Reckoning with

Winslow Homer:

His Late Paintings

and Their Influence

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Winslow Homer

As a young man of twenty-five, Winslow Homer first tasted public recognition in covering the Civil War for *Harper's Magazine*. Older, soberer, and alone, he spent the last twenty years of his life memorializing the rocks and surf of Prout's Neck, Maine. In the years between he painted as broad a range of subjects as any American artist: children and old men, languid society ladies at resorts and robust fisherwomen on the beach, cows being milked and boats being swamped, the Adirondacks and the Bahamas. By the time he died Homer had the reputation of a hermit, known to the rest of the world only through his oil paintings, which appeared, one or two at a time, annually in exhibitions in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Chicago. He had no students, no apprentices, and few artist friends. His flinty character and equally taciturn, granite-like canvases—elemental, even crude dramas of the ocean and shore—seemed an absolute to his contemporaries. At the time of his death, his reputation was fixed in the public's mind: a lonely figure who spurned society, he was a great marine artist and our greatest native painter.

How did he get to this place? His early career was solid and successful, but no more so than that of many of his contemporaries. Fortunate to be reviewed generously from the start, he had made the obligatory trip to Europe in 1867, as soon as he could, but apparently to little effect. There was no discernible change in his style or subjects after the excursion, although it was a handy thing to have been well reviewed in Europe and he had almost won a medal, a nice feather in his cap.

Homer lived in New York City for the next twenty years. For the first decade his studio was in the University Building on Washington Square, then in the Tenth Street Studios along with most of the other leading artists in the city. He joined the appropriate organizations, even a few clubs, but was never a leader. During the summer months, he sensibly left the city seeking
material to paint, as did most of his artistic brethren. Looking back on his time in New York, his contemporaries struggled to find clues that would explain his later isolation. Under his convivial exterior they claimed to find a certain reserve, but that smacks of hindsight. Other accounts describe him as a dapper, presentable bachelor—qualities he retained to the end.

During this period he was grouped with other genre painters, always abreast of and generally helping to form the changing fashions in subject matter during the 1860s and 1870s. He supported himself by supplying drawings to such magazines as Harper's as well as by selling his paintings. By the end of the 1870s, he was able to cease commercial illustration and concentrate entirely on painting. His particular specialties—and everyone had to have one or two—were the New England farmer and the rural Southern black. In the New York art world of his day, he had a substantial but not a significant presence. As many of his contemporaries later remarked, if he had died before the age of forty-five, he would have been remembered for a few interesting pictures and not much else.

In 1881 Homer’s life changed; he returned to Europe, not to
Paris but to London. Now a mature artist, even if he did not quite know what he wanted, he recognized what he did not want to do. He did not want to stay in his usual rut of places and subjects. He did not want to try the Continent again. He did not even want to explore London. In a sense, whatever London could have offered him in its urbanity, he could more comfortably have found in New York. And as for the Continent, he knew what was going on there; it was happening in New York City, right before his eyes.

A few years before, in 1877, there had been an uproar at the National Academy of Design, New York's only center for the display and promotion of contemporary art. The young turks who had gone away to train in Munich, Paris, and The Hague had come back and shaken everything up. They knew what art was all about and threatened to teach their elders, rebelliously founding the Society of American Painters. None of this dreary business of pretty and perfect, painting so much like a photograph that no one cared about the difference. They wanted paint and real painting. However diluted a version of the gospel of Whistler or the impressionists, their work was aesthetically minded and technically proficient.

Faced with the need to renew his art and life, Homer headed in the opposite direction, off to the little English fishing village of Cullercoats near Tynemouth, and began painting the hardy fishermen. Not the first artist to do so, he followed a trend made popular by Jules Breton (1827-1906) in France and, in England, Charles Napier Hemy (1841-1917) and Colin Hunter (1841-1904). The north of England, including Cullercoats, where the fishermen toiled on the rough North Sea, was already a favorite painting ground for many artists.

Returning to America at the end of 1882, Homer began to paint heroic scenes of action—or at least stressful inaction, scenes without leisure. Where before he had treated boys and girls in placid waters, now he saw men and women laboring against mighty turbulence (Figure 1). His models, and Homer, seem to have grown up and to have set aside childish delights. The next year he moved to Prout's Neck, abandoning New York.

The progress of Homer's career seems to have been one of renunciation: from the most horrific and widest fields of human action, the battlefields of the Civil War, to monotonously pound-
ing surf on a barren rock (Figure 2). He left behind the society and bustle of the city, the world of art, and the hope of love, for a life stripped down to its essentials. He became as monolithic as his subjects. Yet few successfully abandon the accumulated memories and associations of a life. Although he may have turned his back on New York City, he occasionally looked over his shoulder; ties with his former life were not entirely severed.

But what is the balance of past and future in him? Interpreting Homer and his art—the significance of the move and its consequence for his paintings—is a difficult enterprise. Homer, the most reticent of artists, gives us little help. As he wrote to an early biographer: "It may seem ungrateful to you ... I should not agree with you in regard to that proposed sketch of my life. But I think it would probably kill me to have such [a] thing appear, and, as the most interesting part of my life is of no concern to the public, I must decline to give you any particulars in regard to it." But we may, out of the skein of possibilities, weave a plausible picture of his emotions and motivations.

At the heart of this activity lies Homer himself. What he might have thought he was doing determined what he painted. But did his intentions determine the meaning of his works? We may imagine him in front of his easel: several sets of events co-mingling as he puts paint to canvas. First, the immediate experience of the rocks and water, the things the painting is most directly about. Second, a lifetime of looking at and making art: this is the knowledge he brings to bear on the task at hand, consciously and unconsciously fitting his direct experience into the patterns he found most satisfying after a lifetime. Third, the practical sensations of his body and situation. We might imagine his father blistering around the garden, intemperately ordering the servants about. Perhaps Winslow has a stomachache or new shoes that pinch his toes. After a lifetime of habit, most such realities could be shut out. Then, there are his emotions and his psychology, the life lived and felt outside the drama of the studio and his aesthetic perceptions. Today, his father grates on his nerves; perhaps he will give the deer a touch of his father's eyebrows. But we can seldom recover such private meanings and can only imagine that in ways he could not or would not bring to the surface, he felt alone, and the absolute and unyielding battle
of rock and water was anesthetizing and oddly comforting. Finally, there was the fact of America: Homer was embedded in the culture of his day, both representing and interpreting it—consciously or not—in his depictions of the American landscape. Whatever Homer may have said about the overt meanings of his canvases, the forces that brought him to his final subject, Prout's Neck, were not always under his control.

The incidental causes for his move to Maine should not be underestimated. His brother Arthur had honeymooned at Prout's Neck in 1875 and returned each summer thereafter. The family business instincts scented a good opportunity for investment, and the Homers bought land there in 1883. Like any good unmarried child of his day, Winslow was the one responsible for looking after his parents, which presumably entailed living with them. But whatever his plans may have been, they were overturned by the death of his mother in 1884. What was to have been a summer place for the entire family became a year-round residence for Winslow. He lived in his own cottage, which was also his studio, a few feet from the main house where his family stayed. During the winter, his father lived in a hotel in Boston while Homer remained at Prout's Neck: distant, but not too far away.

Homer's existence at Prout's Neck during the summer was hardly reclusive. The place, if it did not crawl with people, certainly ambled. Several hotels were within a few hundred yards of his studio. However strenuously he tried to avoid their clientele, he could not evade them entirely. Although remaining aloof (after all, he was at work), he seems to have gotten on well with most of his summer neighbors at Prout's Neck, some of whom were professionals in other fields. Artists who might be resident at the Neck during the summer occasionally entered his private circle. Only in the depths of winter did he live entirely alone and, even then, seldom for more than a few weeks. Nearly every January, he headed for New York City and then south to the Caribbean. Several times each year he went fishing with his older brother, Charles, to the Adirondacks or Quebec during the summer or fall, and to Florida in the winter.

Despite his busy life, we may guess that he longed for love and companionship beyond that of family and friends. Most viewers have read that loneliness in his work, but we can never be certain
that we are not imposing the interpretation. Certainly Homer would never have admitted to it. Professionally, there was no particular need for the stimulation of New York City. For most culture (especially music, an abiding interest), he had Boston, which he visited frequently to see his father. Given the changed nature of his subject matter, Prout’s Neck was the best place to be, and in his peculiarly literal fashion, he no doubt asked himself: “Why do anything else?” His stance was always deliberately inartistic: fishing, he would claim, was his major interest, and he would never have dreamed of introducing himself as an artist. Instead, he paid elaborate attention to the views of the local butcher, whom “he would let ... tear his pictures all to pieces.” His letters have the tone of a crafty Yankee trader, on the lookout for every dollar. He badgered his dealers constantly. Sounding like any tailor or small shopkeeper, to one of them he wrote: “I will paint for money at any time. Any subject, any size.” The society he created, of fishermen and local handymen, embraced people as remote from his career and professional interests as can be imagined. He stoutly denied any sense of deprivation (except in a few weak moments), just as he rejected the claims of the New York art world, threatening continually not to paint. “At present and for some time past I see no reason why I should paint any pictures,” he exclaimed in 1893. In 1907 he informed one critic: “Perhaps you think that I am still painting and interested in art. That is a mistake. I care nothing for art. I no longer paint. I do not wish to see my name in print again.” Of course, he did continue to paint.

In trying to peer beneath his stony surface, to recover Homer’s meanings in what he painted, we might begin with his family. His mother, Henrietta, was the artistic one and received full credit from Winslow for his interest in painting. He treasured her watercolors all his life, showing them proudly. As a second son he may always have been marked as hers; one intriguing argument that he was named after her pastor serves to underscore the point. Homer regarded himself as her successor in other ways. Prophetically, the day before his birthday in 1895, he wrote to his older brother, Charles: “I suppose I may have 14 more [birthdays] (that was mother’s age 73 years); he lived only one year longer, to the age of seventy-four.” Prout’s Neck must have been tinged
with nostalgia and irony for him; after her death, he refused to live in the main house with his father.

Charles Savage Homer, Sr., his father, was something of a pompous windbag, full of the delusion of his own success, when in fact he had repeatedly failed and abandoned his family. In a sense, he represented all that Winslow rejected: commerce, society, and the accumulation of things. Homer's early biographers often commented on the dissimilarities between the two: the florid, imposing Charles, Sr., whose house was filled to overflowing with everything consumable, and the trim, small Winslow, whose studio was spartan. Visiting his father's house, across the lawn from his studio, Homer would remove fruit from the overflowing bowls on the sideboard; his father would furiously put it back. But Homer half-jokingly wrote at one point: "I find that living with Father for three days, I grow to be so much like him that I am frightened." In sum, Homer's attitude seems to have been one of jocular, waspish toleration and devotion; in other words, it was contradictory, but the contradictions were balanced by love.

Less is known about his brothers. Charles, Jr., two years older than Winslow, was everything Homer, Sr., was supposed to be. An industrial chemist of some repute, he became wealthy, married well and happily, but had no children. Winslow cared for Charles' wife, Mattie, deeply. Not merely fishing partners, Charles and Winslow shared an interest in the same line of work. Charles specialized in paints and varnishes, too—as a chemist. His other brother, Arthur, was five years younger than Winslow, and the two were never particularly close. Arthur's business ventures, like their father's, were sometimes less than successful. He and Winslow had heated discussions about who owned what property on Prout's Neck. On the other hand, Arthur had two sons, of whom Winslow was certainly fond and occasionally helped. Both of his brothers represent the spheres that Homer avoided: business and domesticity. And yet Homer remained in the arms of his family all his life.

Homer might be said to have had the same relation to the world beyond his family, the America of his day. Praised glibly all too often as the most American of painters, he should perhaps be taken to task for what he refused to paint: none of the drama of
city life found its way into his work, none of the business and urban hustle that was transforming America into an industrialized world power even as he painted. His paintings spurn the city and everything it represents, just as he himself did. Characteristically, as late as 1903, not understanding how "that thing" the telephone worked—although there were 2,371,000 of them in the country by 1902, one for every thirty-five Americans—he was unable to use one.¹⁰

In Homer's day urban growth threatened most observers of American life. The country felt filled in, completed; the American frontier was declared closed in 1893. Under the onslaught of mechanization, immigration, and incorporation, the normal relations of life threatened to dissolve or warp. The rationalization imposed on the economy and labor by the growth of national corporations provided seemingly limitless new comforts for consumers and increasing hardships for workers. Immigration brought to these shores large numbers of non-English speaking people to form new underclasses. Machines and innovative technology—such as the Corliss steam engine introduced at the Centennial Exposition, which stood 39 feet tall and weighed 650 tons—seemed to reduce human beings to the level of drones. Ostensibly Homer refused to deal with this. Standing with his face to the ocean, America behind him, he nonetheless felt the pressure of those forces at his back. His landscapes may be taken as his answer. As Ralph Waldo Emerson reminds us, "The land is the appointed remedy for whatever is false and fantastic in our culture."¹¹

Proceeding along this path of analysis, however, will take us only so far. Homer deliberately left few clues behind, other than his paintings, and these, unlike verbal texts (which are ambiguous enough), evade all but the most obvious interpretations. In the end we must be content with our informed intuitions. We might compare with envy what we can responsibly say about Homer with what we know and can report about Henry Adams (1838-1918), only two years younger and a fellow-Bostonian. Adams, a self-revelatory writer, most conscious of being the direct descendant of presidents, displayed deliberately his motivations and reactions to contemporary culture and society. While we may differ in interpreting what Adams had to say, the nature and the
depths of his dissatisfaction with the crass capitalism of American life are clear, his sense that in seeking material success in this world Americans were blunting themselves to authentic experience, that they were sacrificing the heart of life for the transitory satisfactions of power. Adams' critique of the materialist goals of American culture, as exemplified by, as one historian says, "modern man—urban, rootless, rational, immersed in the 'inauthentic' realm of commercial exchange," is one of the most articulate and extensive at the turn of the century. This conflict between the outer life and the inner life is dramatized in many ways in Victorian experience and the gulf between the quiet self and the noisy world was one that many tried to bridge. Transcendentalism, belonging to the generation before Adams, is but one attempt.

Adams expressed his dilemma in several ways, but his basic terms for the two poles of experience were decidedly sexualized. The life of progress and action was identified with a Protestant male autonomy, as exemplified by his father, the diplomat Charles Francis Adams, while the life of reflection and true sensation was identified with a Catholic female dependence, as exemplified by his relations with women, including his beloved wife, Marian Hooper Adams. Or, as Adams called these sets of associations, the Virgin and the Dynamo.

For Adams, the Virgin embodied the connection we have lost between the here and now and the infinite, what Sigmund Freud called "oceanic feeling." She had been replaced by the Dynamo, mindlessly progressive, undirected energy, nominally in the charge of men but in reality controlling them. Adams addressed his ambivalence about being in the world but not of it in a poem, Buddha and Brahmin, in words that apply to Homer's characteristic situation:

But we, who cannot fly the world, must seek
To live two separate lives; one, in the world
Which we must ever seem to treat as real;
The other in ourselves, behind a veil
Not to be raised without disturbing both.

As we will see, Homer, a realist to the core of his being, turned repeatedly from the reality of life to the world behind the veil.
What Adams expressed in his poem, by telling the story of the Brahmin, Homer's paintings show us as unmetaphorically, as metonymically as they can. In matter-of-fact settings, the horizon is always muffled in fog and the figures, huddled together, gaze toward a curtain of mist, seeing nothing substantial (Figure 3). This is just the point: the horizon is a "veil not to be raised."
Homer himself said: "a horizon is horrible—that straight line!" Although we cannot be certain what his figures look at or what Homer felt and tried to say, as Henry Adams would tell us, the significant fact is that they rest in the balance between inner and outer worlds. Homer's art achieves a reciprocity between the simple, hard certainties of rock and ocean, loneliness and death, and everything else he and we might wish for.
Chapter One: Winslow Homer

1. While Homer may have abandoned the world of art, it did not forget him. He served on juries for the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh and rejected many more offers to serve. Invited to join “The Ten” in 1898, he turned them down, writing: “I am reminded of the time lost in my life in not having an opportunity like this that you offer ... but I am too old for this work and I have already decided to retire from business at the end of the season. So you see that I cannot join you at even this most cordial invitation—and admiring as I do all of you.” Although his letter is dated January 20, on January 9, 1898, The New York Times reported the group as “Eleven Painters,” because of the group’s certainty that Homer would join them. Patricia Jobe Pierce, The Ten (Concord, N.H.: Rumford Press, 1976), pp. 25-26.


3. For example, his friendship with the Portland, Maine, architect John Calvin Stevens was sealed with the gift of The Artist’s Studio in an Afternoon Fog, 1894, which he gave in return for Stevens’ design and help in building a house in 1901. Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., and William David Barry, “Brother Artists: John Calvin Stevens and Winslow Homer,” Bowdoin 61, 4 (Fall 1988): 16-19.


5. Quoted in Downes, Life and Works, p. 167.

6. Ibid., pp. 167, 228.


8. Winslow Homer to Charles Homer, Jr., February 21, 1895, Homer papers, Bowdoin College Museum of Art, New Brunswick, Me.

9. Quoted in Goodrich, Homer, p. 104.

10. Ibid., p. 218.


13. Quoted in Goodrich, Homer, p. 224.