity's significance and made nature a world of dissonance, violence and uncertainty, offered comforting philosophical ideals for science and religion in the late nineteenth century. More specifically, Spencer's theories united evolutionary theory with an unwavering belief in American progress and the country's "image of itself as a nation guided by providential dispensation," all the while sustaining the idea of the "spiritual nature" of humanity. Spencer's philosophies, too, preserved the belief in a transcendent realm where the human spirit persisted after death and the earthly life. In this context, Dewing's paintings reminded New Englanders "of a transcendent realm and of social refinement," both reflecting and "assisting the evolutionary progress of American society."⁸³ Offering a utopian spiritual realm populated by elegant figures symbolizing Anglo-American cultivation, the painting also served as a form of visual therapy and psychic rejuvenation from the hectic, neurasthenic-inducing experiences of industrial life, facilitating evolution toward a higher state of being through its subdued, mellifluous harmonies and the dematerialization of paint into an evanescent ether.

Winslow Homer's painting, however, embodied a different kind of aesthetic, his distinct representations of nature along with his technical struggles with oil paint violating expectations for how artists should engage with their materials and how paint should behave and function. In some of Homer's seascapes, such as the more peaceful and placid *West Point, Prout's Neck* (fig. 1.18), nature was endowed with the same kind of harmony, order and balance as that represented by Dewing, in which figures coexisted peacefully with their surroundings. In a painting such as

⁸³ Ibid., 2-3. On the reception and reconciliation of evolutionary theories in the United States, see 11-47. For a discussion of Dewing's art in particular, see 135-219.

High Cliff, however, nature was cold, violent, and untamed. To a degree, as we have seen, even genteel critics such as Cox and Van Dyke could appreciate such depictions of nature, provided that these representations were securely contained within the realm of the pictorial, existing as a kind of safe, therapeutic release in Victorian parlors. For these critics, however, Homer's seascapes often had too much the stuff and experience of this raw and crude natural world in them in the way the artist's paint behaved, threatening to the calm and quiet of the drawing rooms whose function it was to shelter inhabitants from such crude forces. Indeed, most unsettling for these critics was the way the conflicting, elemental representations of nature in Homer's seascapes were embodied in the way the artist struggled with his materials, his paintings offering up a coarse surface of harsh, labored brushstrokes along with dissonant slabs and swirls of pigment, the overwhelming physicality of paint on the verge of subsuming form and representation. If paint in the hands of artists like Dewing, Sargent, or Chase fluidly gave way to the thought and will of the artist, signifying the transcendence of mind over matter, Homer's struggles betrayed otherwise, embodying a more entangled physical experience with the material world.

Historians have observed that the use of terms such as "savage" referred to Homer's representations of a crude, elemental nature or laid claim to something instinctual and childlike, and therefore authentic, in the artist's rustic style. The language of critics, however, with their tentative efforts to come to terms with the nature of his surfaces, suggests a more nuanced usage of these terms indicating not only the crude, unpolished style of Homer's painting but also the relationship between the artist and his materials. Sigmund Freud's psychological notion of the "uncanny" helps explain these meanings. Sensations of the uncanny, as Freud theorized, were instances in which viewers were struck by something as both alien yet vaguely familiar because

these sensations aroused conditions and impulses belonging to stages of development that were estranged from the psyche through repression. In Freud's words, qualities of the uncanny reified "a regression to times when the ego had not clearly set itself off against the world outside and from others," a state of being controlled by basic, unconscious drives and urges.⁸⁴ In addition to the intellectual uncertainty with what was variously perceived as Homer's disconcerting and repulsive yet perversely appealing materiality—characteristic responses to the uncanny—the way critics used the terms "primitive," "savage" and "barbaric" to describe his seascapes suggests that the physical qualities of paintings such as *High Cliff* invoked inchoate dimensions of being and experience associated with the primitive in the very manner Homer handled paint. Such associations held a larger and urgent cultural resonance outside the art world in this post-Darwinian era, when theories of human and natural evolution were reformulated and contested in a battle to confirm the reality of a higher plane of being, the special nature of modern humanity, and the possibility of social and spiritual perfection. Art, in this context, was enlisted as a means to affirm these ideals and beliefs. Instead of nurturing these values, however, Homer's petulant processes and surfaces exposed "threatening, lowering, savage" experiences of the physical world that destabilized the idealistic principles of genteel culture and threatened the transcending function of art.⁸⁵ This primitive, transgressive nature of the relationship between Homer and his paints, as I explore in the remainder of this chapter, was a product of his technical struggles with oil painting and its disruption of habit, memory, and his efforts to materialize realist sensations of nature. Although his images of the sea defied genteel standards of propriety in its preference for art as a form of spiritual uplift and nature as an ideal space of harmony, Homer as we shall

⁸⁴ Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" (1919), in *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 143.

⁸⁵ Caffin, "American Painters of the Sea," 551.

see was nonetheless a product of genteel culture in his fundamental beliefs towards the world. In his painting of the coast, however, Homer's values ran into conflicts with the material contingencies of painting, unsettling the artist's belief in the function of painting along with his attitudes towards physical experience, which fueled his struggles to elevate paint from a crude substance into signs of vision and sensation. These physical and psychological conflicts, inflected by his experiences of the coast of Maine, can be illuminated by comparisons to similar dilemmas in science, religion, and philosophy in this post-Darwinian world in which beliefs in the relationship between humans and the animal and material world underwent radical transformations.

Nature, the Material World, and Sensuous Experience

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, especially after the publication of Darwin's *The Descent of Man* (1871), the character of primitive humanity as ancestors of modern civilization, as well as the relationship between man and the animal world, preoccupied American minds. Herbert Spencer in particular had articulated views about the nature of the primitive mind that were widely influential in the United States for the way the Englishman made evolution more palatable, claiming that humans were different from animals in kind rather than degree. Included in his sweeping multivolume *System of Synthetic Philosophy* (1862-1896), Spencer's theories of evolution were also attractive to Americans since, in place of the godless, brutal world implied by Darwin, Spencer restored a sense of harmony, peace and order, insinuating the existence of a divine hand guiding the teleological progress of life and nature. As in many studies of the period, Spencer's observations of primitive man situated the type in contrast to white European and American civilization in order to affirm the latter's more

perfected intellectual and spiritual superiority.⁸⁶ As Spencer wrote, primitive man was driven by immediate sense experiences of the external world, reacting by instinct rather than self-reflection and contemplation. He was compulsive and impulsive, wavering between passiveness, sloth, aggression, and unpredictability, an anti-social and egoistic being easily succumbing to base desires and urges. Endowed with heightened powers of perception and acutely observant of the surrounding world, primitive man also experienced nature more immediately but as something overwhelming and threatening, his powers of intellect given over to self-preservation in the here and now.⁸⁷

John Fiske (1842-1901) was one of the Americans most moved by Spencer's theories, a prominent historian and lecturer and one of the most influential mouthpieces for Spencer's evolutionary theories among Anglo-Americans in the northeast.⁸⁸ Fiske argued that nature's God-directed goal was the spiritual perfection of mankind or what he called the fulfillment of the "psychical life," claiming that "whereas in its rude beginnings the psychical life was but an appendage to the body, in fully-developed Humanity the body is but the vehicle for the soul."⁸⁹ Following Spencer, for Fiske the primitive mind was susceptible to the physical urges of the body and the vicissitudes of nature. Due to a more intimate relationship between man and his environment, primitive man also had more acute sense perceptions along with greater spatial and

⁸⁶On the influence of Spencer's theories and his influence in the United States, see Pyne, *Art and the Higher Life*, 17-22.

⁸⁷ Summarized from Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Sociology*, vol.1 (1876; repr., Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1975), 53-91. For a summary of Spencer's views of primitive man and its influence, see George W. Stocking, Jr. "The Dark-Skinned Savage: The Image of Primitive Man in Evolutionary Anthropology," in *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1968), 117-18.

⁸⁸ Pyne, *Art and the Higher Life*, 22.

⁸⁹ John Fiske, *The Destiny of Man: Viewed in the Light of His Origin*, 16th ed. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1891), 65.

navigational skills.⁹⁰ Owing to the lack of the power of the primitive mind to detach itself from the immediate external world, savage man was unable to abstract, theorize or deduce anything apart from what was given to his senses; thus he was incapable of achieving superior intellectual states of meditation and reflection.⁹¹ In Fiske's reassuring view of human history, which added a more explicit spiritual dimension to Spencer, evolution from this savage state was the progressive strengthening of the power of the human mind over the degrading bonds of the physical world toward a higher, spiritual plane of being.

In reviews of Homer's seascapes, critics often characterized the artist as endowed with heightened sense perceptions and powers of observation. Homer seemed to enjoy a more intimate relationship with nature in his self-seclusion at Prout's Neck where, unfettered by the trappings of civilization, these more salubrious, primitive characteristics of humanity were nurtured. More disquieting, however, was a sense of this savage relation to nature embodied in the artist's relation to his materials. Like primitive man, the artist encountered the material world of paint as something immediate and overpowering, an experience in which the physical overwhelmed and subdued what Fiske called the "psychical life," or the intellectual command of the mind. Such a savage relationship threatened to obliterate both art's spiritual function as well as civilized man's projection of himself as transcending the degrading bonds and resistance of the physical world—subverting, in other words, the privileged hierarchy of mind over matter, which it was painting's responsibility to express in technique, if not also in subject. Critics often made subtle analogies to the conflicts between land and sea represented in Homer's seascapes

⁹⁰ John Fiske, *Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy: Based on the Doctrine of Evolution, with Criticisms on Positive Philosophy*, vol. 4 (1874; repr., Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1903), 67-69.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 86-88.

and the splenetic entanglements between man and matter embodied in his surfaces. While Charles Caffin's observations of Homer's seascapes plunging "one into contact with the crudeness of elemental force" seems to apply as much to their materiality as it does their imagery, another critic went so far as to suggest that Homer seemed to make "a part of his brush" the "struggles" and the "elemental" qualities "of the coast in its rugged strength," as if the artist's confrontation with a primal nature somehow inflected his savage convolutions with paint.⁹² This sentiment was also echoed by Kenyon Cox, who noted that Homer "place[d] himself in direct competition with nature, and if his work seems harsh or violent it has become so in the effort to match nature's strength with his own."⁹³ "Winslow Homer's art," another wrote, "is not one which appeals to the cliff-dwellers of the great cities. His is the out-of-door man's. Intense, full of brute strength, the power of the sea which smites the rock is behind his brush."⁹⁴

To be sure, Prout's Neck presented an overawing experience of the natural world. The Harvard geologist Nathaniel Shaler (1841-1906), a widely published and popular nature writer, wrote that the prolonged observation of spectacular, rocky coastlines such as those at Prout's Neck afforded sublime experiences of a nature of a different order from that of the inland, where individuals were accustomed to their more serene environments. In much of the world, Shaler found, "the order of nature is so quiet, and its processes so familiar, that the whole appears merely commonplace. It is otherwise with those who dwell in the peculiar realm where the great reservoir of the waters comes in contact with the land: on the ocean's shores the processes of

⁹² Caffin, "A Note on the Art of Winslow Homer," 52; Arthur Hoeber, "Winslow Homer: A Painter of the Sea," *The World's Work* 21 (February 1911): 14017.

⁹³ Cox, *Winslow Homer*, 41.

⁹⁴ Reuterdaahl, "Winslow Homer, American Painter," 9.

change are so marked, man's combat with them so continued, that all mariners, and even those who reside near the sea, acquire a far more vivid impression of the earth's activities."⁹⁵

In the midst of an experience of nature such as that represented in *High Cliff* (fig. 1.1), in which the ocean's humbling expanse and its incessant pounding against massive, intractable geological formations whose granular surfaces, furrows, and layers of compacted sediment carry the traces of ages of accumulation and erosion, one became humbly aware of the vast machinery and age of the earth, of the harshness and contingency of nature, and of the finitude of the self in it. The material world in *High Cliff*, just as Homer encountered it in the act of painting, was something at once inert yet chaotic, unyielding and diminishing. Such an experience with matter was figured and embodied everywhere in Homer's painting, as if his experience of nature not only affected how he represented the coast but also, perhaps more subconsciously, how he engaged with paint. In the way, for instance, the minute figures in the upper right corner of the painting—their fleeting, almost dematerialized forms hinted at with a thinned, translucent black—are squeezed to the margins by nature's sublime power and presence. Or the way perspective is tilted slightly downward, thrusting viewers headlong into the relentless world of an elemental conflict between water and rock. Even as the painting does so, however, we are also kept at bay by the overwhelming physicality of the painting's surface, with its smears and slabs accentuating paint's substance and the flatness of the picture plane. This quality is also enhanced by the way Homer inverted traditional practices of perspective. Traditionally, forms in pictorially close spatial proximity to viewers were given greater concrete presence with heavier pigments, while elements in the background were painted with long or thinned paints to indicate spatial distance. In *High Cliff*, however, the background of water and sky is painted with thick,

⁹⁵ Nathaniel S. Shaler, *Sea and Land* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1894), 1.

impastoed swirls while the rocks in the foreground are executed with leaner paints that reveal the coarse texture of the canvas. Giving a more tangible presence to the agitated ocean and rising plumes of spray, Homer's technique collapsed perspective and further asserted paint's resistant physicality, almost as if he were incapable of making his viscous material conform to traditional techniques.

On a certain level, too, beyond the processes evident in its materiality, *High Cliff* became about Homer's practice of painting itself, his struggles to transform paint from an amorphous sludge subconsciously feeding itself into his representation of the coast. The consuming physicality of the painting's surface, along with the turbulent and boundless horizontal world of rocks and water scarcely contained within the limits of the picture frame, bring to mind the concept of base materialism that Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss drew from French philosopher George Bataille. For Bataille, base materialism denoted a crude, formless stuff experienced as an alienating other that confounded human efforts to create form and meaning out of matter.⁹⁶ The process of painting seems illustrated in *High Cliff* in the elevation of this horizontal realm of base materials of water and rock—perhaps not coincidentally the fundamental elements of paint—into the civilized, cultural sphere of symbolic order of painting, signified by the rising sprays and standing figures. This hierarchy between the horizontal and the vertical—between the crude realm of filth and scatology and the vertical format of the picture, in which paint addresses itself to eyesight alone—can be even read more directly as a metaphor for Homer in the act of painting, as he elevated his amorphous materials from palette to canvas. If the painting stands as a metaphor for the process of sublimation of raw paint into transparent signs of perception, however, it can also be read as a metaphor for the potential for de-

⁹⁶ Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide*, exh. cat. (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 31.

sublimation, the sprays of paint especially teetering precariously on the edge of representation and on the verge of falling back into the raw, the earthly, and the formless.

If the material world as experienced through both paint and nature in *High Cliff* presented a consuming physical world that diminished a sense of individual agency and significance, it also brought into question the reality of a transcendent, spiritual plane of being. Such a dilemma in the face of nature's intricacies and vicissitudes was one that many in the late nineteenth century grappled with. Shaler, for instance, also wrote about the troubling kinds of questions the intimate study of nature incited concerning a divine presence, particularly with the rise of modern science and positivist theories of the universe that seemed to undermine traditional beliefs at every turn.⁹⁷ In this sense, Homer's struggles can be seen as the product of a crisis as much metaphysical as it was material, provoked by his agitating frustrations with paint along with his experiences of raw nature at Prout's Neck that challenged the artist's spiritual beliefs and his corresponding attitudes towards the external world. Several scholars, for instance have argued that Homer held to a pantheistic view of nature, expressing in his letters a "faith in a God of spirit and the persistence of the individual soul," along with an "all-embracing conception of God's presence in the world," as Elizabeth Johns has written.⁹⁸ In 1872 Homer received a copy of George Chaplin Child's *Benedicite*, a best seller in the English-speaking world after its publication in 1866 and a text that Homer cherished.⁹⁹ Child called attention to the harmony of

⁹⁷ See in particular Nathaniel S. Shaler, *The Interpretation of Nature* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1895).

⁹⁸ Elizabeth Johns, *Winslow Homer: The Nature of Observation*, 137-38. See also Charles Colbert, "Winslow Homer, Reluctant Modern," *Winterthur Portfolio* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 37-55, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/382161>; Patricia Junker, "Expressions of Art and Life in *The Artist's Studio in an Afternoon Fog*," in *Winslow Homer in the 1890s: Prout's Neck Observed*, 34-65.

⁹⁹ David Tatham, "Winslow Homer's Library," *American Art Journal* 9, no. 1 (May 1977): 94, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1594057>. The text was a gift from John Gourlie, a friend and founding member of the Century Association in New York, of which Homer was a member. On the frontispiece to the book Homer had attached a sketch portrait he drew of Matthew Maury, whose *Physical Geography of the Sea* (1868) demonstrated a spiritualist view of nature

religion and science, finding God's presence and guiding hand through an empirical observation of nature. For Child, each element in the universe had its own part and place, with nature a space of order and harmony given for humanity's benefit and grace. "Nature," he wrote in a way that would have been attractive to Homer, "is a book written by the finger of God Himself, and of which every page is filled to overflowing with illustrations of wisdom; it is a picture in which His goodness is painted in colours of perfect truth; it is a sculpturing in which His power is expressed in marvels of form and harmony."¹⁰⁰

Another insight into Homer's beliefs can be found in the writings of Hubbard Winslow, a Congregational pastor at the Bowdoin Street Church in Boston where Homer's parents were members. (The scholar Gordon Hendricks has even suggested that Homer's deeply spiritual mother named her son after her pastor.¹⁰¹) In his treatise *Elements of Intellectual Philosophy*, Winslow found the world to be composed of both inert and animated matter. "Life," he found, was "a power imparted by God," creating in matter "a *vital power within*."¹⁰² In his view, each object in nature had its own purpose, with human life destined for immortality by means of the soul, for which the body was a temporary vehicle; the soul, in fact, formed the body as an instrument of a divine life force, which accounted for the difference between animals and humans, who represented a higher, rational order of life. Mankind's dominance over the world and animals were due to "superior powers of the *mind*," which endowed them with the ability to "apprehend means of appropriating all the laws and powers of nature to his use, thus making

much like Child's and which has been used to interpret his seascapes. See especially David Tatham, "Winslow Homer and the Sea," in *Winslow Homer in the 1890s: Prout's Neck Observed*, 66-85.

¹⁰⁰ George Chaplin Child, *Benedicite: or the Song of the Three Children*, 2nd ed. (London: John Murray, 1868), 329.

¹⁰¹ Gordon Hendricks, *The Life and Work of Winslow Homer* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1979), 13-14.

¹⁰² Hubbard Winslow, *Elements of Intellectual Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Jenks, Hickling, & Swan, 1853), 17. Emphases in original.

them to become, as it were, his own sinews and muscles, guided by his own wisdom, and obedient to his will.” The picture Winslow painted of the world was also one of harmony wherein every form and relation unfolded according to a divine plan. “Life,” he wrote, making an analogy between the role of clay to a potter’s hand and the earth under the direction of the Almighty, is “eminently a plastic power. It *organizes, changes, reproduces, moulds by an inward force, and assimilates to itself the material subject to its agency.*”¹⁰³

Something of this pantheistic vision can be seen in Homer’s *West Point, Prout’s Neck* (fig. 1.18), in which the glowing orange sunset imparts the quality of a divine hand calming nature after a parting storm and infusing the ocean’s energy with a vital spiritual force. The picture’s straightforward perspective and balanced composition also create a world of peace and amicable order. In *High Cliff*, however, the worlds of paint and nature are far different from the spiritual harmony symbolized in *West Point* or proposed by Hubbard Winslow. In Homer’s efforts to organize and transform paint, his materials and the nature they represented were experienced as something impervious to the will, his sense of control reluctantly surrendered to the material subject. Instead of malleable, the material world here was experienced as base, dissonant, and alienating, conjuring Darwinian perspectives that threatened the beliefs of the genteel tradition demonstrated in Winslow’s writings. “For the benevolent, spirit-impregnated nature of the transcendental vision,” the historian Cynthia Russett has explained of the impact of Darwin’s theories on Americans, “it substituted an iron maiden presiding over endless panoramas of anguish and extinction. The serene cosmic pattern was replaced by the blind movement of mindless forces eternally sifting and shaping all living things, men as well as the lowliest mollusk, toward ends unperceived and perhaps nonexistent.” As a general way of

¹⁰³ Ibid., 18, 243.

thinking, Darwinism pervaded many forms of culture in the late nineteenth century, reducing all life in the minds of many to principles based on the “struggle for existence, natural selection, and survival of the fittest.”¹⁰⁴ In doing so it changed how both nature and the self were perceived, the universe transforming into an uncongenial state of flux, blind chance, and savage brutality.

This was the kind of world Homer had explored in the subjects of many of his oil paintings beginning in the 1880s. In *The Life Line* (fig. 1.13) and *Undertow* (fig. 1.19), for instance, figures engage in collective lifesaving acts against a ruthless oceanic world. The art historians Roger Stein and Jules Prown have perceived in *Life Line* in particular a meditation on the ocean as a site of tragedy and isolation as well as a potential arena for human bonding and collective action. Stein, for instance, observes a pictorial strategy in the “careful ordering of pictorial space” that becomes “an act of human will in the face of natural chaos.” This “form and structure,” he writes, “rather than confirming our sense of the habitability of our seascape universe, only serves to undermine the abyss between the human will to form and order and the universal chaos of the sea.”¹⁰⁵ In general, scholars have argued one way or another for Homer’s beliefs and attitudes towards nature, perceiving either the manifestation of a divine presence in his images or a universe of Darwinian struggles and thermodynamics presenting a world of pure force and matter. “Nature, in Homer’s understanding of it,” Paul Staiti argues in his observation of thermodynamic principles represented in the seascapes, “is blind, uncaring, and godless, and it brooks no mistakes.”¹⁰⁶ Yet it seems more proper to suggest that Homer suffered a crisis in his

¹⁰⁴ Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Darwin in America: The Intellectual Response, 1865-1912* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Co, 1976), 3-4, 11.

¹⁰⁵ Roger Stein, *Seascape and the American Imagination* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1975), 111-12, and Jules Prown, “Winslow Homer in His Art,” *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1987), 31-45, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3108970>. See also Roger Stein, “American Seascape Art,” in *America and the Sea: A Literary History*, ed. Haskell Springer (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 179-80.

¹⁰⁶ Paul Staiti, “Winslow Homer and the Drama of Thermodynamics,” *American Art* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 11,

spiritual beliefs, one provoked by the bewildering turmoil of painting itself in which his pictorial representations of nature's sublime yet hard resistance to human will and significance in paintings such as *High Cliff* was felt on the level of material practice, becoming a momentary part of lived experience.

This crisis with the material world Homer experienced in painting was one shared in more intellectual avenues by many of his contemporaries, who tried to come to terms with the problems Darwinism posed to human agency and significance. The evolutionary theories of thinkers like Homer's fellow Bostonian John Fiske constituted efforts to overcome threats to spiritual transcendence posed by Darwinism in particular. In his *Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy*, for instance, Fiske situated the evolution of both organic and inorganic nature into one grand cosmic design, placing human consciousness as superior to the laws of natural phenomena and guided by a divine force. "There exists a Power, to which no limit in time or space is conceivable," Fiske declared, "of which all phenomena, as presented in consciousness, are manifestations, but which we can only know through these manifestations."¹⁰⁷ Fiske thus restored nature to a place beneficent to humanity and assured a sense of meaning and purpose to mankind as an elect progressing toward spiritual perfection. Although boldly optimistic on its surface, the conviction with which thinkers like Fiske neatly synthesized science and the spiritual belied the doubt and anxiety fueling their ideals. Others, such as Homer's fellow Bostonian, the journalist, novelist, and historian Henry Adams (1838-1918) openly grappled with the troubling implications of science and determinism. His rich Brahmin heritage that saw the universe in

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3109370>. On Darwinian readings of Homer, see Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr., "Something More than Meets the Eye," in Cikovsky Jr. and Kelly, *Winslow Homer*, 247-81; Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr., *Winslow Homer* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990); Carol J. Guttzeit, "The Darwinian Presence in American Painting, 1859-1900," PhD diss., Rutgers University, 1996.

¹⁰⁷ Fiske, *Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy*, vol.4, 237.

spiritual terms threatened by positivist science, in *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918) the author sardonically concluded that history was the interminable conflict between nature and man.¹⁰⁸ In a way that would have resonated for Homer, Adams found the natural world to be an overwhelming foe impervious to human existence and human efforts to give it form and meaning. “In plain words,” he wrote, “Chaos was the law of nature; Order was the dream of man.” Adams found himself in a world “where order was an accidental relation obnoxious to nature.” For the author, humanist notions imposed on nature such as “Unity, Continuity, Purpose, Order, Law, [and] Truth” in science, philosophy, and religion were folly, “the despotism of artificial order nature abhorred.” This search for significance was a compulsion of the human mind, continuously “dragged at one moment into the unknowable and unthinkable, then trying to scramble back within its senses and to bar the chaos out.”¹⁰⁹

Though he would turn to more optimistic solutions, William James, too, was disturbed by the threats to autonomy and will, leading to an even deeper metaphysical crisis in the early 1870s that generated severe mental depression and physical ailment. To a friend, a young James wrote that he felt, after exploring philosophies of empiricism and evolutionary theory, “that we are Nature through and through, that we are wholly conditioned, that not a wiggle of our will happens save as a result of physical laws; and yet, notwithstanding, we are en rapport with reason.”¹¹⁰ James became determined to embrace the “individual reality and creative power” of inner life against the contingencies of physical existence, transforming the resistance between the self and reality so troubling to Adams into a positive form of being. “My belief to be sure can’t

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 131.

¹⁰⁹ Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1918), 456-60.

¹¹⁰ William James to Thomas W. Ward, March 1869, quoted in George Cotkin, *Reluctant Modernism: American Thought and Culture, 1880-1900* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 39.

be optimistic,” he wrote in his diary in 1870, “but I will posit it, life (the real, the good) in the self-governing resistance of the ego to the world. Life shall be built on doing and creating and suffering.”¹¹¹ In the end, against the genteel inclination to think in terms of intellectual abstractions and formal concepts that transcended the chaos of real experience, James resolved to reject all “block-universes,” or closed systems of thought, whether religious, philosophical, or scientific. Instead, he embraced growth, change, and uncertainty as part of human experience, along with the power of individual will.¹¹² In more clinical terms, James took these beliefs from his private to his professional life, exploring in his work on physiological psychology the connection between the physical processes of the body and consciousness. Defending the human intellect against forms of mechanistic determinism that reduced the mind to a series of “molecular changes of the brain-substance,” as English biologist T.H. Huxley famously proposed, he also argued against Herbert Spencer’s theory of the human mind as mirroring reality, which also constricted agency.¹¹³ Belief was not justified or true because it mirrored reality, James argued, because “mirroring reality is not the purpose of having minds.” “I, for my part,” he announced,

cannot escape the consideration . . . that the knower is not simply a mirror floating with no foot-hold anywhere, and passively reflecting an order that he comes upon and finds simply existing. The knower is an actor, and co-efficient of the truth. . . . Mental interests . . . help to *make* the truth which they declare. In other words, there belongs to mind, from its birth upward, a spontaneity, a vote. It is in the game.

Truth and belief, in other words, were products of immediate conceptual and physical engagement with the world, not of theoretical abstractions transcending the self. This kind of

¹¹¹ From the diary of William James, 30 April 1870, quoted in Robert D. Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 122. On James’s depression and his psychological development of the virtue of resistance, see 117-24.

¹¹² Paul Boller, Jr. *American Thought in Transition: The Impact of Evolutionary Naturalism* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969), 123-147.

¹¹³ James, *Principles of Psychology*, 86.

frank assertion of the ego and affirmation of human action against the external world was fundamental to the development of James's pragmatic philosophy. Seeing thought as an instrument of individual experience rather than a reflection of reality, pragmatism restored agency to the self by prizing thought as a form of causation in the material world rather than something passively molded. The function of thought was the "production of belief," which, "in short, are really rules for action: and the whole function of thinking is but one step in the production of habits of action."¹¹⁴ As Louis Menand has shown, James's ideas of habit were central to his thinking: the development and reiteration of habitual engagements with the world—both conceptual and physical—generated and reinforced beliefs and attitudes towards the world owing to the satisfying correspondence between conceptual expectations and the external environment.¹¹⁵ To articulate his philosophy, James rephrased the "practicalist" or "pragmatist" principle first articulated by the philosopher Charles S. Peirce in 1872: "To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object . . . we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve—what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare."¹¹⁶

Like James's emphatic declaration of "the self-governing resistance of the ego to the world" in the face of despair, Homer's struggles against oil painting can be read as a vociferous declaration of the will. Each aggressive slash and stroke in *High Cliff* was not only an act of representation, but also the artist's way of throwing his hat into the ring—his own strident

¹¹⁴ William James, "Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence" (1878); "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results" (1898), quoted in Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001), 356-57, 354.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 355.

¹¹⁶ William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907; repr. New York: Longmans, Green, 1940), 46-47.

“vote”—against matter’s relentless obstinacy, which mitigated a sense of autonomous selfhood and significance in the world while dashing hopes of spiritual transcendence. As we have seen, Homer’s materials were a source of contention for the way his accustomed habits with oil painting, as exercised in paintings such as *Life Line* (fig. 14), were frustrated in his efforts to bring to it the more painterly methods he was accustomed to in watercolors. Precipitating a crisis in his spiritual attitudes towards the world, given James’s notions of the production of belief we can also see these physical complications as having provoked a crisis of belief in the function of paint and painting itself. For if, according to James, habit sustains belief by confirming a sense of the meaning and purpose in actions and the objects they entail, the manner in which Homer’s habits were disrupted—presenting obstacles, effects, sensations, and experiences other than expected—complicated his realist convictions in paint as a medium of empirical impressions. Instead, the resistance, limitations, and unique properties of oil painting along with the medium’s raw physicality were amplified, making of painting an alienating physical exchange between man and crude matter.

This dilemma is signified in the clouds and columns of spray dancing off the rocks found in so many of Homer’s seascapes, including *High Cliff* (fig. 1.1), *Northeaster* (fig. 1.2), and *Winter Coast* (fig. 1.20). The art historian Jules Prown has seen these sprays as a symbol of the transcendent, representing “the transubstantiation of water into vapor, of liquid into gas, of sea into sky, of matter into spirit.”¹¹⁷ Though from a distance these bursts may take on the represented qualities of vapor and mist, up close, in many instances, this appearance is eclipsed by paint’s physicality. Instead, the plumes solidify into a material thickness that arrest and consume figures such as the rugged outdoorsman in *Winter Coast*, the wall of water/paint

¹¹⁷ Prown, “Winslow Homer in His Art,” 41.

impeding vision and symbolizing the raw power of the material world as well as Homer's doubts about paint as an unequivocal medium of perception and representation.¹¹⁸

Yet another way in which Homer may have experienced a crisis of belief in paint's essential function, and also in which his uncanny materiality invoked associations with the savage, was in the more somatic manner of painting his seascapes demanded. As we have seen, this way with paint ran counter to the more restrained methods he practiced previously. *High Cliff's* lustrous texture, however, exhibits a sensuousness of surface that would have run close to the kind of solipsistic reveling in painting's sumptuousness that critics such as Cox and Van Dyke found degrading to the idealistic role for art. In particular, the gesticulatory brushwork in the rising spray (fig. 1.14), applied with rich, unctuous pigment, has a kinesthetic quality to it, suggesting a highly physical contortion of the hand, wrist, arm, and shoulder. Moving in about an arm's length away from the canvas—or where Homer would have been standing while painting—the plumes of mist and foam congeal into pure, spinning and swirling paint. It is almost as if, despite himself, that Homer became momentarily infatuated with the pleasure of painting at the risk of its physicality consuming both the artist and the picture. In this passage in particular the methodical and plodding manner that Homer had employed formerly was surrendered to the medium's tactile sumptuousness, a moment in which Homer submitted to the base desires and urges of the body against his own inhibitions.

Such painterly flourishes exhibit a temperament not normally associated with the quiet and reserved Homer and must have gone something against his nature. A lifelong bachelor, Homer was restrained in poise and demeanor, his letters revealing a thoughtful, diligent, meticulous, as well as a timid mind. The artist detested clutter and was obsessed by cleanliness

¹¹⁸ Charles Caffin, in "American Painters of the Sea," 552, observed this quality, writing that a "burst of spray" in one of his unnamed seascapes left "wanting" the "suggestion of liquidity and penetrableness."

and order, presenting himself in public in a reserved but fashionable, even dandyish manner (figs. 1.21). Friends and acquaintances often remarked how Homer did not fit the picture of an artist. “To look at him,” one of his friends remarked, for instance, “one could not imagine him painting.” Another associate observed that he “was polite, modest, simple . . . He was the essence of gentlemanly elegance . . . He might have been taken for a stockbroker.” Similarly, fellow artist Cecilia Beaux (1855-1942) recalled after meeting Homer in 1897 that he “was a spare, oldish man, with a short, dark, almost unnaturally dark, moustache. Everything he wore, and even his cane, was new; gloves, necktie, hat, suit . . . He looked, I whispered to myself, as a diamond expert might, if I had ever seen one.”¹¹⁹ These qualities were revealed in the more restrained way Homer formerly used oils, in which painting’s physicality was subdued through deliberate, precise methods. In spite of this controlled manner, however, the hard and timid qualities that many observed in oils such as *Life Line* still betrayed a certain discomfort with the more sensuous nature of the medium, an uneasiness not found in his more fluid, effortless watercolors. The twentieth-century art critic Clement Greenberg (1909-1994), for instance, observed these characteristics. Greenberg lamented in Homer’s work “a certain coarseness of execution in oil, a certain bitterness and even acidity of paint quality, a lack of resonance in texture.” Pointing out that Homer was self-taught in both oil and watercolor, Greenberg suggested that perhaps the

explanation of the difference may lie in the curious mixture of contempt and diffidence that Homer seems to feel toward physical substance in general—a contempt which proved less of a liability in water color than in oil, simply because water color was less substantial. Homer’s habits of working in his later maturity has its bearing on this difference. He would spend weeks and months pondering a motif, waiting for the right weather and light, but once he had started a picture he would work fast and even impatiently—as if the activity of painting were an obstruction. . . . It may seem

¹¹⁹ Cecilia Beaux as quoted in Goodrich, *Winslow Homer*, 150-52.

anomalous that a materialist should have such a disdain for matter. But Homer was a good American and like a good American, he loved *facts* above all other things.¹²⁰

In Greenberg's terms, Homer was a painter caught between his fidelity to empirical fact and a particularly "American" scorn for direct physical experience that was unnervingly intensified in oil paint's substantiality. The distinction Greenberg drew between Homer's comfort level with oils and watercolors was an observation that the critic Richard Watson Gilder (1844-1909) made more generally in response to the annual exhibition of the Society of American Water-Colors in 1879, in which Homer showed several works. "Water-colors lend themselves better to the artistic qualities of our painters than oils, and the public understand them better," thought Gilder:

There is a quality among the Americans of the eastern and middle states that is called, for want of a better term, Puritanism, and although this characterization does not really fit the case, it will be sufficiently understood. This Puritanism, then, makes us a little obtuse to, and a good deal afraid of, anything that looks mellow, languid, or luxurious; so that when a painter does exhibit signs of a strong feeling for color, we are apt to fight shy of him. Water-colors are crisp, clear, and, unless in the best hands, crude; but even crudeness is not so terrible to us as richness of color...The narrower limits and greater simplicity of water-color drawing predispose Americans to excellence in this branch, just as the wider complexity of oil-painting cause many of those who venture into that field to produce compositions rank and turgid in color.¹²¹

For Gilder, much as in Greenberg's observations of Homer, oil paint's more complex density, richness, and coloration were sources of discomfort for American artists, a product of Protestant ethics and its mistrust in sensuous experience as a corruption of the intellectual and the spiritual.

Such "Puritan" anxieties over the physical described by Gilder and Greenberg hinged on philosophical and moralistic distinctions between the mind, the body, and matter manifested in Homer's personal convictions. Homer's beliefs, as well as his realist aesthetic, reflected mid-nineteenth century "common sense" realism, which saw the world through a rationalistic lens

¹²⁰ Clement Greenberg, "Winslow Homer," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 187-88.

¹²¹ Richard W. Gilder, "Culture and Progress: The Art Season of 1878-9," *Scribner's Monthly* 18, no. 2 (June 1879): 310.

with the belief that humans were capable of perceiving objects as they actually were in the external world. This attitude was opposed to the notion that individuals perceived only images of things, which made observation something subjective and contingent. As the historian Bruce Kuklick has described, common sense realism was rooted in the notion “that self-consciousness and the senses were trustworthy and conveyed what humanity thought they conveyed.” In this view, there existed a world of things apart from the self, with knowledge acquired through direct impressions and sensations combined with intellectual contemplation.¹²² These beliefs, for instance, were demonstrated in the writings of Homer’s pastor Hubbard Winslow, who drew on the theories of John Locke and others to explain the acquisition of knowledge in ways compatible with his spiritual views of the world. “The mind is so constituted as to hold direct intercourse with the material world through the senses,” he wrote.¹²³ Winslow also gave primacy to the mind as an entity distinct from the body—a physical instrument in the service of the mind and subservient to the powers of the intellect, itself an immortal spirit. “The dissolution of the body may but serve to free [the mind] of the grossness which encumbers it, and send it forth on freer wing to higher modes of being.”¹²⁴

Such attitudes toward the world can be seen in *The Life Line* (fig. 1.13), where Homer made every effort to meticulously transcribe form and detail. Homer’s disciplined application of oil paint was designed to harness oil painting’s physicality and restrain the “grossness” of the body in order to privilege empirically observed fact and make of the picture a dramatic event that might have happened in reality apart from subjective consciousness. In *High Cliff* (fig. 1.1)

¹²² Bruce Kuklick, *A History of Philosophy in America, 1720-2000* (New York: Clarendon Press, 2001), 49, 60-61.

¹²³ Winslow, *Elements of Intellectual Philosophy*, 71.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

however, Homer struggled with and momentarily surrendered to paint's carnal pleasures amidst painting's chaotic processes. Here, the artist's memories, conceptualizations, and intentions were intertwined with and confused by oil paint's resistant physicality and sensuous power, an experience manifested in the broad slabs of pigment emphasizing paint's raw substantiality, the tensions and confusions between flatness and depth as well as form and formlessness, and the painting's appearance of being inchoate, as something in the process of formation.

These qualities of *High Cliff* bear a material and visual resemblance to what William James called "the great blooming, buzzing confusion" of immediate sensuous experience, a state of precognition prior to reflective mental categorization through which the world was given conceptual form and clarity.¹²⁵ This state of "pure experience" was a direct, intimate encounter with the material world involving both mind and body that imposed, as James described in ways that characterize *High Cliff's* surface, an experience "multitudinous beyond imagination, tangled, muddy, painful and perplexed," presenting "the immediate flux of life which furnishes the material to our later reflection with its conceptual categories . . . a *that* which is not yet any definite *what*, tho' ready to be all sorts of whats."¹²⁶ Integral to James's notions of experience was his emphasis on the body as the root of being and the way he collapsed Cartesian distinctions between the individual mind and the physical world. As Richard Shusterman has explained, James's "somatic philosophy" was based on the principle that the mind and the body worked reciprocally, with thought conditioned by the body and perception mediated by physical

¹²⁵ James, *Principles of Psychology*, 318.

¹²⁶ James, *Pragmatism*, 21, and *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1912), 93. For a helpful discussion of James's phenomenology and notions of "pure experience," see Bruce Wilshire, "The Breathtaking Intimacy of the Material World: William James's Last Thoughts," in *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, ed. Ruth Anna Putnam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 103-24.

experiences of the world.¹²⁷ Originating in the body, the data of sense perceptions were also remade by personal consciousness: for James, there was no such thing as the kind of raw, unfiltered, objective sensory data imagined by “common sense” realism, for minds were not mirrors but rather instruments of thought. As he observed in his famous theory on the “stream of consciousness,” moreover, no sensory data were ever perfectly replicated, since subjective thought was a continuous stream and always in transition, shot through with associations, memories, and bodily attitudes that inflected states of mind and perceptions from moment to moment. For James, too, consciousness was shaped and defined as much by uncertainties and indistinctness as much as it was by clear, discrete ideas and mental images. Arguing against the traditional assumption that “we can have no images but of perfectly definite things,” James invested in “the re-instatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life,” what he called the “fringes” of conceptual experience. “The traditional psychology,” he explained,

talks like one who should say a river consists of nothing but pailfuls, spoonfuls, quartpotfuls, barrelfuls, and other moulded forms of water. Even were the pails and pots all actually standing in the stream, still between them the free water would continue to flow. It is just this free water of consciousness that psychologists resolutely overlook. Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to use, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead. The significance, the value, of the image is all in this halo or penumbra that surrounds and escorts it,—or rather that is fused into one with it and has become bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh; leaving it, it is true, an image of the same *thing* it was before, but making it an image of that thing newly taken and freshly understood.¹²⁸

In this continuous stream, James argued, there was no stuff of thought that could be distinguished from the thing known. Instead, James saw consciousness as a point of contact, a flow of exchange, between mind and matter. Appropriately enough, James (once an aspiring

¹²⁷ Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 135. On James’s emphasis on the body in his psychology and philosophy, see 135-79.

¹²⁸ James, *Principles of Psychology*, 165.

artist) used the substance of paint as a metaphor. In the traditional philosophical view, he argued, conceptual “experience . . . would be much like a paint of which the world of pictures were made. Paint has a dual constitution, involving, as it does, a menstruum (oil, size or what not) and a mass of content in the form of pigment suspended therein. We can get the pure menstruum by letting the pigment settle, and the pure pigment by pouring off the size or oil.” Rejecting this subtractive method that sought to isolate thought from its contents, or menstruum from pigment, James instead found that the world could at one moment be experienced more as consciousness, at another more as its content—the objects of thought—the two never distinguishable or inseparable within the flowing stream. Rather, consciousness assumed different roles in different contexts according to the needs and concentration of the perceiver. “In a pot in a paint-shop, along with other paints, [paint] serves in its entirety as so much saleable matter. Spread on a canvas, with other paints around it, it represents, on the contrary, a feature in a picture and performs a spiritual function.”¹²⁹

Like James’s philosophical formulations of physical and conceptual experience, in which the self was constantly made and re-made in fluid contact with the world, the material and sensuous entanglements Homer experienced in his efforts to picture an external world of concrete fact threatened the ideal of the rational superiority and transcendence of the human mind. Instead, the ebb and flow of the artist’s confused experiences of painting, which seem incarnated in the turbulent waters in *High Cliff*, collapsed the distance between the mind and the physical world, the flowing “free water of consciousness” confused by painting’s technical demands and physical convolutions. Such experiences would have undermined Homer’s realist attitudes toward the world by opening up perception to the subjective and fleeting as well as

¹²⁹ James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 8-9.

making being and consciousness susceptible to the base and carnal. The historian Daniel Singal has shown how James's philosophy, which made life a flow of exchange between the corporeal and the conceptual, shook the foundations of the Victorian tradition in American thought. This tradition prized the mind as a rational instrument of reflection believing in rigid distinctions between the self in the world, in particular between a higher realm of transcendent intellectual experience and the lower, crude physical world of the body and base matter.¹³⁰ In addition to James's philosophy, Darwinism also posed threats to this traditional system of belief by collapsing the distance between humans and animals as well as modern and primitive man. In contrast to modern humanity's cultivation and restraint, the savage "contained those instincts and passions that constantly threatened self-control, and which therefore had to be repressed at all cost." Above all, sexuality was the primary threat, "conceived of as a hidden geyser of animality existing within everyone and capable of erupting with little or no warning at the slightest stimulus."¹³¹

The tensions and anxieties embodied in Homer's savage processes, especially in the mix in *High Cliff* (fig. 1.1) of sumptuous swirls of pigment in the waters combined with stiff and inhibited slabs of paint in the rocks, reveal Homer's apprehension over the lascivious aspects of painting that undermined the will and self-control. Such anxieties toward sensual experience were also found in the writings of nineteenth-century crusaders for Victorian respectability who, counteracting these threats, worked to maintain discipline over the dangers of the carnal. One of the more famous of these figures was John Harvey Kellogg (1852-1943), inventor of corn flakes and author of manuals of proper behavior for young men that "dwelled on the dangers of sensual

¹³⁰ Daniel Singal, "Towards a Definition of American Modernism," *American Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 11, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2712627>.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

self-indulgence: in food, in sleep, and above all, sex.”¹³² Another example was the anonymous author of an article entitled “Slave or Master?” published in *Century Illustrated Magazine* in 1883, which targeted scientific perspectives that immorally halted human agency. “A doctrine that denies free will, and makes of man only a bundle of appetites and impulses and propensities whose law is in themselves, destroys not only religion and morality, it also destroys the foundations of education, and makes a discipline of solecism.” To sanction the indulgences of carnal appetites, as materialist theories did, was an evil with or without religious doctrine, encouraging anti-social behavior responsible for the malaise of society. The need for will and self-discipline was urgent then more than ever in the face of science’s irresponsible depravity: “There is no baser servitude than that of the man whose caprices are his masters, and a nation composed of such men could not long preserve its liberties.”¹³³ It was a social and moral imperative to master one’s impulses, “subjugating the moods instead of being subjugated by them,” in order to gain in character, diligence and success. “The body will not do its best work unless . . . it is ‘kept under’; and what is true of the body is equally true of the mind; its whims and caprices and moods must be brought under the subjection of a masterful will.”¹³⁴

Such moral admonitions, the historian G.J. Barker-Benfield has written, were part of a number of guides for young men intended to prepare them for the rigors of the self-making world of commerce and the pressures of competitive individualism in democratic American life. More specifically, Barker-Benfield situates these moral tracts in the context of ideology of the “spermatic economy” of the nineteenth century, guided by the idea that men were endowed with

¹³² Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 13-14.

¹³³ “Slave or Master?,” *Century Illustrated Magazine* 25, no. 6 (April 1883): 953, <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.wustl.edu/docview/125528916>.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 954.

a finite amount of sexual fluids, to be directed toward procreation, and sexual energy, to be channeled into more productive means. Kellogg's manual, for instance, focused on mental and physical self-discipline, warning against the dangers of sexual indulgence among other self-destructive habits. In this discourse—which depended on “the most commonplace and traditional split . . . between higher and lower, mind and body, intellect and passion, work and sex”—one's own male body as well female sexuality were potential sources of moral and physical corruption, threatening to the healthful cultivation of mind and body and the concentration of energies crucial to commercial success and autonomous selfhood.¹³⁵ Barker-Benfield has identified what he calls a form of “proto-sublimation” at work in the thinking of moral leaders such as the famous Reverend John Todd (1800-1873), like Hubbard Winslow a mentee of Lyman Beecher and author of the best-selling *The Student's Manual: Designed, by Specific Directions, to Aid in Forming and Strengthening the Intellectual and Moral Character and Habits of the Student*, first published in 1835. Anticipating Freud's theories, these writers prescribe the healthful channeling of lascivious energies into higher, more productive resources, in particular the rigors of commerce and self-made success. Sexual energies, if not applied to procreation or if not transformed into more economically and morally productive channels, were forms of social and individual self-destruction.¹³⁶

Much of the allure of Homer's seascapes may have been the way the artist to a certain degree seemed to channel physical sensuality and pleasure into more productive realms of aesthetic production, accounting for their embrace as metaphors of business and industry and as potent models of aggressive individualism as discussed in the beginning of this chapter. For the

¹³⁵ G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes Toward Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 182.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 182-88.

business-minded Homer, however, this self-indulgence constituted a threat to the integrity of the self. Just as his painting halted progress toward the transcendent in the face of a relentless material world, so too did it relinquish control of the higher faculties of the mind to the voluptuous processes of painting. Instead of mastering his carnal appetites he momentarily became a slave to them in the act of painting, succumbing to the bondage of the body in painting's sensuality.

The nature of Homer's sexuality has often been addressed in literature on the artist. Involved in romantic relationships early in life, after his move to Prout's Neck he committed himself to bachelorhood, seemingly unconcerned with matters of domesticity, love or marriage. Several scholars, however, have perceived subtle forms of sexual repression in his subject matter.¹³⁷ Jules Prown, for instance, has noticed in *Life Line* (fig. 1.13) a sublimated sexuality—one he calls “indirect” and “Victorian”—symbolized in the intimately intertwining figures, vertical sprays, exposed flesh, and the to-and-fro rocking of the breeches buoy and waves. For Prown, the picture is a “fantasy that conflates heroism, damsel-saving, and sex, a fantasy marked by a large measure of frustration” in the chaste contact between the figures and “perhaps a certain anxiety associated with women or sex as well.”¹³⁸ Prown, like others, also observed how Homer appears to have equated women and sexuality with the sea in all its mysterious power,

¹³⁷ Henry Adams, in “Mortal Themes: Winslow Homer,” *Art in America* 71, no. 2 (February 1983): 113-26, argues with a Freudian analysis that Homer's preoccupation with death and futile struggles of man against nature and his self-imposed social isolation beginning in the early 1880s were the results, among other things, of a failed relationship. Also in a Freudian vein, Thomas Hess, “Come Back to the Life raft Ag'in, Winslow Homer Honey,” *New York Magazine* (June 11, 1973): 75-76, relates key Homer paintings including *Lifeline* and *Undertow* to personal, tragic events and relationships, including themes of repressed and frustrated sexuality. On speculation about Homer's failed relationship with Helena de Kay, who seems to be the source of his frustration, see Sarah Burns, “The Courtship of Winslow Homer,” *Magazine Antiques* (February 2002); Joseph Stanton, “Winslow Homer, Helena de Kay, and Richard Watson Gilder: Posing a Rivalry of Forms,” *Harvard Library Bulletin* 5, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 51-72; Henry Adams, “The Identity of Winslow Homer's ‘Mystery Woman’,” *Burlington Magazine* 132, no. 1045 (April 1990): 244-52.

¹³⁸ Prown, “Winslow Homer in His Art,” 38-39.

particularly in works such as *Life Line* and *Undertow* (fig. 1.19), in which women are being pulled from its grip.¹³⁹ Clement Greenberg also wondered if

there was some unconscious connection for him [Homer] (as for Poe) between the sea and sex. One of his frequent subjects in the eighties was women being saved from drowning or shipwreck, with wet clothing clinging to their bodies in a surreptitious approximation of the nude—which he hardly ever attempted to do directly. Later on, the raging surf would hold the center of his attention, with women’s figures appearing less and less often.¹⁴⁰

Following Greenberg, Robert Hughes has seen in the apparitional column of foam flung up by the ocean in *West Point, Prout’s Neck* (fig. 1.18) as “a sinuous white torso—the ghost of a female presence, a water witch.”¹⁴¹

Whereas in these pictures any notion of sexuality remained safely contained and sublimated within the realm of symbolic representation, in paintings such as *High Cliff* (1.1) it dangerously and savagely burst forth into lived physical experience. The artist’s libidinal energies and sexual frustrations erupted over into painting’s splenetic frenzies, with oil paint itself becoming a female body in all its truculence, sumptuousness and mystery, an alienating other at once resistant yet seductive. That Homer on some level not only equated women with the sea but also paint is symbolized in *Undertow*, in which the lead male strenuously pulling the voluptuous female figures to safety can be read as Homer struggling to raise paint from the horizontal realm of base materialism into the elevated vertical realm of form and symbolic order, a conflict made more manifest in *High Cliff*’s materiality. If both *High Cliff* and *Undertow* embody the tension between these two orientations, they also invoke the distinction Sigmund

¹³⁹ Ibid., 43. See also Theodore Stebbins, “‘Driftwood’: Winslow Homer’s Final Painting,” *Antiques Magazine* 150, no. 1 (July 1996): 70-79.

¹⁴⁰ Greenberg, “Winslow Homer,” 186.

¹⁴¹ Robert Hughes, *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 37.

Freud made, in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), between the horizontal orientation of animal life, a world of filth and scatology governed by physical needs and carnal appetites, and the upright state of civilized man, controlled by the intellect, hygiene and self-control.¹⁴² Just as the erect heroic male in *Undertow* struggles to elevate the female victims from the treacherous, amorphous ocean, so too in *High Cliff* did Homer struggle to elevate the body of paint from the sphere of the crude, formless and carnal, a world down into which he was frustratingly and inescapably pulled with every sensual twist and turn of the brush.

Meaning and Value

Homer's culture was profoundly concerned with finding meaning in a world threatened by determinism and materialism, a world where old values and faiths seemed outworn and incompatible. This was an existential crisis the artist also experienced, but in material practice, in the thick of painting's vicissitudes and complications. In 1878 one contemporary drearily summed up the drab existence Darwinism offered: "Life without meaning; death without meaning; and the universe without meaning. A race tortured to no purpose, and with no hope but annihilation. The dead only blessed; the living standing like beasts at bay, and shrieking half in defiance and half in fright."¹⁴³ One response to this bleak fate was the motto of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, "Not Matter, But Mind; Not Things, But Men."¹⁴⁴ Asserting the supremacy of human will and spirit over the material world, the exposition stood as the last great bastion of genteel culture, its classical architectural designs, grand sculptural programs, and

¹⁴² Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), 54-55n.

¹⁴³ Borden P. Bowne, quoted in Pyne, *Art and the Higher Life*, 12.

¹⁴⁴ T.J. Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 167.

artistic and technological exhibitions defending the progress and supremacy of modern Anglo-American civilization as an ordained elect. In more morbid, pragmatic, yet moving terms, on the other hand, William James found matter to be

indeed infinitely and incredibly refined. To any one who has ever looked on the face of a dead child or parent the mere fact that matter *could* have taken for a time that precious form, ought to make matter sacred ever after. It makes no difference what the *principle* of life may be, material or immaterial, matter any rate cooperates, lends itself to all life's purposes. That beloved incarnation was among matter's possibilities.¹⁴⁵

Many times Homer's paint became rocks and water incarnate, vivaciously transforming itself into the texture, dynamism, and richness as well as the weight and mass of sea and stone. As we have also seen, however, it could also become harsh, resistant, inert, or seductive. If at one moment Homer's materiality personified the elevating transformative and transcendent powers of the artist, at another it laid bare the raw, menacing power of the physical world. It invoked what Freud later observed in 1930 of the essence of life: that we are always "threatened with suffering" from many "directions," including "from our own body, which is doomed to decay and dissolution and which cannot do without pain and anxiety as warning signals," as well as "from the external world, which may rage against us with overwhelming and merciless forces of destruction."¹⁴⁶

The question remains, then, of what kind of value and meaning viewers found in Homer's materiality. What was it, in other words, that critics such as Charles Caffin found so compelling if also troubling in the way Homer's savage materiality "plunge[d] one into contact with the crudeness of elemental force" in both its subject matter and material process? Or what qualities did critics such as Kenyon Cox and John Van Dyke find in Homer's savage painting that was so

¹⁴⁵ James, *Pragmatism*, 95. Emphasis in original.

¹⁴⁶ Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 26.

alluring despite the way his material struggles transgressed genteel attitudes towards art and the physical world? As Bruce Robertson has demonstrated, for a generation of American moderns at the turn of the century, Homer and his art fulfilled the need for an heroic, virile man of vision whose powerful art provided authentic and ennobling experiences of untamed nature in comparison to the felt unreality and superficiality of modern urban life as well as the evasive idealism and polite effete-ness of genteel culture. Homer's art offered uniquely "American" qualities, something that was independent, strong, original, rugged, honest, and above all, real. Homer presented nature in all its primitive fullness in worlds where life and death, aggression and harmony, and pleasure and pain coexisted.¹⁴⁷ What also seemed to be so resonant for some, and at the same time so disturbing yet perversely attractive for others such as Cox and Van Dyke, was the way Homer's dynamic engagement with paint fulfilled this same yearning for physical vigor and direct experience on the level of material process. These qualities would have been particularly attractive in the context of vitalist impulses and the cult of the "strenuous life" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With Theodore Roosevelt (once a student of James) as its most famous proponent, the strenuous life movement advocated sport and outdoor life as a way of restoring masculine vitality, strength and a grounded sense of self in response to what Lears has called the feeling of "weightlessness" in American culture provoked by modernization.¹⁴⁸ This movement was but one sign of a larger "dissatisfaction with modern culture in all its dimensions," writes Lears. "For the educated bourgeoisie, authentic experience of any sort seemed ever more elusive; life seemed increasingly confined to the airless parlor of material comfort and moral complacency. Many yearned to smash the glass and breathe more

¹⁴⁷ Robertson, *Reckoning with Winslow Homer*, 63-80.

¹⁴⁸ On Roosevelt and the strenuous life, see Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 108.

freely—to experience ‘real life’ in all its intensity.” This included, among other practices and ways of thinking, the “rejection of urban artifice in the name of a rustic or childlike ‘simple life’” as well as “the philosophical vitalist’s rejection of all static systems in the name of the flux of ‘pure experience.’”¹⁴⁹ As we have seen, Sarah Burns has also situated Homer’s seascapes within the culture of the strenuous life, arguing they were forms of therapy that offered “primitive nature’s rejuvenating, if perilous, magic.” In their representations of a primal wilderness, they served as sources of masculine renewal for urban audiences affected by modern business’s stress and enervation, also acting as “the litmus test and confirmation of true, vital manliness” crucial to the health and progress of Anglo-American culture.¹⁵⁰ In addition to his subjects of untamed nature, however, on a more subconscious level it was also the savage nature of Homer’s uncanny materiality that was alluring, his entangled, physical mode of painting liberating viewers from the stifling air of genteel culture in its direct embodiment of “pure experience.” This would account for the way many critics positively responded to Homer’s seascapes in subtle “physiological” terms, as if his paintings were somehow “bodily” felt, as Burns has observed.¹⁵¹

William James’s philosophy of “pure experience” so exemplified in Homer’s materiality has also been linked to the intellectual’s fascination with the strenuous life, constituting an effort to ground both mental and physical life in concrete reality as opposed to the propensity for

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 5.

¹⁵⁰ Burns, “Revitalizing the ‘Painted-Out’ North,” 25.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 25. Like Burns, many scholars only cursorily observe the physiological responses to Homer’s process. David Tatham also briefly notes that critic’s responded to Homer’s painting in ways that refer as much to his dynamic process as to their imagery, arguing that conventional descriptions or comparisons were hard to apply. See “Winslow Homer and the Sea,” in Beam, *Winslow Homer in the 1890s: Prout’s Neck Observed*, 67. Cynthia Prebus also writes that Homer’s paintings “elicited kinaesthetic and multi-sensory responses that were conveyed at both conscious and unconscious levels,” arguing that critics saw Homer’s paintings in terms of the perception of bodily movements within a vogue for vitalism and subjective artistic creation. Prebus, however, is referring to more of the conceptual and spiritual impulses felt in Homer’s work instead of tangible material process. See “Transitions in American Art and Criticism: The Formative Years of Early American Modernism, 1895-1905,” 100.

intellectual abstraction in genteel culture.¹⁵² “The secret of Being,” James once wrote, “is not in the dark immensity beyond knowledge, but at home, this side, beneath the feet and overlooked by knowledge.”¹⁵³ Like Roosevelt, James was concerned about the enervation and degeneration of modern urban society, but unlike the Rough Rider he promoted values of masculinity and physical fitness to develop mental toughness and social cohesion in lieu of war and martial ideals.¹⁵⁴ In the essay “What Makes Life Significant,” for instance, James found the middle-class utopian society at Chatauqua, New York—a community based on principles of order, diligence, sobriety, and altruism—to be an anemic form of culture both oppressive and lifeless, symptomatic of society at large. Instead, James found the hard, unruly experiences of both nature and modern life something rejuvenating and ennobling. In place of antiseptic genteel society and its fear of pain or conflict, James missed all that gave to life “its moral style, expressiveness and picturesqueness,—the element of precipitousness, so to call it, of strength and strenuousness, intensity and danger.”¹⁵⁵ James instead found a brand of heroism in the life of the laboring classes and public servicemen where “human nature *in extremis*” was found in danger, risk, and toil: “Sweat and effort, human nature strained to its uttermost and on the rack . . . this is the sort of thing the presence of which inspires us, and the reality of which it seems to be the function of all the higher forms of literature and fine art” instead of an art of evasive transcendence.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵² Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 279.

¹⁵³ William James as quoted in Richardson, *William James*, 159.

¹⁵⁴ See, for instance, William James, *The Moral Equivalent of War* (New York: American Association for International Conciliation, 1910).

¹⁵⁵ James, “What Makes Life Significant?,” in *Talks to Teachers on Psychology: And to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals* (New York: Henry Holt, 1901), 271.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 272, 274-75.

Following these values, Martin Jay argues, James’s philosophical version of experience expressed “a yearning for something lost or suppressed in the modern world, something occluded by conventional ways of grasping and ordering reality.”¹⁵⁷ In place of the security of intellectual abstractions, fixed categories, and idealistic unities imposed on nature, and instead of “the old and comfortable dualisms of subject and object, spirit and nature, mind and matter,” James instead gave prominence to a world known through immediate, pre-reflective sensations amidst the realities of flux, contingency, disunities, and disjunctions—a world of relations and transitions experienced in the process of becoming and in things lived directly, both physically and conceptually, from moment to moment.¹⁵⁸ “Knowledge of sensible realities,” he wrote, “thus comes to life inside the tissue of experience. It is *made*; and made by relations that unroll themselves in time.”¹⁵⁹ What James called “pure experience” was the “primal stuff . . . of which everything is composed,” including both thought and thing, which are not discrete but exist in continuous, flowing relation to one another.¹⁶⁰ “Pure experiences” were a “quasi-chaos” in which the only givens were the “objective nucleus of every man’s experience, his own body,” along with “the material environment of the body, changing by gradual transition when the body moves.” “We live, as it were,” he believed, recalling the subject, processes, and material tensions in *High Cliff*, “upon the front edge of an advancing wave-crest, and our sense of a determinate direction in falling forward is all we cover of the future of our path.”¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ Jay, *Songs of Experience*, 275-76.

¹⁵⁸ Richardson, *William James*, 450.

¹⁵⁹ James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 57.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 65, 69.

Read in these terms, Homer's painting, with all its tangible traces of "pure experience" and what James called "a muddle and a struggle" of corporeal life lived in the concrete, embodied a kind of somatic materiality—a painting that was as much about the residue of physical process, and of the rich, tangled complexity of material experience in painting as it was a visual representation of the external world.¹⁶² It incarnated the flux of physical reality that directed us not toward transcendent abstractions but instead, in James's words, toward "sensation; that fleshbound thing which rationalism has always loaded with abuse," offering "all the thickness, concreteness, and individuality of experience" that existed in the inchoate, "immediate and relatively unnamed stages of it."¹⁶³ Instead of looking up and beyond, Homer's materiality looked "downward," placing us on our bellies "in the middle of experience, in the very thick of its sand and gravel," where, "in the pulse of inner life immediately present," we find sublime complexities of existence in the awareness that "in each of us is a little past, a little future, a little awareness of our own body, of each other's persons . . . and of the earth's geography and direction of history."¹⁶⁴

An avid sportsman who not only painted but also participated in annual fishing and hunting excursions, Homer too was an ardent champion of the outdoor life. He also played the part of the kind of rugged wilderness adventurer he often painted in his reclusive seclusion at Prout's Neck where, like the solitary hunter in *Winter Coast* (Fig. 1.20), he could face nature in all its elemental strength. Homer would have agreed with James's assessment of modern society

¹⁶² William James as quoted in Richardson, *William James*, 451.

¹⁶³ James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1909), 252, 280.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 277, 286.

and the philosopher's call for a culture that engaged with "human life in its wild intensity."¹⁶⁵ However, this aspect of somatic materiality embodied in his surfaces would have been a meaning and function for paint that would have disturbed the artist. Homer's physical and metaphysical struggles with paint threatened to undermine paint's realist function, making of painting instead something solipsistic and self-referential through the artist's restless, corporeal absorption and hesitant self-indulgence. They also opened up the self to subjectivity and to embodied, finite existence, threatening the notion of an objective reality apart from the self along with the possibility of spiritual transcendence. Homer's troubled moments of painting were a universe in which, to follow James, experiences were pluralistic, depending on the contingencies of individual bodies, sensations, and feelings within in the flux of physical experience. In his frustrated encounters with paint's crude resistance, the mind, body and matter were experienced as part of the same continuum and susceptible to the same forces, making being vulnerable to the fate of matter itself—to time, death, and dissolution.

The resulting anxiety inscribed in Homer's surfaces accounts for how he spoke as if in exalted relief after completing a work, free from the exasperating physical and metaphysical tensions of practice and admiring a finished painting, in retrospect, as a triumph of will and spirit. This was especially true of *High Cliff* (fig. 1.1). Despondent over its failure to find a buyer, more than once Homer called it one of his best works, once writing his dealer "I think if it will not sell there is little use in my putting out any more things." "I cannot do any better than that," he wrote again, "Why should I paint?" Yet another time he remarked that "the fact that good picture *High Cliff* is unsold has been most discouraging to me," as if the effort put forth had

¹⁶⁵ James, "What Makes Life Significant?," 273.

been too great for the returns.¹⁶⁶ The anxieties Homer felt in the act of painting were also perhaps the reason for his wish to spatially distance viewers from his paintings, an exhibition procedure on which he was insistent. In 1904 he wrote M. Knoedler and Co.: “I shall send you within three weeks two Paintings & will ask you to show them one at a time in your show window . . . Your window is the only place where a Picture can be seen in a proper manner—That is at a point of view from which an artist paints his Picture—To look at & not smell of.” In 1907 he again wrote that one of his seascapes could only “be seen properly from the opposite side of 5th ave . . . as it is painted at the distance of 60 feet from the artist,” accompanying the letter with a sketch of a man with his nose in a picture with the caption, “This man cannot see it.”¹⁶⁷

Though written partly in jest, Homer was aware it took great distances for his paintings to congeal into pictures. As one critic wrote of an exhibition of his seascapes, “The range at which these pictures look their very best is very great . . . at a distance of thrice the width of the canvas their beauty is far from what it is when the observer stands ten picture breadths away.” Their proper viewing distance might even be, in fact, “the other side of the gallery.”¹⁶⁸ Yet the artist’s earnestness also indicates a very private reason for this distancing. Franklin Kelly has suggested that Homer, as a deeply guarded individual who also wanted his work exposed to the public, did not want audiences to get too close to his paintings for what they could reveal of his personality.¹⁶⁹ Homer may also have wanted to distance viewers from his paintings so that matter might not eclipse form and imagery, maintaining paint’s transparent role as a sign of visual

¹⁶⁶ Homer to M. Knoedler & Co., 14 January 1902; Homer to O’Brien and Son, 27 September 1902; Homer to M. Knoedler & Co., 6 January 1903, quoted in Cikovsky and Kelly, *Winslow Homer*, 327.

¹⁶⁷ Homer to M. Knoedler & Co., 8 November 1904, quoted in Hendricks, *Life and Work of Winslow Homer*, 263; Homer to M. Knoedler & Co., 19 November 1907, quoted in Cikovsky and Kelly, *Winslow Homer*, 311.

¹⁶⁸ *New York Times*, January 16, 1891, quoted in *ibid.*, 311.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 312.

sensations; or, just as importantly, so that viewers might not get a hint of the coy artist's frustrating toil and struggle with painting nor his somatic, sensual self-indulgence in its seductive processes.

The artistic, physical and spiritual crises engendered in the act of painting his seascapes seems to have plagued Homer to the last, finding a closing meditation in the last work he would ever paint, *Driftwood* (fig. 1.22). In this painting a figure in oilskins carries a rope to secure a log lodged between two wedges of rock at the bottom of the canvas, with the upper portion filled with roiling waters painted with dense, agitated strokes, as if Homer reveled in painting with one last flourish of frenzied gesticulations. Theodore Stebbins has seen this work, executed after a decade of decline in Homer's productivity and following a debilitating stroke he suffered in 1908, as a contemplation of the artist's mortality. In his view, the faceless figure served as a self-portrait of Homer as he faced the sublime power of the sea, which the artist had many times, in pictures such as *Life Line* and *Undertow*, equated with both sex and death.¹⁷⁰ If it was a final statement on nature and mortality, this painting was also one last meditation on the overwhelming, troubling physicality and resistance of painting, its materials of paint and wooden brushes signified in the union of water, rocks, and the felled timber that lays unyielding before the artist. A weakened, enfeebled Homer appears supplicant as if succumbing to the power of the material world, shoved to the bottom corner by the weight of the painting's sheer materiality and on the verge of falling face-forward into the advancing crest, or drowning in paint. According to legend, however, in a final gesture of defiance, after Homer finished *Driftwood* he smeared the paints on his palette and hung it on the wall of his studio, never to touch brush nor paint again

¹⁷⁰ Stebbins, "'Driftwood': Winslow Homer's Final Painting," 70-79.

and liberated from the demanding tensions—material, moral and spiritual—experienced in the act of painting.¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ Beam, *Winslow Homer at Prout's Neck*, 254.

Chapter II

Albert Pinkham Ryder and Paint's Conquering Worm

The paintings of Albert Pinkham Ryder (1847-1917) are notorious for their poor physical conditions. Critics and art historians from his own time until now have understood Ryder's paintings to be the works of a visionary and prophet of the metaphysical whose art and life were devoted to a relentless pursuit of the spiritual. His peculiar techniques, resulting in irreparably damaged paintings that in some instances have degenerated into utterly illegible states, have been excused as the tragic mannerisms of a naïve eccentric whose otherworldly concerns trumped more mundane technical matters. *Temple of the Mind* (fig. 2.1), for example, painted in the mid-1880s, has been seen as a pivotal work in Ryder's career. It marked the artist's turn from largely pastoral landscapes toward a more distinctive style of painting in form, color and imagery, his work inspired by literary, poetic, and religious themes or, in the case of his haunting nocturne seascapes, by nature filtered through the power of the imagination.¹ Ryder's close friend, the art critic Charles De Kay, considered it to be the artist's masterpiece, "a piece of pure symbolism, as beautiful in thought as the finest work of the kind during the Middle Ages, and lovely in color as nothing else. It is a picture steeped in faery [sic], and may be taken as one of the greatest achievements American painting has yet shown."² Yet, since its creation Ryder's poetic vision has been corrupted by the physical decompositions to which many of his works have been prey.

¹ Charles Eldredge, for instance, in *American Imagination and Symbolist Painting*, exh. cat. (New York: Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, 1979), 55, has written that it is "perhaps the earliest and most complete statement of the artist's mature style."

² Henry Eckford [Charles De Kay], "A Modern Colorist: Albert Pinkham Ryder," *Century Magazine* 40, no. 2 (June 1890): 259, <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.wustl.edu/docview/125510533>.

The painting has deteriorated and darkened to the point where forms are indistinguishable save for highlights and silhouettes. Its once lustrous, golden color has tarnished and dulled, and its leathery surface is mutilated by a dense web of cracks, wrinkles, and abrasions.

Characteristically, the art historian Lloyd Goodrich proclaimed that it “is one of the great tragedies in American art that Ryder was not more skilled in his use of materials.”³ “His art, subjective and imaginative,” wrote the collector and critic Frederic Fairchild Sherman as early as 1920, “was concerned chiefly in realizing his vision and in painting an enduring idea, unhappily regardless of an enduring picture.”⁴ The conservator Sheldon Keck, who performed some of the most extensive analyses and treatments of Ryder’s works in the latter part of the twentieth century, went so far as to say that the artist’s “indifference to sound technical procedures and his careless abuse and misuse of the products of his brush” left “us with an inheritance which too often has little or no relation to his initial design. . . . [I]n few other instances has the final inheritance shown itself in such extremes of physical and chemical travesty.”⁵ Reflecting these sentiments, approaches to Ryder’s art have been dedicated to transcending the material travesties of his paintings and unearthing the inimitable visions that inspired his art, assuming the artist’s willful ignorance of technical knowledge. While art historians have scrutinized Ryder’s imagery and ideals along with his visual and literary sources, conservators have examined his materials and techniques in order to shed light on his unusual methods and to prevent further deterioration. In art historical texts and conservation labs alike, every effort has been made to repress these physical disruptions by restoring the poetic revelations lurking beneath their tortured surfaces.

³ William Inness Homer and Lloyd Goodrich, *Albert Pinkham Ryder: Painter of Dreams* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), 153.

⁴ Frederic Fairchild Sherman, *Albert Pinkham Ryder* (New York: Privately Printed, 1920), 43.

⁵ Sheldon Keck, “Albert P. Ryder: His Technical Procedures,” in Homer and Goodrich, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 182.

Rather than distinguish between Ryder's ideals and their material incarnations, this chapter restores to the foreground the physical atrophy of his paintings alongside the poetic imagery and intangible realities this "painter poet of the immanent in things" sought to make tangible.⁶ How can we interpret the abject materiality of Ryder's paintings in ways that make them a part and product of his aesthetic, rather than an unfortunate ignorance of technical knowledge? What do they reveal about his conceptual and material struggles with painting, and how might these conflicts have been shaped by Ryder's eccentricities and spiritual aspirations for art as well as inflected by larger cultural concerns of his time and place?

Ryder has been considered as an eccentric and an outlier whose art and life were largely untouched by the cultural anxieties of his age. In particular, for many of his contemporaries and in traditional scholarship, his art demonstrated a resolute faith in the transcendent in an era plagued by spiritual doubt and uncertainty.⁷ Especially unsettling to traditional beliefs in the reality of the unseen and the transcendence of the human soul, as we have seen in the context of Winslow Homer's seascapes, were post-Darwinian worldviews that transformed life and nature into a godless arena of conflict and suffering. Humanity was reduced to an insignificant element

⁶ Marsden Hartley, "Albert P. Ryder," *The Seven Arts* 2 (May 1917): 96.

⁷ This isolating approach in scholarship on Ryder, which examine his art and life largely in exclusion from broader social or cultural issues, characterize the two most significant studies on the artists: William Inness Homer and Lloyd Goodrich, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, and Elizabeth Broun, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, exh. cat. (Washington DC: Published for the National Museum of American Art by the Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989). Notable exceptions to this perspective include Sarah Burns, "Dirty Pictures," in *Painting the Dark Side: Art and the Gothic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 221-45; Eric Rosenberg, "Intricate Channels of Resemblance: Albert Pinkham Ryder and the Politics of Colorism" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1992); Saul E. Zalesch, "Ryder among the Writers: Friendship and Patronage in the New York Art World, 1875-1884" (PhD diss., University of Delaware, 1992). While Rosenberg and Zalesch situate the critical reception of Ryder's work within the politics of the New York art world, Burns examines Ryder's art in an even broader context, linking the attraction to his dreamlike imagery and abject paintings to the fascination with dreams as a manifestation of the human psyche as well as the filth and disorder associated with sprawling urban slums, both realms spaces of chaos and irrationality threatening to middle-class values of order, rationality, and hygiene.

of brute animal and material existence, unguided by providence and subject to the indifferent laws of nature. Methods of scientific empiricism were equally foreboding, questioning anything that could not be observed through the senses.⁸ For the sociologist Thorstein Veblen, the spiritual anxieties of this Gilded Age were the product of cold, scientific skepticism, “in a peculiar degree capable of an impersonal, dispassionate insight into the material facts with which mankind has to deal.” It exercised a hard, unrelenting insistence on the “matter-of-fact” that “sticks by the opaque truth and refuses to go behind the returns given by tangible facts,” perspectives degrading to the emotional, spiritual life of humanity.⁹ William James put a sarcastic spin on the skepticism of modern science towards the kind of pious idealism practiced by Ryder in his essay “The Will to Believe,” otherwise a defense of faith:

The talk of believing by our own volition seems . . . worse than silly, it is vile. When one turns to the magnificent edifice of the physical sciences, and sees how it was reared; what thousands of disinterested moral lives of men lie buried in its mere foundations; what patience and postponement, what choking down of preference, what submission to the icy laws of outer fact are wrought into its very stones and mortar; how absolutely impersonal it stands in its vast augustness,—then how besotted and contemptible seems every little sentimentalist who comes blowing his voluntary smoke-wreaths, and pretending to decide things from out of his private dream! Can we wonder if those bred in the rugged and manly school of science should feel like spewing such subjectivism out of their mouths?¹⁰

In this culture, in which the empirical study of the physical world seemed to extinguish any hope in providence or the transcendence, Ryder’s evocative dreamscapes masked in smoky atmospheric veils as well as his religious imagery offered comfort for those clinging to the spiritual side of humanity. Ryder was one example of a host of artists in the turn-of-the-century

⁸ For a discussion of the causes and nature of religious doubt in this era, see Paul A. Carter, *The Spiritual Crisis of the Gilded Age* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971).

⁹ Thorstein Veblen, “The Place of Science in Modern Civilization,” *American Journal of Sociology* 11, no. 5 (March 1906): 585, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2762805>.

¹⁰ William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans Green, 1898), 7.

American northeast, the art historian Kristin Schwain has noted, who produced forms of visual culture emphasizing the realities of an unseen spiritual order. This proliferation of the sacred in art, as Schwain argues, promoted by artists and cultural leaders, affirmed the vitality of faith in American society and demonstrated how challenges to spirituality by science and modernization further entrenched belief rather than undermining it.¹¹ This resurgence of the sacred in the art of Ryder and other artists, however, was also a reaction to the acute spiritual crisis afflicting American culture.¹² As I shall argue in the following pages, this crisis is one that Ryder also suffered in his efforts to work the earthly materials of painting into a vehicle for the transcendent, the artist's technical and physical struggles producing metaphysical anxieties that resonated with the uncertainties of his time, which in turn fueled his obsessive methods. This is particularly true of the paintings of his later career when he became the eccentric and ascetic that defined his legend, explored more dramatic and imaginative themes, and painted with a compulsive accretion of rich paints and experimental media. Even before the paintings left their easel, these processes resulted in cracking surfaces, tarnished colors, and downward slides of thick paints and greasy varnishes. Such threatening deteriorations, to which Ryder was an agonized witness, were simultaneously the result of and impetus for the artist's anxious and inadvertently injurious techniques, aimed at capturing and restoring his unique spiritual expressions. The cracked and strained surfaces of Ryder's paintings as we see them today are the residue of this struggle between the artist's mystical, romantic attitudes towards art and nature and the crude, annihilating physical world of painting that threatened soul and spirit.

¹¹ Kristin Schwain, *Signs of Grace: Religion and American Art in the Gilded Age* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

¹² Elizabeth Johns has also argued that Ryder's religious imagery was meant to bolster faith in response the spiritual crisis of the age. See "Albert Pinkham Ryder: Some Thoughts on His Subject Matter," *Arts Magazine* 54, no. 3 (November 1979): 164-71.

Painting Dreams

This conflict is materialized in *Temple of the Mind* (fig. 2.1), a fantastic composition inspired by classical motifs, the pastoral landscapes of the French Barbizon school, and the writing of Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), to whom Ryder was often compared for his phantasmagoric imagery and the mystical moods of his pictures.¹³ “The theme,” Ryder wrote in a rare description of one of his paintings,

is Poe’s Haunted Palace. . . . The finer attributes of the mind are pictured by three graces who stand in the center of the picture: where their shadows from the moonlight fall toward the spectator. They are waiting for a weeping love to join them. On the left is a Temple where a cloven footed faun dances up the steps snapping his fingers in fiendish glee at having dethroned the erstwhile ruling graces: on the right a splashing fountain.¹⁴

A part of Poe’s celebrated tale “The Fall of the House of Usher,” “The Haunted Palace” is an impromptu dirge performed by the ailing, manic protagonist Roderick Usher to allegorically suggest, in Poe’s words, “a mind haunted by phantoms—a disordered brain.”¹⁵ Cursed by the “tottering of his lofty reason upon her throne,” Usher’s requiem opens with a sanguine account of a green valley, the realm of the “monarch Thought” whose palace stands triumphantly adorned with gold and yellow banners and in which spirits circle lyrically around their ruler’s throne. Through the palace’s doorway, “Echoes whose sweet duty / Was but to sing, / In voices

¹³ Dorinda Evans has made comparisons between the composition of *Temple of the Mind* and the landscapes of Camille Corot, most notably *Dance of the Cupids* (1866, location unknown), then owned by the New York journalist Charles A. Diana. See Evans, “Albert Pinkham Ryder’s Use of Visual Sources,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 21, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 28, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1181014>. Robert Pincus-Witten, in “On Target: The Symbolist Roots of American Abstraction,” *Arts Magazine* 50, no. 8 (April 1976): 85, has linked the faun and graces to a range of classical motifs, including the Elgin marbles. More recently, Diane Chalmers Johnson has related *Temple of the Mind* in composition and theme to Corot and the French artist Adolphe Monticelli, both favorites among Ryder’s circle of artists and writers. See Johnson, *American Symbolist Art: Nineteenth-Century “Poets in Paint”* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004), 82-83. On the comparison between Ryder and Poe, see “Albert Pinkham Ryder: A Poe of the Brush,” *New York Press*, December 16, 1906, 5.

¹⁴ Allen Weller, “An Unpublished Letter by Albert P. Ryder,” *Art in America* 27, no. 2 (April 1939): 101-2.

¹⁵ Edgar Allan Poe as quoted in Broun, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 300. Poe had also published the poem separately in 1839 before including it in the short story.

of surpassing beauty” flow merrily until, suddenly, “evil things, in robes of sorrow, / Assailed the monarch’s high estate.” The once opulent valley falling into desolation, instead of beauty and mirth the interior of the palace is infested by evil red forms dancing wildly to a “discordant melody,” with terrible, horrific throngs rushing from the entryway in fits of delirious laughter.¹⁶

Like Usher’s self-reflexive lamentation, Ryder’s nocturnal, dreamlike visualization imparts a melancholic air. Ryder’s fiendish faun, whom he substituted for Poe’s “evil things,” arrogantly prances as he approaches the temple’s portal, his sinuous curves visually echoed in the tree behind. To his right, Ryder’s diminutive personification of love, a cupid figure, appears to raise his fist at the conqueror in anger. The graces that Ryder invented in lieu of Poe’s echoes stand defeated, their dejected demeanor in stark contrast to the savage fête of their vanquisher. Ryder also conspicuously silhouetted their heads against the shimmering, winding river, accentuating the significance of these higher “attributes of the mind.” Anchored by the gleaming moon, the composition is framed on the left by the fantastic classical Corinthian temple—a bastion of spiritual beauty and harmony as well as the poetic imagination the faun threatens to contaminate—and a weeping willow to the right, which casts its sorrowful boughs over the banished muses.

Drawing on Poe as a point of departure, Ryder imaginatively reconfigured the author’s allegorical representation of Usher’s descent into madness into an allegory of the susceptibility of the self to the hazards and chaos of the physical world, symbolized by the evil faun standing for the carnal and the base. The exalted powers of the mind, signified by the temple and echoes, are also indicated by the fountain, a symbol for the flowing energies of the soul and creative

¹⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), in *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Castle Books, 2002), 176-77.

consciousness.¹⁷ At the same time this theme is represented in the painting's symbolism, however, it is also incidentally yet poignantly embodied in its soiled, degraded materiality, which like Usher's mind has atrophied into a state of inescapable gloom and confusion. Enveloped by a wrinkled, leathery surface, its form and color having long since faded into a frustrating murkiness, the painting is also laced by a web of deep fissures through which substances have oozed into tiny globules, the cracks widening and deepening at the bottom of the support where paint has sagged and settled into thick mounds.¹⁸ The consequence of Ryder's idiosyncratic processes driven by the obsession to capture an ideal form of emotional and spiritual expression, the deterioration of *Temple of the Mind* has ironically adulterated the artist's poetic, dreamy vision and pulled his materials back toward the very realm of the base and the earthly that he sought to transcend through paint. In both its symbolic imagery and atrophied materiality, the painting has come to personify Ryder's exasperating experiences of painting, its allegory reflecting his struggles against the truculence of paint and the physical world made painfully evident in their decay.

Aside from a vague testimonial that he aimed to "improve the medium" and "to make paint less painty looking," Ryder made few comments on the mysterious methods concealed

¹⁷ Carl Jung, for instance, found the symbol of the fountain in art and literature to be "an image of the soul as the source of inner life and of spiritual energy." See Juan Eduardo Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* 2nd ed. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2002), 113. As will be discussed further below, Diane Chalmers also sees this painting—in imagery and symbolism only—as an allegorical representation of the dangers of the physical world, observing that the picture indicates not so much "madness, but a wanton lust taking over the temple from the civilizing graces." She links this romantic preoccupation to the poetry of Ryder's friend Charles De Kay, much of whose writing deals with the "theme of the struggle of the human spirit against the evils of physical sensuality." See *American Symbolist Art*, 82-83. My analysis of this painting also borrows from the reading by Sarah Burns, who interprets this painting as an allegory for the "invasion" of the temple, signifying "beauty, harmony, benevolence, and love," by "lust, bestiality, and confusion," signified by the prancing faun. See Burns, *Painting the Dark Side*, 221-22.

¹⁸ For a detailed account of the material condition of *Temple of the Mind*, see Carl Grimm, "A Study of Authenticity in Paintings Attributed to Albert Pinkham Ryder" (PhD diss., University of Delaware, 1999), 237-38.

beneath the rich, congealed films of paint and varnish that characterize his works.¹⁹ Despite what appears to be an entirely naïve practice, it appears that Ryder in fact acquired some formal painting instructions early in his career. While he may have received lessons from one of the several artists located in his hometown of New Bedford, Massachusetts, we know that he studied with the portrait painter William E. Marshall upon his move to New York around 1870. Though his training under Marshall focused on drawing in order to pass the entrance exam for the National Academy of Design—a review process requiring drawings from antique casts that Ryder failed on his first attempt—Marshall almost certainly taught the aspiring artist such rudimentary aspects of painting as the fundamentals of color, how to set a palette, and how to begin a picture. But Ryder also found in Marshall the romantic encouragement to pursue art as a form of poetic expression above technical matters, inspiring Ryder’s disregard of convention in favor of eccentric experimentations.²⁰

The information we have today about Ryder’s methods, in addition to what has been learned from modern technical examinations, is found in stories handed down from friends and associates. The artist Philip Evergood, for instance, remembered from his childhood that Ryder used “to chew tobacco, spit into a spittoon next to his easel and dip his brushes into the tobacco juice.”²¹ The painter Marsden Hartley remembered Ryder taking dirt from his boot heels to brown his tones, sprinkling his pictures with ash, and also once running a hot poker drawn from

¹⁹ Ryder as quoted in the diary of Charles Erskine Scott Wood, August 1896, quoted in Broun, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 78.

²⁰ On Ryder’s training, see Broun, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 13-20. Broun surmises that Ryder may have studied in New Bedford with the marine painter R. Swain Gifford, who championed the painting methods of the French artist Thomas Couture. Several other marine painters, including Benjamin Russell, William A. Wall, William Bradford, and the Dutch artist Albert Van Best also worked in the area. Whether Ryder had any contact with these artists before moving to New York, however, remains speculation.

²¹ Phillip Evergood, in Kendall Taylor, "Ryder Remembered," *Archives of American Art Journal* 24, no. 3 (1984): 15, 2n.

the fire through one of his paintings to strike in a bolt of lightning.²² Several visitors to Ryder's studio also recollected how he tried to restore the sheen of his painting and rid them of dirt and scum by wiping them with wet sponges and oily rags, even running them under the faucet.²³

Although provocative, such tales may have been manufactured to explain away the character of his paintings. That Ryder used bitumen to obtain deep, rich blacks and browns, for instance—a longstanding and logical apology for their premature deterioration since it is a tarry, volatile substance gathered from natural petroleum deposits—has thus far been proven a myth through chemical analysis.²⁴ On the other hand, other reminiscences, coupled with modern technical examinations, point more reliably to a number of the artist's unusual habits. The artist Kenneth Hayes Miller, a close friend of Ryder, remembered always seeing in his living quarters “countless jars of medium” including “resin, oil, wax, candle grease, even alcohol, and above all, varnish and more varnish.”²⁵ Miller even recalled, as did other of Ryder's visitors, how the artist would place a painting on the floor and pour varnish from the jar to coat the surface, painting

²² Marsden Hartley, “Albert Pinkham Ryder” (1936), in *On Art / by Marsden Hartley*, ed. Gail R. Scott (New York: Horizon Press, 1982), 263-64.

²³ Evelyn Eastwood, “Notes from an Interview with Albert Lorey Groll at 222 West 59 Street, New York City, September 14, 1946,” unpublished writings on Albert Pinkham Ryder on partial microfilm reel, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, reel 653.

²⁴ Grimm, “A Study of Authenticity in Paintings Attributed to Albert Pinkham Ryder,” 38n57. In his technical studies Grimm notes he found no presence of the material.

²⁵ Kenneth Hayes Miller, in Alice B. Loucheim, “Ryder: Seen by Marsden Hartley, Walt Kuhn, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Reginald Marsh, Kenneth Hayes Miller.” *Art News* 46, no. 9 (November 1947): 29. Aside from candle grease, all these substances could be found in the studio of many artists. Resins are the organic natural materials exuded by trees. Varnishes are made from with the addition of turpentine, alcohol, or oil, depending on the type of resins (such as damar or mastic resins). Wax is a medium used in encaustic painting dating back to ancient Greece. Traditionally, it consists of dry pigments combined with beeswax and resin. For a detailed description of these materials and their uses, see Ralph Meyer, *The Artist's Handbook of Materials and Techniques* 3rd rev. ed. (New York: The Viking Press, 1970), 176-203, 324-29.

again before allowing the layer to dry.²⁶ The art critic Sadakichi Hartmann also told of how Ryder would apply a “lavish pouring of varnish over the canvas while he paints, to realize luster, depth and mystery.”²⁷ Another of Ryder’s friends, a ship captain who remembered Ryder working on *Temple of the Mind* during a transatlantic voyage in 1882, wrote that the artist had mentioned he used pure alcohol as a medium, especially in the beginning stages of a painting since it “worked smoothly and with transparency.”²⁸ More recently, conservator Joyce Hill Stoner has found in *Curfew Hour* (fig. 2.2), one of the most deteriorated of Ryder’s paintings, the presence of non-drying oils such as those used for cooking between layers of paint and varnish. Such oils fail to desiccate upon exposure to air (whereas linseed and other traditional painting oils harden completely). According to Stoner, this indicates the use of a “rag charged with butter or perhaps the homemade perfume oils in his studio” which he used to make scented fragrances to give to friends.²⁹

Though additives such as cooking and perfume oils, candle grease, or pure alcohol—a highly corrosive substance—would have contributed to the decomposition of his paintings, analyses indicate that if Ryder did use such media it was in minuscule quantities. In fact, modern conservators have observed that the problem was not so much the kind of materials Ryder used

²⁶ Lloyd Goodrich, “Notes on Conversation with Kenneth Hayes Miller,” 26 June 26, 1947, in Homer and Goodrich, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 233.

²⁷ Sadakichi Hartmann, “A Visit to A.P. Ryder!,” *Art News* 1, no. 1 (March 1897): 2.

²⁸ John Robinson, “Personal Reminiscences of Albert Pinkham Ryder,” *Art in America* 13 (June 1925): 183.

²⁹ Joyce Hill Stoner, “Art Historical and Technical Evaluation of Works by Three Nineteenth Century Artists,” *Appearance, Opinion, Change: Evaluating the Look of Paintings*, ed. Peter Booth (London: United Kingdom Institute for Conservation, 1990), 40. Stoner also detected the presence of mysterious proteins and “sugar based materials . . . which may have been used to increase the viscosity of the paint to create meringue-like impasto visible in cross sections and final paint surface.” Shelley Svoboda and Camilla J. Van Vooren also note that Ryder made homemade scented perfumes to give to friends. See “An Investigation of Albert Pinkham Ryder’s Painting Materials and Techniques with Additional Research on Forgeries,” *Postprints (American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works. Paintings Specialty Group)* (1989): 38.

as it was the ill-advised manner with which he handled and combined media, especially in his paintings of the early 1880s and after.³⁰ At this time, the conservator Sheldon Keck observed, consonant with his transition to a more dramatic and imaginative subject matter, Ryder turned from working in a more direct, “alla prima” fashion, or painting spontaneously with thinner paints in a single sitting, to experimenting with the prolonged accumulation of layers of media. These techniques were inspired by his exposure to old masters such as Corot, Millet, Turner, Titian, and Rembrandt both in New York and during his European travels in 1877 and 1882.³¹ In characteristically obscure terms, Ryder expressed his veneration for the luminous effect of the work of such old masters on several occasions. For instance, he told of how, when he first began painting, “I realized I had in my possession the wherewith to create a masterpiece that would live throughout the coming ages . . . I at once proceeded to study the works of the great to discover how best achieve immortality with a square of canvas and a box of colors.”³² Affirming the artist’s ideals, Marsden Hartley later wrote that “Ryder found the Louvre exhausting, and who hasn’t, but there is every evidence from his pictures that he looked with microscopic intensity at something or other, for his entire technique, faulty as it was, was built up on European culture as

³⁰ David Erhardt, David von Endt and Jia-sun Tsang, “Condition, Change, and Complexity: The Media of Albert Pinkham Ryder,” *Postprints (American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works. Paintings Specialty Group)* (1990): 30-31. The authors note that “analyses coupled with previous findings indicate that while Ryder did use nonorthodox materials and may have mixed in other materials with his paints, the amounts of these other materials were in general small enough to make them hard to detect in bulk analysis. Where detectable amounts were found, as in the possible addition of non-drying oils, they did not necessarily correlate with the condition of the painting. Much of the blame for the condition of Ryder’s paintings, therefore, must be put on the way he used his materials rather than what he used.”

³¹ Keck, “Albert P. Ryder: His Technical Procedures,” 175-77. Ryder was exposed to the art of the Barbizon School, including Corot, at the gallery of his friend and dealer Daniel Cottier in New York. On this and the artist’s European travels and its potential influences on his art, see Broun, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 56-68.

³² Albert Pinkham Ryder, “Paragraphs from the Studio of a Recluse,” *Broadway Magazine* (September 1905), in Homer and Goodrich, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 185.

imbibed from the masters.”³³ “Everything has been done in art so all is left to improve the medium,” Ryder also surprisingly proclaimed in a way revealing his preoccupation with the effects of paint, “and it’s only when you see my pictures in company with old masters that you really feel what they are. It takes fine quality to not seem out of place in such company.”³⁴

The more traditional techniques that Ryder emulated demanded a large degree of diligence, patience, and preparation, contingent on the careful planning of form and composition, the measured application of layers of media, and a keen familiarity with the behavior and effect of various materials. An *Art Amateur* article from 1881, for instance, prescribed such procedures, advising readers to build a painting from leaner to fatter coats by proceeding methodically from layer to layer and evenly across the canvas. Readers were instructed to start with a highly thinned underpainting of watercolor over underdrawing to define form, then to use thinned oils to define mass and tone and to engage with a slightly more loaded brush for highlights. In the final stage, details were to be defined with thinned paints, with a final layer of oils to be applied for shadows, highlights, and textures using glazes (the fluid application of darker, transparent paints over lighter fields) and scumbling (the loose application of lighter, opaque paints over darker underlayers). Throughout, the author cautioned patience and control by allowing each layer to dry sufficiently so colors would not muddle and to use a “firm and clear” brushstroke “without much teasing of the brush,” which would produce “a certain turbid or muddy appearance.”³⁵

³³ Hartley, “Albert Pinkham Ryder” (1936), 263.

³⁴ Ryder as quoted in the diary of Charles Erskine Scott (C.E.S.) Wood, August 1896, quoted in Broun, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 78.

³⁵ “Landscape Painting in Oils: A Second Lesson,” *Art Amateur* 5, no. 3 (August 1881): 50-51, <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.wustl.edu/docview/124472300>. For a thorough discussion on historical conventions of oil painting, see Virgil Elliott, *Traditional Oil Painting: Advanced Techniques and Concepts from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 2007).

Though Ryder's routines varied, as in this traditional system he often outlined form with light underdrawings or painted sketches over priming, blocked in masses of light and dark with thinned paints to establish an initial composition, then worked with an accumulation of layers.³⁶ Where he departed from these techniques, however, was his impatient insistence on building his paintings into a palpable, undulating mass by applying with brush or palette knife a thick, churning morass of fat, slower drying paints such as lead white for his underlayers, then coating them with an accretion of media such as pure oils and varnishes along with layer upon layer of thick glazes—all with incongruent viscosities, pigment ratios, and drying rates. Far from methodical, Ryder instead painted compulsively—loading, mixing, and “teasing” paints directly on his supports of wood or canvas. He also obsessively reworked his surfaces by shifting forms, scraping or rubbing out portions or the entire picture, refilling voids, and sealing his surfaces with gelatinous coats of varnish. As microscopic cross-sections of his paintings reveal, the result of these methods were not the evenly striated layers of media that characterize most paintings, but rather an irregular pattern of swirling sediments. (fig. 2.3) “According to his own statement,” the artist Walter Pach explained,

Mr. Ryder uses no sketches from nature, but lays the picture in according to what he feels to be its needs. Then follows a process of small or large changes that frequently extends over a period of years. The position of clouds in a sky, the contour of a hill, or the movement of a figure undergoes infinite modifications until the stability and harmony of masses is attained that the artist's astonishing sense of beauty demands. “I work altogether from my feeling for these things, I have no rule.”³⁷

Working erratically across a painting, Ryder also often painted wet on wet, incapable of waiting for the media to dry or, impatient to set down his ideas, progressing impulsively onto the next

³⁶ The following discussion of Ryder's processes draws heavily from Keck, “Albert Pinkham Ryder: His Technical Procedures,” 175-84; Broun, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 122-132, and Grimm, “A Study of Authenticity in Paintings Attributed to Albert Pinkham Ryder.”

³⁷ Walter Pach, “On Albert P. Ryder,” *Scribner's Magazine* 49, no.1 (January 1911): 126-27.

detail—all in the effort to obtain just the right color, glow, luster, shape, or design and capture the ideal form of his imaginative visualization. These methods could within weeks produce deep, widening cracks as the outer films dried and the still-wet sludge beneath underwent invisible molecular transformations affecting the structure of the whole, the dregs slowly expanding and contracting, bubbling forth between fissures, and oozing downward like a mudslide.³⁸

Something of Ryder's organic methods suggests the vivid description in "Fall of the House of Usher" of Roderick Usher's "phantasmagoric" and intuitive painting in all the protagonist's "excited and highly distempered ideality." Ryder may have found a particular affinity for the passage, accounting in part for his fascination with Poe's gothic tale:

From the paintings over which his elaborate fancy brooded, and which grew, touch by touch, into vagueness at which I shuddered the more thrillingly, because I shuddered knowing not why—from these paintings (vivid as their images now are before me) I would in vain endeavour to educe more than a small portion which should lie within the compass of merely written words. By the utter simplicity, by the nakedness of his designs, he arrested and overawed attention. If ever mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Roderick Usher. For me at least, in the circumstances then surrounding me, there arose out of the pure abstractions which the hypochondriac contrived to throw upon his canvas, an intensity of intolerable awe, no shadow of which felt I ever yet in the contemplation of the certainly glowing yet too concrete reveries of Fuseli.³⁹

In his quest to transform his imagination into paint and attain, like Usher, the perfect union of thought and substance, we can imagine the portly Ryder hunched in front of his easel—by all

³⁸ Keck, "Albert Pinkham Ryder: His Technical Procedures," 176-78, helpfully explains the complex drying process of oils: "An oil painting dries by a chemical process, namely oxidation of the oil molecules comprising its medium, not by evaporation of water as in watercolor or gouache. Oxygen from the air combines with the oil increasing its weight while it is also releasing certain volatile by-products of the oxidation, thus losing some of its weight. Simultaneously polymerization joins chains of molecules together increasing the viscosity of oil. This process of drying is exceedingly slow. Oxidation begins at the paint surface and proceeds inward, its progress dependent on the thickness of the paint and on the various drying rates contributed by the pigments employed in the paint . . . Shortly after application, under normal circumstances, the paint surface usually reaches in two or three days what is called the initial set and in a day reaches tacky set, followed in another day or two by tack-free set. At this point, the paint layer has reached its maximum weight increase which gradually diminishes over a period of weeks or months. Because of weight loss during this period, occasioned by the departure of gaseous by-products, the paint film tends to shrink unless it has a firm attachment to its substrate of primed canvas or panel. Traction cracks may well appear in time, especially in the heavy thick layers of paint so often seen in Ryder's work."

³⁹ Poe, "Fall of the House of Usher," 175-76.

accounts dripping with the accumulated residue of his labors—and building, touch by touch, his phantasmagoric visions into concrete incarnations. Slathering and swirling his thick media, we can also imagine the artist at one moment reveling in the chaos coagulating into perfected form and luminous color, at another dejected at his materials falling into an irretrievable mud, his experiences fluctuating between elation and despondency, triumph and frustration.

Ryder began *Temple of the Mind* (fig. 2.1), for example, by laying in forms with a thinned black and white underpainting on the wooden panel measuring just over two feet in height, defining contours and tonal masses of elements such as the willows or temple with a relatively broad brush and in loose, sketchy strokes.⁴⁰ He then gradually built the surface with folded, swirling layers of wet, thick paints of different transparencies with a relatively limited palette of lead white, yellow ocher, other earth tones, and Prussian blue, which also acts as a siccative, hastening the drying of media. Between still-wet layers of paint he added coats of pure oils and varnishes, some having the character of industrial resin varnish such as those used on coaches, along with other unidentified media, many of which were experimentally mixed with pigments to enrich color. As the painting slowly grew, Ryder also altered or shifted forms and colors, pushing and pulling paint or scraping portions away altogether according to his momentary intuitions. Walter Pach, for instance, recalled how there was once a bridge instead of a fountain in the painting, suggesting “the idea that when once a person has crossed this bridge, he can never return. ‘It was a pretty allegory,’ said Mr. Ryder, ‘but that bridge with its horizontal line never seemed to suit the picture. I wanted an upright and thought the fountain might give it. I remembered a fountain I had seen in Florence and put that in, which is what you see today’.”⁴¹

⁴⁰ This discussion of technique and materials draws heavily on Grimm, “A Study of Authenticity in Paintings Attributed to Albert Pinkham Ryder,” 223-43.

⁴¹ Pach, “On Albert P. Ryder,” 128.

Ryder's brushwork, too, underwent a series of changes as the pictures demanded. In the dark masses he painted in a more controlled manner, gradually building up rich, translucent glazes with long, fluid strokes. With these we can imagine him hunched close to his canvas and firmly grasping a loaded brush in his fingertips, slowly pulling it across the undulating surface. Other marks, however, such as those scumbles made with brighter, opaque paints, are more cursory, exhibiting the kind of brushwork Sadakichi Hartmann described when he remembered Ryder "holding the brush at the middle of the handle and hesitatingly dragging it across the canvas."⁴² In addition to using looser cross-hatchings as well as blending and weaving pigments where forms met to soften contours, Ryder also anxiously scribbled, stippled, or dabbed fatter mixtures of white and yellow for highlights with a fine brush, as in the shimmering waters or the iridescent moon, which as in so many of his paintings was built with swirls of paint into a glowing, sculptural orb.

Though Ryder worked on *Temple of the Mind* for over three years, he toiled over other of his paintings much longer to bring to fruition incipient visions. He worked in sporadic yet fervent, withdrawn periods of creative absorption, then stowed his paintings for days, weeks, or even years of gestation as they awaited their next session. "I like my slow dreamy way with a picture, fancying thereby they have a charm peculiar or like self creation," Ryder once explained of his long processes in a way that elided his labors and made his pictures the natural outpouring of his imagination.⁴³ "My pictures have got to take years to mature and ripen," he is quoted as also saying. "I've carried the idea for some of them around for years before I begin to put it on

⁴² Sadakichi Hartmann, *A History of American Art*, vol. 1 (Boston: L.C. Page and Company, 1901), 313.

⁴³ Ryder to Albert T. Sanden, 12 August 1899, quoted in Broun, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 129.

canvas.”⁴⁴ Very often he spoke of these protracted processes in romantic terms, as if creation was not predictable and systematic but instead organic and intermittent, with momentary bursts of energy and divine inspiration flowing to the truly patient diligent artist. “Art is long,” he wrote:

The artist must buckle himself with infinite patience. His ears must be deaf to the clamor of insistent friends who would quicken his pace. His eyes must see naught but the vision beyond. He must await the season of fruitage without haste, without worldly ambitions, without vexation of spirit. An inspiration is no more a seed that must be planted and nourished. It gives growth as it grows to the artist, only as he watches and waits with his highest effort . . . The canvas I began ten years ago I shall complete to-day or to-morrow. It has been ripening under the sunlight of the years that come and go. It is not that a canvas should be worked at. It is a wise artist who knows when to cry ‘halt’ in his composition, but it should be pondered over in his heart and worked out with prayer and fasting.⁴⁵

For the idealistic Ryder, artistic inspiration was something that flowed from above through the soul, obtained through restraint and self-denial of physical, earthly needs. In less somber terms, Ryder also joked about his sluggish progress, supposedly once commenting about a painting: “I was foolish enough to sell that canvas to a man who wanted to get it some twenty-five years ago, and at first he was so unreasonable, always trying to take it from me. But lately he has been so very nice,—he asks for it only about once a year.”⁴⁶ “I am glad you like that picture,” he also once responded to a request for a painting, “and if you will come again next year I think I can let you have it, when I have done the little more it needs. I have only worked on it for about ten years.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ “Albert Pinkham Ryder: A Poe of the Brush,” 5.

⁴⁵ Ryder, “Paragraphs from the Studio of a Recluse,” 186.

⁴⁶ Ryder as quoted by Walter Pach, “Albert P. Ryder, Thomas Eakins,” in *Queer Thing, Painting: Forty Years in the World of Art* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938), 62.

⁴⁷ Ryder as quoted by Henry C. White, “A Call Upon Albert P. Ryder,” unpublished manuscript, in Homer and Goodrich, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 226.

Though he was sincere about his convictions, concealed behind Ryder's idealistic sentiments and whimsical quips were anxieties over painting provoked by his compulsive methods and scrupulous fussing over formal details, as well as the physical condition of his paintings as they deteriorated before his eyes. In one of the more revealing examples, for instance, Ryder labored over *The Lorelei* (fig. 2.4) for over fifteen years, sporadically fretting over it from the mid-1890s until his death in 1917. Sadakichi Hartmann explained how Ryder was especially concerned with the positioning of the seductive siren, writing that the maiden was "going through a whole cycle of evolution. Now large, now small, now emerging from the rock, now sinking back into it, almost vanishing at times, coming forth again, changing her position, drapery, expression, color of her hair, a hundred times."⁴⁸ In 1899, Ryder wrote reassuringly to a friend serving as an intermediary between the artist and his waiting patron that progress was being made, repeating his belief in the spiritual basis of artistic creation:

It was not until this spring that I felt the witching maiden was placed where it should be. It is only now that I am convinced that a moonlight rare and pale will be the most beautiful and positive treatment of the subject. An ounce of poetry added to a picture is worth many pounds of paint literally; and truly worth the doing and undoing of an hundred pictures to obtain. Again one who paints not by rule but by inner promptings is thereby more or less a stranger to his talent whatever it may be; but there is a compensation in sometimes going "a mountain in a night." So we will hope for the night, and a day added may make a picture that is a song in paint.⁴⁹

Despite the calm tone projected in his letters, according to Ryder's friend Charles Fitzpatrick he was tormented by *Lorelei*, which gave him the most difficulty of any of his paintings:

He would get it up to what anyone would call finished. Lay it aside and the next time you saw it, it would be all out, and maybe rubbed down. If we heard a rapping sound on the floor (and it was always at night) we knew he was rubbing down the *Lorelei*. . . . The picture was finished at least three times, but he would not let it go. It was a strange weird

⁴⁸ Sadakichi Hartmann, "An American Painter," unpublished manuscript, quoted in Broun, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 249.

⁴⁹ Ryder to C.E.S. Wood, 2 October 1899, in Homer and Goodrich, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 210.

moonlight, and when it was at its best and looked as though he called finished, it looked as though it was painted by a man with strange subconscious power.⁵⁰

On several occasions Ryder appeared to be on the verge of finishing the painting, yet he never found satisfaction with its color, patina, or the placement of the figure. Though in 1901 he wrote a friend, for instance, that he had “lost” the *Lorelei* but found his way again, encouraged by some new manner of “treatment” he was using that was “in a measure a kind of revelation for method to introduce in some stage of my future work,” five years later he was still fretting over the picture, writing that he felt he was “getting the Lorelei into shape. I think she was too perpendicular on the rock, reclining, more as I have her now, seems to help the feeling of the picture very much: of such little things painted dreams are made of.”⁵¹ Louise Fitzpatrick spoke of the painting as “the last supreme effort of Ryder’s agony” that consumed his energies to the point of nervous exhaustion, his labors spoiled and debased by the deterioration caused by his “revelation” in technique. “I begged him to leave it so. But alas, in the making of the picture, the varnish, the oils, the wax, the heat, and his fear that it would not dry made him dig into it, and then the work of undoing started and it was put aside. He could no longer stand the strain of even speaking about it.”⁵²

As many viewers remarked, when Ryder achieved his goal his creations magically took on inimitable qualities of color and surface, as if transformed into precious jewels glowing mysteriously from within. Charles De Kay found that Ryder’s “pictures glow with an inner radiance, like some minerals, or like the ocean under states of cloud, mist, wind. Some have

⁵⁰ Charles Fitzpatrick, “Albert Pinkham Ryder,” in Taylor, “Ryder Remembered,” 9.

⁵¹ Ryder to Harold Bromhead, 2 August 1901; Ryder to C.E.S. Wood, 9 February 1906, in Homer and Goodrich, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 187, 210.

⁵² Louise Fitzpatrick to C.E.S. Wood, 17 April 1918, quoted in Broun, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 250.

depth, richness, and luster of enamels.”⁵³ The English critic and art historian Roger Fry found Ryder’s paintings to have “a sense of the complexity, infinity and richness of matter,” achieved by the way the artist painted “over and over again, loading his paint sometimes to a dangerous extent” and creating “a wonderful enameled surface overlaying a broken and highly varied impasto.” “It may be,” Fry acutely observed, “that his peculiar technique, which he has worked out himself, is also due to a certain tentativeness, almost a hesitation, in his manner, which leads him continually to refine on the idea . . . In any case, the result of this infinitely laborious process is one of great simplicity in the achieved result.”⁵⁴ Of *The Flying Dutchman* (fig. 2.5), Fry wrote that “the quality of paint has the perfection and the elusive hardness of some precious stone. I doubt whether the artist himself could to-day tell us by what unconscionable processes, by snatching at what felicitous accidents, by obedience to what half-guessed principles, he has wrought the slimy clay of oil pigment to this gem-like resistance and translucency. The whole effect is that of some uneven enamel, certainly of something that has passed through fire to give it so unyielding a consistency.”⁵⁵ Along the same lines, Walter Pach wrote that the luster of Ryder’s paintings were “intimately connected with the pigment, and the glow which he has again and again extracted from his material is such as potters and enamellers have striven for, and only attained at their best.”⁵⁶ Whereas these descriptions have more bearing on paintings such as *Flying Dutchman*, others were equally enamored with the chiaroscuro of paintings including

⁵³ De Kay, “A Modern Colorist,” 252.

⁵⁴ Roger Fry, “The Art of Albert P. Ryder,” *The Burlington Magazine* 13, no. 62 (April 1908): 63, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/857485>.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁵⁶ Pach, “On Albert P. Ryder,” 128. Following these kinds of descriptions, Elizabeth Broun has connected Ryder’s ceramic-like surfaces to the vogue for decorative pottery in the 1880s and 1890s. See *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 127-28.

Jonah (fig. 2.7) or the subtle tonal effects and hazy atmosphere of nocturne paintings such as *With Sloping Mast and Dipping Prow* (fig. 2.10). These paintings combined dark tones with glowing forms that seemed to emanate from the canvas, giving an otherworldly appearance to the subject or suggesting liminal states between dusk and dawn or waking and sleep. As the twentieth-century critic and admirer Paul Rosenfeld wrote of Ryder's nocturnes, they seemed to be "pools of very dusk in gilt borders; cold glamorous patterns pitched so low that for a while they resist they eye, and open with extreme reluctancy their dreamy spells. . . . The tender conjunctions of shapes, the strange subtle promontories and capes of pigment, are as elusive as colors and sounds and light in a dream."⁵⁷

In many instances, however, it did not take long for the structural deterioration of his paintings to threaten these luminous qualities or subtle tonal variations, sometimes before they even left the easel. As the anecdotes about his toils over *The Lorelei* attest, his thick skeins of paint sagged and cracked over wet deposits of paint and varnish as he worked. The artist Arthur Davies remembered, for instance, how Ryder once came up to him "in great distress," asking what he did "to keep paint on his canvas" since "his paint at times would drip down & dry on his easel in blobs."⁵⁸ Ryder frantically resorted to radical and hazardous measures such as wiping his surfaces with wet sponges or passing his paintings under a faucet to remove dust and grime, coating them with thick varnishes poured straight from a jar, mixing liberal amounts of siccatives into his paints, baking his paintings in his oven to accelerate the drying process, and using red-

⁵⁷ Paul Rosenfeld, *Port of New York: Essays on Fourteen American Moderns* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1924), 3-5.

⁵⁸ G.B. Hollister, "Albert Pinkham Ryder as Remembered by Arthur B. Davies," unpublished remarks in Homer and Goodrich, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 222.

hot pokers to seal drying cracks.⁵⁹ As they are handed down to us today the tortured surfaces of many of Ryder's paintings are scarred by fissures, encrusted with brittle and blistering paints, and darkened by thick, soiled layers of varnish—both the consequence of his idiosyncratic experimentations and the impetus for them.

Ryder's degraded materiality is at its worst in *Curfew Hour* (fig. 2.2), in which browned globs of paint have contracted and calcified into islands floating over an amber varnish oozing beneath. The once lustrous surface has degraded into a matte, leathery encrustation scarred by cracks, the cottages to the left, cows below, and the peasant in the bottom right of the pastoral landscape all but reduced to ghostly apparitions.⁶⁰ (fig. 2.6) Ryder took the title of the painting from the opening line of the English romantic poet Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Courtyard" from 1751: "The curfew tolls the knell of parting day, / The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lea, / The plowman homeward plots his weary way, / And leaves the world to darkness and to me."⁶¹ Gray was incited by falling night and surrounding gravestones to contemplate the arbitrariness of one's lot in life, the inevitability of death for all regardless of stature and station, and the sobering reality of the mass of men left unremembered. The liminal state between night and day represented in the poem, signifying approaching death and once

⁵⁹ These procedures are described in Svoboda and Van Vooren, "An Investigation of Albert Pinkham Ryder's Painting Materials and Techniques," 38-9; Grimm, "A Study of Authenticity in Paintings Attributed to Albert Pinkham Ryder," 42. Though some pigments such as Prussian blue, which Ryder used liberally, act as natural driers (that is, they accelerate the oxidation of paint) a medium of metallic salts mixed with oil or resin can be added to paint to accelerate drying as well. These driers, however, darken paint and are unstable, making paint unusually brittle and susceptible to damage. For a description, see Meyer, *The Artist's Handbook of Materials and Techniques*, 209-12.

⁶⁰ The condition of the painting is analyzed thoroughly in Grimm, "A Study of Authenticity in Paintings Attributed to Albert Pinkham Ryder," 95-111.

⁶¹ Thomas Gray, "Elegy Written in a Country Courtyard" (1751), in *The Poetical Works of Thomas Gray* (New York: George Routledge and Sons, 1887), 43. A detailed analysis of the painting's iconography and original state is provided by Doreen Bolger Burke, "Albert Pinkham Ryder," in *American Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, vol. 3, *A Catalogue of Works by Artists Born Between 1846 and 1864*, ed. Kathleen Luhrs (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art in association with Princeton University Press, 1994), 10-11.

conjured by Ryder's imagery of an iridescent moonlit scene at twilight, is now manifested in the painting's material state, suspended between the exalted expression of Ryder's poetic vision and the vulgar physical world revealed in its atrophy.

That Ryder felt caught between these two worlds, just as his paintings have become, was something he expressed in frustration on several occasions. "Although things have'nt [sic] materialized yet it is not because I have held the honor lightly, but more because I have," he wrote to a friend regarding his progress on an unnamed painting in 1903. "There have been accidents . . . and a fault, I sometimes think, the smallest thing I do: it is as if my life depended on it: and then the great shadow, always, of the impossible and the unattainable."⁶² "Have you ever seen an inch worm crawl up a leaf or a twig," he also wrote, "and there clinging to the very end, revolve in the air, feeling for something to reach? That's like me. I am trying to find something beyond the place on which I have a footing."⁶³ In his experiences of painting and his witness to their decomposition, Ryder felt trapped between the higher life toward which he aspired and the degrading physical world to which he was inextricably bound. The wide, sinuous fissures in *Curfew Hour* bring to mind the artist's earthworm metaphor, twisting and winding their way through the surface just as we can imagine Ryder's doing as he tenderly yet tortuously worked to transform his materials into something beyond the physical, only to be pulled back to material reality by their decay.⁶⁴ In the end, even more than Ryder's searching worm, the snaking furrows and physical death of the painting conjure Edgar Allen Poe's "The Conqueror Worm" from 1843. Like Gray's "Elegy," Poe's poem was a meditation on death's unfailing certainty.

⁶² Ryder to Harold Bromhead, 20 March, 1903, in Homer and Goodrich, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 188.

⁶³ Ryder as quoted in Sherman, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 28.

⁶⁴ My thanks to Dr. Alexander Nemerov for his suggestion of this parallel between the artist's earthworm metaphor and the curvilinear characteristics of much of his imagery.

The verse illustrates a theatrical play viewed by angels on high and acted out by miming humans. These humans think themselves “Godlike” but are only “puppets” chasing phantoms, tempted by false hopes and dreams in the form of “vast and formless things,” with “Much of Madness, and more of Sin, / And Horror the soul of the plot.” Suddenly, death enters in the form of a grotesque worm, extinguishing life as fast as it came and making clear humanity’s inevitable fate in spite of its longing for immortality and the divine:

But see, amid the mimic rout
A crawling shape intrude!
A blood-red thing that writhes from out
The scenic solitude!
It writhes!—it writhes!—with mortal pangs
The mimes become its food,
And the angels sob at vermin fangs
In human gore imbued.⁶⁵

Pursuing the impalpable, fleeting phantom of the transcendent through paint—as Ryder put it, trying to “achieve immortality with a square of canvas and a box of colors”—both despite and owing to his methods his paintings have fallen prey to the tragic limits of physical existence, to “the Conqueror Worm” that inevitably feeds on all earthly life, becoming as vulnerable to the ravages of time and death as the actors of Poe’s play.

The Material and the Spiritual

In spite of—or perhaps because of—the palpable physical condition of his paintings, those who wrote about Ryder from the 1890s into the twentieth century often excused or ignored the decomposing materiality of his pictures. Instead, many gave prominence to the conceptual and spiritual origins from which his imagery flowed, coloring the artist as an inspirational visionary whose art and life were exemplary models for this materialist age in which faith was

⁶⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Conqueror Worm” (1843), in *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, 961.

wanting. One critic, for instance, proclaimed Ryder a “prophet,” “a flaming pillar in the darkness” hunting for “truth and beauty.” The artist’s small seascapes such as *The Flying Dutchman* (fig. 2.5), the author believed, were evocative of nature’s mysteries and of transcendence to a higher plane of being, its forms and rhythms having been “performed with measured ceremony, sanctification, and benediction from the Most High.”⁶⁶ Finding the superior value of the artist’s work to lie in his cerebral conceptions rather than their physical incarnations, the critic deemed Ryder’s work “thought-painting” and justified his unusual technique for being concerned only with “the attainment of the perfect expression of concentric conclusive thought.”⁶⁷ “Ryder paints dreams,” another author wrote along the same lines. “His paintings are evolved from his inner consciousness and are pure *tours de force* of the imagination and memory.”⁶⁸ Explaining away the peculiar nature of his methods, the critic and artist Elliot Daingerfield also emphasized the same sentiments, seeing Ryder as above all an artist rather than a painter—in his art, “the perfectness of emotional expression is far superior to that brilliancy of technic which is the token of the painter.” Ryder disdained painterly formulas or conventions since he “understood art to be an expression of the spirit, and any trammels put upon the liberty

⁶⁶ Walter de S. Beck, “Albert Pinkham Ryder: An Appreciation,” *International Studio* 70 (April 1920): 37, 42. Saul Zalesch, in “Ryder among the Writers: Friendship and Patronage in the New York Art World, 1875-1884,” 108-87, has noted how the reception of Ryder’s paintings between 1877 and 1884 by figures including Charles De Kay and Richard Watson Gilder focused on the poetic, painterly, and subjective nature of his work. These qualities were emphasized in order to validate their significance as opposed to more traditional notions of finish indicated by verisimilitude, visual clarity, and technical polish. Zalesch notes that the emphasis on the poetic and the spiritual in writings on the artist were due to the lack of a critical language that could adequately address these features of Ryder’s painting. In the section that follows I focus on the critical reception of Ryder’s work after 1885, when the hazardous effects of Ryder’s techniques were already apparent, arguing that the troubling nature of his decaying materiality rather than his painterly style was a cause for concern and the reason for critical insistence on the artist’s spiritual and poetic expressions.

⁶⁷ Beck, “Albert Pinkham Ryder,” 40.

⁶⁸ “Albert Pinkham Ryder’s Mystic Art,” *Current Literature* 45 (September 1908): 291. <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.wustl.edu/docview/124783722>.

of that expression would have galled him too deeply.”⁶⁹ In even more idealistic terms, Sadakichi Hartmann wrote that everything by Ryder, including technique, “was sacrificed to express the radiance of the innermost, the most subtle and most intense expression of a human soul.”⁷⁰ This kind of romantic sentiment was also rehearsed by Roger Fry, who drew attention to the significance of Ryder’s imaginative visions and excused his hazardous techniques by likening his genius to that of a “lyrical poet” whose talents could spontaneously generate in any moment and whose artistic “effects depend upon no slowly built-up knowledge of technique and construction, no inherited craftsmanship handed on from one generation to another. What Ryder has to say is so entirely personal, so immediately the fruit of his own peculiar humours, that he was bound to find for it a mode of expression equally peculiar and individual.”⁷¹ Though acknowledging the lamentable effect of Ryder’s processes, Fry reasoned that “we accept it nonetheless as it is, as . . . something in which the peculiar method is felt to be essentially bound up with the imaginative idea and to be justified by the perfection with which it renders that.”⁷²

Portraying Ryder as a mystic with superior powers of vision, many also vindicated his techniques by seeing in his works not only an eccentric disdain for the limiting trappings of convention but also a certain apathy towards the material world, his chosen medium of painting merely a means toward spiritual expression. This relationship was personified in the artist’s notoriously squalid living conditions, taken as a sign of his inexorable investment in the ideal and of a saintly disregard for earthly comforts. Drawing a parallel between Ryder’s art and life,

⁶⁹ Elliot Daingerfield, “Albert Pinkham Ryder, Artist and Dreamer,” *Scribner’s Magazine* 63, no. 3 (March 1918): 380.

⁷⁰ Hartmann, “A Visit to A.P. Ryder,” 3.

⁷¹ Fry, “The Art of Albert P. Ryder,” 63.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 64.

for instance, the collector and historian Frederic Fairchild Sherman found his painting to be “a complete expression of himself. His defective technic is as truly the result of his disregard of established procedure in painting as the disorder in which he lived was a result of his disregard of established laws of life.”⁷³ Ryder “lived in the abjectest disorder and dreamers are apt to do this,” remarked Marsden Hartley, a lifestyle “so typical of a mystic’s blindness to the common things of the day” and the mark of a true visionary America was likely never again to witness or produce.⁷⁴ “In that strange little world of chaos that was his home, his hermitage,” Hartley opined,

I have known that wisdom which is once and for all the wisdom for the artist, that confidence and trust that for the real artist there is but one agency for the expression of self in terms of beauty, the eye of the imagination, that mystical third somewhere in the mind which transposes all that is legitimate to expression. To Ryder the imagination was the man; he was a poet painter, living ever outside the realm of theory.⁷⁵

The mystic artist, poet, and writer Kahlil Gibran also recalled after a pilgrimage to Ryder’s apartment that the artist “lives the life of Diogeneus [sic], a life so wreched [sic] and so unclean that is hard for me to describe. . . . He is no longer on this planet. He is beyond his own dreams.”⁷⁶ Indeed, in his comments Ryder appeared to live to the fullest his romantic principle of self-denial for art’s sake: “The artist should not sacrifice his ideals to a landlord and a costly studio. A rain-tight roof, frugal living, a box of colors and God’s sunlight through clear windows keep the soul attuned and the body vigorous for one’s daily work. . . . The artist needs but a roof, a crust of bread and his easel, and all the rest God gives him in abundance.” Ryder delighted in

⁷³ Sherman, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 63.

⁷⁴ Marsden Hartley, “A.P. Ryder: The Light that Never Was” (c. 1929), unpublished manuscript, in Homer and Goodrich, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 228.

⁷⁵ Hartley, “Albert P. Ryder” (1917), 95.

⁷⁶ Jean Gibran and Kahlil Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran: His Life and World* (New York: Interlink Books, 1991), 281-83.

these windows in front of which he positioned his easel, their revelations of nature stimulating his quest for truth and beauty:

I have two windows in my workshop that look out upon an old garden whose great trees thrust their green-laden branches over the casement sills, filtering a network of light and shadow on the bare boards of my floor. Beyond the low roof tops of neighboring houses sweeps the eternal firmament with its ever-changing panorama of mystery and beauty. I would not exchange these two windows for a palace with less a vision that this old garden with its whispering leafage—nature’s tender gift to the least of her little ones.⁷⁷

As if only to underscore his otherworldliness, however, visitor after visitor to his Fifteenth Street apartment, where he moved in the mid 1890s, noticed how these “tender gifts” did not offer sunlit visions but were instead obscured by a grimy film of soot and cobwebs, revealing only dark apparitions. The rest of Ryder’s dim and musty dwelling, lit by a single gaslight, was cluttered with dust and detritus. It was stuffed and stacked to the ceiling with unused tables and chairs, old newspapers and magazines, empty picture frames, tattered clothes, dirty food cans, soiled dishes, empty cereal packages and fruit crates, soiled rags, piles of ash and soot, and even dead mice stuck in traps, evidently left to rot for months.⁷⁸ Browned, torn wallpaper on the walls and ceiling rotted away, with long pieces of cracked paper hanging from the ceiling like stalactites. A reporter from the *New York Press* described the space in disbelief:

Two thirds of the room was full, packed solid with things that had never been moved since they were set there years before. . . . In one corner a pile of empty cereal packages mounted to the ceiling. In another a stately tall chair staggered under its accumulated load. A black wedding chest rich with carving was almost undiscoverable under the odds and ends that burdened it. A splendid Greek head stands on the top board with a foot bath on one side and a box of hay on the other. Against an exquisite piece of portrait sculpture, the work of a master hand, a friendly package of rice. The confusion was unimaginable, incredible.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Ryder, “Paragraphs from the Studio of a Recluse,” 185-86.

⁷⁸ Winthrop Sargeant, “Nocturnal Genius,” *Life Magazine* 30 (February 26, 1951): 87.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Sherman, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 18-19.

The rug on which Ryder slept, which he used after his cot became too filthy, was tattered, dank, and infested with moths, stuffed into a corner of the wooden floor near the stove he used for both heating and cooking. On the grate of the stove, surrounded by piles of ashes, matches, and egg shells, the artist kept a pot in which he brewed for days on end a bizarre, nauseating stew, “freshening” it up by adding meat, fruit, beans, or whatever other ingredients he had at hand.⁸⁰ Mingling with the rancid stench of these concoctions and the musty odor of the apartment were the lingering vapors of oils, varnishes, and turpentine, with paintings and the physical residue of Ryder’s practice strewn everywhere. “What made it worse,” Sadakichi Hartmann observed, “was that everything was marked with the peculiarities of his technique. Lumpy drippings of oil paint and varnish, half-dry or hardened, clung to every object and gummed to the floor where it was still visible.”⁸¹ The artist’s “den,” as he called it, also filled with “a great disorder of canvases of a peculiar dark turbid tone, lying about in every possible position, amidst a heap of rubbish . . . I involuntarily had to think of a dump in which street urchins might search for hidden treasures.”⁸² In the center of this confusion, in ceremonial fashion, sat Ryder’s heavy wooden easel and an old leather chair, the shrine led to by a path carved between the rubbish. Glued to the floor and plastered thick with oils and varnishes, the basin of the easel was filled with matches and paint tubes and the floor littered with drippings, dirty brushes, and a rotting palette smothered with calcified paint and media.⁸³

His eremitic lifestyle exemplifying his fervent idealism and pious devotion to his art, Ryder’s art and life served as sources of spiritual inspiration in a culture plagued by economic

⁸⁰ Charles Fitzpatrick, “Albert Pinkham Ryder,” in Taylor, “Ryder Remembered,” 8-9.

⁸¹ Hartmann, “Albert Pinkham Ryder,” 503.

⁸² Hartmann, “A Visit to A.P. Ryder,” 2.

⁸³ Frederic Newlin Price, *Albert Pinkham Ryder: A Study of Appreciation* (New York: W.E. Rudge, 1932), xiii.

and scientific materialism; they promised hope for experiences of transcendence and beauty as well as for the powers of poetic consciousness to intuit the unseen. Yet the tenacity with which critics insisted on the artist's mysticism or privileged the superior imagination, clairvoyance, and feeling of his poetic visions while excusing or eliding their material incarnations reveals deeper fears and anxieties over the tangible conditions of his paintings. Their decay, for one, threatened their preservation, demonstrating an abiding concern for the conservation of such cultural heritage. "Alas for the eternity of pictures," Hartley lamented some twenty years after Ryder's death. His paintings "are so far gone because of their faulty technique, some of them having long since slid down their surfaces, lying at present in pigmental folds at the mercy of any chemical disturbance."⁸⁴ Perhaps even more immediate and disconcerting, however, was that his faulty technique, together with his disintegrating, murky surfaces, made evident a struggle between the artist and his materials that few were willing to concede or recognize. When they did, it was often romanticized as part of the natural, organic ebb and flow of artistic creation. "What bitter torments and what curiously twisted ecstasies," Sadikichi Hartmann observed, "must have moved through the undergrowth of his emotions in reducing the original color splendor to gloom, and then to revivify the same with vivid points."⁸⁵ In more critical yet no less romantic terms, another commentator observed that the artist, whose "laborious and unintelligent practice of superimposing colors upon each other at unreasonable times explains the deplorable wrecks which many of his canvases are fast becoming," was an "inspired bungler working with

⁸⁴ Hartley, "Albert Pinkham Ryder" (1936), 263.

⁸⁵ Sadakichi Hartmann, "Albert Pinkham Ryder," *Magazine of Art* 31 (September 1938): 501-2.

materials which he never understood” but who nonetheless mysteriously “tortured his medium into expressing forms of bewildering beauty.”⁸⁶

While these comments hinted at the conflicted nature of Ryder’s processes, others—observed by fellow painters sensitive to the nuances of their medium—were much more pointed, offering deeper insight into what may have distressed his audiences. The most extensive of these was by the twentieth-century artist Charles Sheeler, an artist who came of age among a generation of American moderns who for the most part looked with reverence on Ryder’s subjective and graphically powerful art. For Sheeler, however, whose precisionist paintings of industrial landscapes or domestic interiors were shaped by a meticulous, systematic attention to technical craft, Ryder’s art demonstrated the opposite of this kind of mastery and control:

As for Ryder, his subject almost invariably had its origin in an idea contained in a specific poem or in an image evoked by a poetic idea. A given picture was, as we know, built up over a period of numerous years with many additions and subtractions in the course of the elusive process of transforming the image of the mind into an image for the eye. Nature was a point of departure for his flight into fantasy. Fantasy has its place in art, but I feel that in Ryder this was never fully translated into the special terms of painting. His uncertainties, his continual revisions are partial proof. I suppose no artist known to history ever revised his work so often. He had no sense of the painter’s materials but built his canvases with layers of varnish and bitumen. He never seemed to care about his craft enough to learn it. It seems to me that there is very little in Ryder that we cannot learn in literature, and not so well, because we are continually being troubled by his struggle with his medium.⁸⁷

For Sheeler, the literary inspirations for Ryder’s art, including romantic authors such as Poe, Byron, Hugo, Shakespeare, Coleridge, and Longfellow, among many others, had more to offer than Ryder’s disruptive paintings.⁸⁸ Engrossed in fantasies and dreams, Ryder’s art according to

⁸⁶ Glen Mullin, “Albert Ryder,” *The Nation* 112, no. 2920 (June 22, 1921): 899-900.

⁸⁷ Charles Sheeler as quoted in Constance Rourke, *Charles Sheeler: Artist in the American Tradition* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), 186.

⁸⁸ On the literary influences on Ryder’s art, see Broun, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 80-99.

Sheeler lost itself in a dramatic breach between the conceptualization of an image and the physical process of painting, made apparent in his technical failings. In more cursory terms, Walter Pach observed the same when he wrote that Ryder's painting had unfortunately "withdrawn into separate elements of mind and matter."⁸⁹ Hartley, too, made this kind of summary explanation in an otherwise admiring memorial: "No artist . . . was ever more a master of his ideas and less a master of the medium of painting than Ryder; there is in some of his finest canvases a most pitiable display of ignorance which will undoubtedly shorten their life by many years."⁹⁰

As Sheeler's derisive comments in particular make clear, the troublesome discontinuity between conception and execution embodied in Ryder's paintings subjected the transformative powers of the artist and the higher faculties of the mind to the brute matter of paint, his ethereal visions of the poetic and supernatural tormented by the cruel contingencies of the physical world. The disquieting nature of Ryder's paintings that were often repressed in the reception of his work owed to more than the apparent struggle between mind and matter; rather, it was the way his atrophying materiality threatened the reality of soul and spirit that many sought proof of in his art. Instead of reassuring revelations of a higher realm of being, the decay of Ryder's paintings, which compromised his sanctified expressions, unnervingly conjured the very spiritual uncertainties of the age that critics enlisted his art to soothe and mitigate.

This crisis in faith came into focus in debates concerning human immortality, the spiritual transcendence of individual consciousness, and the persistence of the soul beyond physical life explored by Ryder's contemporaries, including religious leaders, intellectuals, philosophers, and

⁸⁹ Walter Pach, "Albert Pinkham Ryder, Thomas Eakins," in *Queer Thing, Painting: Forty Years in the World of Art* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938), 62.

⁹⁰ Hartley, "Albert P. Ryder" (1917), 94.

scientists. Developments in biology and physiology were especially troubling to beliefs in the unseen, reducing the mind—the fountain of soul and spirit—into a physical entity subject to the chance permutations of brute matter. Ryder’s decaying works would have undoubtedly made manifest the challenges to spiritual life wrought by such materialist theories of life and nature. “Beware of science” John Fiske wrote in jest from a believer’s perspective, characterizing the apprehensive tenor of the day, “lest with its dazzling discoveries and adventurous speculations it rob us of our soul’s comfort and leave us in a godless world.” Fiske admitted that scientific materialism threatened faith with every discovery or revolution in theory:

Time-honoured creeds are losing their hold upon men; ancient symbols are shorn of their value; everything is called into question. . . . There are those who deny the existence of God. There are those who would explain away the human soul as a mere group of fleeting phenomena attendant upon the collocation of sundry particles of matter. . . . How then, it is asked, amid the general wreck of old beliefs, can we hope that the religious attitude in which from time immemorial we have been wont to contemplate the universe can any longer be maintained? Is not the belief in God perhaps a dream of the childhood of our race, like the belief in elves and bogarts which once was no less universal? And is not modern science fast destroying the one as it has already destroyed the other?⁹¹

For Fiske, science could in fact enhance understanding of the divine rather than wither faith away, as exemplified in his efforts to reconcile evolutionary theory with religious belief. Fiske’s *Outlines of a Cosmic Philosophy* had been an argument for the omniscient presence of divine intelligence, seeing the universe and evolution as a comprehensible manifestation of a divine energy that humanity was only beginning to grasp. Science, however, promised to further enrich human knowledge; just as it advanced our understanding of nature, so too would our understanding of the spiritual life evolve. Other thinkers also tackled the dilemmas that materialist views of nature posed to faith. “We have looked on while disrespect for the unseen, in the name of science, has torn at the vitals of everything which makes life worth living, or death a

⁹¹ John Fiske, *The Idea of God as Affected by Modern Knowledge* (1885; repr., Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913): 42, 58-60.

great opportunity,” described Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1844-1911), author of the best-selling novel *The Gates Ajar* (1868), which reassured those who lost loved ones during the Civil War of the reality of the afterlife. Modern science however, had thrown such beliefs into question, robbing civilization of immortality and transcendence:

We have endured while murder in the name of surgery has been done upon the fair body of truth. We have suffered while the sweet reasonableness of human hope as writhed under the scalpel of its vivisectors. . . . We learned that we were not men, but protoplasm. We learned that we were not spirits, but chemical combinations. We learned that we had laid up treasure in the wrong places. We learned that the Drama of Hamlet and the Ode to Immortality were secretions of the gray matter of the brain.⁹²

“The theory that the body is a mechanism operated by the soul which is a material entity composed of [a] lighter and more ethereal substance, has nothing to commend it when viewed by modern science,” another intellectual stated, characterizing the spiritual dilemmas of the age.

“The phenomena of life as we now live it, including the facts of consciousness and the whole complicated process of sensory existence, are bound up with the body.”⁹³ If the soul is dependent on the brain, William James also asked, “How can we believe in life hereafter when Science has once and for all attained to proving, beyond possibility of escape, that our inner life is a function of that famous material, the so-called ‘gray matter’ of our cerebral convolutions? How can the function possibly persist after its organ has undergone decay?”⁹⁴

In the face of such dire questions, many thinkers, including Fiske, Phelps, and James, devised theories to sustain belief in the transcendence of soul and spirit, or at least hold out its possibility. Answering skeptics with a theoretical argument for immortality, for instance, and

⁹² Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, "The Psychical Wave," *Forum* (June 1886), <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.wustl.edu/docview/90986443>.

⁹³ Kirsopp Lake, *Immortality and the Modern Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1922), 17-18.

⁹⁴ William James, *Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1898), 7.

granting the philosophical possibility that the phenomena of sense experience were illusory, James argued that we could conceive of the brain as an organ for the refraction of a divine energy transmitted from the genuine reality of “infinite Thought,” just as light passes through a prism.⁹⁵ Elizabeth Stuart Phelps found that theories of evolution, constituting the most direct threat to belief in the unseen, must “advance the struggle for existence into the struggle for immortality” for it would be nothing but a “moral atrocity” and “philosophical absurdity” if this tragic earthly existence, full of pain and suffering, were all that was given to us.⁹⁶ Courageous indeed were those who seriously examined “the question of a thinking and feeling world beyond or own,” the existence of which had been “already scientifically recommended to any mind that is not unwilling to accept it.”⁹⁷ Phelps held out hope that the “physical science” of her day would, in time, contribute to the development of a “spiritual science,” promising a “more orderly, more manly, and more nearly universal acceptance, than any form of religious belief detached from natural research is now likely to command.”⁹⁸ In spite of this hope, however, Phelps also warned that, for all of its enlargement of human understanding, neither science nor reason could help us reach the afterlife: “No dirigible airship has yet been invented to carry the human spirit to heaven and leave it there, while the human body inhabits this solid earth.” Imagination, feeling, and faith were needed to experience the transcendent. In ways reminiscent of Ryder’s representation of *Temple of the Mind* (fig. 2.1), Phelps described the threshold

⁹⁵ Ibid., 15-16.

⁹⁶ Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, "The World Invisible: Part I," *Harper's Bazaar* 42, no. 4 (April 1908), <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.wustl.edu/docview/125013371>.

⁹⁷ Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, "The World Invisible: Part II," *Harper's Bazaar* 42, no. 5 (May 1908), <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.wustl.edu/docview/125013107>.

⁹⁸ Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, "The Struggle for Immortality," *North American Review* 138, no. 331 (June 1884), <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.wustl.edu/docview/137191472>.

between earthly life and the unseen spiritual world as a gleaming marble temple, the climb up to which is long and arduous yet promising enlightenment and eternity.⁹⁹

John Fiske also addressed the issue of immortality, again reconciling science and religion to present a confident view of the supernal and life everlasting. For Fiske death was but an awakening, a blessing from the divine, without which life would be nothing “but a moral desert as cold and dead as the savage surface of the moon.” Far from antithetical, materialist doctrines of evolution and idealist notions of human immortality were not only compatible but intertwined. Modern science made it difficult to conceive of the metaphysical, he conceded: “At the moment of death, as soon as the current of arterial blood ceased to flow through the cerebral vessels, all signs of consciousness cease for the looker-on; and after the nervous system has been resolved into its elements, what reason have we to suppose that consciousness survives, any more than the wetness of water should survive its separation into oxygen and hydrogen?”¹⁰⁰ Yet, as he believed, there was a realm of existence that far surpassed the physical experience of human understanding. Recent scientific observations had only proven this: such as the notion that “we live and move in an ocean of ether in which the particles of all material things are floating like islands.” Just because the human mind could not conceive of the notion that “disembodied souls” occupy the space around us did not disprove it; rather, it only affirmed the possibility since proof could not be found otherwise. Consciousness was an altogether different matter than the mere vibration of molecules. Instead of thought being the product of the brain, like music is to a harp, Fiske believed it was more likely that consciousness was more likely an emanation from a “Divine Intelligence” for which the brain was a temporary instrument, an equation in which “the

⁹⁹ Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, "The World Invisible: Part III," *Harper's Bazaar* 42, no. 7 (July 1908), <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.wustl.edu/docview/125010227>.

¹⁰⁰ John Fiske, *Life Everlasting* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1901), 18, 54-55.

soul is not the music, but the harper.”¹⁰¹ For Fiske, immortality could neither be confirmed nor denied at the present stage of human understanding, but its reality would inevitably be validated through the continued study of natural forces. Such knowledge would progress in tandem with human evolution, moving toward a perfected spiritual life marked by “the ever-increasing predominance of the life of the soul over the life of the body.”¹⁰²

The theories of Fiske and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps aimed to reassure believers and cynics alike of the reality of the transcendent in an age when science undermined traditional forms of belief and in which nothing less than the fate of humanity was at stake. While they demonstrate the ways in which believers adapted their thinking in this post-Darwinian era, such theoretical convictions that neatly synthesized evolutionary science with traditional religious beliefs were themselves tantamount to a struggle for the survival of faith in an age riddled with doubt. In this context, Ryder’s paintings embodied this intellectual struggle between the material and spiritual: his oozing, crumbling, and wrinkling surfaces behaved like so much decaying and secreting gray matter, obliterating the life of the soul manifested in the artist’s poetic visions. All that constituted the spiritual self, his surfaces augured—consciousness, feeling, belief, and experiences of the transcendent—were not ordained and sanctified from above. Instead, like Ryder’s atrophying works they were the product of the random permutations and chemical combinations of brute matter and subject to the finitude of physical existence.

Like his contemporaries, Ryder also experienced this intellectual and spiritual crisis, his struggles with painting conjuring forth the very uncertainties he worked to temper through his visionary paintings. The artist’s frantic, injurious efforts to save his paintings from the ravages of physical deterioration can be seen as material counterparts to the intellectual efforts of thinkers

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 62-63, 80.

¹⁰² Fiske, *The Idea of God as Affected by Modern Knowledge*, 165.

like Fiske and Phelps to reconcile science and spirituality and restore belief in the unseen. Uncharacteristically for writings on the artist, which so often focused on his resolute faith in the transcendent, the painter Marsden Hartley hinted at the notion that Ryder was afflicted by these fears and anxieties concerning the spiritual. Hartley perceived in the artist's "little pictures" not the fruits of a steadfast believer but rather the tortured "drama of the sick soul," epitomizing "the tragic union of love and death. There is an unceasing passion in them," Hartley wrote, "to enter that 'other' world—to escape, if possible, from this unceasingly wearisome one." For Hartley, the beauty of Ryder's pictures came from the artist's "ancient soul longing for the ancient illusions," yet they were also filled with "despair," even "hypocrisy," owing to Ryder's lurking suspicions or fears that such dreams were folly in a materialist age. This was evident in seascapes such as *Jonah* (fig. 2.7), in which the seas became "dramatic entities possessed of the devil and devilish treacheries" rendered in all of the ocean's "poetic terror and its poetic mercilessness."¹⁰³

Whereas Hartley found evidence of Ryder's "sick soul" in the natural imagery of his seascapes, we can also see this tragic attitude towards life and nature in the artist's materiality, his deteriorating surfaces embodying the spiritual anguish the artist experienced in and through painting. The psychological models of the sick soul and the "healthy minded" were developed by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* published in 1902, a product of this age of spiritual examination in which he studied religion in terms of its value to personal experience rather than its claims to truth.¹⁰⁴ For James, the healthy minded inherently saw the world as something harmonious, hospitable, and benign. For these buoyant souls, pain, suffering, and

¹⁰³ Hartley, "A.P. Ryder: 'The Light That Never Was'," 227.

¹⁰⁴ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902; repr., New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), 448.

other forms of evil were but fleeting aspects of life extraneous to God's plan and excluded from their optimistic worldviews.¹⁰⁵ Among the healthy-minded James included authors such as Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson along with advocates of "New Thought" and other "mind-cure" movements of the day who endorsed the power of positive thought in shaping one's life. Also in this category were modern liberal Christians who banished from their musings the "morbidness" of "the old hell-fire theology," insisting on "the dignity rather than on the depravity of man." James might well have also included in this category intellectuals such as John Fiske, whose thinking exemplified the new "religion of Nature" influenced by evolutionary theory. "The idea of universal evolution," James found, "lends itself to a doctrine of general meliorism and progress which fits the religious needs of the healthy-minded so well it seems almost as if it might have been created for their use."¹⁰⁶

Whereas the healthy-minded maintained steadfast optimism in the beneficence of the universe, for the sick-souled the world seemed naught but pain and suffering, a cruel source of dissonance, resistance, and misery. For these anguished hearts, evil was not something that could be ignored or denied—it was not a "diseased, inferior, and excrementous stuff" that could be easily "sloughed off and negated." James differentiated between two kinds of sick souls. The more morbid kind felt that sin and evil permeated being at its core. These were souls for whom there was "a wrongness or vice in his essential nature, which no alteration of the environment, or any superficial rearrangement of the inner self, can cure, and which requires a supernatural remedy." There were others, however who didn't live in such eternal "darkness and apprehension." Instead, their descent into melancholy and despair was periodical and something

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 86-87.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 91, 89.

to which even the most healthy-minded were susceptible. It was a temporary state of spiritual uncertainty incited by discordant experiences of the world, when individuals found themselves face to face with harsh realities and the sobering awareness that “life and its negation are beaten up inextricably together.” These were “people for whom evil means only a maladjustment with *things*, a wrong correspondence of one’s life with the environment.” This was an evil that was “curable, in principle at least, upon the natural plane, for merely by modifying either the self or the things, or both at once, the two terms may be made to fit, and all go merry as a marriage bell again.”¹⁰⁷ In their moments of tormented unbalance, however, those other sick souls discovered misery in the imminence of suffering and in the vulnerability of life to decay and death. In these instances, those uplifting qualities “of the successful moments themselves when they occur is spoiled and vitiated. All natural goods perish. Riches take wings; fame is a breath; love is a cheat; youth and health and pleasure vanish. Can things whose end is always dust and disappointment be the real goods which our souls require? Back of everything is the great spectre of universal death, the all-encompassing blackness.”¹⁰⁸

Otherwise ever the optimistic visionary, in his experiences of painting Ryder typified the kind of sick soul whose despondency was provisionally aggravated by the estrangement between inner and outer life, between his spiritual ideals and the resistance of the material world of painting to these beliefs. Induced by and embodied in his volatile surfaces, his struggles were moments of despair in which the artist felt trapped between the higher life toward which he aspired and the physical world to which he was bound, coming face to face with the realization that all “are partners of death, and the worm is their brother,” to use James’s suitable phrase. “Let

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 124-25.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 128.

our common experiences be enveloped in an eternal moral order; let our suffering have an immortal significance; let Heaven smile upon the earth, and deities pay their visits; let faith and hope be the atmosphere which man breathes in,” Ryder might well have said along with James in his phases of healthy-mindedness. Yet amidst the ebb and flow of painting, at one moment reveling in his experiences and creations, at another dejected by the resistant physicality of his materials and their decay, Ryder at times instead found “the curdling cold and gloom and absence of all permanent meaning which for pure naturalism and the popular science evolutionism of our time are all that is visible ultimately.” In such instances, James described, “the thrill stops short, or turns into anxious trembling.”¹⁰⁹ Realized in the fidgeting, apprehensive brushstrokes stippled across the surfaces of his pictures like *Temple of the Mind* (fig. 2.1), Ryder’s anxious trembling was provoked by the premonition shared by others of his generation: that the spiritual self was but a fleeting sensation as susceptible to the random permutations and limitations of brute matter as his deteriorating paintings. The artist’s wild experimentations, in this sense, were not just material techniques aimed at attaining specific effects and preserving his poetic incarnations. They were also, in psychological terms, distressed efforts to modify the external world of things to correspond to inner beliefs; to restore a healthy-minded assurance of the spiritual life that his deleterious methods paradoxically tore asunder.

Ryder’s *Jonah* (fig. 2.7) embodies the kind of struggle between matter and spirit that led to moments of doubt and misery. Ryder labored and tortured over *Jonah* for over ten years, beginning around 1885. Though in its early stages he had written “I am in ecstasys [sic] over my *Jonah*: such a lovely turmoil of boiling water and everything,” he was still toiling over the

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 130.

painting a decade later.¹¹⁰ Ryder built layer upon layer of rich paints, oils, and varnishes, all the while scraping or rubbing off portions, shifting forms, and gouging out clumps of rich pigments, experimenting with techniques until he found he could “make it felt as true” as he put it.¹¹¹ The splintered surface of the painting, riddled with wide, deep fissures, is the result of discrepancies in viscosity and drying time between his thick, impastoed underpaintings and thinner scumblings and glazings of green, pink, red, orange, and blue he piled on top to achieve a shimmering effect of depth and surface. The color, however, has dulled and soiled to a murky brown, with forms and shapes such as the ghostly figures in the boat fading into the dark, molten surfaces that seem to swallow light. The painting is thick with undulations and mounds of roiling paint giving the object a visceral mass and weight, particularly at the bottom of the canvas where paint has sagged. The painting was so dense, in fact, that when it was delivered to the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s retrospective exhibit of the artist’s work in 1918, the stretcher had separated from the frame and the canvas pulled from the stretcher, torn from the fastening tacks owing to the sheer weight of media.¹¹²

Jonah exemplifies Ryder’s belief that “an ounce of poetry added to a picture is worth many pounds of paint literally; and truly worth the doing and undoing of an hundred pictures to obtain.”¹¹³ Starting to crack and slide almost immediately after he began the work, the painting embodies the alienation between spirit and matter Ryder experienced in painting it, reflected in

¹¹⁰ Ryder to Thomas B. Clarke, 7 April 1885, in Homer and Goodrich, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 189.

¹¹¹ Ryder to C.E.S. Wood, 10 January 1895, in Broun, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 235.

¹¹² Bryson Burroughs apologized and described the incident to the painting’s owner, Charles Erskine Scott Wood, in a letter of October 15, 1918. From the Albert Pinkham Ryder Curatorial Files, Smithsonian American Art Museum.

¹¹³ Ryder to C.E.S. Wood, 2 October 1899, in Homer and Goodrich, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 210.

its tortured surface and the subject of the “soul’s despair in conflict with wind and wave.”¹¹⁴ The work represents the moment the disobedient prophet is cast overboard by his shipmates for incurring the wrath of God in the form of a violent storm and the looming whale ready to consume him. Consumed by the churning swells, the vulnerable Jonah, terror contorting his face, raises his arms desperately toward God, who holds an orb in his right hand while extending his left hand in benediction. In an image of man’s helplessness against the power of nature that promises hope for redemption, it is perhaps no coincidence that the flailing Jonah, on the verge of being engulfed by the maelstrom, resembles Ryder (figs. 2.8 and 2.9). Whereas in Homer’s self-portrayal in *Driftwood* (fig. 1.22) the artist is seemingly on the verge of falling into the consuming physical world of paint/water, Ryder represented himself caught in its vortex. Frantically reaching skyward toward the divine, the vulnerable, writhing artist is clutched by the ineluctable turbulence and wrath of the sea, symbol of the alienating power of the material world of painting, in which the artist’s spiritual yearnings were threatened by the vicissitudes of the earthly and base. The painting makes palpable not only a conflict between the material and the spiritual, but also the tragic struggles between a sick-souled Ryder’s romantic attitudes towards art and nature and the crude limitations of the physical world, embodied in the roiling waters and cracked surface bearing the traces of decay and death.

Ryder’s romanticism, in terms of his artistic and poetic themes, has been examined in great detail. An idealistic celebration of the imagination, his art was concerned with expressing the broad range of human emotion, from comedy to tragedy to spiritual uplift, conveyed through the human figure, the forms of nature, and fanciful symbols, his images often inspired by romantic authors such as Poe, Longfellow, Coleridge, and Hugo, as well as the composer

¹¹⁴ Hartley, “Albert P. Ryder” (1917), 94. In 1965 conservators filled the cracks of the painting and varnished the surface, noting that it is unlikely the painting will ever fully dry. See Broun, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 237.

Wagner.¹¹⁵ Ryder's practice of writing poetry alongside his painting, some of which were meant to accompany his paintings while others were independent works focusing on themes of love, tragedy, and divine power, also reveal the romantic habit to link painting with poetry and literature. The nature of Ryder's romanticism, however, reached deeper than matters of artistic subject to an even more fundamental level, coloring how he perceived and engaged with the external world. Infusing the external world with spirituality and poetic feeling, nature for Ryder was "not an external phenomenon but an embodiment of man's subjective self," as Lloyd Goodrich observed.¹¹⁶ The literary historian M.H. Abrams has examined how the metaphor of the lamp was used to characterize such romantic concepts of consciousness developed in the early nineteenth century. Demonstrating a "radical transformation" in "the concept of the role played by the mind in perception," it was opposed to the classical mode of perception that saw the mind as the mirror of nature and the external world as something distinct from the self. In this view, defining Winslow Homer's habit of thought, the mind was "a passing receiver for images presented ready-formed from without." In the romantic model, however, the mind was an active rather than passive agent in perceptual processes, "contributing to the world in the very process of perceiving the world."¹¹⁷ The metaphor of the lamp—as well as the fountain, which as we have seen Ryder included in *Temple of the Mind* (fig. 2.1) to symbolize the creative energies of the imagination—was used to characterize this projective power of the mind as it gave the world shape and meaning. The English poet William Wordsworth for instance, employed this

¹¹⁵ See, for instance, Broun, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 81-99.

¹¹⁶ Lloyd Goodrich, "Realism and Romanticism in Homer, Eakins and Ryder," *Art Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (Winter 1949): 27.

¹¹⁷ M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 57, 58.

metaphor in a verse from *The Preludes* (1805): “An auxiliar light / Came from my mind which on the setting sun / Bestow’d new splendor.”¹¹⁸

The lamp of the mind casting its glow onto nature and animating it through imaginative projection, art in the romantic way of thinking was the synthesis of soul with the external world. In turn nature itself became a mirror, the outward manifestation of inner reality, the mind “at once projective and capable of receiving back the fused product of what it gives and what is given to it.” The artistic imagination, “by projecting its own passion and life,” thus “transforms the cold inanimate world into a warm world united with the life of man.”¹¹⁹ Such creative fusion characterizes Ryder’s *With Sloping Mast and Dipping Prow* (fig. 2.10), the title of which was borrowed from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (1798).¹²⁰ Infused with the soft light of the moon, the painting’s warm glow can equally be read as the lamp-like emanation of Ryder’s imaginative energies bringing forms and figures out of cold darkness, the painting a mirror of the artist’s radiant projections. Such works realized Coleridge’s pronouncement that art “is the mediatress between, and reconciler of, nature and man,” as he wrote. “It is, therefore, the power of humanizing nature, of infusing the thoughts and passions of man into everything which is the object of his contemplation.” For Coleridge, as it was for Ryder, art imbued the world with “associative powers of passion” and in doing so “elevate[d] the mind by making its feeling the object of its reflexion.”¹²¹

¹¹⁸ William Wordsworth, *The Preludes* (1805), quoted in *ibid.*, 60.

¹¹⁹ Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 67, 68.

¹²⁰ The twentieth-century critic and collector Duncan Phillips made an extensive comparison between Ryder and Coleridge. See “Albert Ryder,” *American Magazine of Art* 7 (August 1916): 387-91.

¹²¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “On Poesy or Art” (1818), in *Coleridge’s Essays & Lectures on Shakespeare & Some Other Old Poets & Dramatists*, ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge (New York: E.P. Hutton & Co., 1907), 311.

Apart from his paintings, many of Ryder's statements also reflect these romantic attitudes towards art and nature. In addition to using organic metaphors to explain the process of creation as did Coleridge and Wordsworth ("An inspiration is no more than a seed that must be planted and nourished," as Ryder wrote), Ryder also elevated the expressive over the mimetic arts, employing the metaphor of the lamp to articulate his views on the power of the creative imagination.¹²² "Imitation is not inspiration," he insisted, "and inspiration only can give birth to a work of art. The least of a man's original emanation is better than the best of a borrowed thought." "The artist should once and forever emancipate himself from the bondage of appearances and the unpardonable sin of expending on ignoble aims the precious ointment that should serve only to nourish the lamp burning before the tabernacle of his muse," he also instructed.¹²³ For Ryder, to mirror reality in art was a sinful waste of the oils fueling the projective lamp of the mind that radiated its passionate glow onto the altar of nature. Whereas the external world was a source of inspiration, however, the muse was ultimately the fusion of outer and inner reality. Ryder's romantic fixation on capturing his imaginative projections was exemplified in his practice: while he drew inspiration from long, late night walks through the city streets, along the Battery, or in Central Park, the artist painted with feverish intensity in his dark, squalid quarters, bowing before his shrine-like easel with nothing but his thoughts and materials in his efforts to materialize the ineffable.

Ryder's art was in part an effort "to reanimate the dead universe of the materialists," as Abrams wrote of romanticism: "to overcome the sense of man's alienation from the world by healing the cleavage between subject and object, between the vital, purposeful, value-full world

¹²² On organic metaphors of expression in romantic thinking see Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 48-56.

¹²³ Ryder, "Paragraphs from the Studio of a Recluse," 185.

of private experience and the dead postulated world of extension, quantity, and motion.”¹²⁴ This dead world of matter frightfully materialized in his deteriorating paintings, creating an alienating rupture between the self and the world, Ryder’s struggles were efforts to alleviate this disjunction and restore the spiritual to his art. Yet Ryder’s anxieties were also fueled by the resistance of physical reality to the artist’s romantic attitudes towards that world. In the exacerbating chaos of his painterly efforts to fuse inner and outer life and in the disintegration of his works, Ryder experienced the limits of the subjective self, “the boundaries of the imagination” of the romantic mind that the art historian Bryan Wolf has examined in American art and literature. “In our very efforts to express the inexpressible—to be translated to visionary realms outside the confines of the real and present,” Wolf writes of the romantic consciousness in the early nineteenth century, “we can travel only so far as our imagination will carry us. And that imagination is bound by the very language it would transcend.”¹²⁵ For Ryder, these languages were not just the forms of nature or the visual language he used to convey his expressions, but also the substance of paint itself. Threatening to fall back into crude, formless matter, the resistance and deterioration of his materials, limiting and consuming his imaginative projections, created a seemingly irreparable and alienating breach between mind and matter that he sought to heal. “We are language bound, earth-mired, and our feet,” Ryder’s experiences incessantly reminded him, “like our occasional leaps, return continually to the brown earth from which we departed.”¹²⁶ In similar terms, the contemporary art historian Donald Kuspit has discussed Ryder’s art in terms of a conflicted relationship with the external world. For Kuspit,

¹²⁴ Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 65.

¹²⁵ Bryan J. Wolf, *Romantic Re-Vision: Culture and Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century American Painting and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 15, 10.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

the artist embraced it as an extension of the self yet he was also uncomfortable with it, “at once in contact with the world yet not committed to it . . . because he finds nothing in the world that corresponds to his attitude towards it.” Accordingly, Ryder had to “transform the world to suit his own immanence,” regarding “the world as purely an imaginative obstacle to its fully becoming what it ought to become.” This encounter was part of the dramatic resonance of his pictures, particularly in Ryder’s turbulent seas and in his protagonists’ efforts at “self preservation, despite the absence of a sustaining world.”¹²⁷ While we can see this in his imagery, however, we can also see it in Ryder’s struggles with paint, the conflicts between man and nature in his works inflected by his physical experiences and his distraught efforts to preserve the imaginative and spiritual self against the overpowering intransigence of his materials.

This theme of self-annihilation and the resistance of the material world to artistic idealization is one examined by American romantic authors, including Poe, Herman Melville (1819-1891) and Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864). The struggle for self-preservation, as we have seen, is materialized in *Jonah* (fig. 2.7), manifesting an experience of the physical world of both sea and paint as something “dangerous,” as Marsden Hartley noted of such works. “It would be expected of them that they would swallow ships and care [nothing] for little human fretting souls,” an attribute “of Herman Melville’s concept of the sea.”¹²⁸ Indeed, Ryder’s representation of maelstrom and leviathan brings to mind Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851), in which the narrator Ishmael embarks on the Pequod from Ryder’s hometown of New Bedford.¹²⁹ In particular, Melville’s passage in *Moby Dick*, “The Mast Head,” provides useful ways to think about the

¹²⁷ Donald Kuspit, “Ryder’s Expressiveness,” *Amerikastudien* 8 (1983): 220-21.

¹²⁸ Hartley, “A.P. Ryder: ‘The Light That Never Was,’” 227.

¹²⁹ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick; or The White Whale* (1851; repr., New York: The Book League of America, 1940), 8.

romantic dilemmas regarding the relationship between the self and world that bring into focus Ryder's material and metaphysical conflicts. The chapter serves as Melville's meditation on the tenuous relationship between the inner self and external reality in the romantic quest for spiritual revelation and unity with nature, symbolized in Ahab's manic pursuit of the elusive white whale.¹³⁰ In Ishmael's first station at the lookout post towering above ship and waters, he experiences a moment of spiritual transcendence. Above the fray of reality, where "you stand, lost in the Infinite Series of the sea," one is

lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie . . . by the blending cadence of waves and thoughts, that at last he loses his identity; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature: and every strange, half-seen, gliding, beautiful thing that eludes him; every dimly discovered, uprising fin of some indiscernible form, seems to him the embodiment of those elusive thoughts that only people the soul by continually flitting through it. In this enchanted mood, thy spirit ebbs away to whence it came; becomes diffused through time and space.¹³¹

Momentarily detached from the physical world through meditation, as Melville describes, the self is lost in dreamlike, mystical contemplation of the unknown. In such instances, particularly "for many romantic, melancholy, and absent-minded men, disgusted with the carking cares of the earth," the forms and figures of the world transform into outward projections of internal soul and spirit, fusing self and world into a spiritual whole. As Melville warns, however, these visions are fleeting and perilous: "But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch; slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. Over Cartesian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at midday, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through the transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise forever."¹³² Resembling the image of

¹³⁰ Charles Feidelson, Jr. *Symbolism and American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 29.

¹³¹ Melville, *Moby Dick*, 121, 124.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 123, 124.

Ryder/Jonah cast into the vortex of a foreboding material world of sea and paint, Melville explores the precariousness of romantic flights of fancy, its transitory moments of transcendence and unity with nature obliterated by an acute awareness of the limitations of physical existence. Tumbling back to material reality, or plunging into it to grasp those elusive, flitting forms, are modes of self-annihilation, generating an alienating breach between the self and the world. “To submerge in the sea is to drown,” as the literary historian Charles Feidelson has explained of the passage, “the self and the world are two, not one. . . . The phantom is ungraspable as long as we stand on the bank; and the ocean is annihilative once we dive into it.”¹³³ In his immersion into the chaotic, seemingly ephemeral materials of painting in order to seize the fleeting forms and figures of his projective imagination, Ryder, like Ishmael, experienced these dilemmas of romantic consciousness. Reaching towards the infinite yet clutched in the turbulence of physical existence, as in *Jonah*, the artist became painfully aware—in a muddied color, a crack in his surfaces, or the descending slide of his thick pigments—of the abyss between spiritual transcendence and the annihilating physical world to which we are vulnerable. For, as Melville reminds us in another way, “the soul is glued inside of its fleshy tabernacle, and cannot freely move about or in it, nor even move out of it, without running great risk of perishing.”¹³⁴

As Feidelson has examined, Melville’s allegory indicates the author’s literary struggles to reconcile the actual and imaginary into significant, meaningful form. Far from a seamless materialization of the spiritual, Ryder’s paintings also made tangible the frustrating antagonism between material realities and the romantic musings of mind and soul. This conflict and theme, shared by other romantic authors to whom Ryder was also compared, including Poe and

¹³³ Feidelson, *Symbolism and American Literature*, 29.

¹³⁴ Melville, *Moby Dick*, 121.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, resulted in the development of what Feidelson has argued was their distinct symbolist aesthetics, reflecting neither back on the romantic egoism of the artist nor on the external world but instead creating in their works an independent, symbolic reality. Ryder's symbolist aesthetic, too, can be seen as the product of these same struggles, in his case between the ideal world of the spirit and imagination and the real, tangible world of paint.

Ryder has been situated as a central figure among American symbolists, united in their preoccupation with “the internal, symbolical world rather than the external, empirical one,” escaping “from the tyranny of Fact and the denunciation of Soul which threatened to extinguish the life of the Imagination.”¹³⁵ Beyond his visionary imagery, however, Ryder's works also reflect the aesthetics of symbolism. This is exemplified in the way he obsessively insisted on an “expressive unit of form and meaning” through the fusion of “representation, design and subjective emotion,” creating “an equivalent but independent representation,” as the art historian Robert Goldwater has described of symbolism.¹³⁶ The result, as in *With Sloping Mast and Dipping Prow* (fig. 2.10), is a series of simplified yet dynamic forms interlocking ship, sea and sky into a unified pictorial structure, freezing Ryder's vision into a static, evocative emblem of mood transcending the particulars of time and place. “The emphasis then,” Goldwater explains of such aesthetics, “was upon the autonomous existence of the work of art, not for its own sake but because, thus freed of dependence on externals, it could alter and rearrange them in accordance with the artist's desire to evoke emotion and suggest ideas and so could become a symbol of the affective life of the mind.”¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Eldredge, *American Imagination and Symbolist Painting*, 15.

¹³⁶ Robert Goldwater, *Symbolism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 7, 9.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

The art historian Reinhold Heller has also observed that the symbolist creation of an independent work of art was a function of “the very materiality of the paintings themselves,” affirming “the existence of the painting as a newly created reality juxtaposed to or coexisting with the objects of ordinary reality.”¹³⁸ To be sure, Ryder’s paintings emphatically assert their physical presence with their tumultuous surfaces and heavy traces of the artist’s processes, presenting a “physical object with a life of its own, organic rather than fixed,” as Broun has observed of Ryder’s works.¹³⁹ Announcing their “otherness” and artificiality through facture, such devices “deny the presentation of art as an extension of visible nature,” writes Heller, insisting through form and materiality the work of art’s “symbolic function as the subjective expression of Ideas.” This “ironic concern with material process” on the part of European symbolists in particular was influenced by the German philosopher Hegel, who claimed that “the sensuous appearance of the art object is significant in that through it apprehension is made possible, and the making of the object in turn is a realization of human existence through a process of ordering and shaping.” “The physical, sensual object,” Heller explains, “is therefore spiritualized; in art the spirit appears made sensual.”¹⁴⁰

Drawing on Heller’s definition, the art historian Diane Chalmers Johnson has also proclaimed Ryder a painter of the “symbolist mode” for the way “he discovered painting that creates an object unto itself, not a mirror held up to nature.”¹⁴¹ Indeed, later in his life, Ryder recollected his epiphanic discovery of painting as an independent counterpart to nature in his

¹³⁸ Reinhold Heller, “Concerning Symbolism and the Structure of Surface,” *Art Journal* 45, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 148.

¹³⁹ Broun, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 122.

¹⁴⁰ Heller, “Concerning Symbolism and the Structure of Surface,” 150-52.

¹⁴¹ Johnson, *American Symbolist Art*, 77.

youth, presaging the material processes and character of his later works. Yet, as the passage reveals, his unique aesthetic was not the result of a comfortable, uncomplicated synthesis of thought and thing, but rather of his professed struggles with the medium. Painting plein-air, he recalled, he was dissatisfied with the effect of painting to replicate natural forms:

In my desire to be accurate I became lost in a maze of detail. Try as I would, my colors were not those of nature. My leaves were infinitely below the standard of a leaf, my finest strokes were coarse and crude. The old scene presented itself one day before my eyes framed in an opening between the trees. It stood out like a painted canvas—the deep blue of the midday sky—a solitary tree, brilliant with the green of early summer, a foundation of brown earth and gnarled roots. There was no detail to vex the eye. Three solid masses of form and color—sky, foliage and earth—the whole bathed in an atmosphere of golden luminosity. I threw my brushes aside; they were too small for the work at hand. I squeezed out big chunks of pure, moist color and taking my palette knife, I laid on blue, green, white and brown in great sweeping strokes. As I worked I saw that it was good and clean and strong. I saw nature springing to life upon my dead canvas. It was better than nature, for it was vibrating with the thrill of a new creation.¹⁴²

Confronting the problems and limitations of painting, Ryder realized in the medium the potential to serve as a vehicle of his romantic projections, his spiritual and emotional responses toward nature. Just as this epiphany was a result of his struggle with the medium, however, so too was the nature of his symbolist aesthetic. Expressive units of form, design and color, the reality of Ryder's paintings as independent physical objects, embodied in their palpable surfaces and organic decay, were also the result of his searching, conflicted efforts to fuse thought and thing.

Nathaniel Hawthorne examined this antipathy between the real and the ideal in his short story "The Birthmark" from 1843. Hawthorne's tale is revealing for the way it examines more specifically the resistance of the physical world to romantic ideals of truth, beauty and perfection that drove Ryder. Instead of an artist, however, the protagonist of Hawthorne's story is the eminent scientist Aylmer, newly married to a wife of unsurpassed beauty save for a birthmark in the form of a crimson hand on her cheek. Tormented by this intolerable defect, this "visible mark

¹⁴² Ryder, "Paragraphs from the Studio of a Recluse," 186.

of earthly imperfection,” he becomes possessed of the idea of removing it. For the scientist, this little blemish came to stand for

the fatal flaw of humanity which Nature, in one shape or another, stamps ineffaceably on all her productions, either to imply they are temporary and finite, or that their perfection must be wrought by toil and pain. The crimson hand expressed the ineluctable gripe in which mortality clutches the highest and purest of the earthly mould, degrading them into kindred with the lowest, and even with the very brutes, like whom their visible frames return to dust.

Like the blemishes and defects in Ryder’s paintings, the birthmark became for the scientist a frightening, terrorizing mark of earthly imperfections, a “symbol of his wife’s liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death.”¹⁴³ Confident in his own powers, the megalomaniac undertakes a series of experiments on his wife in his hubristic quest to transform matter into spiritual perfection. The crimson hand, however, is not a superficial mark but instead part of the fiber of her being, forcing the scientist to devise the most potent elixir to remove it. Upon drinking the concoction Aylmer’s wife falls into a deep sleep, and the crimson hand gradually fades. As it fades, however, so does her soul, the crimson hand “the bond by which an angelic spirit kept itself in union with a mortal frame.” Having achieved spiritual perfection, the scientist had unwittingly taken his wife’s life, his pursuit of beauty resulting in her destruction. “Thus ever does the gross fatality of earth,” Hawthorne warns, “exult in its invariable triumph over the immortal essence which, in this dim sphere of half development, demands a higher state.”¹⁴⁴

Like Hawthorne’s scientist, Ryder was obsessed with wringing his materials into spiritualized perfection through toil and pain, endeavoring to stamp his projective visions into physical reality and wrest them away from the gross fatality of the earth. Unlike the scientist,

¹⁴³ Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Birthmark” (1843), *The Complete Novels and Selected Tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. Norman Holmes Pearson (New York: Modern Library, 1937), 1022.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 1033.

Ryder was painfully aware of the material world's resistance to human ideals of beauty and immortality. His chemical experimentations and persistent fussing with the surfaces of his paintings were efforts to remove their defects, ironically pulling his visions back toward the crude and base. Many of the paintings that Ryder kept in his apartment for years with their faces to the wall, unwilling to relinquish them until he obtained the perfection he sought, must have invoked to the artist what the scientist's experiments did in his wife: that "even his most splendid successes were almost invariably failures, if compared with the ideal at which he aimed." To his wife, the volume in which Aylmer's experiments were recorded was "as melancholy a record as ever a mortal hand had penned. It was the sad confession and continual exemplification of the shortcomings of the composite man, the spirit burdened with clay and working in matter, and of the despair that assails the higher nature at finding itself so miserably thwarted by the earthly part."¹⁴⁵ Ryder, too, was burdened with clay and working in matter, his idealist aspirations for spiritual transcendence and beauty spoiled by the realities of the physical world.

The Abject and the Carnal

The physical world's resistance to the spiritual is also a theme in Poe's "House of Usher." More specifically, it is personified in the form of Roderick Usher, afflicted by a mysterious physical illness and mental disorder and suffering from "a morbid acuteness of the senses," rendering him painfully vulnerable to even the faintest of odors, light, textures, and flavors. Tormented by physical existence, Usher engaged in poetry, music, and paintings of a mystical, indescribable, and phantasmagoric nature as a means to reach for spiritual transcendence and

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 1029.

escape the bondage of earthly life, his art inflected by a “highly distempered ideality,” according to the narrator—a man of logic and reason.¹⁴⁶

Ryder may have been attracted to Poe’s tale for the way Usher’s phantasmagoric paintings resembled his own personal visions. Yet he also likely felt a special affinity with Usher’s spiritual efforts to escape the sufferings of both body and mind through art. Ryder, too, was afflicted by mental and physical ailments, especially in the last twenty years of his life. Since childhood he had problems with his vision, the impetus for his long, nighttime walks and preference for dark rooms. It also demanded that he refrain from painting periodically, the artist writing to a waiting patron that if he did not rest his eyes “there is a great possibility of little ulcers coming out of the eye itself; I need say no more to explain how serious a trouble of that nature has to be taken.”¹⁴⁷ In addition to eye sores, he was afflicted by chronic rheumatism as well as a host of other ailments, including aching, swollen feet, gout, insomnia, and chronic perspiration as well as fatigue, the artist growing excessively swollen and portly in his later years. In the early 1900’s he was diagnosed with nephritis, a disorder of the kidneys caused by prolonged exposure to toxins and poisons: likely the result of the strange victuals he boiled in the pot on his stove for days on end.¹⁴⁸ To alleviate pain Ryder would concoct homegrown remedies, including various kinds of water therapy, filling his stove with oatmeal to alleviate foot pain, and drinking copious amounts of buttermilk.¹⁴⁹ Within the context of the larger cultural concern for masculine health and revitalization, Ryder’s unusual and obsessive therapies—akin to his

¹⁴⁶ Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher,” 174-76.

¹⁴⁷ Ryder to Harold W. Bromhead, 12 October 1901, in Homer and Goodrich, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 188.

¹⁴⁸ Broun, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 140.

¹⁴⁹ Zachary Ross, “Linked by Nervousness: Albert Pinkham Ryder and Dr. Albert T. Sanden,” *American Art* 17, no. 2 (Summer 2003), 89-90.

idiosyncratic manner of painting—can be seen as equivalents to the direct contact with elemental nature practiced by Homer or the cult of the strenuous life advocated by Roosevelt. These therapies alleviated concerns over the degeneration and feminization of urban American men and served as antidotes to the nervous exhaustion, or “neurasthenia,” afflicting those worn by the enervating pressures of modern city life and the marketplace.¹⁵⁰ Indeed, though his physical ailments were ironically caused by his hazardous living conditions and eating habits, Ryder understood his illnesses to be the result of nervous exhaustion, his self-made remedies and nighttime walks aimed at rejuvenating his psychic and physical self.¹⁵¹ Ryder’s other response was—like his literary counterpart Usher—to paint, constituting the artist’s momentary efforts to escape the torment of physical existence through art and reach for the transcendent. His deteriorating paintings, however, would have only reminded him of his own physical suffering, particularly in the splintered, sagging surfaces of paintings like *The Lorelei* (fig. 2.4) or the tortured pigments of *The Curfew Hour* (fig. 2.2), which resemble so much drying, cracked, and scabbed skin or festering boils or blisters. These physical attributes invoke French philosopher Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection, a state of repulsion at something like bodily excrement or the skin congealed on milk because it blurs the boundaries between inside and outside, self and other, by reminding us of the thin limits and vulnerable boundaries of our bodies and thus our impending death.¹⁵² In this regard, Ryder’s deep anxieties over his paintings and efforts to

¹⁵⁰ For a discussion of neurasthenia in its cultural context as well as the various forms of therapy prescribed to treat it in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 47-58; Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 152-63. One of the earliest scientific descriptions of neurasthenia was the neurologist George Miller Beard’s *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1861).

¹⁵¹ Ross, “Linked by Nervousness: Albert Pinkham Ryder and Dr. Albert T. Sanden,” 86-96.

¹⁵² Jules Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2-3. Sarah Burns has also applied Kristeva’s notion of abjection to Ryder’s paintings, but in

preserve them from degeneration were also attempts to maintain a hold of his own physical integrity and hope for spiritual transcendence through paint, his physical ailments and susceptibility to the contingencies of earthly existence reflected in their sickly surfaces.

Beyond the abject states of Ryder's paintings, the sensual side of painting represented yet another threat to the artist's spirituality. The swirling, folding layers of paint concealed beneath the calcified surface in works such as *Jonah* (fig. 2.7) embody the way Ryder caressed, slathered, rubbed, and molded his pigments, the artist momentarily lost in sensual, painterly self-indulgence and unwittingly building up the painting into undulating masses and curves that suggest the voluptuous forms and folds of the human body. His constant shifting of forms, obsessive scraping away of layers of pigment or entire portions of paintings, and his moments of prolonged retreat from a work coupled with instances of intense absorption, reveal both a reveling in paint's sumptuousness as well as a measure of frustration with it as something threatening to spiritual selfhood. Ryder seemed to have emblemized this concern with painting in *Temple of the Mind* (fig. 2.1), which warns of the dangers the carnal posed to spirituality and creative consciousness.¹⁵³

Ryder's conception of love was largely platonic, Elizabeth Broun notes, the artist seeing in women a source of moral and spiritual uplift, represented in the idealized virgin figures in many of his canvases that are symbols of charming innocence and purity (fig. 2.11).¹⁵⁴ With one notable exception, *The Lorelei* (fig. 2.4), Ryder refrained from exploring the theme of the femme

terms of the reception and perverse fascination with his works, rather than from the view of the artist. See *Painting the Dark Side*, 240.

¹⁵³ Elizabeth Broun has suggested that "Longing and anxiety—at least partly sexual—were at the root of Ryder's way of painting, especially his endless striving toward perfection and insistence that each canvas needed just a few more touches." See *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 84.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

fatale that captured the imagination of artists and authors in Europe and America in the late nineteenth century. Informed in part by developments in biology and evolutionary theory, the preoccupation with the femme fatale in art and literature in the form of sirens, vampires, or witches manifested a perverse attraction to these evil temptresses as well as anxieties over the dangers feminine sexuality posed to male autonomy, morality, and the progress of civilization.¹⁵⁵ In the American context more specifically, G.J. Barker-Benfield has examined how the pressures and anxieties of competitive individualism and democratic culture shaped male attitudes towards female sexuality, perceived as potential threat to moral, physical, and mental health. Women were to be guardians of domesticity, sources of moral and spiritual cultivation, and perpetuators of the race. The discursive difference between the external, masculine world and the internal domestic realm of the feminine was “the difference between ‘turmoil’ and ‘peace’; between chance, competition, anxiety, vicissitudes, restlessness,” as Barker-Benfield observes, “and innocence, calm, moderation, simplicity, order; . . . between immorality and morality.”¹⁵⁶ The indulgence in sex for pleasure’s sake was tantamount to a form of anarchy, an immoral contamination of the domestic sphere that posed dangers to the psychological and moral development of the individual as well as to social and political order.

For Ryder, too, sexuality was a threat to morality and spirituality, a form of immorality to be restrained in the act of creation. His physical self-denial and renunciation, embodied in the belief that creativity “should be pondered over in his heart and worked out with prayer and

¹⁵⁵ On international representations of the femme fatale and the cultural anxieties that informed these images, see Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

¹⁵⁶ G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes Toward Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 20.

fasting,” was crucial to harnessing spiritual energies as a locus of inspiration and creativity.¹⁵⁷

The artist’s moments of sensual self-indulgence in painting, however, were both a source of pleasure and anxiety. Ryder’s sexual frustrations were made explicit in one of his poems, in which the artist personified himself in the wind, a transcendent force that could move freely through nature:

For I’m the wind, the wind, the wind, the wind!
I’ll away, I’ll away to where maidens
Are sighing for fond lovers,
And softly coo and woo
And whisper in their ears
Making their hearts throb
Their bosoms rise
...
But I’m the wind, the wind, the wind
I’ll away, I’ll away to gloomy pools profound
And stir the silence
Of their reflective depths
With rippling laughter
At my wanton freaks
And my fantastic wanderings
Who can pursue, who comprehend?¹⁵⁸

The tone of the poem shifts from elation at the prospect of sexual union to despondency in its impossibility, the ethereal, spiritual force of the wind unable to unite with the physical. Ryder’s poem expressed unfulfilled consummation. In the end, he retreats in dejection, the “gloomy pools,” notion of stirring depths, and unfathomable, “fantastic wanderings” begging comparisons to the artist’s paintings and searching processes. Ryder’s labors over *The Lorelei* (fig. 2.4), however, show how his sexual frustrations also manifested themselves in his painterly practice. Representing the siren whose seductive song lured men into the deadly waters below her, Ryder worked on the painting for over fifteen years. Obsessively shifting the position of the maiden,

¹⁵⁷ Ryder, “Paragraphs from the Studio of a Recluse,” 186.

¹⁵⁸ Ryder, “Voice of the Night Wind,” undated poem, in Broun, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 322.

changing her appearance, or scraping off and reworking the surface altogether, the siren was a source of both ecstasy and corruption, an object of desire that he returned to momentarily for gratification and which he would never relinquish—it was in his studio at the time of his death. Today, the siren has completely disappeared, as if in Ryder’s hands paint itself became a femme fatale, a seductive and wanton “freak,” to use the phrase from his poem, threatening to spiritual selfhood.

These characteristics of Ryder’s surfaces—the way they conjure the forms of body and manifest sexual anxieties—attracted the twentieth-century author and critic Paul Rosenfeld (1890-1946). Rosenfeld devoted the first of fourteen chapters of his book *Port of New York* (1924) to Ryder, positioning the mystic as a model for modern American artists. Rosenfeld’s interpretation was shaped by a radical rethinking of the body in the twentieth century, the critic embracing sexuality as the locus of being and identity. Bringing a quasi-Freudian interpretation to bear on Ryder’s works, the critic described Ryder’s paintings themselves as bodies, as living, breathing, tender and organic entities with “a delicacy as intense as that when all life becomes [a] tremulous palping finger-tip.” In spite of Ryder’s otherworldliness, Rosenfeld insisted his art was “sublunary,” of this earth instead of a higher, spiritual realm.¹⁵⁹ “Sexual fear in particular speaks from the forms,” the critic found. “It was the sexual expression of the mechanism of resistance to the present moment that kept the foregrounds comparatively empty, and gave interest preponderantly to the middle and upper reaches of the canvas.” Rosenfeld even went so far as to suggest that Ryder’s paintings—their square formats and palpable, undulating masses—were the female form, as it was in the hands of all male painters:

If to the conscious mind of an artist his canvas is a rectangle of stuff of prepared pigment; to the unconscious, it is the trunk of a woman. The regions of the rectangle have a

¹⁵⁹ Rosenfeld, *Port of New York*, 4, 5.

correspondence to the regions of the flesh. The means of communication is the application of paint; but the application of paint becomes to the unconscious a form of embrace. The canvas is brought to life through marriage: the full speech of body to body and soul to soul.¹⁶⁰

For Rosenfeld, painting was a sexual consummation between painters and their materials. Yet the absence of activity in the foreground of Ryder's paintings, near the base that corresponds to the sexual regions of the body, revealed Ryder's sexual apprehensions. The artist

could not bring his whole man into entire contact with the object. The upper, spiritual regions of the body were singing flesh to him. The lower he could not fit into his scheme of beauty. He was under the necessity of keeping a distance between the object of his interest and himself. The complete union, the complete seizure of the present moment, he did not wish to achieve. Hence, the dead areas in the surfaces he painted.¹⁶¹

Chaste and fearful of the carnal, Ryder was above all a poet who worked from the upper regions of spiritual feeling and imagination, which served as the force of his inspiration for twentieth-century moderns. American moderns, however, would have to wait for another artist, John Marin, in their search for an artist whose paintings demonstrated both sensual and spiritual expression.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 14.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 15.

Chapter III

John Marin's Warring Worlds

In Paul Rosenfeld's *Port of New York*, the same volume that opened with an account of Albert Pinkham Ryder, a photo of John Marin (1870-1953) by the artist's friend and dealer Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946) served as the text's frontispiece. Composed with the artist resting his chin in his hand and looking at the viewer with calm assurance, the photograph announced Marin's vital importance to the modern movement in American art (fig. 3.1). It was Marin, along with thirteen other artists, authors, composers, and intellectuals, including Stieglitz, who gave Rosenfeld "the happy sense of a new spirit dawning in American life," awakening "a sense of wealth, confidence, and of power which was not there before."¹ Whereas Ryder was in Rosenfeld's estimation the first American to create a unique form of modern expression in his romantic yearning for spiritual fulfillment and in his passionate, lyrical paintings—the artist's paintings ultimately inhibited by his restlessness and physical restraint—Marin was the artist of the twentieth century who most forcefully embodied the figure of a physically and spiritually liberated artist, bringing at last the wandering ship of American art to shore. "Marin," Rosenfeld believed, "is fast in American life like a tough and fibrous apple tree lodged and rooted in good ground." Drawing nourishment and inspiration from American soil, Marin's watercolors exuded the artist's bold lyricism and lust for life, the artist's "sudden, rhythmical, flashing visions" manifesting themselves on paper with an unsurpassed versatility of technique and vibrancy of expression.²

¹ Paul Rosenfeld, *Port of New York: Essays on Fourteen American Moderns* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1924), vi.

² *Ibid.*, 153, 156.

By the time Rosenfeld's tribute was published in 1924, Marin's reputation in the New York art world had well been established by supple watercolors such as *Movement: Fifth Avenue* from 1912 (fig. 3.2). As early as 1915 the *New York Sun* critic Henry McBride asked in astonishment why no major museums owned works by the artist or why connoisseurs and the public alike shunned his work. "Marin, as an artist," he thought, "has so long been a private force among aspiring art students that it is amazing to realize he is not yet a celebrity." The reason, McBride found, was that the watercolors by this "living, live original," manifesting his persistent originality and experimentation, appeared "to be mere confusions" to the mass of onlookers.³ For artists and critics, however, Marin was a quintessential modern artist as well as a supreme master of watercolor, surpassing even the great American practitioners of the medium, including John Singer Sargent or Winslow Homer. As McBride observed in 1916 of an exhibit of Marin's watercolors at Stieglitz's *Little Galleries of Photo-Secession*, informally known as *291* for its address on 5th Avenue, Marin "is one of the most undoubted talents in America, and its slow progress into the consciousness of the great public is a tragedy—for the public."⁴

In *Port of New York*, Rosenfeld echoed these sentiments. The author had Marin's urban paintings like *Movement: Fifth Avenue* in mind when he praised Marin's watercolor techniques in ways reminiscent of the critical reception of Homer's watercolors as a medium perfectly suited to the artist's aims and sensibilities. For Rosenfeld, Marin's art of spontaneous expression was perfectly attuned to the more fluid and unforgiving substance, "a means which precludes hesitations. It is a means which demands, perhaps as much as any other medium, rapidity of decisions. It will not wait for long calculations. It requires a sort of instantaneous discharge of

³ Henry McBride, "Marin and Taste," *New York Sun*, February 28, 1915, in *The Flow of Art: Essays and Criticisms*, ed. Daniel Cotton Rich (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 82-83.

⁴ Henry McBride, "Marin's watercolors," *New York Sun*, January 22, 1916, in *ibid.*, 99.

energy; a concentration and complete unification of resources, for its service.” Taking advantage of his medium’s insistence on speed and spontaneity, Marin in Rosenfeld’s estimation painted with such impulsive directness and skill in response to nature, embracing the immediacy of sensuous experience and emotional feeling, that “Whistler, Winslow Homer, Cézanne, the Chinese, are forgotten when he works. Conception and execution are so closely allied in Marin that they appear almost identical. His works are immediate realizations; expressions produced by one right in the middle of things and feeling them through every pore.” “And so much is Marin water color’s man,” Rosenfeld went so far as to say, writing as if the medium chose the artist for itself, “that he seems to be able to summon all his powers right on the spot before the singing landscape.”⁵

Movement: Fifth Avenue typifies Marin’s paintings of New York and areas near the artist’s home in Cliffside, New Jersey, demonstrating the artist’s response to the chaotic rush of modern urban life as well as the playful, expressive spontaneity with which he handled watercolors, summoning his expressive powers in the midst of the singing city. Painted on the spot near the corner of Fifth Avenue and Forty-Fourth Street, he began the painting on relatively thick, off white paper by using light pencil sketches and light blue strokes of paint to outline the prismatic forms of the distorted buildings and bustling crowds below.⁶ With the essential structure of the work in place, he then painted in a fury of activity, exploiting the medium’s potential with a variety of techniques. Executing broad horizontal washes of pink, orange, and blue in the sky, in the buildings and crowds Marin frenetically applied a broad array of marks,

⁵ Rosenfeld, *Port of New York*, 158-59.

⁶ The following discussion of Marin’s technique in this watercolor draws from Martha Tedeschi, “Great Forces at Work: John Marin’s New York,” in Martha Tedeschi and Kristi Dahm, *John Marin’s Watercolors: A Medium for Modernism*, exh. cat. (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 114.

from short, angular dashes and geometric scribbles to longer, free-flowing strokes of varying widths and opacity. In order to overlap forms and planes he also used “subtractive techniques” such as blotting out or rubbing off colors then reapplying pigment in layers, as in the brown angular forms on the left of the page.⁷ These overlapping, fragmented and repetitive forms and brushstrokes convey a dynamic sense of movement frozen in time. Executed with what one critic called Marin’s unique “lightning swift shorthand of suggestion,” the artist’s wish to indicate the watercolor as embodying an instantaneity of vision is indicated by the street clock to the right of the composition, hypothetically marking the time of Marin’s painterly encounter.⁸

In an early statement on these bold paintings of New York, written for Stieglitz’s publication *Camera Work* to accompany an exhibit of his watercolors in 1913, Marin outlined his aesthetic ideals to explain the unique character of his paintings:

I see great forces at work; great movements; the large buildings and the small buildings; the warring of the great and the small; influences of one mass on another greater or smaller mass. Feelings are aroused which give me the desire to express the reaction of these ‘pull forces,’ those influences which play with one another; great masses pulling smaller masses, each subject in some degree to each other’s power. . . .

While these powers are at work pushing, pulling, sideways, downwards, upwards, I can hear the sound of their strife and there is great music being played.

And so I try to express graphically what a great city is doing. Within the frames there must be a balance, a controlling of these warring, pushing, pulling forces. This is what I am trying to realize. But we are all human.⁹

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Edward Alden Jewell, “A Marin Retrospective,” *New York Times*, October 25, 1936, 39.

⁹ John Marin, statement in *Camera Work*, no. 42-43 (April-July 1913), in *The Selected Writings of John Marin*, ed. Dorothy Norman (New York: Pellegrini and Cudahy, 1949), 4-5. Hereafter referred to as *Selected Writings*. All correspondences cited are letters from Marin to Alfred Stieglitz, unless otherwise noted. Many of Marin’s writings and letters are intentionally structured in free verse or poetic form, attentive as he was to the structure and form of writing as he was painting. Where possible and necessary, I have preserved the original structure of the artist’s writings as presented in Norman’s volume as well as in the selections from the volume *John Marin by John Marin*, ed. Cleve Gray (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970).

Marin's watercolor, with the structures pulling inward and peeking over and around one another, leaning over the stream of businessmen marked with hasty splotches of blue pigment, depict these pushing and pulling masses, all vibrating together in an electric, vital impulse. More than just an informal, spontaneous slice of life, his pictures also constituted efforts to realize the pictorial balance of these elements. As he would state another way, for Marin painting "must not make one feel that it bursts its boundaries. . . . I can have things that clash. I can have a jolly good fight going on. There is always a fight going on where there are living things. But I must be able to control this fight at will with a Blessed Equilibrium."¹⁰ Though giving the impression of intuitive impulsiveness, Marin's aim was to create an equilibrium of these "warring, pushing, pulling forces" through the delicate coupling of explosive energy and the deliberate formal organization of form, color, line and texture, a practice subject to "human" contingencies of technical skill as well as the limitations of the medium.

As critics like Rosenfeld and McBride observed, the elasticity of watercolors was the means through which Marin could effectively combine these two seemingly antithetical poles of expressive immediacy and artistic control and order in response to things observed. "No other vehicle would have facilitated the spontaneous recording of the artist's impulsive response to nature," the art historian William Innes Homer has explained, the artist taking advantage of the "loose informality and speed of execution that the medium invites."¹¹ The artist's swift and gestural application of watercolors matching the chaotic rush and physical impact of the bustling scene, such works facilitated the notion that the artist's temperament and aesthetic sensibility were suited to the elastic medium in ways that seemingly collapsed the distinction between

¹⁰ Marin, "John Marin, By Himself," from *Creative Art* (October 1928), in *Selected Writings*, 126.

¹¹ William Innes Homer, *Alfred Stieglitz and the American Avant-Garde* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1977), 100.

conception and execution, between visceral experiences of the external world and the act of painting.

Just as there was widespread admiration for Marin's watercolors, however, so too was there often a common hesitation, if not disappointment, with the artist's work in oil paint, which the artist experimented with throughout his early career until taking up the medium in earnest in the late 1920s. Whereas Marin's watercolors indicated an artist in effortless control of his medium with whimsical exuberance, the artist's work in oil paint offered an altogether different aesthetic and sensibility. The critic Lewis Mumford (1895-1990), for instance, otherwise an ardent admirer of Marin, remembered lamenting upon seeing an exhibit with the artist's oils in the late 1920s that "Marin abandoned the medium in which he has no contemporary rival." For Mumford, Marin's effort to "master of new set of technical problems" was admirable, "but what was once spontaneity in one medium was thinness and superficiality in the other. In oils," Mumford found, "Marin was plainly a novice, and the question was: Was the change worth it?"¹² "We are a great admirer of Marin's watercolors," another critic characteristically felt in 1934, "and this showing contains some fine examples, but we confess to a sense of disappointment about the oils. The brilliant assurance which communicates a sense of place without ever failing the inner impulse of the artist, . . . which is the glory of [his] watercolors, seems to resolve in sketchiness and incoherence in oils."¹³

This reception of Marin's oil paintings characterized especially the responses to the thick, exuberant paintings seascapes the artist executed in the 1930s and early 1940s such as *My Hell Raising*, painted in 1941 (fig. 3.3). Such paintings bore the brunt of accusations of bewilderment

¹² Lewis Mumford, "The Art Galleries: Marin—Miró," *New Yorker*, November 19, 1932. 70.

¹³ Rita Wellman, "Pioneers and Contemporaries," *Parnassus* 6, no. 1 (January 1934): 13.

and incoherence, as if the artist outstretched his zone of comfort in tackling the subject of the sea in the more viscous and stubborn medium. Like Homer, in these works Marin turned from watercolors to oils to exploit the thick, greasy properties of the medium and conjure the weight and mass and movement of the roiling sea on the coast of Maine, where the artist and his family annually spent their summers. Bringing to oils the same vivacious and spontaneous approach he used in watercolors, he also sought to express his emotional and physical responses to this sublime power, trying to capture the pushing and pulling forces of the ocean instead of the city by exploring the play of masses in the churning waves and the dynamic conflict between water and rock. Marin's impulsive, instantaneous discharges of energy, however, as I will explore in this chapter, were obstructed by the resistant physicality of oil painting, the artist frustrated in his effort to exert balance and control over the pushing, pulling forces of paint itself in ways that undermined his artistic ideals for painting and intensified his own philosophical conflicts and uncertainties toward art and nature. In a letter to Stieglitz from 1934, written some three years after he began painting the sea in oils, Marin revealingly admitted the reality of struggle and failure in his painting : "For you see with awareness," Marin confided, "with alertness—with intelligence—with all there's *a something*—that undefineable—which creeps in—which often shows up that you weren't quite so aware—not quite so alert—not quite so intelligent—Then takes place a different awareness—an awareness of frustration—of defeat." For Marin, this sense of failure came with the recognition that his paintings were at moments unable to carry the burden of his aesthetic ambitions, directed toward creating a "masterpiece" that was

a worth while object—which carries aboard its making—the whole kit—
Sensitivity
objectivity
subjectivity
spirituality

and etc. etc. etc.—¹⁴

In Marin's lofty ideals, his painting was to be a synthesis of these seemingly antithetical aesthetic and philosophical attitudes towards art and nature, a combination of objective, naturalistic representations of the external world and subjective, expressive responses to that world, bound together in an aesthetic unity that accentuated the formal properties of painting while standing as an organic equivalent of these multivalent sensations. His roiling brushwork a frantic mass of pigment bordering on formlessness and threatening to burst the boundaries of the canvas, *My Hell Raising* demonstrates one of the moments in which Marin's synthetic ambitions for painting teetered on the edge of defeat, the artist struggling with oils to achieve his "Blessed Equilibrium." Maintaining a tenuous hold on form, color, and identity, each stroke in the sea of *My Hell Raising* is on the cusp of dissolving into the greasy morass of unctuous substance, as if weighted down by the conceptual and physical pressures the artist demanded of paint to simultaneously serve as objective representations, emotional and physical expressions, and paint on canvas.

As Rosenfeld's chapter on Marin indicates, the artist once held an esteemed place among American artists in the first half of the twentieth century. By 1948, his stature had grown to the point that he was voted by sixty-eight artists and critics nationwide as the nation's foremost artist in a survey in *Look* magazine. That same year, Clement Greenberg also proclaimed that Marin was "certainly one of the best artists who ever handled a brush in this country. And if it is not beyond all doubt that he is the best painter alive in America at this moment, he assuredly has to be taken into consideration when we ask who is."¹⁵ Recently, curator Debra Bricker Balken has

¹⁴ Addison, ME, 28-30 August 1934, in *Selected Writings*, 161.

¹⁵ "Are These Men the Best Painters in America Today?," *Look*, February 3, 1948, 44; Clement Greenberg, "Art," *Nation*, December 25, 1948, 732.

examined Marin's oil paintings of the 1930s and 40s, a largely overlooked aspect of the artist's career. Balken argues that Marin's importance was due to the unique way the artist carved out a middle ground between modernism and regionalism with his expressive abstractions of Maine, the two styles the focus of aesthetic and cultural debates during the Great Depression. Marin also prefigured and influenced the Abstract Expressionists, his painting "straddling multiple artistic movements while forecasting a distinct phase of mid-century modernist history."¹⁶ As in many other studies of the artist, Balken sees Marin's decreasing reputation since his death as a matter of circumstance: overshadowed by the Abstract Expressionists, Marin's stature also waned following the death of Stieglitz in 1946, the photographer responsible for the artist's fame through shrewd promotional tactics as well as annual one-man shows at his galleries. I would suggest, however, that Marin's reputation has faltered in part because of the difficulty his oil paintings of the 1930s and early 40s have posed, especially his oil seascapes which constitute the majority of his output in this more time-honored, "high muck a muck" medium, as he once called it.¹⁷ These works embody the artist's struggles with his materials in ways that have made his works boorish and problematic, filled with hesitations and doubt. These anxieties, evident in the artist's paintings as well as his writings, have been elided in studies on Marin in favor of conventional idealizations of the artist as a master in full conceptual and physical command of his media, directed by a resolute philosophical security. Marin's oil paintings of the Maine coast such as *My Hell Raising*, however, tell a different story. As the artist's writings and letters also reveal, his war with paint was as much intellectual as it was material. The fidgeting, congested surfaces of his oil seascapes demonstrate Marin's searching, sometimes conflicted attitudes

¹⁶ Debra Bricker Balken, *John Marin: Modernism at Midcentury* (New Haven: Yale University Press in association with Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, MA, 2011), 31.

¹⁷ Addison, ME, 30 July 1933, in *Selected Writings*, 151.

towards art and the external world, the artist caught between the two attitudes of the realist and the romantic, the scientist and the poet. This philosophical uncertainty that pervaded his thinking was amplified by the disruptive contingencies of oil painting manifested on the surfaces of his seascapes.

Between the Real and the Expressive

Marin's writings are filled with the spirited attitudes he brought to painting. Wrought with vernacular expressions and homespun aphorisms mixed with more high-minded aesthetic pronouncements, along with a good measure of cynicism and wit, they indicate what the art historian Wanda Corn described as his "boyish character, puckish personality, and reputation for an art of youthfulness, spontaneity, and gestural excitement."¹⁸ At the same time, Marin's distinctive and self-styled texts are filled with contradictions and frustrations. At one moment arrogant and affirmative, at another anxious and self-deprecating, his thinking demonstrates a mind struggling to lay hold of his aesthetic and philosophical values. "There are moments when I am unbelievably in love with myself," he wrote Stieglitz from Maine in 1927:

But there are moments when I unbelievably hate myself, for being myself.
Curiously twisted creature.
Prejudiced as Hell.
Unprejudiced as Hell
Narrow—as they make 'em.
Broad minded next minute.
Hating everything foreign, to a degree, with the opposite coming in, time and time.
A shouting, spread eagled American.
A drooping wet winged sort of nameless fowl the next.¹⁹

¹⁸ Wanda Corn, in *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 32.

¹⁹ Stonington, Deer Isle, ME, 21 August 1927, in *Selected Writings*, 115.

Such searching, conflicting pronouncements characterize his voluminous correspondence with Stieglitz especially. After first meeting in Paris in 1909, Stieglitz served as a constant source of psychological and financial support for Marin, overseeing the commercial affairs of Marin's art while providing the security of monthly stipends. He also served as a spiritual and artistic mentor for Marin, who confided in the elder pioneer of modern photography his artistic aims, triumphs, and frustrations.²⁰

The shared ideals between the photographer and the painter were forged since their early days at 291. At the gallery, Marin—already thirty-nine by the time of his first exhibit there—found a kind of artistic refuge with kindred spirits, having cast about in search of his vocation. Marin engaged in art as a young child, sketching from nature in his grandfather's farm in Delaware, in the woods and Palisades along the Hudson River in New Jersey, where he lived, and in the Catskills in upstate New York. The artist's biographer MacKinley Helm noted that on his daily excursions, Marin always brought with him "a box of paints and a pencil shoved in his pocket alongside of the fishhook and birdshot," along with "a pad of good paper tucked under his arm."²¹ During his teens he also began exploring watercolors, painting country scenes in a vaguely impressionistic manner after having studied reproductions of English watercolorists. Raised, however, in a conventional, middle-class household made of "Bible readers of Yankee descent" and "as thoroughly Yankee as apple pie and baked beans," as Helm insisted, Marin was

²⁰ On the professional and personal relationship between Stieglitz and Marin, see Ruth Fine, "John Marin: An Art Fully Resolved," in Greenough, *Modern Art and America*, 341-46. See also Marcia Brennan, *Painting Gender, Constructing Theory: The Alfred Stieglitz Circle and American Formalist Aesthetics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 136-41.

²¹ MacKinley Helm, *John Marin* (Boston: Pellegrini & Cudahy in association with Boston Institute of Contemporary Art, 1948), 5. Biographical information draws from Helm's study as well as E.M. Benson, *John Marin: The Man and His Work* (Washington, DC: American Federation of Arts, 1935), and Ruth Fine, *John Marin* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art; New York: Abbeville Press, 1990).

expected to pursue a more reputable career.²² Briefly studying mechanical engineering, he soon thereafter became an apprentice for several architectural firms. Setting up his own practice in 1893, he quit four years later to devote himself to painting. After several years of travelling the country and exploring landscapes in watercolor, in 1898 his family allowed him to pursue formal training by enrolling in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, where he studied under the painters William Merritt Chase and Thomas P. Anschutz.

Marin later claimed that he took little from this experience, preferring to sketch outdoors during his time at the Academy and gaining little from the traditional instructional practices of life drawing or the study of classical casts. The art historian William Innes Homer has observed, however, that Anschutz, a progressive thinker in his attitudes toward art and teaching, likely encouraged Marin's natural predilection for individuality of style.²³ Nonetheless, while there Marin seemed to have spent more time outdoors than in class, mining the city and riverfront for subjects, which earned him a prize in 1900 for a series of outdoor drawings of wildlife and riverboats.²⁴ Leaving the academy in 1901, after another itinerant year he briefly attended the Art Students League. Again dissatisfied with the rigid structure and traditionalism of such formal education, Marin spent only two semesters there, spending another idle year experimenting with painting before embarking on a five-year trip to Europe.

In Europe, where he was based in Paris and made excursions to Germany and Italy, Marin turned to etching, attracting attention for the skilled draftsmanship he executed in his picturesque views of European sites. Feeding an American appetite for such subjects, this work

²² Helm, *John Marin*, 4.

²³ Homer, *Alfred Stieglitz and the American Avant-Garde*, 90.

²⁴ Fine, *John Marin*, 27.

brought him recognition and income; by 1910, however, the year he permanently returned to the U.S., his interest in the medium and the more conventional styles he practiced with it vanished.²⁵ Wanting to return to painting in earnest and explore a more modern aesthetic, he was encouraged by the success of a series of watercolors on exhibit at 291 in 1909. His experiments with watercolors at this stage, the art historian Ruth Fine has observed, reveal a progressive move from description to suggestion, from a constrained style to more fluid and spontaneous creations that explored the properties of the medium along with his own unique aesthetic. Though Marin worked in oils sparingly by this time, even then the artist preferred watercolors for its liberating potential. Unrestricted in both technical and traditional terms, watercolors permitted him “to explore form with a greater sense of abandon,” as Fine observes.²⁶ Prone to experimentation and dazzled by the new New York that had risen from the ground since his departure for Europe, in works such as *Movement: Fifth Avenue* (fig. 3.2) Marin began to capture the tempo, energy, and phenomenal sensations of the city in fractured forms and slashing strokes of bold color. Though both Marin and Stieglitz downplayed any European influences on the painter’s art in order to substantiate Marin’s “Americanness,” even before the Armory Show these eclectic works show the influence of Fauvism, Cubism, and Futurism as well as Cézanne and Picasso, whom Stieglitz exhibited in 1911.²⁷²⁸ In spite of these apparent influences, Marin insisted his work was self-made, as if the natural product of an American modern, paralleling the nationalist rhetoric of Rosenfeld. “I didn’t look at paintings much in Paris,” he once stated. “I guess I took a couple of

²⁵ Homer, *Alfred Stieglitz and the American Avant-Garde*, 91.

²⁶ Fine, *John Marin*, 80.

²⁷ Homer, *Alfred Stieglitz and the American Avant-Garde*, 92.

²⁸ Ruth Fine notes that Marin would have also seen the works of Cézanne and Matisse in the several Salons in Paris in which Marin’s art was exhibited alongside these modern masters. See Fine, *John Marin*, 77.

trips to the Louvre. But mainly I played billiards, walked about, took trips to the country. . . . I didn't know anything about the Impressionists at the time—although I must have seen some of their works in windows when I'd go walking, without knowing it.”²⁹

As with so many other American moderns, the Armory Show in 1913 was a “catalyst” for Marin’s art, bolstering his aims while encouraging new ways of seeing and thinking about painting.³⁰ Yet even before this Marin found encouragement in the form of Stieglitz and his gallery, a site of experimentation and intellectual debate about the proper function and direction of modern American art. At the heart of the photographer’s ambitions lay an unwavering belief in the power of cultural expression to liberate society from the stifling, dehumanizing values and materialist drives of modern American civilization. Before World War I, these principles guided his exhibition of forms of American and European modernism as well as his support of artists, including Marin, who fulfilled his ideals.³¹ In the hyperbolic language characteristic of the intellectuals associated with Stieglitz, the author Waldo Frank wrote that *291* was a haven where all those who were “spiritually homeless” drew sustenance, the gallery an “altar at which life was worshipped above the noise of a dead city. Here was refuge, certain and solitary, from the tearing grip of industrial disorder.”³² For Rosenfeld, the gallery was a “laboratory” where spirits were set free to work and explore. Marin, he singled out, was one of the artists on whom “experiments” were performed by Stieglitz, “conducted for the purpose of proving that an artist in America could remain completely obedient to the promptings of an imperious, uncompromising,

²⁹ Marin, undated quote in Dorothy Norman, “Introduction,” in *Selected Writings*, x.

³⁰ Homer, *Alfred Stieglitz and the American Avant-Garde*, 203.

³¹ Edward Abrahams, *The Lyrical Left: Randolph Bourne, Alfred Stieglitz, and the Origins of Cultural Radicalism in America* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1986), 98.

³² Waldo Frank, *Our America* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1919), 184.

revolutionary spirit, and yet maintain himself beneath the statue of Commerce and Industry.”³³ In a tribute written in 1934, Marin remembered Stieglitz the man and 291 the place as embodying a spirit, one that “*had to be fought for offensively and defensively / for this spirit had its reason for existence / from there being surrounding opposite spirits.*” Stieglitz’s gallery, for Marin, was an asylum for “*a small group of kindred spirits who gather about him*” to wage a battle “*between the spirits of light and those of darkness,*” the spirit of the place itself living on long after its doors closed in 1917:

*A place that is never locked for those who produce a key.
A place that is never locked to anyone—
anyone can enter and walk about—
but if one got nothing then the Inner remained closed—
they hadn’t the key.*³⁴

Marin could not have thrived, Rosenfeld wrote, without the inspiration of Stieglitz and his gallery in these early years, the climate of experimentation and intellectual debate providing “nourishment” which Marin then “spread with overflowing liberality upon shore and ocean.”³⁵

In the decade after the close of 291, Stieglitz narrowed his vision to promote and exhibit the work of a select group of artists, including Marin, Georgia O’Keeffe, Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, Charles Demuth, and Paul Strand. In addition Stieglitz’s pontification, the ideals of the photographer and his artists were endorsed and defended by authors and cultural critics including Rosenfeld, Lewis Mumford, and Waldo Frank. Wanda Corn has examined how this circle of artists collectively railed against the incessant “pioneerism” and “puritanism” of twentieth-century American culture. While the term “pioneerism” referred to the rampant pursuit of

³³ Rosenfeld, *Port of New York*, 258.

³⁴ John Marin, “The Man and the Place,” in *America & Alfred Stieglitz: A Collective Portrait*, ed. Waldo Frank et al. (New York: Literary Guild, 1934), 33-34.

³⁵ Rosenfeld, *Port of New York*, 154, 164.

material wealth and economic growth in American society that rendered it morally and spiritually vapid, the term “puritanism” targeted the repression of sensual urges and pleasures. Their aesthetics were aimed at restoring these two voided areas in order to “make a bankrupt culture emotionally and spiritually whole and healthy” and, in doing so, forge a cultural renewal and cultivate a new American identity.³⁶ This national spirit would also be established in the group’s indissoluble bonds with American “soil,” another rhetorical term that circulated in their writings and conversations and an ideal cultivated in their paintings and photography of nature and American landscapes, including Marin’s representations of Maine. Rosenfeld’s characterization of Marin as an artist “fast in American life like a tough and fibrous apple tree lodged and rooted in good ground,” for instance, celebrated the artist’s spiritual and organic relationship to nature and substantiated Marin’s art as something intuitively American.³⁷

Although Stieglitz’s galleries served for Marin as a temporary spiritual refuge, he often referred to Maine as his “spiritual home.”³⁸ During the 1910s and 20s the artist occasionally travelled to other regions to paint, including the Kittatinny Mountains in Pennsylvania, the Berkshires in Massachusetts, the Adirondacks, the White Mountains in New Hampshire, and Taos, New Mexico.³⁹ It was Maine, however, that drew his attention almost every year from his first visit in 1914 until his death, serving as a perpetual source of artistic stimulation. An outdoorsman since childhood, the artist was captivated by Maine’s harsh and diverse topography,

³⁶ Corn, *Great American Thing*, 32. For a discussion of the formation of the ideals of the Stieglitz circle, as well as a detailed analysis of Rosenfeld’s *Port of New York* as manifestation of their concepts and concerns, see 3-40.

³⁷ Rosenfeld, *Port of New York*, 156.

³⁸ Helm, *John Marin*, 32.

³⁹ Bricker Balken, *John Marin: Modernism at Midcentury*, 1-2.

including the rocky cliffs and coast, the changing moods of the sea, the quaint villages perched along rugged shorelines, and the thick woodland areas cluttered with ancient pines.

In addition to the rugged landscape, part of Marin's attraction to Maine was to escape what William Inness Homer called the "rarefied intellectualism" that saturated Stieglitz's galleries. Though a devoted member of the group, he was dubious about "abstruse theories and abstract jargon," which often "kept him away from the more philosophical discussions that took place at 291."⁴⁰ Preferring immediate experience to abstract theorization, in Maine the painter could engage in direct contact with nature as well as devote himself to painting. The haven offered "an ideal pattern for his habit of work," his biographer Helm wrote, involving "the constant and manifold elaboration of familiar themes, the production of several versions and treatments of a particular motif in a quick series of 'sittings' or over a succession of seasons." Requiring self-isolation to engage in sustained experience of his subjects, Marin's painting was a product of intense looking coupled with conceptual familiarization in order "to get under the surface" of natural elements and arrive at the essential structures and movement of things observed.⁴¹ "And who misses me in New York and elsewhere: nobody, not very much," he wrote Stieglitz from Maine during World War I, justifying his self-absorbed withdrawal from the worlds of culture and society:

Everybody is interested primarily in themselves and their doings, and what happens within their ken is the all important. High ideals, helping our fellows, mankind and all that, only that it gives us pleasure. And so, to out with it for me and myself, I am more interested, yea lots more, in me myself and my doings than French wars, German wars, English wars, all other wars, all social doings, social happenings, the trend of the world, all things pertaining thereto. The Negro art, the Picassos, the Picabias, the De Zayas [referring here to exhibits and affiliates of 291], the this, the that. Yes even too, 291, and

⁴⁰ Homer, *Alfred Stieglitz and the American Avant-Garde*, 99, 202.

⁴¹ Helm, *John Marin*, 71, 23.

all else. Here as I sit with my fishing rod waiting here for a bit Me, John Marin, I am it. Conceit, self, egoism, complacency, sufficiency, all, let me hug ye, hug all.⁴²

Marin's desire for greater degrees of solitude, along with his perpetual quest for new sources and experiences of the Maine landscape, was also demonstrated in his progressive eastern migration over the years toward more remote sites. The Marins visited West Point their first summer, renting a small wooden shack looking out over Casco Bay and from where Marin would troll the waterways and nearby islands in search of subjects. The painter was so taken by the scenery that the following summer he bought a small island off of Small Point with the intent of building a home; though it was inhospitable, he would use it in the following years as a camping site to fish and paint.⁴³ Starting in 1919 the Marins spent their summers on Deer Isle, an island one hundred miles north of Small Point. In 1932 they moved further up the coast to the peninsula of Cape Split, one of the easternmost points in the United States. After two years there Marin bought a home right on the waters of Pleasant Bay, where he relished living off the land by fishing, crabbing, hunting, and foraging for berries, as well as painting in his studio perched on the waters.

Although partly for personal seclusion and natural inspiration, Marin's annual extended trips to Maine also followed the model of his fellow artists, who sought sanctuary in the rural countryside to forge a bond with the landscape as well as escape the wearisome and alienating effects of city life. Wanda Corn writes that Stieglitz and his artists were all so committed "to nature as an antidote to the enervating city that all of them made rural living an essential part of their lives," the retreats a way to mine for new artistic sources while rejuvenating their depleted physical and emotional selves.⁴⁴ In taking "root" in and nourishment from the vast American

⁴² Small Point, ME, 1 August 1915, in *Selected Writings*, 20-21.

⁴³ Tedeschi, "The Border of the Sea," 131.

⁴⁴ Corn, *Great American Thing*, 32.

landscape, the artists and intellectuals of the Stieglitz circle were also following the advice of the nineteenth-century poet Walt Whitman (1819-1892), who they embraced as their guide for his transcendental attitudes towards nature as a salubrious and unifying source of spiritual and communal experience.

Written as a critique of American society in the wake of the Civil War, Whitman's essay "Democratic Vistas" from 1871 was particularly influential to the circle for its celebration of American life and nature and for Whitman's theory of art.⁴⁵ Dissatisfied by the widespread spiritual corruption in a society preoccupied by material progress and economic expansion, Whitman called for aesthetic creativity as a form of social guidance and moral transformation that would "breathe" into "these lamentable conditions . . . the breath recuperative of sane and heroic life."⁴⁶ For Whitman, nature provided the ideal models of morality, wholesomeness, and diversity. "As the greatest lessons of Nature through the universe are perhaps the lessons of variety and freedom," he opened the essay, "the same present lessons also in New World politics and progress."⁴⁷ "Nature," in Whitman's terminology, included everything external to the self in both the natural and manmade world: in both could be found exalted experiences providing spiritual uplift. The modern city, Whitman wrote in ways reminiscent of Marin's *Movement: Fifth Avenue* (fig. 3.2), with its clutter of buildings reaching skyward, its scintillating landscape of lights and signage, and the roaring crowds rushing in the streets or assembled in parks and urban centers, fulfilled the "senses and appetites" for "power, fullness, motion, etc." Though

⁴⁵ For a discussion of Whitman's influence on the Stieglitz circle, see Celeste Connor, *Democratic Visions: Art and Theory of the Stieglitz Circle, 1924-1934* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 11-50. Connor examines more specifically how Whitman was influential in the group's aims of cultural renewal that emphasized a democratic form of art guided by ideals of craft, inclusiveness, multiculturalism, and personal and social liberation.

⁴⁶ Walt Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," in *Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Select Prose and Letters*, ed. Emory Holloway (London: Nonesuch Press, 1964), 668.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 657.

demonstrating the vital energy and promise of society, however, the “meaningless antics” and vulgar moral corruption of material gain tainted the urban landscape, which paled in comparison to the natural world “in her fields of freedom and open air, in her storms, the shows of night and day, the mountains, forests, seas.”⁴⁸ Whitman called for an art to match the beauty and splendor of these natural wonders as something pointing to the “elevating and ethereal ideas of the unknown.” For those in the Stieglitz circle this became their rallying cry. “You can cultivate corn and roses and orchards,” Whitman asked, “but who shall cultivate the mountain peaks, the ocean, the tumbling gorgeousness of the clouds?”⁴⁹ In their eyes, Stieglitz and his artists answered Whitman’s call for “a class of Bards who will, now and ever, so link and tally the rational physical being of man, with the ensemble of time and space, and with the vast and multiform show, Nature, surrounding him, ever tantalizing him, equally a part, and yet not a part of him, as to essentially harmonize, satisfy, and put at rest.”⁵⁰

Marin especially seems to have taken Whitman’s calls to heart. His affinity for the author was embodied not only in his art that celebrated the dynamic rhythms of nature in all its facets, but also in the exuberant, free verse style of his writings that reveled in physical experience and the restorative powers of the natural world. “I have just been in for a swim and feel better,” he wrote Stieglitz from Small Point in 1917 in ways reminiscent of Whitman’s celebration of the exhilarating, sensuous minutiae of experience:

The water delicious, the sands to the touch of the feet. Big shelving wonderful rocks,
hoary with enormous hanging beards of sea weed, carrying forests of evergreen on their
backs. The big tides come in, swift, go out swift.
Wonderful days.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 667.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 713, 690.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 717.

Wonderful sunset closings.
Good to have eyes to see, ears to hear the roar of the waters. Nostrils to take in the odors
of the salt sea and the firs. . . .
Big flying eagles.
The solemn restful firs.
The border of the sea.⁵¹

For Marin, Maine was an unequivocal site of rejuvenation, the artist delighting in the fullness of physical and spiritual experience the landscape had to offer. “Huge waves sounding on a rock-ribbed shore makes the heart, liver, lungs, everything, the whole human critter expand ‘nigh to bustin’ point,’” he wrote Stieglitz during his first visit in 1914. “Then you live, live, live, and you ‘got to do somethin’, yell, curse, something big, the biggest that is in you.”⁵² Stimulated by the pleasures and beauty of nature, this kind of bigness and unity of self that Marin felt in nature, according to Whitman, came from the contemplation of a “single, solitary soul . . . in the midst of the significant wonders of heaven and earth.” Such experiences imparted a “quality of BEING, in the object’s self, according to its own central idea and purpose,” which was the true “lesson of Nature.”⁵³

For Marin, that purpose was to paint. The Maine environment especially provided plenty of artistic inspiration from his very first trip. “This is one fierce, relentless, cruel, beautiful, fascinating, hellish, and all other ish’es place,” he exclaimed. “To go anywhere I have to row, row, row. Pretty soon I expect the well will give out and I’ll then be obliged to row for water as I have to make water colors—to Hell with water for cooking, washing and drinking.”⁵⁴ Marin explored the broad range of topography Maine offered in order to capture its essential

⁵¹ Small Point, ME, 31 July 1917, in *Selected Writings*, 35.

⁵² West Point, ME, 16 September 1914, in *ibid.*, 18.

⁵³ Whitman, “Democratic Vistas,” 689.

⁵⁴ West Point, ME, 7 August 1914, in *Selected Writings*, 14.

characteristics in watercolors such as *Sea Movement: Green and Blue* from 1923 (fig. 3.4), in which Marin's vivacious handling conveyed the dynamic energy of earth, sea and sky as forces coexisting in pulsating tension. Like his watercolors of New York, Marin presented in his Maine paintings internal responses to things intensely observed, synthesized into aesthetic harmony on his papers. The view is of Mark Island seen from Deer Isle in Stonington, Maine. Revealing what Tedeschi calls his "improvisational" nature, Marin integrated "multiple angles of viewpoint" in the painting, the looming brown form of Mount Desert impossibly thrust behind the island and brought into closer proximity.⁵⁵ The sloping ridges of the mountain, defined by brusque lines in black charcoal over wet paper, serve as both a counter-force and backdrop to the island, characterized by rows of pines dabbed on with opaque green pigment drybrushed over a light green wash. Offsetting the island and the mountain, Marin transformed the sky in the upper right to a positive shape, sketched with rich blues energetically dashed on and bled into the paper with two swirls playfully rubbed out to indicate clouds. The bottom half of the composition, devoted to the choppy, windswept waters of the sea, was painted with energetic, overlapping strokes of green and blue, at once bled into the paper and painted wet on wet. These were also overlain with black chalk lines, in some instances rubbed into wet paper, to note the crest and trough of waves. In several areas Marin allowed the white of the paper to show through, including the bottom and right edges as well as in the mountain and the waves to indicate foam or reflected light, the loose handling also suggesting casual spontaneity and direct observation. Marin's free flowing and energetic handling manifests the artist's exhilarated sensations in nature as well as the spirited attitudes he brought to his art, imparting a sense of the artist's ease and facility with watercolor which seems to pulsate and breathe freely on the surface of the paper.

⁵⁵ Martha Tedeschi, "The Border of the Sea: John Marin and Maine, 1914-1932," in Tedeschi and Dahm, *John Marin's Watercolors*, 131.

The diversity of style and subject matter in Marin's watercolors of Maine are also revealed in works as different as *Rocks and Sea, Maine* (c. 1917, fig. 3.5) or *Blue Sea* (1923, fig. 3.6). *Rocks and Sea* examines a view of rock cliffs descending to a placid sea with delicate, lyrical washes applied over a subtle calligraphic chalk lines. In *Blue Sea*, by contrast, Marin employed more opaque watercolor pigments in a broader view of the sea. With the vantage point looking down on the coast and surrounding islands, Marin painted broad, linear strokes of thick blues over lighter washes, creating an arbitrary geometric configuration imposed over the scene. These linear elements demonstrate Marin's unique device of what Tedeschi has called his "internal painted frames" that served several functions, including moving the picture toward greater degrees of abstraction and "anchoring the dynamic compositions that operated free of any underlying grid."⁵⁶ They were also a way for Marin to obtain compositional clarity and control by imposing geometric order over the organic forms of nature, achieving his cherished "Blessed Equilibrium" through abstract formal elements that also served to frame the view and echo the horizontal and vertical forces of nature.

After his turn to oils with more sustained engagement around 1928, exploring both the country and the city with the medium, Marin still continued to work in watercolors throughout his career, dividing his attention between the two. As he divulged to Stieglitz, this simultaneous working between the two media had its virtues:

As to my doings—my makings—on canvas and paper—of oil paint—of waterpaint—of a quiet realized recognition of—a difference between—the stretched canvas—as a burden bearer for to tenaciously grip and to hold and to bind its expressing oil paint—of a white paper—of itself—of a quality intrinsic—for to hold—for to show—of itself and its water paint talk.

There seems now to me a benefit found in the—in the working of these two—in the working of others than these two—

⁵⁶ Martha Tedeschi, "John Marin's Loaded Brush: Orchestrating the Modern American Watercolor," in Tedeschi and Dahm, *John Marin's Watercolors*, 36.

Of an [sic] one offsetting another—of a greater understanding of each—thereby of a seeing each thereby.⁵⁷

Although his working between the two media made the artist more aware of the distinctions and possibilities of each, Marin's turn to the heavier medium nonetheless seems to have been a hesitant one. "I know that when I quit this Expression in *Water Colors*—the which I am now playing with," Marin facetiously wrote Stieglitz, "and get to the dignified—the high muck a muck medium Oils—I know that my clothes 'l' a'gin to have paint spots on em and that my wife 'l' a'gin to say things." While joking about the unavoidable filth and mess of oil painting, beneath such humorous quips laid a certain trepidation with the tribulations he experienced with oils, the artist anticipating a laborious encounter with the resistance of oil painting as opposed to the effortlessness of watercolor that he had to confront when his creative juices and experiments with the more fluid medium ran dry in Maine. As he wrote Stieglitz from Cape Split in 1933, "I find that I begin to think about (Oil paint) when the Wells begin to get low," meaning for the artist that "I am still puttering around that I can still see across the road without glasses and that I still have a few teeth that bit—that I still can scratch my head and can even still—stub my toe—."⁵⁸ Although more stubborn and demanding, Marin seems to also suggest, oils offered a different kind of aesthetic, the more intransigent medium serving as a prompt for new forms of creativity and artistic experience.

Until around 1930, however, Marin seems to have been especially reluctant to paint focused views of the sea in oils such as *My Hell Raising* (fig. 3.3), just as his predecessor Winslow Homer was. This was perhaps partly due to the daunting precedent set by Homer's paintings, whose formidable paintings of the coast loomed large in the minds of many painters in

⁵⁷ Small Point, ME, 28 August 1932, in *Selected Writings*, 146.

⁵⁸ Addison, ME, 30 July 1933, in *ibid.*, 151.

Maine. Another reason for Marin's hesitancy to take on the subject of the dynamic conflict between water and rock was due to the overwhelmingly chaotic nature of the sea. Demanding the more unctuous properties of oils to capture the texture and weight of things seen and felt, painting the sea required that Marin momentarily surrender the medium with which he felt more comfortable and adept. The artist discovered, however, as Homer did, that these raw, substantial elements required something other than the fluidity and transparency of watercolors. "Water you paint the way water is and moves—Rocks and soil you paint the way they were worked for their formation," he wrote to Stieglitz in 1931, explaining his exploration of the density of oils in his paintings of the bulky masses of water and rock.⁵⁹ Prior to this transition, however, for Marin the seas were too hectic a subject to take on, the artist daunted by the prospect of attempting to bring pictorial control and order to the amorphous, churning seas in a medium resistant to the spontaneity and improvisation his expressionist aesthetic demanded. "Yes, my chief interests in life," he wrote to Stieglitz in 1920: "I am strong on houses and islands, the ocean can go nuts. But houses and islands will have my help."⁶⁰

Eventually, however, Marin gave way to the ocean and to oils after examining Maine in all its facets in watercolors for over fifteen years. This transition may have been inspired by a major exhibition of Homer's paintings, along with the work of Thomas Eakins and Albert Pinkham Ryder, at the Museum of Modern Art in 1930, which included several of Homer's seascapes.⁶¹ Marin's seascapes were the artist's efforts to put his unique expressionist stamp on

⁵⁹ Marin to Stieglitz, 20 July 1931, in Helm, *John Marin*, 67.

⁶⁰ Stonington, ME, 14 September 1920, in *Selected Writings*, 59.

⁶¹ *Sixth Loan Exhibition, New York, May 1930: Winslow Homer, Albert P. Ryder, Thomas Eakins*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1930).

the coast of Maine and conquer Homer's daunting influence.⁶² Another major impetus for the persistent exploration of the sea was his purchase of his summer home on Pleasant Bay in Cape Split in 1934, perched just twenty-five feet from the shoreline. (fig. 3.7) Though he executed oil paintings of the coast prior to this, on Pleasant Bay Marin could directly observe the coast from his studio and paint the sea in all its tempers, from placid waters to the violent fury of windswept breakers battering the rocks. As he once wrote Stieglitz from Cape Split, "Here the Sea is so damned insistent that houses and land things won't appear much in my pictures."⁶³

Rocks and Sea: Small Point, Maine, painted in 1931 (fig. 3.8), demonstrates one of Marin's first efforts to paint the sea and "stub his toe" in oils. In this work Marin used much the same motif and perspective as in *My Hell Raising*, employing a high horizon line to focus the painting on the scarred rocks and churning waters. The surface is riddled with swirling and fidgeting strokes along with chaotic, impulsive scribbles drawn and scraped into the paint to mark forms and movement. Although several areas, including the brown of the rocks and the white of the foaming waters, are richly built into an agitated texture, over much of the canvas Marin used thinned pigments lathered and soaked into the canvas, allowing the canvas to show through along the bottom and right edges. Even though the artist insisted that his work between the two media amplified the unique properties of both, these passages reveal how he brought his spontaneous, fluid watercolor techniques to oils, unable or unwilling to relinquish his ties to his medium of preference.

⁶² Bruce Robertson argues that Marin's seascapes were the artist's challenge to Homer's iconic works. See *Reckoning with Winslow Homer: His Late Paintings and their Influence*, exh. cat. (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art in cooperation with Indiana University Press, 1990), 150-53.

⁶³ Addison, ME, 10 September 1936, in *Selected Writings*, 171.

In *My Hell Raising* (fig. 3.3), by contrast, Marin used richer, more unctuous pigment across the entire canvas, applied with frantic and explosive gestures. The painting was inspired by Marin's experience of a hurricane that battered Cape Split in 1941: "Those seas out there," he told his biographer MacKinley Helm, "could take all the inhabitants of the earth and spew them about."⁶⁴ In response, Marin painted a churning, treacherous sea, manifesting the sublime power of nature in the conflict of elemental forces. "The wind has increased to hurricane strength—how it shrieks," Marin wrote Stieglitz in 1915 in one of his first experiences of a coastal storm in ways that characterize the physical and emotional resonance of this future painting: "[T]here is something heroic astir in it all—the racing sea—the defiant wall of rock—the wind has the sound of a million cats and mad witches."⁶⁵ Like Homer in *High Cliff, Coast of Maine* (fig. 1.1), Marin employed a high horizon line that tilted perspective downward, thrusting viewers head-on into the waves engulfing the shore. The top of the work, executed with long, fluid and controlled strokes of blended hues of white, orange and blue, depict a glowing overcast sky through which the sun shines on the horizon, marking or at least promising the passing of the storm. Whereas in Homer's painting the horizon is engulfed by the storm and the dangerous, churning waters, in Marin's seascapes the straight horizon is almost always visible and "placid," as one commentator has observed. This distant calm implies "that the sea's anger is only momentary and this beautiful natural force will return to serenity and peace after its fit of temper has abated."⁶⁶ This area of tranquility, however, provides a stark contrast to the frantic brushwork in the bottom two-thirds of the canvas, representing the tumultuous waters battering the cliffs. These passages were painted over a ground of off-white, orange, and pink that captures the reflection of the glowing

⁶⁴ Helm, *John Marin*, 84.

⁶⁵ Small Point, ME, 19 September 1915, in *Selected Writings*, 26.

⁶⁶ H.C. Morris, "John Marin: The Sea as Symbol," *Western Humanities Review* 9 (January 1, 1955): 329.

sky in the background. In many areas, such as in the lower right corner, Marin showed his predilection for a thinner medium by using paint diluted with turpentine to simulate the fluidity of watercolors, the texture of the canvas showing through thin washes of ivory black and burnt sienna. (fig. 3.9) Over these forms, however, the artist swirled thicker, more opaque dabs of zinc white to note splashes of water dashing against the rocks, characterizing his use of heavier and sumptuous yet more obstinate pigments across the canvas.

Marin painted the sea in particular with thick, unctuous pigment, the artist's physical gesticulations of squiggles and undulating swirls matching the tossing, agitated swells breaking against the coast. A detail of the center of the canvas in particular shows a lively range of marks and notations. (fig. 3.10) Over a thinned orange ground, Marin used a brush loaded with white, cerulean and Prussian blue, and even accents of green and black, slathered and smeared on with a series of long blended strokes and quick, horizontal and vertical swirls and smudges. Toward the bottom of the detail the crest of two waves were built in a frenzy of painterly energy, a thick mixture of blue and black jabbed, daubed, and twisted onto layers of wet paint beneath. Allowing the ground to show through in several areas with more transparent pigments, Marin also applied richer, more opaque paints, such as the churning mounds of white or the long, blended mixtures of blue and white. In these, as in other areas of the canvas, Marin seems to have swirled paint on the palette and haphazardly dragged the brush across layers of wet pigment, resulting in an effect of not only weight and movement but also refracted light and depth of surface. This sense of depth is enriched by the visible layering of paint and the way Marin even flipped his brush over and gouged out a sgraffito of quick scratches in the green curl of paint near the center of the detail, the eclectic techniques creating an intricate surface of colors and textures.

The effect of Marin's vivacious handling of paint is that of undulating, crashing waves pushing and pulling against one another and the rocks, the artist working to convey a chaos of dynamic forces while attempting to hold those forces in check to achieve his "Blessed Equilibrium" through a compositional balance of form, hue and texture. In the painting, too, as in his watercolors, Marin attempted to impart a sense of joy and playfulness with an otherwise sublime and threatening experience of nature, exhibited through the spirited brushwork as well as the use of bold, saturated colors. This playful exhilaration is also demonstrated in a watercolor from the same year, *Cape Split, Maine*, which shows an identical use of bright blues and greens along with soft oranges, the choppy seas indicated through a buoyant calligraphy of arciform strokes. (fig. 3.11)

In *My Hell Raising* Marin endeavored to work oil paint with these same exuberant techniques. As vivacious and dynamic as they first appear, however, the qualities of facility and ease in his watercolor gives way to a congested mass of pigment in his oil painting. The encrustations of fidgeting brushstrokes give the impression that the artist uncomfortably forced his intuitive practices onto a reluctant substance in ways that slowed and dulled his impulsive painterly habits, resulting in an aesthetic bordering on superficiality and incoherence. As we have seen in relation to Homer's practices, oil painting, in its variations of viscosity and technical complexity relative to watercolors, requires greater degrees of deliberation and patience, which must have tried Marin's restless energy. As Marin's first biographer Eugene Benson observed, "In contrast with the swiftness of watercolor execution the new discipline of working on an oil in shifts over a long period must have fallen 'like cold chains' upon this Ishmaelite who 'never sat with his wings furled together for six months'," quoting a letter from

Percy Shelley to John Keats.⁶⁷ The tedious blending of oil, turpentine, and pigment to achieve the right opacity and viscosity and the intricate mixing of colors on palette to the obtain the desired color and texture, along with the patience needed to allow layers to dry sufficiently in order to achieve the desired effect of each particular stroke in relation to the totality of the composition, all seem to have stifled Marin's impulsive explosions of physical and emotional energy.

To a degree, the artist's greater ease of painting with free and loose painterly motions can be seen in a contrast of the water to the rocks in *My Hell Raising*. Whereas the flowing sea, demanding a looser application, is composed of rather fluid strokes, the painterly notations in the rocks are a mash of dashes and squiggles. (fig. 3.12) In comparison to Homer's clear, stiff slabs representing the rocks in *High Cliff* (fig. 1.1), Marin's brushwork is awkward and irresolute, as if the artist was unsure of how to note such weighty, stationary objects. Though he was more comfortable with the speed and improvisation allowed by the dynamic elements of nature, however, the brushstrokes in the sea also reveal a measure of irritation and restlessness, as if he was aggravated with the slower processes and viscous materials involved in oil painting. The energetic swirls of pigment are also in many instances chaotic and muddied, as in the detail of the center (fig. 3.10), owing to the artist's impatience to allow layers and strokes to sufficiently dry, resulting in blurry, confused mounds of pigment. The fierce turbulence of thrashing pigment manifests Marin's struggle against the greasy obstinacy of oil painting and his fight to maintain equilibrium of form, color, and the identity of each particular stroke as it threatened to dissolve into an amorphous clump of pure paint. In an effort to assert balance and order, in fact, some time after completion Marin painted a thin, off-white border on the far edges of the canvas (not

⁶⁷ Eugene M. Benson, "John Marin—'And Pertaining Thereto'," in Museum of Modern Art, New York, *John Marin: Watercolors, Oil Paintings, Etchings*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936), 33.

seen in reproduction). An example of one of his internal painted frames, the thin rectangular band in this instance appears as an afterthought, a way to impose order and control on the warring turmoil of paint on the verge of bursting the boundaries of the canvas.

In addition to its turbulent surface, the title *My Hell Raising* also indicates Marin's frustration with oil painting. Marin employed some version of the boorish phrase "raising hell" often in his letters. He used it, for instance, to refer to nature, offering one meaning for the title when he wrote from Maine: "The waves splash, the waves beat upon that rock, upon those rocks, trip hammer beating—there raising incessant Hell—Hurray."⁶⁸ While here the phrase referred to the invigorating experience of the coast, Marin more often used the term as a self-fashioned, folksy idiom signifying his act of self-expression. "Then too I can, up here," Marin once wrote Stieglitz from Maine, "raise Hell with the other fellow who isn't here, he can't answer. This egotistical self, this one's own self, being right, seeing—it is after all what keeps us a'going but it's damned boring to the other fellow."⁶⁹ Speaking of a hypothetical artistic dialogue, to "raise hell" for Marin was a way to throw up the ego against the world through paint as he did in *My Hell Raising*, a compulsory, liberating affirmation of subjective experience made in response to nature. As he wrote to Stieglitz in 1941, "[W]e the Human Cuss—must of our very nature—Raise a bit of Hell—with quite a bit if Heaven—right here on this—Old Earth."⁷⁰ Another letter the artist wrote to Stieglitz from Maine is even more revealing:

Today I am in one 'Hell of a mood.' . . .
I sort of want to raise Hell in my stuff and don't know how to do it properly.
Feel like tearing things to pieces. . . .
Look at the Raphael photo on the wall and hate it for its perfection, smugness.

⁶⁸ Stonington, ME, 11 September 1921, in *Selected Writings*, 74.

⁶⁹ Stonington, ME, 26 August 1921, in *ibid.*, 69.

⁷⁰ Addison, ME, 10 August 1941, in *ibid.*, 200.

In my present mood don't like much anything.
Want to be crazy.
Will be crazy.
Like to paint some dam [sic] fool pictures—no you fool they may be foolish but dam foolish?
To paint disorder under a big order.
Smugness.
When is one not smug?
Is it when one is tossed about and tosses, being played with and playing? Maybe that's a thrust at it, a stab at it. . . .
Today I am an apostle of the crazy. But Dammit, it's got to be a caged crazy, otherwise it would butt into another crazy. Then you have destruction. So. There you have the ideal humanity, crazy humanity, each in his little cage.⁷¹

Along the same lines, “raising hell” here was Marin’s strained effort to arrogantly and emphatically proclaim subjective presence in painting by being boorish yet grandiose in ways that scorned traditional standards of aesthetic perfection. This “craziness,” however, was an emancipating chaos that needed to be caged within the canvas through formal ordering, a way to further assert the artist’s will and control. The art historian Ruth Fine has described the “disorder” Marin spoke of in this letter as “being the chaos of the visible world that he encountered anew each time he trekked into the landscape that he then transformed.”⁷² To be sure, *My Hell Raising* offers up a tumult of natural forces in the unruly waves clashing against the scarred rocks of the Maine coast. Yet equally disorderly are the swirling, restless strokes of viscous pigment jumbled and jammed together on the canvas. Just as the painting represents an agitated battle between water and rock, however, so does it present a war between Marin and oil paint in his attempt to bring order and form to the equally amorphous, tumultuous nature of the medium, something that challenged and overwhelmed the artist’s efforts to “control the fight at will” and bring equilibrium to disorder. Rather than controlling the chaos of paint, in *My Hell*

⁷¹ Stonington, ME, 15 August 1919, in *ibid.*, 46.

⁷² Ruth Fine, “Prelude: To Paint Disorder Under a Big Order,” in Tedeschi and Dahm, *John Marin’s Watercolors*, 19.

Raising paint seems to have overwhelmed the artist. The smugness of the self, he pointed out, could easily be snatched away when the artist was played on and tossed about rather than doing the tossing. In this sense, the painting's title meant more than Marin's efforts toward a self-assured, "crazy" act of self-expression; it also signified his personal anguish and perdition in his egoistic fight against oil paint to control the substance and maintain a balance of expression and representation synthesized into an organic, pictorial unity.

When selections of Marin's oils began to be exhibited alongside his watercolors they were received with mixed reactions, with many critics recognizing this struggle between Marin and his paints. For a few, however, Marin's work in oil paint demonstrated the triumph of his art, as if his entire career had been a long and slow, exploratory road to a rewarding embrace of the more serious, time-honored medium. Lewis Mumford's initial hesitation with Marin's oil painting, for instance, quickly gave way to forthright praise, the intellectual noting that the artist achieved a new "depth and solidity" in these works, forming "the top of Marin's accomplishment—and I know of no one today who has climbed higher."⁷³ Another critic celebrated the artist's work in the "less malleable medium," which exhibited "Marin's almost religious reverence for natural forces" in the way they conveyed "memories of the sounds of nature and the strife of her elements—the groaning of rocks, the booming of waves as they rise up and strike the edges, and the whistling of the rushing air."⁷⁴ Of the painting *Wave on Rock* from 1938 (fig. 3.13), the critic Jerome Mellquist wrote that it signified a triumph in Marin's art, "undoubtedly the most expert of his increasingly numerous performances in the heavier medium. It is a veritable exposition of color. . . . This painting has warmth, power, and spontaneity,

⁷³ Mumford, "The Art Galleries: Marin—Miró," 69.

⁷⁴ Martha Davidson, "John Marin: New York," *Art News* 36, no. 25 (March 19, 1938): 16.

qualities which the critics have frequently denied to his earlier oils.”⁷⁵ In his defense of Marin, Melquist acknowledged that the artist was bound to receive negative criticism of his oils in comparison to his unsurpassed watercolors, which continued to receive the majority of critical acclaim. The off-hand comment of the *New York Times* art critic Edward Alden Jewell summarized this kind of reaction to Marin’s oils when they first began to be exhibited: “He has recently taken to oils, but without, as yet, attaining anything like the success that has been reached in water-color.”⁷⁶ Another critic, writing in response to the artist’s retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1936, also characteristically stated: “Watercolor is the ideal medium for Marin’s direct, spontaneous personality. He has made a virtue of the finality of the material which is immediately absorbed by the paper and which permits no reworking.” “The oils,” on the other hand, only made “evident that watercolor has been the natural vehicle for Marin’s personality. The direct relation that watercolor creates between the artist and his work is considerably hampered by the slower oil technique.”⁷⁷

Such responses were the natural consequence of the way the artist’s handling of watercolor had been celebrated for how it embodied the perfect match between an artist and his medium, both watercolor and Marin insisting on freedom and impulsiveness. Paul Rosenfeld went so far as to speak of Marin’s seamless use of watercolors in nationalistic terms, employing the rhetoric of the Stieglitz circle to proclaim the uniquely American qualities of both the artist and the medium. With Marin, he claimed, “the artist and the medium are in complete accord; and that accord is the result of a complete adjustment of both to American life.” “The capacity for

⁷⁵ Jerome Mellquist, “Marin and His Oils,” *Nation*, March 12, 1938, 308.

⁷⁶ Edward Alden Jewell, “The Rise of John Marin,” *New York Times*, October 23, 1933, 13.

⁷⁷ Martha Davidson, “Marin, Master of a Minor Medium,” *Art News* 35, no. 4 (October 24, 1936): 11-12.

quick decision required by it, and for the expression of life of the moment and the movement which inheres in it,” Rosenfeld explained, “has made it particularly accessible and attractive to men of the nation whose soil and climate and mode of life demanded a nervous balance, quick responsiveness,” of which Marin was the prime example and practitioner.⁷⁸ Marin’s fellow painter in the Stieglitz circle, Marsden Hartley, also believed that “John Marin is behind no one in his comprehension and accomplishment in his medium. . . . He has brought his medium to very genuine heights, has pushed it further than any modern I can possibly think of.”⁷⁹ As did Rosenfeld, Hartley saw an intimate connection between Marin and watercolors as if the artist and the medium were linked physically and spiritually, the fluid paint a natural counterpart to Marin’s spontaneous modes of expression. The critic and dealer Samuel Kootz likewise found the artist to be a supreme technician in the medium, effortlessly combining material and sensation in his impulsive flourishes:

I know of no living artist who handles water color [sic] as breathlessly, as confidently as Marin. Water color as a medium requires a great deal of spontaneity, a quickened perception and an urgent necessity to immediate composition—that is, if one is intent upon carrying on the important matters of composition, of order, of organization. Marin achieves brilliant success in water color because his geometry is inseparably wedded to his sensations; it at all times keeps pace with the racing motion, and so provides us with one of his deeply felt exposures of spirit, so ordered, so composed, that we receive its fullest impact.⁸⁰

As Kootz wrote another time in a 1930 study of modern American painting, “Quick decisions are demanded by water color, sure decisions, and Marin excels in it because there is no hiatus

⁷⁸ Paul Rosenfeld, “Art: An Essay on Marin,” *Nation* 134 (January 27, 1932): 124.

⁷⁹ Marsden Hartley, “The Recent Paintings of John Marin” (1928), in *On Art / by Marsden Hartley*, ed. Gail R. Scott (New York: Horizon Press, 1982), 81.

⁸⁰ Samuel M. Kootz, *New Frontiers in American Painting* (New York: Hasting House, 1943), 30.

between the seeing and the realization upon paper.”⁸¹ Writing of an exhibition of at Stieglitz’s gallery *An American Place* in 1940, one reviewer observed that even at age seventy Marin’s watercolors exhibited the enduring finesse and agility of a young man coupled with the finesse of a seasoned artist. The artist’s watercolors, according to this observer, “have a calmness and an ease and a sense of philosophic security.”⁸²

Such pronouncements were repeated time and time again, the artist’s watercolors eliding the distinction between conception and execution, between inner and outer sensations in response to the external world and their application on paper. His oils of the sea, however, were often met with critical perplexity and disappointment, responses that characterized reviews of his work well into the 1940s. As late as 1949, one critic found in response to a retrospective of the artist’s work in Los Angeles that Marin’s oils were bound to disappoint in comparison to his “instinctive” work in watercolor, his oil paintings seeming “muddy” and “unsympathetic” as well as “out of character and step.”⁸³ “Marin has valiantly persisted in his determination to use oils,” Edward Alden Jewell found in 1942, some fifteen years after Marin had begun using oils in earnest. “I say ‘valiant,’ but to me it still appears that oil is *not* his medium. For the most part the canvases look messy and inarticulate.”⁸⁴ Very often, Jewell found earlier in 1938, “the paint remains paint, however vehemently it may be lathered on. We are waylaid, whereas with one of his successful watercolors before us we are prone to forget all technical matters, impelled toward the heart of a lyric mystery.” The author singled out the painting *Gray Sea* from that year (fig.

⁸¹ Samuel M. Kootz, *Modern American Painters* (New York: Brewer & Warren, 1930), 45-46.

⁸² “John Marin at Seventy,” uncited review in John Marin Printed Material and Drawings, 1929-1955; owned by John C. Marin, Jr.; microfilmed by the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, reel N60-10.

⁸³ Kenneth Ross, “Famed John Marin Watercolors Given Initial L.A. Exhibition,” *Daily News* (c. 1949), in *ibid.*

⁸⁴ Edward Alden Jewell, quoted in “Marin Pro and Con,” *Art Digest* 16 (January 1, 1942): 23.

3.14) as a particularly problematic painting in this regard, finding that “the canvas is an incommunicative pother of white—not in itself sensuously beautiful as paint; contributing nothing to the expressiveness, little or nothing to the design, of the whole work.”⁸⁵ The critic James Thrall Soby rehearsed these sentiments. For Soby, Marin’s aesthetic “springs from a sensibility so acute, burning at so consuming a heat, that it finds its logical expression in watercolor . . . Corrections and revisions do Marin little good, for he is right or wrong to begin with, and once begun he must translate his vision quickly. In any case, his best watercolors have an inner illumination, a textural excitement and a sureness of stroke which tend to disappear in many of his oils.” Instead, these appeared “unnecessarily labored and at the same time hesitant.”⁸⁶

In these responses to Marin’s oil paintings of the sea, the notions of ease, fluidity, intimacy, unity, and philosophical security associated with his watercolors often gave way to impressions of hesitancy, uncertainty, incoherence, and insecurity. Three years after Marin’s death, MacKinley Helm recalled that the artist was despondent at such invectives, the reviews of his works causing the artist “deep distress.” “They say at ‘The Place’ [*An American Place*] that my oil paintings don’t fly,” the artist told Helm. “Hell . . . don’t they know that you don’t use thick paint for flying?”⁸⁷ For Marin, critical comparisons of his watercolors to his oils were misleading, since his use of the more substantial medium was meant to give weight and tangible presence to water and rock, while his watercolors conveyed natural forms through a lighter, seemingly effortless quality. Marin was so troubled by the criticism, in fact, that he wrote

⁸⁵ Edward Alden Jewell, “Picture by Marin put on Exhibition,” *New York Times*, November 11, 1938, 22.

⁸⁶ James Thrall Soby, *Contemporary Painters* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1948), 20.

⁸⁷ MacKinley Helm, “Conclusion to a Biography,” in *John Marin: Tributes by William Carlos Williams, Duncan Phillips, Dorothy Norman* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956).

something of an apology for his oils to accompany an exhibition at *An American Place* in 1938, entitled “To My Paint Children.” Writing to his watercolors and oils in his free-verse style, Marin confessed to having created works that were in some instances problematic, although for him they all in some way still “clicked.” “Now—my Paint Kids—Poppa—knows you / are Splayed in parts—are weak / in parts,” he wrote, with sometimes “here and there a—missing—to complete your balanced order.” “Now there have been Somethings said / about which I will now speak,” Marin continued, addressing more specifically the diverging ways in which his watercolors and oils were received:

you see—you my—water paint kids and
 my—Oil Paint—Kids are different
 but you were made each and every one
 of you by that same old Codger—your Poppa—
 I would say you are neither the one
 or the other to be jealous of one another
 to you my Oil Kids—your Poppa—got a
 somewhat reputation a making your *water* sisters
 but you Seem to be a Coming along—
 tolerably well—tolerably well—maybe a little
 haltingly but still a moving I hope—as to why
 I speak of this there be those who have said—
 may still say—You should never have been born—
 Give them not a thought—
 You are not if you are not
 but you *Are* if you *are* and *that's that*
 Now to all of you *again be yourselves*.⁸⁸

As the artist was well aware, his oil paintings were marginalized in favor of his watercolors, some critics even questioning whether Marin should have explored the medium in the first place. The artist admitted that his paintings were still a little “halting,” confessing to the frustrations that he had with painting while promising that progress was being made. Yet his defense of his oils and his desire to justify their existence itself reveals a measure of insecurity with his

⁸⁸ John Marin, “To My Paint Children,” brochure for exhibition at *An American Place*, February 14, 1938, in *Selected Writings*, 177-79. Emphases in original.

practice. For Marin, the criticisms of muddiness, incoherence, and hesitation leveled at his works only reminded the artist of his struggles to create a synthetic pictorial balance of the subjective and objective, inner impulses and outer sensations.

Very often throughout his career, as examined in brief in the beginning of this chapter, Marin would confess to Stieglitz a certain amount of difficulty in this quest to achieve a synthetic unity in both oils and watercolors. “Anyone who paints is a damn fool, “he once complained to his friend, for instance, “unless he be born a damn fool then he has a right to paint.”⁸⁹ As early as 1915 he showed his frustration in a letter to Stieglitz during one of his first visits to Maine. In his usual breathless and staccato manner, Marin wrote in irritation that “it isn’t easy to paint anything—to really put it on so that one knows it is painted—there are a few painters—fewer maybe than anything else—for that requires a knowledge a skill a manipulation of craftsmanship. . . . Artist great—plus handler of materials & tools—forgotten—you understand me—that now I am speaking not of (*what*) but (*how*).” Marin, in this instance, was grappling with a synthesis of masterful technique coupled with subjective responses to the world, that “alive expression which a great knowledge of glorious painting might produce which would bring out a great sigh of content.”⁹⁰ The dilemmas and frustrations that his experiments in painting produced would persist as the years wore on, the artist often admitting failure or defeat in his inability to produce work with the quality and balance he strove for. “To start out, I will say that I am not on very good terms with myself this year,” he wrote another time, “in fact I spend a good part of the time cussing myself. Everything seems to be a task . . . My work, as I look at it, some early rotters.”⁹¹

⁸⁹ Undated and unpublished manuscript notes, in *John Marin by John Marin*, 96.

⁹⁰ Small Point, Maine, 19 September 1915, in *Selected Writings*, 25.

⁹¹ Stonington, ME, October 1922, in *ibid.*, 83-84.

Very often, these struggles affected him deeply: “I am in another mood. Days have past. Serious work, painting away down in the depths of gloom. Of piffle, rats, fudge, and some more.”⁹²

When Marin turned to oils to paint the sea in Maine, however, his troubles seem to have been amplified, the artist often speaking of painting as “spoiling more Canvas with paint.”⁹³ He once metaphorically suggested in jest to his son that painting in oils was laborious and tedious, writing from his home in Cliffside, New Jersey during the winter months: “The other day I thought of trying oil paint. Well, there happened to be a tube of white oil paint meandering about my joint. It came in contact with a coat of mine. It left its smear. I got some benzine [sic] and went to work . . . I don’t like to work so I am afraid I’ll have to give up the idea of oil painting.”⁹⁴ Nevertheless, when Marin did turn to oils to focus on the sea, it demanded a manner of painting different from which he was accustomed, including a rich buildup of paint to capture its weight and energy. “So maybe I’ll start painting,” he wrote to Stieglitz from Maine, “if I do—I shouldn’t wonder but what I’d paint Rocks—Sea—Sky—and Earth—and I’ll probably use plenty of paint—like the feller up here said about baking beans—plenty of pork—plenty of pork—plenty of pork.”⁹⁵ The viscosity of oil paint and its resistance to his preferences for speed and spontaneity, however, was a source of irritation, a struggle he explicitly connected with the painting of the ocean in 1932:

Maine—makes or breaks
Maine demands and rivets
—A painter man—here—if—of—her breed or her adoption—must needs conform—
The sea—it’s the sea—.⁹⁶

⁹² Stonington, ME, 14 August 1923, in *ibid.*, 90.

⁹³ Marin to John Marin, Jr., Cliffside Park, NJ, 18 May 1939, in *ibid.*, 190.

⁹⁴ Cliffside, NJ, 8 October 1925, in *ibid.*, 105.

⁹⁵ Addison, ME, 12 July 1939, in *ibid.*, 191.

⁹⁶ Small Point, ME, 28 August 1932, in *ibid.*, 144.

As Marin came to realize in his painting of the churning seas, it demanded that the artist conform his habits in response to the weight and unruly movement of both the subject and the medium, a change that to some degree was no mere adaptation but also a threat to the self. Marin expressed something along these lines in response to his first visit to Maine, writing Stieglitz “There be and have been mighty men, I suppose, but who has gotten to the bottom of this mighty ocean unless as a Corpse HA—HA—.”⁹⁷ This statement seems to presage his later experiences of oil painting while also accounting for his hesitancy to paint the sea in oils, the artist referring to not only the vast, sublime mystery of the sea but also the way the attempt to paint it was threatening to individual will and control in works such as *My Hell Raising* (fig. 3.3), the self and the ego lost amidst paint’s disruptive physicality and resistance.

Conversely, *My Hell Raising* also reveals an artist succumbing to the self-expressiveness of painting amidst the fight to coax and prod paint into balanced signs of the objective and subjective. Marin seems to have taken a solipsistic pleasure in the working of the sumptuous pigments into forms of physical and emotional expression in ways that threatened the referential qualities of each stroke. The artist referenced such a losing battle in another letter to Stieglitz from 1927, his painting unnervingly falling into pure subjectivity: “This year seems to be a year of tumble downs, more than ever,” he wrote in dismay. “I find myself constantly struggling with things, playing one thing against another. And when I get through they look so much like Marin, they act like Marin. Cannot I ever get away from this fellow Marin? Or shall I throw all this overboard and say, Dam it all I like this fellow Marin, can’t help myself. But I tell you I cuss him a plenty.”⁹⁸ For Marin, maintaining the balance between painting as a representation of the

⁹⁷ West Point, ME, 7 August 1914, in *Selected Writings*, 15.

⁹⁸ Stonington, Deer Isle, ME, 21 August 1927, in *ibid.*, 114-15.

external world and painting as an imprint of physical and emotional selfhood was fragile, his work threatening to fall into self-expression and losing its hold on nature. These tensions are indicated in *My Hell Raising* in the way each stroke occupies a tenuous hold on its identity, as if on the verge of dissolving into the mass of pigment frantically swirled and slathered on the canvas. “It’s a question as to whether the open sight vision—that is of things you see—isn’t better than the inner, I mean vision things,” Marin wrote Stieglitz in ways that express the dilemmas made tangible in the fidgeting strokes of *My Hell Raising*:

That, I guess, is a muted unanswered question. But the Superiors would claim not. Nevertheless, take today for example. I was laying off in my boat, and there was a schooner under full sail coming toward me. I made about 20 drawings, none near perfect . . . I couldn’t begin to describe the wonder of it. After writing this, my answer now, to myself, is that you cannot divorce the two, they are unseperable [sic], they go together. The inner picture being a composite of things seen with the eye, the art object being neither the one nor the other but a separate thing in itself. Do you get me? I don’t know what I get myself. I usually do and don’t more or less.”⁹⁹

Scholars have generally seen such statements as Marin’s seamless wedding of the objective and the subjective, that Marin “believed that his inner and outer vision were inseparable, and that his paintings represented their synthesis.”¹⁰⁰ Yet as Marin’s hesitant questioning at the end suggests, the artist was caught between these two attitudes and relationships toward the world in both material and conceptual terms, his philosophical uncertainties amplified by his physical struggles to integrate and unify a totality of experience in his oils.

Marin’s letters to Stieglitz served as a testing ground in which to sort through his conceptual ambivalence, revealing his struggles to lay hold of his philosophical attitudes towards art and nature. Throughout his life Marin repeatedly emphasized the role of art as a form of self-expression inspired by the observed world. “So that the artist,” he wrote his dealer, “seems to be

⁹⁹ Stonington, ME, 7-12 October 1920, in *ibid.*, 62.

¹⁰⁰ Brennan, *Painting Gender, Constructing Theory*, 151.

born with Eye feeling. He eyes something and must express it with his hands through some medium. The imaginary something, too, has to be seen from him through his eyes.”¹⁰¹ This ideal was most clearly articulated in the early statement that accompanied his exhibit of his paintings of New York at 291, such as *Movement: Fifth Avenue* (fig. 3.2). “You cannot create a work of art unless the things you behold respond to something within you. Therefore if these buildings move me they too must have life.”¹⁰² In this expressionist mindset, Marin saw the external world as an outward manifestation of inner emotional resonances, which animate a world that is then reflected back on the viewing subject. If this emotional vivacity is demonstrated in the sentient structures and lively movement of *Movement: Fifth Avenue*, it is also imbued in the waters and rocks of *My Hell Raising* (fig. 3.3), which were animated by Marin’s dynamic brushwork that gave the warring masses an energetic, vital presence.

At the same time that Marin maintained this devotion to expression, however, he also struggled to preserve in his art and thinking a realist attitude towards the world, one that believed in the existence of a concrete, stable reality apart from the self that could be observed and represented in paint. Marin, for instance, criticized the painting of so many of his contemporaries as confections made to “Express Symbolically their European eyed Abstractions,” which bore little or no relation to an external reality that could serve as an anchor for art. In his playful, down-to-earth manner, Marin warned that “well, you are not to forget that robins naturally hop about, they don’t walk. Chickens walk, they don’t hop. Those are little things, yet fundamental to the beast. So it is with boats, so it is with all things. And those old boys, those of real expression,” he asserted, referring perhaps to old masters such as Rembrandt, “no matter how

¹⁰¹ Stonington, ME, 20 September 1919, in *Selected Writings*, 48.

¹⁰² Marin, statement in *Camera Work* (April-July 1913), in *ibid.*, 4-5.

expressed, didn't make their chickens to hop." "No, at the root of the matter," Marin explained, "however abstractly, however symbolically expressed, I would still have it, 'Town of Stonington,' 'the boats of Maine,' 'the people of Maine,' 'the sheep of the Maine isles,' seething with the whole atmosphere of Maine."¹⁰³ Though his painting relied on conveying essences of form, energy, and movement rather than details, Marin's insisted throughout his life that his works were above all rooted in the laws and experiences of nature as directly experienced and observed:

I would say—(if I were asked)—to a person who thinks he wishes to paint—or to do anything—for that matter . . . Go look at the bird's flight—the man's walk—the sea's movement . . . They have a way—to keep their motion—nature's laws of motion have to be obeyed—and you have to follow along . . . —The good picture embraces these laws—the best of the old did—that's what gives them their life.¹⁰⁴

"Out door painting as such is just a *Job*," he would state another way, "to get down what's ahead of you." For Marin, this realism was to be worked into the very way paint was applied to canvas, so that "when you get through your paint builds itself up—moulds itself—piles itself up—as does that rock—this very set of things—why then you might call yourself a painter."¹⁰⁵

In his thinking, Marin seems to have been caught between the two worldviews represented by Winslow Homer and Albert Pinkham Ryder, a parallel the artist's friend and collector Duncan Phillips made when he compared Marin, the realist, and the romantic. Marin's affinity with Homer, Phillips believed, was found "in his passion for and knowledge of the sea off the coast of Maine and in his special mastery of water color as a medium." Both Marin and Ryder, on the other hand, were "nature poets" utterly absorbed "in their own intimate sources of

¹⁰³ Stonington, ME, October 1919, in *ibid.*, 51-52.

¹⁰⁴ Marin, "A Few Notes," from *Twice a Year* no. 2 (Spring-Summer, 1939), in *Selected Writings*, 185.

¹⁰⁵ Small Point, ME, 20 July 1931, in *Selected Writings*, 140.

inspiration.”¹⁰⁶ For Phillips, Marin comfortably straddled the bridge between these two aesthetic and philosophical poles. The thrashing tensions in *My Hell Raising* (fig. 3.3), however, point to the artist’s material and conceptual confusions in his simultaneous realist belief in an objective world apart from the self with its own laws and forms, and nature as an outward projection of inner sensations, which collapsed the distance between the self and the world. Marin also shared with these artists the kinds of frustrations they experienced with the physical world of painting. Like Homer, Marin seemed to have been momentarily lost in the solipsistic, gesticulatory flourishes of painting at the expense of representation of the external world. At the same time, like Ryder Marin fought with painting to surmount the medium’s resistance to his emotional and physical responses to the world, his expression restricted by oil painting’s complex vicissitudes and opposition to his impulsive exuberance.

Marin’s entangled efforts to synthesize these two poles of being were further complicated by what might be called his brand of symbolic transcendentalism. Marin’s realist attitudes was also yoked to a transcendental view of the world, seeing in nature a spiritual energy that he tried to capture through painting. In this, too, Marin followed the model of Whitman, for whom nature was a pathway to the divine, with all life bound together by a vital, spiritual energy.¹⁰⁷ For Whitman, the highest function of literature was to rejoice in

Nature, (the only complete, actual poem,) existing calmly in the divine scheme, containing all, content, careless of the criticisms of the day . . . And lo! To the consciousness of the soul, the permanent identity, the thought, the something . . . that fully satisfies. That something is the All, and the idea of the All, with the accompanying

¹⁰⁶ Duncan Phillips, in *John Marin: Tributes by William Carlos Williams, Duncan Phillips, Dorothy Norman*.

¹⁰⁷ John I.H. Baur, “Introduction,” in *John Marin’s New York, October 13-November 6, 1981* (New York: Kennedy Galleries, 1981). “The truth is,” observed Baur, “that Marin was old enough to be rooted in an American tradition that saw in nature an ultimate reality, and this militated against abstraction. The pantheism of Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman, of naturalists like Audobon and Burroughs, of painters like Cole and Bierstadt, was still a living force while Marin was young.” Marin’s transcendentalism, for Baur, was demonstrated most forcefully in the attitudes he exhibited “towards the coast of Maine—its rocks and sea, its storms and sunsets, its pines and rugged landscape.”

idea of eternity, and of itself, the soul, buoyant, indestructible, sailing space forever, visiting every region, as a ship the sea. And again lo! the pulsations in all matter, all spirit, throbbing forever—the eternal beats, eternal systole and diastole of life in things—wherefrom I feel and know that death is not the ending, as was thought, but rather the real beginning—and that nothing ever is or can be lost, nor ever die, nor soul, nor matter.¹⁰⁸

Closely echoing Whitman, Marin too embraced the totality of physical and spiritual experience, the artist at once a part of nature and blessed with ability to celebrate it through sensitive combinations:

This thing, this human is a nature product. He has bones and over and round about layers of soft stuff, flesh, concealed therein and binding nerves, muscles and lots of things. He seems to be Nature's highest product in that he has the ability to use and to form into combinations other of nature's products. These forms, used by a certain Kind of Human, are called Art products. And these forms used by certain Kind of Human have an exalted value in that they put into motion the Spirit, through the eye and approach the great Seeing, not as reminders of other seeings but in themselves.¹⁰⁹

Far from the cold, dead world of scientific materialism, reality for Marin was animated by the pulsating force of nature, his art serving to vitalize what he referred to as the "Seeing" or what Whitman and the transcendentalists called the "Over-Soul," a spiritual energy binding all people and things. Inspired by Whitman, Marin's vitalism was also influenced by the French philosopher Henri Bergson's concept of "élan vital" set forth in *Creative Evolution*, first published in English in 1911. Another key influence on the philosophy of the Stieglitz circle, Bergson's concept of a vital force, responsible for the creative impulse in humanity and for organizing and unifying all of life, found its expressions in Marin's lyrical abstractions, in which nature was animated by the artist's intuitive responses to a living, pulsing natural world.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," 716.

¹⁰⁹ Marin, "Foreword," from *Manuscripts*, no. 2 (March 1922), in *Selected Writings*, 76.

¹¹⁰ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (New York: Henry Holt, 1911). Selections of Bergson's writings were published in Stieglitz's journal *Camera Work*: "An Extract from Bergson," *Camera Work*, no. 36 (October 1911): 20-21, and Bergson, "What is the Object of Art," *Camera Work*, no. 37 (January 1912): 22-26.

While revealing his transcendental and vitalist attitudes towards art and nature, Marin's statement above also emphasizes the role of the work of art as an autonomous object embodying this seeing of nature, a pictorial equivalent to nature's forces that stood independent of it. For the artist, painting was to be a balance of inner and outer visions in ways that neither copied nor reflected one or the other, but instead lived in a vital, pulsating synthesis on the canvas, which asserted its own material presence through an organic unity of interdependent parts, including form and color as well as paint and canvas. "I feel that I am not to destroy this flat working surface (the focus plan of expression) that exists for all workers in all mediums," Marin wrote, emphasizing his attention to the limiting conditions of painting. "That on my flat plane I can superimpose, build up onto, can poke holes into—By George, I am not to convey the feel that it's bent out of its own individual flatness." He put another way, "I must for myself insist that when finished, that is when all parts are in place and are working, that now it has become an object and will therefore have its boundaries as definite as that of the prow, the stern, the sides and the bottom of the boat."¹¹¹ "If you copy a seen object or a mind object it is—wrong," he went so far as to say. "Any object seen in nature or any object seen in the mind must be recreated to live with and on the surface it's to exist with and on—to be—right—."¹¹² While this philosophy towards art reflects the formal concerns of advanced twentieth-century art, Marin's conceptual efforts to combine the objective and subjective into a synthetic object more specifically indicates the philosophical attitude that Charles Feidelson has called the "symbolistic imagination" that dominated twentieth-century art and literary criticism. In this view, Feidelson explains, the language of the work of art was itself the carrier of meaning, a symbol that is "autonomous in the

¹¹¹ Marin, "John Marin, By Himself," in *Selected Writings*, 126.

¹¹² Marin, "Marin Catalogue" for *An American Place* (Spring 1946), in *ibid.*, 217-18.

sense that it is quite distinct from the personality of the author and from any world of pure objects, and creative in the sense that it brings into existence its own meaning.”¹¹³ This theory coincided with the philosophical ideal to collapse the alienating distance between the self and the world created by Cartesian dualism through art and literature by doing away with “the question of subjective expression or objective description,” instead positing an integration of “symbol, attitude, and object” into a unified, aesthetic whole that offered a form of creative presentation rather than representation. The independent meaning of the synthetic, symbolic object was to be discovered in the language itself, not “behind” the work in the author or artist’s mind or “in front” of the work “in an external world.”¹¹⁴

Marin’s symbolist ideas towards art and his struggles to integrate the real and the expressive into an independent symbol that would live of its own right on the surface of his canvases can be compared to the poetry of his friend and another traveler in the Stieglitz circle, the author William Carlos Williams (1883-1963). “A small plant, perhaps a weed, certainly a weed, growing from a split stem in a certain patch of ground,” Williams wrote of Marin in a tribute to the artist after his death, “that’s what we were, one to wax into a painter, Marin, and one into myself.” As the poet remembered, Marin was “a flaming expression of the ground form which we both sprang. He was an affirmation of all that I felt of it that comforted me in times of stress . . . I could count on him to back me up.”¹¹⁵ This common front shared between the author and the painter was the symbolist imagination manifested in Williams’s poetry. In his study of the poet’s writings and philosophy, Donald Markos identifies Williams’s symbolism as an effort

¹¹³ Charles Feidelson Jr., *Symbolism and American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 49.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 52, 45.

¹¹⁵ William Carlos Williams, in *John Marin: Tributes by William Carlos Williams, Duncan Phillips, Dorothy Norman*.

to overcome the alienation between the self and the world wrought by scientific worldviews, which rendered nature something cold, indifferent, and lifeless. Williams, like Marin, believed in the objective existence of a world apart from the self; both artist and poet, however, also believed in the power of subjective imagination to infuse spiritual value into the world through art and writing.¹¹⁶ The author's keen attention to the language, form and structure of his poetry, however, was a means to attain the universal in ways that transcended the subjectivity of the author as well as the minute particulars of the external world. Like Marin's attitudes towards painting, Williams conceived of poetry as independent creative entities, as "organic forms of which the whole exceeds the sum of its parts" that "imitate nature's power to generate new forms," focusing on the transcendent experience of images or objects in nature.¹¹⁷ As William's explained, his thinking of poetry as a self-contained, autonomous form of creativity was influenced by the author Gertrude Stein, with her "formal insistence on words in their literal, structural quality of being words . . . It all went with their newer appreciation, the matter of paint upon canvas as being of more importance than the literal appearance of the image depicted."¹¹⁸ Generating new meaning through the symbolic properties of his poetry, Williams's insistence on the thingness of his poems, such as the character and qualities of printed words and their sounds when read or spoken points to the tensions inherent in his thought as well as Marin's physical painting. For both author and artist, their emphasis on the physical properties of their art threatened its transcending function to transport beholders into another realm of thought and being. Instead, the specific concreteness of their painting or poetry emphasized the here and now,

¹¹⁶ Donald W. Markos, *Ideas in Things: The Poems of William Carlos Williams* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994), 33.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹¹⁸ William Carlos Williams as quoted in *ibid.*, 122.

just as Marin's effort to integrate the subjective and objective was limited by the physical resistance and solidity of oil painting.

Guiding Williams's thought, too, was an organic and vitalist conception of nature and creativity inspired by romantic transcendentalists including Whitman and Emerson as well as Bergson, in which nature was conceived of as something alive and in flux, infused with a divine creative energy and growing toward an unknowable but ideal potential.¹¹⁹ Williams expressed this organicism through images of plants and soil, symbolizing growth and the "generative power in nature," as in his description of Marin and himself as "weeds" growing from the ground.¹²⁰

Marin, too, used such organic metaphors in his writings, the following passage a statement from the catalogue to a retrospective of the artist's work in 1947:

He—be he working on a flat surface reforms his seeings on this surface to a seeing of his own choosing so that which he chooses shall live of its own right on this flat— . . . The flat—the symbol of the soil and upon this soil—upright—the plant growing and living. . . . so as in nature—the soil not to lose its identity, the plant not to have its nature killed—and on the soil and amongst the plants—there'll be stones—there'll be weeds—that's life—Leave it to the true creative artist—he'll find a place for the stones and the weeds of life in his picture and all so arranged that each takes its place and part in that rhythmic whole—that balanced whole—to sing its music with color, line and spacing upon its keyboard.¹²¹

For Marin, his "seeings" were adapted to the medium of painting, the flat of the canvas described in metaphorical terms as the soil or ground upon which the growing, living language of paint was applied, neither paint nor canvas or his visions losing their identities in the creative process. Generating an integrated object teeming with life and growth akin to the creative powers of nature, for Marin the meaning of his paintings were ideally located in the painterly language

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 155.

¹²⁰ Ibid.,159.

¹²¹ Marin, "Marin Writes," in Institute of Contemporary Art, *John Marin: A Retrospective Exhibition*.

itself, synthesized into a balanced, organic whole and singing like a musical instrument to the soul.

Conceiving of nature as something apart from the self, both Marin and Williams reveled in the direct experience with the world of things as a form of self-realization, a source of imaginative and spiritual renewal made tangible in the symbolic unity of their art and poetry. According to Markos, this “eagerness the mind has for a reality independent of itself” as well as the elation of “their coming together in perception” was symbolized in Williams’s poem “The Seafarer,” written in 1950:

The sea will wash in
but the rocks—jagged ribs
riding the cloth of foam
or a knob or pinnacles
 with gannets—
He invites the storm, he
lives but it! instinct
with fears that are not fears
but prickles of ecstasy,
a secret liquor, a fire
that inflames his blood to
coldness so that the rocks
seem rather to leap
at the sea than the sea
to envelope them. They strain
forward to grasp ships
or even the sky itself that
bends down to be torn
upon them. To which he says,
It is I! I who am the rocks!
Without me nothing laughs.¹²²

With images of jagged rocks jutting into a thrashing sea much like Marin’s *My Hell Raising*—as Markos explains—Williams used the rocks to symbolize an observing self. Instead of a passive object battered by the stormy waters, the rocks in the poem—and by extension the individual

¹²² William Carlos Williams, “The Seafarer,” in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, ed. Christopher MacGowan, vol. 2, 1939-1962 (New York: New Directions, 1988), 114.

imagination—give life and expression to the external world symbolized in the leaping waters by straining forward and penetrating into it. Elated by this momentary unity of the self and nature, Williams’s poem symbolized the idea that imagination and consciousness are not just mirrors of nature that are acted on, but are instead active agents that infuse the world with life and meaning. The invigoration and ecstasy of this unity between self and nature is dependent on their difference, the imagination inflamed by direct experience with nature toward a transcendent fusion through perception.¹²³

In *My Hell Raising* (fig. 3.3), Marin’s efforts toward an ecstatic unification with nature through a spontaneous encounter that would live on canvas as an independent symbol of that union is indicated in the physical and emotional exuberance of brushwork and color, demonstrating the artist’s effort to penetrate into the worlds of nature and paint and infuse them with life and vitality, like the rocks in Williams’s poem. However, whereas the rocks in “The Seafarer” are given power and are leaping forward into the sea in the exhilaration of direct experience, the rocks in Marin’s painting are muddled, limp, and engulfed by the sea. To apply Williams’s metaphor of the rocks as symbols of the power of imaginative consciousness to Marin’s painting, it is as if the external world of things in *My Hell Raising*, or more specifically paint, was experienced as something alienating to imaginative consciousness and resistant to Marin’s fight to synthesize expression and representation into a symbolic unity of paint and canvas. “Art is a wedding of man and material,” he once stated to Stieglitz. As he breathlessly wrote of his painting,

I demand of them that they are related to experiences I demand of them that they have the story embracing these with the all over demand that they have the music of themselves so

¹²³ Markos, *Ideas in Things*, 28.

that they do stand of themselves as beautiful forms lines and paint on beautiful paper or canvas.¹²⁴

Yet oil painting, in its slow, dulling mulishness and technical complexity, seems to have been resistant to these complex, hasty demands Marin made of paint. Instead of a balanced fusion of self, world, and paint, Marin's experience of painting the sea in oils created an alienating distance between the artist and his materials, embodied in the anxious strokes that push and pull against one another, the muddied, congested painting on the cusp of dissolving into formlessness and obliterating the transcendent synthesis he sought.

The Physical and the Embodied

Marin's fight for synthetic unity of thought and thing was further compounded by the physical exuberance he brought to painting. Bearing the traces of wild gesticulations, with twists and turns of the brush involving not only the fingers but also the wrists and arms and the force and motion of the body, the extraordinary physical brushwork in paintings like *My Hell Raising* was more than a component of Marin's spontaneous fight for willful expression. As we have seen, Marin's turn to Maine in art was in part to celebrate the salubrious effects of the natural landscape, manifested in his dynamic presentations of nature as something pulsating and vital. Yet this wholesomeness experienced in nature extended to the artist's physical processes as well, each energetic and vigorous stroke a celebration of the artist's vitality and strength in ways that demonstrate Marin's immersion in the cults of masculine health and the "strenuous life" in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries that served to alleviate the enervating effects of urban life. Like his counterparts in the Stieglitz circle, Marin's annual excursions to Maine were made in part to engage in a form of physical and psychical renewal, the artist delighting in the revitalizing

¹²⁴ Addison, ME, 31 August 1940, in *Selected Writings*, 194.

effects of nature along with the ennobling trials and tribulations of country living that went along with it. “I start out in my boat,” he once recounted to Stieglitz of a painting excursion to an island off of Small Point. “I return and tell my wife of the terrible struggle I went through, the cruel rocks, the vicious sea, my little boat being tossed about, my human soul in distress and all that gibberish. . . . Or, I go out and return and tell her of the bully time I have had, the great big joy of it all.”¹²⁵ Marin’s letters are filled with such accounts of the invigorating, life-giving experiences of rugged outdoor life in Maine, what he called “the wild,” writing to Stieglitz as much about his adventures in fishing, hunting, and hiking as about art. Very often the artist linked his painting with his outdoors pursuits, delighting in the demanding environment and reveling in the virile challenges of painting outdoors. One anecdote in particular that the artist recounted to Stieglitz demonstrates the great athletic lengths he went to in order to find inspiration in scenes along the coast:

The other day I went to the Head of the Cape in the car—when I got there the thing to do was to get down to the foot of the Cape on the ledges—about 200 feet below . . . To get there—a tangle mess of fir trees—there’s a path—the one who made it was a fool—or was a fool—I being of course the greater fool must needs make my own—with my (leettle hatchet)—then to lug the load—2 canvases and an easel—a paint box—a palette—also the hatchet for chopping out—then a vast assortment—tobacco pouch—pipe matches & what not—also myself—on the back trip all of these—also myself.¹²⁶

Marin’s fellow artist and neighbor in Maine, Ernest Haskell, “marveled” at this daring bravura and youthful vigor Marin exhibited when painting: “Once I found him painting on the limb of a tree—high up—painting with both hands. He is ambidextrous. And watching him, it seemed the most natural way to paint.”¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Small Point, ME, 3 July 1917, in *ibid.*, 33.

¹²⁶ Addison, ME, 31 August 1940, in *ibid.*, 193.

¹²⁷ Ernest Haskell, “John Marin,” *The Arts* 2, no. 4 (January 1922): 201-02.

Bringing to his artistic practice a childlike exuberance, painting with both hands for Marin was a means to work even more spontaneously, uninhibited by the slowing demands of painting with one hand. Often working this way, Marin brought the kind of energy and athleticism he practiced in nature to painting, his vigorous strokes serving as forms of physical regeneration for both the artist and his audience. Many critics related Marin's painting to sport, both offering invigorating experiences of nature and physical vitality. Lewis Mumford, for instance equated Marin's art with his athleticism, linking the sensitivity he found in his paintings with the same wholesome activities the artist enjoyed. "In its freedom from sentimentality," Mumford wrote,

Marin's attitude toward nature is as healthy as that of a trapper, a hunter, or a fisherman. He angles for his pictures as a fisherman angles for his trout, conscious of the light, the ripple of water, the dart of the dark body under the stone, . . . always waiting for the moment when his interest in all these accessories will coincide with the lift of the rod or the pull of the trigger which will give him his game.¹²⁸

This kind of athletic energy and sensitivity that Mumford appreciated in Marin's painting, however, was more than a reaction to the enervating effects of modern urban life. In the artist's emphasis on physical vigor and tactility, his painting reacted against what the critic called "the senseless mechanical negation of life" in modern culture, a civilization left "without the benefit of senses, shut off from the experiences that come through the eye, the hand, the ear, the nose, the touch, the body." For Mumford, the all-pervading mechanistic ideology in industrial society, which reduced the human body to a machine in the service of higher forms of productive efficiency, had "limited the provinces of the senses, and confined its operations to a blind world of matter and motion."¹²⁹ The task of artists, Mumford wrote, was "to open up once more all the

¹²⁸ Lewis Mumford, "The Art Galleries: John Marin," *The New Yorker* 12, October 1936, 53.

¹²⁹ Lewis Mumford, "The Metropolitan Milieu," in Waldo Frank et al., *America and Alfred Stieglitz: A Collective Portrait* (New York: Literary Guild, 1934), 45. On the treatment of the human body as a motor or machine in the

avenues of human experience; to sharpen the eye, quicken the touch, refine the senses of smell and taste, as a preliminary to restoring to wholeness the dwarfed and amputated personalities” generated by industrial culture.¹³⁰ The dehumanizing reduction of organic bodies into machines that Mumford criticized was demonstrated, for instance, in the ideas and practices of the mechanical engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856-1915). Taylor devised systems of scientific management for laborers to maximize the efficiency of industrial production, subjecting the human body and energy to rational control. As the literary historian Mark Seltzer points out, such practices posed problems to human autonomy and being, reducing the self to a mechanism of production, representing a “violent dismemberment of the natural body and an emptying out of human agency” at the same time it promised “a transcendence of the natural body and the extension of human agency through the forms and technologies that represent it.”¹³¹ While this utopian ideal excited figures such as Taylor, for Mumford and those in the Stieglitz circle it was psychologically and physically deadening. In response, Stieglitz and his artists embraced organic experiences of the nature, as in Marin’s lyrical abstractions, which animated the external world. Bringing to his art an intense athletic exuberance, Marin’s painting also embodied the fullness of corporeal experience Mumford sought, a model of physical renewal that worked against the mechanization of the body in industrial culture. The artist’s ambidextrous manner of painting, in this sense, was also a way of demonstrating a form of self-control and the vivacity of the body, the artist in full command of his physical faculties in ways that were constricted by industrial assembly lines.

search for greater degrees of efficiency and labor power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Anson Rabinbach, *Anson Rabinbach, The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) and Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

¹³⁰ Mumford, “The Metropolitan Milieu,” 46.

¹³¹ Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, 157.

Such a bodily renewal is also manifested in the way Marin reveled in the sensuality of oil painting, indicated in the slathering and swirling strokes of *My Hell Raising* (fig. 3.10). This carnal pleasure is even more evident in *Gray Sea* (fig. 3.14). A detail from the center of the painting (fig. 3.15) shows how Marin dabbed and blended rich gobs and swirls of wet paint, caressed into a glistening, sumptuous mold of pigment. As he stated around the time he began to paint the sea in oil:

Yes I'll have it that painting is a *Job*—a *Job* in paint—and I am afraid that in the crazed desire to be modern—to have ideas—to be original—to belong to the tribe of *intelligencia*—we have gotten away from the paint job which is a *lusty thing* . . . and I feel almost like saying 'what you have to say don't amount to so much'—but the *lusty* desire to splash about—submerge oneself in a medium—you might come up to the surface with something worth while—Oh there be phases and phases and still more—but at the present I sing to the LUSTY.¹³²

Marin's infatuation with the sensuality of painting was more than a matter of personal gratification; it was also shaped by what the art historian Marcia Brennan has called the discourse of "embodied formalism" that permeated the critical writings and conversations of the Stieglitz circle, in which the forms, symbols, and pigment of their art were understood "as aestheticized analogues of the artist's gendered presences."¹³³ This critical and aesthetic embrace of corporeality and eroticism in art was a conscious revolt against the propriety and morality of American society, demonstrating a radical reorientation in attitudes towards the body in the twentieth century. For Homer and Ryder in the context of the "spermatic economy" of the nineteenth century, sexual energy was something to be repressed or channeled into more productive arenas. For those in the Stieglitz circle, however, it constituted the core of identity, to be released in their art and creative impulses, demonstrating their rebellion against the "puritan"

¹³² Small Point, ME, 20 July 20 1931, in *Selected Writings*, 140.

¹³³ Brennan, *Painting Gender, Constructing Theory*, 3.

heritage of American culture. Their revolt allied with the broader cultural politics of sexual liberation in the early twentieth century, they also found inspiration and heritage in the figure of Walt Whitman, who celebrated physical being and liberated sensuality as part of the broad continuum of experience.¹³⁴ Transforming Sigmund Freud's notions of sexuality as the nucleus of being and identity by extinguishing the repressions and conflicts seeded in the unconscious that lay at the heart of Freud's theories, they saw their artworks as transparent, healthful manifestations of an artist's psychic and sexual constitutions.¹³⁵

In the case of Marin, Paul Rosenfeld especially exercised the discourse of embodied formalism in response to the artist's works. The critic saw Marin's paintings in explicitly phallic terms, describing his works as "an instantaneous discharge" of primal, sexual energy in ways that exhibited the "principle of fecundity in humankind." For Rosenfeld, Marin painted from "the navel" rather than the intellect, the artist's body and loins the locus of creative selfhood in the production of works of art that manifested the erotic in human experience.¹³⁶ Marin, too, embraced these carnal attitudes towards art and life:

I would say that no two forms born are alike no two identical—a form based upon the idea of leaving out the Emotional will not raise that Stir for it is not sexual that all endeavor has to be sexual to be vital to give birth to any old COCK O ROBIN and that's the trouble with most art endeavor it is not sexual—has no sex—that everything that lives was born of SEX.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Ibid., 20-34.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 102-04. On Freud's influence on American intellectuals in the early twentieth century, see John Burnham, "The New Psychology" and Sanford Gifford, "The American Reception of Psychoanalysis," in *1915, The Cultural Moment: The New Politics, the New Woman, the New Psychology, the New Art & the New Theatre in America*, ed. Adele Heller and Lois Rudnick (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 117-45.

¹³⁶ Rosenfeld, *Port of New York*, 158-59.

¹³⁷ Marin, undated and unpublished manuscript notes, in *John Marin by John Marin*, 54.

Referring to his paintings as his “Paint Children” and to himself as their “Poppa,” Marin understood his paintings as produced through an erotic union between the artist and his pigments. For Rosenfeld, to the “unconscious” mind of an artist his canvas and paints were “the trunk of a woman,” the acting of painting a form of “embrace” in which the painting is “brought to life through marriage: the full speech of body to body and soul to soul.”¹³⁸ In his thinking of painting as a form of sexual consummation, Marin too thought of his voluptuous pigments as a feminine body, with which to unite through procreative energy to create a living, breathing entity.

For all his embrace of painting as a form of physical vitality and a kind of sexual union, however, Marin’s fidgeting strokes also indicate a level of discomfort with his sensual indulgence in paint. Rosenfeld observed something of this as well, writing that there was “a richness of touch; sensuality, even, crushed out like fruit-juice, in Marin. But it is a richness economically emitted, athletically held in rein; a sensuality not repressed and sour, but chaste and not easy.”¹³⁹ Although momentarily reveling in paint’s voluptuous power, the restlessness and tensions embodied in Marin’s surfaces manifest a fight against his carnal urges to maintain his cherished balance of expression and representation. The artist’s anxieties also manifest the paradoxical attitudes of the embodied formalism of the Stieglitz circle, in which they thought of their art as both bodily and spiritual, earthly and aesthetic. Ultimately, their own lingering Victorian heritage was demonstrated in the way they sublimated sexuality and corporeality into natural, symbolic forms in their works, insisting on art as an exalted realm of experience.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Rosenfeld, *Port of New York*, 14.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹⁴⁰ Brennan, *Painting Gender, Constructing Theory*, 9. Brennan writes that, in the rhetoric of the circle, “the group’s artworks were both sensuously embodied *and* aesthetically engaged, sexually liberated *and* spiritually purified,” their works in the end standing for “representations of aestheticized and sublimated corporeality.”

While for Marin this corporeality was not just aestheticized but something tangible and experienced in painting, in works like *My Hell Raising* (3.3) he too was caught between a solipsistic reverie in the seductive sensuality of oil paint and the effort to make of his painting a transcendent unity of inner and outer visions, of expression and representation.

In response, not long after painting *My Hell Raising*, Marin withdrew from painting the sea in the manner that characterized his seascapes of the 1930s and early 1940s. *Movement: Boats and Objects, Blue Gray Sea* from 1947 (fig. 3.16) is representative of his later work, the artist using oil paint in a way more reminiscent of his watercolors by painting with thinned pigments applied by lightly dragging the brush across the surface of the open, unclotted canvas. This manner of painting demonstrated Marin's retreat from the physical and conceptual conflicts and uncertainties induced by his oil paintings of the sea from the previous decade, in which he struggled against the consuming physical resistance and sensuality of the medium to create a synthetic unity of expression. In 1943, Marin had written that he had become

a slave to the brush—It even insists that I give it a good washing after each daubing which is proof enough that I am a slave . . . This brush has led his slave in some strange places this year and I must confess to many a shock but he has no sympathy—just don't give a damn for any feelings—so that I am just dragged around in these strange places—willy nilly—.”¹⁴¹

Written with his usual sarcastic wit, Marin's letter to Stieglitz suggests that painting the sea in oils in works like *My Hell Raising* had become something alienating and overwhelming, threatening to the wholesome embrace of both nature and the self. Rather than controlling his medium, paint controlled him, the artist a slave to its physical demands and complexities. In response, in *Movement: Boats and Objects, Blue Gray Sea* turned to more fluid pigments, executing light spontaneous touches as well as drawing in lines and forms in order to reacquire

¹⁴¹ Cape Split, ME, 29 September 1943, in *Selected Writings*, 209.

control over his materials. Although moving away from a thick, churning painterly handling, in these paintings Marin also demonstrated a renewed respect for the medium. Perhaps in response to the work of the younger generation of artists such as Jackson Pollock, who examined the unique properties of painting through their non-objective abstractions that emphasized process and action, Marin stated in 1947 that he wanted to “give paint a chance to show itself entirely as paint.” “Using paint as paint is different from using paint to paint a picture,” he explained further. “I’m calling my pictures this year ‘Movements in Paint’ and not Movements of Boat, Sea or Sky, because in these new paintings—although I use objects—I am representing paint first of all and not the motif primarily.”¹⁴² Marin’s aim in these paintings was to examine the sensuous beauties of the medium, as he had in *My Hell Raising*, but in a safe manner, the artist working with thinner oils in ways he could more easily manipulate the materials according to his liking and which avoided the anxious, muddying, fidgeting congestions of the previous decade. It is also revealing, however, that at the same time he persisted in using natural forms as an anchor for these works, he also sought to “represent” paint rather than present it, the artist unwilling or unable to relinquish paint’s referential function. In Marin’s mind, paint could be enjoyed for its sensuous beauties not in and of itself, but as a medium for the symbolic representation of nature and expression, its ties to the crude physical world to be sublimated and transformed by the superior powers and creative will of the artist.

¹⁴² Marin as quoted in Helm, *John Marin*, 101.

Afterword

John Marin's responses to contemporary American painting in the 1940s offer another way to understand the artist's conflicts and apprehensions with his convoluted oil paintings of the sea. In the preface to his 1948 biography by MacKinley Helm, Marin took the opportunity to vent some "Spleen" regarding what he felt were the serious defects of recent trends, which foregrounded "physical and mental disturbances" in art. Amounting to a thinly veiled critique of Abstract Expressionism, with his recognizable staccato patterns and halting language Marin found certain forms of abstraction "diseased." In particular, the "non-objective approach" was suspect for the way it was "streamlined of all humanity / where an old fashioned human embrace / is quickly nullified by divorce." For Marin, the extreme forms of abstraction in works such as Pollock's *Full Fathom Five* from 1947 (fig. 4.1) demonstrated alienating retreats from the recognizable world, presenting private symbols that divorced art from nature as well as its audiences. This was always the risk run by artists, according to Marin, whose responsibility was to combine a healthy respect for nature with expressive responses to it. Yet, in his view certain artists pushed too far in pursuing forms of personal self-expression, mining dubious experiences for the sake of originality:

[T]hat sensitive people have
The going out of one's way to be different
always a questionable refuge—when one has—nought to say
Cannot the artist be or better that he be—a
well balanced healthy individual
Of course—there have been those—will be those who
with their disease have given to the world—and will give
Something Vital
They are not those who I speak against
but that—deadly—humorlacking—
that deadly—fun and play lacking
Those who would start Symphonies early in life—
those who would Startle the world whose—ideal—

is the advertisement—
 is the noise
 Just suppose we look at man—he hasn't changed much in
 his physical appearances in the last Two thousand years—
 How Come—he's now so different
 How Come—he now has this hatred of all things Seen—
 And taking its place a diseased mental seeing
 How Come—A pleasure in torture
 an Exaltation of torture
 Has it a great moral lesson—?
 and what the Hell have moral lessons or any other lessons to do
 With Art
 The Creative one has his seeings and his own way of
 putting them down—
 If he's healthy mankind will find out
 If he's diseased mankind will find that out too
 —anyway—
 The birds are still singing
 —out there—¹

For Marin, a balanced artist was one who referenced the external world in painting, the “out there” a common language rooted in nature that could be collectively appreciated in tandem with the artist’s personal visions. “To the extent of others’ sharing—that cannot be measured—we cannot even measure our own extent,” he wrote Stieglitz earlier in 1937, explaining this philosophy, “but this we have in common—a hope that [what] we have seen and heard and touched or done—of worthwhileness—has been sensed and felt to a degree by others.”² This embrace of the world, moreover, was the source of beauty in art—at least if painted by the healthy-minded. “How one has to wage mightily to preserve beauty,” he once commented as if he felt he was fighting against this younger generation of artists to preserve the uplifting function of art:

¹ John Marin, “Foreword,” in MacKinley Helm, *John Marin* (Boston: Pellegrini & Cudahy in association with Boston Institute of Contemporary Art, 1948).

² Marin to Alfred Stieglitz, Cliffside, NJ, 23 September 1937, in *The Selected Writings of John Marin*, ed. Dorothy Norman (New York: Pellegrini and Cudahy, 1949), 176.

Those sensing and feeling beauty—love—The evil minded don't know the meaning of love—they never have—and never will experience love—Curious—the lover can hate—but the hater cannot love—
Consider the wealth of that to love the lover possesses—in nature forms
Mountains—hills plains and vales—Oceans—seas lake rivers—streams
and the living forms that have movement thereon—
Those loving these forms and having ability make use in expressing—those ignoring fall back on what they term their inner seeings unrelated to the world about them—
--One loving—have the feeling of belonging—expressing—Supplying a want—not loving—where is the belonging—personally—myself speaking—I've no place for—no—want for—what is termed Abstract—the non-objective—no not one.³

In his concern for expressing a pantheistic love of nature, Marin felt that those who ignored the world were inherently diseased, retreating into subjective visions and plumbing the depths of tortured psyches to the detriment of beauty in art. In contrast to the dynamism and vitality Marin celebrated in the city, their works were full of the “noise” evocative of the alienating cacophony and chaos of urban life. Instead of love and beauty, their paintings were full of pain and suffering—non-objective, solipsistic forms of self-absorption that rejected nature with little concern for a symbolic relation with their audiences or for uplifting experiences of the world. “Shakespeare,” Marin commented in 1947 in ways that encapsulated the philosophical differences between himself and this younger generation, “didn't give us tragedies only; he gave us comedies as well. I'd like the modern artists to think about that—there's room in life for both and I'd like to see them restore the balance and give us something a little cheerful. The sun is still shining and there's a lot of color in the world. Let's see some of it on canvas.”⁴

Much of Marin's distaste for the work of these new American artists, Ruth Fine notes, was due to the rhetoric of existential angst that fueled their creative processes, exhibiting a tragic

³ Marin as quoted in Dorothy Norman, “John Marin: Conversations and Notes,” *College Art Journal* 14, no. 4 (Summer 1955): 321, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/773143>.

⁴ Marin as quoted in “Noted Artist Abhors all ‘isms’,” *Palisadian* (1947), in Ruth Fine, *John Marin* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art; New York: Abbeville Press, 1990), 282.

attitude towards art and life rather than a celebration of nature and experience.⁵ Marin's charges of violence, torture, and disease leveled against their work, however, were aimed at both the "physical and mental disturbances" of their art.⁶ The artist's disgust with the art of this younger generation was aimed at more than their inward exploration of troubled psyches; it was also a reaction against something lowering, repulsive, and threatening in the way painters such as Pollock engaged with their materials, their work perhaps conjuring Marin's own conflicts and anxieties with the alienating physicality of painting. Marin may have even taken a jab at Pollock's *Full Fathom Five* (fig. 4.1) in a statement accompanying his retrospective in 1947: "Shakespeare's lines 'Full fathom five thy father lies, of his bones are coral made' can be factually told by anybody but who can tell it the way Shakespeare tells it it's the artist speaking so that to the artist it's the way of the telling always that concerns him: the painter his way, the sculptor his. The material used the way used of a verity that's the story."⁷ Instead of saying something beautiful or healthy with paint, Pollock's *Full Fathom Five* might have seemed to Marin to be a disgusting, illegible jumble of pigment. Impenetrable and lurid, with dense encrustations of oil paint haphazardly applied with a brush and palette knife overlain with looping swirls of latex house paint, the painting shows little concern for the sensuous qualities of the medium or for the coherent representation of churning waters referenced in its title. Instead, the turbulent surface is harsh and disjunctive, its unformed and incoherent clumps of blue and

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Marin, "Foreword," in Helm, *John Marin*.

⁷ Marin, "Marin Writes," in *John Marin: A Retrospective Exhibition* (Boston: Institute of Modern Art, 1947). Though the exact date Marin wrote this statement is unknown, it is possible he saw Pollock's painting when exhibited at the Betty Parsons Gallery that same year. As Sheldon Reich notes, it is likely that Marin saw Pollock's works on view at the gallery every year since 1943. See Reich, *John Marin: A Stylistic Analysis and Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 2 (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1970), 236.

white, the arbitrary globs of yellow, pink, and purple, and the webs of black and metallic pigment resonating with the banal garishness of commercial signage and the tumultuous “noise” of urban life that art was supposed to transcend.

Pollock’s manner of painting in *Full Fathom Five* might have even been more repulsive for Marin. In particular, the operation of “base materialism” that Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss identify in *Full Fathom Five* and the way Pollock embraced painting’s inextricable ties to the debasing world of the body and raw physical experience may have invoked for Marin his own struggle to elevate oil paint into a transcendent unity of expression. On the verge of formlessness in its bewildering complexity of snarled clumps, thick encrustations, and interlacing webs, the surface of the painting, with its puddles, poured skeins, and detritus, testifies to the weight of gravity and the horizontal axis of making. (fig. 4.2) The title of the painting also clues viewers into the horizontal orientation: “Full fathom five thy father lies, of his bones are coral made,” from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, describes what the subject of the passage viewed while gazing into the sea, just as Pollock’s painting implied that viewers were peering downward into churning waters.⁸ Pollock’s processes of de-sublimation, or the lowering of painting into the realm of the base and crude, are also apparent in the traces of bodily movement and the physical processes evident in *Full Fathom Five*. The skeins of poured paint especially indicate the artist’s frenetic gesticulations and athletic movements as he leaned over the canvas and looped and swirled paint, using quick, broad sweeps of the arm or sharp flicks of the wrist to fling paint, all the while shuffling rapidly around the canvas. Even more than Marin’s lusty painterly discharges, which were sublimated into expressive and symbolic representations

⁸ Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide*, exh. cat. (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 95-97. For a further discussion that relates Pollock’s drip paintings to the base and abject, see Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 243-320.

of the world, Pollock's painting may have appeared to the elder artist to be wild and repulsive ejaculations of paint onto the ground. Instead of the exalted, Pollock's scatological painting addressed itself to the abject and carnal in human experience, what Marin would have felt to be a kind of torture exacted on the sumptuous beauties of painting and a violence done to the transcendent function of art itself.⁹

Beyond this lowering of painting into the earthly and base, the attitudes this younger generation of painters took to their practices and the different relationship between the artists and their materials was perhaps just as distressing for Marin. Part of Marin's struggle was in his effort to preserve a sense of autonomy and control over the consuming physical world of paint, maintaining a healthy distance between the self and the material world. These artists, however, with all their emphases on spontaneity and improvisation and their courting of chance and accident as a part of the creative process, relinquished a degree of artistic will and embraced a more fluid relationship with their materials. These practices were influenced by surrealist principles of psychic automatism, which employed spontaneity as a means to access the unconscious. The Abstract Expressionists, however, including Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Robert Motherwell, transformed this technique into what Motherwell called "plastic automatism." Rather than reflecting psychic states, as in the surrealist approach, in plastic automatism the meaning of the artwork was produced in and through painting. The creative act was engaged in by figures like Pollock without predetermined ends, the artist reacting impulsively to the behavior and physical properties of his materials, which shaped his decisions

⁹ In his interpretation, T. J. Clark views these embodied practices of Pollock's painting as their primary function and importance in postwar American culture. In particular, Clark sees the wild, primitive, and somatic aspects of Pollock's drip paintings as a way to explore avenues of experience as yet uncolonized and appropriated by capitalist society. See "The Unhappy Unconscious," in *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 299-369.

and processes. This material dialogue was in turn a form of momentary self-discovery and personal transformation, the psychic self renewed in the creative process through a fluid and dynamic give-and-take between the artist and his paints.¹⁰ Harold Rosenberg famously articulated this process of self-discovery of “action painting” when he wrote that these American painters approached painting “as an arena in which to act,” the canvas the site not of a picture or representation “but an event.” Working without conscious intention or preconceptions, the painter “went up with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him.”¹¹

The historian Daniel Belgrad has placed this artistic emphasis on spontaneity as a reaction against the economic and social world of corporate liberalism in American culture in the 1940s and 50s. With its demand on conforming to an “American” way of life, normalized through scientific management and bureaucratic control in the workplace and mass consumption in the marketplace, the atmosphere of corporate liberalism left little room for personal freedom. This social control of corporate liberalism, Belgrad notes, was distinct from the “technological control” of capitalist industrialism discussed in the final chapter of this study in that it “entailed the rationalization of mental attitude rather than physical space.” It also imposed a form of “objectivity” in its empirical attitudes towards nature, rooted in a Cartesian dualism that saw the self as something separate from the world, posed a rigid distinction between mind and body, and believed in the existence of rational truths that were discernable through the intellect rather than

¹⁰ Angela Miller, “‘With Eyes Wide Open’: The American Reception of Surrealism,” in *Caught by Politics: Hitler Exiles and American Visual Culture*, ed. Sabine Eckmann and Lutz Koepnick (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 82-83.

¹¹ Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” *Art News* (December 1952), in *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique*, ed. Ellen G. Landau (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 190.

through subjective impressions.¹² In reaction, artists and thinkers in the 1940s began to reject objective, abstract thinking, searching for forms of subjective experience that grasped the holism and dynamic interplay of bodily, conceptual, and spiritual experience through improvisatory acts of creation. With the practice of plastic automatism, artists such as Pollock embraced the contingency of concrete experience, exploring how the subjective self was renewed through a fluid exchange with the social and physical world. In effect, the avant-garde art and philosophy of this period demonstrated a radical rethinking of the relationship between the self and the world, collapsing the distinctions between the two. This way of thinking about the creative process had its roots in the pragmatic tradition of William James as well as the twentieth-century philosopher John Dewey. Plastic automatism was also shaped by “field” theories that perceive all life as relational and bound by a continuous field of events and energy, including Einsteinian physics, the cosmology of Alfred North Whitehead, and the Gestalt psychology of Paul Goodman, which saw the psychic self as something fluid and shaped by the environment. In this view, interacting with the world, or in the case of artists such as Pollock with the materials of paints, brushes, sticks, canvas, and paint cans, was a way of transforming both subject and object through a relational, dynamic interplay.¹³

Pollock’s drip paintings especially bear the traces of this philosophical and artistic turn. With their vortices and palimpsests of paint as well as their elimination of reference to the external world, Pollock’s paintings accentuated the artist’s physical processes and search for forms of subjective experience. Rather than applying paint to canvas directly with a brush,

¹² Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 3-5.

¹³ On the theories of Whitehead and Goodman and their influence on postwar American culture, see Belgrad, *Culture of Spontaneity*, 120-156.

Pollock distanced himself from his support on the ground, using various tools to drip and fling paint while athletically dancing and weaving in and around the work, surrendering a degree of physical and intellectual control to gravity and the properties of his pigments. The swirling mounds, congealed and wrinkling pools, and haphazard flecks and drips of painting in *Full Fathom Five* (fig. 4.3) embody Pollock's embrace of the contingencies of the materials as he worked spontaneously, his actions and impulsive decisions made in response to the manner in which each stream of paint flowed, dripped, pooled, and interacted on the surface. The pigments and artist working in dialogue, Pollock's process presented a form of creation in which both the painting and the self were transformed through the creative act. Painting in this sense was both an artistic and personal "risk," a psychological and physical struggle in search of identity through material processes.¹⁴

Marin might have found this manner of engaging with paint offensive to his fundamental attitudes towards art and nature. For Marin, painting was a means to an end—a way to present self-contained, subjective responses to a world distinct from the mind, dependent on his control and volition over his materials. For artists such as Pollock, however, the act of painting was an end in itself, a means of self-discovery through paint that made subjective identity relational and produced through a fluid continuum of the mind, body, and matter in ways that made struggle a virtue of the creative process. Pollock and other Abstract Expressionists' courting of chance and spontaneity, moreover, may also be a reason Marin's art and reputation declined after his death. The kind of spontaneity celebrated in Marin's watercolors, which seemed to elide the distinction between conception and execution and which were disrupted in the more reputable medium of

¹⁴ Ibid., 104. As Belgrad writes, in their "exploration of subjectivity" the process of Abstract Expressionist gesture painters such as Pollock and De Kooning demonstrated an "act requiring 'honesty' and entailing both aesthetic and psychological 'risk.' Each painting rehearsed the psychological interactions through which individual subjectivity was formed, emerging as a repeatedly reinscribed surface," or a palimpsest.

oils, found its fullest expression and immediacy in the art and philosophy of this younger generation. Marin's spontaneity was restrained by his hold on the representation of nature as well as his insistence on control over his materials. For Marin, part of his artistic pleasure derived from the way his paintings realized "the putting down—my way—the seeing—my way," just as his frustrations came from moments "when the going is not my right way." As he wrote:

And when I squeeze the red out of the tube and it's moulded onto its working surface to my moulding I have delight and when I squeeze the blue out of the tube and its moulded onto its working surface to my moulding—I have delight—and it's so when all others of my choosing are squeezed out and moulded to my mouldings that I have delight.¹⁵

Whereas for Marin gratification and success on the way his paints were submissive to his choices and actions, for Pollock painting demanded that he relinquish control to the properties and contingencies of his materials so that his painting had a "life of its own." "When I am 'in' my painting," he famously wrote, "I'm not aware of what I'm doing," the artist's processes hinging on improvisation and material dialogue.¹⁶

The manner in which Pollock and other Abstract Expressionists engaged with painting indicates a drastic reorientation in philosophies and attitudes from those of the artists examined in this study. Rather than employing painting as a medium to represent perceptions, spiritual visions, or expressions of the world, as Homer, Ryder, and Marin fought to materialize, for Pollock and his generation painting became a process through which these experiences were discovered. In doing so they relished in the resistance of painting and its ties to the crude world of the body and base materials, engaging with paint as a physical substance and painting as a process involving both body and mind, the lower and the exalted. While these complicating vicissitudes were precisely what each of the artists in this study struggled against, Homer's

¹⁵ Marin to Stieglitz, Cliffside, NJ, 23 September 1937, in *Selected Writings*, 175.

¹⁶ Jackson Pollock, "My Painting," *Possibilities 1* (1947-1948), in *Reading Abstract Expressionism*, 140.

somatic materiality, Ryder's abject paintings, and Marin's anxious, fidgeting seascapes nonetheless pointed the way toward the work of the gestural painters in the mid-twentieth century, their struggles with the frustrating yet seductive, physical resistance of painting becoming in the hands of artists like Pollock in the mid-twentieth century an integral aspect of the creative process. In this respect, Pollock's statement that "The only American master who interests me is Ryder" takes on a new meaning. In addition to Ryder's expressive forms, Pollock was perhaps also attracted to the artist's physical struggles to make tangible the spiritual and transcendent.¹⁷ For Pollock and his generation such material conflicts were to be embraced as part of painting. In the hands of Homer, Ryder, and Marin, however, they were something to be suppressed in order to maintain painting's representational function as well as the proper hierarchical relationship between mind and matter, between the elevated spheres of the perceptual, spiritual, and emotional over the threatening experiences of the base and carnal.

For all of Pollock's philosophical embrace of unconscious spontaneity, plastic dialogue, and painting as a means of self-discovery, his famous drip paintings nonetheless betray the artist's efforts to assert a higher degree of control over his materials. In *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)* (fig. 4.4), for instance, Pollock did away with thick oil paint and direct contact with the canvas he employed in the encrusted underlayer of *Full Fathom Five*, instead distancing himself from the support and using sticks, basters, knives, or dried brushes to pour fluid enamels across the surface. Although at first glance appearing to be a series of wild and improvisational, haphazard skeins soaked into the canvas or sitting atop the surface, the overall compositional effect is of a balanced visual field. The smooth, looping lines of pigment (fig. 4.5) in particular are evidence of how Pollock anticipated the behavior of his medium as he steadily and

¹⁷ Jackson Pollock, "A Questionnaire," *Art and Architecture* (February 1944), in *Reading Abstract Expressionism*, 133.

rhythmically danced around the canvas and weaved in and out with broad sweeps of the arm and gentle flicks of his wrist. These lyrical pours verge on the immaterial, together with the organic, homogenous field that erases the distinction between foreground and background, appealing to the “purely ‘optical’,” as Michael Fried wrote. “The materiality of pigment is rendered sheerly visual, and the result is a new kind of space . . . in which conditions of seeing prevail rather than one in which objects exist, flat shapes are juxtaposed or physical events transpire.”¹⁸ This element of optical transcendence, however, exists in tension with the congested areas of the canvas, in which Pollock perhaps lingered a bit too long with a pose or gesture, the pigments swirling, muddying, and wrinkling on the surface (fig. 4.6). Instead of appealing to eyesight, these details emphasize paint’s tactility and physicality, asserting the horizontality of making and the base materialism of paint. These tensions perhaps indicate the artist’s psychic conflicts with the aesthetic and philosophical implications of plastic automatism. Pollock tried to exercise conceptual and physical control and transform his pigments into a lyrical visual field rather than let his materials fall into abject formlessness, privileging sight and transcendence over the earthly and base. In these works, Pollock seems to have lingered within the philosophical tradition of his predecessors by privileging mind over matter, the artist occupying an uncomfortable position within the radical reorientation in attitudes towards painting and experience in the mid-twentieth century.

The disruptive materialities and painterly struggles of Homer, Ryder, and Marin, along with the action paintings of Pollock, remind us that paintings are not just forms of representation or transparent screens for the projection of objects, ideas, perceptions, or ideologies. Instead, they are the result of a convoluted, sometimes frustrating encounters in which artistic aims are

¹⁸ Michael Fried, “Jackson Pollock,” *Artforum* (September 1965), in *Reading Abstract Expressionism*, 258.

resisted by the complexities of material production: a dialogue shaped by materials and attitudes towards physical experience along with artistic intention and struggle. They are not, in other words, the seamless materialization of the visions of a painter, who effortlessly molds and bends his or her materials to their will; rather, they are physical objects created from the ground up, the product of a disheveled process that is “multitudinous beyond imagination, tangled, muddy, painful and perplexed,” to apply William James’s definition of “pure experience” to painting. It involves “the immediate flux of life which furnishes the material to our later reflection with its conceptual categories . . . a *that* which is not yet any definite *what*, tho’ ready to be all sorts of *whats*.”¹⁹ Art history tends to address painting in terms of the latter, thinking about painting in terms of concepts and intellectual abstractions, the “whats” that a painter presents to us after the fact of the muddy and muddled practices. In order to fully unravel the complexity and meaning of a work of art, however, exploring the dynamics of physical process as a point of mediation, in its material specificity and in its cultural contexts, is essential. Doing so can add new dimensions to how things and ideas are materialized in works of art, complicating our interpretation of artifacts while enriching our understanding of the historical texture of material practice.

¹⁹ William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907; repr., New York: Longmans, Green, 1940), 21, and *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1912), 93.

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Illustrations



0.1 Jackson Pollock, *Full Fathom Five*, 1947, oil on canvas with nails, tacks, buttons, key, coins, cigarettes, matches, etc., 50 7/8 x 30 1/8 in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Peggy Guggenheim, 186.1952.



0.2 Asher B. Durand, *The Beeches*, 1845, oil on canvas, 60 3/8 x 48 1/8 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of Maria DeWitt Jesup, from the collection of her husband, Morris K. Jesup, 1914, 15.30.59.



0.3 Asher B. Durand, *The Beeches*, detail.



1.1 Winslow Homer, *High Cliff, Coast of Maine*, 1894, oil on canvas, 30 ¼ x 38 ¼ in.
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, Gift of William T. Evans, 1909.7.29.



1.2 Winslow Homer, *Northeaster*, 1895, oil on canvas, 34 ½ in. x 50 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of George A. Hearn, 1910, 10.64.5.



1.3 Winslow Homer, *Maine Coast*, 1896, oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of George A. Hearn, in memory of Arthur Hoppock Hearn, 1911, 11.116.1.



1.4 Winslow Homer, *Rocky Coast and Gulls*, 1869, oil on canvas, 16 ¼ x 28 1/8 in. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Bequest of Grenville H. Norcross, 37.486.



1.5 Winslow Homer, *Rocky Coast and Gulls*, detail.



1.6 Winslow Homer, *Rocky Coast and Gulls*, detail.



1.7 Winslow Homer, *The West Wind*, 1891, oil on canvas, 30 x 44 in. Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, Gift of Anonymous Donor, 1928.24.



1.8 Winslow Homer, *Early Morning after a Storm at Sea*, 1902, oil on canvas, 30 ¼ x 50 in. Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of J.H. Wade, 1924.195.



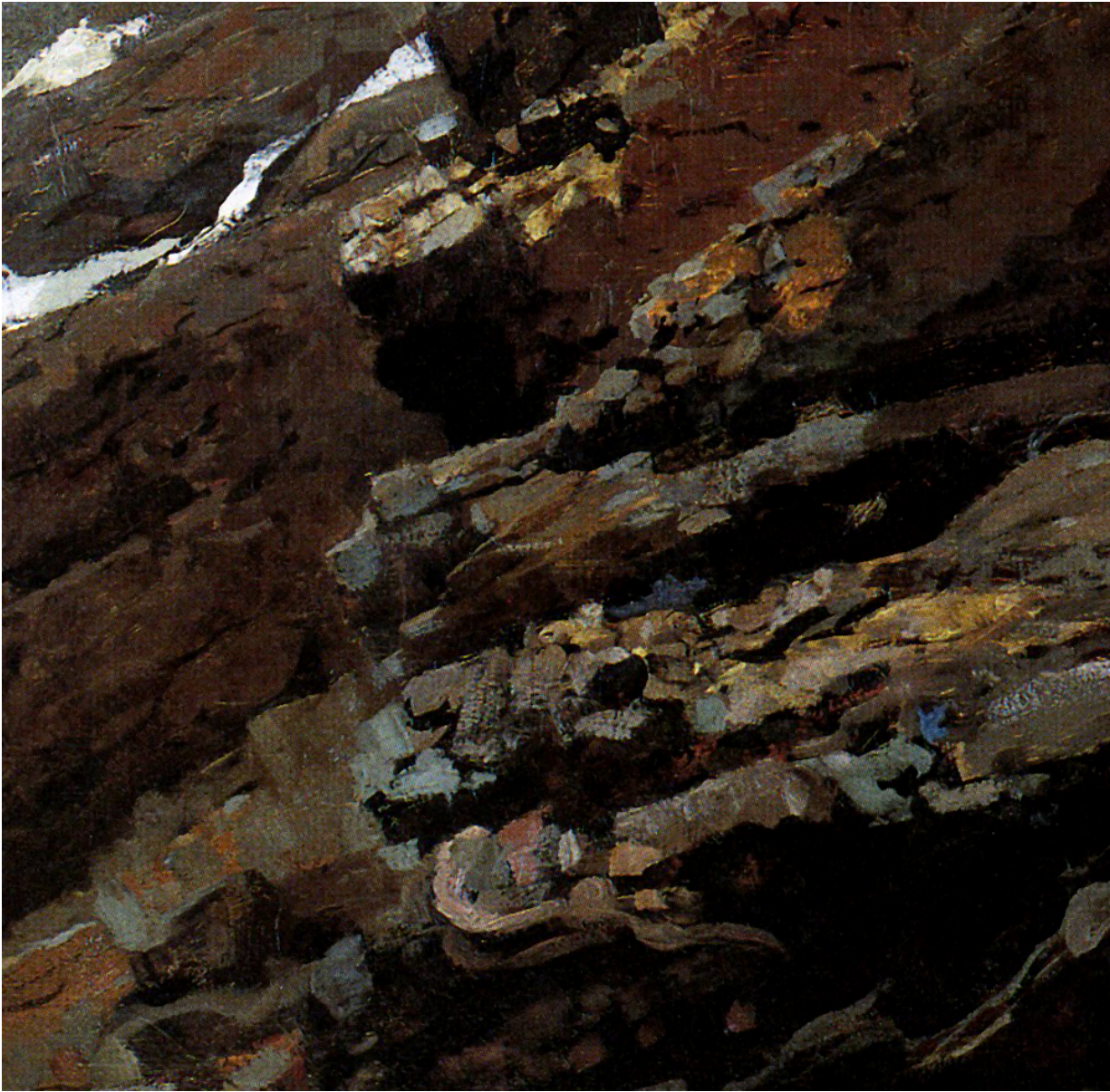
1.9 Winslow Homer, *Incoming Tide, Scarborough, Maine*, 1883, watercolor on paper, 15 x 21 ½ in. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Gift of Ruth K. Henschel, 1975.92.8.



1.10 Winslow Homer, *Sea and Rocks during a Storm*, 1894, watercolor on paper, 16 x 22 in. Private Collection.



1.11 Winslow Homer, *Sunlight on the Coast*, 1890, oil on canvas, 30 ¼ x 48 ½ in. Toledo Museum of Art, Gift of Edward Drummond Libbey, 1912.507.



1.12 Winslow Homer, *High Cliff*, detail.



1.13 Winslow Homer, *The Life Line*, 1884, oil on canvas, 28 ¼ x 44 5/8 in. Philadelphia Museum of Art, George W. Elkins Collection, 1924, E1924.4.15.



1.14 Winslow Homer *High Cliff*, detail.



1.15 William Merritt Chase, *Shinnecock Hills*, c. 1895, oil on canvas, 34 1/8 x 39 1/2. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, Gift of William T. Evans, 1909.7.11.



1.16. John Singer Sargent, *Elizabeth Winthrop Chanler*, 1893, Oil on canvas, 49 3/8 x 40 1/2 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, Gift of Chanler A. Chapman, 1980.71.



1.17 Thomas Wilmer Dewing, *The Hermit Thrush*, 1893, oil on canvas. 34 2/3 x 46. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, Gift of John Gellatly, 1929.6.39.



1.18. Winslow Homer, *West Point, Prout's Neck*, 1900, oil on canvas, 30 1/16 x 48 1/8 in. Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, Williamstown, MA, acquired by Sterling and Francine Clark, 1941, 1955.7.



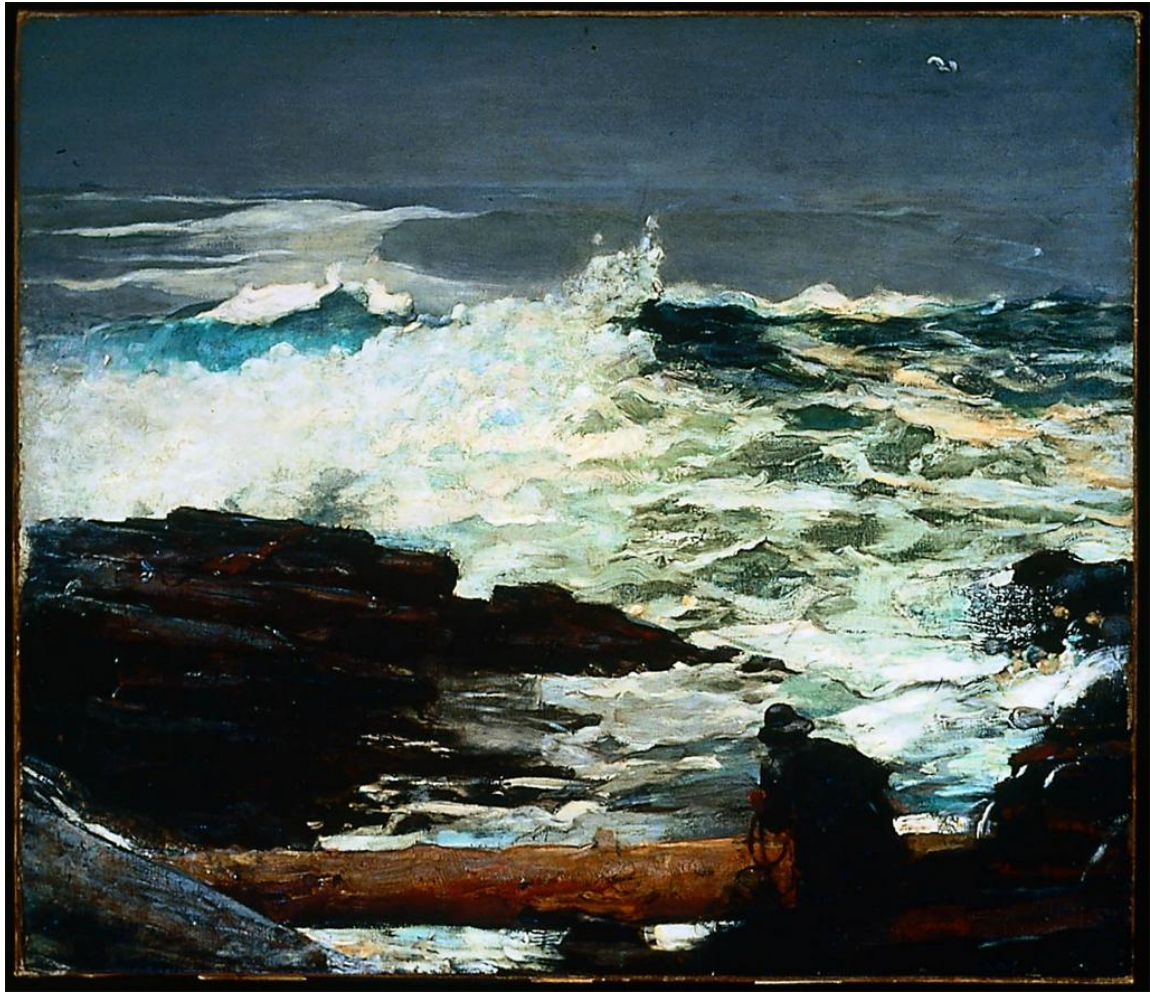
1.19 Winslow Homer, *Undertow*, 1886, oil on canvas, 30 x 47 5/8 in. Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, Williamstown, MA, acquired by Sterling and Francine Clark, 1941, 1955.4.



1.20 Winslow Homer, *Winter Coast*, 1890, oil on canvas, 36 x 31 5/8 in. Philadelphia Museum of Art, John G. Johnson Collection, 1917, cat. 1004.



1.21 Peter A. Juley, *Winslow Homer, Prout's Neck, Maine*. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, Peter A. Juley & Son Collection, J0001697.



1.22. Winslow Homer, *Driftwood*, 1909, oil on canvas, 24 ½ x 28 ½ in. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1993.564.



2.1 Albert Pinkham Ryder, *Temple of the Mind*, c. 1883-1885, oil on wood, 17 ³/₄ x 16 in. Albright-Knox Gallery of Art, Buffalo, New York, Gift of R.B. Angus, 1918:01.



2.2 Albert Pinkham Ryder, *The Curfew Hour*, c. 1882, oil on wood, 7 ½ x 10 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1909, 09.58.1.



2.3 Cross-section of paint from Albert Pinkham Ryder, *Story of the Cross*. Conservation Analytical Lab, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Reproduced in Elizabeth Broun, *Albert Pinkham Ryder* (Washington DC: Published for the National Museum of American Art by the Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 125.



2.4 Albert Pinkham Ryder, *The Lorelei*, c. 1896-1917, oil on canvas, 22 ½ x 19 ¼ in.
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, Gift of Tulip Tree Foundation, 2011.8.



2.5 Albert Pinkham Ryder, *The Flying Dutchman*, completed by 1887, oil on canvas mounted on board, 14 ¼ x 17 ¼ in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, Gift of John Gellatly, 1929.6.95.



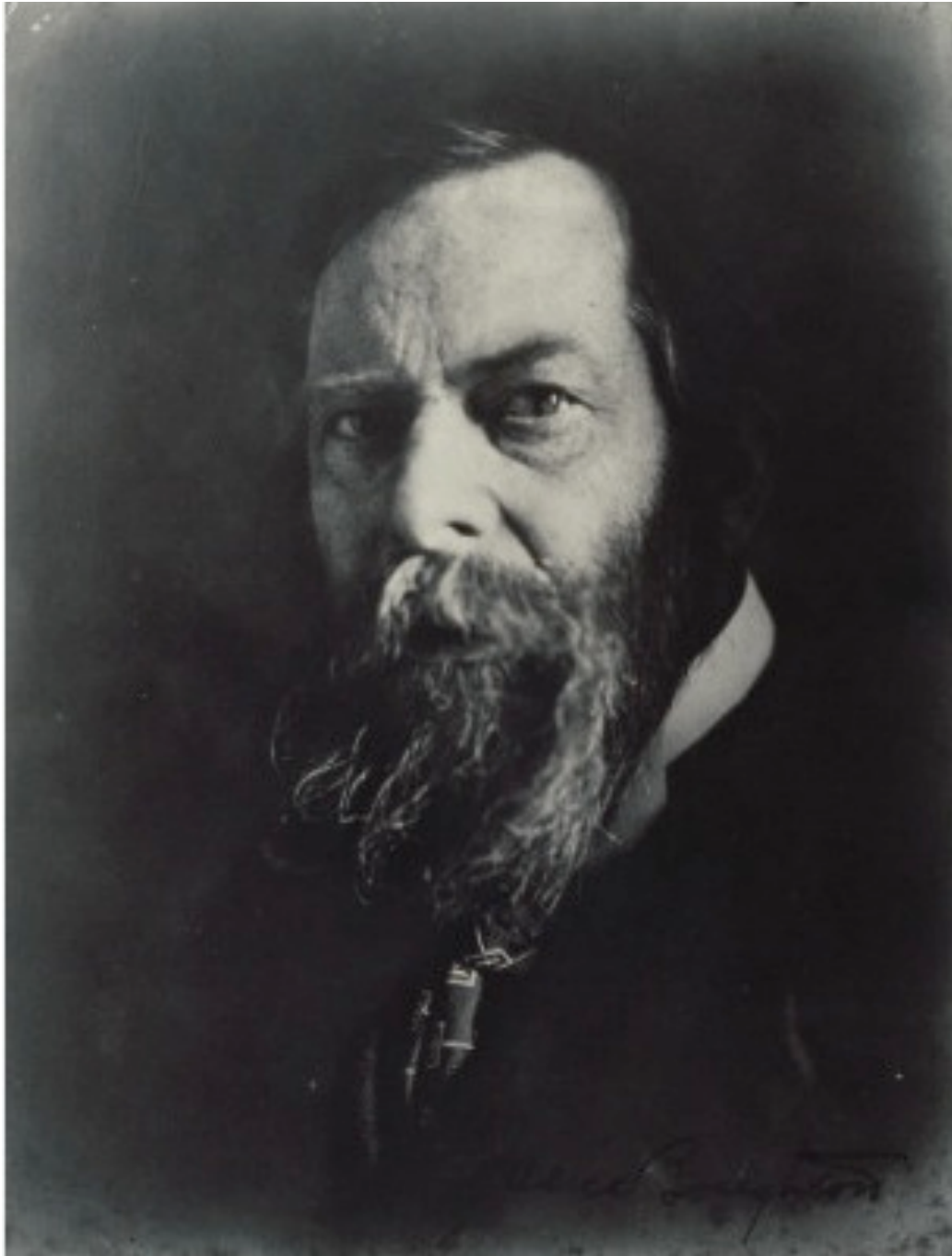
2.6 Albert Pinkham Ryder, *The Curfew Hour*, detail of bottom right corner.



2.7 Albert Pinkham Ryder, *Jonah*, c. 1885-1895, oil on canvas mounted on fiberboard, 27 ¼ x 34 3/8 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C, Gift of John Gellatly, 1929.6.98.



2.8 Albert Pinkham Ryder, *Jonah*, detail



2.9 Alice Boughton, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, 1905, gelatin silver print, 8 5/16 x 6 3/8 in. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, NPG. 77.10.



2.10 Albert Pinkham Ryder, *With Sloping Mast and Dipping Prow*, c. 1880-1885, oil on canvas mounted on fiberboard, 12 x 12 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, Gift of John Gellatly, 1929.6.102.



2.11 Albert Pinkham Ryder, *The Country Girl*, oil on canvas, 17 3/8 x 13 5/8 in. The Maier Museum of Art at Randolph College, Lynchburg, VA, Purchase made by the Fine Arts Fund, 1947, M.1947.1.



3.1 Alfred Stieglitz, *John Marin*, 1921-22, palladium print, 9 ½ x 7 5/8 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949, 49.55.39.



3.2 John Marin, *Movement: Fifth Avenue*, 1912, watercolor and pencil on paper, 16 7/8 x 13 11/18 in. Art Institute of Chicago, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949. 554.



3.3 John Marin, *My Hell Raising*, 1941, oil on canvas, 25 x 30 in. Collection of Barney A. Ebsworth.



3.4 John Marin, *Sea Movement—Green and Blue*, 1923, watercolor, charcoal, and graphite on paper, 16 7/8 x 20 1/2 in. Art Institute of Chicago, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949.564.



3.5 John Marin, *Rocks and Sea, Maine*, c.1917, watercolor and charcoal on paper, 16 5/8 x 19 1/2 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949, 49.70.117.



3.6 John Marin, *Blue Sea*, 1923, watercolor and charcoal on paper, 13 15/16 x 17 1/2 x. Art Institute of Chicago, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949.563R.



3.7 Herbert Seligmann, *Marin's House at Cape Split*, n.d., private collection. Reproduced in Ruth Fine, *John Marin* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1990), 230.



3.8 John Marin, *Rocks and Sea: Small Point, Maine*, 1931, oil on canvas, 25 11/16 x 31 11/16 in. Cleveland Museum of Art, Norman O. Stone and Ella A. Stone Memorial Fund, 1956.361.



3.9 John Marin, *My Hell Raising*, detail.



3.10 John Marin, *My Hell Raising*, detail.



3.11 John Marin, *Cape Split, Maine*, 1941, watercolor, graphite, pencil on paper, 15 1/2 x 20 1/2 in. Art Institute of Chicago, Oliva Shaler Swan Memorial Collection, 1943.93.



3.12 John Marin, *My Hell Raising*, detail.



3.13 John Marin, "Wave on Rock," 1937, oil on canvas, 22 ¾ x 30 in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, purchase with funds from Charles Simon and the Painting and Sculpture Committee, 81.18.



3.14 John Marin, *Gray Sea*, 1938, oil on canvas, 22 x 28 in. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Gift of Marin and Mrs. John Marin, Jr., R.38.14.



3.15 John Marin, *Gray Sea*, detail.



3.16 John Marin, *Movement: Boats and Objects, Blue Gray Sea*, 1947, oil on canvas, 29 x 36 ¼ in. Art institute of Chicago, Alfred Stieglitz Collection; Robert A. Waller Fund, 1949.610.



4.1 Jackson Pollock, *Full Fathom Five*, 1947, oil on canvas with nails, tacks, buttons, key, coins, cigarettes, matches, etc., 50 7/8 x 30 1/8 in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Peggy Guggenheim, 186.1952.



4.2 Jackson Pollock, *Full Fathom Five*, detail.



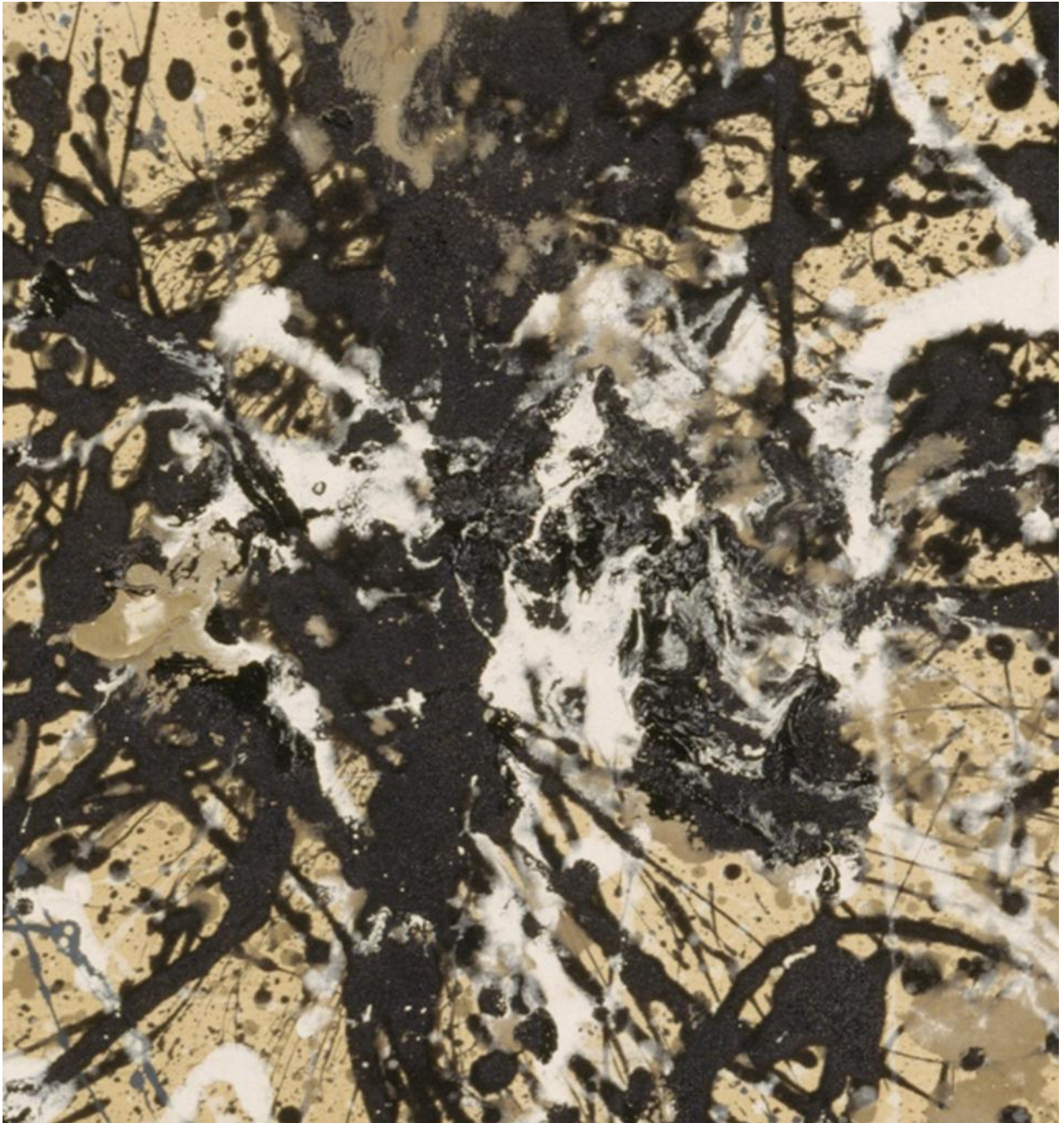
4.3 Jackson Pollock, *Full Fathom Five*, detail.



4.4 Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)*, enamel on canvas, 105 x 207 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, George A. Hearn Fund, 1957, 57.92.



4.5 Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm, (Number 30)*, detail.



4.6 Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm, (Number 30)*, detail.